

MATERIALIZING LEADERSHIP: FROM OIL AND GAS TO RENEWABLE ENERGIES

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“The shift from oil & gas to renewable energy must be accompanied by a change in perspective.”



Recently arrived at EDF Renewables to take over the construction of the offshore wind farm of Fécamp, Willy Gauttier explains the reasons for his transition to the world of renewable energy and the specificities of this industry.

DÉCIDEURS. COMING FROM THE OIL & GAS SECTOR, WHAT SKILLS DO YOU BRING TO THE RENEWABLE ENERGIES WORLD?

Willy Gauttier. I arrived at EDF Renewables as Construction Director on a launched project. This function does not really exist in France. It is more or less the equivalent of Project Director in a company. What I have seen, in the managerial position that I hold today, is ultimately very similar to roles I have served in my previous positions. The leadership and management skillsets are readily transferable. What will change is mainly the cultural aspect. Many people move from one industry to another for value or for motivation. Personally, I have been thinking about it for several years because I wanted to contribute to the energy transition in a meaningful way.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE RENEWABLE ENERGY INDUSTRY?

When I arrived at EDF on the Fécamp project, I first discovered the importance of the permitting and negotiation phase of the building process. This is a very laborious phase, which includes a tremendous amount of environmental studies. A small team of four to six people is dedicated to these functions. In addition to the prior consultation work that must be performed to study the impact, if any, to the community surrounding the project, this team is also responsible for ensuring all required approvals are obtained on schedule and that the project progresses smoothly.

The other important point of differentiation is the cost and associated means of the projects themselves. Our projects are financed, which is rarely the case in the oil sector. This may create certain constraints that the lender may impose, which must be considered. The transition from O&G to renewable energy must be accompanied by a change of perspective regarding the cost aspects. We handle the large-scale, industrialization and optimization aspects of projects. As such, we consider people coming from the car industry as interesting potential candidates! For me, that's the biggest effort we have to make when we move from one area to another.

IS THE COMPLEXITY EQUIVALENT?

Honestly, I find that a renewable development project is less complex than in O&G. We obviously find a similar challenge in terms of soil issues as well as a very strong need for electrical expertise. On the other hand, the technology itself is sometimes less complex, which permits us more resources to be creative and focus on optimization.

WHAT ABOUT THE SAFETY ASPECTS?

The O&G industry has always understood that a high level of safety is imperative. The world of renewable energy has obviously understood this as well, but the entire sector, particularly on the subcontractors' side, has not yet reached the same standard. There is a lot of work to be done on this, and the professionals from the oil industry will have a lot to contribute toward this process.

IS THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL ANCHORAGE THE SAME?

These major projects have an unavoidable political dimension, and their acceptability also depends on job creation. There is therefore a strong local content theme. We strongly encourage the use of local businesses. What we know from the O&G sector is that good business practices such as interfacing with schools and promoting training courses are key to success of the project. Energy professionals who understand and embrace this approach will be able to play a role for us. In Le Havre, for example, there are ongoing discussions with the dockers to ensure that jobs are available for them.

WILL WE SEE THE EMERGENCE OF A FRENCH WIND ENERGY INDUSTRY?

We are seeing a shudder of French offshore wind power, and the public authorities are clearly going to encourage expansion of this. However, we are still sorely short of installers. I think there is a way to develop a larger French sector, because there are still many projects yet to come. We must consider working hand-in-hand with wind turbine manufacturers to optimize efficiency and reduce costs.