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Women wearing hats: Career challenges in the oil industry

My name is Amanda Henson and I am a petroleum geologist for Baker Hughes Inteq. For those of you who don't work in the oil and gas industry, my job may also be defined under the not so glamorous title of mudlogger. My work is based on off-shore oil rigs located around Australia, primarily in the North West Shelf, Bass Strait and Timor Sea.

Before I speak about my specific role as a mudlogger, I'll firstly let you know a little bit about the company I work for. Baker Hughes Inteq is an American based company with many divisions, and has operations worldwide. Our division, surface logging, provides a service to oil and gas exploration and production companies such as BHPBP, Woodside, Exxon Mobil and Santos among many others. We are contracted out to different rigs by these oil companies to perform our role of monitoring drilling parameters during drilling, and to provide an independent mudlog of the well. In the Asia-Pacific region, we currently have contracts for approximately 10 offshore rigs.

MY BACKGROUND AND HOW I GOT INTO THIS INDUSTRY

The most commonly asked question when I say to people that I work on offshore oil rigs, is

“Are you a cook or a cleaner out there?”

After replying (and yes I must admit, with a rather smug grin) “No I'm a petroleum geologist”, they then ask,

“How on earth did I get into this career?”

Well, my story starts from when I was very little when I discovered I was very interested in dinosaurs. I found them absolutely fascinating (my favourite was the Diplodocus!), hence began my love of science. During my final years at school, I was given an opportunity to do geology during year 11 and 12. My school had an excellent geology department, and this paved the way for me to continue on with an advantage in geology throughout my Bachelor of Science degree at Macquarie University. I completed my honours degree in 2000 with a thesis on geochemistry.

In 2001, I moved to WA to enter the mining industry. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd end up on offshore oil rigs. I remember going down to Fremantle one day to look at a rig that was stacked just off the coast. Little did I know I'd be on that rig in a months time! Not long after, I answered an advertisement for a petroleum geologist. At the job interview, the first thing my prospective employer said to me was

“You do realise this job is offshore?”

“It's what?!?” I replied.

After he finished laughing, we went through the interview process, after which he offered

me the job. I was in shock at the whole offshore prospect, so I told my prospective employer that I'd get back to him!

It is here that I thank my mother and girlfriends who were so encouraging and supportive in telling me I'd be fine out there and to take the job! So I did, and a few weeks later (after doing a helicopter underwater escape training, or HUET, course), I was out on the same rig I'd been down to see in Fremantle less than a month before, except now it was 200km off the coast of Karratha, WA.

As you may know, helicopters are the main form of transport to and from the rigs. In Australia, like the rest of the world, it is mandatory for all offshore personnel to hold a current HUET course certificate. In the case of a chopper ditching in the ocean, the most likely cause of death is not the impact of the crash, but drowning due to not being able to get out of the chopper. After doing this course, it is said that your chance of survival increases from 60% to around 90%. The course itself really manages to drive home the reality of a chopper ditching in the ocean due to their simulation techniques, and it is very scary to say the least. In a pool, sits a metal cage containing four seats with seatbelts, as well as doors and windows similar to those found in a helicopter. To pass the course you must sit fully clothed inside the cage on one of the seats, strap yourself in with the seatbelt and wait to be tipped upside down, underwater, so you can go through the escape drill through the doors and windows of the simulated chopper. You must do this about 6 or 7 times, and exiting through different doors and windows, to pass. It is by far the most terrifying thing I have ever been through, however it does make you feel a whole lot safer when you finally do travel on the choppers.

A TYPICAL DAY

My hitches on offshore oil rigs can extend from a few days to 4 weeks. Though occasionally the hitch may extend for a few days longer than this. Time off the rig is usually the same amount of time as the last hitch worked.

Facilities on board are usually quite good, with cinemas, TV rooms, table tennis facilities, and a gym, though if you feel like going for a walk, round and round the helideck is your only option. On most rigs you stay in a 2 or 4 man room and although the boys have communal showers, the girls will get a bedroom with an ensuite. All meals are catered for, and all your laundry is done for you. You just put it outside your bedroom door dirty, and you wake up in the morning, it's there clean (and the guys out there reckon they don't have a warped sense of reality!).

A typical day on the rig for me involves 12 hour shifts, so there is not much time for anything else except for eating and sleeping. After waking up and collecting my clean laundry from outside my bedroom door, I don my beautiful orange coveralls, hard hat and steel cap boots. After breakfast, we have a pre-tour meeting that tells us where the drilling is up to and what procedures are to happen in the next 12hrs or so. I then head to the Baker Hughes unit and do a handover with the guys on the opposite shift and begin work. It's a bit easier to describe a typical hitch as opposed to a typical day.

BEFORE DRILLING:

- Check sample program
- Calibrate gas systems, calcimeter and sensors
- Set up mudlog format

DURING DRILLING:

- Collect, describe and log samples
- Perform calcimetry analyses
- Collect gas and mud samples
- Collect data for mudlog such as mud and drilling parameters, directional surveys, gas data
- Liaise with the wellsite geologist and oil company representatives
- Maintain communications with the drill floor and pit room

AFTER DRILLING:

- QC final mudlog
- Organise sample splits, packing and distribution
- Write a sample manifest
- Write up the geology and shows for the final well report

MALE/FEMALE PROFILES; NUMBERS AND OCCUPATIONS

During my interview, I was told that I'd be the 3rd girl this company had employed in an offshore capacity, and one had left recently. So out of 80 offshore personnel managed by the Perth office, I would be one of 2 girls working offshore. I was also informed that out of 100-150 personnel out on a rig at any one time there would be maybe up to 3 or 4 females on board, however there would be times where I would be the only female on location. I am pleased to say that 3 other girls have since been hired for Baker Hughes Inteq.

With this information in mind, I set off to my first rig. It was really scary to see from the chopper this tiny, tiny rig all by itself in the middle of a huge ocean. All I wanted to do was turn around and go home. How could I live out here for a month? When we arrived on board, I was getting out of the chopper and I was terrified that I would get my head chopped off by the rotors if I didn't duck far enough. As I ducked getting out, I fell back into the chopper doorframe and promptly ripped a huge hole in the bum of my jeans. Me, 100 men, and a huge hole in the seat of my pants...what a fabulous initiation! I thought if I could get through that I could get through anything!

The girls I have met out on the rigs have all, without exception, had a tertiary education. Usually engineering, or geology, though I have also met female nurses and radio operators. Unless they work for the oil company, the majority of the men on board do not have a tertiary education. As expected by these figures, the women all hold technical positions, such as wireline loggers, geologists, drilling engineers, and nurses, while the

boys hold all the labouring positions such as roustabouts, roughnecks, crane operators, and drillers.

As in many other industries, the glass ceiling effect is still in action throughout the petroleum industry. In petroleum companies themselves, very few women occupy high level management or board positions, and if they do, they are not promoted from inside the company. In a survey produced in 2000 by 'Chemical and Engineering News' Magazine¹ the following figures were produced. As you can see the figures for women holding board positions in these oil companies are quite dismal.

	BOARD OF DIRECTORS			
	WOMEN		TOTAL	
	INSIDE	OUTSIDE	WOMEN	BOARD
CHEVRON	0	2	2	12
EXXON MOBIL	0	3	3	18
KERR MCGEE	0	2	2	12
PHILLIPS PETROLEUM	0	2	2	10
WOODSIDE ENERGY LIMITED ³	0	1	1	12
SANTOS LTD ⁴	0	1	1	8
TOTAL	0	11	11	72

Women directors per company =
1.8

Women directors % of board positions =
15.2%

In his book "Human Instinct"², Professor Robert Winston touches on the subject of 'glass ceilings'. He says that although women have the talent and want to do these jobs, many

are not interested in making risky decisions to succeed. As we can see in everyday life, men are commonly greater risk takers while women traditionally prefer taking a safer option. While risk taking may be a dicey strategy that can lead to dire consequences, if the risk does pay off (along with talent and ambition) it can put you much further ahead on the corporate ladder (as men well know).

“NATURAL TALENT IS RARELY ENOUGH FOR THE TRUE GENIUSES AND HIGH ACHIEVERS IN ANY FIELD. TALENT IS OFTEN ACCOMPANIED BY PERSISTENCE, A WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS, AND A BURNING DESIRE TO BE THE BEST.”

Prof. Robert Winston, *'Human Instinct – How Primeval Impulses Shape Our modern Lives'*, Bantam Press (2002)

Through my relatively limited off shore experience, I have met only one female in a management position. She was a company woman for Woodside Energy Limited who had a degree in drilling engineering. She was 28 and brilliant.

SNAPSHOT TO 1980 COMPARED TO TODAY

With regards to the industry 20 years ago, I don't think much has changed for women in jobs involving an offshore capacity besides the slight increase in numbers for women working offshore. I have noticed that the attitudes of men who have been working offshore for 20-30 years is vastly different from those who have been working offshore for 10 years or less. I think these attitudes reflect an industry in 1980 that was far less tolerant of women than it is today

The younger generation of offshore workers like having the girls out there. Why? Well one of the most common reasons, is that they behave better! Believe it or not they appreciate females working offshore as they feel they can act more gentlemanly. One comment I once received was “It can get a bit feral out here without girls on board”. The attitudes of older generation male offshore workers however, paints a slightly different picture. Many older men definitely don't agree with women working offshore, and at times many will make themselves very clear about their point of view. Unfortunately, since these are the people with the greatest experience, they are also the ones who hold all the higher level and management positions.

Since I have been working in the petroleum industry, I have had a few setbacks. The main issue being that 3 times in the last year I've been told I can't go out onto a rig as there is not enough room for females out there and have therefore lost that contract (and

wages to go with it). On the other hand, on the same rigs there have been occasions where I have had to share a room with a male. I don't mind sharing with the boys, (as long as we get a bathroom other than the communal shower), though I do think it's got to be one or the other. Either I always get my own room and I am occasionally refused work, or I share with the boys when necessary. All this when the rig hierarchy dictates that the managing guys on the rig all take up a 2 man room to themselves. I do feel that is a problem for women working offshore, especially when we are losing wages because of it. To be fair, Australia does seem to be a rig graveyard, where, after starting off life in the North Sea or the Gulf of Mexico the rigs then get work in (what seems to be) every other country in the world, with Australia being their final resting place 30 years later. This fact alone does not make it the easiest of situations for anyone working offshore, however even if 30 year old rigs did not cater for women with their facilities, it's no excuse to not adapt to the situation or the equal opportunity times we supposedly live in. One of the girls who works for Baker Hughes recently told me that she feels guilty whenever she goes out to a rig, as she believes that she is taking away the room of one of the senior guys. She even goes so far as to often find that person and apologise to them. I can tell you now, that I certainly don't feel guilty and I won't be apologising for being a female!

Along with the lack of female quarters and facilities on oil rigs, there is also the constant fielding of comments and questions about myself, many of which are completely inappropriate. There have been many times where I've quietly pulled down pictures of half naked women from walls, and deleted any files I can find on the computers containing pornographic pictures. I am a firm believer in that there is a time and a place for everything. Unfortunately I also believe that education is desperately needed in the petroleum industry, and in small yet hopefully significant ways, I do try to get my point across as much as possible.

The petroleum industry is clearly a male dominated industry, and so far I may have painted a fairly dim view about what it's like for females working on off shore oil rigs in Australia. Besides the problems, there are some very good points about working in the industry. You don't have to cook or clean anything on board, the time off work is great, and the money is also very good (and is made even better by the fact that you don't spend a cent when you are off shore). Knowing that everyone on board is in the same situation as you, and having the ability to laugh at yourself (definitely a must for anyone working offshore), makes for many amusing scenarios. You absolutely rack up the frequent flyer points every time you go to work and the chopper rides are a lot of fun, provide a great view and are a unique way of getting to work. The sighting of beautiful coral reefs and many sea animals such as sharks, penguins, whales and manta rays that you would ordinarily have to pay thousands of dollars on a trip to the barrier reef to view in the wild. And my personal favourite is the shock on peoples' faces when I tell them where I work; now that is fun!

There may be a view held by many people that working on offshore oil rigs is hot, dirty work. It is hot, dirty work if you hold a labouring position out there. However many of the technical and management positions on the rigs involve sitting in an air-conditioned

lab or office in front of a computer. Sure, as part of my job, there are greasy sensors to fix and mud samples to collect in rooms that can get up to about 50 degrees Celsius in temperature, though for the majority of time, on an average day I'll be sitting in relative comfort of an air-conditioned lab. With this in mind, why aren't there more women in these positions? I think that there are a number of possible reasons:

1. The known fact that fewer number of women compared to men, undertake engineering or geoscience degrees at university. Throughout my uni degree, we typically had a ratio of approximately 4-5 boys for each girl.
2. The isolation, and the idea that it is a hot and dirty industry, may sound exciting, though not too appealing as a long term career prospect to many women (especially younger women). The way the industry is now, means that taking a risk to find out exactly what it is like to work in the petroleum industry and off shore oil rigs, would most likely involve completing a 3 to 6 year degree. That's a lot of study just to take a chance to see if you could work in that environment.
3. The inflexibility of 3-4 week hitches, and the impossibility of combining this type of work with traditional motherhood roles of raising a family.

I hope more women in the future consider the petroleum industry and work on off shore oil rigs as a career option. It is definitely not a career for everyone, and as I said, both males and females need certain personality traits to be able to be happy doing this sort of work. Though working offshore is a career option that, for the right people, can be very rewarding and lead to great satisfaction and success especially in a scientific and technical capacity.

Hopefully today I've shed some light on what working on offshore oil rigs is like and some of the issues surrounding this industry. Like most jobs there are good and bad aspects, and although some old habits and views need to change, at this stage of my career the good is definitely out weighing the bad!

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BIBLOGRAHPY

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