INTERACTIVE BOOKLET

Sustainability Skills for the Future of Work: An HR & ESG Perspective

Developing the skills to drive ESG transformation in organisations

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Welcome to this Interactive Booklet on Sustainable Transformation

A practical introduction to sustainable transformation through short activities, reflection exercises, and real-world examples.

Whether you are new to sustainability or looking to deepen your understanding, this guide explores how sustainability connects to everyday work and how you can contribute to positive change.

Find your role in the journey

Sustainable transformation involves everyone, but people contribute in different ways. Use the perspective that is most relevant to you as you work through the guide:

· **If you are an employee:** Understand how sustainability connects to your role and everyday work, reflect on what is already happening, and identify where you can contribute. The guide will help you build the confidence, connections and language to engage in sustainability and see how your role fits into the organisation's wider journey.

· **If you are a business or organisational leader:** Reflect on how your organisation is approaching sustainable transformation and how effectively you are involving your people. The guide will help you connect ESG and sustainability efforts to business value, identify what is needed to turn ambition into action, and create an open environment where employees feel included and empowered to contribute.

· **If you work in HR, Learning & Development or People:** Connect your organisation's sustainability ambitions with the skills, culture and support people need to make them happen. The guide will help you identify skills gaps, support people through change, enable meaningful dialogue, and create opportunities for people to develop and contribute.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this learning guide, you will be able to:

- Explain why sustainability is a strategic priority for organisations.
- Describe the role of ESG in driving sustainable transformation.
- Identify the key organisational enablers of successful transformation.
- Recognise the future skills needed to contribute to sustainable change.
- Reflect on how you can apply these concepts in your own role.



How to Get the Most out of this Interactive Booklet?

Work through the guide at your own pace. Complete the activities and think about how the learning connects to your work. And, before you begin, **take a few minutes to reflect on your current understanding and confidence**.

✓ Sustainability & ESG self-assessment

Rate your confidence from 1 (Not confident) to 5 (Very confident).

1 = Not confident **2 = Slightly confident** **3 = Moderately confident** **4 = Confident** **5 = Very confident**

1. Sustainability fundamentals

A. I understand the difference between sustainability, ESG and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
□ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5

B. How confident are you in understanding how sustainability contributes to your organisation’s goals?
□ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5

2. Sustainability in my role

A. I can explain how my day-to-day work contributes to my organisation's sustainability goals.
□ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5

3. Future skills

A. I understand the skills needed to support sustainable transformation, such as systems thinking, collaboration, responsible AI and adaptability.
□ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5

4. Organisational change

A. I understand why people, culture and leadership are essential for successful sustainability transformation.
□ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5

5. Taking action

A. I know one practical action I could take to make my work or organisation more sustainable.
□ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5

Don't worry if your confidence scores are low. This workbook is designed to help you build your understanding step by step. At the end of the guide, you'll return to these questions to see how your confidence has grown and identify the next skills you'd like to develop.



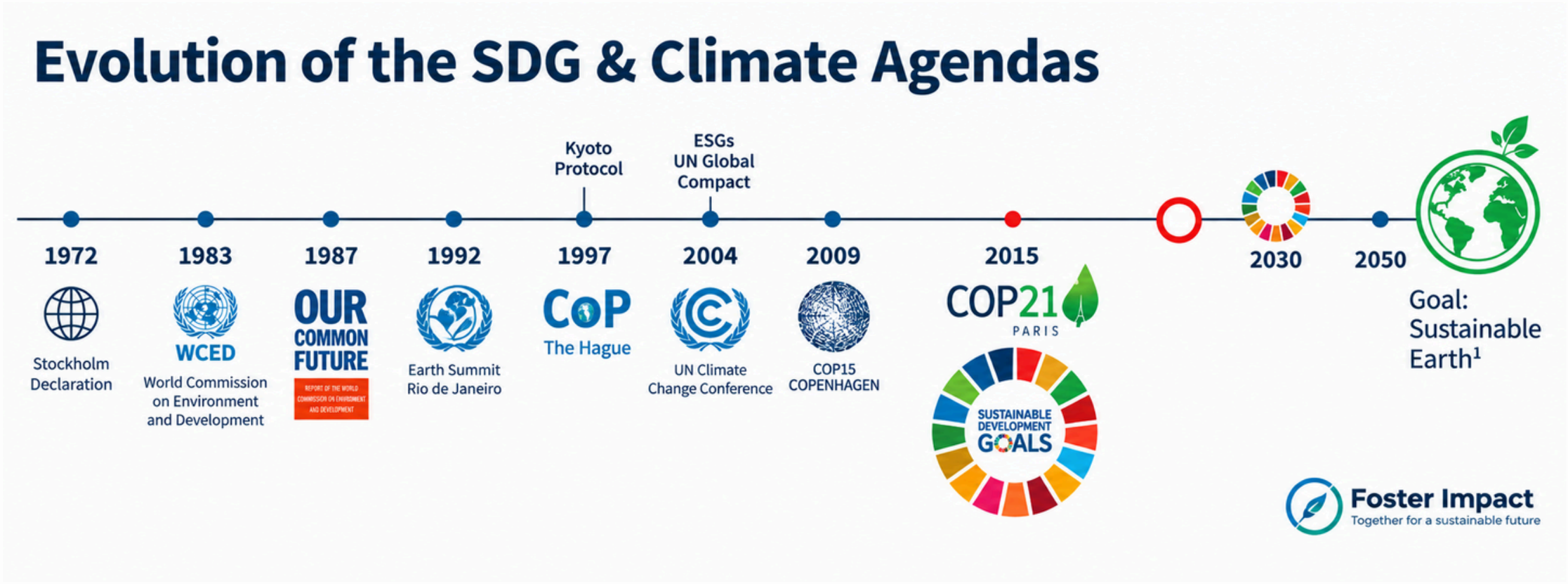
MODULE 1: A Global Perspective on Sustainable Development

1) The evolution of the global sustainability agenda and the SDGs

Sustainability is often discussed as a recent idea, but today's sustainability agenda has developed over more than sixty years, with roots that reach further back. Scientific research, major environmental and industrial incidents, public pressure, international cooperation, corporate responsibility and new approaches to measurement have all contributed to how sustainability is understood today.

During the twentieth century, several related strands developed in parallel, including environmental protection, development and poverty reduction, human rights and labour, climate change, biodiversity, pollution and corporate responsibility. Over time, these strands increasingly converged through international agreements, goals and frameworks.

In September 2015, all UN Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets. The Goals and targets came into effect on 1 January 2016. In December 2015, governments adopted the Paris Agreement on climate change at COP21, which entered into force in November 2016.
This history matters because sustainability is not one single framework. It is an evolving system of global goals, international agreements, national policies, measurement systems and organisational frameworks.



2) From global goals to national action

Global agreements establish shared direction, but implementation happens at national and subnational levels.

The 2030 Agenda set out the 17 SDGs and defined their associated targets as global and aspirational, with each government setting its own national targets, guided by the global level of ambition and taking national circumstances into account. Countries determine how these targets are incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies. The Agenda also provides for follow up and review at national, regional and global levels.

The Paris Agreement follows a related model. Countries work towards shared global climate objectives through their own Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDCs, which set out national climate commitments and are strengthened over time.



2.1 The SDGs and the Paris Agreement

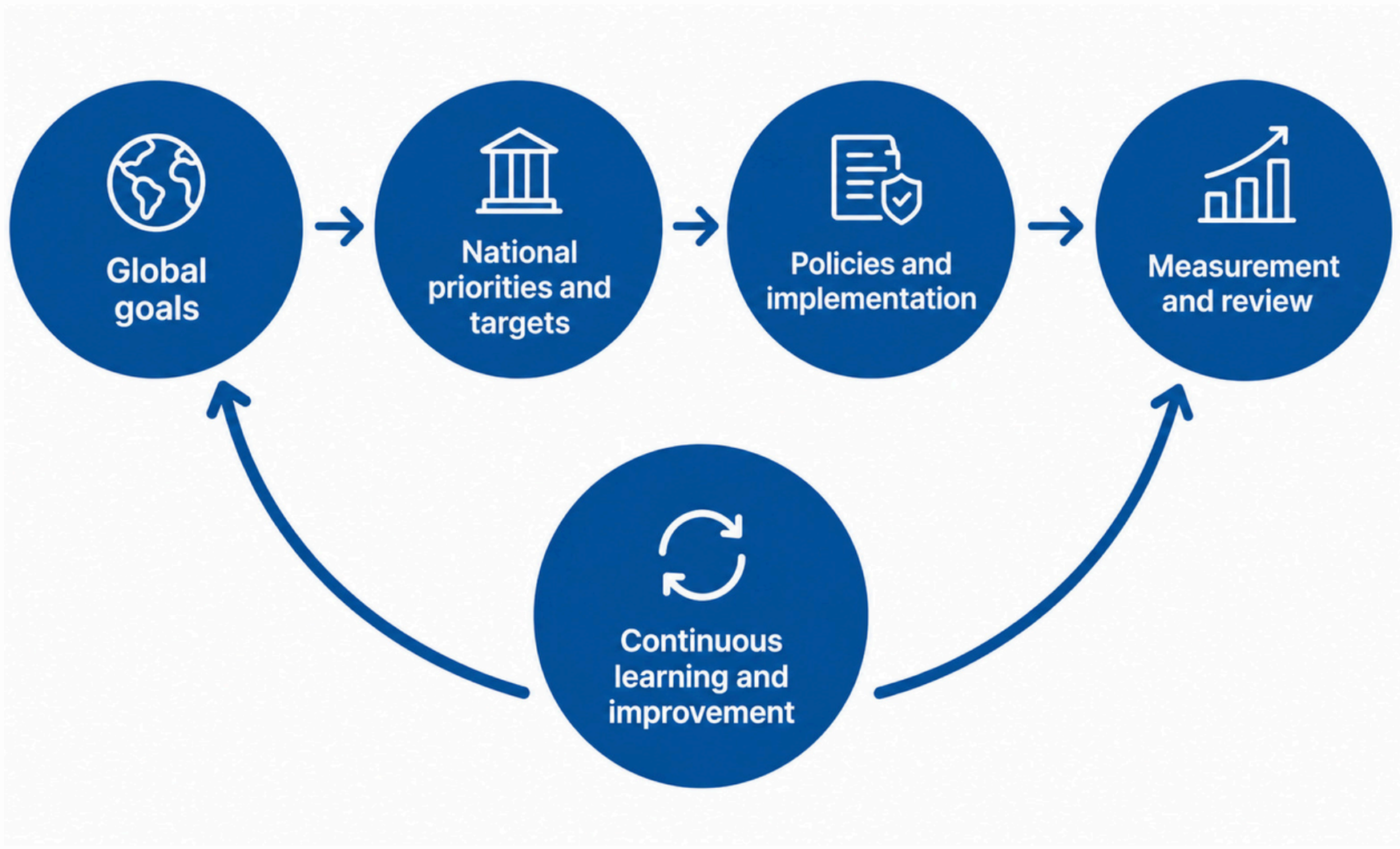
Key considerations:

- The 17 SDGs were adopted by the UN in 2015 to address global challenges by 2030.
- The Paris Agreement (2015) climate treaty on limiting warning to below 2°C (pursue 1.5°C) .
- Both were established as roadmaps for national level goal setting, but implementing these at national level is challenging, shaped by evolving targets, international negotiations and differing national circumstances.

The ambition may be global, but implementation depends on national leadership, institutional capacity, finance, data, political priorities and changing government agendas. Countries also differ in their needs, capacities, vulnerabilities and responsibilities.

Governments, businesses, investors, civil society and communities may therefore interpret priorities, responsibilities, costs, pace and acceptable trade-offs differently.

This creates an important progression:



But this becomes more complex as it (national goals) are implemented at subnational levels and translated into corporate, organisational and stakeholder expectations, regulations and actions:



Measurement and reporting are essential because governments need credible data to assess progress against national and international goals. National and subnational data contribute to country-led assessment, while national reports and official statistics inform regional and global review.

2.2 Sustainability innovation in different cultural contexts

The same sustainability objective can look very different depending on the local context.

Swiss startup **Essento**, a startup supported by EIT Climate-KIC, for example, developed **insect-based foods** for human consumption. Although Switzerland authorised certain insect species as food, **cultural norms and consumer readiness remained important barriers to uptake**. In other regions, insect consumption is already established as part of traditional diets. Regulatory frameworks also differ between markets.

For SMEs and startups, the lesson is that sustainability solutions cannot always be transferred unchanged between countries. Regulation, consumer attitudes, stakeholder expectations, culture and market readiness all influence implementation.

The case illustrates that regulatory compliance and environmental performance do not necessarily translate into market acceptance. Social and cultural factors, including consumer attitudes, and market readiness, can be equally important in determining whether a sustainable innovation succeeds across regions.

2.3 Equity and inclusion in a global context

Different national and regional contexts also raise questions of **equity and inclusion**. Countries and communities do not have the same resources, capacities or exposure to sustainability risks, nor do they necessarily benefit equally from the opportunities created by sustainability transitions.

The 2030 Agenda recognises this through its commitment to leaving no one behind. These differences can include gender and access to opportunity, national working age and labour standards, intergenerational priorities, and the relationship between domestic requirements and international expectations.



At a global level, this means asking:

- Who experiences the greatest environmental or social impacts?
- Who bears the costs of transition?
- Who has access to finance, technology, skills and data?
- Whose perspectives and knowledge are included?
- Who benefits from new markets, technologies and opportunities?
- What are the implications for future generations?

These questions can produce different priorities across countries and cultures. Equity and inclusion therefore influence how sustainability goals are interpreted, financed and implemented, and how responsibilities and benefits are shared.

2.4 What does this mean for SMEs and startups?

Global sustainability frameworks may appear distant from the everyday work of an SME or startup, but their influence can reach smaller organisations through:

- National and regional requirements
- Customers and supply chains
- Procurement and tenders
- Investors and lenders
- Public funding programmes
- International customers, suppliers and partners

The effect will not be the same for every organisation. Geography, sector, company size, business model and position within a value chain all matter.

For an EU-based SME or startup, this may mean working within European expectations while engaging with customers, investors, suppliers or partners operating in different regulatory, economic and cultural contexts. Organisations outside the EU may similarly encounter European expectations when participating in European markets, funding programmes or value chains.

The key point: Global sustainability priorities may be shared, but their implementation is shaped by local regulation, economic conditions, stakeholder expectations and culture.

Reflection

Think about the sustainability issues receiving the most attention in your own country, region or organisation.

1. **Which factors shape those priorities most strongly?**

□ Global sustainability challenges

□ National or regional policy

□ Local environmental or social conditions

□ Customers and supply chains

□ Investors or finance

□ Public funding or procurement requirements

□ Culture and public expectations

□ Other

2. **Would the same priorities or expectations apply in another country or region?**
3. **Why or why not?**



MODULE 1: Activity

Same Goal, Different Context

1) Choose one sustainability issue, for example climate change, biodiversity, labour standards, supply chain traceability or water use.

2) Consider how the same issue might be approached by an SME or startup operating in **Europe, North America, and another region or emerging economy.**

3) Ask:

- What is the shared global sustainability objective?
- What is shaped by the national or regional context?
- How might culture, economic conditions, capacity or vulnerability influence the approach?
- Which stakeholders may have different duties, expectations or priorities?
- What would need to be adapted rather than copied?
- How might these differences affect an SME or startup operating across different markets?

The purpose is to recognise that shared global sustainability goals need to be translated into different national, regional, cultural and organisational contexts.

MODULE 2: Why Sustainability Matters Now

1) What is sustainability?

We talk about sustainability constantly in media, boardrooms, and classrooms. But what does the word actually mean, and why does it matter to every organisation and every person?

In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission offered a definition that sustainability means "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Today, the challenge of pursuing progress without foreclosing the future has never been more urgent.

Sustainable development requires an integrated approach that considers environmental concerns alongside economic development and social wellbeing. For organisations, this means considering how decisions affect people, the environment and long-term business viability.

1.1 The four pillars of sustainability

Sustainability rests on four interconnected pillars:

- **Environmental sustainability**: Responsible use of natural resources, biodiversity, energy efficiency, and circular thinking.
- **Social sustainability:** Equality, inclusion, wellbeing, and safe, healthy environments for people.
- **Cultural sustainability:** Respect for diversity, local traditions, and cultural heritage.
- **Economic sustainability:** Responsible consumption, long-term profitability, and transparent business systems.

When employees and leaders understand all four pillars, sustainability stops being an abstract corporate initiative and starts shaping everyday decisions —both professional and personal.



2) ESG framework and sustainability terminology

In business, sustainability is often discussed through the **ESG framework: Environmental, Social and Governance.** ESG provides a structured way to understand and assess an organisation's sustainability performance, risks and impacts. It helps investors, customers, employees and regulators assess issues that were previously more difficult to compare or quantify. Over the years, ESG has moved from a niche concern to a mainstream expectation, one that shapes access to capital, talent, and markets. According to the CBI (Climate Bonds Initiative), two-thirds of investors now take ESG factors into account when making investment decisions.

Reflection: Think about your own organisation.

Which of the four pillars is currently the strongest?

Which receives the least attention?

What makes you think so?

Environmental

Environmental covers a company's impact on nature: carbon emissions, energy use, waste management, pollution, climate risk, and biodiversity.

Social

Social covers a company's impact on the people involved in the business, including employees, people in supply chains, and customer interactions. It touches upon labour practices, human rights, diversity and inclusion, community involvement, employee wellbeing, and customer relations.

Governance

Governance covers how a company is managed and held accountable: board composition, executive pay, shareholder rights, anti-corruption measures, and transparency.

ESG is a strategic lens through which companies can identify risks, improve operations, and demonstrate long-term value. An ESG strategy can show that an organisation is managing risk proactively. For example, by adapting processes to meet future environmental legislation, making it a more credible partner for investors, customers, and employees who are thinking beyond the next quarter.

2.1 Understanding the terminology

SDGs, ESG, CSR, and CSRD are all terms you will encounter. They are related but distinct:

- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**: The UN's 17 global goals for sustainable development.
- **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**: A largely voluntary approach to corporate responsibility, often focused on ethics, reputation and relationships with stakeholders.
- **Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)**: A framework for assessing environmental, social and governance performance, risks and impacts.
- **Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)**: An EU sustainability reporting regulation applying to qualifying companies.

- **Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD)**: An EU framework focused on identifying, preventing and addressing certain human rights and environmental impacts.
- **Global Reporting Directive (GRI)**: A widely used voluntary sustainability reporting framework.
- **Voluntary Standard for Sustainability Reporting (VS)**: The EU voluntary sustainability reporting standard for smaller organisations outside mandatory reporting requirements.

An important concept within CSRD is **double materiality**: Organisations consider both how sustainability issues affect the organisation financially and how the organisation affects people and the environment.

The regulatory landscape continues to evolve, and requirements differ across jurisdictions. The broader direction, however, is towards greater transparency and accountability for sustainability performance.

2.2 Sustainability in practice

The following examples from different industries illustrate how environmental, social, and governance issues can affect organisations in practice.



A) Environmental: Wildfires and water scarcity

Climate-related events are becoming more frequent and more severe, affecting communities and businesses across the world.

Recent wildfire seasons in North America and Southern Europe demonstrate how environmental risks can disrupt supply chains, damage infrastructure, reduce agricultural productivity, and threaten water availability. These impacts extend far beyond the immediate environmental damage, affecting insurance costs, business continuity, and long-term investment decisions.

B) Social: Labour practices in global supply chains

Social sustainability extends beyond an organisation's own workforce. Labour practices, working conditions, health and safety, fair wages, and human rights can affect organisations across industries.

may face scrutiny over labour conditions within their supply chains.
Restaurants and hospitality businesses, as well as any business, need to ensure fair working conditions for seasonal and frontline employees.
Organisations in the real estate and construction sector are expected to demonstrate safe working environments and responsible labour practices across contractors and subcontractors.

This highlights the importance of transparency, supplier engagement, and responsible sourcing practices.

C) Governance: Boeing and organisational accountability

Strong governance provides the foundation for effective environmental and social performance. The Boeing 737 MAX crisis in 2019-2020 demonstrated how weaknesses in governance, organisational culture, oversight, and decision-making can have significant consequences for public trust and financial performance.

The case illustrates that sustainability depends not only on environmental initiatives or social programmes, but also on transparent leadership, accountability, and effective governance systems.

Together, these examples demonstrate why ESG should not be viewed as three independent topics. Environmental, Social, and Governance issues are interconnected, and weaknesses in one area often affect performance in the others.

3) The business case for sustainability

Sustainability is not only an environmental or ethical issue. It affects how organisations manage risk, reduce costs, attract talent, respond to customers, access finance, innovate and remain competitive.

Some businesses have already demonstrated how sustainability initiatives can create both environmental and commercial impact.

Explore some examples of sustainability in action:

A) Forestry and Bio-materials

The action: Manufacturing 100% certified wood materials and biodegradable paper packaging.

The impact: Replaces single-use plastics in global shipping, traps carbon dioxide from the air, and creates new profits through carbon-credit markets.

B) Information Technology (IT)

The action: Powering massive computer data centres with renewable energy and designing low-power processors.

The impact: Lowers the high carbon footprint of digital tools, keeps energy costs steady, and satisfies strict global electronics laws.

C) Agriculture and Agribusiness

The action: Using regenerative farming methods such as natural crop rotation and smart water irrigation.

The impact: Stops soil erosion, saves local water supplies, and protects the long-term food supply from extreme weather and droughts.

D) Apparel and Retail

The action: Making clothes from recycled fabrics and running programmes to collect, upcycle, and reuse old clothing.

The impact: Keeps tonnes of waste out of landfills, reduces the water needed to grow raw cotton, and builds strong customer loyalty.

However, there is still work to be done and untapped opportunities to discover that can create competitive advantage. Business benefits require sustainability to be genuinely embedded in how an organisation operates, not solely as a communications exercise or as the responsibility of a single business function.

Sustainability may bring competitive advantage in areas such as:

- **Reputation and trust:** Credible sustainability practices can strengthen relationships with customers, employees and other stakeholders.
- **Cost reduction:** Reducing energy, materials, packaging and waste can create operational savings.
- **Talent:** Employees increasingly consider organisational values and working conditions when choosing employers.
- **Customer loyalty:** Sustainability can influence purchasing decisions and customer relationships.
- **Access to capital:** Investors and financial institutions increasingly consider ESG-related risks and opportunities.
- **Competitiveness:** Sustainability can help organisations respond to changing regulation, markets and customer expectations.
- **Innovation:** Sustainability challenges can create opportunities for new products, processes and business models.

The business case is strongest when sustainability is embedded in how an organisation operates rather than treated as a communication exercise or the responsibility of one function.

Action idea: Conversation starter

When speaking with a sceptical CFO or board member, begin with business risk rather than sustainability itself. A useful opening question is: ***"If we don't invest in sustainability, what risks could affect our organisation over the next five years?"***

- Framing the discussion around resilience, competitiveness, and long-term value often creates a more productive conversation than starting with compliance or environmental responsibility alone.

Another option is: ***"What are some of potential negative things we could cause to our employees, surrounding society or environment that could ruin our reputation and thus make us lose business?"***

- This is a double materiality assessment's question related to negative impacts

Or, a different approach, to be more positive: ***"What are some of those positive things we do or could cause to our employees, customers, surrounding society and the environment that has or could have a major positive impact to our reputation and business?"***

3.1 Sustainability and competitiveness

Sustainability and competitiveness are converging. Markets, supply chains, and customer expectations are shifting in ways that systematically favour organisations with strong sustainability practices.

Sustainable organisations can be better positioned to manage risks, reduce exposure to regulatory changes and volatile resource costs, attract talent, meet growing procurement expectations and access capital from investors using ESG criteria.

These are not temporary pressures. Organisations that build sustainability capability early often find it becomes a source of differentiation and innovation.

Sustainability is no longer a specialist concern. It touches procurement, finance, marketing, HR, operations, and leadership. That is both the challenge and the opportunity: organisations that understand this, and build capability broadly, will be structurally better placed to compete.

3.2 Sustainability as a driver of innovation

Competitiveness is closely linked to innovation. When organisations are challenged to do more with less, eliminate waste, or find alternatives to harmful inputs, they are forced to think creatively.

Examples include renewable energy, electric vehicles, plant-based proteins, biodegradable packaging and the circular economy. Organisations that move early in these areas can build knowledge, networks and capabilities that support new markets and competitive advantage.

Innovation can result in:



Better products: Designed to last longer, use fewer virgin materials and be easier to repair, reuse or recycle.



More efficient processes: Such as right-sized packaging and optimised shipping that reduce materials, costs, fuel use and emissions.



New business models: Such as product-as-a-service, where companies retain ownership, refurbish products and generate recurring revenue through reuse and circularity.

Sustainability also changes how organisations think about time horizons. When companies account for long-term environmental and social impacts in their strategy, they tend to make more resilient investment decisions.

Cross-functional learning plays an important role here. When HR, operations, finance, procurement, marketing, and sustainability teams work together they bring together different perspectives and identify opportunities and trade-offs that individual functions may miss.

MODULE 2: Activity

Looking Beyond the Headline

Sustainability solutions can create benefits while also creating new questions.

Read the example questions below, one-by-one. Ask yourself: *What would I answer? What is this claim not telling me?* Then, turn the page to get the reveal.

QUESTIONS

1. **Forestry and bio-materials:** If a company plants trees for carbon credits, does that mean fewer trees are cut down overall?
2. **Information Technology (IT):** If a data centre purchases all the available renewable electricity in a region, who powers everyone else?
3. **Agriculture:** If a farm adopts regenerative practices, could any new challenges emerge?
4. **Apparel and retail:** What happens to clothing placed in a retailer's recycling collection bin?

REVEAL

1. **Forestry and bio-materials:** If a company plants trees for carbon credits, does that mean fewer trees are cut down overall?
    - Not always. Some companies plant fast-growing single-species tree farms to generate carbon credits. These support far less biodiversity than natural forests, and the trees may be harvested long before they have absorbed significant amounts of carbon.
2. **Information Technology (IT):** If a data centre purchases all the available renewable electricity in a region, who powers everyone else?
    - Local communities may continue relying on fossil fuels. Even when powered by renewable electricity, data centres also require significant amounts of water to cool their servers.
3. **Agriculture:** If a farm adopts regenerative practices, could any new challenges emerge?
    - Yields may decrease in the short term. If less food is produced on the same land, production may simply shift elsewhere, potentially resulting in additional land conversion.
4. **Apparel and retail:** What happens to clothing placed in a retailer's recycling collection bin?
    - Much of it is exported for reuse, but clothing that cannot be resold often ends up in landfill elsewhere. Recent EU legislation has restricted the destruction of unsold clothing by large companies, but it does not solve every challenge associated with textile waste.

This next part is where the reviewer's restructuring adds the most value. Rather than treating funding, procurement, and investor expectations as separate topics, they become one continuous story:

Capital → Investors → Customers → Suppliers

4) The investment lens

Sustainability increasingly influences how organisations access capital, build business relationships, and participate in global supply chains. Investors, lenders, customers, and procurement teams are all asking similar questions: **How is this organisation managing environmental, social, and governance risks, and is it prepared for the future?**

4.1 Investor expectations

Investors are also looking beyond financial performance to assess whether an organization is well positioned for future risks such as to regulatory change, climate exposure, supply chain disruption, and shifting customer expectations.

They do not expect perfection, but they expect organisations to understand their impact, manage their most significant risks, and improve over time. Standardized reporting frameworks such as the CSRD matter here because they give investors comparable, reliable data to work with which is something that the fragmented, self-declared sustainability reports never reliably provide. In addition, investors increasingly want to see sustainability matters embedded in strategy and governance, not managed as a separate initiative.



4.2 Sustainability and access to capital

Sustainability performance affects the terms on which capital is available. Sustainability-linked loans and bonds tie interest rates directly to measurable ESG targets, meaning that the organizations that meet their goals can borrow on better terms. Major banks offer dedicated sustainable finance products, and the EU Taxonomy defines which activities qualify for green-labelled financing, shaping access to ESG-screened funds and EU capital programmes.

Public funding adds another dimension. Programmes such as InvestEU and Horizon Europe direct significant capital toward sustainable innovation and green transition investments, which are relevant particularly for smaller organizations for whom private capital markets are not the only or most accessible route.

4.3 Procurement and supply chains

Investor expectations often reach organisations indirectly through procurement. Large organisations are expected to understand the sustainability performance of their suppliers. As a result, suppliers are receiving more requests to provide information about carbon emissions, labour practices, diversity, governance, and other ESG-related topics.

Even organisations that are not directly required to comply with CSRD or other reporting requirements may therefore experience growing pressure from customers to provide sustainability information.

Sustainability is increasingly important for organisations of all sizes in global supply chains. Even those not directly subject to European regulations may face ESG requirements from customers, particularly multinationals.

If this applies to your organisation, a few practical steps can make responding easier:

- Keep basic environmental, workforce, and governance information organised and up to date. Future-safe framework to apply is EU's Voluntary Standard for Sustainability Reporting (used to be called VSME).
- Document existing sustainability policies and identify who is responsible for them, even if your organisation has a small team.
- Be transparent about your current position and your plans for improvement. Buyers generally value credible progress over unsupported claims.

Being prepared can strengthen customer relationships and improve access to tenders and supply chains.

Procurement is increasingly becoming a mechanism through which sustainability expectations spread across entire industries. Organisations include sustainability criteria alongside quality, price, and delivery performance when selecting suppliers. In some sectors, demonstrating strong ESG performance is becoming an important competitive advantage.

For suppliers, this creates both challenges and opportunities: building sustainability capabilities can help retain customers, access new markets, and remain competitive.

As expectations continue to evolve, organisations that respond proactively will be better positioned for future business opportunities.

5) Beyond compliance

Regulations play an important role in driving sustainability. Organisations that approach sustainability solely as a reporting exercise risk overlooking its broader strategic value.

Sustainability is most effective when it becomes part of how decisions are made across the organisation. Embedding sustainability into organisational culture encourages employees to identify opportunities, manage risks proactively, and contribute to continuous improvement.

Rather than asking, "What do we have to report?", organisations can begin asking:

- **How can we reduce waste?**
- **How can we use resources more efficiently?**
- **How can we strengthen relationships with customers, employees, suppliers, and communities?**
- **How can sustainability help us innovate and remain competitive?**

This shift in mindset marks the difference between compliance and long-term value creation.

This is why the greatest benefits of sustainability emerge when it is integrated into everyday decision-making across departments rather than owned by a single team.



MODULE 3: Turning Sustainability into a Business Practice

Reflection: *How would you know learning has created real organisational change?*

The problem is usually not that people do not care about sustainability. Nor is it necessarily that the strategy is wrong. The problem is the gap between what the organisation says is important and the decisions people actually make every day. That is where sustainability becomes a management issue.

1) From ESG to better business

In most companies, sustainability has to compete for attention with customers, sales, costs, quality, people, investments and dozens of other priorities.

This is especially visible in SMEs. There is rarely a large sustainability department waiting to implement a new programme. The CEO, management team and employees already have full calendars.

So the starting point should not be:

How can we make people work for ESG?

Better questions to ask are:

How can sustainability help people make better business decisions?

How can sustainability be integrated in strategic decision making, informing action in everyday work life?

That changes the conversation:

- Reducing energy or material use can reduce costs.
- Understanding changing customer expectations can protect future sales.
- Looking at working conditions and competence can reveal risks to the company's ability to deliver.
- Discussing environmental and social impacts can uncover risks that management has not previously considered.
- Engaging customers, employees and other stakeholders can reveal opportunities that would otherwise remain invisible.
- Sustainability then stops being an additional layer of work. It becomes another lens for understanding the business.

The first leadership task is to understand what matters. And, one of the most important lessons from practical sustainability work is that not everything can be a priority. This sounds obvious, but sustainability frameworks can produce very long lists of topics, impacts, risks, opportunities, indicators and actions. A company cannot seriously act on all of them at once. **This is why materiality and prioritisation matter** — but they should not be treated only as technical ESG exercises.

The useful question is: What matters most to the future success of this organisation and to the people and environment it affects? Management has part of the answer. But only part.

- Employees see things management does not see.
- Customers see something different.
- Suppliers, owners and other stakeholders have their own knowledge.

This is why participation matters. Not simply because participation sounds good, but because better information leads to better decisions. In practical strategy and sustainability work, management teams are often surprised by what employees or stakeholders prioritise. That gap is valuable information.

1.1 People support what they help to create

Traditional strategy work often follows a familiar pattern:

A small group develops a strategy → Management approves it →

Someone creates slides → The strategy is presented to employees

Then the organisation wonders why implementation is difficult. Some of this logic can be reversed. You can ask people early about:

1. What are we already doing well? What is our positive impact?
2. What should we improve? What are our negative impacts
3. Which risks worry you? If we do not improve, what are the consequences to our business?
4. Where do you see opportunities? What strengths can be turned into superpowers?
5. What should we prioritise?

This does not mean giving everyone the right to decide everything. Leadership still has responsibility for decisions. But there is an enormous difference between asking people for their knowledge and simply informing them afterwards.

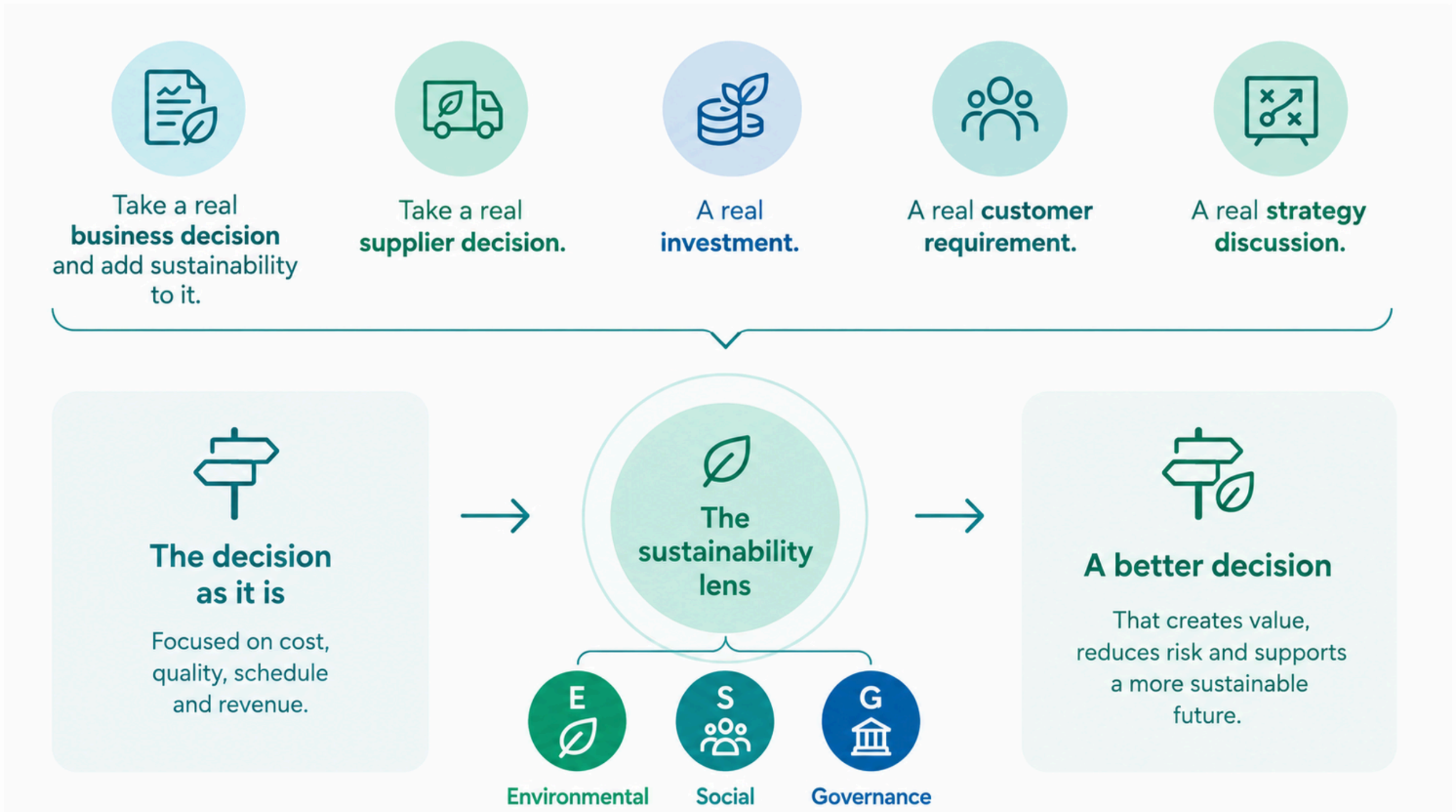
When tens and hundreds of people participate, the purpose is not to reach consensus on everything. The purpose is to create better situational awareness and make visible where the organisation agrees, where it disagrees and what people consider important.

This is also where prioritisation methods matter. If people are asked whether safety, customer satisfaction, employee wellbeing, profitability and environmental responsibility are important, almost everyone will say yes. That does not help management very much. **When people have to compare alternatives, however, priorities begin to emerge. And priorities make action possible.**

1.2 Learning by doing

Sustainability competence is not created primarily by making everyone an ESG expert:

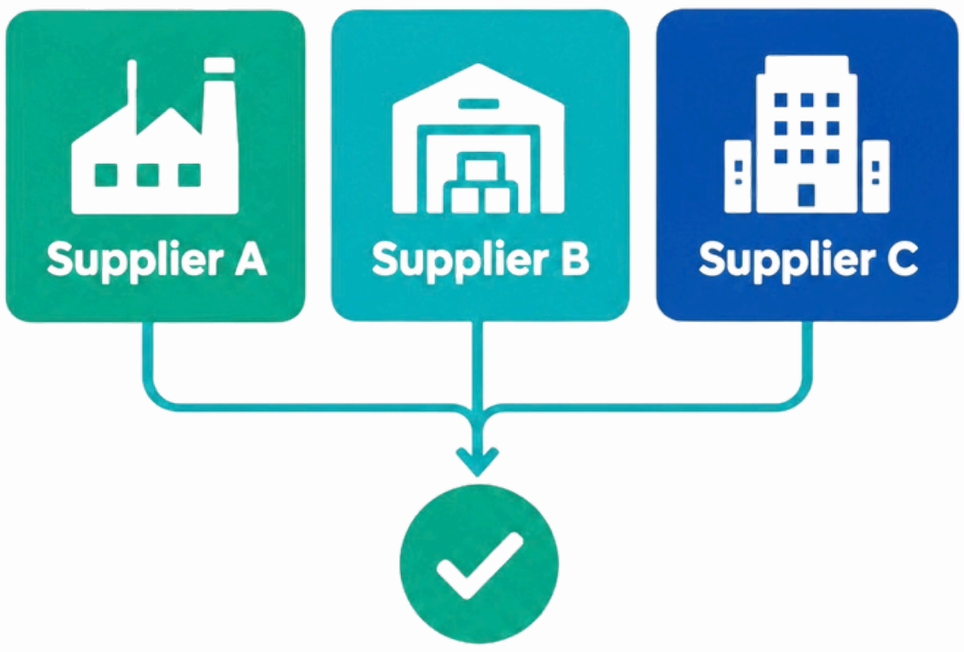
- A **procurement professional** does not need to become a sustainability reporting specialist. They need to understand how sustainability changes specifications and procurement decisions.
- An **HR professional** needs to understand what it means for people, competence and working conditions
- A **salesperson** needs to understand what customers increasingly expect and how sustainability can create customer value.
- A **project manager** needs to recognise relevant impacts, risks and opportunities when making project decisions.
- And **management** needs to understand how all of this connects to strategy, investment and competitiveness.



That is when sustainability starts becoming a capability rather than a subject people once learned about in a training course.

A procurement example

Imagine that a company is selecting a supplier. Traditionally, the decision might focus on price, quality or delivery times.





Now broaden the picture to take sustainability into account. Some questions arise:

- What is the supplier's environmental impact?
- Are there risks related to working conditions or human rights?
- How resilient is the supply chain?
- Could regulation affect the material or supplier in the future?
- What are customers beginning to require?

Suddenly sustainability is not separate from procurement. It is part of making a better procurement decision. But there is another important point: The goal is not necessarily to create a huge questionnaire and ask every supplier hundreds of ESG questions. That can create work without creating much value.

The goal is to identify which sustainability questions actually matter for this decision and use that information.

The real questions are: **Are we making better decisions because we understand our impacts, risks and opportunities better?** And: **How do we know transformation is happening?**

This is how the impact of sustainability learning should be measured. Success should not be measured only by the number of people who completed sustainability training. Ask what changed afterwards:

1. Are sustainability considerations appearing in investment decisions?
2. Has procurement changed?
3. Are employees raising relevant risks and opportunities?
4. Are management teams discussing sustainability together with business strategy rather than as a separate agenda item?
5. Have identified priorities turned into projects with owners?
6. Are customers or employees being involved in decisions where their knowledge matters?
7. Is the organisation doing something differently?

If learning does not eventually change behaviour or decisions, its organisational impact is limited. The principle applies far beyond procurement:

Strategy → Priorities → Action

Sustainability transformation can be thought of as a simple chain:



Reporting has a role. Measurement has a role.

But reporting should describe what the organisation is doing — it should not become the reason the organisation exists.



1.3 Leadership’s role

Leadership buy-in is often mentioned as a requirement for sustainability transformation. But “buy-in” is actually too weak a word. **Leadership has to make sustainability usable.**

People watch what management asks about, what gets resources, what gets measured and what happens when priorities conflict. If management says sustainability is important but every real decision is made only on short-term cost, employees understand the real message very quickly.

Leadership therefore does not mean having all the answers. It means creating direction, making choices and creating conditions in which people can contribute their knowledge.

One important lesson from strategy and sustainability work can be expressed very simply: **People usually know much more about the organisation than management is able to ask them.** Good leadership finds ways to use that intelligence.

Sustainability should eventually become almost invisible. This is perhaps the ultimate goal.

At the beginning of a transformation, organisations need sustainability strategies, ESG programmes, training, frameworks and specialists because they are learning something new. But success should eventually mean that sustainability becomes part of normal business. Just like quality.

- A **product team** considers lifecycle impacts because that is how good products are designed.
- **Procurement** considers supply-chain risks because that is how good procurement is done.
- **HR** considers wellbeing, competence and inclusion because that is how a strong organisation is built.
- **Management** considers environmental and social change because ignoring them would mean making decisions with incomplete information.

At that point, there is no longer a need to persuade people to “do ESG”. The organisation is simply running the business better.

Scenario: “Our sustainability strategy exists, but nobody uses it”

Imagine a 250-person company. It has a sustainability strategy, targets and an annual report. But when employees are asked about it, very few can explain what the strategy means for their work. Sustainability rarely appears in investment, procurement or operational discussions.

What should leadership do first? The answer is not another presentation. **It should start by listening, and asking employees and management:**

- What are we already doing well?
- What should we be doing better?
- Which sustainability issues actually affect your work and our business?

Then, compare those answers with the company's stated strategy. The interesting part is the gap. **That gap tells the organisation where leadership, learning and action are really needed.**

Reflection

Think about your own organisation. Choose one important business decision that is made regularly, for example a supplier choice, investment, recruitment, product decision or customer proposal.

Ask yourself: **What would change if environmental, social and long-term business impacts were considered systematically in that decision?**

And one final question: **How would you know, six months from now, that sustainability learning had actually changed the way your organisation works?**



MODULE 4: Sustainability is about People

Research at the intersection of HR and ESG shows that sustainability transformation is fundamentally a people transformation. Strategies set direction, but people make everyday decisions. Even strong ESG strategies can have limited impact if employees do not understand their role, feel included, or have the confidence and opportunity to act.

Deloitte's Human Capital research found that l**ess than 30% of respondents felt empowered to take ownership of their organisation's sustainability outcomes**, with organisational culture identified as an important barrier.

Sustainability therefore needs to become part of how people work, make decisions and collaborate. This requires giving people a voice and equitable access to the knowledge, information and opportunities needed to contribute.

Cultural change is built one decision at a time. Culture is not a communication campaign; it is shaped by everyday behaviours, decisions and norms. A sustainability culture makes sustainable behaviours visible and valued across the organisation, while creating space for people to raise concerns, challenge practices and suggest new ways of working.

Leadership plays a key role. When leaders model sustainable behaviours, acknowledge trade-offs and show that sustainability is a genuine priority, it becomes embedded in everyday work rather than remaining a reporting exercise. Integrating sustainability into language, routines and recognition helps turn strategy into action.

1) Diversity, equity and inclusion in sustainability

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and sustainability are connected. DEI is part of the social dimension of ESG, covering human rights, fair treatment, equal opportunity and inclusion across organisations and supply chains.

Diverse perspectives help organisations identify risks, challenge blind spots and develop solutions to complex sustainability challenges. Inclusive access to learning is equally important: sustainability knowledge and opportunities should reach people across functions, locations and backgrounds to support meaningful participation in the sustainability agenda.

2) The role of HR: from strategy to behaviour

HR plays a key role in embedding sustainability into everyday organisational life through culture, leadership, learning, skills, inclusion and engagement. Research from the World Economic Forum also highlights employee engagement as a major ESG challenge, with almost half of surveyed companies identifying it as their main obstacle.

The key question is: **How do we move people from understanding sustainability to acting on it?** Culture, inclusion, psychological safety and learning are essential to making this shift.

2.1 Building sustainability skills

The transition to sustainable ways of working is creating new skill requirements across professions. Beyond technical expertise, organisations increasingly need people who can think systemically, collaborate across functions, solve complex problems and understand the wider impact of decisions.

This makes continuous learning essential. Sustainability should be integrated into onboarding, leadership development and professional learning rather than treated as a one-off awareness topic.

2.2 Learning needs to be relevant to people's roles

Sustainability affects each function differently, so one generic training programme is unlikely to be enough. Role-specific and inclusive learning helps people understand how sustainability connects to their responsibilities and how they can contribute. Research from SHRM also highlights the growing importance of learning and development in preparing people for changing skill needs. **For example:**

- **HR**: creating a culture that supports learning, inclusion and sustainable behaviours.
- **Marketing**: communicating sustainability responsibly and avoiding greenwashing.
- **Finance**: considering long-term sustainability in financial decisions.
- **Procurement**: making responsible and sustainable purchasing decisions.
- **Operations**: translating sustainability goals into everyday processes.

2.3 Building genuine engagement

Engagement goes beyond awareness. People are more likely to act when they feel their contribution matters. Organisations can strengthen engagement by:

- Connecting sustainability to purpose and everyday work
- Showing how individual actions contribute to wider outcomes
- Recognising sustainability contributions at all levels
- Creating opportunities for employees to identify problems, propose solutions and test new approaches

The webinar research also highlighted that scepticism can hinder sustainability progress. Creating space for doubts, questions and constructive disagreement can help build more genuine and lasting engagement.

2.4 Human sustainability

This connects to the broader concept of human sustainability. Deloitte's research links it to skills and employability, wellbeing, belonging, equity and opportunities for development.

Sustainability is therefore not only about environmental outcomes, but also about creating organisations where people can develop, contribute, remain employable and feel they belong.

This makes lifelong learning particularly important. As jobs, technologies and sustainability requirements evolve, organisations need to support people in continuously developing the skills they need to adapt and contribute.

The human side of sustainability is therefore closely connected to learning, inclusion, wellbeing and opportunity.

Activity: Complete this sentence:

"In my role, I contribute to sustainability by..."

2.5 From awareness to action

Employees may understand why sustainability matters but still be unsure how it applies to their role. Meaningful behaviour change requires organisations to:

- Connect sustainability to everyday decisions.
- Provide practical guidance and relevant skills.
- Build confidence and recognise positive behaviours.
- Create opportunities to contribute ideas.
- Encourage collaboration across teams.
- Enable people to question existing practices safely.

For HR and Learning & Development professionals, this means going beyond awareness campaigns and helping employees turn sustainability knowledge into practical action.



MODULE 4: Activity

Case study: Why do Sustainability Strategies Fail?

Discuss the questions below, focusing on culture, inclusion and behaviour rather than policy:

1. Do employees understand what sustainability means for their role?
2. Do they feel empowered to make different decisions?
3. Do they feel safe to question or challenge existing practices?
4. Do they have the right skills and learning opportunities?
5. Does the organisation support collaboration across different functions?
6. Are different perspectives and experiences included in the process?

Sustainability becomes real when people change how they work, making it a people, culture and learning issue.

MODULE 5: Future Skills for Sustainable Organisations

Activity: Which three future skills do you most need to develop?

1) Driving change through skills

Sustainability is no longer a specialist topic. It is becoming a core capability across every profession. Whether you work in finance, marketing, HR, procurement or engineering, the decisions you make influence environmental, social and economic outcomes every day. Developing the skills to navigate this complexity is becoming one of the defining challenges of the future workforce. The organisations that will thrive are not necessarily those with the most advanced technologies, but those with people who continuously learn, collaborate and adapt.

Future-ready organisations therefore invest as much in people as they do in innovation.

2) Why future skills matter

The green and digital transitions are reshaping every sector. Artificial Intelligence, climate change, new regulations and changing customer expectations mean that organisations must constantly adapt to remain competitive.

This has changed what employers value most. Technical expertise is still important, but it is no longer enough. As AI automates routine tasks, the real competitive advantage lies in human capabilities: thinking critically, solving complex problems, collaborating across disciplines and making responsible decisions in uncertain situations.

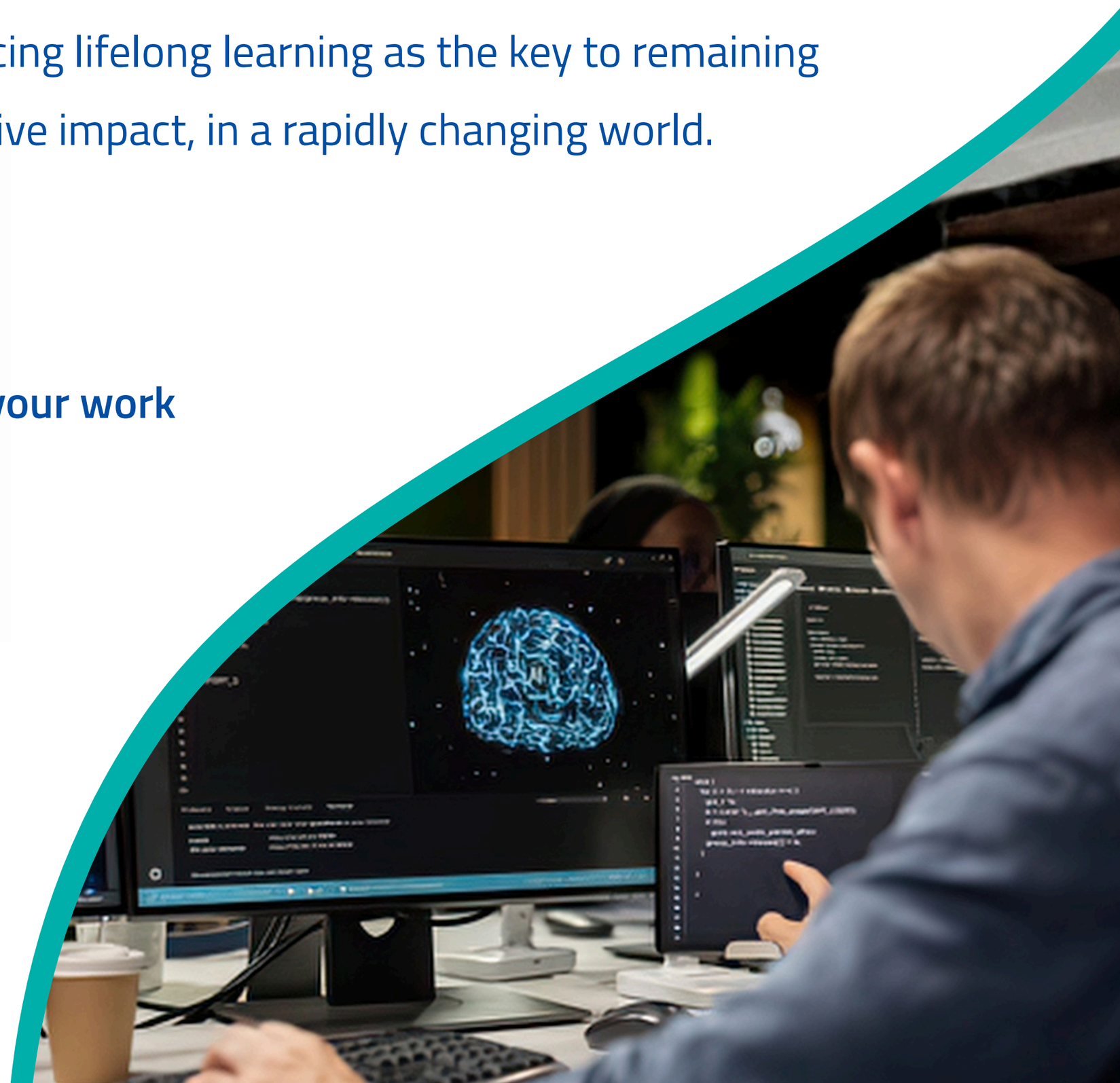
Future skills are therefore not just about learning new technologies. They are about developing the mindset to create value throughout our careers by continuously adapting, questioning assumptions and applying knowledge in new contexts. The European GreenComp framework describes sustainability as a competence that combines knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, enabling individuals to think systemically, act responsibly and contribute to a more sustainable future.

2.1 Sustainability reminds us that no decision exists in isolation

Whether we develop a product, analyse data, design a marketing campaign or adopt a new AI tool, our choices can have environmental, social and economic consequences. Thinking in these interconnected dimensions helps us move beyond narrow decisions towards solutions that create long-term value for people, organisations and the planet.

This is why collaboration, inclusivity and knowledge sharing matter so much. When people from different disciplines and backgrounds bring their perspectives together, they challenge assumptions, uncover blind spots and create a ripple effect that empowers others to make more informed and responsible decisions.

For **organisations**, investing in future skills means investing in resilience. For **individuals**, it means embracing lifelong learning as the key to remaining relevant, and making a positive impact, in a rapidly changing world.



Reflection

What has changed most in your work during the last five years?

- □ Technology
- □ Customer expectations
- □ Regulations
- □ Collaboration
- □ Other

3) Four capability areas for sustainable organisations

3.1 Thinking for complexity

Modern sustainability challenges are often described as "**wicked problems**" because they have no single solution. Climate change, biodiversity loss, AI, supply chains and resource scarcity are interconnected. Solving one challenge without considering the others can unintentionally create new problems.

This requires **systems thinking**—the ability to understand how decisions affect wider systems rather than isolated problems. **Key skills include:**

- Systems thinking
- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Decision-making

Another procurement example

A procurement decision based solely on cost may reduce expenses today while increasing emissions, supply chain risks and reputational damage tomorrow. **Looking at the whole system leads to better decisions**.

3.2. Leading change

Sustainability transformation is ultimately about people. Leaders at every level, not only managers, help create cultures where sustainability becomes part of everyday decision-making. **Important capabilities include:**

- Leadership mindset
- Entrepreneurial mindset
- Initiative
- Resilience
- Adaptability
- Empathy

These skills help people move from reacting to change to creating it.

3.3 Working together

No single department can deliver sustainability alone. Finance, HR, marketing, procurement, operations and leadership all contribute. This makes collaboration one of the most valuable future skills. **Key capabilities include:**

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Stakeholder engagement
- Cross-functional working
- Inclusive thinking

Sustainable innovation rarely comes from one discipline alone. It emerges when different perspectives come together to solve shared challenges.

3.4 Working responsibly with AI and data

AI is becoming part of everyday work. Used responsibly, it can support sustainability by helping organisations analyse data, optimise resources and improve decision-making.

However, AI should never replace human judgement. The future of work is increasingly about human-AI collaboration rather than human replacement. Professionals will need to know not only how to use AI effectively, but also when to challenge its outputs and take responsibility for final decisions. And **increasingly need skills such as:**

- AI literacy
- Responsible AI
- AI ethics
- Data literacy
- Digital literacy

The goal is not simply learning to use AI tools, but understanding when to trust them, when to question them and how to use them responsibly.

Did you know?

Some of the world's leading AI companies are now employing philosophers, ethicists and social scientists alongside engineers to help ensure AI systems reflect human values. **Future skills are becoming increasingly human.**

4) Lifelong learning is the new competitive advantage

The skills needed today will not necessarily be enough tomorrow.

This is why lifelong learning has become one of the defining characteristics of successful organisations.

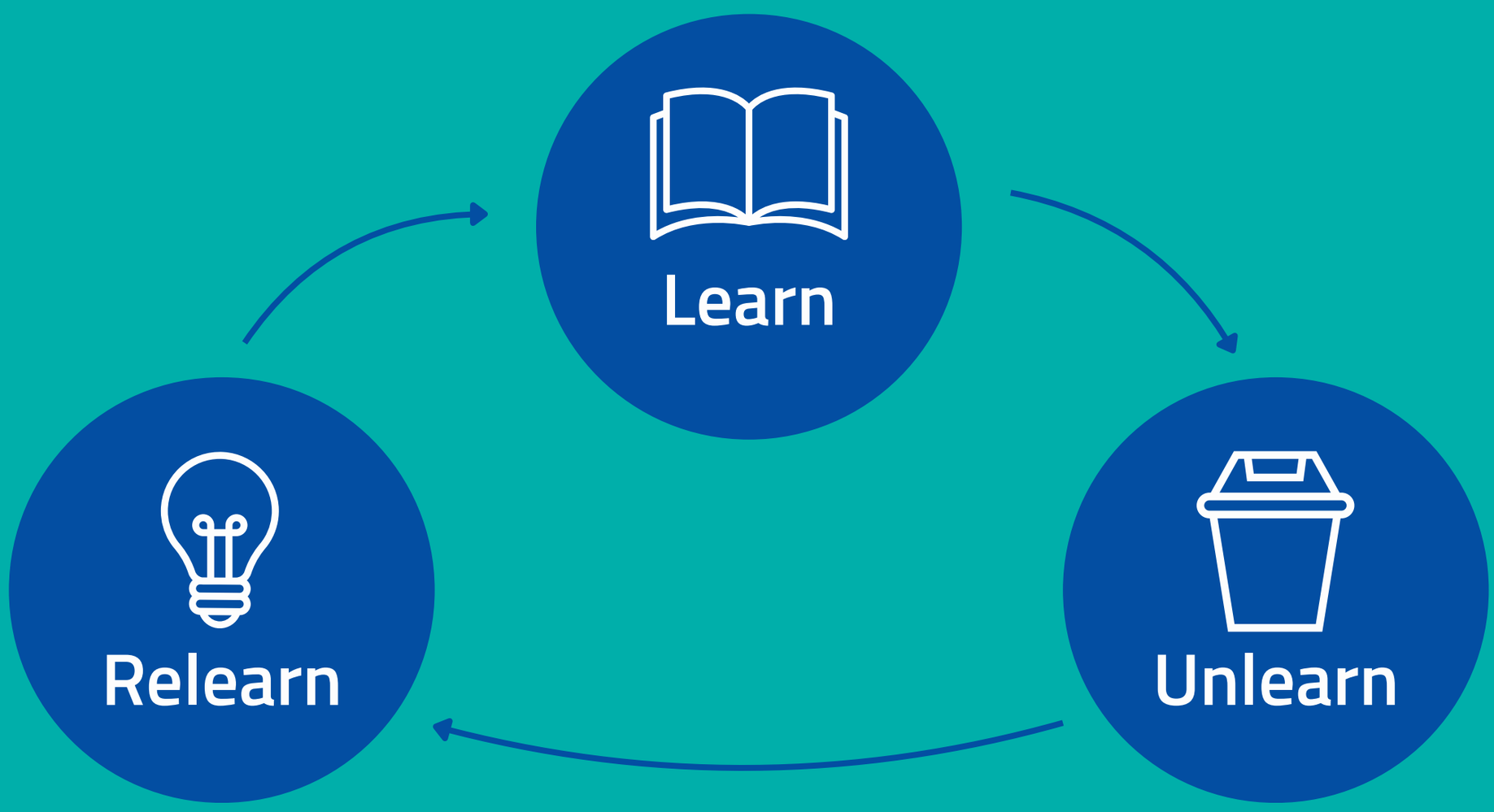
Learning is no longer something we complete at university or during onboarding.

It is a continuous process of learning, unlearning and relearning as technologies, industries and societies evolve.

Rather than trying to predict every future skill, successful professionals develop the ability to adapt. In fast-changing environments, adaptability becomes more valuable than expertise in any single tool. The most resilient professionals are those who know how to learn continuously and apply their knowledge in new contexts. **This is perhaps the most important future skill of all.**

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn"

Alvin Toffler



5) Building your learning pathway

One course will not prepare you for every future challenge. Learning works best when it is continuous, flexible and connected to your goals. Increasingly, professionals **build expertise through**:

- Short online courses
- Microcredentials
- Workplace learning
- Peer learning
- Communities of practice
- Mentoring
- Practical projects

Together these create personalised learning pathways that grow alongside your career.

MODULE 5: Activity

Your Future Skills Profile

Which **three skills** would have the greatest impact on your work?

- □ Systems thinking
- □ Leadership
- □ Communication
- □ Collaboration
- □ Adaptability
- □ Entrepreneurial mindset
- □ Problem solving
- □ Responsible AI
- □ AI ethics
- □ Data literacy
- □ Digital literacy
- □ Continuous learning

Reflection

For **each** skill, write **one action** you could take during the next month.

SKILL	MY NEXT ACTION



Thank You for Reading this Interactive Booklet!

WHAT'S NEXT? Continue Your Learning

Every new skill you develop strengthens not only your own career, but also your organisation's ability to innovate, adapt and create long-term value.

Whether you want to deepen your understanding of sustainability, AI, entrepreneurship or leadership, continuous learning helps you stay relevant in a rapidly changing world. **Future-ready organisations are built by future-ready people.**

Where to start? You can explore:

- EIT Campus - Discover flexible courses and learning pathways across sustainability, AI, innovation and entrepreneurship. You can also check the EIT Campus Skills Development Guide.
- Learnsy - platform for sustainability learning - Discover practical learning experiences designed to help organisations build future-ready capabilities.

Looking back

Return to your initial self-assessment and reflect on what has changed.

- Has your understanding of sustainability developed?
- Which idea challenged your thinking most?
- Which future skill feels most important now?
- How confident are you contributing to sustainability in your role?
- What is one insight you will apply in your everyday work?

Putting sustainability into practice

Now connect what you have learned to your organisation. Review its ESG, sustainability or annual report, if available. If not, reflect on the commitments and initiatives you are aware of. **Ask yourself:**

- What are the main sustainability priorities?
- How are they translated into action?
- What role do people and teams play?
- Where are the opportunities for improvement?
- What could you contribute through your role?

FINAL ACTIVITY

Use your organisation's ESG or sustainability report as a starting point and address the following points. If none is available, use the sustainability commitments or initiatives you are aware of.

1) What is your organisation saying?

What sustainability commitments has your organisation made? And which commitment is the most relevant to your role or team? Examples: climate targets, DEI, employee wellbeing, responsible AI, circular economy, community engagement, governance and ethics.

2) What is your organisation doing?

Look beyond commitments and identify the actions and initiatives supporting them. How closely do these actions align with the commitments?

- ☐ Strongly aligned
- ☐ Partly aligned – some gaps remain
- ☐ Not yet aligned
- ☐ I'm not sure

3) Identify a gap or opportunity

Where do you see a gap between commitments and action? What is one opportunity for improvement? Consider communication, skills, collaboration, leadership, procurement, technology, engagement or resources.

4) Check how confident are you discussing this opportunity internally

1 – Not confident | 2 – Slightly confident | 3 – Moderately confident
4 – Confident | 5 – Very confident

5) Build your case and assess who should be involved

- ☐ Manager
- ☐ HR
- ☐ Sustainability/ESG
- ☐ Innovation
- ☐ Procurement
- ☐ Senior leadership
- ☐ Employee representatives/staff networks
- ☐ Other

Why are they the right people to involve? Who else may need a voice?

6) Communicate the opportunity

What would you want your organisation to understand, and what action would you propose? Use evidence from its commitments, actions and identified gaps.

My key message: _____

7) Consider risks and opportunities

What is one potential risk, and how could it be managed? What opportunity could the action create? Consider potential impacts on:

- People
- Environment
- Business performance
- Compliance
- Reputation

8) Measure impact

How would you know your action is making a difference?

- ☐ Employee participation or engagement
- ☐ Diversity of voices
- ☐ Ideas or concerns raised
- ☐ Actions implemented
- ☐ Employee feedback
- ☐ Progress against ESG targets
- ☐ Skills or learning outcomes
- ☐ Business or operational performance
- ☐ Other

What result would you expect to see?

Your Personal Action Plan

Small actions create lasting change. **Choose one realistic action for each timeframe and identify who can support or enable it.**

TIMEFRAME	MY COMMITMENT	WHO CAN SUPPORT OR ENABLE IT?
This week		
This month		
Next 6 months		

One Future Skill I Will Develop

Which capability will help me take this action forward?

- □ Systems thinking
- □ Critical thinking
- □ Communication
- □ Collaboration
- □ Leadership
- □ Responsible AI
- □ Data literacy
- □ Adaptability
- □ Entrepreneurial mindset
- □ Continuous learning

My first step to develop this skill:

_____

Who could support me?

_____



Key Takeaways

- Sustainability creates long-term value for organisations, society and the planet.
- People drive transformation. Strategies create change when people understand and act on them.
- Leadership is for everyone. You do not need a management title to contribute.
- Inclusion matters. Diverse perspectives and equitable opportunities strengthen transformation.
- Future skills are sustainability skills. Critical thinking, collaboration, systems thinking, adaptability and responsible AI help navigate change.
- Learning never stops. Lifelong learning builds the skills and confidence needed to adapt and contribute.

Closing Reflection

Sustainability is becoming part of everyday decision-making across roles and functions. Sustainable transformation is ultimately about people — the choices we make, the questions we ask, the skills we develop and the actions we take.

What will you do differently?

Resources

- European GreenComp Framework
- EntreComp Entrepreneurship Competence Framework
- DigComp Framework
- UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI
- OECD Future of Work Resources
- World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report
- European Learning Model (ELM) for Microcredentials
- EIT Campus Blog
- Learnsy Blog
- ExecutESG
- EU's Voluntary Standard for Sustainability Reporting
- Deloitte's Human Capital Research
- Understanding the EU AI Act - Blog Article
- United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris Agreement
- Edible Insects blog
- EC Edible Insects Blog
- Food Risk Concerns from Edible Insects Blog
- Insect-based Burgers Blog
- Environment & Society Portal, Environmental History Timeline - For a broader and searchable chronology of global environmental and sustainability developments see
- Sustainability Skills for the Future of Work: An HR & ESG Perspective - Webinar Recording

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