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Hot Project Sector to Watch: Solar

The employment picture is bright for project managers in the solar sector. Do you have what it takes to get hired?

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Around the world, the sun is rising on the solar sector as organizations invest billions in renewable energy sources.

Solar industry employment in the United States now totals more than 100,000, which is double the number in 2009, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association.

By 2015, China's national goal is to reach 15 gigawatts of installed solar energy capacity, a 50 percent increase over its previous five-year goal, according to the country's National Energy Administration.

In Europe, renewable energy employs more than 1 million people, a 25 percent increase since 2009, according to the EurObserv'ER, a barometer that measures the progress made by renewable energies in each sector and member State of the European Union. With 268,110 jobs, solar is overtaking wind power for the first time as Europe's second largest renewable energy employer behind only biomass.

These opportunities mean an increased demand for project professionals who can streamline the installation, operation and maintenance of a brand-new solar infrastructure.

"Solar can be considered a project-based industry because it focuses on the construction, installation, operations and maintenance of energy generation systems," says Andrea Luecke, executive director of The Solar Foundation, a nonprofit that strives to increase the use of solar energy in Washington, D.C., USA.

"There is a healthy demand for project managers to oversee and coordinate a variety of activities along the solar value chain, including resource assessments, policy evaluation, market analysis, strategic planning, project and system design and procurement, manufacturing and construction management."

The most attractive project management candidates for the solar sector have a strong technical background, says Danilo Tambone, PMP, senior project manager, EPC Europe, Lanco Solar International, an engineering, procurement and construction organization in the solar power sector in Milan, Italy.

"Project management skills should be integrated with knowledge of electrical, mechanical and structural design," he says. "Plus, technical knowledge of the equipment to be installed, construction and safety procedures, and an in-depth understanding of the bureaucratic process is required to timely connect the plant to the grid."

These technical skills don't always have to come with solar knowledge.

"A lot of smaller companies are looking for help and might be willing to teach solar to an experienced project manager," says Patricia Hovey, president of North Fork Renewables Group, a Southold, New York, USA-based recruitment firm that specializes in renewable energy.

Even medium-sized companies are willing to overlook a lack of solar experience, says Prabish Thomas, managing director of PTL Solar FZ LLC, a renewable energy solutions firm in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

"At this early stage of the solar sector's development, solar experience or education is not a prerequisite if project management skills are evident," he says.

Those skills come from project managers with transferable experience in complementary industries, says Melissa Zucker, vice president of human resources at Solaria Corp., a Fremont, California, USA-based solar photovoltaic manufacturer. For example, commercial construction professionals are likely to have skills that are prized by solar employers, such as siting, scheduling, budgeting, stakeholder communication and construction superintendence.

Knowledge of cost management and process improvement efficiencies is also beneficial, adds Ms. Zucker. "The solar industry is very competitive from a price perspective. Part of that is introducing automation and tools where there haven't been any before."

Project managers who can present and manage projects in sustainable terms bring value as well, says Mr. Thomas.

"Familiarity with strategic finance, ROI, payback periods and sustainable practices will all aid in marketing a project on its 'green' merits and achieving successful outcomes," he says.

Once you've obtained these attributes and skills, start networking.

"There are a number of solar-specific conferences throughout the year where a jobseeker will meet potential employers," Ms. Luecke says. Examples include the Solar Power International conference in the United States, the European Photovoltaic Solar Energy Conference and Exhibition in Germany, or the Asia Solar Expo in China.

Soon enough, you'll be able to show off that you're a project manager with the skills to shine in the emerging solar sector.

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What do you think?

What skills do you think are necessary for those who want to break into the solar sector. Go to our [LinkedIn group](#) and comment