

## Employers Face Looming ‘Great Crew Change’

By Mella McEwen | mmcewen@mrt.com | Sunday, July 26, 2015

Despite the current downturn in the oil and gas industry, forecasts show continued growth as far off as 2035.

“We will not be reducing our need for energy,” said Elaine Cullen, a long-time researcher for the federal government specializing in workplace health and safety. She is now president of her own company, Prima Consulting Services.

She recently authored a white paper for the workforce housing provider Target Logistics. In “The Great Crew Change: Managing Generational Differences in Oil, Gas, Mining and Construction Workforces,” Cullen said that industries such as oil and gas, mining and construction are all facing a dramatic shift as the traditional and baby boomer generations retire, making way for generations X and Y.

She sees multiple challenges in ensuring industries have not only the quantity of workforce but also the quality of workforce they need.

That begins with ensuring workers are prepared, Cullen said.

“We spend an extraordinary amount of money on remedial education — how to be on time, how act professionally, stay until your shift is done, how to dress appropriately,” she said in a phone interview.



**Great Crew Change** – Joe Pfeil, an engineer with Devon Energy, on an active pumping rig located on Highway 385 south of Odessa, photographed Tuesday, Sept. 24, 2014. James Durbin/Reporter-Telegram

As the “Great Crew Change” gets underway, employers will be challenged to navigate the shifts in corporate culture caused by generations and cultures working side by side, she said.

The older generations tend to be more focused on their careers and getting the job done, while younger workers -- who also are goal-oriented -- expect more of a work-life balance.

The key is to train supervisors on how to communicate with each generation, with each culture “and put together a team that can work together. It’s basic leadership training. Leadership is about people.”

In search of workers, the booming oil and gas industry has imported workers not only from different parts of the country but different parts of the world. Cullen recounted that, during a recent trip to Midland, she gave a presentation to a group that included not only people from the region but also from the Middle East, Africa and the Ukraine.

The booming industry also has created opportunities for young women to enter fields such as engineering and the geosciences. Cullen said that during a recent appearance at the University of Houston, there were many women in the audience.

Women bring unique sets of skills to the table and are very good at adapting to shift work, “especially if they’re making good money,” she said.

But that increase in young women entering the industry will mean companies must help them balance work and family. Cullen said businesses that offer benefits such as on-site child care centers or paid family leave will have a distinct advantage over their competitors in recruiting and retaining workers.

Education has changed with the oil and gas industry’s booms and busts, Cullen said. After oil prices collapsed in the 1980s, universities restructured their engineering and geology and geophysics departments to allow for broader training. Graduates now have the ability to work across various disciplines, she said.

The constraint is a lack of professors to teach college courses, she said, estimating that one-third more graduate students will be needed to fill teaching positions.

Still, she sees a continued need for workers, especially highly skilled blue-collar workers who can apply their talents in different aspects -- from oil and gas to solar. For example, the nation’s aging power grid, parts of which date back to the 1930s, will need to be replaced with smart-grid technology.

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