



Karen Cunningham on finding fulfillment in her job and the need for diversity in the energy industry

Deloitte is proud to introduce the next profile in our series of women in the energy industry. By highlighting the stories of women in energy, we hope to help facilitate meaningful conversations, create connections, and showcase the myriad of opportunities available to enter and thrive in the energy industry.



A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Karen Cunningham has lived in four different countries including France, where she finished her high school education. She first envisioned herself working as a consultant many years ago while writing a letter to her future self. Fast forward to now, Karen is actualizing her dream as a Deloitte Consulting LLP Managing Director in Deloitte's US Energy, Resources and Industrials practice.

Karen Cunningham
Managing Director
Energy, Resources and Industrials
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Connecting the dots: transitioning from Life Sciences to Energy

Karen's route to consulting in energy wasn't a straight line. Growing up, she always knew that she wanted to travel the world and help people, but she had difficulty articulating the exact career path. After graduating with an MS in Organizational Psychology from Illinois Institute of Technology, she started working for a Chicago-based consulting company that focused on the life sciences and health care industry.

It was during this time period that she came across Deloitte and eventually joined the company. At first, she thought she would be doing similar life sciences work as she did in her previous firm, however, serendipity led her to venture into something completely different—energy. Initially in the industry, she spent a year working on an oil and gas project in Canada leading change management for a post-merger SAP integration.

"I realized I could draw on my experience from consulting in a different industry and focus area,—and from my educational background I/O psych—and apply it somewhere else. And because I had studied and lived in four countries and could conduct business in French, these experiences helped as I lived in Canada for this first project at Deloitte."

Karen was able to grow her network and build lasting relationships that carried forward after the project ended. "What I really took away from the project was the network of people," she says. "I met energy leaders and practitioners who I continue to work with today, though now in the Power, Utilities and Renewables (PU&R) sector, and realized that there was this really strong support system of people who truly cared, who were doing really interesting and impactful work, and that there was room to help define the space for Human Capital and take on a lot of responsibility to grow."

Crafting a life of substance

Karen always does her best to look at the bigger picture and find meaning in any project or task that she takes on. From serving her clients in PU&R, enabling them to transform for the future via their people—to her new role as the Human

Capital lead for sustainability, climate and equity in the US and globally, her passion and excitement for the work and people gets her jumping out of bed each morning.

"I want to be helping work toward something bigger than me. Being able to attach what I do day-to-day, to something so important, is so central to why I work."

Ups and downs

The road to success hasn't always been easy for Karen. As it is for many people, becoming a mother was a very big transition for her, finding a balance between work and raising her kids. Karen had to rethink her relationship with work and what really mattered to her, which meant reprioritizing certain things. Even Karen's Business Chemistry® style shifted. Originally a very high driver and integrator, she underwent a period of self-discovery during which she realized that she had no desire or mental capacity to be a driver. As a result, her style changed to that of integrator and pioneer.

She also managed anxiety and depression with the help of her family and close friends. "I think it is important to talk about this. A lot of people may see success in just the good outcomes, but acknowledging some of the struggle beneath the water and sharing how and why we overcome them to continue on a path is a real part of who we are and the real part of success."

There have been mentors throughout Karen's life, particularly her first one at Deloitte, whom she credits for investing time in getting to know her and propelling her on her current career path. The other mentors that she had along the way helped shape her perception about herself and her potential.

The importance of diversity in the industry and women empowering other women

In an industry that has historically been dominated by men, it may have been easy for some women to not feel included. And while her mentors and leaders are hyper

focused on inclusion, there have still been times Karen has not been an exception to this. She remembers being the only woman in most of her meetings for many years, and perhaps only invited to elevate the diversity in the room.

"Early in my tenure, there were definitely times where maybe I didn't speak up as much as I wanted to because I felt like I didn't earn my space there. What I remember is being put off by that initially and then realizing that 'hey Karen, you're in the room, now you have a seat at the table, who cares how you got there. Use it!'"

She believes things have changed since then with organizations being more intentional about recruiting women and racially/ethnically diverse professionals and many measuring their progress in diversifying their talent, like Deloitte. Most of her clients are making that shift to be more representative and to bring more diversity of thought and background to their teams. As the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leader for one of her client accounts at Deloitte, she strives to have a culture where they are driving the outcomes of diversity and inclusion through thoughtful programming, interactions, structure, and expectations.

She encourages women who are already in the industry and those who hope to enter in the future, to always be confident in their abilities and understand the power of using their voice. She also advises them not to be intimidated because whatever they have achieved is due to their own merit and hard work.

"Speak up. You have a perspective," she emphasizes. "Even if it is something out of left field, it is a perspective that needs and deserves to be heard."

Karen Cunningham: The lightning round

Women in Energy

Describing herself in three words: integrator, pioneer, indecisive

Favorite food or drink: Cookies and cream ice cream

Favorite place to travel: Iceland

One thing on her bucket list: Visiting all 63 of the US National Parks

One way she practiced self-care during the pandemic: Hiking with the kids and pandemic rescue puppies

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