

# ENGINEERING CAREERS

JOINT VENTURE WITH DESIGN GROUP STAFFING INC.

## VITAL ROLE IN RESOURCE EVOLUTION

Mike Duff enjoys a unique view of the evolution of Alberta's resource sector and Canada's engineering industry from his seat as the head of Design Group Staffing Inc., one of the leading privately owned staffing firms in the country — and by far the largest when it comes to engineering and technical staffing.

He came to Canada from his native Australia upon graduation for what he expected to be a one-year working holiday in 1971. Having grown up in Sydney, he thought he'd see a bit of the world before building his career back home. An electrical engineer, his plan was to go to Montreal but he was redirected to Edmonton, a place he had never heard of, where he took a three-month contract position to work on the design of a steel mill.

"The early 1970s was an exciting time to be in Alberta," says Mr. Duff, whose three-month contract was extended to a couple of years.

It was a significant boom time for Alberta's tar sands. Oil hit an historic high in 1973 when it shot from \$3 a barrel to \$14. And that proved to be one of the drivers of tar sands expansion. Certainly, mega projects for such power players as Syncrude and Suncor were being designed and constructed. Mr. Duff found work on one of those projects. When that job finished, he decided to stay and

start a business. He saw an opportunity to help resource companies meet staffing needs.

"I got into business providing engineering and design staff in the Edmonton area," Mr. Duff says. "There was a big demand for people in Alberta."

In 1976, he launched Design Group Staffing. Today, providing engineering and construction designers, engineers and draftsmen remains the core business for the now-national staffing agency.

"About 50% of our business still comes from the energy, resource and tar sands industry," Mr. Duff says. "We started in a shared office in Edmonton, paying \$200 a month for rent and secretarial services. We have grown to 400 employees and 25 branches across the country and we have expanded from engineering to provide information technology, accounting and finance staff. We also have a division that provides secretarial and administrative support."

The growth has largely been organic in the engineering and professional area of the business, mirroring the growth in the resource sector, while about 20% of revenue comes from acquisitions primarily in the administrative support side of the business.

"We can now provide a full range of services to clients across the country," he says.

Design Group's growth also reflects a new reality with re-



Mike Duff's intended short visit to Canada is now into its fifth decade.

spect to Canada's workforce. According to Statistics Canada, about 20% of the workforce today comes from non-traditional positions: temporary, part-time and contract workers.

"Since I got into business, the use of contingent or temporary workers has grown dramatically," Mr. Duff says. "That has been driven by a few things. In part, it is the result of the need for more flexibility and companies wanting to be more efficient with the use of their workforce and increase it or decrease it depending on their needs. In fact, up to 25% of the workers in the engineering, construc-

tion and banking industries are contract or temporary workers. That is the way of life for many professionals today. On the employee side, particularly when it comes to the Gen Xers and Gen Ys, people are also looking for more flexibility and mobility in their roles. They want a variety of experience. As interested as people might have been in my day to sit for 15 or 20 years in a business working their way up, today they want to do it right away and they want to move."

Along with the shift away from full-time, long-term employment to contract, project-based positions, there has also

been a clear recognition, again from both the employer and employee perspective, of the need for fit.

"Companies today really are who they hire," Mr. Duff says. "We have transitioned from hiring coming down to gut feel or black art to disciplined processes with multiple interviews, specific outlines of roles and outcomes and a more systematic approach of profiling personalities to meet job/project requirements."

Increasingly, those projects rely on advances in technology, and the kinds of careers now possible in the oil patch are

much different than they were in the 1970s when draftsmen were in high demand.

"I remember visiting our customers' offices when I first started and there would be dozens and dozens of drafting boards lined up," Mr. Duff says. "Today, we don't provide draftsmen as much as technologists. There is also more electronic control of processes and many more high-tech roles. A lot of things are modularized today and companies are looking for a greater range of skills and disciplines than there ever has been."

For example, process instrumentation and control, satellite mapping and environmental engineering are all new areas of career development in the resource sector and are pushing the industry further.

"While traditional engineering — structural, chemical, electrical, mechanical for example — is alive and well, it is evolving and creating exciting new opportunities," Mr. Duff says.

"And as the economy continues to strengthen, we are seeing projects in Alberta that had been put on hold ramping back up. As oil prices remain above \$80 a barrel, there will be considerable competition to build and I think the industry will be very strong in the future. In fact, we are already up 200% over what we budgeted in 2010 and things are expanding fairly quickly."



### Helping engineer successful recruitment.

Last year, at Design Group Staffing Inc., we placed more than 15,000 people in permanent, temporary and contract positions in a variety of job roles and industries across the country. Each week, Design Group Staffing pays over 3,000 skilled contract and temporary personnel who work at diverse locations - from downtown office towers to industrial parks, petrochemical refineries, remote field sites and mines. Whether you're looking for a new recruit or a new job anywhere in Canada, we can help.

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**Design Group Staffing Inc**

