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Optimizing well placement and reducing costs using AI-driven automation in drilling operations

Kofi Yeboah Adjei [1,*], Godwin Ekunke Odor [2], Sharafadeen Ashafe Nurein [3], Peace Chinaza Ogu-Opara [4], Onyedioranma Collins Ugwu [5], Ikechukwu Bismarck Owunna [6] and Ekunke Onyeka Virginia [7]

[1] *Department of Management Science, Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, Ghana.*
[2] *Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Portharcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.*
[3] *Department of Systems Engineering, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria.*
[4] *Department of Geology, Federal Univeristy of Technology Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria.*
[5] *Department of Computer Science, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.*
[6] *Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria.*
[7] *Department of Renewable Energy Engineering, Henriot Watt University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.*

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Abstract

AI is increasingly being used in drilling operations, redefining efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and safety within the oil and gas industry. Traditional drilling operations are usually plagued by inefficiencies, high NPT, and suboptimal well placement due to over-reliance on manual decisions and conventional geological interpretation. AI-driven automation uses machine learning, IoT devices, real-time data analytics, and predictive maintenance to provide improved drilling precision, better placement of wells, and reduced operational risks. Industry leaders have shown that the gains in efficiency are huge; Chevron recorded a 30% increase in drilling speed, with a corresponding 25% reduction in operational costs, resulting from AI-driven automated drilling. Shell reported 130% gains in drilling efficiency due to AI-enhanced optimization models. BP and ExxonMobil implemented AI predictive maintenance, realizing a 20% reduction in maintenance costs, with a resulting 15% increase in equipment uptime. Saudi Aramco optimized well placement, leading to a 35% increase in production and reduced drilling time. This review critically assesses such AI applications in drilling automation with regard to operational efficiency, cost reduction, and sustainability. While a game-changing technology, several barriers to widespread diffusion exist: integration of data, which is highly complex; costs of implementation, which are relatively high; and skilled people are required. The ability to remove these barriers through technological development and strategic collaboration by the industry will be key in maximizing the full benefits of AI in drilling automation.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Drilling Automation; Well Placement Optimization; Predictive Maintenance; Cost Efficiency

1. Introduction

The oil and gas industry is facing increasing challenges related to efficiency, cost reduction, and environmental concerns. Traditional drilling operations, which rely heavily on manual processes and human expertise, are often costly and prone to inefficiencies. As hydrocarbon reserves become harder to access, companies must adopt innovative technologies to improve well placement accuracy, reduce operational risks, and enhance overall efficiency [1]. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing the oil and gas industry by offering advanced data analytics, predictive modeling, and automation. AI-driven automation in drilling operations helps to streamline decision-making, enhance drilling precision, and

* Corresponding author: Kofi Yeboah Adjei

minimize risks associated with unpredictable geological formations. The adoption of AI technologies such as machine learning, deep learning, and real-time data processing is crucial for optimizing drilling operations [2]. These innovations not only contribute to cost reduction but also ensure safer and more sustainable energy production. In recent years, oil and gas giants like Shell and Chevron, have begun integrating AI-driven automation into their drilling operations [3]. These technologies help companies manage large volumes of geological data, improve drilling efficiency, and ensure optimal well placement. By leveraging AI, oil and gas companies can increase their operational efficiency, reduce downtime, and enhance the accuracy of their drilling activities [4].

1.1. Problem Statement

Despite continuous advancements in drilling technologies, several persistent challenges still hinder optimal performance. These include:

- Suboptimal Well Placement: Poor positioning of wells leads to low hydrocarbon recovery, higher operational costs, and increased environmental impact. Traditional methods rely on geological surveys and human interpretation, which are susceptible to errors.
- High Non-Productive Time (NPT): Equipment failures, unexpected geological conditions, and manual intervention contribute significantly to NPT, leading to financial losses and project delays.
- Safety and Environmental Concerns: Drilling operations involve high-risk environments where human errors can result in catastrophic failures. AI-driven automation reduces human intervention, enhancing safety and minimizing environmental damage.
- Data Management Challenges: Oil and gas companies generate massive amounts of geological and operational data. Manually processing and interpreting these data sets is inefficient and prone to errors. AI-driven automation provides real-time insights and predictive analysis to facilitate informed decision-making.

Objectives

This paper aims to:

- Explore the role of AI-driven automation in drilling operations.
- Assess the impact of AI technologies on optimizing well placement.
- Evaluate the cost reduction potential of AI-driven automation in the oil and gas industry.
- Examine real-world case studies from industry leaders adopting AI-driven drilling technologies.

1.2. Scope of the Review

This review focuses on AI-driven automation in drilling operations, specifically in optimizing well placement and reducing costs. It provides an in-depth analysis of the various literatures on AI technologies applied in drilling, their Objectives, Methods Used, Findings and Practical Implications. Additionally, the review presents case studies from major oil and gas companies implementing AI to enhance their drilling operations and results achieved.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of Traditional Drilling Operations

Drilling operations in the oil and gas industry involve complex, multi-stage processes aimed at reaching underground hydrocarbon reservoirs while maintaining safety and cost-effectiveness. Historically, these operations relied on manual techniques, geological surveys, and conventional decision-making, which often led to inefficiencies [5].

2.1.1. Traditional Drilling Techniques [6]

- Rotary Drilling – The most commonly used technique, where a rotating drill bit is used to cut through rock formations. Drilling fluids are circulated to cool the bit, remove cuttings, and maintain wellbore stability.
- Cable Tool Drilling (Percussion Drilling) – A method in which a heavy chisel-like tool is repeatedly dropped to break rock formations. While largely obsolete, it was widely used in early oil exploration.
- Directional Drilling – Introduced as an advancement over vertical drilling, this technique allows operators to steer the wellbore to access remote reserves.
- Vertical Drilling – A traditional approach where wells are drilled straight downward to target reservoirs. While simpler and less expensive, it has limitations in accessing complex formations.

2.1.2. Challenges in Traditional Drilling Workflows [6]

- Uncertainty in Geological Formations – Traditional drilling relies on seismic surveys and logging tools, which may not always provide precise subsurface information, leading to drilling in non-productive zones.
- Manual Decision-Making and Human Error – Engineers and geologists manually interpret data, increasing the risk of errors in wellbore trajectory, fluid selection, and pressure management.
- High Non-Productive Time (NPT) – Traditional drilling often experiences unexpected downtime due to equipment failures, loss circulation, wellbore collapses, or incorrect drilling practices.
- Environmental Impact – Inefficiencies in traditional drilling result in high emissions, excessive drilling fluid usage, and waste disposal issues.

2.1.3. Implications of Traditional Drilling [7]

Traditional drilling is cost-intensive due to several factors which include:

- Drilling Rig and Equipment Expenses – Costs related to rig rental, drill bits, and casing materials.
- Labor and Operational Costs – Expenses associated with workforce wages, transportation, and maintenance.
- Well Failure and Sidetracking Costs – Incorrect well placement or equipment failures necessitate re-drilling, increasing costs.
- Non-Productive Time (NPT) Losses – Unexpected downtime due to technical failures results in millions of dollars in losses annually.

2.1.4. Limitations of Data Utilization in Traditional Drilling [8]

Traditional drilling operations generate vast amounts of data from logging tools, seismic studies, and downhole sensors. However, much of this data is underutilized due to Slow Manual Processing where Engineers analyze data manually, delaying decision-making; Limited Real-Time Insights where traditional methods lack AI-driven real-time adjustments, leading to inefficient drilling; Data Fragmentation where lack of integration across drilling platforms reduces operational transparency.

2.1.5. Transition Toward AI-Driven Drilling [9]

To address the inefficiencies of traditional drilling, the industry is shifting toward AI-driven automation. AI enhances drilling efficiency by Optimizing Well Placement where Machine learning algorithms analyze geological and seismic data to predict the best drilling locations; Reducing Downtime where predictive maintenance models forecast equipment failures, preventing unexpected breakdowns; Improving Safety where AI-powered monitoring systems detect hazardous conditions, reducing workplace risks; Enhancing Cost-Efficiency where AI streamlines drilling workflows, reducing waste and non-productive time (NPT).

2.2. AI Technologies in Drilling Operations

2.2.1. Machine Learning and Predictive Analytics [10]

Machine learning models analyze historical and real-time data to predict drilling outcomes and optimize operational parameters. These models help in Predicting equipment failures and maintenance needs, Optimizing mud weight and drilling speed to prevent wellbore instability, Identifying geological anomalies that may impact drilling operations.

2.2.2. Computer Vision and Sensor-Based Monitoring [11]

AI-powered computer vision systems monitor drilling activities and equipment conditions using Infrared and Thermal Imaging which detects heat anomalies in drilling equipment to prevent failures and Real-time Video Analysis which Identifies wear and tear on drill bits and alerts operators about necessary maintenance.

2.2.3. Reinforcement Learning for Autonomous Drilling [12]

Reinforcement learning enables AI systems to learn from previous drilling experiences and optimize well trajectories. It continuously adjusts drilling parameters based on real-time feedback, improving efficiency and reducing costs.

2.2.4. IoT and Smart Sensors [13]

Internet of Things (IoT) devices equipped with smart sensors collect and transmit real-time data from drilling rigs, mud systems, and downhole tools. AI systems process this data to enhance decision-making and operational control.

Table 1 Literature review of relevant case studies

Papers	Objectives	Methods Used	Findings	Practical Implications
[14]	Identify and drill high-performance infill wells efficiently. Optimize well placement under complex geological conditions.	Multi-disciplinary data integration and machine learning techniques. Automated opportunity index generation for infill well locations.	Extended production plateau and significant incremental oil production achieved. Reduced well placement time by up to 80%.	Enhanced precision and speed in well placement decisions. Significant cost savings and improved operational efficiency.
[15]	Enhance drilling operational efficiency and BHA integrity. Advise optimal drilling parameters and operational procedures.	AI-driven systems for optimal drilling parameters and procedures. Real-time data integration for monitoring and control.	Enhanced drilling efficiency and BHA integrity through AI systems. Achieved continuous ROP improvement up to 2.5X factor.	Enhances drilling efficiency and BHA integrity through AI. Enables real-time data integration for optimized operations.
[16]	Minimize predicted shock and vibrations during drilling. Maximize drilling rates while reducing mechanical specific energy.	Physics-based time domain model with Machine Learning algorithms. Real-time Digital Twins operating at the edge.	Improved drilling performance by 40% using digital twins. Enhanced weight transfer, RPM performance, and reduced vibrations.	Improved drilling performance by 40% through optimized operations. Reduced overall drilling costs with real-time data utilization.
[17]	Integrate digital drilling with subsurface modules for optimization. Enhance collaboration and data utilization in well planning.	Integration of digital drilling planning solutions with subsurface modules. AI-enabled subsurface integration for effective data utilization.	Integrated workflows optimize well planning and execution. AI-enabled integration enhances collaboration and data utilization.	Optimizes well planning and execution processes. Enhances collaboration and data utilization in workflows.
[18]	Improve identification and handling of drilling anomalies. Enhance operational safety and efficiency in drilling operations.	Anomaly Identification Model (AIM) using machine learning and deep learning. Gate Filtering Model (GFM) combining algorithmic and machine learning techniques.	Improved anomaly detection and handling in drilling operations. Enhanced operational efficiency and safety through reduced manual review.	Improved detection and handling of drilling anomalies. Enhanced operational efficiency and safety for RTOC staff.
[19]	Automate selection of optimal directional drilling tools. Predict section time and cost for upcoming wells.	Machine learning models for tool selection automation. XGBoost algorithm for accurate predictions.	XGBoost algorithm predicts optimal directional tool accurately. Tool selection depends on well-specific factors, not universal rules.	Automates optimal directional tool selection for cost-effectiveness. Reduces human bias, enhancing decision-making in drilling.
[20]	Integrate Generative AI into oil and gas drilling operations. Enhance operational efficiency and informed decision-making.	Integration of Generative AI with specialized LLM agents. Data retrieval from aggregated storage for user inquiries.	Generative AI enhances operational efficiency in drilling. Methodology reduces costs and improves decision-making in complex environments.	Enhances operational efficiency and decision-making in drilling. Reduces costs and improves resource utilization in operations.

[21]	Optimize borehole trajectory management in drilling. Enhance trajectory accuracy and minimize operational costs.	Tangential, balanced tangential, average angle calculation methods. Radius of curvature and minimum curvature methods.	Machine learning optimizes well trajectory and drilling efficiency. Developed software improves survey data analysis and cost-effectiveness.	Enhances trajectory accuracy and minimizes drilling costs. Improves efficiency in analyzing survey data.
[22]	Extend software functionalities for drilling automation. Ensure wellbore stability and reduce non-productive time.	Real-time simulations for optimal drilling parameters. Decision-making heuristics and artificial intelligence integration.	Smart twin enhances drilling operations through real-time simulations. Advisory mode successfully suggests optimal drilling parameters.	Enhances drilling operations through real-time simulations and decision-making. Reduces non-productive time and ensures safe operations.
[23]	Explore AI's role in operational excellence in oil and gas. Analyze AI applications for cost reduction and business growth.	AI-driven predictive maintenance for operational efficiency. Machine learning to enhance production processes.	AI optimizes exploration and drilling processes. AI enhances predictive maintenance and production efficiency.	AI optimizes exploration and drilling processes. Enhances predictive maintenance and production efficiency.

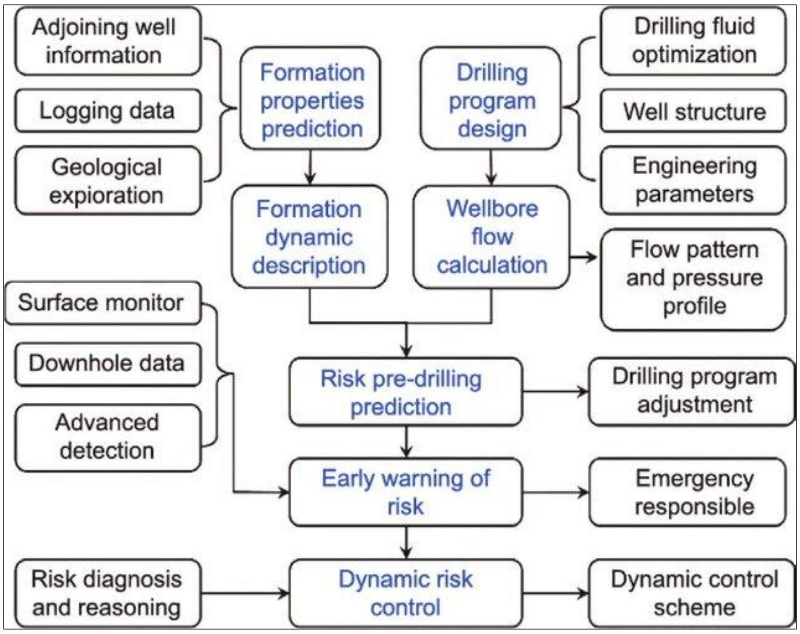

Figure 1 Application scenarios for AI in drilling risk control [24]

2.3. Applications of AI in Drilling Automation.

The application of AI in drilling automation has led to significant advancements in drilling efficiency, cost reduction, and safety improvements. AI is transforming various aspects of drilling operations, including real-time decision-making, predictive maintenance, and well placement optimization.

2.3.1. Real-Time Data Processing and Decision Support [25].

AI-driven systems integrate large volumes of real-time drilling data to enable predictive decision-making. These systems leverage machine learning models to continuously analyze drilling conditions, ensuring optimal control of drilling parameters such as weight on bit, rotational speed, and mud flow rates. AI-powered decision support tools enhance operational efficiency by detecting early signs of wellbore instabilitythereby preventing costly failures, optimizing drilling trajectories in response to changing geological formations, Automating drilling adjustments, reducing manual intervention and human error.

2.3.2. AI in Well Placement Optimization [26].

Well placement is a critical factor in maximizing hydrocarbon recovery. AI-driven models process vast geological and seismic datasets to recommend the most productive wellbore locations. These AI-enhanced capabilities allow for Enhanced Reservoir Characterization using AI algorithms analyze rock properties and fluid distribution to improve subsurface mapping, Geosteering Assistance using AI-powered geosteering systems dynamically adjust well paths to avoid drilling into non-productive zones, Risk Reduction using AI to predict potential drilling hazards, minimizing the risk of costly sidetracking operations.

2.3.3. Predictive Maintenance and Equipment Failure Prevention [27].

AI applications in predictive maintenance enhance drilling rig performance by forecasting equipment wear and potential failures before they occur. Key advantages include: Proactive Maintenance Scheduling where AI-driven predictive analytics assess equipment health, ensuring timely maintenance before failures impact operations. Reduced Downtime where AI algorithms detect anomalies in drilling system components, preventing unexpected equipment breakdowns. Cost Savings where avoiding emergency repairs and unplanned downtime results in substantial financial savings for drilling operators.

2.3.4. AI-Powered Drilling Fluid Optimization [28]

AI enhances drilling fluid management by optimizing mud weight, viscosity, and composition in real time. Advanced machine learning models analyze wellbore stability data to Prevent differential sticking and lost circulation, Adjust drilling fluid properties dynamically for various formations and Improve hole cleaning efficiency, reducing operational delays.

2.3.5. AI for Automation in Offshore and Deepwater Drilling [29].

Offshore and deepwater drilling present unique challenges due to extreme environmental conditions and high operational risks. AI technologies play a crucial role in Autonomous Rig Operations where AI-driven control systems manage automated drilling tasks, reducing reliance on human operators. Subsea Robotics and AI-Enabled Monitoring where AI assists remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) and autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs) in pipeline inspections and seabed mapping. Dynamic Positioning Optimization where AI algorithms enhance vessel stability during offshore drilling operations.

2.3.6. AI for Safety Enhancement in Drilling Operations [4].

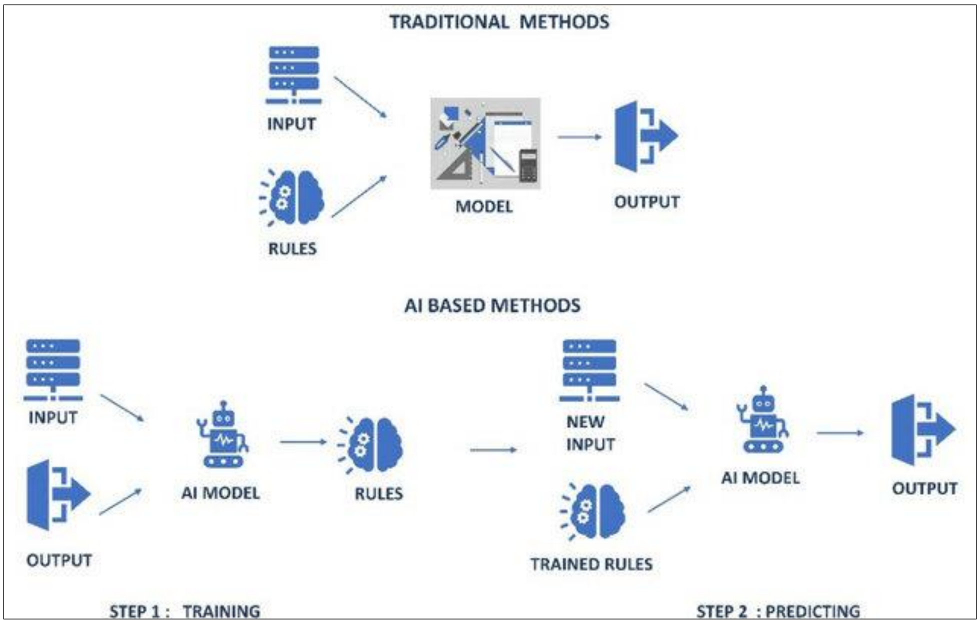

Figure 2 Diagramatic comparison of Traditional against AI-Driven Well Placement Models [30]

Safety remains a top priority in drilling operations, and AI is instrumental in reducing accidents and hazards. AI-based safety applications include; Hazard Detection and Risk Assessment where AI monitors drilling sites for potential safety threats, including gas leaks and equipment malfunctions, Automated Emergency Response Systems where AI-integrated alarms and automated shutdown protocols mitigate risks in case of hazardous conditions. Worker Safety Monitoring where AI-powered wearables track workers' health metrics, reducing fatigue-related accidents

3. Discussions

AI reduces operational costs by optimizing resource utilization, minimizing equipment failures, and improving drilling efficiency. These cost savings translate into higher returns on investment (ROI). AI systems enhance safety by minimizing human errors and providing real-time alerts for potential hazards. Automated monitoring reduces the risk of accidents and injuries. AI-driven automation streamlines processes, enabling faster decision-making and seamless integration of multiple data streams. This leads to more efficient drilling operations. Optimized drilling operations reduce emissions and resource consumption, contributing to environmental sustainability. For example, precise well placement minimizes the environmental footprint of drilling activities.

3.1. Traditional Drilling Versus AI Driven Drilling Method

Table 2 Comparison of Traditional Drilling and AI-Driven Drilling Methods

Parameter	Traditional Drilling	AI-Driven Drilling
Decision-Making Process	Manual interpretation of geological data	AI-driven real-time analytics and automated decision-making
Well Placement Accuracy	Based on historical data and manual calculations	Optimized using machine learning and predictive models
Operational Efficiency	High NPT and inefficiencies due to human intervention	Reduced NPT and optimized workflows through AI automation
Safety Measures	Reactive response to hazards	Predictive hazard detection and real-time monitoring
Data Utilization	Limited real-time insights, slow manual processing	Continuous real-time data analysis for instant adjustments
Maintenance Strategy	Reactive maintenance leading to unexpected failures	Predictive maintenance preventing breakdowns
Environmental Impact	Higher emissions and waste due to inefficient drilling	Optimized resource use and reduced emissions
Cost of Operation	High due to delays, errors, and inefficient resource use	Lower costs through optimized drilling and reduced downtime
Automation Level	Minimal, requiring manual oversight	Fully automated and AI-assisted drilling operations
Adoption Complexity	Well-established but prone to inefficiencies	Requires investment but provides long-term efficiency gains

3.2. Case Studies of the successful impact of AI drilling application in top oil and gas companies.

Table 3 AI applications, their associated efficiency improvements, and the companies implementing these technologies.

AI Application	Efficiency Improvement	Company	Source
Predictive Maintenance	20% reduction in maintenance costs, 15% increase in equipment uptime	BP, ExxonMobil	[31]
Automated Drilling	30% increase in drilling speed, 25% cost reduction	Chevron, Shell	[32]
Drilling Optimization	130% improvement in drilling efficiency	Shell, TotalEnergies	[31]

Well Planning Optimization	35% increase in production, reduced drilling time	Chevron, Saudi Aramco	[31]
Safety Enhancements	20% reduction in safety incidents	BP, ExxonMobil	[31]

These AI applications are driving significant improvements in drilling operations, making processes more efficient, cost-effective, and safer.

3.3. Challenges and Limitations of AI applications in Drilling.

AI models rely on high-quality data for accurate predictions. Inconsistent or incomplete data can hinder model performance. Many oil and gas facilities operate on legacy systems that are incompatible with modern AI technologies. Retrofitting these systems is often costly and complex. The industry faces a shortage of professionals skilled in AI development and implementation. Bridging this gap requires targeted training and education programs. Adopting AI-driven automation must comply with industry regulations and address ethical concerns related to workforce displacement and data privacy.

4. Conclusion

AI-driven automation has emerged as a revolutionary force in modern drilling operations, significantly enhancing well placement accuracy, reducing costs, and improving overall operational efficiency. Case studies from industry leaders highlight substantial improvements such that Chevron's AI-driven automated drilling led to a 30% increase in drilling speed and a 25% cost reduction; Shell's AI-powered drilling optimization resulted in a 130% efficiency boost; BP and ExxonMobil reduced maintenance costs by 20% and increased equipment uptime by 15% through AI-driven predictive maintenance; Saudi Aramco's AI-assisted well placement optimization contributed to a 35% rise in production and reduced drilling time. These advancements demonstrate the transformative potential of AI in drilling operations. However, challenges such as high initial investment costs, workforce adaptation, and integration with legacy systems persist. Overcoming these obstacles will require continued research, industry-wide collaborations, and policy support for AI-driven innovations. Future developments should focus on refining AI models, improving interoperability between digital systems, and addressing regulatory and ethical considerations. Ultimately, AI-driven drilling automation represents the future of the oil and gas industry, offering unparalleled efficiency, safety, and sustainability. By embracing these advancements, the industry can achieve long-term cost savings, optimize resource utilization, and contribute to environmentally responsible drilling practices.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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