



## Working for a DNO during COVID-19



**Alex Crow, Portfolio Investment Engineer at Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN) and YEP Forum Ambassador, reflects on being a Young Energy Professional (YEP) working for a Distribution Network Operator in the first half of 2020.**

Unprecedented/strange/challenging/unusual times: I have lost count of the amount of different ways I have heard our current climate described and I could go on. Within SSEN, the Distribution Network Operator (DNO) where I work, the job roles are diverse and we have all had to adapt how we work during the coronavirus pandemic. Throughout this time, SSEN has maintained a dedicated team of critical workers on the front line, ensuring a safe and reliable supply of electricity to our customers living under lockdown. While our teams work hard to keep the power flowing all year round, the pandemic has demanded new ways of working to help keep them safe, such as adopting a one-person, one-van policy to respect social distancing measures, more detailed risk assessments and enhanced Personal Protection Equipment.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, other roles which have seen a large proportion of the workforce settling in to their new office at home seem more likely to transition to a new normal. I find myself in the latter of these two groups. Like much of the UK workforce, there has been significant change in day-to-day life at work and there will be more to come.

The energy industry has faced some significant challenges over the past few months, with energy demand falling to record low levels,<sup>2</sup> as industry closed and transport use decreased. SSEN and other DNOs have worked with the regulator and other stakeholders to agree changes to how we operate, which have helped ensure we keep the power flowing.<sup>3</sup>

My new normal at work has brought newfound knowledge that I have a work-specific laugh. Oh, and that apparently, I talk really loudly on the phone (two things my wife was very happy to tell me within a day of working at home together). Now that my days are filled with wearing a headset, I reflect upon the value of informal conversation, which can be much more easily achieved face-to-face, than by email or instant messenger. The importance of informal conversation in work has been widely researched,<sup>4</sup> and for me, it often exists in the first few minutes of entering a meeting room. With all meetings currently online, it can be all too easy to jump straight to the point without the

<sup>1</sup> <http://news.ssen.co.uk/news/all-articles/2020/april/at-the-frontline-delivering-for-customers-ssen/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newpower.info/2020/06/late-may-bank-holiday-set-new-record-for-low-demand/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/ofgem-publications/163116>

<sup>4</sup> Fay, M.J. (2011), "Informal communication of co-workers: a thematic analysis of messages", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 212-229.

informal chat, especially when chairing. Yet, I feel so much more fulfilled when my days of telephone conferences have had those moments where someone says, “I can’t believe the weather is so nice and we’re stuck inside,” before we get to the matter at hand.

I also reflect upon being a young energy professional in the current climate. I think back to the summer networking event in August last year, at which Sara Powell from FTI Consulting touched on the value of each of our professional networks and how they are built through face-face communication. This resonated strongly for me at the time and continues to do so now. Those relationships I have built at work by getting out of my seat and going to other desks or floors in the office are the strongest I have now. Those are the people that I have no hesitation in contacting if I need to throughout my working day.

The majority of challenges the energy industry currently faces are not new but we will be addressing them from our own homes or while using different working methods in the field for the foreseeable future. To all young energy professionals: we must continue to contribute towards a low-carbon future. For DNOs, tackling this challenge will be embedded in the next price control RIIO-2.<sup>5</sup> Some of the reports about how young professionals are currently disproportionately affected may be bleak,<sup>6</sup> but let us end by thinking about how coronavirus has accelerated practices such as the adoption of flexible working policies and online collaboration tools which may enable us to work smarter, provided we remember to maintain and build those human relationships that make our working lives enjoyable and efficient. These tools are factors millennials look for in a workplace.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime, maybe I will try to tone down my work laugh, for the sake of my current co-worker.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://news.ssen.co.uk/news/all-articles/2019/july/riio-ed2-customer-engagement-group/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

<sup>7</sup> [Deloitte Millennial Survey 2019](#)