

Unsung Heroes

An Interview with Robert B. Catell,
Chairman, Advanced Energy Research and Technology Center, Stony Brook University

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Catell was formerly the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of KeySpan Corporation and KeySpan Energy Delivery, the former Brooklyn Union Gas. His career with Brooklyn Union Gas started in 1958. Following National Grid's acquisition of KeySpan Corporation, Catell became Chairman of National Grid U.S. and Deputy Chairman of National Grid plc. He currently serves as Chairman of the Advanced Energy Research and Technology Center, Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School, Futures in Education Endowment Fund, and the newly announced National Offshore Wind Research and Development Consortium. Catell received both his bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering from the City College of New York and is a registered Professional Engineer.



Robert B. Catell

You have been a leader in the energy industry throughout your career. As someone who has such a passion for the energy industry, how do you see the role that leading energy companies are playing during this crisis?

I believe that the energy industry employees are some of the unsung heroes during this crisis. They have been very quietly doing their jobs to keep the energy flowing and the lights on and ensuring a steady power supply to hospitals as well as to essential

businesses and residences.

Many of these employees have sequestered at generating plants, control centers, call centers and other energy facilities. They have chosen to be away from their loved ones to ensure we have a safe and reliable energy supply and that they are able to respond to emergency situations.

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INSTITUTION BRIEF Advanced Energy Research and Technology Center (aertc.org) is located in the Research & Development Park at Stony Brook University and is a true partnership of academic institutions, research institutions, energy providers and industrial corporations. The Center's mission is innovative energy research, education and technology deployment with a focus on efficiency, conservation, renewable energy and nanotechnology applications for new and novel sources of energy.

The world is facing an unprecedented crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers and all other essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?

I say a very sincere "thank you and God bless" to the healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies, transportation and all other essential workers who are risking their lives and personal safety to serve those in need during this unprecedented crisis. These dedicated individuals are often taken for granted and not given the recognition they deserve.

All of this is being accomplished while the industry continues to be sensitive to customers' abilities to pay their bills.

How vital is the work being done by the energy industry in regard to ensuring the safety and security of the energy grid during this crisis?

In addition to the role I indicated energy employees are playing to keep the lights on, the industry is continuing to explore technologies to protect the delivery system against cyber attacks which would create major problems during normal times, but that would be particularly disastrous during this crisis.

You serve as chairman of the Advanced Energy Research & Technology Center (AERTC) at Stony Brook University. How has the crisis impacted the work of AERTC?

The Advanced Energy Research and Technology Center at Stony Brook University is basically shut down from the standpoint of the physical facility, but research continues to be done remotely. Many of the research projects dealing with the future of our energy production and delivery system are being done from remote locations, including our important work done in collaboration with Brookhaven National Labs.

In addition, we are responding to the many requests for research in the areas of resilience, reliability and incorporation of renewables into the energy mix.

Stony Brook University has been deeply engaged in the battle against this virus. Will you provide an overview of the work that Stony Brook has been doing, including the temporary hospital that was built at the University?

Stony Brook University has a number of companies that are working on areas related to the virus, especially in the areas of testing and immunization. One of its companies, Applied DNA, has recently received FDA approval for a testing method that will greatly increase the number of tests that can be done with increased accuracy which is critical to reopening the economy.

Stony Brook Hospital has been in the forefront of treating COVID patients and is even operating a temporary hospital which was built at the campus and drive in testing facility serving thousands of Long Island residents. The hospital has also been involved in clinical trials to improve treatment and to find a vaccine. The entire staff of the hospital deserve a special thank you for their efforts.

There is a great deal of discussion about businesses reopening in a "new normal." What is your outlook for what this new normal may look like?

Nobody really knows what the "new normal" will look like, but we know it will be different. I believe that we will do a great deal more of our business remotely using vehicles like Zoom and Go to Meeting which will put a lot more emphasis on the Internet and communication technologies like 5G. Offices will be designed with more separation between desks. The "open office concept" may become a thing of the past.

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Education will utilize more computer-based teaching and classrooms will probably be smaller and more spread out.

From an energy industry standpoint, as we move to more renewables, I believe there is a need to put increased emphasis on security and reliability.

Leading companies in all industries have changed the way they operate and have been engaged in providing talent, resources and supplies to those on the front lines of this crisis. This has provided an example of the role that business plays as a force for good in society. What are your views on the responsibility that leading companies have to address societal need?

I have always believed that business has a responsibility to play a role as a force for good in society and I feel this has been demonstrated during this crisis. Companies

have stepped up and provided talent and resources and supported those on the front lines.

There have been examples of businesses that have altered their production capabilities to manufacture ventilators and personal protective equipment. Pharmaceutical companies, hospitals and medical research institutions have accelerated their efforts to find a treatment for the virus and have simplified and accelerated testing for potential vaccines to protect the public.

Many companies have supported not-for-profit efforts to provide relief to the less fortunate populations which have been severely impacted. We have a lot of good lessons learned from this crisis which, hopefully, will bode well for the future.

You are known to be an optimistic person. During this difficult and uncertain time, what would you say to young people

across the country who are deeply concerned and scared about the future?

I am an optimistic or a “glass half full” person, but we should not take this crisis lightly. Having said that, I would like to offer a ray of hope to the young people across the country concerned about our future.

We will get through this and will be better prepared for any future health crisis. There are a lot of lessons learned which we can benefit from, starting with the need for spending money in the area of research not only in the medical fields, but extending to manufacturing, energy and the environment. New jobs will be created as many of these new technologies develop, along with new mechanisms to communicate and educate.

Hopefully, we will soon be able to get back together to enjoy each other’s company, attend sporting events, and go to beaches, parks and recreation facilities. ●



Advanced Energy Research and Technology Center at Stony Brook University