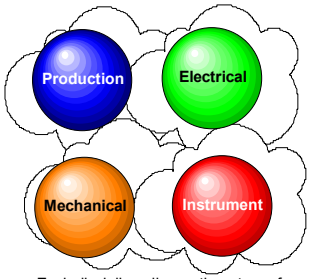
‘Multi-competence’ - flexible work practices in the new era

“Which of the 20 professional institutions does a multi-skilled engineer apply to?”

Traditional offshore HR strategies were based on ‘scientific management’. Analyse tasks and equipment, and limit individuals to a few simple, repetitive tasks, to get round human frailty or low skills. Gear training to a single discipline per worker, assume that plant needs to be handed over between workers, and rely on procedures and controls. Such demarcations turn easily into restrictive practices in a culture of single-discipline engineering.

Flexible working aims to break down these barriers, so individuals become competent in a range of diverse tasks. Modern plants are based on complex integrated technology, needing little human intervention. If the various skills are embodied in different people, numbers become uneconomic - especially offshore, where logistics play such a big part. Safety is also compromised where a single-discipline worker lacks an integrated understanding of the process and can create malfunctions through failure to recognise the full implications of his/her actions.

Dilution of skills or competitive edge?



Each discipline allows others to perform some of its duties in an assistant role - sometimes called the "fried-egg" approach!

More and more offshore companies are exploring multi-skilling as a way to reduce staffing, improve safety, or increase productivity - especially on new installations with DCS systems or older assets near the end of productive life. In the past, contractors were used only as a source of single-discipline labour, but not now. Most recent schemes are promoted by operators - but for contractor personnel, not the operator's own staff. Incentive contracts are often based on single-discipline norms, giving a multi-skilled contractor a commercial edge.

Most schemes are at a planning stage, and are limited rather than radical. Often they are based on multi-discipline *teams*, with multi-tasking. People with similar jobs share some work - e.g. between electrician & instrument tech, mech fitter & pipe-fitter, or process & utilities. Deck crews are key targets, with combined crane-driver/ rigger/ scaffolder/ painter teams. Other areas (e.g. engineering services and drilling maintenance) remain largely untouched. Most initiatives are platform-specific, with heavy reliance on *on-the-job* training and assessment.

Competence and flexibility

Competence assurance schemes offer opportunities to introduce multi-skilling in a safe, controlled way. Current schemes typically are based on competence standards, with on-job assessment. Current VQs, even if generic, are often based on a single-discipline premise, and may be difficult to apply across their full range, prompting demands for a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach. This may be easier to say than to achieve, without masses of paper.

Neither is it always recognised that multi-discipline teams put new pressures on the competence of supervisors, in terms of their technical understanding, their ability to identify hazards and assess risks outside their own discipline, their organisational skills, and their ability to manage on-job training and assessment.

Learn from other people’s mistakes

In brief, flexible working offers benefits, but is more complex than most people think. It is not just about individual competence, but goes to the heart of how the organisation is managed, and how its business processes work.

Initiatives succeed when they:	Initiatives fail when they:
• set a clear target within the spectrum of skills integration	• assume staff are fully competent in their base discipline
• check the existing competence of supervisors	• pay little attention to supervisory competence in critical areas
• check the competence of operatives in their base discipline	• lack focus on the precise end-target of integration
• are clear on the desired future organisational structure	• lack controls to measure progress on costs and efficiency
• are clear on contracting strategy (with manageable interface)	• have over-complex systems of skills analysis and assessment
• set realistic targets for completion	• use incentives to 'sell' the scheme, perverting assessment
• analyse the work in competence terms	• ignore social nature of platforms (able to emasculate change)
• use an effective blend of on- and off-job training	• create perceptions of a political battle between functions
• use competent trainers and assessors, on- and off-the-job	• set over-ambitious time-scales to achieve cost savings
• train supervisors before any operative training takes place	• fail to recognise impact of business changes during scheme

There are few real specialists now: multi-competence is the core of flexible organisations