Key issues
- The key challenge was identifying which elements of the assessment process could be standardised from project-to-project, whilst still capturing consideration of site-specific sensitivities and regulatory requirements. The toolkit was initially developed for offshore exploration drilling, as this was considered the most uniform type of impact assessment. When the toolkit was later expanded to include onshore oil and gas exploration, some of the tools could not be fully standardised due to the variability of baseline sensitivities.

- A secondary challenge was the communication of the tools to all potential users within Shell, so that more projects begin to utilise the tools and these can become living documents that are continually improved over time. Full roll-out of the toolkit has been partially delayed due to a reduction in the number of exploration projects Shell is pursuing following the world-wide drop in oil prices.

Purpose of the project
Impact assessments (IAs) for oil and gas exploration activities must often be conducted within restricted timeframes, making IA / permitting activities on the critical path for the project. This situation has the potential to compromise the robustness of assessment and lead to costly delays. Shell wanted to explore ways to reduce these risks and be more efficient on the impact assessments carried out for their exploration projects globally.

Description of the project
Shell commissioned ERM to develop a toolkit to improve standardisation in the impact assessment process that could be used to support all of their oil and gas exploration projects across the world. As part of this work, ERM first reviewed a representative sample of impact assessments for past exploration projects prepared for Shell. Then a toolkit was developed for offshore exploration drilling. This was later expanded to include onshore exploration drilling and both onshore and offshore seismic surveying.
After reviewing the potential areas for standardisation, ERM included the following in the toolkit:

- Standard Terms of Reference (TORs) for impact assessments
- Project standards tables – Pre-populated tables comparing applicable Shell corporate requirement and relevant international guidance/conventions.
- Baseline decision trees – A series of visual flow charts that map the typically affected receptors for exploration activities and the decision making process to identify what baseline data may be required, and what options are available given any schedule constraints.
- Aspects & Impacts Registers – Pre-populated interaction tables based on the assumed project activities and default receptors that are most likely to be impacted by exploration activities. Indicative rankings of the magnitude and manageability of the associated impacts are included.
- Template Environmental, Social and Health Management Plans (ESHMPs) – Indicative ESHMPs in table format. These include indicative mitigation measures that are often appropriate based on a review of impact assessments for past similar projects.

Lessons learnt
Use of the toolkit has allowed Shell to:

- apply a consistent assessment approach in all of their global exploration ventures;
- avoid the need to start from scratch each time, thus reducing the length of time and costs required to deliver IAs within the short time windows available in exploration;
- enable informed conversations with internal Shell leads, stakeholders and contractors earlier in the planning process about some of the potential impacts, mitigation and costs; and
- include indicative mitigation measures in contractor specifications.

Looking beyond oil and gas exploration, this process could be repeated to standardising elements of the impact assessment process for other projects, especially for multiple simple projects whose project activities vary little from location-to-location.

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