

Gilles Hennenfent was born and raised near Strasbourg, France. He graduated from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Physique de Strasbourg (ENSPS), where he pursued a curriculum in applied & engineering physics. After that, he moved to Vancouver, Canada, where in 2008 he was awarded a PhD in Geophysics from the University of British Columbia (UBC). He is a research geophysicist at Chevron and lives near San Francisco, California.

Success story

Gilles Hennenfent, research geophysicist, Chevron



What did you want to become as a child?

My parents tell me that, as a child, I kept saying I wanted to become president of France... I do not quite remember that, or perhaps do not want to admit it! What I do remember is that I wanted to become a pilot in the French air force.

What brought you into this industry?

It was a series of small events and coincidences that brought me into the oil and gas industry. The first event was a 3-month internship I did at the Virtual Reality Laboratory (VRL) in Natal, in the northeast of Brazil. I found the project work, which was sponsored by Petrobras and focused on reservoir visualization, very interesting. A year later, I was doing an internship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), working on holographic optical interconnection elements for a compact optoelectronic neural

network co-processor – note that this had no connection whatsoever with geophysics. My former supervisor from Brazil, Dr. Silvio J. Bezerra, contacted me because he knew that Dr. Felix J. Herrmann, of the department of Earth & Ocean Sciences at UBC, Vancouver, was looking for graduate students in the area of geophysics. At first I was not so interested because I did not know anything about geophysics, but I still decided to give it a chance. My first phone call with Dr. Herrmann was quite an experience. I had never before heard someone talking about research with so much enthusiasm – that's how it started.

What would you regard as your career highlights/achievements and why?

The highlight of my short career so far was probably receiving the Arie van Weelden Award from the EAGE in 2008. It was a real pleasure to see that people

value the research I do and that I enjoy doing every day. It is also a great satisfaction to know that I can contribute to some disciplines in our field.

What were the defining moments of your career path and how did these moments influence you professionally?

There were two defining periods that truly influenced me, not only professionally but also personally. The first period was the “classes préparatoires”, a 2-year preparatory course taken before attending an engineering school. The work was far from easy but I learned so much! I cannot remember a lot, but it clearly showed me how far I was capable of going. There was no other choice than learning how to focus, prioritize, and work efficiently.

The second defining period of my career path was at the Seismic Laboratory for

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Imaging & Modelling (SLIM) at UBC. I made the choice of joining this newly-established research group, led by Dr. Herrmann, with the hope that I would work on exciting research topics with an accessible faculty member. My hopes were exceeded! Dr. Herrmann had created a fantastic research environment and I was fortunate enough to participate in its development. When I started we were just three students and Dr. Herrmann. By four years later, the group had partnered with Dr. Michael Friedlander from Computer Science and Dr. Ozgur Yilmaz from Mathematics, and had about

15 students and staff from very diverse backgrounds. This was quite a challenge at first. No one really spoke the same technical language. Our research interests were rather different but we learned to widen our research horizons, really listen to each other to try and try hard to understand where each other came from; simply communicate together. The effort was quite considerable but so were the rewards! This experience totally changed the way I look at research projects and interact with fellow scientists. For that I am very grateful to the whole SLIM team, and in particular to Dr. Herrmann.

Have you undertaken any further studies/courses throughout your career?

As a Chevron new hire, I take classes on a regular basis to broaden my skills.

What goals would you advise someone starting out in the industry to set for themselves to become successful?

I am not sure about goals but here are a few thoughts: I think that there is no single path to a long term objective. Also, in my experience, a long term objective is rarely a steady target. One refines, or even changes it with time and life events. Know what you like to do, be good at it, and be ready to seize any opportunity that points into the right direction for you. Good luck! And a last word to the wise: someone told me recently that the harder you try, the luckier you get...