

Relationship Building is the Key to Success



Iman Hill has risen through the ranks from petroleum engineer to senior management roles with Shell and BG. She talks to GeoExpro about the skills needed to thrive in the modern oil industry, the paucity of women in high-ranking jobs – and about the pleasures and pitfalls of juggling a successful career with the demands of a young family.

Jane Whaley

"Self-discipline, consistent performance and setting clear boundaries are essential" explains Iman Hill, who has recently become Vice-President and General Manager, Developments, at BG Group. "My children can see that it is necessary to be disciplined and to work hard in order to achieve, and I think that is one of the best examples I can give them. They also see that women can and should do anything."

Iman has now worked in the oil and gas industry for more than 20 enjoyable and fruitful years. She considers that her aim in any job is to deliver beyond expectation, be dependable and to create opportunities for others.

The rise of the NOC

Why does she enjoy working in this business? "It's a very dynamic industry," she says, "allowing you to see a lot of the world and to continue learning, all the time. While I enjoyed practical work as a petroleum engineer, what I really like is looking at the whole value chain, generating innovative strategies and creating relationships to win new business."

"The industry is changing," Iman continues. "Decreasing resources means more competition. The independent oil and gas companies in particular need to recognise the rising capacities and capabilities of the national oil companies, whose abilities are now matching their aspirations. The balance of power is shifting, which to me means that the international companies need to be dynamic and to understand their own strengths and capabilities and work them to the limit within their strategic framework. The way ahead is to allow your best people to build relationships with each other, with your industry partners and with the NOCs. I firmly believe that relationships are the foundation of the industry and the

future, and that those companies who want to work in true partnership with host governments will be successful. The important distinction here is that being a true partner means creating value for all, not just driving your own business agenda, and sometimes this means compromising on something you want."

"Companies have to be wary of risking their long term future for short term goals. For success in the oil industry you need to make the most of your existing assets and create value. You must be able to bring good opportunities into the 'funnel', whilst making sure these are worked on in a timely fashion. A company also needs to focus on 'today's core countries', as well as those which will become core in the next decade, and build sustainable relationships at every level. And don't forget that it is always very easy to overestimate how good your relationship is, when you're the one doing the assessing!"

Structured training at BP

Iman had not always envisaged a life in the oil industry. She was born in Saudi Arabia to an Egyptian mother and Palestinian father, the eldest of 6 children. Her parents, both doctors, sent her along with her two sisters to boarding school in Edinburgh, which was, as she says, "Quite a challenge - we didn't speak much English and as the eldest, I had to look after my younger sisters. I was only 5!"

Iman went to Aberdeen University and studied Biochemistry, but she decided that the career opportunities offered in this domain did not appeal to her, so she took a Masters in Computing and then began to look around for a job. "Obviously, all the big companies in Aberdeen were in the oil industry, so I suppose it was inevitable that I would end up working for one of them," she laughs. In 1986 she started with BP as a trainee petroleum engineer.

"In those days there were few degrees in petroleum engineering, so companies like BP picked good science graduates and put them through an excellent structured training

programme. While my academic background wasn't an obvious route for a petroleum engineer, my undergraduate degree showed that I was both scientific and practical, while computing demands ordered thinking. BP looked after us well, with a structured training programme which took three years and covered a whole range of disciplines, including petrophysics, production technology and well site engineering. Yes, I did my stint on the rigs in the North Sea!"

What did Iman think of working on the rigs? "Well, I was the only woman, but I just got on with my job, which was to learn the practical work of the petroleum engineer. My male colleagues accepted me when I showed them that I could be a useful member of the team. I think all graduates in the industry should do well site work, as not only do you learn the hands-on details of the job, but it also teaches you to depend on one another. My main problem with working on the rigs was the horrible weather. And I don't like heights! We often had to go up to the monkey board 100 feet above the rig floor, so I really had to conquer my fear!"

New Challenges

After 11 years at BP, with postings in Aberdeen, London and Glasgow, Iman decided she was ready for a fresh challenge and in 1994 she moved to London to work as a freelance petroleum engineer. "I wanted to be a consultant to prove that I could work in any business and physical environment, without large company support," Iman explains. "I think it is important to move out of your comfort zone, and working independently challenges you and builds your skills and experience."

Also during this time in London Iman met and married her husband Albert, and had their first child. "We decided early on that one of us would stay at home with the children while the other was the breadwinner – unfortunately, I drew the short straw! I have always believed it important not to expect allowances because I am a woman,

A successful and high achieving woman, Iman Hill is still a rarity in the industry.

even if that means working up until the day I gave birth, which is what happened with my second child. I had started a new job and it was important to me to show my boss and my team that I was a good choice and a dependable colleague!"

In 1996 Iman was headhunted by Shell to be Principal Petroleum Engineer in Shell Sarawak. "This should have been an enjoyable posting, but unfortunately our arrival coincided with the forest fires in that area and the whole country was covered in haze, which affected our young daughter very badly," Iman explains. "We stayed 18 months, but by then Nadine had been hospitalised and had severe asthma. Shell was enormously supportive of us throughout this and relocated us to The Hague, where my daughter rapidly recovered."

"In the Hague I was appointed Business Interface Manager, Middle East, for the Technology organisation. This was an interesting role, which involved ensuring that technologies developed in the Shell's extensive Research and Development Laboratories, such as water shut-off techniques, and expandable tubulars, were being implemented in the field."

From 2000 to 2002 Iman was in charge of Shell's Exploration and Field Development Planning Unit in The Hague, helping to rebuild the company's regional exploration capability and creating a team capable of delivering best-in-class field developments, before becoming Senior Regional Advisor for Africa to Shell's Committee of Managing Directors (CMD). "In this role I covered all of Shell's core businesses; E&P, Gas and Power, Downstream, Chemicals and Renewables" she explains. "I also developed and implemented various business and sustainable development strategies, but the core job was about building relationships. This was a defining job for me. I learnt a huge amount and I met some fascinating people, including many of Africa's Heads of State and Oil Ministers. I also got to do things like working with the Government of Ethiopia to bring more foreign direct investment to the country. I really enjoyed that job, although it was stressful -

particularly for my husband, as it entailed a lot of travel, which meant Albert was on his own with the children quite a bit!"

Egypt Country Chair

In 2004 Iman Hill became Country Chairwoman for Shell Egypt, based in Cairo, another job she really relished. "The job of Country Chair is also all about relationship building," she explains. "Relationships not just with our own staff, but with the government, oil ministry and national oil companies of the host country. The Chair must understand the needs of both Shell and the country and work hand in hand with the host government. These things enable business to happen. I was also ultimately responsible for the staff and effectively never off duty, so it is hard work, but I loved it."

Iman and her family, now consisting of five children ranging in age from 2 to 11, really enjoyed the 18 months they lived in Egypt. "It's a very pleasant place to live and the kids had a great time with all the swimming and the good weather. In addition, my mother lives in Cairo, so it was wonderful for them to get to know each other better. I enjoyed getting a chance to use my Arabic and liked the different lifestyle, though I have to admit, I never got used to the driving!"

After 18 months in Egypt, BG approached Iman and she was enticed back to the UK to head up the Developments section for them. "I loved working for Shell, but was intrigued to come to a smaller company like BG, which has an excellent reputation and is known for being dynamic and fast moving," Iman says. "I felt I could make a good personal impact and see the effects of that in a much quicker time frame due to the size and culture of BG. I've been here 8 months now and I haven't been disappointed".

Why So Few Women?

The family have moved back to England, to a house 20 minutes drive from BG, which they found on the internet and only saw the day before they bought it! "The chil-

dren have settled well into their new schools and are enjoying life," says Iman.

"I try to be home in time to cook their dinner, help with homework, bathe them and all the usual things a mother does, but I admit that I am very torn sometimes. I often find myself on the phone at the weekend, trying to sort out a problem at work, while the children are running in and out and asking me to play with them. The kids consider Albert to be the 'fun' part of their lives and come to me for emotional support. But I think he has the harder time, as our society is still getting used to the idea of Dads being at home, so it is quite a lonely role. Knowing that the children are safe with Albert has been fundamental to my success. He too is an excellent role model for our brood as they will grow up with no pre-conceived ideas of the roles of women and men!

Iman agrees that there are still very few women in senior management roles in the oil industry. "Although plenty of young women enter the business, it remains a male dominated industry. Perhaps this has to do with the inherent culture of the oil industry. Even though anti-discrimination laws as well as workplace rules allow flexible working, career breaks and childcare support, women still perceive that they will not be taken seriously or advance if they take advantage of these supportive policies. Efforts have been made to change this, but deep down the perceptions remain. This sounds negative, but I am very positive about the opportunities this creates for all of us as individuals to develop an inclusive culture in our own organisations, one that nurtures and promotes diverse ways of doing things. Your competitors may copy your strategies but they cannot replicate your people."

Would Iman encourage her children to go into the oil industry? "I want my children to do whatever will make their souls light up!" she laughs. "If that means the oil industry - well it's a tough business, but it's fun, and if that was the challenge that they wanted and they felt they could make a difference, then yes, I would encourage them!"



"Our ability to accumulate and add value to data underpins our business"

The full interview with Richard Fowler in GEO ExPro No. 2/2006 is available online: www.geoexpo.com ("People").