

The next oil crisis may be people, not petroleum

ASU researcher reveals why one of the energy sector's greatest shortages is not underground

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August 14, 2026

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The oil and gas industry is not running out of jobs — it is running out of people willing to take them, and a new report by Arizona State University reveals why.

“As the global economy shifts, the industry's biggest challenge isn't extraction — it's attraction,” says report author [Jennifer Richter](#), an associate professor in the [School for the Future of Innovation in Society](#) and a member of the [Humanities for the Environment Global Network](#), part of the [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#).

The report, “[Fueling the Future: The Talent Crisis in Oil and Gas](#),” reveals an industry at a critical crossroads.

Worldwide, approximately 6 million people now work directly in the oil and gas industry, with tens of millions more jobs supported across the value chain. As this workforce ages into retirement over the next decade, millions of new skilled professionals will be needed to fill the gap at a time when younger workers see the clean energy and technology sectors as more innovative and more welcoming places to build a career.

The report was produced by ASU in partnership with [Covo Intelligence](#), with additional support from [iSAW International](#), [Women10x Energy](#), [WPC Energy](#) and [Southern Alberta Institute of Technology](#).

It combines a 1,000-person survey of future professionals in Canada and the United Kingdom with an analysis of 7.3 million social media posts to paint a picture of an industry losing ground in the competition for talent — even as global demand for energy workers is expected to grow dramatically over the next decade.

In the future, Richter, who is also affiliated with the [ASU School of Social Transformation](#), would like to see this research extended to the United States and Saudi Arabia, as Saudi Arabia is also

heavily dependent on oil production as a foundation of their economy.

According to survey data, fewer than half of respondents viewed the industry positively overall. When asked about opportunity, innovation and inclusion, respondents ranked it below the alternative energy, technology and finance sectors.

“There’s been a generational shift, with younger workers raised around the ideas of sustainability and the greening of different industries,” Richter said. “They are looking for careers in industries that support their values and they can ethically support.”

The survey also revealed women still see the oil and gas industry as a man’s world.

“It’s still perceived as a very masculine-oriented industry, one that requires a certain degree of physical strength,” Richter said. “We still have these images of working in oil fields even though a lot of the industry is highly technical. There are a lot of different kinds of talent that are needed that women are eminently capable of doing and have proved that over the last few decades.”

A stark gender gap

Today, women make up only about 22% of the global oil and gas workforce and just 19% of executives — figures that have barely moved in a decade. In the survey, 60% of respondents said men have more opportunities than women to grow and advance into leadership roles in oil and gas, a view shared almost equally by men and women. In sharp contrast, most respondents saw roughly equal opportunities in finance, technology and alternative energy.

These findings were backed by social media analysis. Conversations about women’s opportunities in oil and gas were rare compared with other sectors, but when they did appear, they skewed overwhelmingly negative, compared with far more neutral sentiment in finance, automotive and technology. Posts about women in oil and gas leadership consistently centered on the continued scarcity of women in senior roles.

The report calls on industry leaders to collaborate on sharing best practices for recruiting and retaining women, to identify new models that connect inclusion directly to economic performance, and to hold themselves accountable through measurable commitments — not just public statements.

“An obstacle to this progress is today’s political backlash against policies for increasing women’s participation and opportunity that many corporations have had in place for decades,” Richter said.

For an industry that still powers much of the global economy, the researchers argue the message is direct: The next competitive advantage in energy won’t come from what’s extracted from the ground, but from who the industry can convince to work in it.

About ASU’s Global Institute for the Future of Energy

Preparing a new generation of energy leaders, and closing the gap between industry needs and public understanding, is central to the work of ASU’s Global Institute for the Future of Energy. A

collaboration between the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory and [Thunderbird School of Global Management](#), the institute was created to advance energy education and workforce capacity at a global scale, bringing together transdisciplinary research to help train the leaders this report urges that the industry needs today.

To learn more, visit futureofenergy.asu.edu.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



As this workforce ages into retirement over the next decade, millions of new skilled professionals will be needed to fill the gap at a time when younger workers see the clean energy and technology sectors as more innovative and more welcoming places to build a career. Shutterstock photo