

Interview series.

Leaders making a difference, 2024

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Passionate about renewable energies and their impact, here Aurore explains the importance of walking the talk, surrounding yourself with the best people, understanding market triggers and being inspired every day.

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How did your journey in sustainability begin and what has influenced your career choices?

After my MSc in Communication Systems Engineering, I started my career working as a telecommunications researcher for three years, but just didn't feel I was having enough impact. Then the major nuclear accident happened at Fukushima. This was in 2011 and suddenly the need for energy transition was everywhere; on the tv, in the papers, everyone was talking about it. My father is an electrical contractor and at the time was already interested in installing solar panels but not overly familiar with the technology. He suggested I should investigate this industry and work to develop it into the family business. This was the impact I was looking for – selling the technology, selling the installation, delivering something to the client that can save them money and do some good for the planet. It was tangible, so this is exactly what I did. I completed a CAS (Continuous Advanced Studies) in renewable energies, created my own engineering practice and worked as a consultant. In 2015 I joined the fourth-generation family business to integrate the value chain and started looking at other technologies for the whole household energy system, as well as the B2B sector. I also acquired a certification to deliver energy audits for house sales which enabled me to talk to families and understand their needs. In 2019 I decided to do an MBA to reinforce my leadership skills to deliver even more impact. I did a lot of research to understand the whole value chain of the electron: from its production to client delivery, which is when I came across Romande Energie. I started my role there in 2021, selling electricity to end customers including solar contracting, finance installations, EV infrastructures, trying to understand what clients need and developing products and services around renewable energy.



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You mentioned leadership skills, what do you think are the most critical elements to build a strong company culture and reinforce sustainable value?

As a leader, the first rule in this industry is to walk the talk. You need to be a role model and close to the market – understanding how people function, what are the triggers and constraints. As a leader you also need to be aware of who you surround yourself with. Because the topic of sustainability is so huge, you need to surround yourself with people with a rich specialist knowledge, and who are better than you. It's taken almost two years to build my team, but I can say that my whole team are the best at what they do, and better than me. I'm not afraid to say that I don't know, or that I need help – and that's very important because then I give the opportunity for members of my team to help. I really value teamwork, I know I need my team, but also, it's my role to protect them and help them grow in their roles too. It's also important to recognise that we need to be close to the markets, facing the clients and not the board. We need to stay focused on what our clients need rather than pleasing the executive team. I would love my team to say 'no, we're not doing that because it's not what the client needs.'



How do you balance the need to support clients to innovate, whilst also utilising technology and innovation to inspire and gain a competitive edge?

It's important to try and be a step ahead. We absolutely need technology, but the problem is that investing in innovative technology is very costly. Innovation takes many forms and I think that by bringing your customer forward in sustainability and developing their mindset – you can be the frontrunner for that. People want to save energy and do something good, but it always comes down to what it will cost. This is the challenge because people don't like to compromise their personal comforts. Growing up, my father was always mindful of having the best technology to gain energy and make savings. In fact, I love telling the story, where, as a child, after ten minutes in the shower the lights would go out. That was our innovative way of saving energy and money - it worked.

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Based on your expertise, what impact do other roles such as safety and operational excellence have in creating resilient sustainable business practices?

Everyone needs a safe environment, especially those working on construction sites. My industry is seeing such a rapid growth in recruitment, so you need to focus on operational excellence to work on processes, so that they are both safe and efficient – you can't have one without the other. When looking at the challenges of a more sustainable future I see the biggest one being a shortage of labour in all areas. I read a few weeks ago that in Switzerland, to meet carbon neutrality by 2050, we need 400,000 more workers. Digitalisation is key to scale, and scaling up is quickly becoming a problem too. We saw during the pandemic that businesses that were more advanced in change management and digitalisation prospered, likewise the war in Ukraine has highlighted the urgency to be more sustainable and resilient, for example by not relying on gas coming from Russia. We need to be more efficient in all areas of business to be resilient.

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What are the main challenges of moving to a low carbon and more sustainable future?

Businesses need to understand sustainability more widely and look at the whole value chain - where they buy materials and where they come from. It's not just about building an asset. We need to understand the complexities of the value chain; for example it may be cheaper to buy solar panels in China, but if we think about the carbon footprint of our asset then it doesn't make sense in the sustainability context. Those who work in sustainability are all very engaged. We want to have an impact and I do believe that we are making a change. However, I'm very worried seeing what's happening in the world, the disasters, the heatwaves, the floods. In my daily activity I'm confident we're trying to do the right things; but will it be enough? I don't know.



As a leader in renewable energy transition, what would you say are the top three drivers for the industry to move towards a sustainable future?

Our ability to change mindsets and help clients to be more aware is critical. I think we are still at a point where people don't understand what is happening. Secondly, leaders need to transform their company to deliver what's needed; change management, transformation - if you want to have the impact and do this transition, it cannot be a company that works as it used to. Leaders need to be looking at the challenges, how to address them and change the mindsets within the company. And finally, we need to be driven by regulations. We will not be able to reach our goals by only working on mindsets, we need the constraints that regulations bring. Certainly in Switzerland it feels like we're moving in the right direction.



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