

Connecting the World: OTC as a Platform for Global Exchange

By Johnny Zapata



OTC provides excellent opportunities for global networking, and it is not unusual for participants to wear their national attire.

All photos courtesy of OTC.

The international appeal of the Offshore Technology Conference (OTC) was on full display on opening day of the fourteenth OTC in 1982, when the *Houston Chronicle* praised the cross-cultural experience where ninety different nations were represented and the words “oil, gas, and petroleum” were heard spoken in hundreds of different ways.¹

The same description applied to OTC’s fiftieth conference in 2018. Since its infancy OTC has reflected the worldwide reach of the oil and gas industry through the companies, organizations, and attendees who find their way to Houston each year. When I attended OTC for the first time on April 30, 2018, it came as no surprise that, while walking through the exhibition halls, I could understand Angolans speaking

Portuguese on my right, people speaking Russian to my left, and individuals speaking English with a British accent walking in front of me. Hearing other languages that I know, like Spanish, Turkish, and Italian, as well as others that I do not know, I felt I had traveled the globe within NRG Park.

Now having reached its golden anniversary, OTC continues to be an event where people and organizations from many nations are united in the exchange of ideas under a common banner. Even in 1983, a year that saw oil prices tumbling and OTC’s attendance dropping, the conference welcomed twenty-six nations as exhibitors, two more than the previous year.² In 2018 it was apparent that each coun-

try and firm displayed their most up-to-date, cutting-edge technologies. In offering this international forum, OTC has played a vital role in connecting people from around the world for the last five decades, and what better place than an international city with a rich oil history like Houston to host such an event. Yet, as the OTC phenomenon grew, the need to expand beyond Houston became evident, and OTC added three new conferences and two new locations.

EXPANDING THE OTC FAMILY

To expand its outreach globally and technically OTC added three new events to its calendar: the Arctic Technology Conference and OTC Brasil in 2011, followed by OTC Asia, created in 2012 and inaugurated in 2014. These three conferences serve to “extend OTC’s reach around the world and to focus on specific technical and regional issues.”²³ The expansion of OTC events is a direct response to the needs of a growing industry. The spread of offshore exploration in the Arctic, Brazil’s Atlantic coast, and the waters off Southeast Asia, as well as other parts of the world, created the necessity for new events addressing needs specific to each region. Like their Houston counterpart, these OTC events attract attendees from across the globe and encourage the further exchange of new ideas and technologies under development in places where the offshore industry is still emerging. The high industry demand that led to these expansions attests to the integral role offshore technology plays in the present and future development of the global oil and gas industry as well as the success of the flagship Offshore Technology Conference.

ARCTIC TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE

The Arctic Technology Conference is the first OTC event of its kind, as the organization states, “The conference is built upon OTC’s successful multidisciplinary approach, with 12 technical societies and organizations working together to deliver the world’s most comprehensive Arctic event.” The post-show report indicated, “The inaugural Arctic Technology Conference (ATC), held 7-9 February 2011 at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, Texas, brought together 1,318 attendees from 23 countries for a world-class event under the theme *Challenges*

Past and present members of the OTC Board of Directors network at the OTC events booth.



Exhibitors at the Arctic Technology Conference showcase their latest innovations, products, and services, as they have done at the original OTC since 1969.

for Today, Opportunities for Tomorrow.” Since the first ATC the conference has met in Houston in 2012, 2014, and 2018; Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2015; and St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada in 2016. Hosting the conference in Copenhagen and St. John’s allowed for broader accessibility, attracting oil and gas professionals from the circum-arctic regions of Europe and North America. According to ATC, “This will create an opportunity for unprecedented communication and collaboration about challenges and solutions for the global exploration and development of onshore and offshore Arctic basins.”²⁴

Though significantly smaller than OTC, the Arctic Technology Conference includes an exhibition and hosts programs such as The Arctic Next Wave. Since 2015 this program has connected young professionals with seasoned energy veterans. That enables participants “to learn from experts with specific knowledge and make connections that will allow them to tackle future Arctic opportunities.” ATC includes the Arctic Distinguished Achievement Awards, modeled after the Offshore Technology Conference (OTC) Distinguished Achievement Awards. The ATC Awards Committee considers nominations for major technological, humanitarian, environmental and leadership contributions to the industry. Additionally every year at ATC more than ninety conference papers have been presented focusing on “solutions and emerging technologies that address the cutting-edge technologies and practices needed for exploration and production in the Arctic.”²⁵

OTC BRASIL

The first Offshore Technology Conference outside of Houston was housed at the Riocentro in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Running from October 4-6, 2011, the inaugural OTC Brasil showed promise of its success before the conference began. Strong company interest prompted the expansion of the planned exhibition space, adding 3,500 additional



OTC Brasil attracts firms from all over Brazil and the world to participate in its exhibition.

square meters of net space, boosting total space to more than 14,450 square meters. The conference hosted experts from seventeen countries who presented 145 technical papers.⁶ Since the first OTC Brasil in 2011, three more editions of the conference have taken place in 2013, 2015, and 2017. The next one is scheduled in 2019.

OTC Brasil is organized by OTC and the Brazilian Petroleum, Gas and Biofuels Institute (IBP). These two organizations cooperate alongside fifteen international and Brazilian engineering and scientific organizations, which assist in developing the technical program. Like its parent conference, OTC Brasil features an exhibition. The most recent conference in 2017 had more than 120 exhibitors from twenty countries and attracted more than 8,500 professionals representing operating and service companies.⁷

Additionally the conference works alongside a youth program that allows students from across Brazil to participate in the event. The program *Profissional do Futuro*, — Portuguese for “Professional of the Future” — was created to attract young students to the oil and gas industry and is promoted by IBP. Through participation at OTC, the program gives students the chance to engage in debates, receive orientation, and learn about the different opportunities a career in the industry offers.⁸ By serving as a resource for future professionals, the program goes beyond exchanging technology and ideas by investing in the future human capital of Brazilian offshore technology.

The latest installment of OTC Brasil in 2017 hosted 8,500 professionals and dealt with pre-salt development and the pre-salt layer, a sub-oceanic layer of salt under which large

deposits of oil and gas are found, an issue particular to offshore activity in Brazil.⁹ The success that OTC Brasil enjoyed as the first conference outside of Houston was followed by yet another OTC conference.

OTC ASIA

On the other side of the world on March 25-28, 2014, in Malaysia’s bustling capital Kuala Lumpur, thirteen of the energy industry’s leading professional organizations collaborated to create the OTC Asia. Occupying 5,500 square meters at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Center in the shadow of the Petronas Twin Towers, “the inaugural OTC Asia attracted 25,100 industry professionals representing 88 countries and 98 nationalities. The event also included an exhibition showcasing the products and services of more than 240 companies.”¹⁰ Since its inauguration the biennial conference has returned in 2016 and 2018. With the region’s energy sector being dominated by offshore production, it is no surprise that Malaysia, one of Asia’s emerging oil and gas hubs, was chosen to host a new OTC.

The offshore industry in Asia is developing and is still heavily concentrated in shallow waters. As countries and companies attempt to cultivate untapped reserves, they are exploring more challenging conditions such as deepwater drilling. According to OTC Asia, “Covering developments spanning from Russia to Australia and India to Oceania, OTC Asia [provides] industry professionals the opportunity...to share knowledge and discover cutting-edge technologies to further the region’s growth.” Ultimately the conference wishes to “highlight Asia’s growing importance in the global energy mix.”¹¹



Young professionals listen to a presentation at OTC Brasil 2017.

Similar to OTC in Houston, OTC Brasil, and ATC, OTC Asia features outreach programs that focus on helping young professionals in the industry and a program aimed at high school students. OTC Asia indicates that, “The Next Wave programme is tailored to energy professionals under the age of 36 or with less than 10 years working experience in the energy industry.” Through panel and roundtable breakout sessions, young professionals network

with seasoned professionals and receive information about opportunities in the industry as well as guidance on how to make the most of their careers. Teenagers can participate in the High School Student STEM Program, which is “aimed at attracting and engaging the next generation of oil and gas professionals.” With the use of workshops, high school students and teachers engage in interactive activities such as experiments. The program includes guest speakers, an industry panel session, and an exhibition/technology tour so that students can “learn about emerging technology in the petroleum industry, career opportunities, or how energy makes an impact on our everyday lives.”¹² Thus, OTC Asia invests in the future of offshore in an emerging region.

OTC AROUND THE WORLD

In looking at the value of the expanded OTC conferences, oil and gas historian Joseph A. Pratt explained, “The continued growth in offshore production and the technological innovations needed to operate in deeper water and harsher environments encourage global pressure for OTC. Houston was the obvious location for OTC when U.S.-based companies dominated global offshore activity. Growing competition in the offshore industry with the expanding presence of both national oil companies and privately owned national

Young professionals from around the world take advantage of OTC Asia programs such as The Next Wave.



'champions' called forth demand for global competition in sharing technology. OTC responded by creating an international presence."¹³ Now the family of OTC events has expanded across the globe to better meet the demands of the industry.

Starting in 2011 with the first Arctic Technology Conference followed by OTC Brasil, OTC had its sights on events that would focus on regional issues and challenges in the development of offshore technology. OTC Asia shows the growing importance of offshore in one of the fastest developing regions of the world. Although many other events



OTC Asia attendees read up-to-minute news from the show daily in 2016.

similar to OTC have appeared over the years around the United States and the world, the original OTC and its regional conferences with their global reach continue to serve as the primary platform for the exchange of technology and as a resource to current and future professionals in the field.

As the fiftieth OTC kicked off on April 30, 2018, Scottish bagpipers in kilts could still be seen, and the words "oil, gas, and petroleum" could still be heard in a multitude of languages. As the conference ended on May 3, it was clear that OTC remains true to the spirit of exchange. With a permanent presence on three continents, OTC's worldwide impact has grown wider and deeper, just like the industry. Looking forward to the next fifty years, each of the regional conferences will ensure that the developments in other parts of the world will receive their rightful attention. ATC, OTC Brasil, and OTC Asia will serve as vectors of new technology as the center of the offshore industry shifts to other parts of the world. One can only expect that in future years the scenes that have characterized OTC and given it its international flavor will also play out in places as far removed from Houston as Rio de Janeiro and Kuala Lumpur.

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Celebrating OTC's 50th edition in 2018, bagpipers donning kilts, can be seen marching on opening day in Houston.