

Transitioning to sustainability:

employee perspectives on workplace practices

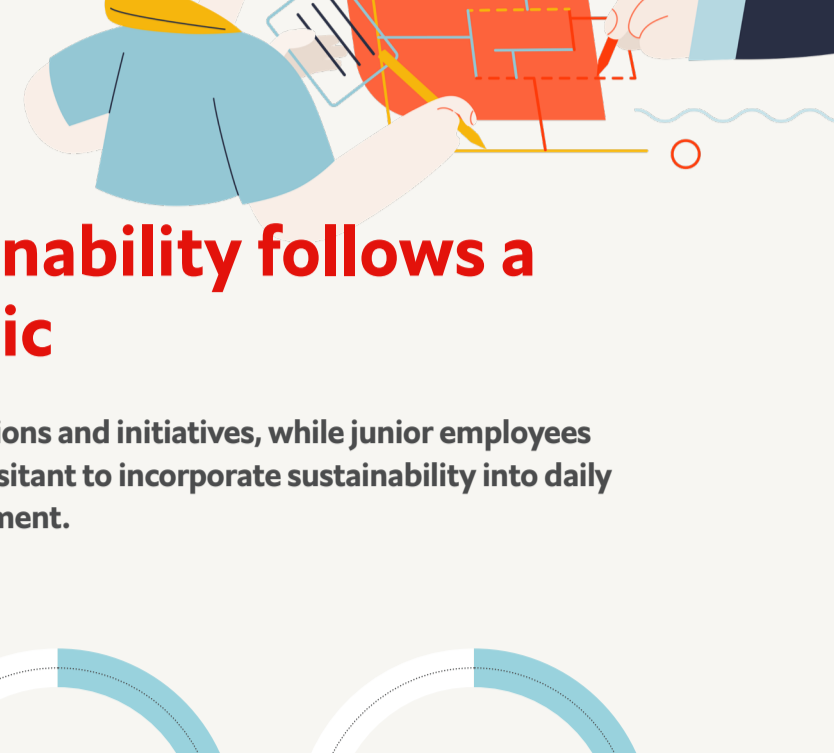
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Workplace sustainability is a multifaceted concept shaped by business priorities, environmental leadership and social impact. It combines organisational purpose with employee well-being, charting a path for businesses to thrive while nurturing people and the planet alike.

“Workplace sustainability is the stewardship of a setting where any individual can see a future.”

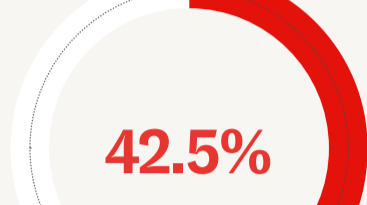
Jody Ono
professor at Hitotsubashi University Business School, Tokyo



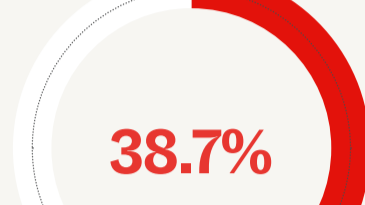
Workplace sustainability follows a top-down dynamic

Senior executives drive strategic decisions and initiatives, while junior employees operate on a mandate from the top, hesitant to incorporate sustainability into daily tasks or push for change with management.

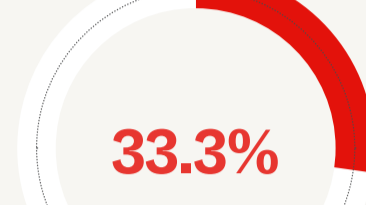
Junior employees:



Participating in internal employee groups to galvanise action



Participating in voluntary sustainability initiatives

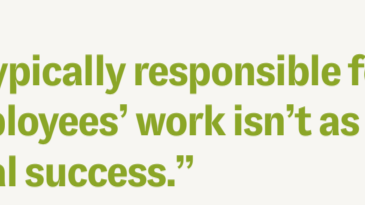


Taking certifications and professional development courses in sustainability

Senior executives:



Increasing spending on workplace sustainability programmes



Creating a sustainability vision and roadmap



Monitoring progress and providing regular feedback

“Senior leadership is typically responsible for tangible business outcomes. Junior employees’ work isn’t as directly tied to immediate commercial success.”

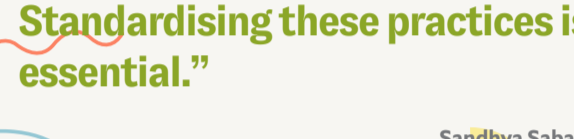
An early-career human resources adviser from Sydney

Senior leaders are broadly optimistic about their organisation’s sustainability goals, but a gap in confidence remains, particularly on the “social” pillar of ESG.

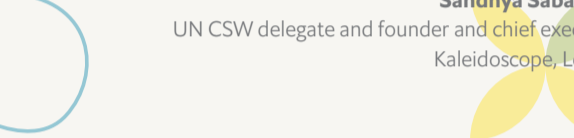
Almost twice as many junior employees (15.2%) are concerned about achieving sustainability in the ‘social’ dimension in their workplace, compared to just 7% of senior executives.



While 45.4% of senior leaders believe that the supply chain safeguards to monitor human rights governance are at advanced levels at their workplace, only 35.6% of junior employees feel similarly assured.



Approximately 56.5% of junior employees believe that even though strict policies against harassment and discrimination are present, more progress is needed. Only 51.7% of senior executives share this urgency.

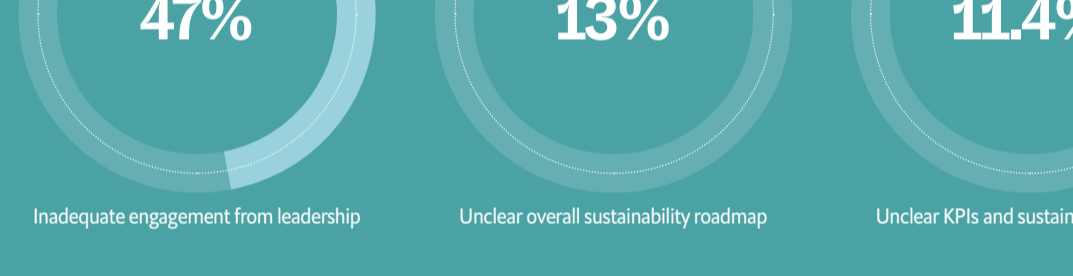


“Social impact depends on how organisations engage with communities. While some industries align naturally with the ‘S’ in ESG, others excel in ‘E’ and ‘G’ but struggle with the broad, industry-specific nature of social metrics, often shaped by executive priorities. Standardising these practices is essential.”

Sandhya Sabapathy
UN CSW delegate and founder and chief executive, Kaleidoscope, London

Despite fair optimism, challenges remain in achieving sustainability practices in the workplace

While approximately nine in ten respondents (85.6%) believe that management is more committed than the workforce in developing an organisation-wide sustainability roadmap, senior executives themselves cite unclear strategies as a major hurdle.



Top-down backing is needed to empower grassroots action: for nearly half (47%) of the junior employees, inadequate engagement from leadership is the primary barrier to sustainability—a concern shared by just 2.2% of senior executives.

Junior employees:



Inadequate engagement from leadership



Unclear overall sustainability roadmap



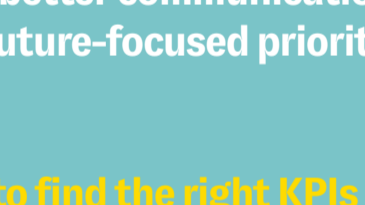
Unclear KPIs and sustainability metrics

Commercial trade-offs are an executive dilemma: 27.3% of senior leaders view them as major barriers to sustainability, compared with only 4.1% of junior employees, who are less exposed to such high-stakes decisions.

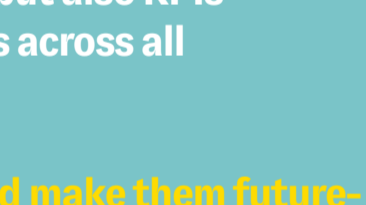
Senior executives:



Perceived commercial trade-offs (eg conflict between business priorities and sustainability performance)



Unclear overall sustainability roadmap



Unclear KPIs and sustainability metrics

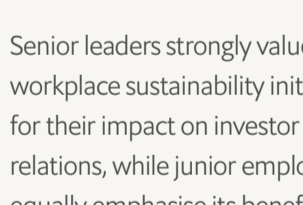
Limited visibility into the long-term strategic planning process, coupled with a disconnect from high-level decision-making, can explain the contradiction between employee and leadership perspectives on barriers to sustainability. Overcoming the barriers that require not only better communication but also KPIs that reflect inclusive, future-focused priorities across all organisational levels.

“Business leaders need to find the right KPIs and make them future-proof by assessing them through new and broader, cross-functional perspectives.”

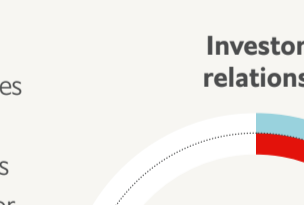
Jana Platau-Wagner
head of Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) policies and engagement, Zurich Insurance, Dublin

Sustainable practices are a talent draw

Both senior leaders and junior employees agree that prioritising workforce engagement is essential for driving sustainability initiatives. Talent is central to shaping the future of workplace sustainability, with organisations fostering participation through targeted efforts such as:



Promote environmental friendly commuting options



Provide learning and development opportunities on sustainability practices



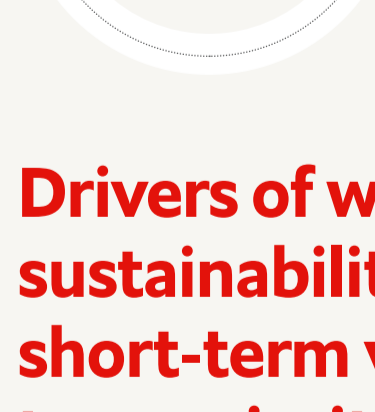
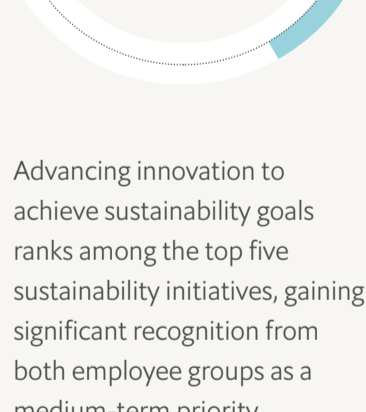
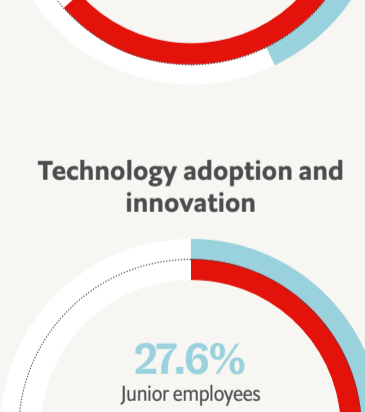
Offer rewards



Support employee-led sustainability groups with resources and recognition

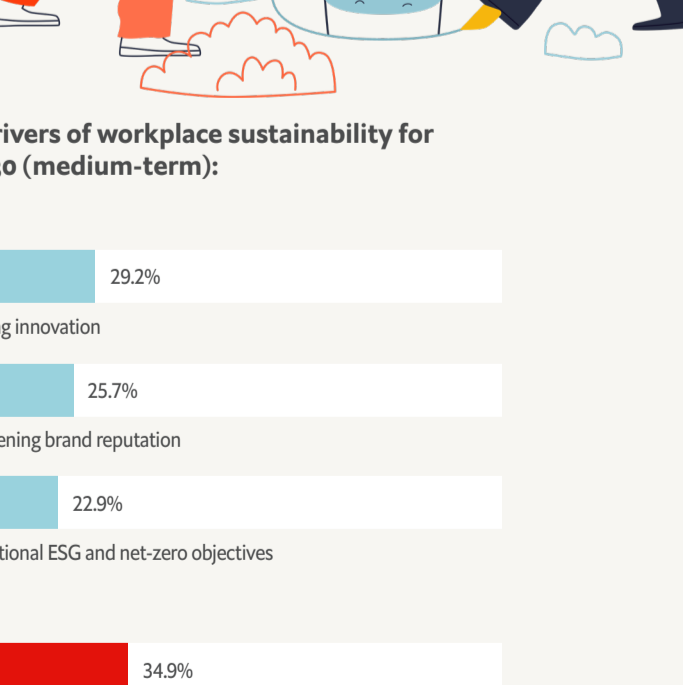
Workplace sustainability positively affects different areas of an organisation:

Senior leaders strongly value workplace sustainability initiatives for their impact on investor relations, while junior employees equally emphasise its benefits for employee health and productivity. All of these practices are crucial to achieve workplace sustainability in the short-term.

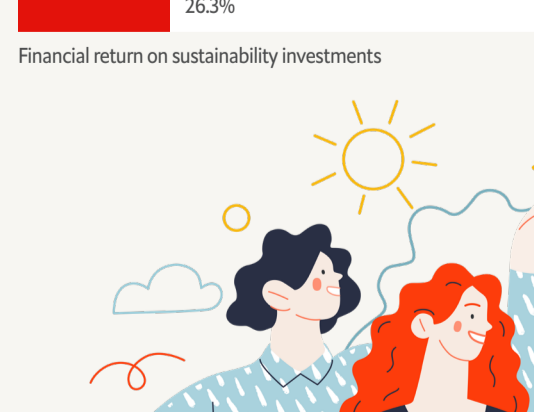


Advancing innovation to achieve sustainability goals ranks among the top five sustainability initiatives, gaining significant recognition from both employee groups as a medium-term priority.

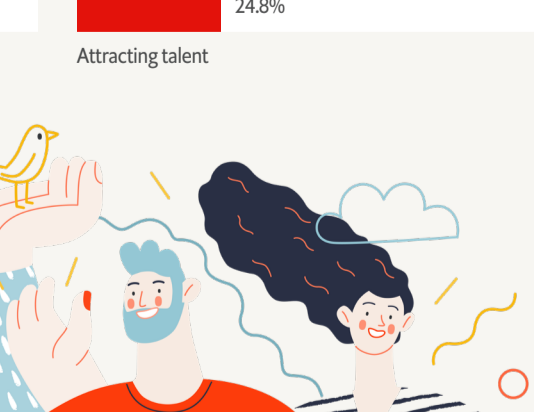
Drivers of workplace sustainability: short-term v medium-term priorities



Top drivers of workplace sustainability for 2025-26 (short-term):



Top drivers of workplace sustainability for 2027-30 (medium-term):



To explore city-level differences in employee perception and sentiment around workplace sustainability across key pillars in an organisation, click [here](#).

Find out more about making sustainability a priority in your workplace by aligning employee perceptions at <https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/project/transitioning-to-sustainability/>.

About the programme
Transitioning to sustainability: employee perspectives on workplace practices is an Economist Impact report sponsored by Kyocera Document Solutions. It examines employee views on workplace sustainability across major global financial hubs in five cities—London, New York, Singapore, Sydney and Tokyo—through a survey of 630 professionals conducted between September and October 2024.