Electrification in Commercial Buildings: Engineering the Transition

Shivani Saikar

ABSTRACT

Electrification of commercial buildings is fundamentally altering how facilities are engineered, operated, and future-proofed. As the commercial sector transitions away from fossil-fuel systems, energy engineers must address challenges that go far beyond equipment replacement. Successful electrification requires careful re-engineering of building systems, accounting for electrical infrastructure upgrades, load profile changes, heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) redesign, and envelope performance improvements. This article examines the technical barriers to full or partial electrification and presents engineering-based strategies to overcome them. Through detailed planning, system optimization, and load management solutions, commercial buildings can achieve resilient, efficient, and low-carbon operations in a rapidly electrifying energy landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Electrification is fundamentally reshaping the energy infrastructure of commercial buildings. As the sector moves to decarbonize operations, building owners and facility engineers are tasked with replacing fossil-fuel-based systems with electric alternatives—an effort that demands more than simple equipment swaps. True electrification success requires holistic re-engineering of building systems, accounting for changes in load profiles, thermal demands, electrical infrastructure, and operational controls.

In commercial environments, the implications are profound. Space heating, water heating, backup power, and even process loads historically dependent on combustion must now transition to high-efficiency electric systems. While this shift offers substantial opportunities for operational efficiency and environmental stewardship, it also presents technical challenges that must be addressed thoughtfully. From electrical capacity constraints to managing peak demand costs, navigating electrification requires detailed engineering analysis, phased implementation, and future-ready system design.

This article explores the technical realities of electrifying commercial buildings—detailing key challenges, strategies for overcoming them, and engineering best practices to deliver resilient, efficient, and future-proofed energy systems.

SCOPE OF ELECTRIFICATION IN COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

The electrification of commercial buildings encompasses a strategic transition of critical building systems traditionally dependent on fossil fuels. Key targets for electrification include space conditioning, domestic water heating, backup power systems, and certain process loads. Each system presents its own engineering challenges and demands a tailored approach based on building type, existing infrastructure, climate zone, and operational requirements.

- **Space Heating and Cooling:** The majority of commercial building heating loads have historically been met using gas-fired boilers, rooftop units (RTUs), or packaged direct-expansion (DX) systems with natural gas reheat. Electrification efforts prioritize the deployment of high-efficiency air-source heat pumps (ASHPs) or ground-source heat pumps (GSHPs) as replacements. In colder climates, cold-climate ASHPs or hybrid systems with auxiliary electric resistance heating are often required to maintain occupant comfort during extreme weather.

- **Domestic Water Heating:** Transitioning from gas-fired storage or instantaneous water heaters to heat pump water heaters (HPWHs) introduces additional electrical load and requires rethinking system recovery times, storage capacity, and potential integration with thermal storage tanks to manage peak demand.
- **Backup Power Systems:** The traditional reliance on diesel-fueled generators is increasingly incompatible with decarbonization goals.

Electrification strategies explore battery energy storage systems (BESS) capable of supporting critical loads, often supplemented by on-site renewables such as photovoltaic (PV) arrays. Engineering a reliable, code-compliant battery backup system requires careful consideration of discharge durations, critical load prioritization, and compliance with interconnection and safety standards.

- **Process and Miscellaneous Loads:** In some commercial facilities such as hospitality, healthcare, and light industrial operations additional loads like commercial kitchen equipment, laundry systems, and small-scale process heating also require conversion from direct fossil fuel use to electric alternatives, often using high-efficiency induction or resistance systems.

Successful electrification planning must also account for electrical service capacity, panelboard sizing, distribution wiring, and metering infrastructure to support the increased and shifted loads introduced by these system changes. Rather than isolated retrofits, building-wide system coordination is necessary to avoid costly infrastructure oversizing, operational inefficiencies, or unintended demand charges.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES IN ELECTRIFICATION

The transition to full or partial electrification in commercial buildings brings with it a series of complex technical challenges. These challenges are often interconnected, requiring a system-level engineering approach rather than isolated equipment replacements. The following are the key technical hurdles and strategies to overcome them:

Electrical Infrastructure Upgrades

The first and often most expensive hurdle in commercial building electrification is upgrading the electrical infrastructure to support increased power demands. Electrification of space heating, domestic hot water, and process loads significantly raises a building's peak and continuous electrical load, often necessitating service size upgrades, panelboard replacements, feeder capacity increases, and utility-side transformer changes.

Service Entrance Upgrades

Commercial buildings historically sized for partial electric operation (lighting, plug loads, fans) now face full HVAC and DHW electrification loads. A building with a 400 amp (A), 208Y/120-Volt (V) three-phase (ϕ) service [approximate capacity: 144 kW at 0.9 PF (power factor)] may require an upgrade to 800 A or a service voltage increase to 480Y/277 V to accommodate the added load from electric heat pumps, HPWHs, and electric vehicle (EV) chargers.

Example Calculation:

Suppose the building electrifies:

- 300 MBH gas boiler replaced by ASHP (~88 kW heating load)
- 120 MBH domestic water heater replaced by HPWH (~35 kW load)
- Addition of 4 EV chargers at 7.2 kW each (~29 kW total).

Total new load ≈ 88 + 35 + 29 = 152 kW.
At 208 V, 3-phase:
Current = $(152{,}000 \text{ W})/(\sqrt{3} * 208 \text{ V} * 0.9 \text{ PF}) \approx 470 \text{ A}$

Thus, the existing 400-A service is undersized and must be upgraded to at least 600 to 800 A. If 480-V service is available, the current draw reduces significantly:

Current at 480 V = $(152{,}000 \text{ W})/(\sqrt{3} * 480 \text{ V} * 0.9 \text{ PF}) \approx 200 \text{ A}$

Thus, upgrading to 480Y/277-V service provides additional headroom and efficiency gains (lower losses, smaller conductors).

Transformer and Utility Coordination

Utility-side transformer capacity is another critical constraint. For instance, a typical 75 kVA utility transformer (at 208 V) supports about 200 amps. Electrification load growth may necessitate a 150 kVA or 300 kVA pad-mount transformer. Utilities require interconnection studies to verify:

- Primary feeder loading capacity
- Secondary voltage drop
- Transformer loading factor (typically max 80 to 85% continuous rating).

Design Note:

Requesting a new service entrance also triggers utility-driven requirements such as service vaults, larger current transformers (CT) metering cabinets, dedicated grounding electrodes (NEC 250.50[1]), and potential relocation of point-of-connection equipment.

Panelboard and Feeder Sizing

Once service upgrades are determined, downstream panelboards and feeders must be resized. Panelboards must be rated at 100% of new connected loads with 125% margin for continuous loads (NEC 215.2 and 220.87[1]). Feeders must account for allowable voltage drop (target: 2% for feeders + 3% for branch circuits).

Example Feeder Sizing:

- Assume 88 kW HVAC load at 208 V, 3-phase (ϕ)
- Full load current ≈ 245 A
- Feeder wire size required (using National Electric Code (NEC) Table 310.16, 75°C column): 350 kcmil copper (Cu) conductor
- Breaker size selection: minimum 300 A with 80% rated devices or 250 A continuous breaker depending on panel UL listing.

Protection coordination must also be evaluated using time-current characteristic (TCC) curves to prevent nuisance tripping.

Managing Peak Demand Profiles

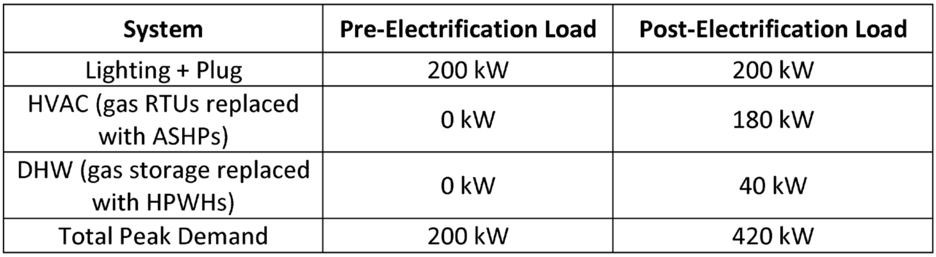
While electrification reduces direct emissions and simplifies mechanical systems, it introduces a critical challenge for commercial buildings: peak demand amplification. Unlike combustion systems that operate independently of electric load, electrified HVAC, DHW, and process systems add significant demand to electrical infrastructure, especially during coincident high-use periods, most notably winter mornings and summer afternoons.

Understanding the Demand Challenge

Electric utilities often bill large commercial customers not only for total energy usage (kWh) but also for peak demand (kW). Electrification increases both base and coincident peak loads, which can significantly inflate utility bills if unmanaged.

Example—Pre- vs. Post-Electrification Peak Profile:

Let’s assume a 100,000 ft^2 commercial office building:



System	Pre-Electrification Load	Post-Electrification Load
Lighting + Plug	200 kW	200 kW
HVAC (gas RTUs replaced with ASHPs)	0 kW	180 kW
DHW (gas storage replaced with HPWHs)	0 kW	40 kW
Total Peak Demand	200 kW	420 kW

Resulting Impact:

If the utility charges $14.50/kW for demand:

- Pre-electrification demand charge = 200 × 14.50 = $2,900/month
- Post-electrification demand charge = 420 × 14.50 = $6,090/month

That’s $3,190/month more, or $38,280 annually, purely from demand charges—even if energy usage remains relatively efficient.

Thermal Lag and Load Coincidence Risks

Electrified systems often operate with greater load coincidence than fossil-fuel counterparts. Heat pumps serving multiple zones tend to start up simultaneously during:

- Morning warm-up periods (6:00 to 9:00 AM)
- Cold weather design days (e.g., < 20°F ambient)
- Simultaneous DHW draw periods (restaurants, gyms, schools).

Unlike gas-fired systems that produce heat independent of electric draw, heat pumps and HPWHs impose instantaneous electric demand.

Engineering-Based Mitigation Strategies

- Load Modeling and Simulation: Simulate hourly building load profiles using dynamic energy modeling to identify peak demand periods and assess electrification impacts across HVAC, DHW, lighting, and plug loads.

- Thermal Storage Integration: Integrate hot or chilled water storage systems to shift heat pump loads from peak to off-peak hours, reducing strain on electrical infrastructure and minimizing demand charges.
- Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS): Deploy BESS to discharge during peak demand windows, providing flexibility, reducing utility charges, and supporting resilience. Systems must comply with UL 9540A [2] and IEEE 1547 [3].
- Load Scheduling and Diversification: Use smart controls to stagger equipment start-up, optimize heating and cooling cycles, and reduce coincident peak loads across multiple zones.

Tariff Analysis and Optimization

A key step is evaluating tariff structures and selecting the most appropriate rate:

- Time-of-use (TOU) tariffs with low off-peak rates and high on-peak charges
- Critical peak pricing (CPP) or real-time pricing (RTP) signals.

Perform comparative cost analysis across 2 to 3 available rate structures using historic interval data and modeled post-electrification profiles. Some facilities can save tens of thousands of dollars annually by switching to TOU + demand response rate classes.

HVAC System Design Complexities

Electrifying space conditioning in commercial buildings requires a fundamental rethinking of HVAC system architecture. Unlike gas-fired systems that can deliver high-temperature thermal energy quickly and with minimal distribution limitations, electric heat pump systems operate at lower supply temperatures, require more precise load matching, and introduce new design constraints around system zoning, refrigerant management, and control sequencing. Engineering an electrified HVAC system is not a one-for-one replacement: it's a multidimensional redesign challenge.

Low-temperature Supply and Distribution System Mismatch

Traditional commercial hydronic systems are designed for hot water supply temperatures of 160°F to 180°F, with design delta-T values of between 20 and 40°F. Heat-pump-based systems, especially air-source units, typically produce water in the range of 105°F to 130°F, which is insufficient to maintain terminal unit output unless the system is re-engineered.

Design Solution:

- Replace terminal devices with low-temperature fan coil units (FCUs) or variable air volume (VAV) boxes with larger coils designed for lower water temperatures and higher flow rates.
- Rebalance pumps and resize them for higher flow (because heat transfer capacity decreases at lower ΔT, the system requires higher GPM to maintain Btu/hr output).

Example Calculation:

Let's say an existing hot water coil was designed for:

- Supply Temp = 180°F
- Return Temp = 140°F
- ΔT = 40°F
- Flow Rate = 10 GPM.

With a heat pump supply of 120°F max, to deliver the same thermal capacity:

Required Flow = (Btu/hr)/(500 × ΔT).
= (10 GPM × 500 × 40)/(500 × 20) = 20 GPM.
→ You need double the flow and potentially a larger pump and piping size to compensate for reduced temperature differential.

Cold Climate Performance and Auxiliary Heat Integration

Air-source heat pumps suffer from coefficient of performance (COP) degradation in cold climates. Below 20°F, the heating output of many ASHPs falls below the building's load, especially during peak morning startup. Additionally, defrost cycles introduce periodic interruptions in heating output.

Design Strategies:

- Use cold-climate-rated ASHPs with inverter-driven compressors and vapor injection capable of maintaining 100% capacity down to 5°F or lower.

- Add electric resistance backup heating sized at between 20 and 40% of peak design load to serve as supplemental or emergency capacity.
- Stagger defrost cycles between multiple units to avoid simultaneous heating loss across zones.

Refrigerant Distribution and VRF System Layout

Variable refrigerant flow (VRF) systems are a common electrification solution in multi-zone commercial buildings because of their high part-load efficiency, zoning flexibility, and heat recovery capabilities. However, they introduce complexities related to refrigerant line lengths, oil return, and compliance with ASHRAE 15 [4] and 147 [5] standards for refrigerant leak management.

Design Constraints and Calculations:

- Maximum equivalent refrigerant line lengths are typically between 985 and 1,640 ft depending on the manufacturer, with vertical separation limits (~165 ft).

- Line sizing must ensure oil return velocities (~500 to 1,000 fpm) are maintained in both cooling and heating modes.

Safety Volume Limit Check (ASHRAE 15):

For R-410A, the allowable charge limit in an occupied space = 26 lb/1,000 ft^3.

If the system contains 200 lbs of R-410A, the mechanical room must be at least:

$= (200 \times 1{,}000)/(26) = 7{,}692\ \text{ft}^3$.

If the room is smaller, refrigerant leak detection and ventilation systems are mandatory.

Control Sequencing and Building Automation Integration

Electrified HVAC systems must be tightly integrated with building automation systems (BAS) to manage staging, defrost cycles, thermostat deadbands, demand response signals, and ventilation logic.

Key Design Requirements:

- Custom logic to optimize zone sequencing and prevent coincident peaks
- Integration with thermal storage systems, if used, for charge/discharge scheduling
- Monitoring and fault detection diagnostics (FDD) to address performance degradation or refrigerant charge issues.

Example:

In a VRF system with simultaneous heating and cooling capability, the control system must prioritize heat recovery between zones before activating compressors—significantly improving COP during shoulder seasons.

Space and Weight Constraints

Rooftop ASHPs and VRF outdoor units may exceed the space or structural load allowances of older buildings.

- Typical 10-ton ASHP units weigh between 800 and 1,200 lbs and require a footprint of between ~25 and 40 ft^2.
- Structural analysis may be required to ensure rooftop load capacities of between 40 and 60 lbs/ft^2 can accommodate grouped units.
- In constrained urban settings, consider wall-mounted or modular stacked units, or relocate outdoor units to grade-level equipment yards with fenced enclosures and adequate clearances.

Acoustics and Occupant Comfort

Electrified systems often operate at variable speeds, improving acoustical performance. However, improperly selected units or unbuffered compressor cycling can introduce low-frequency noise or tonal components.

Design Tip:

- Ensure outdoor units are placed away from air intakes, windows, or reflective walls.
- Target sound pressure levels below 50 dBA at 5 ft in occupied zones during normal operation.

Building Envelope Impacts on Electrification Performance

The performance of an electrified HVAC system is tightly linked to the thermal characteristics of the building envelope. In legacy commercial buildings, poor insulation levels, excessive air infiltration, and thermal bridging often result in high heating and cooling loads that are incompatible with low-temperature systems such as air-source heat pumps. Without addressing envelope performance, electrification efforts may lead to oversized equipment, increased peak demand, and reduced system efficiency.

Thermal Performance and HVAC Sizing

Low-efficiency envelopes require larger heat pumps to meet the same heating or cooling load. Electrified systems—particularly cold-climate ASHPs—operate most efficiently at lower temperature differentials, meaning tighter envelopes directly translate to smaller system sizes and lower power input.

Example: Roof Insulation Upgrade Impact

- 100,000 ft^2 commercial office
- Existing roof: R-15
- Upgraded roof: R-30
- Roof area: 25,000 ft^2
- Winter design delta-T: 70°F (indoor 70°F, outdoor 0°F).

Pre-upgrade Load (R-15):
$Q = (A \times \Delta T)/R = (25{,}000 \times 70)/15 = 116{,}667$ Btu/hr

Post-upgrade Load (R-30):
$Q = (25{,}000 \times 70)/30 = 58{,}333$ Btu/hr

→ 50% reduction in heat loss across the roof → downsizing of heating equipment by between ~5 and 10 tons, depending on building use and infiltration.

Air Infiltration and Heat Pump Performance

Air infiltration significantly impacts the performance of heat pumps, particularly in cold climates. Excess infiltration introduces cold, unconditioned air that increases heating load and forces equipment into inefficient defrost cycles more frequently.

Design Metric:

- Target commercial buildings for ≤ 0.40 CFM/ft^2 @ 75 Pa per ASTM E779 [6].
- Conduct blower door testing or whole-building pressurization tests to quantify actual leakage.

Impact Example:

A 100,000 ft^2 office at 1.0 CFM/ft^2 leakage rate introduces: 100,000 ft^2 × 1.0 CFM/ft^2 = 100,000 CFM.

Assuming 0°F outdoor air and 70°F indoors, that's approximately 280 kBtu/hr of heating load solely from infiltration.

→ Just reducing leakage from 1.0 to 0.5 CFM/ft^2 saves ~140,000 Btu/hr (or 11.6 tons of heating capacity).

Thermal Bridging and Façade Performance

Commercial curtain walls and steel-frame structures often suffer from thermal bridging, where structural elements bypass insulation layers, leading to significant energy loss. Infrared thermography or 2D/3D (2 dimensional/3-dimensional) thermal modeling can quantify envelope losses and prioritize retrofit targets.

Mitigation Strategies:

- Use continuous insulation (CI) over sheathing
- Break metal framing with thermally broken clips or insulation standoffs
- Replace or re-glaze older window systems with low-e double/triple glazing and thermally broken frames.

Envelope Retrofits as a Prerequisite to Electrification

In many cases, envelope upgrades should precede electrification—especially in buildings located in ASHRAE Climate Zones 5 to 7 [7] where winter design temps drop below 10°F.

Electrification without concurrent envelope improvements can lead to:

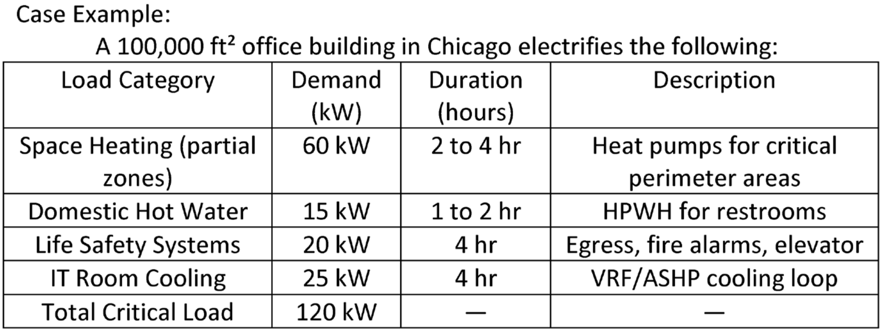
- Oversized and expensive HVAC systems
- Poor occupant comfort (especially perimeter zones)
- High energy consumption and increased electric demand charges.

Backup Power Redesign for Electrified Systems

As commercial buildings electrify critical systems particularly HVAC and domestic hot water, the reliance on fossil-fueled backup generators becomes increasingly misaligned with long-term sustainability and resilience goals. Electrification expands the electric critical load profile, forcing engineers to reconsider traditional diesel generator sizing, emissions compliance, and fuel logistics. Alternative solutions such as battery energy storage systems (BESS) and hybrid microgrids offer viable alternatives, but they demand detailed electrical engineering, control integration, and regulatory coordination.

Increased Emergency Loads Due to Electrification

In a typical pre-electrification design, emergency power is sized for life safety (egress lighting, elevators, fire alarms) and essential systems (IT, security). Once space heating, reheat, ventilation, and DHW are electrified, these become mission-critical loads during outages—especially in winter.



Case Example:

A 100,000 ft² office building in Chicago electrifies the following:

Load Category	Demand (kW)	Duration (hours)	Description
Space Heating (partial zones)	60 kW	2 to 4 hr	Heat pumps for critical perimeter areas
Domestic Hot Water	15 kW	1 to 2 hr	HPWH for restrooms
Life Safety Systems	20 kW	4 hr	Egress, fire alarms, elevator
IT Room Cooling	25 kW	4 hr	VRF/ASHP cooling loop
Total Critical Load	120 kW	—	—

This significantly exceeds the typical 60 to 80 kW diesel generator used for pre-electrification. The alternative is either an oversized genset or a modular BESS design.

Battery Storage as Emergency Backup

Modern BESS platforms can provide backup for critical loads with zero on-site emissions and no fuel logistics. Systems are typically composed of:

- High-voltage lithium-ion battery banks (e.g., lithium iron/ferro phosphate (LFP) chemistry)

- Bidirectional inverters (grid-following or grid-forming)
- Automatic transfer switches (ATS)
- Energy management systems (EMS) with load-shedding logic.

Sizing Example:

To provide 2-hour backup for 120 kW of critical load:

$E = P \times t = 120 \text{ kW} \times 2 \text{ hr} = 240 \text{ kWh}$

- Add 20% margin for battery degradation and inverter losses
- Total required BESS capacity ≈ 288 kWh.

Modular Configuration: 3 × 100 kWh units + 1 × 120 kW inverter

This system could be indoor (UL 9540A certified [2]) or containerized outdoor with temperature and fire suppression controls.

Control Logic and Load Prioritization

Engineers must develop a detailed load shedding and restoration hierarchy, usually integrated into the BAS or EMS.

Typical Logic:

- Tier 1 (must run): Life safety, fire alarms, elevators
- Tier 2: Server room cooling, telecom
- Tier 3: Heating in designated zones, DHW
- Tier 4: Non-critical plug and lighting loads (shed first).

Load priority logic allows partial operation under battery constraints while preserving safety and continuity.

Hybrid Microgrid Opportunities

When paired with on-site solar PV or CHP (combined heat and power), BESS can serve as the anchor of a hybrid microgrid, capable of operating in both grid-tied and island mode. This architecture allows buildings to:

- Operate independently during outages
- Reduce demand charges with peak shaving
- Participate in utility demand response markets.

Example Configuration:

- 250 kW PV array
- 300 kWh BESS
- 120 kW critical loads
- Black-start capability with grid-forming inverter.

ENGINEERING AN ELECTRIFICATION ROADMAP

Transitioning a commercial building from fossil-fuel systems to electrified systems requires careful, phased engineering. To avoid costly rework, oversizing, or operational inefficiencies, electrification must be coordinated across mechanical, electrical, envelope, and utility systems. A structured roadmap supports a successful transition:

(1) Baseline Assessment: Audit building systems, electrical infrastructure, energy usage patterns, and envelope performance. Identify existing system constraints and opportunities for load reduction.

(2) Load Modeling and Scenario Planning: Simulate multiple electrification scenarios to evaluate system sizing, peak demand impacts, thermal comfort, and operational costs under different design options.

(3) Electrical System Coordination: Plan for service upgrades, transformer capacity, and internal distribution adjustments based on projected future loads.

(4) Envelope and Passive Strategies: Implement insulation improvements, reduce infiltration, and upgrade glazing to lower heating and cooling loads before finalizing equipment selection.

(5) System and Controls Selection: Choose electrified heating, cooling, and domestic hot water systems appropriate for the building's load profile and climate. Integrate smart controls to manage load timing and optimize efficiency.

(6) Lifecycle Cost and Carbon Analysis: Evaluate long-term costs, maintenance, energy savings, and carbon reduction across system alternatives to inform investment decisions.

(7) Phasing and Infrastructure Planning: Align system upgrades with existing capital improvement plans and operational timelines. Prioritize early investments that support future phases.

(8) Commissioning and Optimization: Verify system performance after installation, implement continuous monitoring, and recalibrate control strategies to sustain optimal operations over time.

CONCLUSION

Electrification is reshaping the design and operation of commercial buildings, demanding a rigorous engineering approach to transition legacy systems toward all-electric, low-carbon solutions. Unlike traditional retrofits, electrification introduces complex interdependencies between electrical infrastructure, HVAC system design, thermal performance, demand profiles, and resilience planning.

This article has outlined the most critical technical challenges—service entrance constraints, load synchronization risks, HVAC and hydronic redesign, thermal envelope limitations, and emergency power considerations—while offering actionable strategies based on real-world data, simulation tools, and design best practices. From scenario modeling and tariff analysis to integrated controls and load management, engineers have the tools to design systems that perform efficiently while reducing long-term operational risk.

Ultimately, successful electrification projects are not built on product swaps, but on system-level thinking, phased implementation, and precision engineering. As grid carbon intensity continues to decline, and as technologies like cold-climate heat pumps and energy storage mature, electrification is no longer a theoretical pathway—it is a present-day opportunity to create buildings that are cleaner, smarter, and fundamentally more resilient.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Shivani Saikar is an energy manager at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, where she leads strategic initiatives to improve energy efficiency, enhance sustainability, and effectively manages utilities across the laboratory's facilities. She specializes in energy markets, energy performance optimization, renewable energy integration, and reducing carbon footprints. Shivani holds a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and master's degree in energy systems. Shivani can be reached at ssaikar@fnal.gov.