

On-the-Job Learning at Swift Energy: A Case Study

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Swift Energy is an independent, US-based company engaged in the acquisition, development, exploration, and operation of oil and natural gas properties, with a focus on the onshore and inland water areas of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast.

The Vision, Mission, Values, and Behavior (VMVB) program is a training-cum-mentorship model, which has helped Swift Energy in training its young engineers, and also helped reduce nonproductive time by more than 5% and set new technical limits within one year of implementation. Both mentor and mentee share accountability in the program and have to submit periodic evaluations of each other. The incoming field engineer (mentee) does not have to report to the rig supervisor (mentor), but instead works alongside him or her as a team member. Both report to the same person, the drilling engineer. The goal is to create an environment that supports learning within the team and makes teamwork a sustainable competitive advantage.

A four-day orientation introduces the VMVB program to the incoming engineer and the rigsite supervisor. Each engineer and accompanying mentor

is made aware of the seven values to which they are held: stewardship, improvement, performance, passion, integrity, trust, and teamwork. Both are required to read technical manuals, as well as recommended self-development books. The "scope of work" is defined, which requires mutual evaluation and participation in dialogue with the Houston staff.

The conventional model is that the drilling engineer plans the well and supports operations from the office. The rigsite supervisors manage rig operations, administer procedures, and coordinate all logistics, equipment, and personnel. Introducing the field engineer to his or her "role and responsibility" adds a different dimension to the project. It places a trained and disciplined mind at the rotary table, where field engineering and optimization have the best chance of affecting an operation. The different scopes of work allow for flexibility and clarity in that both the field engineer and the rig supervisor play an integral part in the operation without having to be subordinate to one another. A team is born, and it soon becomes apparent that the team members must have a close relationship as rig

performance depends on both of them. The end result is that the whole operation is elevated to a higher level because each is available to teach the other.

Swift believes value is created by balancing both the roles and relationship of the supervisor and new engineer. The field engineer is able to progress by virtue of experience into a well-rounded, field-trained engineer, while at the same time the program allows the company to use the engineer's relatively inexperienced talent in a progressive manner. An outcome of the program has been a constant flow of refined or improved drilling program designs. Since inception, the program has seen one instance where the number of drilling days was reduced from 50 to 15. A common software platform in the company also allows young engineers to study old well plans and use their learning in new wells. The VMVB program has also been successful in implementing innovative concepts within the company, such as rotary steerable drilling, batch drilling, and probabilistic cost analysis.

A detailed article is available here: http://www.hamiltongroup.org/documents/de_work_program.pdf

The Structured Classroom Approach

Interview with Jorrit van der Togt, Shell

Jorrit van der Togt is vice president of learning and organization effectiveness at Shell, responsible for technical professional training. His role is global and he operates from the Projects and Technology Technical Center in Rijswijk, Netherlands. Before his current position, he worked in industrial relations in upstream new hire leadership orientation training and as human resources (HR) manager in information technology (IT) in London and downstream distribution in Houston. Van der Togt earned a BA in management from Nyenrode Business University, MS degrees in IT and in organizational psychology from Utrecht University, and a PhD in social psychology from Groningen University.

What influenced your choice of a career in the oil and gas industry?

I joined Shell via an internship program in South Korea where I worked on an IT program. Although I found Shell a great company to work for, I didn't really like IT, so I opted to join HR instead and have been in HR ever since. Ironically, in my third job in Shell, I worked as an HR manager in IT, which turned out to be one of the best jobs I've ever had. What continues to attract me to Shell are the people I have worked with both on a personal and professional level, the

global network I've established, the global technical and commercial challenges in the upstream and downstream worlds, and the strategic importance of the oil and gas industry that's literally affected by just about any major event in the world.

Classroom training is an important element of Young Professionals' (YPs') development plans. How should YPs decide which courses to select?

Frankly, young engineers should not be selecting courses on their own. Instead they should be guided along the way. In Shell, we invest heavily in our technical professionals and especially in new graduates by providing a deep technical curriculum. The development plan is tailored to individual needs, determined through dialogue between supervisor and graduate, holistically looking at on-the-job training, coaching, formal training, etc.

You need some skills to be productive now, but the majority of your formal training should be laying the foundation for the years to come. So don't focus on courses alone, but focus on building a good launch pad for the future.

Training programs often teach "ready-to-use" recipes for problem-solving, and hence the opportunity to

be creative in discovering solutions is lost. How do you think YPs should balance their need for training?

Business value is often generated by optimizing the end-to-end value chain or by combining elements of technical knowledge to create new solutions. So develop your career like a "T": Get a deep specialization (the vertical), but also get a broad business and technical understanding (the horizontal). Choose training programs that get you in touch with other disciplines and teach integrated solutions rather than recipes and tricks.

In Shell, we talk about *blended learning*. So we shape our programs for inclusive learning, always seeking to relate it to on-the-job realities and requirements. Participants are asked to complete online e-learning or read books and articles in advance of the classroom. Some of our courses also include virtual interaction before the face-to-face event, whereby participants get to know each other online, complete virtual tasks together, and discuss views in forums. This is all done so the time together in the classroom can be used to focus on learning from each other, making connections, and solving real-life problems—that's where deep learning occurs.

Finally, we are living in a “prove-it-to-me” world, and personal development is no exception. Getting yourself certified in key competencies adds real value both for you and the business you are working in.

YPs face a dilemma selecting a managerial career or technical one. What is your advice on how YPs should choose courses/ assignments for their development?

You were recruited because you were a top class graduate engineer—not because of any innate strategic leadership qualities. And yes, in order to progress, in addition to having and developing deep technical skills, you have to build a solid grounding in leadership, business skills, and a commercial mind-set. In Shell we invest in both, and offer both managerial and technical career paths. However, you have to be good at what you were recruited to be good at and so you must focus on building your technical skills first. The good news is that the best technical training is not just about skills; it also teaches you problem-solving, logic, intellectual rigor, and structured thinking. Business, interpersonal, and leadership skills are very important, but typically easier to learn on the job.

Mentoring is another key element of a YP's development plan, requiring one-to-one involvement. But our industry has an unequal age distribution. How serious do you think the problem is and how do you think companies should deal with it?

The problem is very serious and the demographics will only get more unequal, while investment levels are as robust as ever. The key is on-the-job learning, getting yourself stretched, and getting feedback on what's going well. To me, the new professionals who develop the quickest are those

with an insatiable curiosity and a real hunger to learn how the basics work and how they can contribute to making the business work better.

The best mentors are often not those with lengthy monologues, but the ones asking intriguing questions that make you really think. The best supervisors are those who put their new people in a position to prove themselves and learn in a “safe” environment. So select your entry job on the basis of exposure to business-critical tasks, supervisor quality, and, most important, whether you think the job is a challenge. Do not take the job description at face value; instead, look at the job opportunity—what can you add and what can you potentially get out of it.

The petroleum industry is expanding into emerging/underdeveloped economies. How do you suggest multinational companies approach learning and development of YPs within their organizations?

Some of the major players in emerging economies with new oil development have very strong technology capability and very talented people. In Shell, we have the greatest respect for national oil companies—both for their people and their technical capability. However, in fast-growing economies, the competition for talent is more intense than elsewhere. My advice to any graduate—from developed or developing economies—is to get out and go international as soon as you have a good grounding and can thus bring real value to other countries. There's nothing that teaches you so much as operating in a foreign country or region.

What advice can you share about leadership? How can a YP achieve and maintain a successful career with a leading-edge company in the

mastery of core discipline skills? How do you think SPE can help?

It was Napoleon who said that any battle plan was obsolete after five minutes in battle, but he still planned all his wars meticulously as he believed it prepared the mind. So first, do the same and get yourself a plan. Sit and write down what you want out of life, what you want to become very good at, what you can bring to the table, and also be honest about your strengths and where you need to grow. A personal career plan isn't fluffy—see it as a personal business plan that outlines how you'll build your competitive edge.

Second, focus on excellence in your current job. There's no point in continuously thinking how to forge ahead in your career. It's like a game of tennis where the best players focus completely on the ball. Do the best you can and attempt to get a little better every day. Also give some time every day to reflect on what you've learned. If it's nothing, then it has been a bad day regardless of how busy you've been.

Third, teamwork. Focus on becoming a good team player. Listen and always try to learn something from others. The future of the business is about the best teams, not the best individuals. Be mindful of different preferences people have regarding how to communicate and interact. Learn not just to accept but to value these differences. Do not assume everyone is as literate in virtual working and getting in touch electronically as you are. Everyone has something to offer, and you need to figure out how you can get people to give and be the best they can be.

SPE can help in many aspects. It creates connections and facilitates industry learning. It also increasingly plays a role in setting minimum standards for certain technical disciplines, which is important in a globalizing, “prove-it-to-me” world. **TWA**