

The New Energy Landscape



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How often have you met a young woman who proudly and openly said: “my dream is to work in the oil industry.”?

Or how often have you met parents who said “our dream is for our daughter to get a job in the oil sector”. I bet you, not that often, especially when compared with other sectors. This is not limited to the Middle East – on the contrary, the odds are probably higher in this part of the world than elsewhere. Nor it is something new – despite being more than a century old, the industry’s appeal to female talent has not drastically changed over the years.

One cannot but wonder why this is the case. Ironically, there is no single convincing answer. But one can largely blame it on the perception or even misperception of the industry, at least in its modern state. Getting the sticky yellowish-black liquid out of the ground is not quite a beautiful sight. Tough men covered in dirt and mud as they move heavy equipment on what appears to be dangerous structures do not quite convey a relaxed working atmosphere. Hollywood does not help either. Movies like ‘There will be blood’, which portrays the life of a ruthless oil prospector in the early days of the industry, or more recently “Deepwater horizon” which focuses on the disaster on an oil rig in the US Gulf of

Mexico, surely leave viewers uneasy about the industry - to say the least.

There is no doubt that the oil business is demanding and risky. After all, we are getting out of the ground a highly flammable product that was formed millions of years ago and got trapped in a certain rock formation – what is technically known as reservoir – under a certain pressure which is dangerous if not properly handled.

But the industry has come a long way particularly in terms of sophistication and safety of operations. Technology has been key, and it continues to play a central role even more so today. Just think of the new generation of technologies, especially those related to digitalization, including the deployment of robots and drones to carry out site inspections for instance. You could be lounging on a comfortable sofa and monitoring operations on an oil site from your living room.

Irrespective of how one feels about the industry, one cannot but admire the sheer complexity of its operations. Just imagine how oil companies can identify the best spot to drill under thousands of meters of water and then further deeper into the seabed through

the rocks to reach a reservoir and then manage that reservoir for years and decades to come, under any weather condition - all from a huge distance while relying on sophisticated computer screens which would remind you of spaceships! Such an operation also requires careful coordination across a large number of people coming from different disciplines – from technical to financial to managerial and security. So, to those who are up for some adventure, they ought to add the oil industry to their list.

However, it is quite understandable that many young people today, both men and women, fear that they have no future in what is perceived to be a ‘dying industry’. After all, isn’t the world trying hard to move away from fossil fuels – that is oil, gas and coal – the main culprits behind carbon emissions to fight climate change? Of course, hardly anyone wants to spend a lot of time, effort and money pursuing a degree that has a short shelf life. These fears are legitimate. But let us consider a couple of aspects.

First, all respectable forecasting agencies agree that oil and gas are not going to suddenly disappear from our energy mix, anytime soon, or at least not before the next three decades – and who knows what can happen between now and then. In the early days of the oil industry, oil was used for lighting. When electricity was developed, many thought the oil age was over, only to be renewed and extended even longer with the development of the internal combustion engine, or in non-technical language the conventional car. If history is of any guide, one should not underestimate the ability of the oil industry to reinvent itself, especially when faced with existential threats.

Second, oil is not only used for the transport sector. From make-up to perfume, medicine, plastic, furniture, electronics... you name it.



Thousands of products come from oil. Our modern societies revolve around oil. Simply switching from a conventional car to an electric car will not end the oil age (let alone the fact that electric cars have a long way to go to seriously threaten the massive fleet of conventional cars, then add to that planes and other transport means which would need to be electrified). No wonder most international agencies agree that oil and gas will continue to provide at least half the world’s energy needs until the middle of the present century, and many believe far beyond.

Third, there is no doubt that climate change is a serious concern that should not be overlooked. But in the global fight to stop the warming of the planet, the oil industry can still play a role and not a negligible one, especially when it makes every possible use of technological advance to adhere to highest environmental standards and to deliver to the global economy, to industry and to consumers reliable, plentiful and cheap supplies.

Finally, no commentary on the outlook of the oil industry is complete without reflecting on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, which caused a collapse in oil demand, when the world economy was brought into a standstill as planes stopped flying and cars stopped driving. Oil prices collapsed in tandem. The industry’s response has been to cut costs including reducing their workforce – a typical response in such a cyclical industry. That by itself can act as a major deterrent for young talent seeking job security. But first we have to remember that the COVID-19 is ‘a crisis like no other’, to quote the IMF, and has hit the global economy badly. Yes the oil sector, as well as the services industry, were among the most obvious casualties, but hardly any other sector was fully shielded from the crisis. Still, the oil industry has some work to do to minimise the impact of oil price cycles on its employment. Second, as with each crisis, there is a silver lining and wise companies – private and state owned alike – are repositioning themselves to emerge from the crisis stronger and leaner. Building the workforce of the future is at the centre of revised strategies of many such companies, with a special focus on attracting and retaining young talent particularly female.

Far from oil and gas being yesterday’s sector, the path is opening for the industry to be the true gateway to a new energy landscape where old and new energy co-exist and where women play a chief role.