

Leigh Mount



46-year-old Leigh Mount is a subsea construction engineer who has been contracting in one guise or another since 1977. His work experience includes commercial fishing, demolition, digging holes in the road, laying kerb stones, civil engineering diving and offshore diving. He is currently contracted as a senior project engineer for one of the world's largest subsea construction companies.

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Leigh started his self-employed working life as a 'share fisherman' with the local inshore fleet, after a three year apprenticeship in commercial and industrial photography and much door-knocking failed to secure him a job in the photo agency world.

His introduction, in 1979, to a team of commercial divers working on the demolition of a local Victorian pier led to a long-term career as a professional diver, starting with marine civil engineering projects around the country.

In 1982, three very tough months on a TOPS course in commercial diving at Falmouth qualified him to work offshore in the oil and gas industry as a commercial air diver. He headed for Aberdeen, hub of the UK offshore diving industry, to start knocking on doors yet again – this time with more success. Before long, he was offshore as a 'baby diver' on a new diving support vessel called the 'Seaway Condor'.

His earlier industrial photographic background was always in demand with diving companies, and Leigh recalls on one job having to use his wardrobe at a B&B on the Scilly Isles as a makeshift darkroom.

In 1994, he was asked to undertake ad hoc office work, assisting an offshore diving company with the development of offshore construction procedures and the procurement of equipment for a specific offshore project. He alternated this work with diving assignments over the next couple of years.

Three years' later, Leigh was invited to provide consulting services to his present client, which he accepted. A limited company was established, and Leigh has since then worked on numerous aspects of the subsea offshore construction industry, including tendering, engineering and the development of new techniques through to the offshore installation phases of the project. His work has taken him all over the world, including latterly Paris, Houston and his current location, Newfoundland.



Crane on diverless construction vessel, Cape Town

"Unless you are extremely lucky," says Leigh, "at some stage in your contracting career, you will have to work away from home. I have strong recollections of my young son being pulled off me, crying his heart out, and just having to get in the car and go away for the next month or more.

"Working abroad can exacerbate the situation," he continues, "and the further away or the more remote the location, the harder it is. If a domestic crisis or family problem arises whilst you're away, there's not much you can do other than to listen and offer advice – you can't always just drop everything and get on the

next available flight, as it may take you more than a day or two to get home. I was some 300 miles north of the Shetland Isles, on a dive boat in the middle of nowhere, when I got a call through old Portishead radio station telling me that if wanted to see the birth of my first child, I had better start travelling. Before you commit to a contract, you should get your leave and travel rota agreed, otherwise you will miss family birthdays and important aspects of family life."

According to Leigh, freelancing has its merits, but only for those who are prepared to forgo the benefits of job security, health and pension schemes, paid holidays and welfare rights, and to make the financial commitments and take the risks associated with freelancing. "As a freelancer," he says, "you live or die by your reputation, and are only as good as your last job. I see myself as a true consultant, retained by my main client for my industry knowledge and experience. I'm often asked by others within the industry for an opinion or idea on how to address aspects of the job, and I also do ad hoc consulting work for various contacts within the civil engineering industry from my early days as a diver."



Loading 2m x 30m mooring piles weighing 100t

The oil and gas industry has a higher percentage of contractors than any other industry in the UK, and Leigh points out that this is not necessarily the chosen route for many of those individuals. Historically, the industry has preferred to utilise the resources of contractors who can be hired and fired as required, instead of the operators and service companies having to bear the cost and burden of an employed workforce during the lean times.

"The whole community is driven by the price per barrel," explains Leigh. "This extends to everything associated with the



Diving support vessel CSO Wellserver sailing through 'The Narrows' entrance to St John's Newfoundland

industry, including the cost of accommodation, the price of a pint, and the cost of a loaf of bread at the corner shop. I remember a few years ago, when the price fell to just \$11 a barrel – I left my rented accommodation for the client site, only to see another four contractors in the same street tying their personal belongings to their car roofs, as they had been paid off that week. No notice, no soft landing.

"The Government's 'Brown field taxation' has had a marked impact on North Sea projects and in turn the contracting industry since its introduction. Several planned developments and projects were shelved by the operators because of the uncertainty surrounding the tax and its economic implications. Many contractors have moved to other locations, such as Houston, Baku and West Africa. The oil and gas industry has most probably one of the most migrant workforces around."

All Leigh's projects are contracted directly with the client, and he has never had to operate through an agency, either by choice or at a client's request. "Although it operates on a global level, in some pretty far-flung and unusual locations, the oil and gas industry is actually quite small. Word-of-mouth referrals and recommendations count for a lot."

Leigh rates his last project as being one of the most interesting. Based in the Gulf of Mexico, it involved laying rigid steel pipeline's in 7,600 feet of water. The pipe was installed from a specialist vessel and then transferred to a winch on the floating platform, before connection to the process equipment. "The maximum load on the winch during this operation was 700 tons – that's the equivalent to a car park full of Mini cars," says Leigh. "Eleven world records were set during that project."

Work, travel and family commitments leave little time for hobbies, but Leigh admits to enjoying sketching and watercolour painting; he reads a lot too, and finds great pleasure in walking and trekking when he can.

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PCG believes that freelancers have a valuable role to play in the UK's economy, generating wealth and employment and offering some of the brightest and best talent around - consultants, advisers, contractors, engineers, specialists, professionals. This profile was originally published in PCG's Freelancing Matters, Issue No 4. Copyright © PCG 2004

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