



ISEP
Institute of Sustainability &
Environmental Professionals

**State of the
Sustainability
Profession 2025**

Executive summary

This is the 11th edition of the SOTP report and the first since becoming the Institute of Sustainability and Environmental Professionals (ISEP), having changed our name from IEMA which was formed more than 25 years ago. During that time, the role of sustainability has moved from the fringes of the global economy to the centre, and the change of name reflects the crucial role the profession now plays at the heart of many organisations.

Previous editions of this report have primarily focused on the individual, including salaries, career progression and the profile of professionals at that time. While those consistent themes remain, this report – which is based on a survey and interviews with industry leaders – also aims to provide insights on the role and impact that sustainability professionals are making within their organisations. The findings in this report are spread across five interconnected sections: **roles and remits, structures and governance, investment and impact, the future landscape** and **path ahead**.

Starting with **roles and remits**, more than 40% of individual respondents experienced a shift in responsibilities in the past year, reflecting the rapidly evolving nature of the sustainability profession. A key insight to emerge was the focus on disciplines that provide value protection for organisations, despite increasing recognition from industry leaders of a shift towards value creation.

On **structures and governance**, more than 50% of respondents regard their CEO as “leading, proactively supporting or a visible champion of sustainability and environment” – which, according to the data, may be linked to better emissions reduction performance.

On **investment**, we explore whether current macro-economic and geopolitical influences are putting pressure on businesses to deprioritise sustainability. However, less than 2% of respondents say their sustainability budgets have decreased, while almost half say theirs have increased in the past year. Aside from staff costs, value protection sees the lion’s share of budgetary spend when compared to value creation.

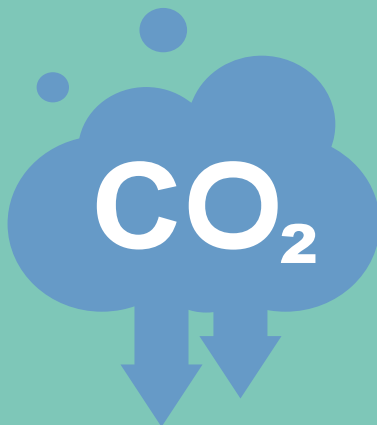
On **impact**, a surprisingly high 28% of respondents suggest their organisations do not measure greenhouse gas emissions at all. For those that do, more than two-thirds say their organisations measure indirect emissions (Scope 3) such as those emerging within their supply chain.

Looking to the **future landscape** and **next steps**, we gain a rich and varied picture of the potential future for the profession. We explore the new and in-demand roles appearing in the profession, debate whether the future success of sustainability equals mainstreaming at the expense of dedicated teams, and ask whether creating value should really be the domain of sustainability and environmental professionals.

About the author



This report is the abbreviated version of a full report, available on the ISEP website, that draws on the experiences of ISEP members and interviews with key leaders from across the global economy. The report was jointly authored with ISEP Fellow Laila Takeh. Laila is a strategy and sustainability advisor and previously co-authored the Green Skills and Toolkit report with the ISEP during her time at Deloitte. She is committed to advancing the impact of the profession.



More than 28% of respondents say their organisations do not measure greenhouse gas emissions. However, of the 72% that do, 68% of them measure Scope 3 emissions in some form

OVER HALF HAVE CEOS WHO ARE LEADING, VISIBLE CHAMPIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY OR PROACTIVELY SUPPORTIVE

25%



REPORT THAT THEIR ORGANISATIONS INTEGRATES SUSTAINABILITY INTO TRAINING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Only 1.9% of respondents say their sustainability budget **decreased** in the past year, despite current macro-economic and geopolitical influences.

ONLY 6%

work in organisations where sustainability and environment targets are linked to remuneration



GENDER PAY GAP INCREASES TO 14.7%
A RETURN TO 2018 LEVELS



£37,069

AVERAGE SALARY OF ISEP GRADUATE MEMBERS MATCHES THE AVERAGE SALARY OF THE WHOLE UK WORKFORCE

ISEP FELLOWS HAVE AN AVERAGE SALARY OF £91,911 UP FROM £79,369 IN 2022 – A RISE OF AROUND 15%

Roles and remits

In this section, we explore the roles and remits of sustainability and environmental professionals through two lenses: the topics within their remits, such as climate mitigation and waste management, and the disciplines they apply to those topics, such as reporting and disclosure or risk management.

RANGE OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Rapidly changing remits: The first insight that emerges is that more than **40% of survey respondents experienced responsibility shifts in the past year**, reflecting the rapidly evolving nature of the sustainability profession.

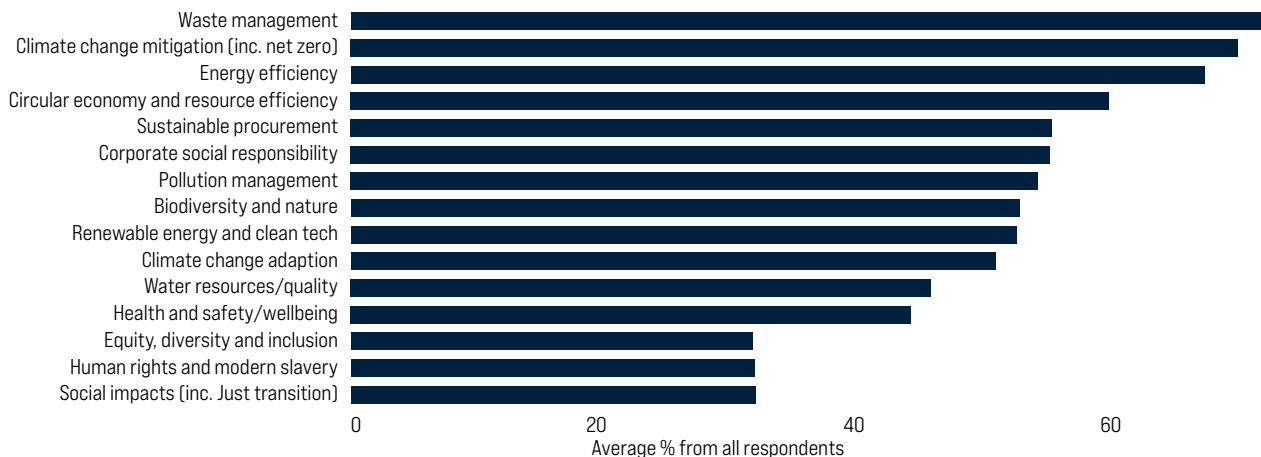
There is a wide and varied spread of topics within the remits of sustainability professionals, yet **more than 70% of all respondents have a focus on**

waste management, climate change mitigation and energy efficiency, which clearly maps to regulatory and cost control pressures. There is a potential ‘opportunity realisation gap’ as **climate adaptation, renewable energy and clean technologies, and water resources/quality** – all areas of potential solutions and value generation against the risk topics – are not equally covered in remits.

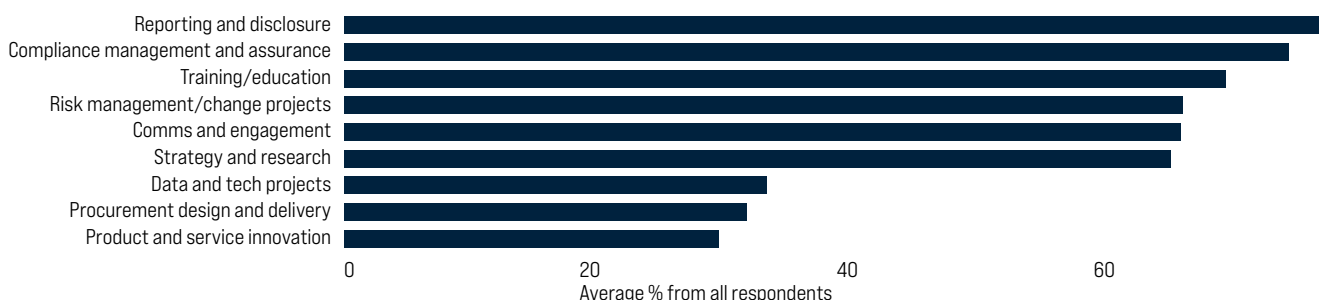
The topics with least focus are EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion), human rights and modern slavery, and social impacts – topics broadly under the umbrella of ‘social sustainability’.

Protecting or creating: Based on this research, the sustainability and environmental profession currently has a clear weighting of focus towards

Topic within professional remit (% of total respondents)



Disciplines within professional remit (% of total respondents)



disciplines that provide value protection to organisations – with **79% of respondents involved in reporting and disclosures, 76% in compliance management and assurance and 68% in risk management**. This compares to value creation disciplines such as **product and service innovation where only 30%** indicate this is part of their role.

We explore this trend in more depth in the Investment and Impact section on P9.

“The sustainability profession has evolved significantly, requiring a broader skillset than its initial focus on compliance and waste management. Leaders must now navigate complex political landscapes, balance organisational values with market demands and possess strong business acumen.”

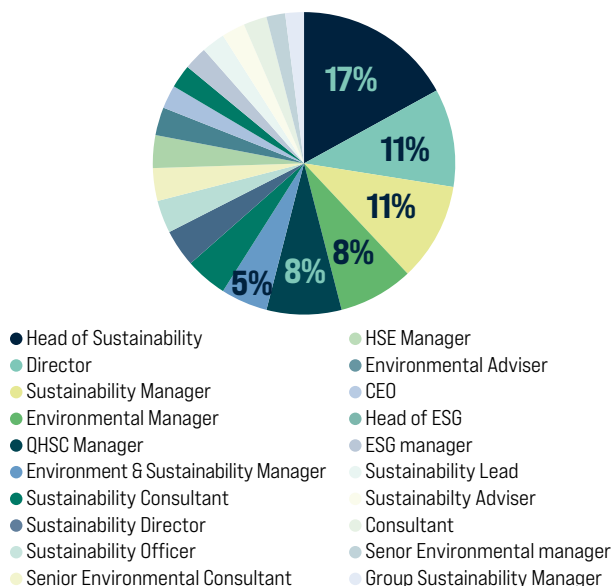
Claire Atkins Morris FISEP
Sustainability Director, Sodexo

TYPES OF ROLES

Common job titles: Head of Sustainability is the most common job title among respondents. It is a role that typically has 11 or more years' experience, with only 24% of people with this job title having six years' experience or less.

Interestingly, of those with 'Head of' job titles, **52% are Chartered Environmentalists (CEnv) and 37% have a sustainability and environment-related postgraduate degree**. While only 3% of respondents have apprenticeship qualifications, new education provisions may alter this in years to come.

Current job titles (%)



Emerging job roles: Data suggests growing reporting expectations seem to be driving new opportunities in specialist roles, such as Carbon Accounting and Data Specialists. Sustainable Procurement and Social Impact roles are also more common. There remains a range of combined health, safety and environment (HSE) roles across the profession. These roles can result in significant pressure for individuals due to mixed remits.

“It’s often difficult to spend the time on the E bit of the [HSE] role. The urgency of avoiding someone being killed due to a health and safety issue is always there. I know climate change is no longer a distant thing and might pose similar risks, but there is already so much to do [on the Health and Safety side], it’s difficult to find the capacity to prioritise it.”

ISEP Fellow workshop, HSE role holder

SALARY BENCHMARKS

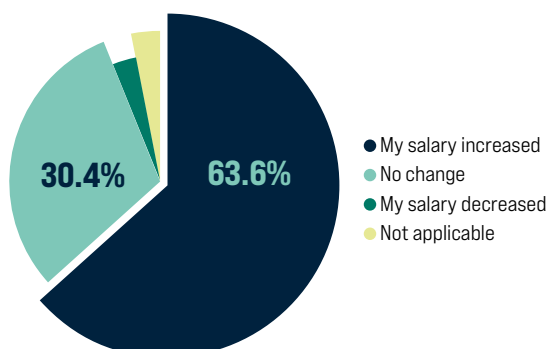
Salaries keeping pace: Despite challenging macro-economic times, **64% of respondents received a salary increase in the past year.**

This is lower than we saw in 2022, when 72% had received an increase. However, a pay rise was more prevalent among those in their role for 5–10 years and 3% of respondents had a salary decrease.

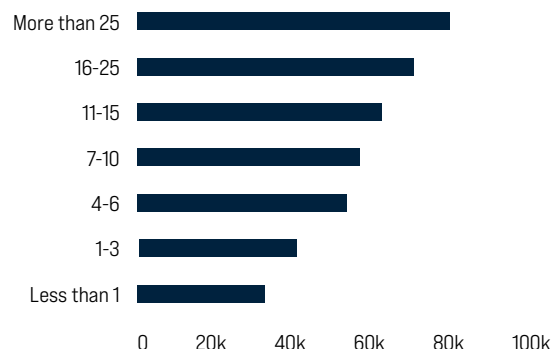
- **ISEP Fellows** have an average salary of £91,911, up from £79,369 in 2022 – a rise of around 15%.
- **ISEP Graduate level** respondents have an average salary of £37,069 – up from £30,547 in 2022 – which is the same as the average salary for the whole UK workforce (£37,000 based on ONS data).
- On average, working for a large organisation results in a **salary £15,000–£20,000 higher** when compared to small organisations.
- 8% of respondents earn £100,000–£200,000, while a small number of individuals earn more than £200,000.

Gender pay gap widens: As seen in wider research, the gap between the average salary for males and females has widened – particularly in more senior roles. Respondents indicate a **gap of 14.7%** this year compared to 8.75% in 2022, making it close to the 14.1% gap we last saw in 2018.

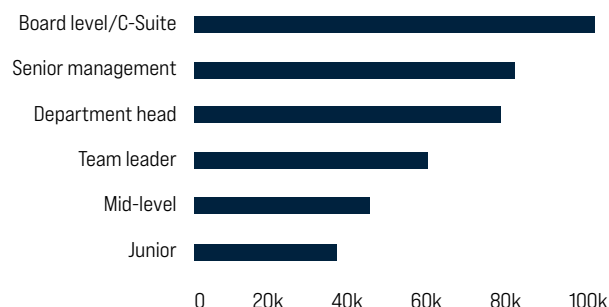
Salary changes in the past year (%)



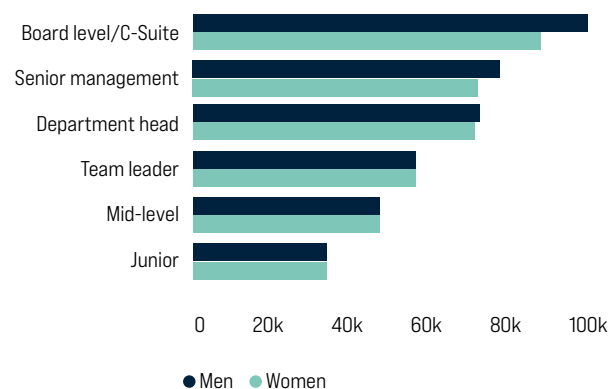
Average salary by years in the role



Average salary by level of role



The gender pay gap



Structures and governance

In this section, we focus on sustainability functions within organisations. Compared to the last report in 2022, we expand our research to look at trends around the sizes, shapes, structures and governance of sustainability teams and the governance and oversight from organisational leadership.

LEADERSHIP

Leading from the front: More than 50% of respondents indicate they have CEOs who are “leading, visible champions or proactively support sustainability”. Fewer than 1% have CEOs that are “laggards” on sustainability.

Of the organisations with emission reductions above 50% in the past year (see P11), 80% had leading or proactively supportive CEOs. However, this potential link needs to be further interrogated with future benchmarking before we can claim a solid trend.

Reporting lines: Interviewees highlight that the level of responsibility and accountability for sustainability professionals has increased in the past 5-10 years. This is backed up by the data, with 48% of sustainability functions now reporting directly to the board or CEO.

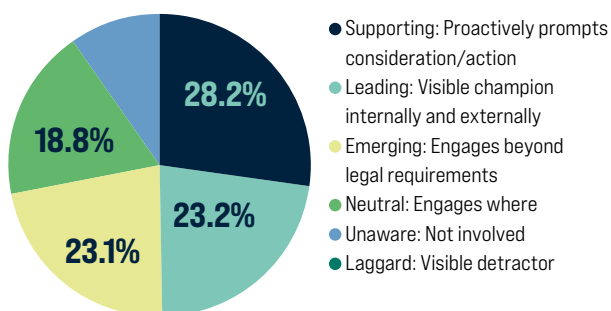
In the built environment sector, this increases to 62%. In the energy and utility sector, it drops to 27%, with 45% instead reporting to HSE.

Mainstreaming decision-making: 15% of respondents suggest sustainability is explicitly integrated into other management decision-making processes. During interviews, there were some exemplars of mechanisms to deliver this effectively, such as SUEZ.

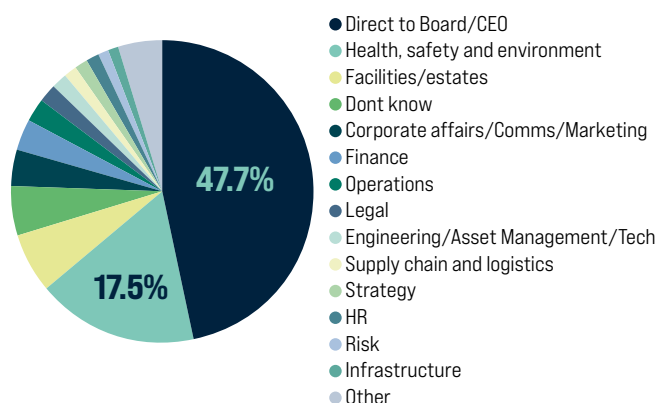
“SUEZ has embedded a triple bottom line approach across its business. This means there’s dialogue around decision-making for what contributes towards our triple bottom line, as it’s not always going to be 33% equal weighting across [people, planet, profit], the world doesn’t work like that, but it ensures all projects contribute appropriately to our strategic goals.”

Leigh Broadhurst, Environment and Sustainable Development Lead at SUEZ UK

CEO (or equivalent) involvement in sustainability and environment



Reporting line for sustainability and environmental functions



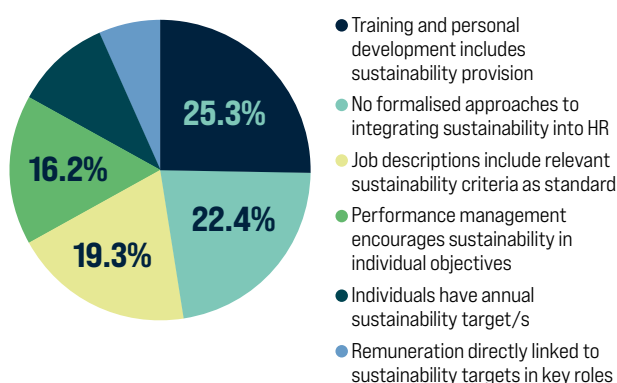
GOVERNANCE

Budget governance varies: While 54% of respondents say that sustainability and environment budgets are owned by the function, when analysed by organisation size, this varies widely. Only 29% in small organisations say they govern the budget. In medium organisations, the range was 49-81% and 34-72% in large organisations.

Human resources integration: Incorporating sustainability and environmental awareness into human resources systems, processes and policies remains patchy. While 25% report that sustainability is integrated into training and personal development, a similar number of respondents say there is no formalised integration into HR.

Only 19% said sustainability is integrated into job descriptions and recruitment, and even fewer have direct links to remuneration. Among the largest organisations with 5,000+ staff, 11-12% of respondents say remuneration is directly linked to the delivery of sustainability and environmental targets for key roles, compared to 2-7% across small and medium-sized organisations.

Integration of sustainability into Human Resources



STRUCTURES AND OPERATING MODELS

Dandelions, hub and spokes: A range of operating models are used across all sizes of organisation. More than 40% of respondents report that their organisation uses either a hub-and-spoke operating model (a central sustainability team with other team members embedded into functions) or a dandelion operating model (sustainability teams in other functions who report into that specific function, with a small central team for some support or coordination). Almost 26% simply have a standalone central team.

However, 12.1% reported they have no operating model at all to manage sustainability; an issue that is evenly spread across small, medium, large and very large organisations. One responder says: "It's a real mess; no-one wants to take responsibility".

SIZE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Size of teams: There are a significant proportion of roles in organisations where less than half of an employee's remit formally focuses on sustainability and the environment – which may point to growing mainstreaming of sustainability. In medium, large and very large organisations, respondents suggest around 5-7% of the employee base have roles with up to 50% of their remit focused on sustainability. For a very large organisation (20,000-50,000 employees) this translates to an average of 1,632 people.

OUTSOURCING TRENDS

Retained or competitive tender: The most common approach to outsourcing was using a small number of retained suppliers (37%), followed by using competitive tenders for specific activities or projects (32%), while around 22% say they don't outsource. Of those who do outsource, 32% do so to gain specialist expertise in specific topics, around 22% outsource to supplement team capacity, 20% for assurance and/or independence purposes and 11% to mitigate risks or liability.

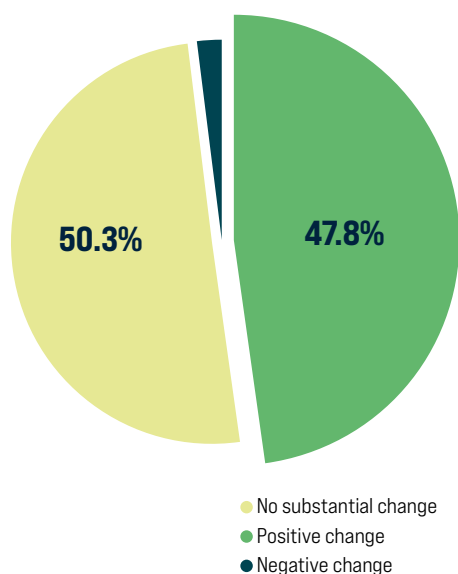
Investment and impact returns

In this section, we focus for the first time on collecting data and insights on the investment and impact patterns observed by sustainability and environment professionals. In future reports, we hope to further investigate the link between investment and impacts as the baseline of data builds.

SUSTAINABILITY BUDGETS

Under pressure: While current macro-economic and geopolitical influences may be putting pressure on businesses to deprioritise sustainability, this has not (at the time of asking) had an impact on budgets. More than 98% of respondents indicate that sustainability and environmental budgets in their organisations are increasing (47.8%) or at least being maintained at previous levels (50.3%), with only 1.9% of respondents saying their budget has negatively changed.

Budget changes for sustainability and environmental functions in the past year
[% of respondents]



However, as one survey respondent said:

“For my clients, environment/sustainability may become more discretionary as there is a move in North America away from ‘do-gooder’ issues (like environment/sustainability) and Canada is needing to ‘focus on its economy’, which may cause environment/sustainability programmes to be cancelled or scaled back.”

The transport and logistics, food production and processing, and the built environment sectors have the highest proportion of respondents who are experiencing positive changes to investment, with 60%, 57% and 55% respectively.



INVESTMENT TRENDS

Human capital: Staffing costs are the largest share of sustainability budget expenditure for organisations of all sizes, at 29% on average. Small and medium-sized organisations spend the highest proportions of their sustainability budgets on staffing [26-56%], followed by large organisations [19-32%]. With 78% of organisations outsourcing (see P8), this reinforces the picture of a highly human capital-intensive approach to sustainability.

Value protection and value creation: Sustainability and environment activities are often viewed through the lens of value protection and value creation (see page P4-5). Functions such as reporting and disclosure, compliance management and assurance, and risk management fall under value protection. Value creation disciplines include product and service innovation, and strategy and research. The remaining disciplines could fall into either category depending on the specific detail.

When considered through this lens and after staffing costs, the data suggests that the majority of organisations commit a higher proportion of their budget towards disciplines that provide value protection (40%) than the budget focused on value creation (26%).

Yet the reflections of leading sustainability voices indicate that this gap is likely to narrow in the coming years.

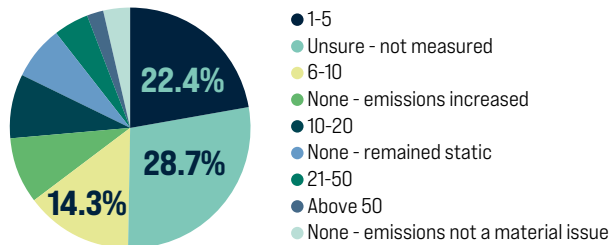
“[We need to demonstrate how sustainability] is going to be a win for the business functions, how it’s financially valuable, and provide a proper value proposition.”

Andy Griffiths FISEP

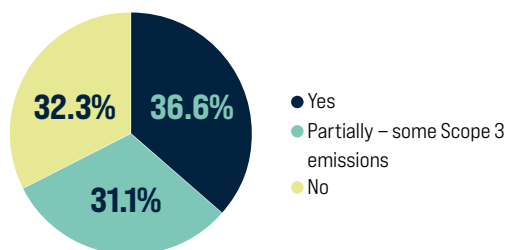
Global Head of Transformation at Diageo



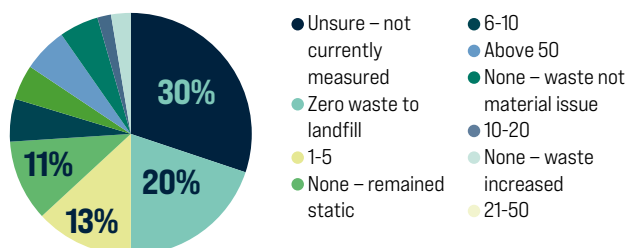
% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (past year)



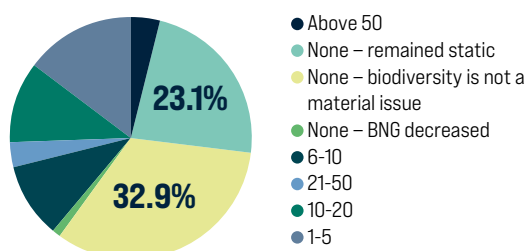
Measuring Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions



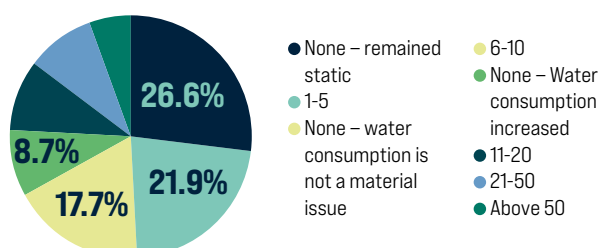
% reduction of waste to landfill (past year)



% increase in Biodiversity Net Gain (past year)



% reduction in water consumption (past year) (excl. unsure/not measured)



IMPACT TRENDS

More than 28% of respondents say their organisations do not measure greenhouse gas emissions. This is distinct from the 3.5% who said emissions are not material. There is no obvious sector or organisation size correlation among those that are not measuring.

Positively, for those that do report on their emissions, close to 68% of respondents in this survey measure Scope 3 emissions (indirect emissions such as those in supply chains).

Emissions reduction: Overall, large organisations are 50% more likely to have reduced emissions than small and medium organisations. Given that they are often likely to be starting from a larger emissions base, there is a double positive in terms of the absolute level of emissions from a larger organisation and their propensity to reduce, even if percentage reductions are similar on average to small and medium organisations.

Reducing waste: This pattern continues in waste-to-landfill reduction data, where 40% of large organisations have reportedly reduced waste-to-landfill compared to 26% of small and medium organisations.

Nature underprioritised: The majority of respondents (70%) report that they don't currently measure biodiversity net gain or believe it is not a material issue. Of those that do measure it, 23% say it has remained static and 14% say it increased by 1-5%, with limited differences between organisation size and sectors.

There was near-unanimous agreement among sustainability leaders in interviews that nature and biodiversity represent the next area to grasp and build activities around.

One survey respondent highlighted an emerging practice:

“[We] put a Nature Guardian on our Board in 2022... and are now working to embed nature into our working practices and daily decision-making. This will create additional value for the business and nature simultaneously.”

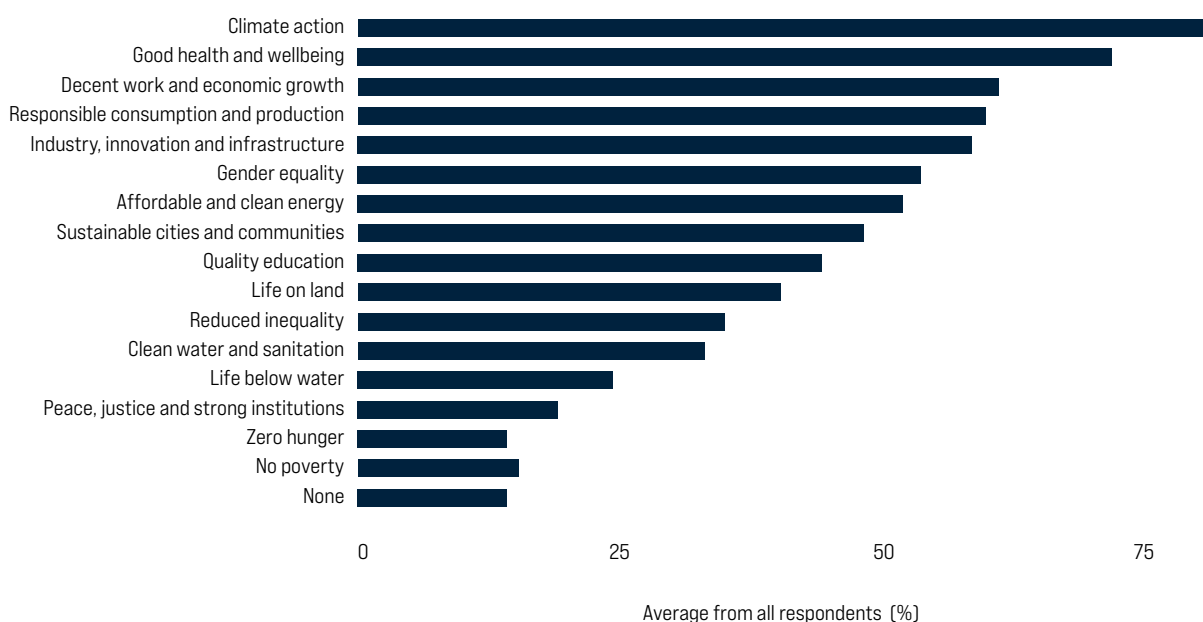
Water lacks focus: Water consumption is not currently measured by 41% of respondents. However, 38% of local government bodies report a 1–5% reduction, while 36% of central government entities and 30% of food sector respondents report similar levels. Additionally, 30% of respondents in the food sector report a 10–20% reduction.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Using the United Nations 17 SDGs as an organising framework, we asked respondents where their organisation had delivered positive outcomes in the past year.

Unsurprisingly, 81% say they made a positive impact on SDG 13 – the climate action goal. The next most covered goals were SDG 3 for good health and wellbeing on 72%, then SDG 8 for decent work and economic growth and SDG 12 for responsible consumption and production, both on 59%.

Despite a challenging few years affecting social issues, such as cost of living and equity, only 14–15% of respondents report positive outcomes for SDG 2 for zero hunger and SDG 1 for no poverty, although these impacts may be reported against SDG 3 and SDG 8 (above).

Sustainable Development Goals: Areas where respondents reported their organisation had a positive impact in the past year



The future landscape

In this section, we explore a rich and varied vision of the future for the profession, gathered through interviews with leading sustainability and environmental professionals and survey responses.

Success for sustainability: There are differing views on whether dedicated sustainability teams will eventually disappear. Some sources suggest that ultimate success for sustainability is simply “how businesses run” and “not a separate thing that’s done on the side”. Others argue that a dedicated sustainability function will always be needed to synthesise information, provide strategic direction, ensure accountability, manage external complexities and bring a singular voice to the topic – “the role of sustainability professionals to stay abreast of the challenges that we face” will remain.

Broader scope and mandate: A “heightened awareness around the interconnectivity of issues” is how **Dr Shamir Ghumra from NHS Property Services** explains an expanding remit, covering topics like social impact, community engagement and climate adaptation alongside traditional environmental concerns.

Navigating complexity and uncertainty: Professionals are increasingly dealing with more complex issues and this is likely to continue into the future. These include evolving regulations such as CSRD and geopolitical uncertainty, “requiring adaptability, flexibility” and the ability to prioritise effectively. **John Scanlon from SUEZ** says they navigate an unpredictable world by setting a “true north” and sticking to what’s important for the business.

Increased need for ‘soft skills’: Beyond technical knowledge, there is a significant emphasis on skills like communication, influencing, stakeholder engagement, building relationships, empathy, flexibility, adaptability and coaching. Sustainability professionals must be able to “translate complex technical information and communicate its relevance and value to diverse audiences, from the board to factory floors”.

Increased external and internal engagement: Sustainability professionals are spending significantly more time engaging with diverse stakeholders, including communities, landowners, supply bases, customers and internal departments.

VOLEX stresses the importance of stakeholder identification, influencing with purpose, and building alliances. They also emphasise collaborating with other companies, even competitors.



Questions for the path ahead

These insights raise some important questions for the immediate future of the sustainability and environmental profession. From the macro-economic and geopolitical influences to global climate impacts and local environmental challenges through to the changing disciplines and skills, we need to stay relevant. Here, we highlight a few of those questions.



As the mainstreaming of sustainability becomes more widespread, how can we ensure the successful integration of

sustainability into organisations' strategies?

Many industry leaders say sustainability is moving from being primarily a compliance-focused function to becoming a core part of the business strategy and operations, where "all functions will integrate sustainability into their work and collaborate to produce more sustainable solutions".

One survey respondent said: "Over the next two-three years, our sustainability and environment function will integrate more closely with business strategy, leverage data-driven decision-making... prioritise transparency, upskilling and collaboration to drive systemic change". For some businesses, this is already becoming a reality, **Andy Spencer of CEMEX** describes this transformation, stating: "That moment in time was a real transformation for us and we went from... being an important function to one that was almost the centre of virtually everything that we were doing."



Do we need to rebalance the focus between value protection and value creation?

While the need for reporting and disclosure, compliance management and assurance is only likely to grow in the years to come, the recognition that sustainability offers value creation opportunities continues to grow, with a clear focus on products and services that are not only more sustainable, but better than the products and services we already have.

As one survey respondent put it: "[Sustainability] will become more involved in actual product design and site work/installation rather than only admin/reporting."

VOLEX emphasises translating sustainability goals into "tangible business benefits" like customer share, recruitment, retention and savings, viewing sustainability as a "lens to look at business to find where money is wasted and where opportunities are."



How can we integrate nature as strongly as carbon into sustainability and environmental strategies?

Organisations that already have specialist roles, such as nature leads or biodiversity specialists, will have a clear advantage in successfully navigating new concepts such as natural capital and the practical application of interventions like biodiversity net gain and nature-based solutions.

SUEZ sees the need to get into "more of the underlying stuff beyond carbon, including nature and biodiversity". **Diageo** has specialised teams focusing on water, nature and agriculture. **CEMEX** teams have become "a lot more technical, a lot more specialists" in fields such as "nature and climate change adaptation". Meanwhile, **Network Rail** emphasises the importance of understanding nature-based solutions and the need for ecology support.

As one respondent from a large built environment organisation said: "The requirements from clients and obligations for my team are increasing every year. We know there is a growing topic of nature that is on the horizon, especially with the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD), which we see will be a big shift for our team".



ISEP will be working with members to develop a new policy position focused on 'Nature as Critical Infrastructure' in the second half of 2025.



Which new or in-demand job roles will provide job growth in the sector over the next few years?

With heightened reporting expectations, roles with the specific technical knowledge and skills required to deliver adequate reporting which informs decision-making, rather than just serving disclosure requirements, are becoming increasingly in-demand. The most in-demand roles appear to be carbon accountants, carbon managers, reporting and data specialists for areas such as ESG and sustainability, and sustainable procurement officers.



This correlates with further research carried out by ISEP and has led to the creation of a new Carbon Accounting and Auditors Register, which is due to launch in late 2025.

As one respondent said: “I expect a big increase in job opportunities. My organisation is going through a cultural shift. Carbon is becoming a key metric on the agenda and that will continue to develop.”

SUMMARY

Although there are significant uncertainties on the horizon, there are huge opportunities with the transition to a sustainable economy beyond carbon, and a significant focus on circularity and natural capital. This will require us to design new products and services, improve resource efficiency, harness new technologies and upskill and retrain workers, all of which will deliver quality jobs, build resilient organisations and drive shared value in global markets.

Sustainability professionals will be increasingly required to identify, translate and communicate opportunities in a way that makes sense for organisation and sector leaders, while staying abreast of the changing regulatory landscape, recognising the interconnectivity of issues and maintaining continued professional development.

METHODOLOGY

The full methodology can be found here:
isepglobal.org/state-of-the-profession





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