



The rig idea

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO WORK ON AN OIL RIG?

JOANNE CHRISTIE LOOKS AT THE BEST WAY TO GET YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR

You don't need to be a genius to work out there's money to be made in the oil business. The price of a barrel dictates the cost of our petrol, makes it into the news almost every day and is the topic of many a heated environmental debate. But politics aside, big bucks mean big salaries and it's not just the company directors sitting in their offices making all the dosh — those working on offshore oil rigs are likely to be making a good deal more than those in equivalent land-based jobs.

With the drilling industry in the midst of a boom, you'd think scoring yourself one of these high-paying offshore gigs would be a piece of cake for a qualified engineer, right? Unfortunately, anyone who's ever casually tried to get into the offshore oil industry has quickly discovered it is one of those 'who you know, not what you know' industries. Andy Downs, a subsea superintendent who works on the rigs as well as recruiting engineers for his team, describes it as "an industry riddled with FBI: friends, brothers and in-laws", but says there's good reason for oil firms to be so cautious.

"The work we [subsea engineers] do is critical, not only to the engineer's life and the lives of the other 100 men on the rig, but also the rig and the company," Downs says. "If our shit goes wrong the rig could blow up, literally, so we don't take chances, or chancers. New hires need to come to me well known or at least well recommended by another of the well-known dinosaurs in our wee circle of subsea gurus."

If you've ever read Paul Carter's book *Don't Tell Mum I Work On The Oil Rigs She Thinks I'm A Piano Player In A Whorehouse*, you'll know Downs isn't exaggerating. Woven between the tales of hilarity and hijinks ►

recruitment

that occurred during Carter's 15 or so years on the rigs, there's more than one tale of the rather untimely demise of a co-worker, including a rather gory reference to a driller that managed to disembowel himself and die right in front of the crew.

But while it may be a tough industry to crack, with so many experienced people reaching retirement age and companies desperate for staff, there's never been a better time to go offshore according to insiders. Mike DuBose, director of operations for Rowan Drilling, says right now is probably the best time to enter the sector in the past 15 years.

"The offshore drilling market is currently enjoying a very robust period of growth," he says. "During the past 10-15 years, the industry was progressing at a very slow pace. This has caused a shortage of petroleum engineers because other industries and other disciplines of engineering offered better opportunities."

"You work for 12 hours, watch a bit of TV and go to bed"

Mechanical, electrical and petroleum engineers will probably find it easiest to get work, though those with experience in other areas such as civil engineering are also in demand. There are also opportunities for recent graduates, though if you're

lacking work experience of any kind, applying for a graduate position with one of the big companies such as Shell or BP may be your easiest way to get a foot in the door. Even in graduate positions, the salaries on offer are substantially better than what you'd get elsewhere, says Darren Montagu, director of Hays Energy, a recruitment firm placing staff in oil jobs.

"The average starting salary for a land based graduate is between £18-22,000, while the equivalent offshore can be anything up to £10,000 higher," he says.

GETTING STARTED

There are offshore setups all over the world, but if you're already in the UK, it makes sense to try your luck in Aberdeen, where most of the UK companies running North Sea operations are based. The local papers, the *Aberdeen Press And Journal* and the *Evening Express*, are a good place to start. Get a copy of the *Aberdeen Yellow Pages* and send your CV to all the relevant companies. There are several ways to get your first gig — as well as oil companies, there are drilling firms and service companies supplying staff to the oil companies, and then there are vendor companies who supply equipment to rigs, and therefore need staff to design, install and maintain the equipment.

To work on a rig you'll need to do a basic offshore survival training course, which takes between two and three days and costs about £400. Once you have a job, the company will usually pay for this, but if you're struggling to

break in, arranging and forking out for your own course is not a bad move, according to Downs.

"It may cost £400 but having self-sponsored oneself through this, you'll show an employer that you have made a commitment to the job you are chasing," he says.

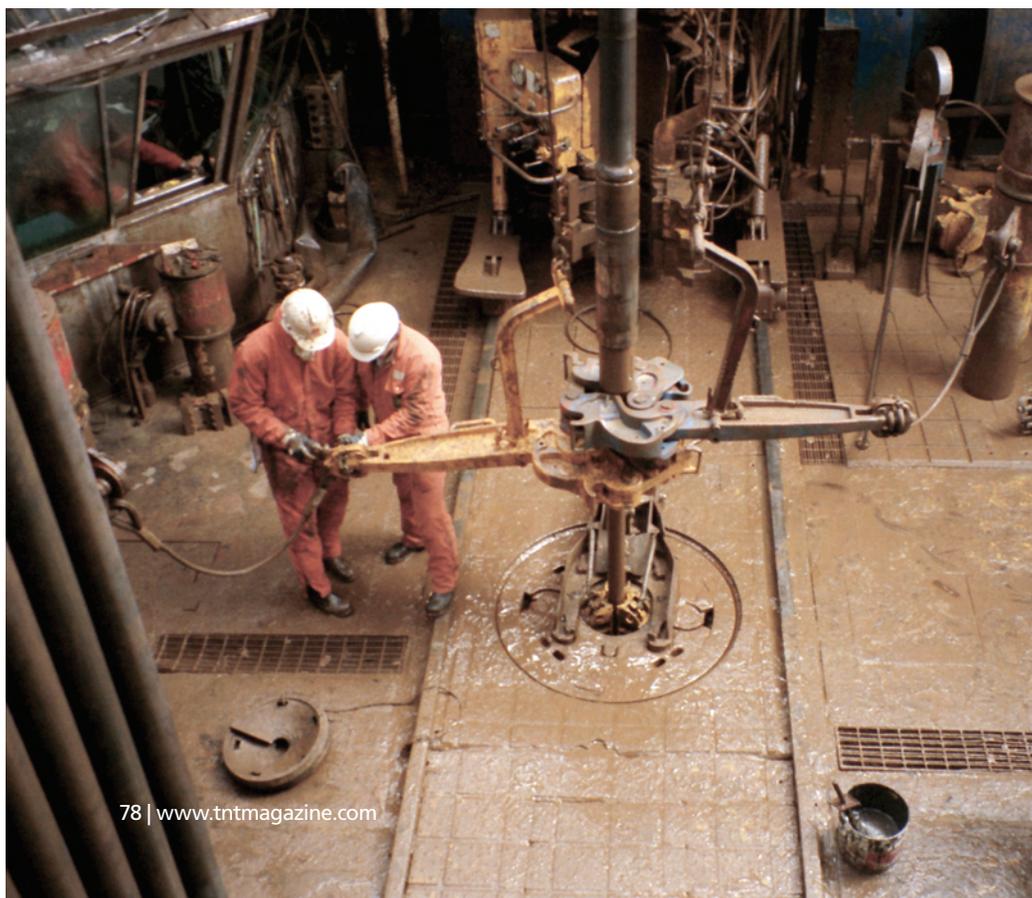
When applying for jobs, you should highlight any experience you've had in similar environments, says Derek Reeley, a consultant at Aberdeen Appointments Agency, who recruit for a number of offshore positions.

"For offshore roles, coming from an industry such as mining could be advantageous as you would be used to working in harsh environments with a good awareness of Health and Safety and being away from home," he explains. Military experience could also give your chances a bit of a boost.

BEING PREPARED

Before you get carried away with the promise of big money, you need to consider whether or not you can adapt to the lifestyle. Most rig workers work 12-hour shifts for two weeks, then have two weeks off, though this varies between setups. David Shakhovskoy, a 28-year-old mechanical engineer from Brisbane, has spent the past few years working on rigs, mostly in Aberdeen, and says people need to be aware that the environment is very different from other jobs.

"There's not a lot to do on an oil rig. You work for 12 hours, watch a bit of TV and go to bed. That's about it," he says. "It's a great single person's job, but for married people it's not so great, especially if they have kids."



OTHER RIG JOBS

If you don't happen to be a qualified engineer, there are other occupations needed on rigs. These include:

Roustabouts: A term for a general labourer. No special skills are required, other than a willingness to start at the bottom and work hard.

Tradesmen: Qualified tradesman can also find work on rigs, particularly mechanics and electricians.

Catering assistants/cooks/bakers: Somebody has to cook for the other staff.

Medics: All rigs need someone with medical skills, though not necessarily a doctor, in case of accidents.

Radio Operator: This job is usually done by someone with good computer and administration skills, and they need to be able to look after logistical and communication issues.

Workers usually have to share dorm rooms with between two and six others and meals are normally served at set times only. Shakhovskoy says it's an industry dominated by men, and that women may have difficulty fitting in.

"There is a pretty good camaraderie on the rigs, but I think if you were a woman out there, you'd have to have a thick skin as it is a pretty crude atmosphere," he says.

He says though health and safety training is detailed and frequent, the dangers of the job can't be overlooked.

"A lot of people lose fingers and stuff like that and there is also the possibility of being crushed," he warns. ■



RESOURCES

- See www.rgitmontrose.com for information about safety courses.
- See www.cleddau.com/rigs for a long-time rig worker's personal tips on rig work and life.
- See www.rigjobs.co.uk for information and a CV/job finding service.
- See www.pressandjournal.co.uk and www.eveningexpress.co.uk to search Aberdeen's local newspapers online.



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