

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)

From Tech Side to People Side by Veronica Flores

An industrial engineer took on human resource duties, quickly finding success and a new career to love.

At the end of 2007, PinnacleAIS had only 16 employees, but the Houston-based oil and gas services company experienced 600 percent revenue growth that year.

Looking toward 2008, Ryan Sitton, president and chief executive officer, desperately needed help staffing up, and the need for a human resource professional became quickly apparent.

As the economy weakened, clients were looking to reduce operating costs and increase productivity, which our engineering services help do by evaluating risks associated with equipment failure. Hence, we continued to grow into 2008—in one short period hiring seven engineers, five drafters, six clerks, a sales manager and a controller.

Still unsure of whether the company was large enough to justify a full-time human resource professional, our leaders considered their options—and brought me into the picture. I was a project engineer with an industrial engineering degree who had been there for six months.

“By taking one of our project engineers, who was not only familiar with the company but also with what we do on a technical level, and placing her in a role to directly touch possible recruits, we could drastically improve our opportunities to bring in the best fits,” explains Sitton.

I was eager to take on the challenge. In June 2008, I became full-time recruiting coordinator. As my responsibilities increased, so did my salary. This was a promotion, as I moved from a base project engineering role into a critical position in the company. I knew I would miss engineering, but I also knew I could make a greater impact in this new position. I used to think that I would eventually return to engineering, but now I enjoy HR too much to leave.

I had always enjoyed the people side of business and was previously involved in some college recruiting, yet I still gravitated toward using an engineer’s analytical skills. This affinity now helps me focus on master scheduling and coordinating HR for projects.

I targeted colleges with higher percentages of graduates who had left their home regions. Such candidates will be more willing to relocate and travel.

Scheduling provides the information necessary to direct recruiting for potential new projects. I collaborate with our sales and marketing professionals to build cost estimates and schedules. My tasks include estimating cost, schedule and resource requirements for proposals; recruiting and staffing positions; and performing the support and compliance roles inherent in HR. The higher the probability of landing the sales, the more people my manpower projections show to hire. This model allows us to recruit, hire, onboard and train a substantial portion of new project teams by the time we are awarded contracts. As a result, teams hit the ground running.

In addition, I soon began developing key policies, finishing an employee handbook and building our employee appraisal system. Building a performance management process was not the easiest project I’ve ever tackled. I worked with Controller Steve Cory to identify PinnacleAIS’ core values and set forth these expectations to our employees. We created leadership and other competencies that were fundamental,

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measurable and developable. These competencies are used to evaluate all our employees. The final element is a numeric value based on the employee's strength in working alone, for a supervisor, with a team and in the company as a whole.

To prepare for my new position, I sought advice from Cory, regularly consulted our employment attorney, and read every article, book and online reference I could find. I participated in online training regarding interviewing, performance appraisals, policies and handbooks.

Lessons Learned

My career switch has taught me invaluable lessons:

Define demand. PinnacleAIS continues to experience growth. We have projects with companies including Chevron, Valero and LyondellBasell where we implement and manage facility reliability programs to help lower operating costs, reduce risks and improve run times. Because we are so specialized, it is difficult to find experienced candidates. Those we find don't know our processes and still require training; therefore, we primarily recruit for engineers directly out of college. Then, we have to teach them what they need to know today and develop them professionally into future leaders. Our exponential growth and particular work create an environment ideal for internal promotions; managers just have to ensure we adequately train employees to jump into those roles.

Meet demand. As an engineer, I took a scientific approach to college recruiting. I defined the qualities we need and determined how to find engineers who exhibit those traits. In a small company, engineers have a lot of responsibility, interact with clients, and adapt to changing projects and locations. They must have the drive and initiative to advance quickly.

First, I pulled data from the major engineering organizations to find the most active student chapters, whose members attend college full time and participate in various activities.

I requested statistics from each of their college career centers to find out the percentage of students who leave their home regions for employment. Such candidates will be more willing to relocate and travel. I then compiled the lists and did cost-benefit analyses for each campus based on travel expenses for recruiting efforts and the available pool of candidates. After selecting the most favorable colleges, I set up informal presentations and dinners with their student organizations—complete with PinnacleAIS giveaways. This tactic gives us one-on-one time and establishes personal relationships with students, thereby differentiating our company and allowing us to be competitive with larger companies.

Develop a tracking system. In the fall of 2008, recruiting started paying off with an abundance of engineering students. It became difficult to manage applications. I was in search of a reasonably priced applicant tracking system. After sticker shock from a few estimates, I found a free resource, SmartRecruiters, that allows us to distribute applications via our careers web site and offers a database to manage them. Now I respond to, rate and track applicants online.

Interview at the grass roots. At PinnacleAIS, every employee has a say in building our company. All employees are trained and have the opportunity to interview and vote on future co-workers. Technology Manager Ben Charlton describes the process as “empowering.” I get many employees involved to get a solid understanding of how an applicant will fit in technically and culturally. All candidates go through screening, technical testing, panel interviews and one-on-ones with managers. When an employee starts, “It's like I already know them,” says Administrative Assistant Candyce Cummings.



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Make a niche. In our company, we wear many hats, but employees still want to know their specific job functions and what is expected. The lines aren't always clear when a company is not large enough to hire specialists, but the work still needs to get done. We have to ensure that the employees we select are dynamic and flexible enough.

We have struggled, for example, to differentiate an asset-integrity consultant—an engineer with a four-year degree—from an asset-integrity technologist with an associate's degree, when tasks overlap. Moving forward, we plan to distinguish tasks that can be conducted by people in multiple positions but must be checked for quality by an employee qualified to sign off on and be responsible for the work.

Endless Possibilities

I never pictured myself in an HR role. Years of technical training and experience did little to prepare me. My career expectations changed. I am no longer concerned only with my career; I now take into account all employees. How do we hire the best candidates? How can we retain top performers? How should we develop employees to reach their potential? I never realized how much goes into HR and how critical it is to the growth and structure of a company. I have learned so much and yet not even scratched the surface. That is the main reason I continue to be drawn to HR and can see a lifelong career in it.

It is exciting to be paving the way in a new department with endless possibilities. Going forward, my primary objectives are to identify requirements for position transitions, help employees define career paths and incorporate those goals into annual reviews. This will increase retention, currently at 89 percent. Furthermore, I'd like to build a training program to provide employees with the skills and the confidence to take on new roles. Development of our personnel will increase the efficiency of our teams and the quality of work for clients

I see myself growing with PinnacleAIS to become a leader and a strong HR manager. I would like to further my education in the profession and attain certifications so that I may ascend to the next level professionally, as well as solidify the credibility of my position and role in the organization.

PinnacleAIS

Services: Provides mechanical integrity and risk-based inspection solutions for the refining and petrochemical industries. Through the evaluation and assessment of client facility assets, PinnacleAIS develops inspection plans that result in increased safety and profitability while ensuring compliance.

Ownership: Privately held; owner, Jennifer Sitton.

2009 revenue: Less than \$20 million.

Top executive: Ryan Sitton, president and chief executive officer.

Employees: 70.

Locations: Three offices in Texas, with projects in Montana and Louisiana.

Connections: www.pinnacleais.com, info@pinnacleais.com, (281) 598-1330 (281) 598-1330

The author is recruiting coordinator at PinnacleAIS in Houston.



The PinnacleAIS Solution

PinnacleAIS provides its customers with unique, integrated technologies and services for asset integrity, reducing the need to hire multiple contractors by streamlining projects to ensure that all initiatives are completed at the same time. The company's integrated solutions span four key areas: Mechanical Integrity, Process and Operational Integrity, Compliance/Process Safety Management and Business Improvement, which can be interwoven to provide a complete model that fully optimizes asset integrity.

PinnacleAIS provides the following solutions for its customers:

- Ensures the most strategic use of inspection resources
- Guarantees compliance with state and federal regulations or codes
- Assesses degraded equipment and reports on the remaining useful life of each asset
- Evaluates safety and minimizes business risks associated with asset integrity
- Develops programs that reduce costs associated with managing the reliability of assets
- Provides unsurpassed customer service

About PinnacleAIS

Based in Houston, TX, PinnacleAIS is a leading technology and services provider, specializing in wholesale improvements in asset integrity for the petroleum and chemical processing industry. Through innovative technology and world class services, PinnacleAIS offers a unique approach to asset integrity, helping operating companies realize substantial improvements in compliance and safety while simultaneously reducing costs and business risks. PinnacleAIS is a member of numerous trade organizations including The American Petroleum Institute (API).

PinnacleAIS was founded in 2006 and is privately held.