



WOMEN WE ARE LOSING:

The triggers making women leave their jobs in energy
– and lessons for companies on retaining talent

A POWERful Women Insight Piece – September 2023





WELCOME

Welcome to this new Insight Piece from POWERful Women. Aimed at leaders, managers and change-makers in the UK energy sector, we want to share the stories we heard from women who have recently left roles in an industry they feel passionately about.

In 2022 we published detailed research into women's experience in the energy workplace and the barriers they are facing in progressing their careers. Now we have decided to dive a bit deeper into the factors that trigger some women to quit. Based on voluntary in-depth interviews, we hope this piece provides some valuable insights into individuals' concerns and motivations – and the positive actions organisations might take to keep the female talent they need for the energy transition.

Katie Jackson, Chair of POWERful Women

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BACKGROUND



The Great Resignation and beyond

In 2021, a new phenomenon was on people's lips – 'The Great Resignation'. Coined by Professor Anthony Klotzⁱ, it describes the record numbers of people leaving their jobs after the COVID-19 pandemic. In the US, more than 19 million workers quit between April and September 2021 and in the UK over 400,000 workers resigned in roughly the same period, up from 270,000 two years beforeⁱⁱ.

In research by McKinsey that yearⁱⁱⁱ, 40% of employees surveyed said they were at least 'somewhat likely to quit' in the next three to six months. And what's more, many people were willing to leave without another job to go to. The findings held across all five countries surveyed (Australia, Canada, Singapore, the UK and the US) and were broadly consistent across industries. "Businesses in the leisure and hospitality industry are the most at risk for losing employees, but many healthcare and white-collar workers say they also plan to quit". More than half of organisations surveyed said they were experiencing a greater volume of turnover than in previous years and expected the problem to continue or worsen.

And indeed, a year later, the Great Resignation (or the Great Break-Up or Great Attrition as it also came to be known) was showing no sign of stopping. McKinsey's follow-up 2022 survey^{iv}, revealed that employees' quitting intention remained steadfastly at 40% across the five countries (33% in the UK) and, interestingly, revealed high mobility between sectors, with just 35% of those who quit in the past two years taking a new job in the same industry.

Is the Great Resignation now a thing of the past? The rising cost of living is affecting decisions, allowing employers to be choosier, but in June 2023, PwC's survey of 54,000 workers in 46 countries found that 1 in 4 were still planning to quit this year, up from 1 in 5 in 2022^v.

McKinsey, on the other hand, has suggested the Great Resignation is ending, thanks to "persistent, looming question marks hanging over the economy", and is being replaced by the new phenomenon of 'quiet quitting' – "the idea of staying in your job but doing the bare minimum"^{vi}. This is not necessarily a positive step forward for talent retention when most employees believe their sense of purpose is defined by work^{vii}.

What about women?

Looking at women across the whole workforce, a survey published in July this year by Encompass Equality found that women were on average 38% likely to leave their employer in the next two years (49% for black women)^{viii}. And looking specifically at women in the energy sector – our area of focus – the annual Global Women in Energy survey^{ix} revealed in late 2022 that over 60% of female respondents said they are thinking of leaving their job in the next one to two years, a significant increase from 44% in 2021. Finally, turning to women in energy in the UK, the Energy and Utility Skills Partnership highlighted recently that women were making up a larger proportion of job leavers than those being recruited. It found disproportionate representation of a number of particular groups in the leavers cohort, including women, who made up 26.1% of the UK energy and utilities industry as a whole in 2022 and 28.2% of 'leavers' (an increase on 2021).

The need to discover why

This research data tells us an important story of what is happening in the jobs market, with a clear message that, despite the challenging economic climate, organisations and hiring managers should not be complacent about being able to attract and retain the talent they need.

But addressing the problem of talent loss and maximising the workforce opportunities requires us to understand the reasons behind people's decisions to quit.

For the energy sector, getting this wrong could be significant. By 2050, the industry needs to build a Net Zero workforce of hundreds of thousands of people^x. These must have the diverse mix of skills, experience and capabilities to drive the innovation, effective leadership and consumer engagement required for successful delivery of the energy transition

McKinsey's advice to companies experiencing the Great Resignation was to "listen and learn", and to avoid the traditional quick fixes of pay rises and perks to address the problem. They

found a disconnect between what employers thought were reasons for people leaving (compensation, work/life balance and poor health – i.e. 'transactional' factors) and the employees' actual reasons (not feeling valued by the organisation or their managers, and not feeling a sense of belonging at work – i.e. 'relational' factors)^{xi}.

When it comes to women in the energy sector, we already know something about their experiences in the workplace. In 2022, we published pioneering research with Bain & Company on the views of women in energy middle management, to discover the career barriers they face and to recommend the most effective diversity and inclusion actions companies can take to cultivate female talent. Based on an industry survey of more than 4,700 respondents working in energy, supplemented with one-to-one interviews, the research concluded that while companies have commitments on diversity and inclusion, there is a delivery gap holding women back. Workplace policies and initiatives – such as flexible working – have been put in place but are not consistently delivering. The research revealed unsupportive cultures that hamper progress and make women less likely to recommend working for their company, particularly to other

women. The report, 'Cultivating Female Talent', showcased the company actions that work and recommended positive steps leaders and managers can take to close the delivery gap^{xii}.

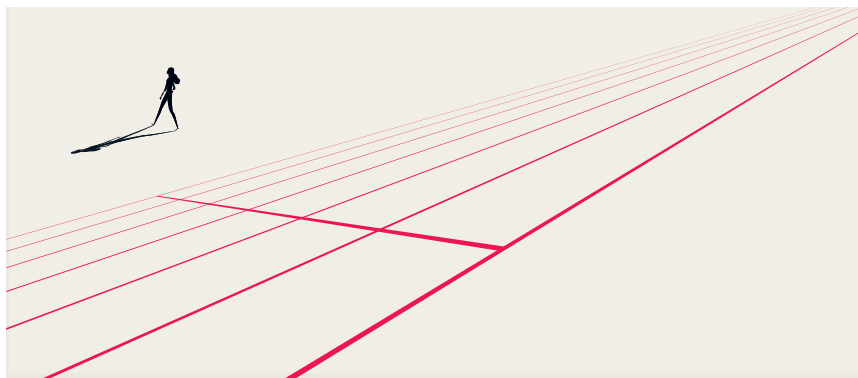
But we wanted to dive deeper, to gain greater insight into the tipping point at which women's experience in the energy workplace leads them to leave their role. We wanted to discover and share their reasons behind this most difficult and significant of decisions.

Our aims

We have followed up our own data-led research in 2022 with this insight piece based on in-depth conversations we have had with women who have recently left or are in the process of leaving the UK energy sector.

This is a deliberately qualitative, rather than quantitative, piece of work, based on interviews with nine individuals who volunteered to share their stories (and chose to remain anonymous). By its nature, the evidence is anecdotal and subjective, but we believe it is no less valuable for this.

We hope that the insights provided from inside these women's stories help to complete the picture provided by quantitative research data to date, adding important details on real behaviour, experience and motivations. We hope it will give food for thought for organisations and leaders, to help them avoid the wrong choices when it comes to retaining talented women and equip them for the challenges and opportunities of the transition to Net Zero.







Stories of women we are losing – interview outcomes

Where the women are at

All nine women we spoke to had left their jobs in the UK energy sector within the last few years (the majority as recently as 2022 and 2023) or were in the process of leaving. The lengths of time in the roles or companies they were exiting varied from just under a year to over 20 years or “my whole career” for some. The nature of their roles was also varied in both type (across all energy sub-sectors, from oil and gas to renewables) and in seniority, including project managers, departmental heads, and senior leadership roles with Board responsibilities. Their employers were also diverse in scale and included some of the UK’s largest (global) energy companies.

We had rich and lengthy conversations with each woman, asking a set series of questions. Below we summarise their responses and provide some conclusions and recommendations at the end.



Why did you decide to leave?

Three key reasons stood out in women's answers to this question:

- 1. Feeling under-valued.**
Despite working hard and being committed, women were not being given opportunities to progress or to contribute in a way that aligned with their values. They experienced limited options and/or job satisfaction, and a lowered sense of purpose and impact.
- 2. An unmanageable work-life balance,** with not enough flexibility both in terms of location and working pattern.
- 3. An unsupportive (sometimes 'toxic') working environment,** including a macho culture, age bias, bullying and no genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion from leadership.

"It's that old adage that people don't leave a role, they leave a boss or company. For me, with a five-year-old, it's about work-life balance. There are issues with the current company culture and if that was better, I'd be managing it all perfectly – I wouldn't feel like this big pull between different parts of my life."

"I left due to seeing diminishing returns on the impact I could have and limited opportunities that didn't motivate me. Upon my departure, I discovered my (male) replacement had got a two-grade salary uplift."

"The company was great outwardly around DEI but I realised this wasn't the reality internally. My concerns were listened to and escalated by my line manager but when it reached the top, it became clear that the people who had the power to change things just weren't interested."

"It was the second time I'd been badly treated by an organisation and so I decided to go out on my own. I thought - if you want an employer to treat you well and with respect, maybe that employer's you."

"I felt completely under-valued as an employee despite having put in four years of non-child-burdened hard graft."

"I have just left my role after five years without anything to go to, due to a toxic environment. There was fighting at shareholder level that trickled down. The senior team were all men and I felt they couldn't relate to my need, as a mother, for flexible working."

"I was essentially forced out. My boss offered me a new role that I didn't like (it would have meant a long commute and spending 8 hours in an office with no windows, no lights). When I questioned it, I was told that if I didn't accept the job I might as well leave. So I did."

"I worked there for 22 years but when I asked if I could relocate back to my home country with my family, they said no."

"I left a role that I loved but it was turning into something else."

"There was a strong drive to hit ESG goals and have diversity of leadership, but there was a very macho culture with bullying and lack of support, especially at the top."





To what extent did the following factors influence your decision to leave?

We asked our interviewees about the key barriers to women's career progress that were identified in our 2022 Cultivating Female Talent research, to find out which, if any, were factors in their decision to leave their jobs. Below we list the reasons in order of importance to the women we interviewed.

The top reasons (cited equally by the vast majority of the women – 8 out of 9) were:

1. Lack of visible or genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion by the company and/or leader
 2. Lack of support networks or affinity groups
-



The following factors were each cited by the majority (7 or 6 out of 9) of the interviewees:

Poor quality professional development

Gender pay gap – either a known pay gap or a lack of transparency on pay difference

D&I policies were in place but they weren't delivered effectively or accessibly

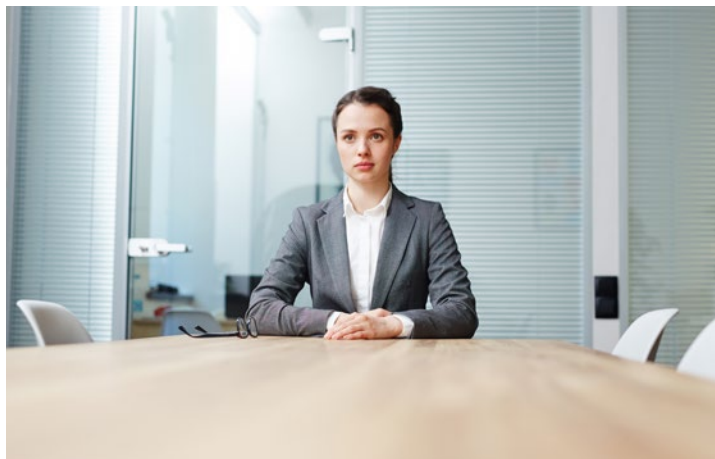
Lack of female role models in the company

The company culture was unsupportive (e.g. boys' club, misogyny)

Felt penalised for using company policies such as flexible working

No promotion to senior levels (i.e. experienced the 'glass ceiling')

Lack of effective channels and feedback loops in the company (i.e. don't feel heard)



Five out of the nine women also said that 'not being respected or recognised for their skills and achievements' influenced their decision to leave and the same proportion said they had 'experienced direct discrimination or harassment', with this being a strong factor in one woman's exit from her job. Age discrimination also emerged as an issue for one woman, both in the role she left and when she tried to re-enter the job market.

Nearly half of the women said that 'the availability of flexible working policies' at the company was a factor and that there were 'not enough diversity policies'.

The impact of line managers

When we asked specifically about non-inclusive behaviours by the women's line managers, seven out of the nine women cited 'unconscious bias'. 'Assumptions about what they wanted or were able to do' was also a factor for two thirds of the women. Four out of nine women felt 'line managers' skills to support and talk' was an issue and the same number cited 'lack of interest from their line manager in their wellbeing and career aspirations', one strongly.

Positive feedback

On the plus side, two thirds of the interviewees said that the availability of challenging and interesting work was **not** a factor (although for one woman the lack of this was a very strong factor in her decision). Most of the women (7 out of 9) said 'feeling they could be their true self at work' was also not an issue. Lack of maternity or paternity leave and parental benefits was a factor for just two of the women we interviewed (and not applicable for two others), although one noted that the company package was basic.



"There were female role models but many of them didn't display positive work-life balance role modelling."

"No one was held to account for the culture. It was an emergent rather than purposeful culture."

"I didn't question my employability until I had to. And that's when I think the age bias and discrimination came in. My male colleagues in their fifties rebounded from the redundancies quite easily but the women didn't, including me. I had to settle for a job with a smaller company in the sector and half the salary I'd had. Men who are older are seen as wiser and women who are older are seen as reaching their sell-by-date."

"The right noises about D&I were made by leaders but there were no actions being taken."

"On paper there was commitment to D&I and some areas of the business were good, but there were pockets of the business where it wasn't visible."

"There was little formal professional development."

"Professional development was poor quality."

"The number of female role models went from very poor to better, but there still wasn't the diversity of lived experiences and life stages."

What other research has shown

The answers to the first two questions above align closely with other data-led research into the reasons for people exiting the workplace. PwC's 2023 Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey concluded that purpose, company culture and inclusion remain key to employee concerns (as they did in 2022, but with the addition this year of feeling overworked and struggling to pay bills).

The Women in Energy Global Study 2022 found that the top 5 reasons cited by female respondents saying they were thinking of leaving their

job in the next two years (a remarkable 60% of women surveyed) were: an interest in new challenges and sectors; Covid-19 had forced the change; lack of training and mentoring; feeling isolated in their current role and lack of leadership opportunities. The survey revealed that companies aren't doing enough to support women – they wanted more flexible working, remote working opportunities and sponsored training and learning opportunities.

McKinsey's research^{xiii} into the reasons behind the Great Resignation, found that employees wanted flexibility, connectivity and a sense of unity and purpose. In 2022 the top 5 reasons people


gave for having left their employment in the preceding year were (in order): lack of career development and advancement, inadequate total compensation, uncaring and uninspiring leaders, lack of meaningful work, and unsustainable work expectations. For the caregiver employee type, which has a high percentage of women, workplace flexibility, support for health and wellbeing and career development were higher priorities. "For them, workplaces that are inflexible and that don't provide a pathway to advancement aren't worth the sacrifice of going back to work while continuing their caregiving duties."^{xiv}

Looking at research on women in particular, line management and culture were the big deal when it came to women's decisions to quit their job. The 'Why Women Leave' research from Encompass Equality (July 2023), revealed that the top five reasons for leaving cited by those who had already left a job were:

- 1** culture of the organisation (65% cited this as having had a huge or significant impact on their decision)
- 2** support from line manager
- 3** prospects for career progression
- 4** the day-to-day work itself
- 5** the amount of work (overworking by at least 10 hrs/week)



It also showed that, unsurprisingly, 71% of women with children said the ability to work flexibly has a huge or significant impact on decision to stay or leave.



Is this an energy sector wide problem or just specific to your company?

We asked if they felt that the issues they'd faced applied to the industry as a whole. Had they seen any friends or colleagues (male or female) in other energy organisations experience these barriers and behaviours?

Overall, the women we interviewed thought that the issues discussed above went wider than just their company. One respondent felt there are pockets of both good and bad practice across the industry and another said that, although they had left their organisation, they suspected that it was actually better than many others.

One woman highlighted companies that still have "old-fashioned ways of executing business activities". Another believed that while these are issues for the energy sector as a whole, it also applies to certain other sectors, like construction and rail.



Why did they think this was?

The energy sector is certainly near the bottom of the league table when it comes to female representation at senior levels, sitting only above Food, Beverage & Tobacco in the 2023 FTSE Women Leaders Report ranking^{xv}. Perhaps this predominance of male leaders has an impact on the culture not being quite right for women, as we hear from these interviews and from wider data-led investigations.

One of our interviewees suggested that it's an industry where people feel passionately that they want to make a difference and so when they feel held back, they will take the sometimes drastic step of leaving – there is more at stake for them personally in terms of their values. Other suggestions were: that the significant scale of projects in the energy sector and the risks involved can lead to high pressure and challenging workplace situations; and there is too much of a focus on recruiting women with STEM disciplines and too little on wider skillsets and capabilities.

"Purpose, impact and value is becoming a bigger focus for people now and it isn't just a female issue. I saw first-hand men and women coming into the company wanting to make change but finding it so hard and frustrating to make an impact that they would get disillusioned and leave."

"I think that any company that has gender imbalance at leadership level is going to have these cultural challenges."

"Flexibility and pay are an issue within the whole energy sector."

"Yes, I believe many of the issues I encountered are energy sector-wide issues."

"I think there is a sector specific challenge generally related to the number of women in the industry and how fast they can get up to the ranks to create more diverse leadership."

"I personally think it's worse in the energy sector."





How difficult was your decision to leave? Was there a tipping point?

The loud and clear message from the women we spoke to was that the decision to leave was a hard one, because they were highly driven in their career aspirations, loved being part of the energy sector, had a passion for contributing to the energy transition and felt defined by their job. Many said they worked with great colleagues and teams, some with good gender balance, and they liked what they did day-to-day in their role.

But eventually tipping points came. These included:

Realising there was no opportunity to progress up the ladder with the company's current leaders and management

Having a request for professional development (coaching) rejected

Returning to work after maternity leave to an unsupportive boss who was poor at his own job and at being a leader

Wanting to feel appreciated and use their skills in a more constructive team environment

Becoming tired of trying to drive change when the company wasn't committed to the energy transition.

Coming to understand that the company was not aligned with their purpose and values and they couldn't have the impact they wanted.

Feeling miserable after too many negative comments from a 'boys club' culture

Feeling demoralised from work not being recognised or respected

Realising that diversity, equity and inclusion were not being taken seriously at the very top of the organisation

Feeling disheartened that inclusivity wasn't percolating through the organisation, they weren't getting it right or they were unwilling to lend support to initiatives

Being bullied and harassed or treated disrespectfully

Some of these tipping points were so severe that a couple of the women left their role with no job to go to and some decided to set up their own businesses. One interviewee said she was still "grieving" leaving a job that had meant so much to her, in a sector that had been "her life's purpose".



"I realised that EDI was not being taken seriously enough at the top level. We were having diversity and inclusion training for our senior staff because our area was very male, white and middle class and we wanted to change that. I think it was the CEO or the COO who said, well, why don't we just hire more people who fit certain criteria? And I thought – if you think it's that simple then this is why there's a problem. There was no meaningful change, no wanting to have a conversation with people, to find out why they might be leaving, it was just a box ticking exercise."

"Innovation is important to me and I didn't really see that happening. Trying to drive change and bring everyone on your journey is tremendously hard work and you have to be tremendously resilient. I just got tired."

"I had been working on a multi-year, multimillion pound innovation programme. I'd worked on setting it up and designing it. Then this colleague joined and we were going to split the work, but somehow he ended up taking ownership of the whole thing. Suddenly he was the face of this programme and I was on the periphery, like a spare part. He would talk over me about the programme and people would start talking directly to him rather than me. This all started to make me feel a bit apathetic towards the role and unhappy for the first time in all my time working there."

"I'm very driven by why I do something and I absolutely love being part of the energy sector – it's been part of my identity for a long time. So it's been very hard to step away from that because I've had 25 year career where that's been part of what defines me."

"It was very difficult because I had only ever worked in energy and assumed I'd stay in the sector. I didn't have another job to go to, so it was a leap of faith that I'd manage financially and find something else. I'd liked what I did but the management and leadership were just not supportive."

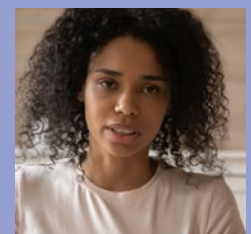
"I returned from maternity leave to be managed by my fifth boss and I had to teach them how to do their job. I decided I wasn't doing this again because I was not convinced he was a good leader for me or someone I could aspire to be or who would help me."

"I realised I was never going to proceed to the next level with the current people in charge."

"Comments were made about me leaving work due to childcare commitments, despite it being 5.30pm when the working day finished at 5pm. There were also negative comments around International Women's Day from leadership that showed how much of a boys' culture there was within the company."

"As a senior leader, I loved my team, with the gender balance it had and the purpose we felt. But several tipping points happened at once: there was bullying and harassment and lack of support at the top, it felt like the company was trying to meet targets without getting the inclusive culture right and I got a negative response when I asked for coaching. I also asked about setting up a female network but one year on nothing had happened. As a woman at that level you can feel isolated and you need your community and support network."

"I quit without a job, which was pretty crazy. But I moved into consultancy because I wanted to use the time I had left in my career to have as wide an impact as possible."



Do you feel that the energy sector in general offers exciting and satisfying careers for women?

We wanted to ask this question because we wanted to understand the opportunity, not just the challenge. And what companies might be missing out on in terms of committed, engaged employees, if they don't get the inclusion and culture right.

All the women we spoke to remained positive and enthusiastic about the importance of energy to society and of the industry as an incredible place to work. Two key themes came through:

Firstly, they saw the sector as offering job satisfaction through the opportunity to contribute in a purpose-driven way, particularly to the energy transition and positive solutions to climate change. They had found it fulfilling at times in their career and had felt motivated to make change happen and to make a difference.

This aligns with the outcome of the Women in Energy Global Study 2022, which gave a loud and clear message that women in energy are passionate about the climate change agenda. The vast majority of the 1,500+ women surveyed in that study said it's a key career driver and that contributing to Net Zero is the most exciting thing about working in energy. Giving opportunities for purpose-driven work on the energy transition is clearly going to help companies not just attract but retain talented women.

Secondly, the women we spoke to saw the energy sector as an exciting growth industry, particularly the renewables sector, offering a huge variety of career opportunities across the sector with space to grow, expand one's knowledge and develop new skillsets.

But these positive views from the women were caveated in our interviews with the need to address issues around diversity and culture, so that talented women aren't left out of the energy transition journey and companies are able to build the right workforce to deliver Net Zero. Despite the exciting opportunities described above, the industry was seen as still stuck in an old-fashioned approach regarding the types of skills required and at the same time is failing to get more women into STEM, engineering and leadership positions.

It was acknowledged that there are more opportunities for women today. Companies have become more progressive on issues like flexible working and allowing individuals to be themselves at work. But it was felt that they need to get the culture right to get the most out of their people and that there were still too few women at senior level, too few positive role models and too little support for women in their career journeys, through for example mentoring, coaching and networks.

"I have chosen not to leave the sector entirely as energy is what makes the world go round. The industry has played a large part in causing climate change but also has the solutions, and there is the chance to work with stakeholders in society to alleviate the problem."

"I couldn't imagine working anywhere else and I believe it is an exciting sector. It definitely feels like there are more opportunities for women since I had my child 10 years ago. The landscape is changing. However, there is still work to be done in encouraging girls to take STEM subjects and consider a career in engineering."

"The sector is changing so rapidly that there are lots of opportunities. I've gone from working offshore, in every sort of industry and male-heavy environment, and seen massive changes in the sector where companies have become progressive in their approach to flexible working, individuals being able to be themselves and so on, but at the same time having high standards and expecting a lot from you. If you end up working somewhere that doesn't have that progressiveness, it feels like part of your empowerment has been taken away from you."

"I first walked into a milk round presentation from my previous company not knowing which sector I wanted to work in. I met the people and loved them, and pretty much my decision was set that I wanted to join that organisation and the energy sector over anything."

"We're motivated by a need to make change. We want to make a difference. We want to try and halt the ravages of climate change. I think it gives women a space to grow and really expand your knowledge."

"Yes, it's an incredible sector to work in. However, we won't deliver the energy transition without the right inclusive workforce. The sector needs to become adaptive rather than static and leaders need to shift their mindsets and accept a variety of skillsets are now needed within the workplace."







RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETAINING TALENTED WOMEN

What would it take for you to commit to a role in the energy sector now? What do you want or need from a good employer?

We concluded our interviews by asking the women what they are looking for in a new employer or what key factors would or do make them feel positive about the opportunities of working in the energy sector. We have used their feedback to draw up a set of recommendations for organisations.

Recommendations for retaining talented women

Women want to feel **empowered to make a difference.**



Companies can:

- ✓ Provide your employees with a sense of purpose, especially around climate change and the energy transition
- ✓ Ensure they feel like they are having a tangible impact and making a difference in their daily role and that it aligns with the company's values and strategy
- ✓ Link the job they do to the impact on wider society
- ✓ Provide a workplace culture where they can be a change agent
- ✓ Support women to upskill and provide opportunities to develop and contribute their specialist knowledge
- ✓ Provide opportunities to work on new ideas, innovations and challenges

Women want to experience **the right supportive and inclusive culture.**



Companies can:

- ✓ Make flexible working standard and integrated as part of the company culture
- ✓ Demonstrate an inclusive culture in practice, not just words
- ✓ Support individual personal needs for flexibility – where, when and how
- ✓ Take intersectionality seriously and support people of different races and sexual orientation too
- ✓ Demonstrate and develop inclusive leadership (in line managers and at senior levels)
- ✓ Role model healthy work-life balance at senior level
- ✓ Establish support networks for women

Women want to **see leadership walk the talk on diversity.**



Companies can:

- ✓ Appoint and retain diverse leadership and management and through the pipeline

- ✓ Work on attracting women from other sectors who have transferable skills

- ✓ Shift mindsets to accept that a variety of skills and strengths are now needed, not just the traditional

- ✓ Support individuals to thrive through development programmes, sponsorship, mentoring

- ✓ Enact company EDI commitments on the ground, ensuring policies are working for women



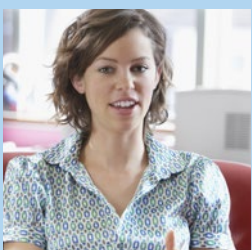
Many of these themes also came through in the wider research from Encompass Equality, which gave three pieces of advice to companies, to:

1. rethink line manager training, since it's the top ranked factor in terms of leaving decisions.
2. give attention and investment to career progression, and organisational culture will evolve as a result.
3. pay more attention to job design – the how and when work is done, not necessarily the where

"I still want to be impactful in the energy transition space. Working somewhere where my purpose aligns with the company's strategy is very important to me and is more important than financial value. What's important to me is having a culture that says we can all be change agents."

"Energy is so interesting. It's such a big puzzle to wrap your head around and try and solve with other people, to actually have a tangible impact. It's just something that's really close to my heart. But it is important that we take intersectionality seriously. It's still a very middle class and white space. We should be thinking about what we can do to attract women from all backgrounds – either from other sectors with transferable skills or by supporting them to upskill."

"I don't want to be the only woman in the room. I don't want to be in that position again. I'm the role model, propped on a pedestal, and the topic of discussion is always "how do you do it?" I'd like to be amongst more women leaders."



"The reason why I chose to go into energy was climate change. Irrespective of what else is happening or how I feel, I still think that if I was going to channel my professional career into anything, that is the biggest challenge as a society we face and there is a huge amount to be done."

"I am still interested in coming back because I'm passionate about energy and contributing my skills and experience. But I need the flexibility to support my personal situation."

"I have now chosen to work for a company where flexible working is standard company culture. During my interviews there were open conversations around this. The company has a team charter which feels like they demonstrate an inclusive culture in practice. The leadership and management appear supportive, collaborative and diverse."

"Working for a company that meets with my values, is a cultural fit and has an inclusive, progressive approach is important to me."

"We won't deliver the energy transition without a diverse workforce. So it's important that women are supported through affinity groups, sponsors and positive role models."

"Nothing would entice me back. I get approached but every time I think about it it's just "it's a no from me". I think too much damage has been done."

"I want to go back, but I feel like they don't want me. I can't believe that I'm still focusing on this energy sector."

"After my next job, I think I'd like to move into the finance sector to help investment flow into new technologies. I want to be that technical knowledge."

Conclusion

We owe our interviewees huge thanks for sharing their stories, particularly about challenging or unsettling situations at work and the difficult personal and professional decisions they felt compelled to make. Hearing their frustrations around their experiences has helped us discover core motivations underlying behaviour that we hope will help others – both employers and employees – and drive change.

The first thing to note is that the results of our conversations align with conclusions from other more quantitative, data-led studies on why people are leaving roles across the global workforce, and in particular when it comes to women's experience. While anecdotal, the women's stories paint a rich picture that we hope will challenge some preconceptions and further inform organisations' strategies on diversity and inclusion, talent retention and attraction.

Secondly, a loud and clear message from the conversations was how positively the women felt – and still feel – about the energy sector as a whole and the opportunity it offers to make a difference. Without fail, they were driven and passionate on issues like the energy transition, innovation and solutions for society and the environment. They want to be part of the Net Zero workforce and the exciting variety of skills and talent it needs. But they also felt held back, with limited or diminishing opportunities to have an impact, mainly due to lack of inclusion.

It is clear that being given purpose-driven work and feeling supported to contribute is important to these women. Culture makes a difference and inclusivity is key. Organisations should check in on their Employee Value Proposition, ensuring it is relevant, well-communicated and lived day-to-day throughout the organisation.

The positive news is that none of the women we spoke to had left to go to another sector. But a few decided to set up on their own. And at least one other expressed a desire for her next move to be to another industry. The conversations didn't suggest we should panic about a leakage of talent from the sector as a whole, but that remains a risk. In a competitive market for talent within the industry, these women's stories are something all company leaders, DEI leads and managers should be taking seriously.

Finally, our set of recommendations sets out what women told us they really want from a good employer. In the words of one of our interviewees, choosing the right boss and organisational culture is as important as choosing the role itself. We heard that women want to a) feel empowered to make a difference, b) experience the right supportive and inclusive culture and c) see leadership really walk the talk on delivering diversity – tangible actions and experiences in the workplace, not just words.

We hope our suggested checklist of positive actions organisations can take to meet these needs – which we know are common across many women in the wider workplace – will prove useful.

We welcome feedback on our insights and look forward to keeping the conversation going.

The POWERful Women Team

“From now on I’ll be thinking about picking the right culture as opposed to the right company.”

“What the energy sector is currently doing well is making that link between the role you do as part of a changing energy sector and how it impacts society. For me that’s really important - to feel that I’m doing more than just turning up for work.”



Acknowledgements

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