

Company recruiting college students for oil-field tech jobs

BY SARAH TERRY-COBO
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OKLAHOMA CITY – Weatherford International is seeking college-aged students for its workforce. They're touting technology to pique the next generation's interest in the oil-field service company's global operations as Baby Boomers retire. Those technological advances are crucial to attracting and shaping future oil-field workers, said Mike Stice, University of Oklahoma Mewbourne College of Earth and Energy Dean.

But what once terrified oil and gas veterans likely won't hurt the industry as much as once predicted, he said.

The Great Shift Change was expected to have a devastating effect on the number of experienced petroleum engineers. After the bust of the mid-1980s, there was a decade or more in which students didn't seek those degrees. So as baby boomers leave the workforce, those who are left have 10 to 15 years less experience. Richard Vaclavik, Weatherford vice president of its U.S. Geozone division, said it's critical to identify talent and develop the industry's next leaders.

"There is a huge gap with those who have 30 to 35 years' experience and the guys with 20 years' experience who will take over in five years," he said.

Stice, who worked in the midstream industry for 35 years before turning to academia, said the rapid pace of changing technology has made the so-called shift change less threatening.

"Much of the experience that was lost wasn't that relevant," he said. "Quite the opposite, this (shale) boom has been a tech-driven boom. The technology is turning these devices into video games, and youngsters are much better at it than we are."

Weatherford held a career event for college-aged students in Oklahoma City on Thursday. The initiative was designed to let potential oil workers get up close to the equipment and technology that drives drill bits these days.

Allen Sinor, Weatherford's vice president of sales, said the company now has robots that help guide a drill bit 5 miles beneath the earth's crust and hit a target that's 3 feet wide.

"That didn't exist 20 years ago," he said.

Wednesday night one of the company's crew finished a wellbore after drilling for seven continuous days, navigating 20,000 feet back to the surface. Wells weren't drilled like that even a few years ago. As wellbores get longer, oil-field service companies need exponentially more water, sand and chemicals to do hydraulic fracturing jobs. That requires careful coordination and a close eye to logistics, Vaclavik said.

"I've been in this business 37 years and it looks nothing like it did eight years ago, or for that matter, even three years ago," he said.

Students are likely to be attracted to those jobs if they understand how computer programs are integral to crunching through tens of thousands of feet of rocks and dirt, he said. Weatherford has partnerships with Google and IBM. The com-



Students and others listen to David Cundiff, left, with Weatherford International, explain downhole monitoring during a career event for college-aged students in Oklahoma City. *PHOTOS BY MARK HANCOCK*



A Roto Flex vertical pumping unit is on display during the career event.

pany's production pumps are connected to the cloud, so a worker can check production on their phone, computer or tablet and enable alerts when something needs to be checked or changed.

Weatherford is looking for Oklahomans, in part because that's where the rigs are. About 63 percent of the 1,052 drilling rigs in the U.S. are in Oklahoma and Texas, according to the Baker

Hughes rig count for the week ending Oct. 5. Texas has about half the active rigs and Oklahoma has 13 percent. Vaclavik said it's more efficient to hire locally, which is important to service rigs drilling in the state's SCOOP and STACK plays.

"That's one of the best things you can do for a company and for Oklahoma," he said. "That's been the case for 60 or 70 years. You have the families of the next generation, their parents and their uncles make a good livelihood working in the industry."

Stice said OU's energy college enrollment has hit a 31-year low for petroleum geology, geophysics and petroleum engineers. The university had a 100-percent placement rate for students graduating from those disciplines for decades. Oil prices plummeted in late 2014 and a two-year bust decimated that record. By 2017, they placed about 40 percent of graduates. They've now rebounded to a 61 percent placement rate.

And some students with engineering degrees aren't getting the jobs they want; some have placed as pumpers, checking tanks and valves on well sites, Stice said.

Weatherford is hiring for a range of jobs locally, including technicians, drillers and engineers.

About two-thirds of the company's 30,000 employees worldwide are 45 or younger. Spokesman Chris Wailes said the need for tech-proficient employees is in part why the company funds initiatives for science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM education.

Ross Powell, technical sales manager, graduated in 2010 and said he can identify with the need for local talent.

"We want to get people who want to stay here and contribute to Oklahoma," he said.