

THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE RIGHT JOB

Personnel with a Competence Profile are Fast Becoming the Norm



It can be said that the modern world is far less forgiving when it comes to experienced personnel. In times past, a person's experience would speak for itself; they could get by on word of mouth, a confident approach and a CV detailing their experience. While in part this is still applicable today, increasingly we find ourselves faced with the requirement to somehow demonstrate this experience, in

short, to show competence.

If we look at the case of a surveyor seeking employment, they have two routes they can go down.

Permanent Employment

First is permanent employment. This is where the surveyor has one chance to open the door, and that is with their CV. This alone won't stop them from getting sent back out the door, and having it closed behind them, as they have to pass the all-important interview.

The interview allows them to sit in front of a would-be employer, and their peers, and

present their case for employability, whilst also navigating an obstacle course of technical questions. This process helps paint a picture for the would-be employer to assess the candidate's suitability, and also gauge their potential competence for the role.

Freelance Employment

The second route is that of freelance employment. The freelancer serves a variety of purposes: providing cover for a staff member who is suddenly unavailable, allowing the survey company to complete their numbers when taking on extra work, or providing a skill set that isn't available to the client amongst their own staff. In the same way that the world of survey seems held together by duct tape and cable ties, it is also propped up by freelance personnel. With this however, there is one problem: how does the employer know what to expect from the freelancer when they arrive on site? The employer didn't have the luxury of being able to interview the candidate, assess their suitability or bombard them with technical questions. They have one tool only, and that is their CV. For the freelance surveyor, this has been their best asset, allowing them to detail all the projects and roles they have performed, whilst also highlighting what equipment and software they are familiar with. It does miss one key thing though, how well did they perform these roles. In other words, how competently can they do their job?

Roots of the Freelancer

One of the simple truths about employing freelance personnel is that an employer wants a ready-made surveyor, engineer, etc. They do not want to invest the time or resources into training them for their specific needs. The freelancer has to be able to hit the ground running and have all relevant skills, experience, and prior training in order to fulfil their role and complete tasks competently. All this prior training and experience starts out with permanent employment. Although it varies depending on the individual, most freelance personnel have had at least a few short years in permanent employment. Going through the process of being a trainee, learning the ropes, and attending any and every training course they get sent on, is what allows an individual to develop the competence to be able to offer their services for freelance employment. This is along with a willingness to be flexible, adaptable, and take pride in their work. Even though they may never return to the same vessel or project again, the employer wants someone who will perform their duties with the same professionalism as any of their permanent employees in the same role. Although when times are busy, the work can be plentiful, in less prosperous times,

work options can soon start to diminish for those who don't exhibit this professional attitude.

Competency

While there is a pool of highly skilled and competent individuals out there, some of which are well known, and respected, there are also those who are less capable and dare we say it, in some cases, incompetent. Though incompetent personnel are rare and, as mentioned, may find the opportunities for contract work diminishing, there are always new ones to replace them. The question is: How do we identify the good, the bad and all those in-between? This is where schemes, such as the competency scheme laid out by International Marine Contractors Association (IMCA) come into place. They provide a mechanism for offshore survey personnel to record their competency and use this to demonstrate it to potential employers. The idea is a simple one; that while performing their duties and daily tasks, they can record evidence of this, and have someone else (someone competent) assess them in doing this. This assessment is recorded in a file, or a log book belonging to that individual. He or she can then add to this record and build up a picture of their capabilities, and at a suitable point in time, have this evidence verified by a suitable person onshore. This verification will help determine the person's grade, ranging from trainee through to supervisory grades.

Training for Career Development

Recording competence means several things to both the individual and the employer. First the individual now has a way of not only identifying their strengths, but also their weaknesses. They can use this to highlight areas for improvement or further training, taking ownership of their own career development. Secondly, it allows any employer to determine if the candidate has the relevant skills for the job at hand, or potentially how far away they are from reaching certain targets. For permanent staff, it means that the employer can more easily see areas for improvement, or future training. For freelance personnel, it means that the employer can now match the right skills to the right role with less risk. Above all this though, for someone to have demonstrated a level of competence in any task, they must have done this safely. And for anyone who has ever stepped foot on that rattly, smokey tug boat, converted for some impromptu survey, or even a large offshore construction barge, they know that safety must always come first.

The Role of an Agency

Whilst it is true that the individual takes ownership of their own career development, it is essential that anyone involved in sending that individual onto a project also plays a part in their career. This role is quite clearly defined with an employer; they employ them, take some responsibility for their training needs, and also are there to help them along the way with any curve balls that are thrown at them. However this is less clearly defined with freelance personnel.

In most cases, there is no direct responsibility or onus upon the agency that represents the freelancer. This is due to various reasons, but one is that the tether (or bond) between an agent and freelancer can be rather loose at times. The freelancer usually has no guarantee of work beyond a few short months, and for this reason, may utilise the services of multiple agents - meaning that not one single agency takes responsibility for that individual. This is a risky approach though, as it results in freelance personnel with little or no support for training or career development, save for those determined few.

Atlas Services Group takes a slightly different approach. While Atlas has thousands of individuals registered for work, ranging from surveyors, to project managers, engineers through to party chiefs, etc., they are all afforded the same opportunities, regardless of loyalty to one (or no) agency. Atlas has an ongoing commitment to help develop the individual's skills, while leaving ownership in their hands. One example of this is the training partnership Atlas has with EIVA. The training courses are not hosted where it's most convenient for Atlas as an agency, but they are hosted where the individuals need them. This year alone training courses have been hosted in Aberdeen, Singapore, Naples, with more to follow. These courses aren't only hosted for those that declare their unwavering loyalty to Atlas, but also to external employers of permanent staff. Another example is the provision of external lectures and training to the industry, whether this is guest lecturing to hydrographic students in The Netherlands, or hosting introductory hydrographic presentations at Ocean Business.

It may seem strange to assist in the training of permanent staff that do not, and may never work for a specific agency, but ultimately having a competent workforce in the offshore industry cannot be a selfish thing. As mentioned, competency and safety go hand in hand and it should be every individual, and every employers goal to make the offshore workplace a safe place.

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