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Europe's renewable energy sector is maturing—is its talent market keeping up?

As Europe's renewables sector matures, the biggest constraint may no longer be capacity but whether companies can find the right leaders to optimize assets, navigate complexity, and build value.

Europe's renewable energy sector is entering a new phase of development. For much of the past decade, the key determinant was whether companies could build capacity quickly—ramping up development capabilities, construction teams, and finally, operations organizations—moving as rapidly as possible from pipeline to production.

Today, the sector is more complex, as are the challenges. The bottlenecks to growth are increasingly structural, with grid congestion, delays in grid connections, and electricity markets struggling to absorb large volumes of solar and wind generation.

This has direct implications for investors. Value creation will increasingly depend not only on building new assets but also on optimizing existing ones. Today's renewable platforms need to handle more complex portfolios, integrate new technological advances quicker, and create more value from assets.

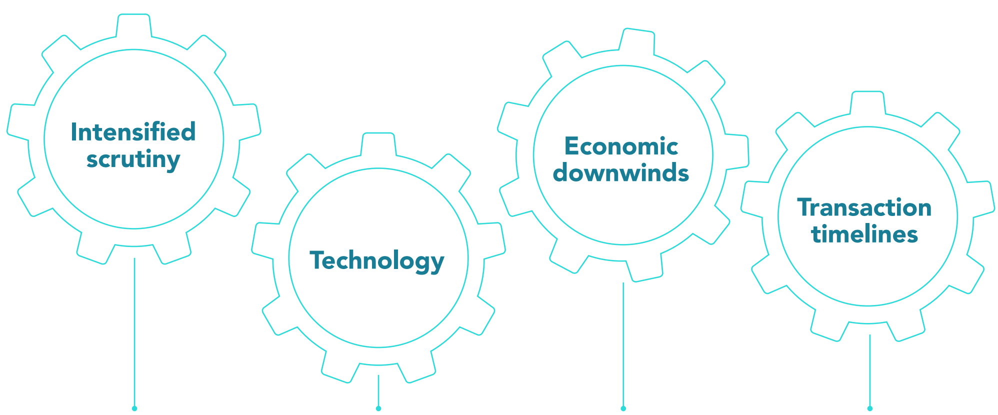
This is where the talent equation becomes critical.

For several years, the European renewables sector experienced a phase of rapid hiring, driven by the large-scale rollout of solar and wind projects, particularly in high-growth markets in southern and northern Europe. In 2023, Heidrick & Struggles noted that "in renewables, companies are growing faster than the supply of leaders can keep up with." Project developers, construction managers, and engineering teams were in high demand as companies raced to bring capacity online.

That dynamic is changing. While hiring activity remains strong, recruitment is becoming far more selective and strategic. Companies are prioritizing roles that directly impact project economics, operational performance, and portfolio optimization across multiple markets.

The clean energy market is maturing

This new inflection point is the result of several factors.



Intensified scrutiny: Across Europe, platforms are experiencing slower permitting, tighter regulatory oversight, and more rigorous due diligence on new projects. Spain's nationwide blackout in 2025, for example, exposed structural gaps in the country's renewables sector—kicking off a wave of activity from Spanish renewables companies and regulators.

Technology: Advances such as improved data analytics and increased digitalization have strengthened clean energy companies' ability to optimize their existing assets. Companies are also exploring how new artificial intelligence (AI) use cases can maximize operations.

Economic downwinds: Less favorable macroeconomic conditions and tighter capital markets are pushing investors and infrastructure funds to place greater emphasis on extracting value from existing portfolios rather than simply expanding capacity.

Transaction timelines: As deals in the sector slow, private equity-backed firms and private corporations are now sitting on assets for longer than previously anticipated. This can expose structural weaknesses: duplicated roles, ad-hoc processes, and a lack of unified systems.

Business models shift from high growth to optimization

In the high-growth phase of the past decade, it was acceptable—even advantageous—for European renewable platforms to "build and flip" assets quickly across the region. Numerous private equity-backed and private platforms made building and rotating assets their business model. For some investors, the value-creation potential during the development phase was so significant that long-term ownership and asset management were often not considered strategic priorities.

That's no longer the case. With the shifts in all aspects of the energy industry, a growing number of boards and investors are seeking leaders, often at CEO or COO level, who can professionalize fragmented organizations and integrate disparate assets into a coherent platform.

Some investors are even looking beyond the renewable energy sector to attract executives from more mature industrial and infrastructure businesses where operational excellence and productivity optimization are deeply embedded.

Digital and technology leaders become increasingly important

The role of the chief information officer, chief digital officer, or an equivalent technology leader is gaining greater prominence as companies seek to navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of AI and digitalization.

As the CEO of a major European independent power producer (IPP) recently told us, "I don't yet know exactly where AI will take the energy sector, but I need someone who understands our business from the inside and can challenge both me and the board to think about what the future will look like and where we should be investing today."

In response to the growing digitalization of the industry, IPPs across Europe have introduced chief transformation officer roles to orchestrate enterprise-wide strategic initiatives, spanning digital transformation, technology, organizational effectiveness, and supply chain optimization. These leaders are increasingly responsible for driving change that translates into measurable business value.

Leaders need more specialized skills

Talent demands in this new phase are shifting toward highly specialized capabilities, including:

- Energy markets and power purchase agreement (PPA) structuring
- Battery storage and system flexibility
- Grid integration and network planning
- Asset management and operational optimization
- Digitalization and energy analytics
- Corporate finance, project finance, and capital allocation

Reflecting the industry's shift from growth to value creation, a chief people officer at a major pan-European platform shared, "There is no shortage of development and M&A talent seeking opportunities with us. Our greatest talent challenge lies in retaining and strengthening our asset management and operations teams, where much of the value creation now resides."

The executive talent imperative

Specialized senior roles are becoming more important to address the industry's evolution: heads of energy markets and commercial strategy; storage and flexibility leaders; COOs and asset management and portfolio optimization directors; digital and transformation leaders; and CFOs and project finance directors.

A private equity-backed renewable energy platform in central Europe recently established and strengthened a group energy management function to optimize merchant exposure, power trading, and battery dispatch across its growing portfolio. Explaining the rationale behind the move, a board member noted that "energy markets have become too critical to value creation to be managed primarily through third parties," as was often the case in the past.

This focus on value extension is equally evident among utilities. For example, one major European utility made moves to reinforce its group-level leadership for storage and flexibility within its renewables business in recent months. The company aims to accelerate the deployment of hybrid assets combining wind, solar, and storage while improving portfolio optimization, and the move is in large part a response to growing grid constraints and renewables intermittency across key markets.

The next phase requires new leadership skills

Beyond technical expertise, the evolution of the European renewable energy sector is reshaping the specific leadership capabilities companies are seeking. Investors increasingly prefer regionally coherent platforms that are simpler to operate, sell, and integrate.

As an illustration of this, we have seen investors over the past year divide a large international IPP into distinct regional platforms in preparation for a sale—demonstrating the extent to which investors are looking for businesses they can easily integrate into their own larger structures.

Companies now are selecting leadership talent for a new set of traits:

- Systems thinking: individual projects are no longer being developed in isolation. Leaders must understand how generation, storage, markets, regulation, and grid infrastructure interact—in essence, they must be able to think in terms of systems instead of single assets.
- Strategic adaptability: regulatory regimes, energy prices, and financing conditions can shift quickly across European jurisdictions. Leaders need to be able to adjust strategies to changing market dynamics while maintaining long-term investment discipline.
- Stakeholder management: renewable energy projects increasingly sit at the intersection of governments, local communities, investors, and regulators. Navigating these relationships requires strong communication, negotiation, and diplomacy skills.
- Cross-disciplinary collaboration: today's energy platforms combine engineering, finance, digitalization, trading, and regulatory expertise. Successful leaders must be able to bridge these disciplines for themselves and their cross-functional teams.
- Resilience and decision making under uncertainty: with project delays, organizational restructuring, regulatory scrutiny, and volatile markets becoming more common, executives must be comfortable making high impact decisions with incomplete information and be able to maintain confidence across investors and teams.

- Long-term value orientation: perhaps most important, this next phase of the energy sector rewards leaders who focus on sustainable value creation rather than rapid expansion. As the sector matures, the ability to balance growth, operational excellence, and capital discipline becomes a defining leadership capability. Being able to tell the organization's story well and sell its vision for growth to management teams, boards, and external investors is an increasingly vital skill for leaders in this space.

The rise of hybrid leaders

Ultimately, the European renewable energy sector is moving toward a leadership model that values hybrid executives—individuals who combine technical credibility, commercial acumen, and strong interpersonal leadership skills.

In the next stage of the renewable energy transition, leading organizations may be those that build the most capable teams, not necessarily the most capacity.

About the authors

Joanna Raczynska
is a principal in the global Industrial and CEO & Board of Directors practices; she is based in the Madrid office.

jraczynska@heidrick.com

Helena Muir
is a principal in the global Industrial Practice; she is based in the London office.

hmuir@heidrick.com

Industrial Practice

Heidrick & Struggles' Industrial Practice helps industrial companies identify and recruit the leaders they need to succeed in this diverse sector.

Leading industrial companies need innovative global leaders who possess the strategic, operating, and financial skills required to win in this complex environment. They need commercially focused leaders who can develop distinctive value-added solutions. And, above all, they need leaders who have the ability to make both an immediate impact and a long-term contribution.

Our Industrial Practice experts combine unparalleled search resources with a deeply consultative approach, developing the ideal candidate profile based on each client's unique competitive challenges, business objectives, and leadership culture.

Leaders of Heidrick & Struggles' Industrial Practice

Global

Jane Bargmann
Boston
jbargmann@heidrick.com

Americas

Sara E. Spiering
Chicago
sspiering@heidrick.com

Asia Pacific & Middle East

Thierry Lindenau
Singapore
tlindenau@heidrick.com

Europe & Africa

Roman Wecker
Frankfurt
rwecker@heidrick.com

Middle East & North Africa

Mohamad Turk
Dubai
mturk@heidrick.com