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Africa Established Areas Supervisor at ExxonMobil

What is your current occupation?

Currently, I am the Africa Established Areas Supervisor in our Upstream Business Development Company at ExxonMobil. As a geoscience supervisor, my role is a mix of project management, staffing and development, opportunity generation and stakeholder engagement

What is your educational background?

I have a Bachelor’s of Science in Quantitative Geoscience, with a mathematics minor, from Applachian State University.

Our proprietary training process is exceptional at ExxonMobil; I’ve participated in numerous courses that run the gamut. A few of the highlights over the past decade include contracts and negotiations, exploration drillwell planning, asset business planning, sequence stratigraphic framework, probabilistic assessments for plays and prospects, new play identification, deepwater systems, tectonostratigraphic framework development, Diversity and Inclusion imperatives.

A key message for students is that the geoscience workforce is dynamic, and boundaries between sectors and occupations are fluid. How has this been true in your career?

I often describe geoscience as being Earth’s storyteller. It’s a nuanced science that requires equal parts quantitative analysis, abductive reasoning and expansive imagination. It seems simple to say critical thinking skills are needed in every sector, but there’s something elegant about that simplicity. Geoscientists are uniquely positioned for a multitude of roles because they are so good at thinking through cause-and-effect, long-term impacts, and how to see the subtle details

that unlock a whole new way of thinking about a problem. There's more than one career path that requires that kind of skill set.

For my career, I started as an individual contributor on a team that was evaluating new plays in the Middle East. Creative and focused exploration was the name of the game because we are exploring a large area that had significant above-ground risk at the time. My next assignment taught me how to approach problem-solving using "fit-for-purpose" tactics. We were basically a task force that roamed the globe, pursuing overlooked basins and underexplored plays. I got to see a lot with that team and learned the value of mentoring and the art of "what could it be." From there, I moved to a more detail-oriented and data-rich environment that was very heavily focused on quantitative seismic interpretation techniques. That team required that I sharpen my data analytics skills because we had so much data, it was impossible to take a single "map-line-log" approach that my early mentors taught me. Big data required efficient hypothesis testing, which meant I had to learn how to ask better questions. That team role morphed into a more business acumen-focused assignment; we took a deep dive into economics, competitive landscape analysis, and business strategy case studies. I call that time the era of brutal truths because I have found in those broadening assignments you find yourself with more questions than answers and you learn the humility of "I don't know what I don't know." My next assignment was as a planning advisor; the best way to describe that role is a Chief of Staff for the senior executives of the company. In that role, I learned how to do situation analyses for external engagements – speeches, presentations, panel discussions – as well as project planning, budget stewardship and reporting, SEC filings, audits, financial reporting methods, bookkeeping, strategy design, scenario analysis, and management of change. This is one of those roles where being able to see the forest and the trees is paramount; and geologists are well suited to that type of work! Coming out of that job, I'm now a geoscience supervisor with a cross-functional team that works all our established Africa assets. It's a huge portfolio, with a variety of opportunities and challenges that require creative solutions, cultural sensitivity and awareness, and an understanding of how our business landscape will be changing in the next 5, 10, or even 30 years. It's a fascinating and exciting time to be an explorationist!

Where do you see your sector moving in future years? How would you advise students to prepare to be competitive job applicants and successful employees?

It's hard to not acknowledge the energy transition when examining the future of careers in geoscience; that's especially true in the oil and gas sector. The future is going to look wildly different with the exponential changes we are experiencing as a global community and the energy transition is part of that change. While there's huge debate over what/how/when, it's important to recognize that geoscience is integral to that future. Because geoscientists are used to working in a multivariate space, dealing with uncertainty and risk analysis, and describing past and future processes based on extrapolating observations from present-day physical models, we are well-suited to addressing complex systems with a delicate balance between energy supply and demand.

Beyond the observational skills that the future geoscientists will bring to the table, I think the next most important skill to build is all around data. Data visualization and communication techniques, data analytics, awareness of programming/machine learning/artificial intelligence technology. Developing the ability to see signal in the noise and then communicating that signal succinctly and effectively is so vital in a dynamic marketplace. Those skills are highly transferrable across job sectors.

The last thing I think every geoscience student should work on, regardless of the career path they choose, is going beyond the traditional thought model of observation/interpretation. What I mean by that is going one step further to implication of that interpretation – what pathways does that open up, shut down, how does that modify the system, etc. I am really excited to see what new technology, a more integrated systems thinking approach to problem-solving, and the next generation of geoscientists will do to change the narrative around the energy transition for the better!

What is the role of networking in your sector? Do you have advice for a student who is just beginning to build their network? What is the best way for students to get their foot in the door?

Networking is so important to my job because I can't do all the work that has to get done by myself. Spending time building meaningful relationships with a diverse network is vital to your success. With the advent of the post-Zoom era, networking globally and with diverse perspectives is infinitely easier. Attend panel discussions on topics tangential to your research; listen to podcasts and reach out to the speakers when they spark thought bubbles that you want to explore; interact with posts on LinkedIn or attend the networking events at your trade conferences… just be open to listening and learning. The last piece of advice that I have on the networking front is don't underestimate the value of mentoring. Not just seeking mentoring but becoming a mentor and laterally mentoring your peer group. Authentically building a network means not treating it as a network you activate only in the hour of need! Check in regularly by scheduling time for yourself weekly/monthly to reach out and say, "what's new!"

What does a "typical" day of work look like for you?

Daily, I support a team of geophysicists, geologists, data analysts, and commercial advisors that are working to identify and mature new oil and gas prospects near existing ExxonMobil footprints across Africa. This support looks like budgeting and project prioritization, career development and training design, cross-functional collaboration, and engagement with our partners and host governments on project development. I think of this role as a roadblock removal service that facilitates our team finding and developing advantaged barrels for the resource owners.

What is the best part of your job?

The best part is probably that I get to see how things work, way beyond what I'd get to see by working with rocks alone. As a supervisor for a fantastic team, I get to engage in career development for my team members and help get their voices positioned to have a positive impact on our science. Seeing the development of a new business strategy in a very established industry is also equally fascinating and educational. I guess the best part of my job as a geoscientist-turned-strategist is that I am constantly challenged; there is always an opportunity to get to learn something new or re-think our understanding of a dynamic situation. I think the access to that opportunity is quite a privilege.

Do you have any other comments or advice for students looking to enter your sector of the geoscience workforce?

I will leave students with this last thought. As geoscientists, we have the privilege of thinking of problems on a much longer time scale (eons, literally) than the general public. There are a lot of systemic issues that we need to solve as a global community. Those problems won't be solved overnight; we have to figure out how to navigate the space between where we are and where we're going with compassion and an awareness that we don't have unintended negative consequences. A lot of that navigation will come from geoscientists sharing their observational skills with the world; teaching others how to learn to look. It's an art as much as it is a science and being able to occupy both spaces is an honor. Please, use that privilege to amplify underrepresented voices. Leverage your skills to help contextualize problems and be a node-connector to bring problem-solvers to the table, learning as you go!

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