

NORMAN BROADBENT

ENERGY INSIGHTS

Leading Hydropower Through the Age of AI

An interview with Sonja Chirico Indrebø on adaptive leadership, AI adoption and transforming critical infrastructure.



MATTHEW WOODALL

DIRECTOR | NORMAN BROADBENT PLC



SONJA CHIRICO INDREBØ

CEO | EVINY FORNYBAR



Introduction

When discussions turn to artificial intelligence, the conversation often centres on technology companies, software platforms, or data-driven industries. Rarely does it focus on a century-old hydropower business responsible for critical national infrastructure.

Yet some of the most thoughtful examples of AI adoption are emerging from organisations where the stakes are highest and the margin for error is lowest.

Mathew Woodall (Director in Power, Utilities & Natural Resources Practice at Norman Broadbent), recently sat down with Sonja Chirico Indrebø (CEO at Eviny Fornybar, hydropower utility in Norway), whose career has spanned oil and gas, offshore wind, and renewable energy infrastructure. The conversation explored how one of Europe's most established renewable energy businesses is navigating the opportunities and realities of AI, what it takes to drive change in highly technical organisations, and why leadership teams can't afford to treat technology transformation as somebody else's agenda.

What followed was a refreshingly balanced discussion; neither driven by hype nor constrained by caution, but grounded in practical leadership, operational realities, and a clear understanding of how people adopt change.

“

The threshold is so low for starting to use it that you find people becoming much more tech-savvy themselves. It's almost like democratising IT.

Continue to full interview...

Matthew Woodall in Conversation with Sonja Chirico Indrebø

Matthew: You've had a long career across oil and gas, offshore wind, and now hydropower. What drew you to this space, and how does it connect to where energy is heading?

Sonja: What I saw was a gap. The electricity need keeps going up, but wind and solar are weather dependent, so you need something to stabilise the grid. Hydropower has always been the baseload solution. But it was built to produce continuously, all the time. That's not what's needed any longer.

So hydropower is really going through a transformation; from being baseload into being a flexible production source. You need to provide energy at the time it's needed, not just continuously. And to do that, your technology needs to behave differently. That transformation is exactly why I wanted to come in. The timing felt right.

As Eviny adapts from a traditional baseload generator to a more flexible and responsive energy provider, technology is becoming an increasingly important enabler of that transition. I asked Sonja where AI is creating tangible value today.

It's almost like having virtual employees that handle the volume work, and you can use your own engineers for checking and verification, deploying them at a higher level.

Matthew: Where are you actually seeing AI show up in the business today? Is it operational, strategic, somewhere else?

Sonja: It started off where most companies start: analysing large volumes of information, being a tool for leaders. But now it's going much deeper. It can extract information from so many sources and pull it together efficiently. What I'm seeing now is it used in almost every pocket of the organisation. Take something seemingly simple: we have old machines, quite complex, and the documentation has always been hard to find. Now, with AI, that information is given straight to the engineer much more efficiently than any IT solution has managed before. It's a real, tangible shift in how our engineers work.

Matthew: But this is critical national infrastructure. The stakes for getting it wrong are real. How do you balance the opportunity with that obligation?

Sonja: AI needs a human in the middle. Full stop. We need to have the competence internally to understand what's being generated and how it's being analysed. These are systems we need to rely on 100%, so we can't just let it loose. It still needs an organisation that follows it up.

We're using agents to a certain extent, but cautiously, always making sure we retain control. And that challenge isn't going away. As the models get more capable, the humans in the middle need to keep developing their own competence to meaningfully challenge what AI produces. That's an ongoing obligation, not a one-time investment.



From Scepticism to Conviction

One of the most interesting aspects of our discussion was that Sonja was not an early AI evangelist. Like many experienced industry leaders, she approached the technology with a healthy degree of scepticism. What ultimately changed her mind was not a presentation or strategic initiative, but seeing how quickly AI began creating value for people across the organisation.

Matthew: Be honest... were you a believer from the start, or did you go through a period of scepticism?

Sonja: Completely honest? I saw a lot of what was coming on the AI side as being overly exaggerated for business outcomes. I've been in this industry a long time, I've seen a lot of hype, and that gives you a healthy scepticism. But I have been convinced, mainly in the last six months, watching how much more AI can actually do now compared to even a year ago.

Matthew: What flipped the switch for you?

Sonja: It was seeing people I never would have expected to engage with this kind of technology suddenly using it, and the energy that created in the organisation. The threshold is so low for starting to use it that you find people becoming much more tech-savvy themselves. It's almost like democratising IT. You have your own developer at hand; you can create knowledge without needing to go through someone else.

Technology adoption is rarely a technology challenge alone. For organisations with deep technical heritage and decades of accumulated expertise, the bigger question is often how to bring people with you.

You need to convince your subject matter experts that this is truly the next step.

Matthew: Eviny is a 100-year-old company with deep institutional expertise. How do you actually change the culture in an organisation like that?

Sonja: You have to bring along your subject matter experts. Not just your leadership team, but your technical leaders, the people your colleagues naturally look to when they want to know if something is real. We call them ambassadors. Once those people see the value, they bring along the others. Like rings in the water.

If they see AI as a threat, or just something they'd rather not engage with, it's quietly put aside and made into something smaller than it could be. But if they become genuinely curious and build

competence? They become the most powerful change agents you have. No amount of top-down communication replaces that.

Matthew: And what do you say to the leaders who are still watching from the sidelines?

Sonja: If you don't take control of this, somebody else is going to do it much better. It's that simple. I also think a board will increasingly find that leaders who aren't on this agenda aren't keeping up with what's happening around them. That's a board-level concern now, not just an IT concern.

As our conversation drew to a close, we moved beyond technology and into leadership itself. If AI is reshaping industries, what does that mean for the leaders responsible for navigating the change?

You can't build a business just by looking in the rear-view mirror anymore.

Matthew: Does the profile of an effective CEO change in this environment? What does leadership look like now?

Sonja: You can't build a business just by looking in the rear-view mirror any more. You have to truly challenge yourself on what new looks like. What would this company look like in five years if we were building it from scratch? That used to be a question for industries in rapid disruption. Now it applies to everyone, including hydropower.

Matthew: Last question. If you had one piece of advice for leaders navigating this, what would it be?

Sonja: Hire for attitude, train for skills. The people you need are the ones with genuine curiosity, and the willingness to try and fail and try again. We're all going into unknown territory here and none of us have all the answers. But if you get the right mindset in the room, and you break the problem into smaller pieces, and you get people focused on describing the actual problem they're trying to solve? You'll get there.

Matthew's Reflections

What struck me most from this conversation was not Eviny's adoption of AI itself, but the way Sonja framed the leadership challenge surrounding it. Across the energy sector, many organisations are asking similar questions: Where should we invest? How quickly should we move? How do we balance innovation with operational risk?

The leaders making the greatest progress are rarely those pursuing technology for technology's sake. Instead, they are creating environments where curiosity, experimentation and practical problem-solving can thrive alongside strong governance and accountability.

Three observations stood out:

1

First, AI adoption is increasingly a leadership issue rather than a technology issue.

The organisations gaining momentum are those where senior leaders are actively engaging with the opportunities and implications, rather than delegating them elsewhere.

2

Second, trusted technical experts remain the most powerful change agents in any organisation.

Winning hearts and minds often starts with the people that colleagues already turn to for credibility and guidance.

3

Finally, the most effective leaders are balancing openness to new possibilities with disciplined oversight.

In critical infrastructure environments, human judgement remains an essential part of the equation.

As industries across the energy landscape continue to evolve, the organisations that adapt most successfully will likely be those that combine technological advancement with thoughtful leadership and organisational readiness.



Sonja Chirico Indrebø is CEO of Eviny Fornybar and one of Norway's most experienced energy executives at the intersection of renewable infrastructure, digital transformation and industrial change. She is leading the evolution of hydropower into a more flexible and resilient part of the future energy system, with a strong focus on how technology and AI can strengthen performance, decision-making and adaptability. Her career spans more than three decades across energy and technology, including senior leadership roles at Corio Generation, Equinor and Statoil.



Matthew Woodall is a Director within the global Power, Utilities and Natural Resources practice. He brings over 20 years' of search experience across the energy ecosystem and its extended supply chain, partnering with organisations on executive search and leadership strategy. Matthew's expertise spans offshore wind, onshore renewables, hydropower, transmission and distribution, long-duration storage (including hydrogen and battery technologies), power generation, and energy retail.