

# HYDRO INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEWS JOHAN STAM, BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, ATLAS SERVICES GROUP

## Supply Hydrographic Personnel

There is a global shortage of hydrographic surveyors. The industry is faced with an interesting challenge and looks to specialised education facilities and personnel suppliers to assist in solving this problem. Even in times of high unemployment it can be difficult to find sufficient skilled personnel to carry out hydrographic survey work in the offshore environment. Hydrographic educational institutions around the world are struggling to attract enough students, resulting in noticeable shortages of trainees within the survey departments of large and small survey contracting companies. Although working conditions have improved considerably over recent decades, the environment in which hydrographic surveyors have to work can lack appeal and is occasionally even hostile. What solutions are personnel suppliers bringing to the industry? We interviewed Johan Stam, Business Development Manager of the Atlas Services Group.

Please give our readers a brief summation of how you became involved in hydrography and of the history of D.O.O.R.

I studied civil engineering and as such my career was wide open; the choice of career was mostly a personal one. My first job was with Ballast Dredging, involved in the construction of the Amsterdam underground. As a land surveyor I managed the survey part of the project in the centre of Amsterdam for both contractor and client. In the seventies many new techniques were introduced, including (basic) survey software and positioning systems. I enjoyed the challenge of getting a dredger working in time or building on a new area of reclaimed land with local personnel, and as such became more and more involved in project management. Later on I joined Intersite Surveys as Personnel Manager.

In 1988 I left Intersite Surveys and started D.O.O.R, providing hydrographic-survey personnel from the freelance market for more than forty clients worldwide. In the early 1990s major pipelines were being built, mostly from Norway. During this time the company grew and we began recruiting experienced personnel from Canada and Asia. When the oil industry began to slow down as a result of lack of exploration investment by the oil companies we saw the market change dramatically: personnel left the industry, many never to return. In 2004 I decided to look for a partner to help expand the business, to share the increasingly complex burden of international administration and to benefit from economies of scale. A partner was found in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, in the form of the Atlas Services Group, a personnel supplier strong in the maritime and oil & gas industry.

What is D.O.O.R's main activity at present?

Answer:

D.O.O.R represents the hydrographic survey division of the Atlas Services Group. Our main activity is the provision of hydrographic-survey personnel for projects abroad and in the Netherlands. As Dutch labour laws have become more flexible, we allocate an increasing number of field staff within the Dutch and international market and have implemented training initiatives for personnel with backgrounds in other than hydrographic surveying. The close synergies within the Atlas Services Group, access to a large pool of technical personnel, has provided additional opportunities with respect to training.

What is your general view on the situation of hydrographic field personnel? Is it indeed difficult to recruit sufficient personnel for hydrographic fieldwork?

Answer:

I've seen slow periods during my career in the dredging industry, and the younger people were always the first to be laid off. Back then some schools even closed their survey departments due to slow demand on the part of the industry. Over the years our clients have maintained the demand for quality. However, nowadays they seem more open to recruiting young and more international specialists. Maritime schools are making new efforts to attract students and the requirement for specialist training is growing. As a company we have always tried to recruit new personnel. However, the industry has generally been focused on the hiring of skilled labour, not trainees. To supplement this lack of knowledge we have been training our new personnel on specialist in-house courses since 1998. In my opinion, the current demand for skilled personnel is far greater than supply and all companies must look beyond the familiar names if the industry is going to fulfil future projects.

What is the impact of the general economic situation on the availability of hydrographic field personnel?

Answer:

The current economic future looks good. Combined with high oil prices there is a stimulus to facilitate innovation in our field. Software and equipment development is taking place that has provided us with new opportunities in less traditional markets, such as deep-water projects and ecological studies. Projects still need daily seabed interpretation, and studies for government and engineering companies require more details from multiple sources. These developments have resulted in a growing need for personnel training, and we have adjusted to the market at hand. The shortage of skilled hydrographic personnel is a global problem, outsourcing and sub-contracting offering the primary means to reduce costs within the current market. The economic situation and technological developments should make our industry interesting to students, but traditional education will delay their entrance into the market by up to four years.

Do you have sufficient "names"™ in your files to fulfil client requests?

Answer:

We have developed a large database of contacts over the years and established lifelong relationships with many of our contacts. But of great concern is the increasing age of the freelance industry as a whole. We have witnessed the retirement of many individuals from our wonderful industry, and foresee another wave taking place over the coming five years. We have been replenishing this stock as best we can, but can only achieve this through innovative cross-training solutions with personnel from different educational backgrounds. Personnel with a maritime officer background are our latest prospects for hydrographic-surveyor training. Here again we benefit from synergies within the Atlas Services Group. Through the Atlas Group we have offices and representation in fourteen different countries and are able to recruit an ever-increasing number of offshore-related personnel. Sadly, even this network advantage does not appear to hold the key to a complete solution; skilled hydrographic surveyors remain in short supply.

What sort of internal facilities does D.O.O.R have for training/education purposes?

Answer:

In 2000 we decided to employ a considerable number of surveyors for the local Dutch market. Government agencies were requesting the same old names from an already diminished pool of personnel, so we started to recruit and train new people. We began "Skilltrade"™, a training company that, in contrast to more traditional schools and in accordance with our interpretation of our clients'™ needs, focuses on a practical, condensed approach rather than a long drawn-out theoretical one. These modular courses were compiled by experienced field personnel from all over Europe, who put their life experience into "what you need to know to operate effectively in the field"™ rather than purely theoretical ideologies. For six years we have used Skilltrade to solve our personnel requirements, but always felt that it had much more potential than we could give it. This year we joined forces with the Shipping and Transport College (STC) in Rotterdam, a school with capacity for two thousand students. Our hydrographic survey courses will soon be under the review of the IHO, which will hopefully result in a twelve-week HNC/HND course, with an opening for external students in January 2007. In addition, we are talking to other educational bodies who share the vision of a new-generation, multi-skilled, multinational workforce.

What steps have you taken to stimulate young people to seek a career in hydrography?

Answer:

Myself, in common with many others who have been in this industry for a while, are keen to stimulate young people to join the industry. The Atlas Services Group regularly gives talks to professional organisations and schools, and at seminars and conferences. We are members of the Hydrographic Society Benelux, which actively promotes the profession to students. We also support the Maritime Museum in Amsterdam, which incidentally is soon to stage an exhibition on harbours with the theme "What have we learned from the past"™. Any exposure or publicity that can be generated for the offshore, coastal or inshore industry will support the flow of youngsters to the hydrographic industry as a whole.

Will hydrography gradually move from field to deskwork? How do you see this developing in the (near) future? Could we end up with unmanned survey units out at sea?

Answer:

Interesting questions. Fully autonomous systems are not yet the norm, but theoretically speaking it is possible. Data links are well established nowadays, with some survey contracting companies processing data onshore whilst the acquisition occurs (almost) simultaneously offshore. However, equipment still needs to be supported, installed and calibrated; survey programs need to be adjusted for the conditions and specific project or weather requirements. Survey teams seem to be shrinking in comparison to ten years ago - but does this result from shortage of personnel or technological advancement? Last year we witnessed vessels going to sea with just half the normal crew. This pressure can wear down staff very quickly and doesn't™ contribute to a positive branding for our industry. We see some functions being combined; the survey-engineer-and-surveyor-in-one is gradually becoming a common requirement, and there is a significant degree of overlap with ROV functions. A good survey team contains a combination of abilities and functions, requiring a better understanding of each member's™ area of expertise. I do not expect to see unmanned survey units at sea in my lifetime.

What sort of developments, in general, do you foresee in the near future with regard to hydrographic personnel?

Answer:

I foresee an increasingly multi-national, multi-functional survey taskforce. A great deal of effort has been invested in attracting new people to our industry, but this has not been well co-ordinated at industry level. I hope the trend will be towards more consistent cross-company and cross-national efforts, with a single message that promotes our industry in the positive light it clearly deserves. The time required to complete a survey qualification will probably be reduced, additional levels of survey education will be introduced (non-degree) that allow for more operator-level-type functions, and modular-style learning will become commonplace. Specialist schools like STC will, through high-profile marketing, support the flow of junior hydrographers into the industry.

Do you have a message for the hydrographic community?

Answer:

We have some interesting challenges ahead, but the industry maintains its dynamic, technology-driven, international character. Survey is one of the most challenging and intriguing industries available today: offering a lifelong career with variations in function to fit all tastes and desires. Let's™ stay positive and look on the bright side of (survey) life. Performing under pressure is par for the course in this industry, but the best results come from good teamwork. We learn from each other and what we become results from who we interact with. Working

together as specialists, clients, suppliers, professional associations and training organisations, we can continue to advance the contribution of our profession well into the next century.

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