

# Perspectives from Association of Edison Illuminating Companies' Annual Meeting

Conversations with Black & Veatch's Deepa Poduval,  
Commonwealth Edison's Najwa Abouhassan,  
Duquesne Light's Elizabeth Cook,  
Eversource's Aftab Khan and George Wegh

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he CEOs of ALLETE, Arizona Public Service, Cleco Corporate Holdings, Long Island Power Authority, Orange & Rockland Utilities, Southern California Edison, and Tampa Energy were there. As were the COOs or Presidents of Associated Electric Cooperative, Commonwealth Edison, Eversource, Oncor, PPL Utilities, and San Diego Gas & Electric. As were dozens of EVPs, SVPs, VPs and other utility operational leaders.

That is, at the one hundred thirty-eighth annual meeting of the Association of Edison Illuminating Companies. Since the year 1885 when Thomas Edison himself launched AEIC.

Seven general sessions over two days in Scottsdale zeroed in on executing the industry's priorities of decarbonization, digitization, resilience, and electrification. While ensuring reliability, safety, and affordability for utility customers.

The Public Utilities Fortnightly team interviewed experts while at the conference. Read on, to have a taste of the cross-industry conversations that took place when AEIC once again got together.

## Deepa Poduval

SVP, Global Advisory Practice, Black & Veatch

**PUF:** This is your first AEIC meeting. What are you hoping to learn while you're here and bring back to your organization?

**Deepa Poduval:** The biggest objective and take away from AEIC has been to get a window into what our clients are focused

on, and what their priorities are. It feels like it's a wide and deep ocean out there.

How are we thinking about sequencing what's next? What's top of mind as you think about these multiple equally impor-

tant, sometimes competing priorities? This AEIC conference has been valuable from that perspective. Each of the sessions have helped provide that window that I was hoping to have.

**PUF:** Black & Veatch is big, and you are in the strategy group. What are a couple of the most important or strategic priorities at your organization?

**Deepa Poduval:** One we're finding, that's markedly different from how we've engaged with our clients in the past, is our clients are seeking more of a partnership than a vendor-client relationship. More often than not, they're coming to us with where they want to go versus what exactly they want. It's not, "Build us this." It's, "We are trying to achieve this. Can you help us figure it out?"

To do that, Black & Veatch has undergone a complete transformation. This is the biggest one in our over one-hundred-year history, where we've said we're going to be organized by clients and client-centric, as opposed to being organized by our solutions because we were finding a given client needed multiple solutions from us.



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They're trying to achieve net zero or reliability or address climate adaptation or aging infrastructure. It required us to pull together multiple items off the menu and work with them on how they integrate with each other and how to get them to meet their ultimate objective.

**PUF:** Five or ten years from today, where do you see Black & Veatch? Where do you see customers you're working with in that transition?

**Deepa Poduval:** Right now, we're seeing significant investment in renewable technologies and expect to see more solar and wind projects over the next five years, near term. That's where we see a lot of emphasis.

But we're starting to see new technologies, new energy, and

clean technologies come to the forefront, perhaps more aggressively than before. We've broken ground on the world's largest green hydrogen hub in Utah and that's not something we would've contemplated saying five years ago. We're in feeds for multiple CCUS projects, biofuel, and sustainable aviation fuel.

A lot will be electrified, and we're in the throes of helping our clients with that, their grid modernization efforts, renewable energy hardening, all of it. But we're also seeing clients who understand not all their answers will come from electrification, as well as nontraditional clients looking for things they weren't before.

Increasingly, we're seeing our clients looking for a more holistic suite of answers and I expect Black & Veatch to be right there alongside them, providing those solutions. ○

# Najwa Abouhassan

## Senior Manager of Distribution Standards, ComEd



**I was part of different task groups and got into the leadership part of AEIC where I chaired the Cable Engineering Committee for 2 years.**

**PUF:** Why do you come to AEIC Annual? What do you hope to learn when you come to these events?

**Najwa Abouhassan:** I have been attending AEIC since 2014 with the Cable Engineering Committee and it all started with my curiosity of cables. I was the subject matter expert for cables as a Senior Engineer and started working with the Cable Engineering Committee.

I was able to learn and contribute to the committee and worked on the development of guides and specifications. We were focused on capturing some of that tribal knowledge that often gets lost as engineers retire and leave the company.

I was part of different task groups and got into the leadership part of AEIC where I chaired the Cable Engineering Committee for two years. I chaired it during COVID. That was my term, which had its own challenges, but learned to pivot because I believed in the mission of the Cable Engineering Committee and the impact it has, not only on ComEd, but on the industry.

That's why I come, to provide updates on the Cable Engineering Committee and to also obtain a wider view of all that is going on in the industry, which is exciting. I get to take that home to my team and peers to share.

**PUF:** What is exciting that you are working on at ComEd? Can you share a few?

**Najwa Abouhassan:** We have a lot going on. I'm excited about the clean-energy law that's been passed in Illinois, and at this conference over the past couple of days, I have been thinking about what I have been learning here and how to tie these learnings to support our objectives at ComEd.

We are focused on equity and educating our communities and stakeholders. My team is responsible for the Forensics Lab, where we have hosted several tours with a focus on sharing how we perform failure analysis of equipment and how we incorporate those learnings into our standards, specifications, training, programs, et cetera.

We are also focused on the impacts of climate change on our equipment and construction standards, which is really exciting. One example is flooding, making sure our equipment is submersible and able to withstand those types of events.

Another example is poles, making sure that we're designing our equipment to withstand extreme temperatures, wind, and ice loading. Those are some of the key issues we're working on.

The next big one is electrification. We see all these electric cars and buses, and being by Lake Michigan and the Chicago

River, all those boats; one can't help but think about how we will electrify all of it and how it will impact transformer and cable loading. It's just so interesting and energizing.

**PUF:** Five to ten years out, can ComEd make meaningful progress toward those goals?

**Najwa Abouhassan:** Yes. We're already on the right path. Our teams are excited about the clean-energy law and the initiatives that are going on, as it's all tied into our strategic objectives.

The next five to ten years will be here before we know it. Having a growth mindset and attending meetings like AEIC provides us with diversity of thought and bringing all these learnings back to our teams at ComEd ensures that we are not only making meaningful progress to these goals but achieving them in a unique way. ○

# Elizabeth Cook

General Manager of Advanced Grid Solutions, Duquesne Light Co.

**PUF:** This is your second AEIC annual meeting, what do you hope to learn or why do you come to these events?

**Elizabeth Cook:** AEIC meetings are extremely valuable because being surrounded by other utilities, there's a significant amount of information to learn. I've attended the AEIC DER subcommittees since 2017, which has proven to be a great resource.

AEIC meetings and engagements create relationships and networks between utilities, so when we're back inside our utility, struggling with the next solution for the problems identified, we can have open discussion with others who have experienced similar issues within their utility.

**PUF:** Back at your home office, there must be a lot of initiatives you're working on. Can you talk about a couple?

**Elizabeth Cook:** I've had my current role for two years. Formerly, I managed the system planning group, where I led efforts around building circuit models, running studies, and determining how we serve our customers. In addition to system planning tasks, more recently, we were responding to the impact of emerging grid-connected technologies, with a focus on how the grid needed to respond and proactively prepare for growth in electrification and distributed energy resources.

Therefore, I formed a new group to ensure we are strategizing and advancing our grid.

Additionally, I am driving the grid modernization imperative, working across all business units of Duquesne Light to ensure we're focused on the North Star, which is full situational awareness at the edge of the grid.

This effort requires input from our customer support team, our IT group, our regulatory team, and our operations group; modernizing the grid calls for collaboration among these groups to

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ensure we're doing projects in a way that will make us successful in the next two to three years and many years to come.

I'm also executing on a few advanced grid solutions projects. We're working toward our first battery, solar, building tie, also known as a microgrid, or what I like to call smart electric energy districts (SEEDs™).

With these projects, I am focused on learning and driving the project execution side, while embracing the challenges these new technologies bring to the table. We believe you must do in order to learn and that has been rewarding. There is lots to learn with everything we're doing. Again, AEIC has been a good resource.

**PUF:** With that specific project or goal, if you look out five or ten years, where are you going to be? Also, where do you see your company in ten years?

**Elizabeth Cook:** I believe we will have full situational awareness of our assets, which comprise the grid. We will optimize how we spend our capital, become more efficient with deploying our workforce, and streamline project execution for more non-wires solutions. That's the North Star.

I see in five or ten years that we will have accessibility to the data and that we're acting on that insight. That we will be able to

create new products and services for our customers that we have yet to define in the industry.

We will have our customers' energy profiles, and we will understand who's using energy, and how they're using energy. Based on these insights, we will create opportunities for customers to engage in ways they never have. As the electric grid changes and experiences growth due to electrification, real-time visibility and optimization of the power system will become crucial.

We will be positioned to quarterback solutions at the edge of the grid and enable accessibility to new technology for all. Of course, part of that is deploying clean energy, so taking the larger grid and breaking it into smaller resiliency hubs where we can incorporate clean onsite generation within communities as needed.

**PUF:** You're in Pittsburgh?

**Elizabeth Cook:** Yes, I am in Pittsburgh where Duquesne Light serves. However, by participation in the AEIC network, I can work with utilities throughout the country, each with unique characteristics. Although member utilities may share a common goal, how they reach the goal will be different due to historical, meteorological, and geographic diversity.

**PUF:** Is some of what you're doing based on the profile of your area?

**Elizabeth Cook:** Yes, one unique aspect about Duquesne Light is it's a two-county utility. We serve the city of Pittsburgh, so we have six hundred thousand customers, but we're only eight hundred seventeen square miles.

Our territory's electric grid infrastructure was created in the early 1900s by George Westinghouse. We have great history with minimal extreme weather events that impacted the grid at scale. We have a large amount of aged infrastructure.

Our territory is unique because we have aged infrastructure and impending extreme weather, like flooding, landslides, and extreme heat. About five years ago, we had approximately ninety-seven landslides that we monitored during the heavy rain season. We are also experiencing more frequent and severe extreme heat conditions.

Knowing our assets are aged, knowing how they're being utilized to the edge, and having hotter summers and more participation than we've had, expedites that urgency of replacing our aged infrastructure.



**I'm driving the grid modernization imperative, working across all business units of Duquesne Light to ensure we're focused on the North Star, which is full situational awareness at the edge of the grid.**

These unique challenges in our geographical footprint inform prioritization when planning the grid for the next generation. One benefit we embraced because we're so meshed, is we have tied our distribution grid into small networks, so our load blocks are enabling us to keep outages during unplanned events to within one thousand customers rapidly.

We invested in this hardware over the last few decades, which is setting us up for success as we start to understand the impact of the software and technology platforms that are becoming available, such as advanced metering infrastructure and distribution management systems. This is key to our future success and will be enabling the edge to drive data insights we have never had before to show up to benefit our customers. ○

Commissioners Jeremy Oden and Chris Beeker won Alabama PSC seats on election day.

# Aftab Khan

Senior VP of Engineering, Eversource

# George Wegh

Director of Protection and Controls Engineering, Eversource

**PUF:** We're here at the AEIC meeting with Aftab Khan, Senior Vice-President of Engineering at Eversource and George Wegh, Director of Protection and Controls Engineering. How many years have you been attending AEIC?

**Aftab Khan:** This is my second time at the AEIC annual meeting and for three or four years I've been part of the AEIC Power Delivery Committee.

**PUF:** What are you hoping to learn or why do you come to this?

**Aftab Khan:** The main value we see at Eversource with the AEIC, the Committees, and annual meeting is the sharing of

best practices and lessons learned. The nice thing about our industry is we're very open about sharing experiences with each other and AEIC is a great organization for us to get together and have those open conversations.

**PUF:** Back at Eversource, I'm sure you're working on lots of things. What are your biggest initiatives you're working on right now?

**Aftab Khan:** We're in a part of the country with ambitious clean energy and decarbonization goals, so one of our bigger challenges is how to make sure that our electric infrastructure,

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How we manage increasing complexity is one example of an area we're focused on. AEIC provides a great forum to exchange ideas.

– Aftab Khan



One of the biggest issues with DG is the way we treat and manage configuration control of the distribution system.

– George Wegh