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## Energy Crisis II: A New Chance to Get It Right

By **Bill Holmes, P.E.** October 14, 2011 01:59:00 pm[Email](#)[Print](#)[Like](#)

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*"The only thing new in this world is the history that you don't know." – Harry Truman*

"You know," my friend Rex Breeden told me, "Once you're gone, out of office, retired, out of power or out of the mainstream, no one cares about you; no one gives a shit about your opinion. You're old and the young guys want to conquer the world themselves, in their own way." Rex was about 85 when he told me that. A self-made man who rose from abject poverty to become president of the board of trustees of Indiana State University, a successful entrepreneur and developer, he had recently sold his real estate business, including the building with his name on it.

Mark, the new owner, offered him an office, but Rex declined. He didn't want to be like Rodney Dangerfield's atheist uncle lying there in his casket, all dressed up with no place to go. He could sit in an office looking wise and distinguished, but he really wouldn't have anything to do and didn't want to be a distraction. He told me his only remaining role was sexual advisor to the new owner. He said that Mark had told him, "When I want your f\*\*\*g advice, I'll ask for it."

I keep hearing Rex's words. I started in the energy conservation field in 1974, just in time for the energy crisis. I went away from the mainstream, designed, built and installed energy monitoring systems in scores of buildings from schools, hospitals, office buildings, shopping malls, to industrial plants owned by Alcoa, Kosmos Cement, Mariah Meat Packing, G.E., RCA, Honda, GenCorp, Golden Castings, Rexnord and more. I developed my own methods and experienced results so far beyond what others were doing, I'm not sure they believed them. I designed energy systems, operated, controlled and maintained them. I taught at Purdue and the University of Wisconsin. I published case studies and articles in journals, gave talks at energy conferences. I had letters of reference from owners and presidents of companies verifying the results and lauding my work.

As the years passed, memories of the energy crisis slowly faded. When industrial plants were cranking out all they could and selling everything they could make in the 1990s, they could care less about energy and utility costs. Make more, sell more and just pay the damn utility bills with that big pile of cash sitting on the CFO's desk. But when things started to slow down, some of these plants actually started to get interested in reducing energy costs. Oh boy! After all of these years, they are starting to get it.

Wrong. They were simply grasping at every straw they could try to stay afloat. We sold and installed our AutoPilot Monitoring System to a number of plants in Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. They worked: huge savings in a short time, more reference letters, more case studies. Our projects received awards from the governor and even an Energy Innovation Award from the U.S Department of Energy. I was named Energy Manager of The Year by the Hoosier (Indiana) Chapter of the Association of Energy Engineers. I got a letter from the president of the Research Council of the Consulting Engineers of America saying my approach was the only sound way; that I understood what few, if any, others did about how to save energy. He asked me to speak at an energy conference he was hosting at Ohio State and I did.

But then something unexpected (at least to me) happened. Our clients, these huge industrial plants in the Midwest, started to downsize. They started laying off people, some of whom had been there for 25 or 30 years, since they day they got out of school. The engineers and operators we had been working with disappeared. One day, I got a call from Rick, the project engineer from the 1,100 acre GE Appliance Park in Louisville, Kentucky. He said, it's just me; everyone else is gone. They fired all the engineers in

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## Author Bio

**Bill Holmes, P.E.**

**Bill Holmes, P.E.** founded Holmes Energy LLC [www.holmesenergy.com](http://www.holmesenergy.com) and developed the AutoPilot Monitoring-Based Commissioning (MBCx) System in 1979. He has a B.S. and M.S. in mechanical engineering and has done additional coursework and research for his PhD. He is a former Purdue professor and taught for several years in the Continuing Education in Energy Management Program at the University of Wisconsin.

Bill has produced savings from 20% to, in a few projects, more than 50% from low-cost, no-cost changes in management, operation, maintenance and control alone in all types of facilities including Industrial Plants owned by Fortune 500 Companies.

He is the recipient of a DOE Award for Energy Innovation and was the Indiana Energy

the facilities department.

Then some of the plants started to move their operations to Mexico, to Juarez. Some of the plants were boarded up or divided into sections rented to small businesses. It was sad; it caused a lot of people a lot of pain. So our great success saving all of this energy and money in these plants came from desperation. They were trying to stay in business but they couldn't. They may have cared about energy and the environment, but that certainly wasn't their top priority. Besides, in Mexico, energy was much cheaper.

In 1997, my youngest child graduated from college and headed to New Jersey. The other two were in Manhattan and Oregon and there was no way they would ever come back to Indiana. My Dad died the next year and John Rumble, my partner, unexpectedly at age 57, two years later. I decided to hang it up for a while so I closed our office and changed our corporate status to inactive, just in case the next energy crisis came back in my lifetime. I seriously doubted that it would. I traveled, worked for a large, utility-owned energy service company (ESCO) out of Boston for a year, took a job in a group home for people with developmental disabilities. I took a sculpture class and found out I had some talent, so I became a sculptor.

I was living in an 1830s farmhouse in a town of 100 people in Southern Indiana and had built a studio in a barn with swinging doors opening out over a field, woods and a river. In the fall of 2008, an old friend with a business in Austin, Texas called and said, "I have 300 clients needing help reducing their utility costs. Would you be interested?" Senator Obama was running for office and he wanted to make energy conservation one of his top priorities. Did I really want to do this? Had the time finally arrived? Did I want to give up this life to go back into the energy business? Richard flew up from Austin for a few days to talk about it. I may have one last chance to achieve what I had worked for my entire career; this was what I had been trying to do since 1974. I couldn't turn it down. If I was going to die, I wanted to go down in flames.

With Richard's help, I was verbally designated the energy services provider for USA Swimming in Colorado Springs, Colorado with 5,000 pools across the country. The energy crisis was back and people were interested in conservation again, particularly with those \$5.00 gas prices in Chicago and on the west coast. And there was this thing called global warming that was getting people really interested in the amount carbon fuels we were burning.

For all of those years I was ahead of my time, now with the Internet and iPhones and global warming, I was back in business. I had lived to see it. The time had finally come. Technology had finally caught up. The Information Age was in full swing. People finally understood the value of information and how to use it and would just eat it up when I explained how we had done it. I could train them and they could have the same results I had.

But wait, was I now so old that all of my experience would be of no interest to the next generation? I always valued Rex's opinions, and there was a good chance what had happened to him would now apply to me. I had watched the same thing happen to my Dad and a number of his very successful friends after they had retired. Nobody really cared about their experience and opinions.

Our first project and several other good possibilities were in Colorado, a Green State that had a lot of money for conservation and a lot of interest. So I dipped into my retirement savings and opened an office in Colorado. The governor had even set up a separate Governor's Energy Office (GEO). A few months later, I was sitting in Joel's office, a manager at the GEO. I told him about my background and history. After I finished, he explained to me why I wasn't eligible to participate in their programs: Only 14 companies were eligible, and guess what? They were all huge ESCOs owned by utility companies, like the one I had worked for. Plus all of the money was to be spent on new, energy efficient equipment.

I wasn't selling equipment. I never had; I was selling information and results, and by the way, cutting energy consumption and costs by 20%, 30% as high as 70% with the old equipment. Somehow, in my 35-plus years in the business, I had missed the fact that you had to have new equipment to save energy. As Joel explained this to me, somewhat apologetically, I had this flashback to the fall of 2002 when I walked into the office of the manager of Sempra Energy Services, an ESCO in Albany, New York. Before I could sit down, he said "You realize we make all of our money from selling equipment, don't you? That energy savings stuff is just a marketing tool."

Joel seemed to appreciate my experience, but then he asked, "if your approach and results are as good as you say, why isn't everyone doing it?" Good question. I told him I had been trying to answer it for more than 30 years. Perhaps it had something to do with making a lot of money, from selling equipment and services without saving much energy, I didn't know. He was young and bound by government regulations and anyway, probably would rather answer that one himself than take advice from an old fart. So I left. I never called him again; I didn't want to be his sexual advisor.

For more information about energy monitoring, be sure to watch Bill Holmes' "Sustainability Matters" Webinar, "The Case for Permanent Energy Monitoring."

Manager of the Year in 1990. He has published numerous papers and been making presentations on his projects and methods for more than 25 years. Bill is a sculptor, a writer and a regular contributor to Sustainable Plant.

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