



Guide to working in the North Sea

This guide is for people who are interested in a career in the North Sea.

As there are so many different types of jobs and career paths to follow it's hard to know where to start!

Let's clear the common misconception;

'I want to work on the rigs because I've heard the money's good'.

It's well paid for a reason! The North Sea is a challenging and hostile environment to work in, and the personnel required to operate an oil rig are each highly skilled. Each offshore worker has to pass rigorous training in order to qualify to work, and they are frequently assessed to maintain their certificates. Working offshore is in by no means an easy job, and safety is always a priority. Now we're clear on that let's take a look at the essentials.

Two things you need to have before working offshore in any discipline are:

- An offshore survival certificate
- An offshore medical

OFFSHORE SURVIVAL

Firstly for UK waters the offshore survival certificate is known as a BOSIET (Basic Safety Offshore Induction and Emergency Training).

The BOSIET includes Safety, Fire Prevention and Fire Fighting, First Aid and Hypothermia, Helicopter Safety and Escape, and Survival at Sea.

BOSIET courses vary in length between providers - usually 2½ to 3 days, and with the advent of e-learning some providers allow the theory parts to be completed via the internet. The cost of a basic course is around £600, plus any accommodation costs. Courses are very popular and there can be a waiting list of a couple of weeks - though gone are the days of a single provider for the UK. The "Offshore Survival Certificate" as the BOSIET is also commonly known, is only valid for 4 years, and a refresher (usually lasting a day) must be done before your old certificate expires otherwise the whole 3 day course must be repeated. There are no exceptions to this rule.

There are "extras" that you can request, and pay for, when doing your survival, e.g. a little extra helicopter escape training bolted on to the BOSIET counts as "Additional Safety Training" for the Norwegian sector



Different countries across the world have differing requirements, some more stringent than the UK requirements described above, whereas others are frighteningly inadequate. For example a BOSIET course is not sufficient for working in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea. The Norwegian Oil Industry Association (OLF) course, is a 5 day affair and a lot more demanding than that required in the UK. Most offshore training companies in the UK run courses allowing you to work in other sectors. These are often run as additions to the BOSIET course.

THE OFFSHORE MEDICAL

Every offshore worker must undergo and pass a medical examination which classifies them as medically fit to work in the offshore environment.

Different offshore authorities have different requirements. For UK waters only physicians who are approved by the United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association (UKOOA) Health Advisory Committee should carry out the examination and issue certificates.

The offshore medical certificate, as it is commonly known, is only valid for a limited time, and you need to renew it to continue working offshore. The frequency for renewal depends on the authority controlling the asset you are visiting and your age.

For UK waters, all assets are controlled by UKOOA and renewals are necessary 2-yearly, with effect from 1 Jan 2007, irrespective of the age of the offshore person.

A typical examination will begin with you filling out an extensive form on your medical history, and lifestyle e.g. alcohol consumption, exercise etc. After this a physical examination will be carried out:

- Urine check (for protein and sugar)
- Height, weight and resultant Body Mass Index calculation
- Blood pressure and pulse
- Basic eye sight test including colour vision
- Lung capacity check
- Hearing test
- A physical examination by a doctor. Check stature, listen to your breathing, reflexes etc.
- The doctor will also discuss the form you filled in, and carry out any additional checks they think necessary.

If your employer is paying for the examination they may ask for additional checks, e.g. drug test, to be carried out.



The Next Step

Don't rush out and get your offshore survival and medical just yet though. These alone will not guarantee you work. You now have to decide what kind of offshore career path you wish to follow. Perhaps you already have some skills you can build on. For example if you are an electrician, you could develop your skills to work in this field offshore. Or if you are a chef or a cook perhaps you would like to pursue this role offshore. There are a wide range of roles to research. Find out what skills are in demand at the moment, and where you would need to train to become qualified. Find out as much as you can about the industry. Perhaps you have a relative who works in the industry, or know a friend who knows of someone that does. Talk to them; ask them for their advice and how they got started. Research a discipline you are interested in, find out where you need to train and the costs involved in becoming qualified. Listed below are just a few of the many job categories to investigate further.

- Engineering
- Drilling
- Piping
- Marine/Diving/ROV
- Technicians
- N.D.T. & Rope access personnel
- Specialized trades & Riggers
- Health & Safety
- Geologists & Geosciences

Working Offshore

Working offshore is obviously different from working in an office onshore. The long working day (12 hours), the harsh weather conditions, especially in the North Sea, the remoteness, and the reliance on helicopter travel do not suit everyone. Others find it a challenging but refreshing environment, quite different from the nine-to-five routine and the rush-hour commute.



What To Expect

A lot depends on the installation. Whether it is a drilling rig, a production platform, or an FPSO (Floating Production Storage and Offloading vessel) they all differ. Some are large, some huge, others small. As a result, the facilities they offer all vary. However, a typical North Sea production platform will boast a core crew of 50-100 men and women. Living quarters are compact but comfortable, usually en-suite, with 2 or more to a cabin. Food is good and plentiful, although do not expect a beer with your meals - alcohol is strictly prohibited offshore.

Offshore crew usually work on a production platform for a period of two weeks before having a rest period onshore for two weeks - 2 weeks on 2 weeks off, though 2 weeks on and 3 weeks off is becoming increasingly common. Those in drilling and exploration can spend longer offshore. Offshore crew work 12 hours a day, including rest and meal breaks, and have 12 hours off. Off-shift, workers can choose to work out in the gym, watch a video or DVD or satellite TV, play snooker, play PC games, read or just hang out with their colleagues.

Downsides

It does have downsides. Living with work colleagues, means that an offshore worker has to be able to co-operate in a group. You have to get on with your cabin mates. Work disagreements need to be patched up quickly. Being away from home can also be a problem. Missing out on the kids' birthdays may be the least of your concerns; unfortunately prolonged absence from home can be a catalyst for divorce and family break up.

Restrictions

In addition to survival and medicals, there are a few other restrictions;

- The minimum age for working offshore in the UK sector is 18.
- You are not allowed to travel offshore under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs. This is strictly enforced at the heliport departure desk. It is not unknown for people to be denied travel offshore because their breath smells of alcohol. Additionally, some operators have provision for carrying out random drugs tests on potential travellers.
- There is a limit to how long you can spend offshore in any one trip. Most operators have a 21 day limit on this. After 21 days you must be onshore for 7 days before travelling offshore again.



Some North Sea Facts:

Oil was first discovered in the North Sea in 1859, and natural gas in 1910. Test drilling first began in 1966, followed by commercial exploitation by tanker in 1971.

The popular view is that the UK's share of North Sea oil is in decline, with energy reserves diminishing rapidly about 35 years after the oilfields were first exploited. There is however a growing body of opinion that suggests that proven oil reserves have been underestimated consistently.

The equivalent of 37 billion barrels of oil have been extracted from the UK Continental Shelf, leaving up to 25.5 billion barrels still to be recovered. Industry experts believe that the remaining reserves exceed current estimates by as much as a fifth.

New technology and the rising price of oil mean that it is now economically viable to drill fields once considered too difficult or too remote.

Our opinion?

There is still plenty of oil left in the North Sea!

