

PERSPECTIVES

Challenges and excitement of start-up drilling companies drive Kathy Willingham of Cactus Drilling

By Linda Hsieh, associate editor

KATHY WILLINGHAM CAN'T help it — she's attracted to start-up companies. In the last 11 years, she has helped to build 3 companies from the ground up and turn them into successful drilling enterprises. "I love being on the ground floor and moving the business up with input from lessons learned. It's both exciting and fulfilling," she said.

Her start-up adventures began in 1996, when Ms Willingham left **AnSon Gas Corp** to help spin off its subsidiary, **Anadarko Drilling**, into **Bayard Drilling**. Over a short period of 18 months, the company grew from just 325 employees to 1,300 employees. By the time **Nabors** acquired the company in 1999, Ms Willingham, as human resources manager, had overseen a 71% decrease in Bayard's recordable incidence rate.

After Bayard's acquisition, she left the drilling business and returned to an E&P company. But barely a year later, she jumped back into the action to help start what is now **Nomac Drilling**. "To me, the newness and interest is all in the drilling business; the E&P business is more status quo. With a drilling company, you'd better always be on your toes.

"There's never a dull moment in the oilpatch. Everytime you think you've seen everything, you really haven't. There's always something new and different in the drilling business," Ms Willingham said. "It's so fast-paced. I love it."

In 2003 she ventured into another start-up at **Cactus Drilling**, where she's currently director of human resources and HSE. Over 3 ½ years, Cactus has grown from 30 employees and 1 field-ready rig to nearly 1,000 employees and 38 operating rigs. Even with that growth taking place in a time of high activity and high turnover, Ms Willingham said, the company has been able to reduce its recordable incidence rate from 7.9 in 2005 to 3.9 in 2006, a 50% improvement.

"It's because we empower the rigs," she said. "Our drillers are responsible for their crews. We make our toolpushers and floorhands accountable. We can give them all the policies and procedures in the world, but that won't make them safe. If a floorhand gets injured, the toolpusher has to take him to the hospital. When that pusher has to tell the family



"You don't find much in the drilling business that repeats. It's always different, which makes it exciting," said Kathy Willingham, **Cactus Drilling director-HR and HSE.**

member and see the consequences of that accident, it hits home."

Another way Cactus has tackled HSE is through personal involvement, Ms Willingham pointed out. "Twice a year we have leadership classes that any of our employees can attend — they just have to step up to the plate. We also take input from drillers on how to improve our operations. When they see their ideas put into action around the company, they feel like they're part of a team.

"And we get to know our people on a first-name basis," she said. "At our leadership meeting yesterday, our workers said, 'You know us by our name; we're not a number.' That makes a big difference."

Still, Ms Willingham acknowledged, both Cactus and the industry have a long way to go with HSE, especially with the influx of new, less-experienced personnel. "Right now, I think we're covering our bases, but we need to do a better job. At Cactus, we're keying in on some major issues. For example, we found that 60% of our accidents occur on Wednesdays — Wednesday is the last day of our shift. So we go out to the rigs and bring this to the crews' attention. If we can stop 60% of our accidents, we've come a long way." ♠

'It's been too good, too fun'

Q: How have you enjoyed working in this industry and what lessons have you learned?

A: This industry's been better to me than I anticipated. I always thought I would get this experience, then move on to something else. But it's been too good, too fun.

Being a woman in an industry that is 99% men, you do worry about a glass ceiling — but that hasn't been a problem. Yes, there have been struggles, and I have to tap on some doors slightly to get it to open, but I've found that if you do your job, pretty soon everyone will see that it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. If you prove what you can do, you're going to go up.

I've also learned a lot from the many business mentors I've had throughout my career, whether it's in HSE, operations, contracts or general business. They've taught me a lot, and without them, this road would've been a lot tougher. I'm grateful to them and to everyone who has helped me in my business endeavors. ♠