Sustainability Census

Tenth Edition (2026/27)

The findings and analysis for the global survey of 2300+ sustainability professionals across all markets, industries and regions.

sustainabilitycensus.com

*Sample size (N = 2,340); total response counts vary per question.

Foreword

We are living through one of the most defining moments for business in recent history.

Climate change, inequality, technological disruption and geopolitical uncertainty are reshaping the environment in which businesses operate. Contrary to some people, I believe that this dynamic has only further cemented sustainability as critical to long-term competitiveness, resilience and value creation.

This year's Sustainability Census offers reasons for optimism. Across industries and geographies, sustainability continues to mature. More organizations are making public commitments, sustainability leadership is becoming more senior, and despite economic and political headwinds, many companies continue to invest in building more sustainable businesses.

Yet one finding stands out.

Globally, we can see that organizations express strong commitment to sustainability, but significantly less confidence in their ability to achieve their goals.

This gap between aspiration and delivery is perhaps the report's most important insight. The next phase of business leadership needs to go much further than making a commitment. It is fundamental that we build the governance, capabilities and culture to deliver on them.

The companies that will thrive over the next decade will not necessarily be those with the boldest sustainability ambitions. They will be those that successfully integrate sustainability into the core of their business strategy. This means looking at how they innovate, allocate capital, manage risk, engage suppliers, develop talent and create value. Historically, sustainability may have been focused on doing less harm, but today, I see it as the founding principle for building businesses that are fit for the future.

At B Lab, we believe business has both the responsibility and the opportunity to help transform our economic system into one that creates shared prosperity for all people and the planet. That transformation begins inside companies, with the decisions leaders make every day about governance, accountability and how value is created for all stakeholders. Financial performance and positive impact should never be labelled as competing objectives, as they reinforce one another over the long term.

The findings in this report push us toward that mutually benefitting relationship. Sustainability is moving beyond specialist teams into operations, commercial functions and innovation. That is where it belongs. Real transformation happens when sustainability informs the decisions that shape every part of the business, rather than remaining the responsibility of a single function.

The report also reminds us that leadership remains the critical factor. Many sustainability leaders still lack influence at the highest levels of decision-making, while resources and incentives often fail to match organizational ambition. These are leadership challenges more than they are sustainability ones, and we should treat them as such.

Periods of uncertainty test conviction. Political narratives, regulations and terminology will continue to evolve, but the responsibility of business to create lasting value for workers, customers, communities, investors, and the planet is a constant.

I believe that the organizations that continue to invest in long-term resilience today will always be the ones best positioned to lead tomorrow.

I read this Census as a call to action for boards, CEOs and executive teams. Tomorrow belongs to organizations that move beyond aspiration, embed sustainability at the heart of strategy and build the capability to deliver meaningful outcomes.

The future will not be defined by the promises we make, but by our ability to turn those promises into lasting impact.

Francine Lemos

Global Chair of the Board

B Lab

Executive Summary

The Sustainability Census is a global study of sustainability professionals, created by Acre and SLR to better understand the people, roles and trends shaping the profession. Drawing on responses from practitioners across regions, sectors and levels of seniority, it provides insight into areas such as career pathways, salaries, reporting lines, team structures, priorities and challenges.

The Census aims to build a clearer picture of how sustainability is evolving inside organisations, while giving professionals and employers useful benchmarks to support decision-making, talent planning and career development. It is designed to help the industry understand where it is today and where it is heading.

According to the survey's results:

- 2,340 sustainability professionals participated globally, the largest global survey of its kind to date.
- Respondents are based across 76 countries, working for organisations headquartered in 58, reflecting the increasingly global footprint of the sustainability profession.
- The profession remains highly educated: 64% of respondents hold a master's degree.
- Where budgets have increased, the most commonly cited drivers are greater strategic prioritisation of sustainability at group level, new or expanded regulatory and reporting requirements, and the launch of new sustainability strategies or investment in new tools and data platforms.
- Where sustainability functions are experiencing budget pressures, the most commonly cited drivers are broader business reprioritisation, lower overall business performance, company-wide cost-saving programmes, and reduced team headcount.
- Despite a more challenging operating environment, 64% of respondents report their sustainability budget either increased or stayed similar over the past 12 months, with 25% reporting an increase. While 27% experienced a reduction, the majority of organisations appear to be holding the line on sustainability investment rather than cutting it.
- At the immediate team level, 53% of respondents report their team size stayed broadly similar over the past 12 months, with a further 29% reporting growth. 17% experienced a reduction, suggesting that while the period of rapid headcount expansion has slowed, outright contraction remains a minority experience.
- Consultancy supplied more new entrants to in-house sectors than any other sector, moving people into almost every corner of the market. Overall, 61% of in-house respondents switched sectors in their most recent move.
- Respondents rate their organisation's commitment to sustainability at an average of 7.3 out of 10, but confidence that public commitments are achievable averages slightly lower at 6.8 out of 10, suggesting a persistent gap between aspiration and delivery.
- The biggest challenges facing the profession are balancing sustainability against competing corporate priorities (59%) and managing regulatory complexity (45%), with political and ideological headwinds emerging as a strong theme in open-text responses, particularly in North America.
- Career progression and better compensation remain the top two motivators for seeking a new role across all regions.
- Nearly 47% of respondents plan to progress their career outside of their current employer within the next 12 months.
- On average, sustainability professionals have spent 64% of their total career in sustainability-focused roles.
- C-suite sustainability titles nearly doubled their share between 2024 and 2026 (from 2.6% to 4.4%), while analyst-level titles almost halved.
- According to global data, 'ESG' appeared in 15% of job titles in 2024, falling to 12.5% in 2026, as 'Sustainability' consolidates its position as the preferred umbrella term across the profession. ESG appears in just 5.6% of US job titles compared to 10.9% in the UK and 11.1% in Europe, with no alternative term emerging to fill the gap, pointing to the distinct impact of political headwinds on the profession in North America.
- The mean satisfaction score with available resources is 6.16 out of 10. Those whose budgets have largely decreased score just 4.3, compared to 6.6 among those with growing budgets; a direct and strong relationship between resourcing and morale.
- In-house professionals earn a median of £95,000 in the UK, compared to £76,000 for consultants, a gap of around 20% that persists across seniority levels.
- In the US, the median base salary is $164,000, reflecting both higher market rates and a more senior respondent mix than other regions.
- The gender pay gap has narrowed meaningfully since 2024, falling from a median of 14.9% to 8.6% globally, though the gap in consultancy (20.6% median) remains more than three times larger than in in-house roles (5.7%).
- 15.1% of sustainability professionals have sustainability targets linked to their own bonus, despite 21.7% of organisations formally embedding sustainability objectives into the bonus structures of their wider workforce. The gap is most pronounced in the UK, where 26.1% of organisations apply sustainability-linked incentives to non-sustainability employees, yet only 14.4% of sustainability professionals have equivalent targets in their own bonus. In the US both figures sit below 10%, reflecting a broader reluctance to tie compensation to sustainability performance in North America.

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Introduction

Welcome to the tenth edition of the Sustainability Census. Ten editions in, this has become something I look forward to more than almost any other report we produce. It is a rare chance to put the day-to-day down, listen to what thousands of you across the profession are telling us, and take an honest reading of where we all stand. Thank you for being part of it.

Before we get into the findings, I want to stay with the bigger picture for a moment, because you cannot really make sense of this year's data without first reflecting on the years that produced it.

Has there ever been a period like this before?

Possibly, but not in our lifetimes. A pandemic, political upheaval, a cost-of-living crisis, climate breakdown, supply chain collapse, an inflation shock, war in Europe, war in the Middle East, energy insecurity, deglobalisation, tariffs, AI, misinformation and deepfakes. I'll stop there before I hyperventilate.

This has made for a turbulent few years for many of us, and that is worth acknowledging. It hasn't been straightforward, and it could not have been. Anyone who tells you they saw this exact combination coming is rewriting history. Most of us were reacting in real time, and that is nothing to be ashamed of.

The challenges have not been unique to sustainability

While there have been pressures specific to our profession, on balance the impact of these macro and socio-economic forces has been felt fairly evenly across most industries.

A small number of sectors have thrived through this period, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Sustainability has not been singled out in its challenges, and has been navigating the same storm as everyone else, often with less institutional shelter. Functions with a longer track record and clearer P&L ownership had more room to absorb shocks. Sustainability teams, often younger and still proving their commercial case, had less room for error and less patience shown to them when budgets tightened.

An improving market

Acre sits in a strong position to read the temperature of the sustainability talent market, and our view is straightforward: it has been a difficult few years, but the data now points to signs of recovery. We are seeing the market shift from a defensive posture back towards an ambitious one.

As we move toward 2027, that optimism is increasingly well-founded. While hiring volumes have not yet returned to the peaks of 2021 and 2022, we are seeing renewed growth in corporate sustainability appointments, alongside strong and sustained demand for C-suite leadership across sustainability-focused service providers, technology firms and non-profits.

The market is not where it was at its height, but the direction of travel is now unmistakably positive. Encouragingly, this recovery looks broader than the boom that preceded it. It is not confined to a handful of high-profile sectors, but spread across industries that are treating sustainability leadership as a permanent fixture rather than a temporary response to pressure.

The road ahead

This is a humbling moment for anyone who considers themselves a futurist! Confident short-term predictions are probably a fool's errand. What we can say with more confidence is this: the underlying drivers of the sustainability agenda– physical climate risk, nature loss, resource security, regulatory change and the demand for accountable, resilient business models– have not disappeared. If anything, they have intensified.

None of this means the work gets easier. The profession that emerges from this period will be judged less on how it talks about sustainability and more on how it delivers it, under tighter scrutiny and with less patience for vague commitments. That is a fair trade. It is also the clearest sign yet that this work has moved from the margins to the centre of how businesses are run.

What we are witnessing is the maturing of a critical profession. The organisations and leaders who endured this period are emerging more rigorous, more commercially literate, and better equipped to make the case for sustainability as a core facet to long-term business resilience. That is a stronger foundation than the one we started from. I move forward with optimism for what this profession can achieve next.

Andy Cartland

Chief Impact Officer & Founder

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Understandings, Limitations & Methodology

Terminology & Sample Size

For ease of interpreting this report, "sustainability" is used as an umbrella term that includes:

- Environment, Social and Governance (ESG)
- Corporate sustainability and responsibility
- Net-zero and climate action
- Impact investing
- Other related terms

While the meaning of "the sustainability agenda" varies from organisation to organisation, the UN defines it as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Despite being the largest report of its kind, we acknowledge that drawing definitive conclusions from every dataset remains challenging at this sample size. The data nonetheless provides valuable insight into the current realities of working in a sustainability-related profession today.

A Note on the Use of AI in this Report

The 2026 Sustainability Census report was produced with the assistance of AI tools, and we believe in being transparent about how and where those tools were used. AI was used to interrogate the underlying dataset, surface patterns and cross-tabulations, and support in the creation of a report outline. AI played no role in the design or administration of the survey, and was not involved in data collection, or design of the report. We believe AI has a legitimate role in research and reporting when its use is transparent and its outputs are subject to rigorous human review. We welcome feedback from readers on our approach.

Geographical Breakdown

Where possible, the data is broken down by sector and geographical region. For this report, we have categorised responses into the following regions:

- **United Kingdom**
  (40% of respondents; n=944)
- **North America**
  (28% of respondents; n=664)
- **Europe**
  (19% of respondents; n=449)
- **Asia (including Oceania)**
  (7% of respondents; n=169)
- **Africa & Middle East**
  (3% of respondents; n=61)
- **South & Central America**
  (2% of respondents; n=53)

The regional demographics represented in the 2026 Census are broadly consistent with those collected in 2023/24, with the UK, North America and Europe maintaining similar proportions. Where comparable data exists, we have made comparisons to the previous Census throughout this report.

Due to lower sample sizes, Africa & Middle East and South & Central America fall outside of the scope of some areas of the report - primarily salary benchmarking, but we are grateful to those from these regions who contributed and their data contributes to the overall picture. If you are interested in these regions, please reach out to Acre for further insight.

Context & the Census Team

A Note on the 2025/26 Context

This report was prepared at a time of considerable macro-level uncertainty for the sustainability profession. The rollback of federal ESG guidance in the United States, continued pressure on DEI programmes, the evolving scope of CSRD and broader shifts in EU regulatory ambition, and questions about the pace of net-zero implementation in certain jurisdictions have all created a more complex operating environment for sustainability professionals. This context is reflected throughout the findings, particularly in the data on budget changes, motivation to seek new roles, and the challenges respondents identify as most pressing. Jurisdictions have all created a more complex operating environment for sustainability professionals.

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Acre and SLR would like to thank our distribution partners for aiding in the collection of responses throughout their networks.

United Nations Global Compact

Solidaridad

U.S. Green Building Council

EASP

Sustainability Africa
People. Planet. Prosperity

ICRS

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Acre is a global sustainability executive search and talent advisory specialist, with more than 20 years' experience helping organisations build the teams they need to drive meaningful environmental and social impact.

Acre's purpose is to create systemic change for our planet and society by activating people's potential. Through executive search, professional recruitment, interim solutions, advisory services and market research, Acre connects ambitious organisations with the leaders and specialists who can turn sustainability commitments into measurable progress.

Working across sustainability, ESG, clean energy, financial services, private capital, infrastructure, consumer markets and professional services, Acre combines deep sector expertise, global networks and local insight to support businesses and candidates shaping a more resilient, equitable and sustainable future.

SLR

SLR is a leading global environmental and advisory consultancy, with a team of 5,000+ talented professionals operating from a network of offices in Europe, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Africa.

SLR's purpose - Making Sustainability Happen - means delivering outcomes that are grounded in evidence, shaped by experience, and built to last. We help companies turn intent into purposeful, practical action that delivers real-world results.

Guided by a philosophy of Rational Sustainability, SLR focuses on what truly drives long-term value. By viewing decisions through the lenses of risk, reward, and resilience, we help clients balance environmental and social responsibility with commercial and strategic success.

SLR's teams have been advising clients for over 30 years at every point of their project life-cycle; from Board-room strategy to on-the-ground delivery.

1 | Demographics

This section outlines the demographic profile of respondents, including region, gender, employment type and other key characteristics shaping the global sustainability profession.

Global Participation

Data was collected from sustainability professionals worldwide across a six-week period in early 2026. 2,340 sustainability professionals participated globally, a 4% increase from the 2023/24 Census (2,253 respondents).

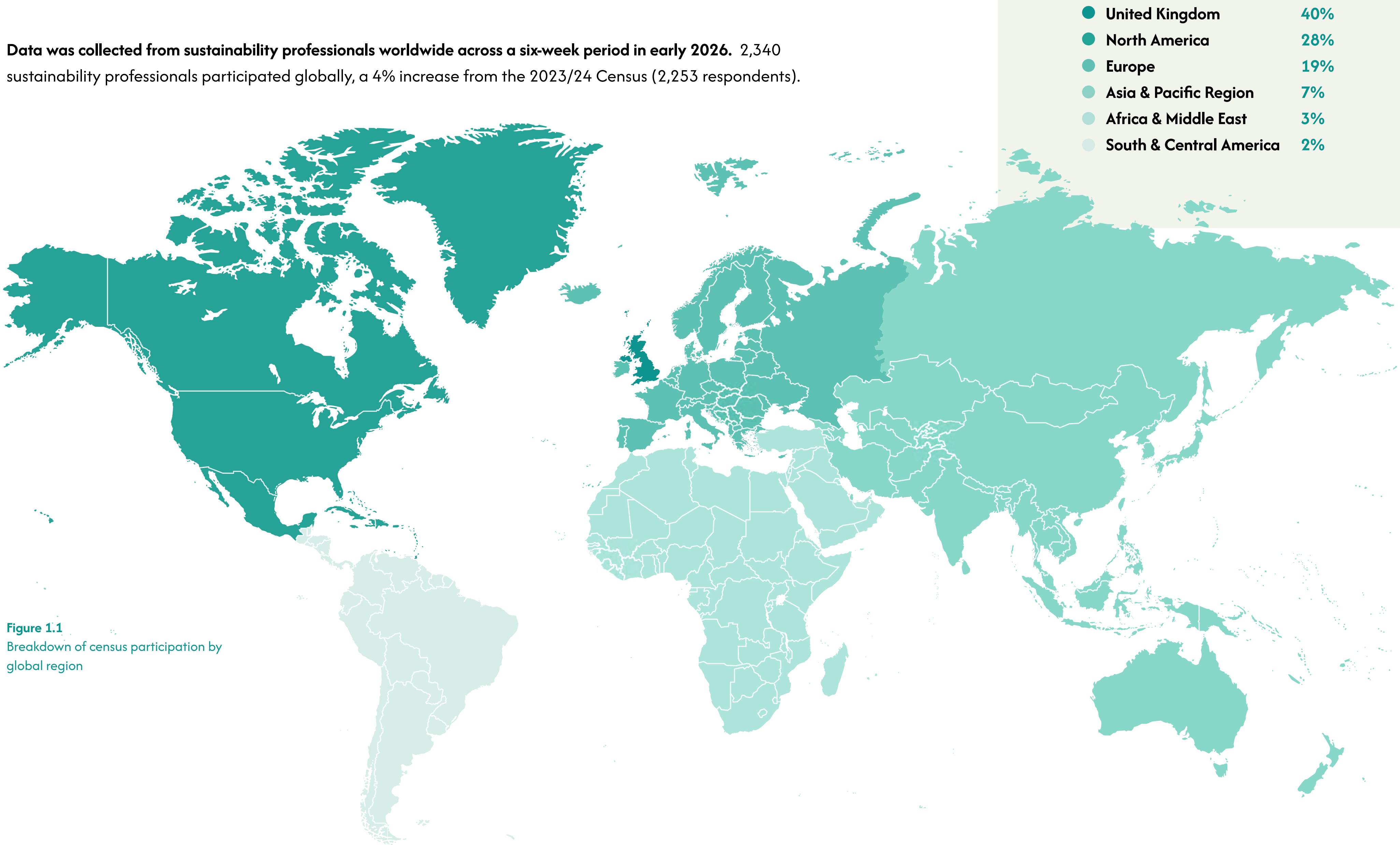
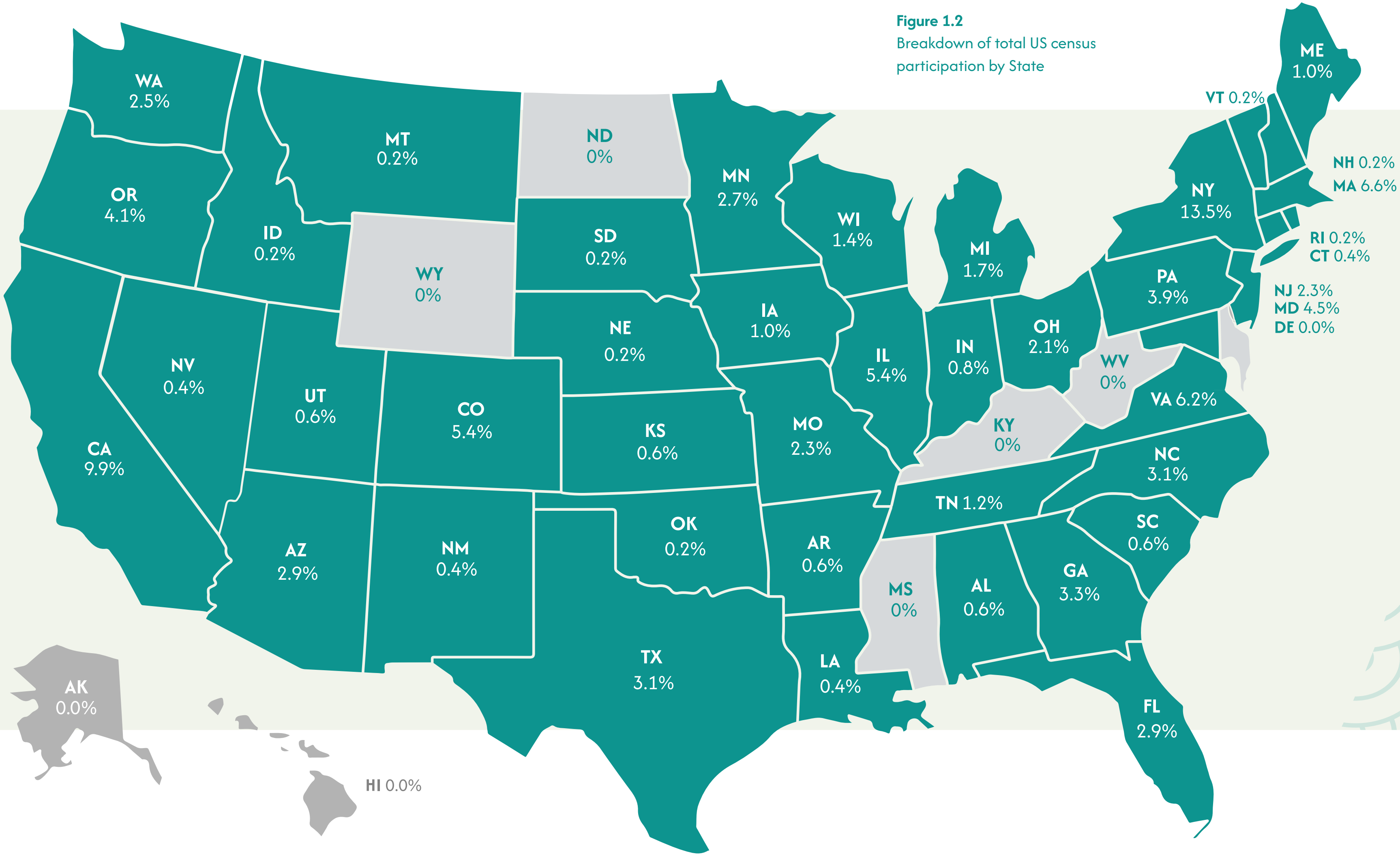


Figure 1.1
Breakdown of census participation by global region

US Participation by State

Figure 1.2
Breakdown of total US census participation by State



UK Participation by Region

The South East of the UK accounts for 60% of UK participation this year, closely tracking where the UK's largest employers themselves are based. Over 70% of the FTSE 100 sit in London, so this map likely reflects the concentration of senior sustainability roles rather than any bias in our reach.

As regional headquarters and sustainability functions grow, we'd expect that balance to shift, and this gives us a clear baseline to track how quickly that happens.

Richard Wright

Chief Executive Officer, Acre

Figure 1.3
Breakdown of total UK census participation by Region

Employment

Type of employment

The overall split between consultants and in-house sustainability professionals has remained largely stable, with only a slight shift towards consultants, rising from **31%** from the 2023/24 census to approximately **32%** in 2026.

In-house professionals continue to make up the clear majority of respondents at around 68%, suggesting that sustainability remains strongly embedded within organisations rather than being primarily outsourced.

There is also a small movement in employment type, with contractor, interim and freelance professionals reducing slightly from 7% in 2023 to 6% in 2026, while permanent roles remain dominant.

This may suggest a continued preference for long-term sustainability capability within businesses.

Figure 1.4

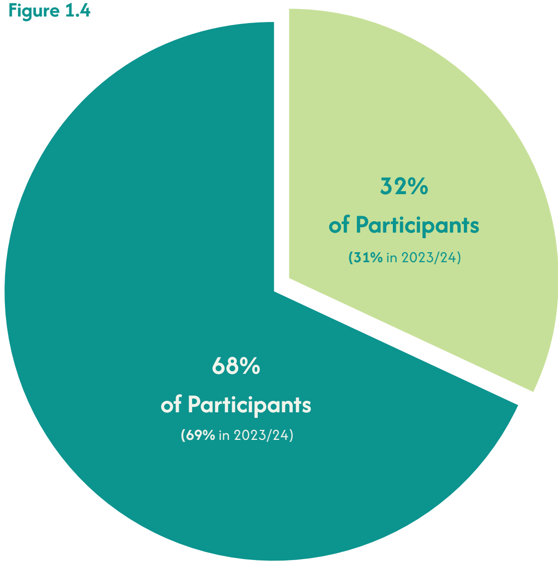


Figure 1.5

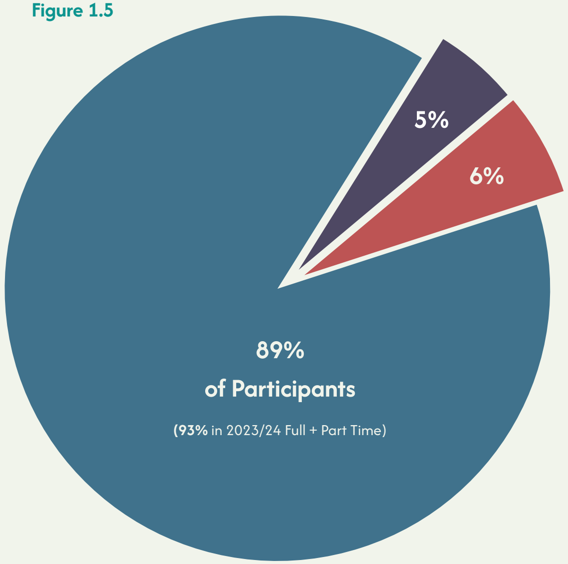


Figure 1.6 Breakdown of employment type by seniority

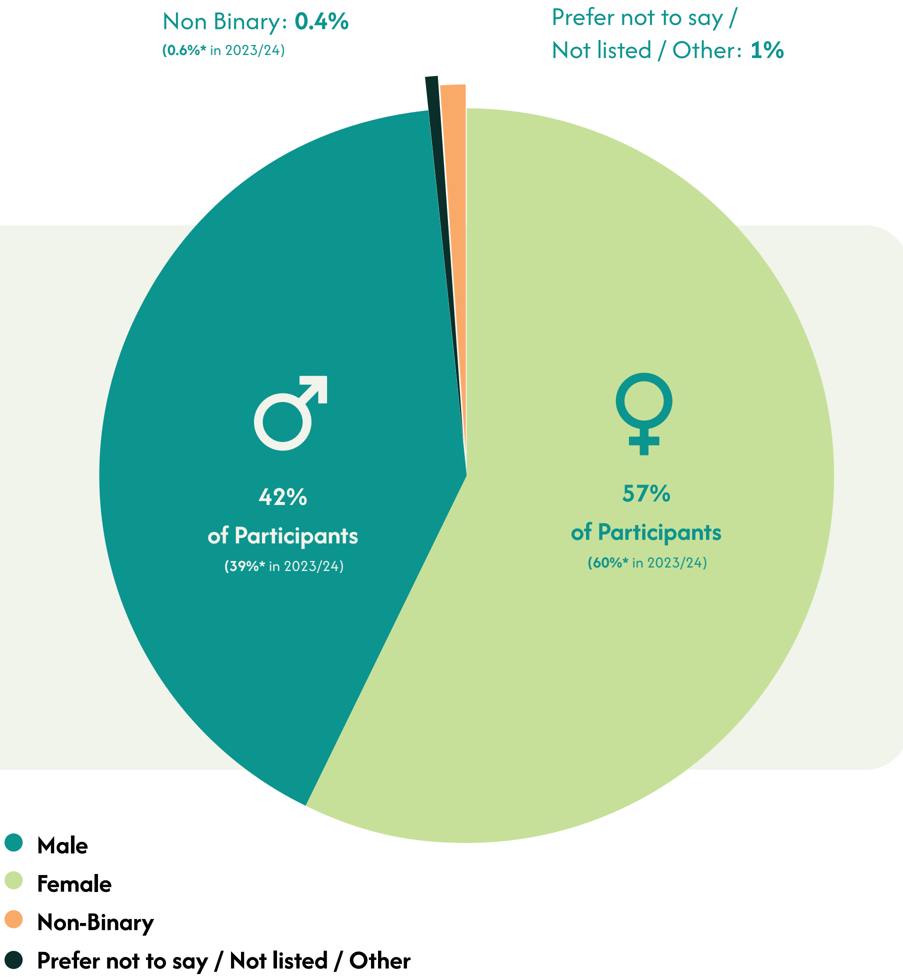
Junior	Management	Senior Leadership	Executive
50.9%	63.8%	72.2%	67.1%
49.1%	36.2%	27.8%	32.9%

Figure 1.7 Breakdown of employment contract by seniority

Junior	Management	Senior Leadership	Executive
83.3%	85.6%	90.3%	93.6%
7.9%	6.6%	4.7%	2.8%
8.8%	7.8%	5.0%	3.5%

Gender Split

Figure 1.8 Breakdown of professionals by gender

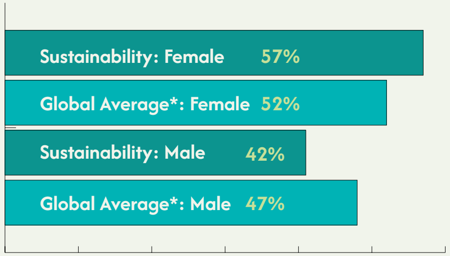


*Prefer not to say / Not listed / Other was not an option in the 2023/24 Census for comparison

Type of employment

Sustainability professions see a higher than average amount of female representation when compared with similar professional occupations globally. There is no reputable data to compare non-binary participants.

Figure 1.9 Global comparison of gender with professional occupations



According to Census results, Asia & Pacific remains the only region in which male respondents outnumber female respondents (54% male, 44% female). North America reports the highest proportion of female respondents (63%).

*Figure 1.9 Source: ILOSTAT, Where women work: female-dominated occupations and sectors

Figure 1.10 Breakdown of gender by seniority

	Junior	Management	Leadership	Executive
Female	66.7%	60.2%	54.3%	51.1%
Male	33.3%	38.5.2%	44.3%	48.0%
Non-Binary	0.0%	0.4%	0.5%	0.0%
Prefer not to say/ Not listed /Other	0.0%	1.0%	0.6%	0.9%

2 | Sector Representation

This section explores sector representation across 28 industries, showing where sustainability professionals work and the varied career paths that lead into each sector.

When I joined Acre 15 years ago, sustainability looked very different. Teams were small, budgets were smaller, and the focus was mostly compliance and reporting. Plenty of organisations were still debating whether sustainability deserved a seat at the top table.

I've loved watching this profession grow from a niche corporate function into something that drives business decisions. Sustainability now shapes strategy, influences investment, and redesigns supply chains to help boards navigate an increasingly complex world. It's gone from something organisations did to protect their reputation, to something they lean on to protect their future.

Reading through this year's Census, what strikes me most is how much the profession has matured. The numbers tell a story, but so does the tone. There's a confidence in this year's responses that wasn't always there in earlier years. One of the clearest signs is its reach. This year's Census includes professionals from over 20 different sectors, proof that sustainability is no longer confined to the traditionally high-impact industries. Construction and the Built Environment is the largest sector represented, at 11% of respondents, but we're also seeing strong participation from financial services, manufacturing, consumer goods, technology and healthcare. Even sectors that once treated sustainability as a side project now have dedicated teams and, increasingly, dedicated budgets. Sustainability is now part of how organisations think about long-term growth, resilience and competitiveness.

The data also tells a story about career stability, and where people choose to build their futures. Construction doesn't just have the largest representation, it also has the highest retention rate, with 61% of professionals staying in the sector. Consumer goods, real estate and investment management aren't far behind. These are sectors where sustainability has settled in, where the roles are established and the career paths are clear.

Transport tells a different story, with a retention rate of just 12%. Utilities and clean technology see similarly high turnover. That makes sense: these are the sectors at the heart of the energy transition, and demand for experienced sustainability professionals has never been higher. Talent is moving toward where people believe they can make the greatest impact, in a market that's dynamic and fiercely competitive. If anything, this level of movement is a sign of health, not instability. It shows people are chasing purpose as much as pay.

Perhaps the biggest change I've witnessed is the shift from generalists to specialists. Early in my career, organisations wanted people who simply understood sustainability. Today, they want people with deep industry insight, people who know how to turn sustainability into commercial outcomes. Commercial instinct and sector expertise now matter just as much as technical knowledge. The best professionals I meet today can speak the language of the boardroom as fluently as the language of climate risk.

Sustainability professionals have real influence at every level of a business now. Instead of being brought in at the end to write the report, they're helping shape the decisions that matter most, from managing risk and unlocking innovation to influencing investment and strategy. Sustainability has become central to how organisations create long-term value.

If there's one thing I hope readers take from this year's Census, it's confidence. Yes, the challenges facing business are significant. But so is the capability of the people leading the response. Every year, we see more organisations investing in sustainability, more sectors recognising its value, and more talented people choosing to build a career in this profession. Fifteen years in, that's still the most encouraging trend I see.

Ben Flint

Client Director

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Sectors Represented in this Report

Sector definitions have been refined for 2026 to better reflect the changing landscape of the profession. Financial services is now broken out into Banking, Investment & Wealth Management, Private Markets & Real Assets, and Insurance. This enables more granular analysis than was possible in 2023/24.

In this edition, we've been able to see a wide range of sectors represented across the report, from construction, manufacturing and consumer goods to financial services, technology, utilities and non-profit organisations. This breadth gives the data stronger context, helping us understand how sustainability is developing across different industries, each with its own pressures, priorities and pace of change. It also supports more meaningful comparisons across the global sustainability profession.

The most credentialled sector

The **Supply Chain** sector has 89% of respondants who are postgraduate, 94% with a sustainability-specific degree.

See **Education**, Page 18

Female led, bar one

Most sectors surveyed had **52–78% split of female** sustainability professionals; **Clean Tech** however is 72% male.

See **Gender**, Page 13

The sector for newcomers

18% of sustainability professionals in **Public Services** have under two years in the function. That's double any other.

See **Work Experience**, Page 23

Figure 2.1 Percentage of respondents within each sector

Sector Retention over Time

For each industry, this page shows the share of sustainability professionals who moved into their role from within the same sector, alongside the three sectors they most often arrived from. **Higher retention marks industries that grow their own sustainability talent; lower retention shows where a sector draws most of its people from elsewhere.**

Sector	Retention	Typically comes from:
Construction & Built Environment	61%	7% Consultancy; 4% Public Services; 4% Professional Services
Consumer Goods: Agri, Food & Bev	46%	13% Consultancy; 6% Non-Profit; 5% CG – Apparel & Home
Consumer Goods: Apparel, Lux & Home	54%	12% CG – Food & Bev.; 10% Consultancy; 4% Mfg – Packaging & Chems.
Packaging, Plastics & Chemicals	38%	12% CG – Food & Bev.; 9% Consultancy; 8% Mfg – Auto & Aerospace
Investment & Wealth Management	52%	17% Consultancy; 9% FS – Banking; 5% CG – Food & Bev.
Banking	38%	18% Consultancy; 7% FS – Investment & WM; 5% Non-Profit
Private Markets & Real Assets	29%	26% Consultancy; 14% FS – Investment & WM; 7% Property & Real Estate.
Auto, Aerospace & Materials	32%	21% Consultancy; 11% Mfg – Packaging & Chems.; 7% Construction
Technology	33%	15% Consultancy; 7% FS – Banking; 6% Construction
Health, Hygiene & Pharmaceuticals	28%	11% Consultancy; 11% CG – Apparel & Home; 6% CG – Food & Bev.
Retail & Wholesale	46%	8% Public Services; 6% CG – Apparel & Home; 6% Construction
Utilities	22%	16% Consultancy; 8% Technology; 8% Natural Resources
Property & Real Estate	47%	19% Consultancy; 6% Construction; 4% Retail & Wholesale
Professional Services	24%	17% Consultancy; 10% Legal; 7% CG – Apparel & Home
Natural Resources	46%	22% Consultancy; 7% FS – Banking; 5% Utilities
Transport	12%	15% Consultancy; 12% Construction; 9% Hospitality
Public Services	26%	13% Non-Profit; 10% Consultancy; 6% FS – Banking
Hospitality	27%	13% Professional Services; 10% Consultancy; 7% Non-Profit
Media & Entertainment	22%	22% Consultancy; 7% Technology; 7% Construction
Non-Profit Organisations	40%	20% Consultancy; 8% Professional Services; 8% Technology
Clean Tech & E-Mobility	21%	21% Mfg – Auto & Aerospace; 12% Consultancy; 8% Retail & Wholesale
Financial Services (Insurance)	22%	13% Public Services; 13% Non-Profit; 9% Consultancy
Telecoms	27%	27% Consultancy; 13% Public Services; 7% Transport

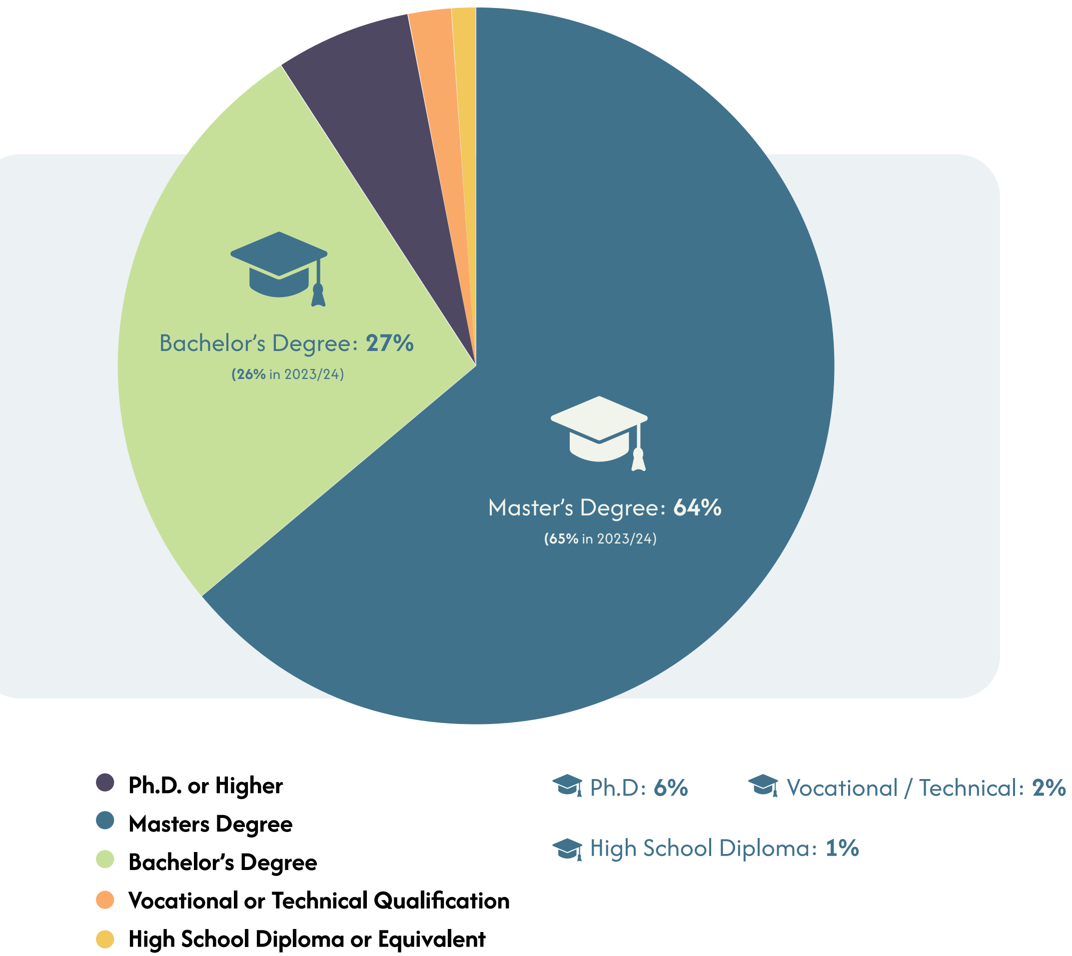
3 | Education

This section examines educational backgrounds, showing how highest qualification levels vary by region, and whether professionals hold sustainability-related degrees or additional specialist qualifications

Highest Level of Education

97% of Respondents have at least a Bachelor's Degree

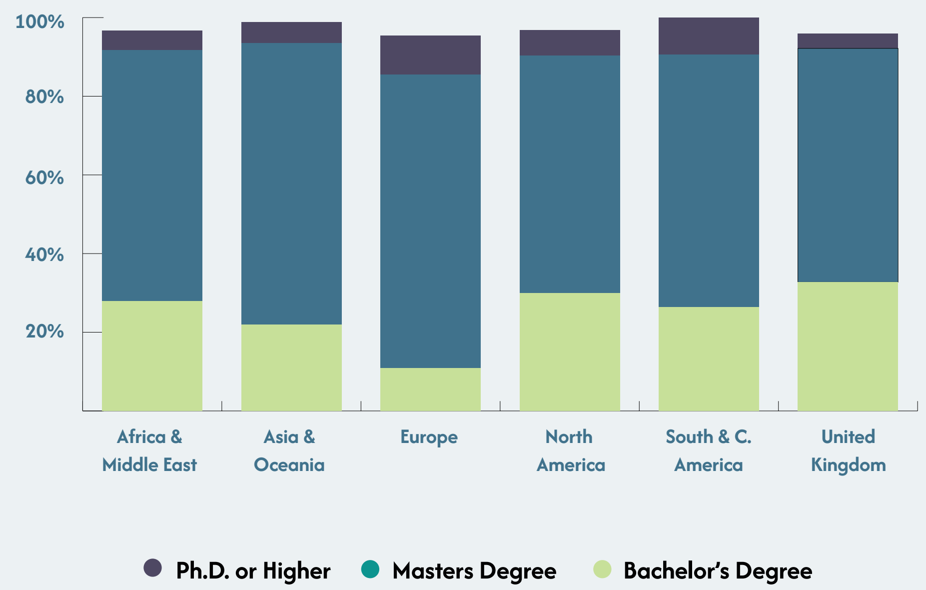
Figure 3.1 Global breakdown of professionals by highest level of education



Europe continues to report the highest proportion of respondents with master's degrees (75%), reinforcing the region's emphasis on advanced formal education. **North America** has the highest proportion of respondents whose highest qualification is a bachelor's degree (30%), a pattern that likely reflects the significantly higher cost of postgraduate education in the region rather than differences in academic ambition or professional structure.

Asia Pacific shows a high proportion of master's degree holders (72%), broadly in line with Europe. **United Kingdom** respondents with master's degrees account for 59% of the UK sample.

Figure 3.2 Percentage of respondents holding Bachelor's, Master's or PhD Qualifications, by Region



Sustainability Specific Education

52% of respondents said their highest qualification was sustainability-related.

67% of respondents have completed additional sustainability-related courses or accreditations beyond their core qualification, reflecting the growing ecosystem of professional development opportunities in this space.

- Highest level qualification is sustainability-related
- Highest level qualification is unrelated to sustainability

Figure 3.3 Share of sustainability related degrees

- Additional sustainability education (course / accreditation)
- No additional sustainability education

Figure 3.4 Share of additional qualifications

4 | Total Career in Sustainability

This section explores respondents' total work experience, comparing overall career length with years spent in sustainability roles to understand career commitment and professional maturity.

Over two decades in sustainability, I have seen the discipline evolve from a niche function into a strategic business priority. Today, as Chief Sustainability Officer and a member of the Executive Committee at Bodycote, I lead work to make sustainability core to value creation and growth.

Twenty years ago, sustainability was rarely represented at Executive Committee level, or given the mandate to shape business strategy.

However, this research suggests the profession may be at an important crossroads. I was particularly struck by two findings in the report. First, Legal/Compliance is now one of the most common homes for sustainability, alongside Operations. Second, ESG reporting and disclosure requirements are consuming an increasing share of sustainability professionals' time and attention. Together, these trends raise an important question: are organisations embedding sustainability as a compliance function, or recognising it as a driver of long-term value creation?

Sustainability should be integrated across business processes and functions, but integration is not the same as dilution. The report notes that Strategy/Planning was the most common home for sustainability in the last census. A shift away from that position may, in some organisations, reflect a narrowing of sustainability's role from a strategic growth driver to regulatory compliance.

Compliance matters. Regulatory requirements must be met. But sustainability was never intended to be a compliance exercise alone. As this report rightly observes, at its best it helps organisations innovate, strengthen resilience, unlock commercial opportunities and create value for stakeholders. Its real leverage lies in influencing strategic decisions, helping businesses grow and preparing organisations for future risks.

That is why leadership matters. The report highlights that executive board representation for the most senior sustainability leader remains far from universal. Every critical business function should be represented by deep subject matter expertise. Sustainability is no exception: management-level expertise ensures it remains connected to strategy, planning and decision-making across the business.

At Bodycote, sustainability is viewed as an important contributor to value creation and long-term business resilience, which is why dedicated leadership matters. Reporting does have a critical role to play. If sustainability is to be recognised as a value creation function, organisations need to be able to demonstrate its contribution clearly. Done well, reporting builds trust, supports decision-making and helps stakeholders understand how sustainability contributes to business performance.

The challenge is ensuring reporting remains clear and material without crowding out programme delivery, strategic execution, innovation and transformation.

AI presents a significant opportunity here. It can accelerate reporting, reduce manual effort and improve communication. Used well, it can create space for sustainability teams to focus more on transformation.

The question is not whether sustainability becomes more embedded in organisations, but whether it becomes embedded primarily as a compliance function or a value creation function.

The organisations that succeed will be those that keep sustainability close to strategy and decision-making, use reporting to build trust and demonstrate value, and use technology to accelerate delivery and increase impact.

Lily Heinemann

Chief Sustainability Officer

Bodycote

Work Experience

The 2026 Census asked respondents how many total years of work experience they have, and how many of those years have been spent focused on sustainability. The results confirm that sustainability is a profession of experienced people with deep roots in the field.

Total years of Work Experience

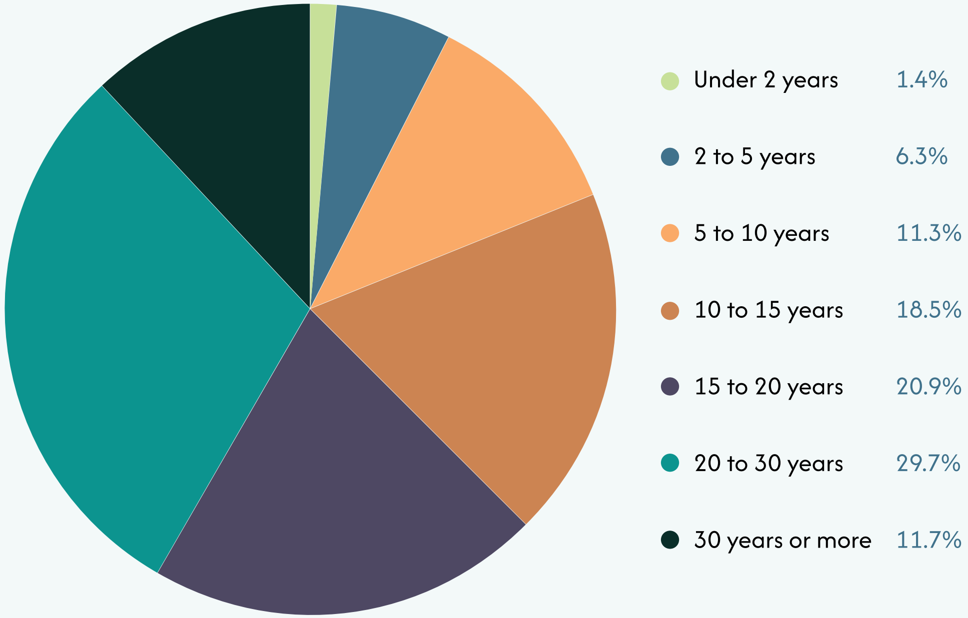


Fig 4.1 Total years of work experience

Years Focused on Sustainability

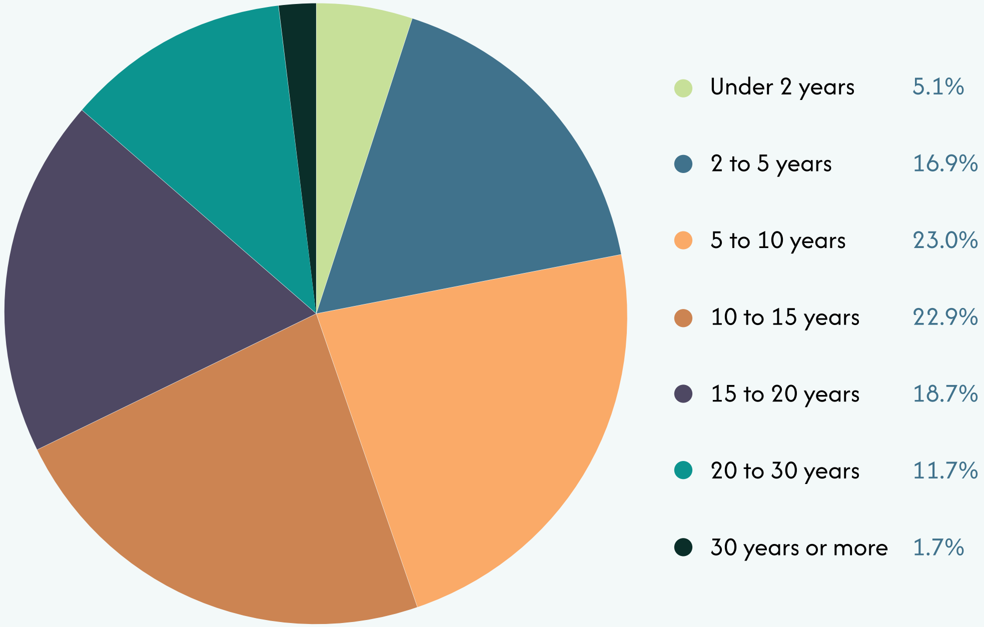


Fig 4.2 Total years of work experience focused on sustainability

Sustainability experience clusters in the middle of the distribution, with more than 45% of respondents having between 5 and 15 years in the field. Sustainability veterans with 15 or more years of focused experience account for 32% of the sample, which demonstrates that the sector has, and hopefully will continue, to provide long term career opportunities.

Career Commitment to Sustainability

On average, respondents have spent approximately 64% of their total career in sustainability-focused roles. This ratio is consistent across regions, ranging from 68% in Europe to 74% in Asia.

Region	Avg. Total Experience	Avg. Sustainability Experience	Share of Career in Sustainability
North America	19.7 Years	12.7 Years	71%
Asia Pacific	17.5 Years	11.8 Years	74%
United Kingdom	18.3 Years	12.0 Years	72%
Europe	18.6 Years	11.6 Years	68%

The majority of respondents (58%) came to sustainability from another profession, while 42% report having spent broadly the same number of years working in sustainability as in total, suggesting they entered the field early in their careers. Among those who transitioned in, 10.4% have ten or more years of total experience but fewer than five in sustainability, indicating a mid-career switch, while 5% are more senior professionals with 20 or more years of total experience but fewer than five in sustainability. While the data hints at a trend toward later-career transitions into the field, it is not yet strong enough to draw firm conclusions, and this will be worth tracking in future editions of the census.

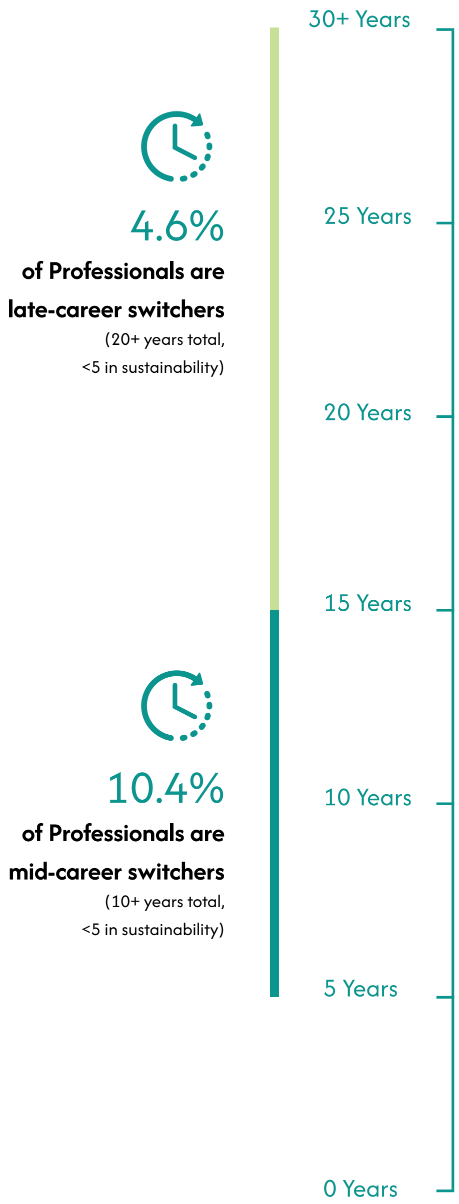


Fig 4.3 Career Change Timeline

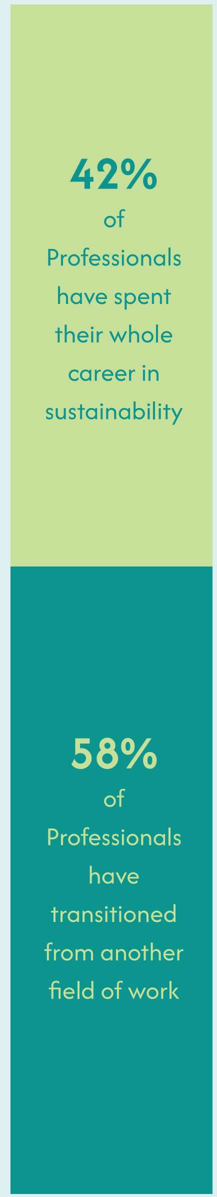


Fig 4.4 Percentage of Professionals Always working in Sustainability

5 | Team Structure & Resourcing

This section examines organisational context, including respondent company size, board-level ownership, reporting structures, ultimate responsibility, budgets and job titles across sustainability functions.

What jumps from these pages is the picture of a mature function.

Over 60% of respondents say budgets are higher or similar to last year. Compellingly, 49% of respondents say their business is developing new commercial ventures linked to sustainability. To see these responses in a survey that covers nearly 25 for-profit sectors is promising. It speaks to value and to a continuing evolution of the function from issues to income, from anecdotal to institutional.

Yes, some respondents report budget declines, but for reasons that could be cited by many functions, e.g. business performance and, undoubtedly related, cost savings. And the fact that many new business initiatives are led by other functions makes sense. If you want to develop and market sustainable products, who better than R&D and marketing, supported by sustainability? It is a sign of positive, practical integration.

The bigger question is what's next. Because sustainability sits at the confluence of science, markets, policy, and social choice, the wind can shift frequently. Tailwinds turn to headwinds and then change back again. Some trends, however, are fundamental. The constituency for sustainability grows and the repricing of environmental assets spreads. Both are accelerated by lower-cost, ubiquitous data and burgeoning AI. Interaction among consumers, customers, investors, and civil society reinforces the direction of travel.

In this context, the job of a corporate sustainability team is to help business enhance efficiency and resilience, to build trust, and to help facilitate the creation of better products and relevant services. The Census tells us that executing the role of the CSO, or the Head of, or any of the other listed titles, effectively, pragmatically, and collaboratively—with the right team for the moment—will generate consequential value and contribute to the indispensability of the profession.

Stewart Lindsey

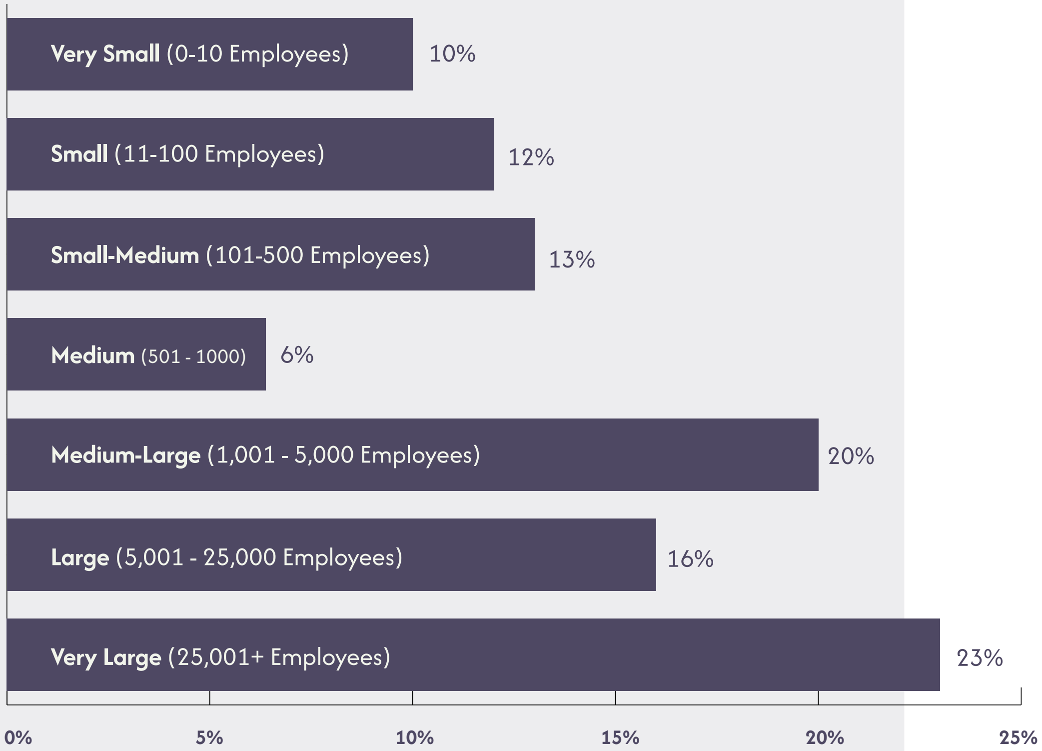
Chief Sustainability Officer

The Campbell's Company

What do teams look like?

Sustainability professionals work in organisations of varying sizes, with around 60% employed by those with more than 1,000 employees:

Figure 5.1 Total size of organisation



Global In-House Sustainability Function Growth

A notable shift emerges in this year's data. When asked whether the overall global sustainability function in their organisation had grown over the past 12 months:

Figure 5.2 Respondents answer if their in-house sustainability function has grown within the past 12 months?

This represents a marked change from the 2023/24 results, in which 65% of respondents reported sustainability headcount growth. With reported growth falling from 65% to 43% in two years, the data points to a meaningful slowdown in team expansion across the profession.

Among those who did not report growth, the majority describe their immediate team as broadly stable rather than contracting, though a notable minority report some degree of headcount reduction. For some organisations this stability may reflect teams that are now established and focused on execution rather than expansion; for others it is more likely a product of budget constraint. The period of rapid team-building observed between c.2020 and mid-2023 has clearly run its course, though the profession has not gone into reverse.

- Organisations represented span **58 countries**
- Two thirds of respondents worked for organisations headquartered in the **UK (37%) and US (29%)**
- 79% of respondents work for an org headquartered in their own region, with **21% working cross-border**
- The most common cross-border pairing is UK professionals in US-headquartered firms (79 cases)
- **23% of UK respondents** work for a non-UK headquartered organisation

Global Sustainability Consultancy Growth

Figure 5.3 Respondents answer if their sustainability consultancy has grown within the past 12 months

Regional variation in consultancy team growth tells a more optimistic story in parts of the world. In Asia Pacific, 61% of respondents report that their organisation's sustainability function has grown over the past 12 months; the highest of any major region and well above the global average of 48%. South & Central America shows the most striking growth of all, with 79% of respondents reporting expansion, though the smaller sample size in this region warrants caution in drawing firm conclusions.

By contrast, Europe reports the lowest growth rate at just 39%, with North America (44%) also sitting below the global average. The United Kingdom sits close to the median, with just over half (52%) of UK respondents reporting growth in team size.

The anecdotal evidence we have seen across Asia Pacific has undoubtedly pointed to growth in hiring within the consulting sector, although this trend has not been universal. Several factors appear to be driving this expansion.

Compared to other regions, organisations in Asia Pacific typically operate with smaller in-house teams. As demands on these teams continue to increase, with limited appetite for additional headcount, consultants are playing an increasingly important role in providing specialist support and capacity.

Significant capital investment into infrastructure across the region, particularly in areas such as data centres and renewable energy assets, is also driving demand for expertise in ESG due diligence, energy transition, and technical advisory services relating to energy and water.

At the same time, mainstream consulting firms, including the Big Four and MBB firms, have moderated their ambitions to provide end-to-end sustainability solutions and are instead focusing on areas where they possess clear competitive advantages. This has created opportunities for specialist consultancies to gain market share.

Growth has been further accelerated by private equity investment into consulting businesses, reflecting a belief in the opportunity to consolidate specialist firms and teams into larger, more globally connected platforms.

The hiring activity we have observed has been concentrated at the senior end of the market, focused on individuals capable of driving revenue growth or providing deep technical expertise that has not yet become commoditised and is therefore less susceptible to disruption from advances in AI.

Paddy Balfour
Managing Director, Asia & Pacific
Acre

Board Level Ownership

Board-level representation for sustainability leaders varies notably by organisation size, and the pattern may be counterintuitive. Smaller organisations are the most likely to have their senior sustainability leader on the executive board, with **50%** of those employing fewer than 10 people reporting board-level representation, and **44%** of those with 11 to 100 employees.

As organisation size grows, board representation declines. Among mid-sized organisations (500 to 25,000 employees), the figure falls to between **25%** and **34%**, and the largest organisations (25,000 to 100,000+ employees) show a broadly similar picture, with representation ranging from **24%** to **37%**. The very largest employers (100,000+) see a slight uptick to **37%**, potentially reflecting the formalised governance structures that come with scale. This also is recognition of the contribution senior sustainability practitioners can make to strategy, operational improvements, and stakeholder expectations.

The consistent finding across all size bands is that the majority of sustainability leaders do not sit on the executive board. This structural gap is present regardless of whether an organisation employs 50 people or 500,000, and points to an opportunity across the profession to build the case for greater board-level visibility as a driver of strategic delivery. While this could reflect structural barriers to embedding sustainability at the highest levels of governance, it may equally reflect the realities of how boards operate: executive board positions carry significant fiduciary responsibility, and sustainability leaders do not always hold the commercial or governance remit that typically accompanies them. The more telling question may be less about whether sustainability sits on the board, and more about the degree of influence sustainability leaders have over those who do.

'Sustainability Leaders' who sit on a Company Board

Figure 5.4 Sustainability Ownership at Board-Level

Reporting Structure

57% of sustainability teams report into another department outside of a dedicated sustainability function. Among those that report into another department, the most common homes are:

Independent 39%	Sitting within Operations 14%
Sitting within Legal/Compliance 14%	Sitting within Corporate Affairs 10%
Sitting within Strategy/Planning 10%	Sitting within Finance 10%

Figure 5.5 Ultimate reporting departments of sustainability teams

"Unsure": 4%

*Respondents from in-house roles only

The rise of Legal/Compliance as a top reporting department, equivalent in share to Operations, may reflect the growing weight of regulatory reporting requirements, particularly in Europe. In 2023/24, the most common home for sustainability was Strategy/Planning. This shift could reflect either a mainstreaming of sustainability into operational functions or, in some cases, a focus toward compliance. The continued decline of Corporate Affairs as the home for sustainability is also noteworthy.

Acre's Sustainability Census data backs up what we see in our Financial Services search work: 57% of sustainability functions don't sit in a standalone team. Most report into investment, research, stewardship, or compliance/risk instead. But where exactly they land depends a lot on the type of firm. In Private Markets, sustainability usually sits within Investment teams, especially Value Creation, working closely with deal teams, operating partners, and portfolio company leadership. At Asset Managers, it's more likely to sit in Research, Stewardship (engagement and proxy voting, since these firms manage public securities), or Compliance/Risk. Some teams report to the COO instead, as net zero, climate, and ESG reporting increasingly fall under that role.

Banks tend to split the function into two. One team handles enterprise-wide sustainability, things like TCFD disclosure and net zero commitments. The other sits inside Investment Banking or Markets and focuses on sustainable finance: green bonds, sustainable lending, and deal structuring. These two teams have very different jobs. One is about reporting and is often seen as a cost center. The other brings in revenue. Insurers split in a similar way, but along different lines: Underwriting/Risk (because climate risk hits the book directly) and Investment (because of oversight of general account AUM).

Gloria Mirrione
Managing Director, Financial Services
Acre

Ultimate Responsibility

Which executive leadership team member has ultimate responsibility for sustainability in your organisation?

This question is open to interpretation, and the results should be read with that in mind. Ultimately, the CEO has responsibility for everything that happens in an organisation, so respondents who named the CEO may just be indicating active sustainability leadership at the top, or simply defaulting to the most senior person in the organisation. The answers reflect how individuals perceive accountability in their organisation, which is not always the same as where strategic ownership actually sits day to day.

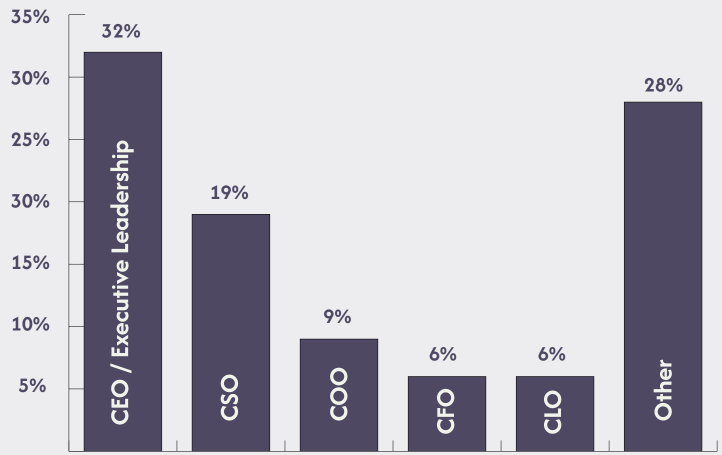
With that caveat, the spread of responses reflects the growing diversity of how organisations are embedding sustainability.

Compared to the previous Census, CEO ownership has fallen from **41%** to **32%,** and CSO ownership has dropped from **36%** to **19%.** These are significant shifts. One interpretation is that sustainability is maturing beyond the point where it requires a dedicated C-suite champion, that it is becoming diffuse, embedded across multiple functions rather than owned by one. The rise in COO ownership, now at 9%, lends some weight to the operational embedding story.

What the data cannot tell us is whether the person named actually drives sustainability strategy, or simply signs off on it. In practice, both the CEO answer and the CSO answer can mean very different things depending on the organisation.

The spread of responsibility reflects the growing diversity of how organisations are embedding sustainability:

Figure 5.6 Ultimate responsibility for sustainability in organisations



CEO = Chief Executive Officer | CSO = Chief Sustainability Officer | COO = Chief Operating Officer
CFO = Chief Financial Officer | CLO = Chief Legal Officer (or General Councel)

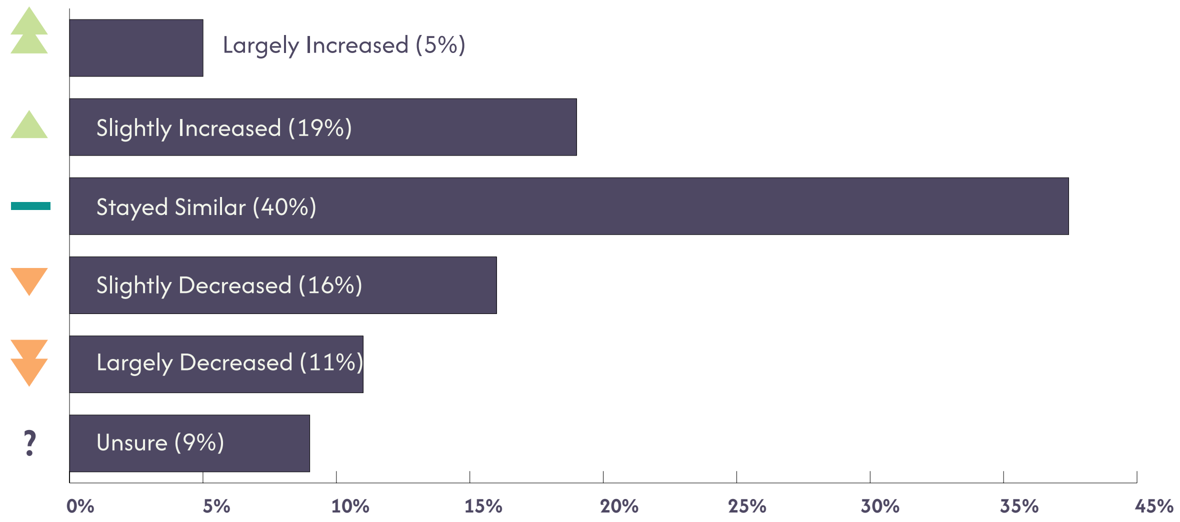
*Respondents from in-house roles only

Budgets

Most sustainability teams held their ground throughout this challenging year. Four in ten (**40%**) report budgets that stayed broadly flat, while the rest split almost evenly: a quarter secured an increase and **27%** absorbed a cut.

Slightly more teams lost budget than gained it, the reasons diverge sharply. Where budgets grew, teams point to rising strategic priority and tighter regulatory and reporting demands. Where they shrank, cost-saving and restructuring dominate, named by two-thirds of those affected.

Figure 5.7 Reported budget changes compared to the past financial year



Where budgets have increased:

25% of in-house respondents reported a budget increase over the past 12 months. Among those, the most commonly cited reasons were:

- Greater strategic priority placed on sustainability at group level (**42%** of those who increased)
- New or expanded regulatory and reporting requirements (**42%**)
- Launch of new sustainability strategy or transformation programme (**36%**)
- Investment in new tools, data platforms or systems (**35%**)

Where budgets have decreased:

27% of in-house respondents reported a budget decrease. Among those, the most commonly cited reasons were:

- Cost-saving or restructuring programme (**66%** of those who decreased)
- Sustainability deprioritised versus other strategic initiatives (**37%**)
- Lower overall business performance / profitability (**38%**)

Note: Participants could select multiple options as reasons for budget increases / decreases

*Respondents from in-house roles only

Consultancies & Commercial Ventures

The Interaction between Corporates and Consultancies

Among consultants, 35% reported an increase in client revenue over the past 12 months and 34% reported a decrease, **broadly tracking the 25% increase and 27% decrease seen among in-house team budgets**, though consultancy revenues moved more sharply in both directions. This is consistent with organisations adjusting consultancy spend more readily than internal headcount when budgets shift, in either direction.

Within the consultancy market, there is a notable regional divergence in growth. Asia Pacific stands out as the strongest performing region, with 61% of consultants reporting that their sustainability advisory function had grown over the past 12 months. This contrasts with Europe, where only 39% of consultants reported growth, the lowest of any major region. The UK sits in the middle at 52%, while North America recorded 44%.

This gap between Asia Pacific and Europe is significant. It may reflect the earlier stage of sustainability market development across parts of Asia Pacific, where demand for external advisory support remains strong as organisations build capability from the ground up. In Europe, by contrast, a more mature in-house profession and a well-established consultancy market may be contributing to greater competition and slower incremental growth, even as regulatory requirements continue to expand. The data suggests that for consultancies looking to grow, Asia Pacific represents a near-term opportunity.

New Commercial Ventures

Organisations are increasingly developing new commercial ventures linked to sustainability, though the function does not always lead them:

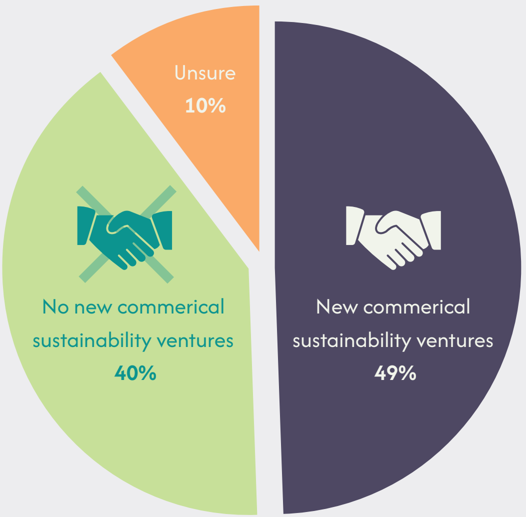


Figure 5.8 Reported appetite for commerical ventures

Of those developing sustainability-linked commercial ventures, the sustainability function leads that activity in only 40% of cases, with 54% of commercial development sitting outside the sustainability team. The findings suggest that sustainability is increasingly being viewed as a platform for commercial growth rather than solely risk management or compliance.

Yet ownership of these initiatives frequently sits outside the sustainability function itself, with most sustainability-linked ventures led by commercial, strategy or operational teams.

This is less a sign that sustainability is being sidelined and more an indication that it is being absorbed into the core logic of how organisations grow and compete. The most commercially fluent sustainability professionals have always understood that the discipline's real leverage lies not in technical compliance but in its capacity to unlock new markets, de-risk supply chains, attract capital and build brands that consumers trust. What the data suggests is that organisations are beginning to operationalise that intuition: sustainability is moving from a specialist function that monitors and reports to a business capability that shapes strategy. For professionals in the field, this creates both a challenge and an opportunity. Those who can operate at the intersection of sustainability, commercial strategy and business growth are increasingly where the most influential roles are being built.

*Respondents from in-house roles only

Sustainability Job Titles

For the first time, the Sustainability Census includes a dedicated analysis of how sustainability professionals describe their own roles. By comparing the self-reported job titles from the 2023 Census, we can track shifts in seniority, terminology, as well as look for emerging specialisms.

The headline finding is that sustainability is moving up the organisational hierarchy in title, if not always in practice. C-Suite titles have nearly doubled their share, 'Head of' roles have grown substantially, and Analyst and Manager-level titles are in decline. These shifts are worth noting, though the C-Suite movement, in particular, is based on relatively small absolute numbers and should be interpreted with some caution. A more senior-sounding title does not necessarily translate into greater influence, resource or accountability: as the board-level ownership data on Page 31 suggests, formal elevation and genuine strategic authority are not always the same thing. The profession is projecting increasing seniority; whether that projection is matched by organisational reality is a harder question to answer.

At the same time, there has been some changes in the language of the sustainability profession. While still prominent, terms like "ESG" are starting to retreat. The fragmentation of equivalent titles across dozens of naming conventions is creating real challenges for benchmarking and career development.

The decline of ESG as a title term is particularly pronounced in the United States, where just 5.6% of job titles include the term, compared to 10.9% in the UK and 11.1% in Europe. Notably, this gap does not appear to reflect a shift toward alternative framing: Sustainability accounts for 41.6% of US titles, broadly in line with the UK (44.0%), while other terms such as Climate, Impact, and Environmental each register below 3%. The data suggests that in the US, ESG is being removed rather than replaced, a pattern consistent with the political headwinds the term has faced in North America. Where ESG has retreated, nothing has stepped in to fill its place in the title landscape.

Seniority Level	Census 2023	Census 2026	Change 2023 - 2026
C-Suite	2.6%	4.4%	+1.8pp
VP / SVP	5.3%	6.7%	+1.4pp
Director	21.8%	21.0%	-0.8pp
Head of	18.8%	23.5%	+4.7pp
Manager	25.3%	22.8%	-2.5pp
Analyst	3.9%	1.5%	-2.4pp
Specialist / Associate	5.6%	4.8%	-0.8pp

Figure 5.9 Changes in quantity of job titles by seniority

Sustainability Job Titles

The Language

The language used to describe sustainability roles has shifted subtly in recent years. This may reflect the political environment, or it might simply be the next step in the profession's evolution. It's also worth noting that these findings reflect the specific community we surveyed and may not hold universally.

ESG appeared in 15.0% of titles in 2024. By 2026, that figure had fallen slightly to 12.5%, a drop of 2.5 percentage points. CSR declined from 1.2% to 0.9%. Responsible in job titles fell from 2.7% to 1.5%. Sustainability, by contrast, remains dominant across both years and is consolidating its position as the preferred umbrella term.

This shift likely reflects several overlapping dynamics. In parts of North America, ESG has become and remains politically charged, leading some organisations to move away from the label in external-facing materials, including job postings and titles. This mirrors a broader pattern in corporate communications: research by The Conference Board[1] found that among S&P 100 companies, use of 'ESG' in sustainability report titles fell from 40% in 2023 to just 6% in early 2025, with companies adopting less politically charged alternatives rather than abandoning their underlying commitments.

More broadly, the mainstreaming of sustainability into operational and strategic functions means that investor-facing ESG framing is giving way to language that communicates purpose more directly. The term sustainability is broader, more intuitively understood, and less associated with the regulatory and financial dimensions of the profession that have attracted political scrutiny.

This does not mean ESG is disappearing as a concept; for many organisations it remains central to how they approach reporting and risk. The label, however, is losing ground. As with earlier transitions in the profession's terminology, from 'CSR' to 'CR' to 'Sustainability', the language professionals use to describe their work tends to evolve ahead of the underlying practice. The retreat of ESG from job titles likely reflects a similar dynamic: the concept remains, but the framing is moving toward language that better communicates strategic and operational breadth, and carries less of the political and reputational freight the term has accumulated in recent years.

Beyond the quantitative shifts, the qualitative richness of the 2026 title data reveals the expanding breadth of what sustainability professionals do.

Among the roles appearing for the first time or growing significantly:

Director of Climate, Nature & ESG Reporting
Chief Mission Officer
Head of Circularity
Head of Sustainability Governance
Head of ES&G Regulatory Change
Regenerative Agriculture Lead
Head of Net Zero Delivery
Sustainability Integration Expert
ESG Assurance
Responsible AI Senior Advisor
LCA Lead
Head of Climate & Nature
CSRD & Sustainability Reporting Leader
ESG Delivery Lead
Sustainability Due Diligence Programme Manager
Sustainability Data Specialist
Sustainability & Resilience Principal
Stewardship Analyst

[1] https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/last-year-just-25-of-big-companies-used-esg-in-their-report-titles-the-slowdown-continues-in-2025-302441386.html

6 | Commitment to Sustainability

This section explores how respondents perceive their organisation's commitment to sustainability, alongside levels of confidence in delivering against stated sustainability goals.

Every company that signs on to the United Nations Global Compact begins with a public commitment to the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact, so I read this year's findings on commitment with particular interest. They confirm what we see across our network: companies in every region are making commitments to sustainability, and most are making them in public. Public commitment has risen almost everywhere since the last edition, even as the wider narrative has grown more sceptical of environmental, social and governance work.

But corporate sustainability has reached a phase of maturity where it is no longer enough to state a goal. We have to show that we can deliver it, and this year's findings expose how far apart those two things can sit. The United Kingdom leads the world on public pledges, with more than four in five organisations having made one. Yet its practitioners report the lowest confidence of any region that those pledges can actually be met. Commitment is running ahead of conviction.

What encourages me is that Asia tells a more hopeful story. Public commitment here has risen sharply, and Asia now reports the highest delivery confidence of any region, with around two-thirds of practitioners confident their organisations can follow through.

Commitment and conviction are moving together. I would not over-read a single year of data, and I am wary of any suggestion that we in Asia have this settled. But the pattern is instructive. In many of our markets, sustainability has arrived alongside the rules and the capital that give it weight, rather than in advance of them, and that sequencing may be quietly working in the region's favour.

Where confidence holds, I believe it reflects something structural. It grows when sustainability is built into how an organisation governs and finances itself, rather than added on afterwards. In Singapore, climate reporting is no longer voluntary. Listed companies now report their emissions, with the largest issuers moving to disclosures aligned with the International Sustainability Standards Board. That moves sustainability out of the communications function and into the language the board, the balance sheet and the auditor already speak. When ownership sits where strategy and capital are decided, a public commitment has somewhere to land. Where it does not, the pledge is made in one room while the trade-offs are settled in another.

This is the work of the coming years, and it asks something of those of us who lead. We must set goals that are both ambitious and achievable, and break long horizons into milestones we can be held to now. We must place sustainability ownership where the real decisions are made. And we must treat the candour of our own practitioners, including their doubts, as intelligence rather than disloyalty, because their confidence is the truest measure of whether a strategy is real.

The Census is at its most valuable when it is uncomfortable. For much of the world, the gap between what is promised and what can be delivered is widening. Asia has the chance to show what it looks like to close it. Commitment must follow strategy, not stand in for it.

David Fogarty

Chief Executive Officer

United Nations Global Compact

References

1 Public commitment figures (UK 84%, up from 71%; Asia Pacific 64% to 78%) — The Sustainability Census 2026, Commitment to Sustainability: Public Sustainability Commitments.

2 Confidence figures (UK lowest average confidence, 6.7 of 10; Asia 67% scoring 7 or above) — The Sustainability Census 2026, Commitment to Sustainability: Confidence in Achieving Those Commitments.

3 Singapore mandatory climate reporting and ISSB-aligned disclosures — Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA), "Sustainability reporting and assurance requirements." https://www.acra.gov.sg/regulations/sustainability-reporting/requirements-timeline/

Overall Commitment Rating

How would you rate your organisation's commitment to sustainability?

Respondents were asked to rate their organisation's commitment to sustainability on a scale of 1–10.

The distribution is weighted toward the upper end, with the largest single group (21%) rating their organisation at 8/10, and a further 18% rating it 10/10. However, a combined 18% rate commitment at 4 or below, suggesting a significant minority still perceive their organisations as poorly committed.

Mean Commitment Rating	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
7.28 /10	7	8	2.09

Figure 6.1 Ultimate responsibility for sustainability in organisations

The **mean** represents the average, the **median** being the middle score, and the **mode** is the most common score. **Standard deviation** shows how much scores vary: low means scores are similar, high means they are more spread out.

Confidence in Achieving Commitments

The confidence picture is more nuanced, and notably the regional ranking has shifted in a way that may surprise. In 2024, North America recorded the lowest confidence of any major region, with 71% of respondents describing themselves as doubtful that their organisation can meet its commitments. In 2026, North America has moved to sit next to the UK in confidence, with 61% of respondents scoring their confidence at 7 or above on a 10-point scale, comparable to the UK (61%), Europe (63%), and Asia (67%).

The UK now records the joint lowest confidence score of any major region, tied with North America: 61% of respondents scored 7 or above, and the average score of 6.7 is the lowest of all regions. This is a striking result for a region that leads on public commitment levels and points to a growing gap between what UK organisations have pledged and what practitioners on the ground believe is actually deliverable. It is also worth noting in this context that only 27% of publicly listed companies in the UK report having their most senior sustainability leader on the executive board, one of the lower rates in the dataset. Where board-level ownership is absent, the connection between strategic commitment and operational delivery can weaken, and the confidence data may be reflecting exactly that tension.

7 | Environment, Social & Governance

This section breaks down the three pillars of ESG, exploring the dominant focus areas across environmental, social and governance priorities within sustainability roles.

E A Key focus on **Environment**

The question I wanted answering in this year's Census was whether the ESG retreat coming out of the US represents a real loss of momentum, or just a change in vocabulary. It's commonplace now to see companies dropping climate language, and "ESG" itself becoming a term people avoid using. So that was where I started: does this retreat show up in the data, or is it confined to how companies talk about the work?

The first place to look was language and job titles, and the change is visible there. Organisations are taking a slight step back from explicit climate and ESG framing, no question. But then I checked the investment side of things, expecting the same pattern, and it was not there. The picture is uneven: some areas are growing, some teams have seen a loss, but more still have held steady. That is not the step change we need, but it is not the collapse the language would suggest either. Which raised a more useful question than the one I started with: if companies are dropping the words but not the spend, what does that actually mean for future pipelines?

If climate disappears from the language, then I'm concerned the ambition can disappear along with it. It gets easier to treat this as a set of nice-to-have activities rather than what it actually is: a strategic issue touching risk, resilience, growth, assets and long-term value. There is also a timing question sitting underneath all of this. Some of what we are seeing now may reflect decisions that were already budgeted before the backlash took hold, in which case the investment figures are lagging behind the language. The real test is what happens over the next cycle, whether this holds or erodes. The Census cannot answer that yet, but it tells me where to look next year.

From there I became curious about organisational structure. The pull towards compliance, reporting and finance is visible, and understandably so. Disclosure rules were designed to get finance leaders paying attention and pull sustainability closer to core business decisions. It would be easy to read that as sustainability finally being embedded, but I'm cautious about that read. There is a difference between sustainability shaping strategy and sustainability being absorbed into reporting processes, and this data cannot tell us which is happening. Anecdotally, plenty of companies talk about the burden of reporting, which points towards the second explanation: teams pulled towards disclosure because that is where the immediate pressure sits, while the more strategic work gets squeezed out.

Two findings I was not expecting stood out along the way. The gender pay gap in consulting is hard to ignore, and the finding that men receive more long-term incentive plans than women is something that I'm grappling to understand. I am flagging both here because they raise questions that deserves more research into the why now that we know that it's happening.

My final reflection was on the participation of respondents from the built environment sector. It has not traditionally been a sector associated with leadership on the sustainability agenda, and there has often been real resistance within it. Seeing stronger engagement there, particularly where decarbonisation is being treated as a practical business issue rather than a peripheral one, was one of the data points I found most heartening. If there is one answer the Census gives with any confidence, it is that this is not a story about lost momentum.

Helen Clarkson OBE

Chief Executive Officer
Climate Group

E A Key focus on Environment

Decarbonisation and carbon management is by far the dominant environmental focus area, cited by **61%** of all respondents who gave an answer, reinforcing its position at the core of the profession. The top five themes are:

Africa & Middle East

Decarbonisation / Carbon Management	18.4%
Climate Adaptation, Resilience, Mitigation	13.8%
Energy Management	11.5%
Environmental Management Systems	9.2%
Circular Economy	6.9%

Europe

Decarbonisation / Carbon Management	26.2%
Circular Economy	14.7%
Climate Adaptation, Resilience, Mitigation	12.9%
Energy Management	7.2%
Biodiversity	6.1%

South & Central America

Climate Adaptation, Resilience, Mitigation	21.1%
Decarbonisation / Carbon Management	15.6%
Land Use, Forestry & Agriculture	11.0%
Circular Economy	10.1%
Environmental Impact Assessment	8.3%

Asia & Pacific

Decarbonisation / Carbon Management	24.7%
Climate Adaptation, Resilience, Mitigation	17.2%
Energy Management	11.1%
Circular Economy	10.8%
Biodiversity	6.4%

North America

Decarbonisation / Carbon Management	23.6%
Sustainable Buildings & Green Real Estate	13.1%
Energy Management	12.4%
Climate Adaptation, Resilience, Mitigation	12.4%
Circular Economy	9.7%

United Kingdom

Decarbonisation / Carbon Management	27.1%
Climate Adaptation, Resilience, Mitigation	17.2%
Circular Economy	9.8%
Energy Management	7.8%
Biodiversity	6.5%

The primacy of decarbonisation is unsurprising, but the strength of climate adaptation alongside mitigation signals a maturing approach that is moving beyond reduction targets alone and grappling with the physical realities of a changing climate. Combined, biodiversity and nature-based solutions account for **20%** of all respondents, reflecting the growing influence of nature on the corporate sustainability agenda and suggesting these disciplines are consolidating into a recognised area of practice. Given the pace of regulatory and investor attention in this space, it will be worth tracking whether this figure continues to grow in future editions of the census.

Note: Participants could select multiple options

Global Average - Key Themes

- Decarbonisation / Carbon Management
- Climate Adaptation, Resilience, Mitigation
- Circular Economy
- Energy Management
- Sustainable Buildings & Green Real Estate

S A Key focus on **Social**

It is very important that Acre is regularly reporting on the state of corporate sustainability and keeping the focus on this very important agenda – even if it only reinforces what many of us are sensing. At this moment corporate attention is distracted, both geopolitically - with political headwinds causing some firms to hide their efforts, as well as pandemics and wars representing supply chain disruption; and economically - with the AI boom and the recent market listings and valuations.

And yet in Asia, and as is reflected in some of this report's findings, commitment to sustainability is increasing. I have watched the progression around 'E' from general Conservation to SRI to CSR, SDGs and ESG; slavery and child labour to fair wages, fair working conditions, Just Transition and DEI in the 'S' space; and now a questioning of the 'G' in a corporate context of whether the composition and selection of Boards is an insiders game rather than a fair selection of correct skills and diversity of thinking, and whether the incentives for governance bodies are fit for purpose to grapple with today's issues.

In light of recent headlines such as 'Who killed the Chief Sustainability Officer?' there is clearly a pivot away from sustainability – but how much is semantics? how much is just a reflection of the moment? and how much is a real shift in priorities?

In light of semantics, between Covid and the straight of Hormuz crisis, the world has realised how fragile global supply chains can be. Add to that the evolving crisis in terms of the decline of natural resource health spurred by climate change, over population, inefficiencies due to incorrect incentives and inept management - the new term is Resilience.

Resilience embraces all of this – not just security in the traditional sense but supply chain resilience in terms of the natural resources all supply chains depend upon. With the current heat waves, the UN declaration that the world is 'water bankrupt', the threat to our food production, sustainability must and will re-emerge as a strategic focus. Therefore this is most likely just a moment, not a long-term trend.

However, and especially in the American context, there is some real pivot away. Optimists will say that the decline of the CSO means that the sustainability agenda is being mainstreamed into companies by being placed into e.g. finance or compliance functions.

Others of us will say that it is being buried and removed from the primary agenda to focus on short-term returns vs transition investment (costs) even though these investments should ensure longer-term corporate health and returns.

From a governance perspective, there is not only Fiduciary Duty for short term results – there is also Duty of Care for preservation of value and viability of the company. Companies who realise that sustainability is about long-term value will be the ultimate winners – those who are focussed on short-term goals and political headwinds will be the losers.

Will the term CSO continue forward? Perhaps not. Perhaps it is Chief Resilience Officer and for the optimistic view perhaps all C-Suite functions and governance boards will have sustainability KPIs embedded. However, until that happens CSOs, sustainability teams and sustainability champions on boards will be vitally important.

Robin Millington

Vice Chair, ESG Advisory Board

SHEIN

S A Key focus on **Social**

The social pillar shows broad spread across themes, with **no single issue as dominant as decarbonisation** is in the environmental pillar.

Africa & Middle East

Community & Social Impact / Just Transition	26.2%
Health, Safety & Wellbeing	19.0%
Labour Standards & Working Conditions	15.5%
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	14.3%
Human Rights & Modern Slavery	10.7%

Europe

Human Rights & Modern Slavery	18.7%
Community & Social Impact / Just Transition	18.4%
Health, Safety & Wellbeing	17.5%
Labour Standards & Working Conditions	16.8%
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	15.4%

South & Central America

Community & Social Impact / Just Transition	34.1%
Labour Standards & Working Conditions	18.7%
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	17.6%
Health, Safety & Wellbeing	15.4%
Human Rights & Modern Slavery	11.0%

Asia & Pacific

Health, Safety & Wellbeing	23.5%
Community & Social Impact / Just Transition	23.2%
Human Rights & Modern Slavery	15.4%
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	15.1%
Labour Standards & Working Conditions	13.2%

North America

Health, Safety & Wellbeing	22.5%
Community & Social Impact / Just Transition	20.6%
Human Rights & Modern Slavery	12.9%
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	12.3%
Labour Standards & Working Conditions	10.8%

United Kingdom

Community & Social Impact / Just Transition	23.5%
Human Rights & Modern Slavery	20.6%
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	14.6%
Health, Safety & Wellbeing	12.5%
Labour Standards & Working Conditions	12.2%

A notably high proportion of total respondents (**28%**) selecting 'not applicable' for the social pillar compared to E and G warrants attention. The risk runs deeper than a question of functional ownership: when people are absent from sustainability strategies, the agenda loses its connection to the communities it is meant to serve, making it harder for employees and wider stakeholders to understand why it matters.A sustainability profession that is overly focused on environment and governance but disconnected from the social side of the work risks losing the very thing that gives the work its meaning.. The continued prominence of human rights and modern slavery reflects sustained legislative pressure from supply chain due diligence requirements, but compliance is a low bar. The more important question is whether organisations are treating people as central to their sustainability strategy rather than as a reporting category within it.

Note: Participants could select multiple options

Global Average - Key Themes

- Community & Social Impact and Just Transition
- Human Rights and Modern Slavery
- Health, Safety & Wellbeing
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Labour Standards and Working Conditions

G A Key focus on **Governance**

Governance is surely more than reporting and disclosure.

Ten years of the Sustainability Census, and we're circling back to disclosure as the main governance story.

This year, **58%** of sustainability professionals cite reporting and disclosure as their primary governance focus. It's the top theme by a significant margin. A lowly second is strategy development at 34% and stakeholder engagement is 25%. And there, somewhere in the middle, is the problem, we've built a sustainability infrastructure around documenting it. Granted we have the spectre of regulation in many geographies, but is that what governance is about?

Perhaps the term governance ought to be swapped out for 'institutional authority'. In other words, what are we, as sustainability leaders, doing to exert influence over decisions and plans across the business?

Some of this year's other census findings, beyond that of governance, provide clues. One data set that jumped out for me is that globally nearly **22%** of organisations have embedded sustainability objectives into the bonus structures of their wider workforce.

This is good news until one compares it to the embarrassingly low figure of **15%** of sustainability professionals that have sustainability targets linked to their bonus. We are asking colleagues to own something we haven't fully embraced ourselves!

That is surely a governance gap that matters more than reporting and disclosure. CSRD, ISSB, and all the other alphabet soup of frameworks matter. But they tell you what to measure and don't hold to account who is responsible for driving change or when the numbers go the wrong way.

At HubSpot, I think about this a lot. As a US headquartered company with a significant presence in the UK and across Europe, we sit at an unusual intersection. In North America, the political and regulatory mood around sustainability has cooled sharply. Meanwhile in Europe, mandatory disclosure is accelerating. We operate in both worlds simultaneously, which means we cannot afford to treat governance as simply compliance in one geography and a strategic priority in another.

It has to mean something everywhere ...

(Continued)

G A Key focus on **Governance**

... In practice, it starts at the Board. Our Nominating, Governance, and Sustainability Committee of the Board owns & reviews our sustainability strategy and holds me to account. Our Responsible Business Steering Group made up of C-suite leaders spanning Finance, Legal, People, and Engineering meets quarterly to drive accountability across functions.

They are my champions at the executive board level (more on that in a minute). It's a governance architecture that is pragmatic and prevents sustainability from becoming a function that the business works around. Oh and my bonus is linked to our responsible business performance.

Coming back to the census data on sustainability leaders having a seat on the executive board. Unsurprisingly this remains a minority sport and mainly found in smaller businesses. I'm relaxed about having an actual seat and as the census narrative alludes to, it's more about the degree of influence sustainability leaders have over those who do.

Some other things that caught my eye is that we're a brainy lot, armed with lots of qualifications and the majority having clocked up over 10 years in the sector spanning a wide array of sectors.

That is a lot of expertise and brain power. I remain optimistic that we can individually and collectively apply that to navigate the political and ideological headwinds that the survey finds is the primary challenge the majority of us are facing.

My CTA: Work to ensure you and your teams' performance to drive sustainability is incentivised. Reporting and disclosure is important and work equally if not more hard to measure your success in exerting institutional authority.

Yogesh Chauhan

Senior Director, Sustainability
Hubspot

HubSpot

G A Key focus on **Governance**

ESG reporting and disclosure is the standout theme in the governance pillar by a significant margin, described in the data as the most popular choice by some distance.

Africa & Middle East

ESG / Impact Reporting & Disclosure	17.3%
Strategy Development & Implementation	16.3%
Stakeholder Engagement	12.2%
Sustainable & Impact Finance	11.2%
Compliance & Regulatory Affairs	9.2%

Europe

ESG / Impact Reporting & Disclosure	23.6%
Strategy Development & Implementation	11.1%
Stakeholder Engagement	11.1%
Sustainable Supply Chains & Procurement	10.1%
Compliance & Regulatory Affairs	9.4%

South & Central America

ESG / Impact Reporting & Disclosure	19.4%
Strategy Development & Implementation	15.7%
Compliance & Regulatory Affairs	11.1%
Sustainable Supply Chains & Procurement	11.1%
Stakeholder Engagement	7.4%

Asia & Pacific

ESG / Impact Reporting & Disclosure	23.4%
Compliance & Regulatory Affairs	13.0%
Strategy Development & Implementation	11.0%
Corporate Governance & Board Oversight	10.4%
Sustainable & Impact Finance	9.5%

North America

ESG / Impact Reporting & Disclosure	21.3%
Strategy Development & Implementation	15.0%
Compliance & Regulatory Affairs	12.4%
Stakeholder Engagement	10.8%
Sustainable Supply Chains & Procurement	10.3%

United Kingdom

ESG / Impact Reporting & Disclosure	24.6%
Strategy Development & Implementation	13.9%
Sustainable Supply Chains & Procurement	11.3%
Stakeholder Engagement	9.8%
Corporate Governance & Board Oversight	9.6%

The scale of the lead that reporting holds over every other governance theme reflects the wave of mandatory disclosure frameworks now reshaping the profession. For many practitioners, navigating CSRD, ISSB and related requirements has become the central organising challenge of their role. The strength of strategy development and implementation in second place is encouraging, suggesting the profession is not simply becoming a compliance function, but reporting is consuming an increasing share of resource and attention regardless.

Note: Participants could select multiple options

Global Average - Key Themes

- ESG and Impact Reporting & Disclosure
- Strategy Development and Implementation
- Sustainable Supply Chains and Procurement
- Compliance and Regulatory Affairs
- Stakeholder Engagement

8 | Job Satisfaction & Motivation

This section explores job satisfaction and motivation, including movement intentions, key challenges, growth plans and how well-resourced sustainability professionals feel in their roles.

"The sustainability profession has reached an inflection point.

But what looks like a plateau for our function just might be something more hopeful: a sustainability function that is no longer a discrete undertaking bolted onto the business but rather a capability rapidly being absorbed into its core. As ownership of sustainability embeds in operations, finance, legal, and strategy, it is traveling into the very DNA of the enterprise. This is not the dissolution of the function, but the maturation of how the work is executed and the emergence of new opportunities for sustainability professionals that are only now just coming into focus.

A key finding in this year's data deserves a close look: only **18%** of organizations plan to expand their sustainability headcount in 2026, yet **47%** of professionals intend to move employers within twelve months.

It is tempting to read this gap as a profession feeling like it is running out of room to grow. But in today's rapidly changing external environment, the exit door rarely solves the challenge.

A professional who moves employers for career progression or better remuneration, the two leading motivators, is likely to face the same challenging budgets and many of the same headwinds. For some, those pressures are real and acute, and no reframing can change that reality. But for many, the more exciting opportunity might already be inside the building.

Consider that nearly half of organizations are now building commercial ventures linked to sustainability, but the sustainability function leads only 40% of them. That gap is unclaimed territory. It is value being created—new markets, de-risked supply chains, products customers trust—that our profession is uniquely positioned to lead but too often isn't yet. For anyone seeking growth, this could be an ambitious and rewarding path to take.

AI offers another opening, though today it is greeted by many with anxiety. It is a potentially powerful enabler, freeing mindshare for higher-value pursuits. AI is poised to absorb much of the reporting and data assembly that consume a disproportionate share of a team's time. What AI cannot do is convene and listen to stakeholders, exercise judgment, look ahead and see around corners.

Professionals who let AI carry more of the compliance load and reinvest that reclaimed time into relationship-building and commercial and strategic work will be well-positioned to define our function's next operating model.

The path of the internal sustainability entrepreneur — the "intrapreneur" — requires support at the highest levels. If we want to retain our people and encourage them to look in, rather than out, those of us in leadership roles owe them the room to experiment, a seat in commercial decisions, and the mandate to drive change. The career growth this generation of sustainability professionals is looking for doesn't have to be at a new employer. It might just be the chance to build the entrepreneurial, embedded, genuinely effective function the enterprise demands.

Anisa Kamadoli Costa

Chief Sustainability Officer, Rivian
President & Trustee, Rivian Foundation

RIVIAN

Headcount Plans for In-House Professionals

Despite the budget pressures documented elsewhere in this report, a meaningful proportion of organisations are planning to grow their sustainability teams in 2026. **Overall, 18% of respondents confirm their organisation is planning to expand headcount** in the sustainability function this year, with a further 19% unsure.

Whether one in five organisations actively recruiting is a glass half full or half empty depends on perspective: set against growing regulatory demand and the scale of the sustainability challenge, it may feel modest; set against the budget pressures and political headwinds the profession is navigating, it is a more resilient number than might be expected.

The more interesting question may be what is filling the gap. Organisations under resource pressure have options beyond headcount: bringing in specialist skills as needed, leaning on consultancy support, or increasingly, deploying AI to stretch the capacity of existing teams. The data on consultancy growth and the preference for specialist skillsets in budget allocation suggests some of this substitution is already underway.

Expansion intentions are broadly consistent across organisation size. Small organisations (under 500 employees) are slightly less likely to be planning growth at 17%, compared to 20% among mid-sized and larger organisations. This may partly reflect the regulatory context: larger companies face greater exposure to incoming legislation such as CSRD, creating a more direct incentive to build internal capacity ahead of compliance deadlines.

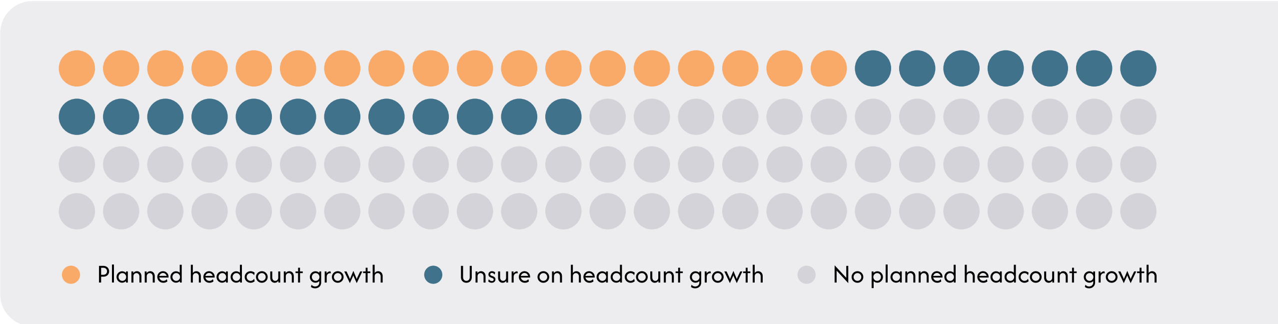


Figure 8.1 Representation of global planned headcount growth in 2026 (including consultancy professionals)

For smaller organisations, growth appears to be driven more by organisational appetite and strategic positioning than by regulatory pressure.

The sector picture is more varied. Construction and the built environment leads on expansion intent, with 27% of respondents in that sector reporting planned headcount growth, followed by manufacturing in automotive, aerospace, defence and related industries at 25%, and technology at 23%. These sectors share a common thread: significant capital expenditure programmes, tightening product-level regulation, and growing investor scrutiny of physical asset sustainability performance. The relative strength of these sectors in headcount planning, against a backdrop of broader budget constraint, suggests that where organisations have a clear operational or regulatory imperative, investment in sustainability capability continues.

Regionally, Asia Pacific leads with 27% of respondents planning to expand, compared to 19% in the UK, 18% in North America, and 15% in Europe. This mirrors the growth trends seen in the consultancy market and reinforces Asia Pacific's position as the region showing the strongest sustainability hiring intentions in this year's survey.

Headcount Plans for Consultancy Professionals

Among consultant respondents, **24%** say their organisation is planning to expand headcount in the sustainability function in 2026. A further **25%** are unsure, leaving just **50%** actively not planning to grow, compared to **68%** of in-house teams. Consultancies are, in aggregate, more optimistic about near-term hiring than their in-house counterparts.

This is set against a mixed recent trading backdrop. Looking back at the past 12 months, **48%** of consultancy respondents report that their global sustainability advisory function grew, while **52%** say it did not, a near even split that reflects the choppy conditions many advisory firms have navigated recently. Client revenue trends reinforce this picture: while **35%** of consultant respondents report increased revenue over the past year, **34%** report revenue declining either slightly or largely.

Regionally, Asia Pacific stands out again. Among consultant respondents in Asia Pacific, **61%** report advisory function growth over the past year and **33%** are planning further expansion, both the highest figures of any region. The UK (**52%** growth, **25%** planning expansion) and North America (**44%**, **22%**) sit in the middle, while Europe lags on both measures, with just **39%** of consultancies reporting growth and **21%** planning to add headcount in 2026.

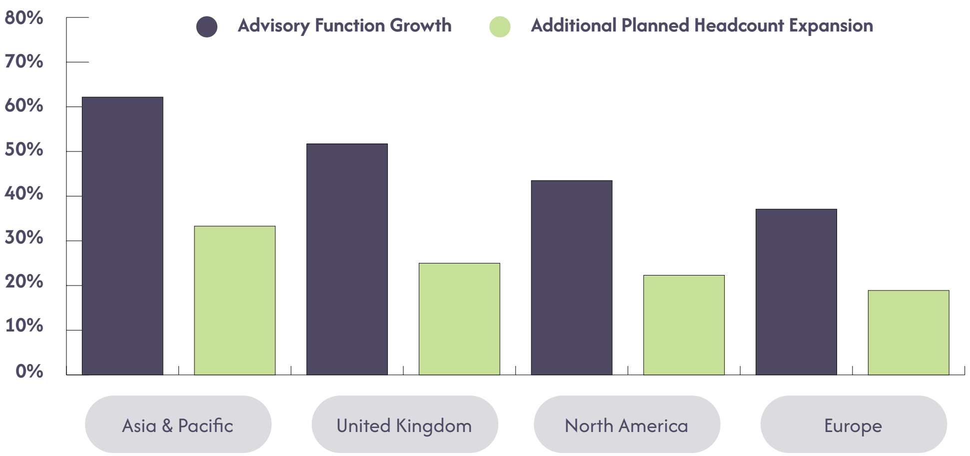


Figure 8.2 Reported function growth and planned headcount expansion by region

Over the past year, one of the biggest shifts I have seen in the sustainability talent market is the conversation moving away from sustainability as a standalone function and towards sustainability as a commercial driver and competitive advantage. Our clients are repeatedly asking us how can sustainability create more value for the business, which is shaping the type of roles being recruited. During my time in Singapore, it was particularly interesting to see how hiring across Asia was less driven by regulation than by the recognition that sustainability can strengthen business performance. There was also a clear focus on building teams closer to supply chains, ensuring greater transparency, credibility and stronger sustainability representation in the region.

Across Europe, the economic background has inevitably slowed hiring. Restructures and tighter budgets have meant leaner teams, with sustainability increasingly being positioned under HR, Finance or Legal as businesses look to embed it into transformation, reporting and risk. Whilst overall hiring remains cautious, I am absolutely seeing an increase in demand for both specialist expertise and senior leaders who can connect sustainability with commercial performance. This has been really exciting to see as it is a necessary shift to ensure sustainability is viewed as a business priority.

Aysen Naylor
Senior Consultant,
Acre

Plans to Move Employer

A significant proportion of sustainability professionals are actively considering a move, creating a notable tension with the relatively limited number of organisations planning to expand their teams.

53% plan to stay with their current employer for at least 12 months	**47%** plan to progress their career outside of their current employer in the next 12 months

Figure 8.3 Reported plans to change employer within the next 12 months

86% plan to remain within the sustainability profession over the next 12 months	**14%** plan to move away from sustainability entirely

Figure 8.4 Reported plans to leave the sustainability profession within the next 12 months

The proportion planning to move is broadly consistent across most regions, with Africa and the Middle East highest at 59%, Asia Pacific at 52%, the UK at 49%, and Europe at 49%. North America is the most settled, with 42% planning a move, perhaps reflecting greater caution in a less certain hiring market given the current political environment.

Among those planning to move, the top motivations are:

Motivation	%
Career progression	52%
Better compensation	47%
Better alignment to employer values	25%
Learning & development opportunities	19%
More flexibility	15%

Figure 8.5 Reported function growth and planned headcount expansion by region

The values alignment finding is significant and a risk we have highlighted in previous reports. More than one in four professionals cite it as a reason to move, suggesting that for a meaningful share of the workforce, purpose and organisational credibility are as important as career advancement and pay. The corollary of attracting highly motivated and values driven individuals to the sector is that their expectations of their employers are equally high.

Note: Participants could select multiple options

Plans to Move Employer

The supply and demand gap is striking. Only 18% of organisations are planning to expand sustainability headcount in 2026 (16% among in-house teams and 24% among consultancies), yet 47% of professionals are looking to move.

For those seeking progression within the sustainability function, opportunities may be more limited than their ambition warrants. For those open to a broader move, whether into a different sector, a more senior role in a smaller organisation, or a shift between in-house and consultancy, the picture is more varied.

What the data makes clear is that the profession is not short of motivated people looking for their next step.

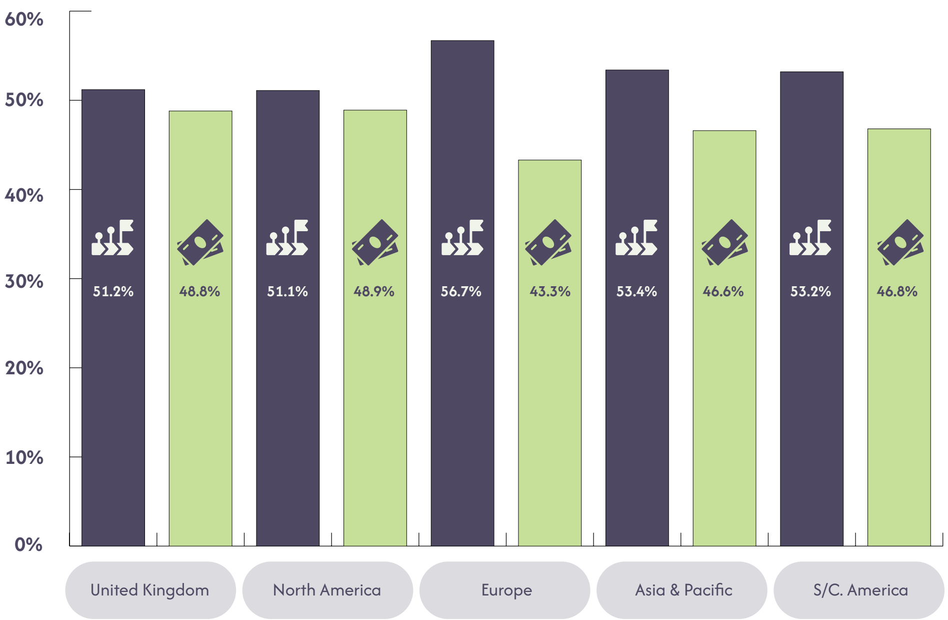


Figure 8.6 Comparison of career progression vs compensation by region

A first glance, the sustainability talent market appears buoyant: 47% of professionals plan to progress their career outside their current employer within the next 12 months. In reality however, things are somewhat quieter.

Many would-be movers currently have limited options available. Amid wider market uncertainty, particularly in the US, professionals are staying put and if they can, they're broadening their role and responsibilities to ensure they remain valuable to the organization.

Nearly half the profession is in effect, a passive candidate pool: open to conversations, and waiting for conditions to improve. When hiring confidence increases and the need for seasoned sustainability expertise returns, I would anticipate movement to manifest in a wave rather than a trickle; given the large numbers of individuals I engage with who are ready for change. It's also encouraging to note that only 10% are considering leaving sustainability altogether, with 86% intending to remain in the field and continue the work.

Referring to Figure 8.6, career progression narrowly outweighs compensation as the driver to move in every region - 51.2% versus 48.8% in the UK, 51.1% versus 48.9% in North America, 53.4% versus 46.6% in Asia & Pacific, and 53.2% versus 46.8% in South and Central America. The gap is widest in Europe, at 56.7% versus 43.3%. Roles offering a credible step up and opportunity for professional growth, will outperform pay-led propositions.

For employers and team leaders, it's also worth noting that low attrition today, most likely reflects a lack of options vs a lack of restlessness - and with that, a focus on professional growth opportunities and retention will be increasingly important as the market starts to pick back up.

Catherine Harris
Executive Director, Americas
Acre

The Challenge of Political and Ideological Headwinds

For the first time in the Census, respondents were asked to identify the biggest challenges facing the sustainability profession. The top responses by volume were:

Among the smaller group of respondents who selected 'Other' and elaborated in free text (107 responses), political and ideological headwinds emerged as the single most common theme, cited by **56%** of that group. While this represents a fraction of the overall sample, the consistency and strength of sentiment in those responses is notable.

Balancing other corporate priorities with sustainability goals	59%
Regulatory / compliance changes	45%
Lack of board level support	40%
Securing sufficient funding	38%
Other (free text)	

Figure 8.7 The biggest challenges facing the sustainability profession

Political and ideological headwinds	56%
Capability, credibility and talent gaps	11%
Market demand issues	9%
Challenges in demonstrating business value and strategic relevance	8%
AI and technology disruption	6%

Figure 8.8 Expanded 'other' topic clusters from free text of the biggest challenges

The prominence of political and ideological headwinds reflects the period in which this data was collected. The retreat of ESG-related commitments by some financial institutions, attacks on DEI programmes, and political contestation of climate science have created a more difficult operating environment for practitioners, particularly those working in North America or global organisations with significant US exposure.

Satisfaction with Resources

Respondents rated their satisfaction with the resources available to deliver on their organisation's sustainability commitments on a scale of 1 to 10. The mean score was 6.16, with a median of 6. While nearly half (**48.5%**) rated their resources at 7 or above, more than one in five (**21.7%**) scored them at 4 or below.

Consultants are notably more satisfied than their in-house counterparts, scoring **6.7** against **5.9.**

Satisfaction with Resources (In-House Teams)

Mean Satisfaction Rating	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
5.9/10	6	7	2.25

Figure 8.9 Satisfaction with resources for in-house sustainability teams in organisations

The **mean** represents the average, the **median** being the middle score, and the **mode** is the most common score.
Standard deviation shows how much scores vary: low means scores are similar, high means they are more spread out.

Satisfaction with Resources (Consultancies)

Mean Satisfaction Rating	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
6.7/10	7	8	2.20

Figure 8.10 Satisfaction with resources for consultancies

The **mean** represents the average, the **median** being the middle score, and the **mode** is the most common score.
Standard deviation shows how much scores vary: low means scores are similar, high means they are more spread out.

The link between budget trajectory and resource satisfaction is direct. Professionals whose budgets have grown rate their resources at **6.6** on average; those whose budgets have largely decreased score just **4.3.** At sector level, financial services professionals report the highest satisfaction, with private markets and real assets averaging **6.8**. At the other end, media and entertainment (**5.0**), professional services (**5.2**) and hospitality (**5.3**) report the lowest scores, potentially sectors where sustainability budgets have faced the most pressure.

Regionally, differences are modest. Europe leads with a mean of **6.4**, while Asia Pacific sits lowest at **6.0**.

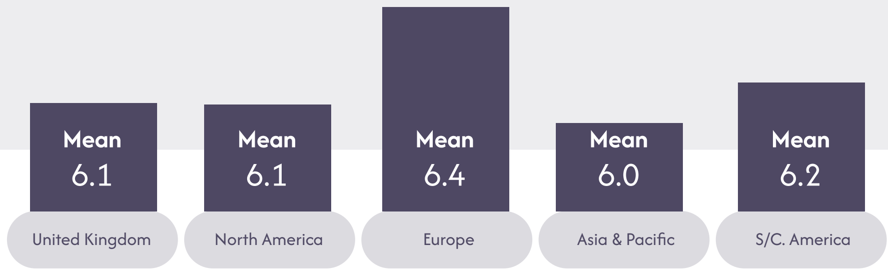


Figure 8.11 Satisfaction with resources across all regions

9 | Global Remuneration

This section examines global remuneration, including salary structures, bonuses and benefits by job level percentile, with comparisons across consultancy, in-house roles, sector and company size.

Remuneration in sustainability has become much harder to benchmark neatly than it was a few years ago. The old idea that someone with a certain level of experience should sit within a clear salary band feels much less true to me now. That is not really a sustainability-specific issue so much as a reflection of broader economic pressure, changing hiring patterns, and a market where pay is more flexible than it once was. Salary now depends not just on experience, but on when someone last moved, what industry they are in, and how much risk sits inside the role.

What strikes me is that the data may look clean on the page, but the lived reality behind it is much messier. Self-categorisation makes comparison especially difficult. An executive in a 50-person business can look completely different from an executive in a 50,000-person company. Both may be senior and impactful, but the scale, complexity, and compensation attached to those roles are unlikely to be comparable.

That is particularly important at the top end of the data. To me, the 95th to 100th percentile is likely capturing board-seated CSOs, owners of sustainability, or leaders whose remit extends well beyond sustainability alone. Some may own strategy, corporate affairs, or other adjacent functions; others may have come through consulting and carried in a very different compensation benchmark.

I also see a clear shift from the sharp salary jumps of the 2021–22 period. We have not seen that kind of escalation repeat. In fact, I have seen some titled roles go backwards in compensation terms. There is more overlap between levels than there used to be, and less of the steep step-change between manager, leadership, and executive bands that earlier reports may have shown. To me, that suggests the market has stabilised, but not necessarily in a way that feels wholly comfortable for candidates. It may be a difficult message for the sector to absorb, particularly for experienced professionals who expected that upward trajectory to continue.

On this point, there's a lot of nuance. In many cases, the roles themselves have become more compelling. The strongest briefs now tend to come to market after much more internal thought and challenge. Organisations are hiring more selectively, but when they do hire, the role is often better considered. I am seeing more focus on value creation, resilience, and commercial impact. For me, that makes many of today's opportunities more interesting than those available a few years ago, even if the salary line is flatter.

That change is also being shaped by technology. AI and other tools are reducing the need for some junior and administrative tasks, especially in reporting and data-heavy roles. While that may improve efficiency, I think there is a real long-term risk here: fewer entry-level opportunities means fewer chances to develop the next generation of sustainability leaders. It may also thin out the junior end of the dataset and shift demand toward more experienced hires, including people moving into sustainability from functions such as finance or strategy.

Another pattern I am noticing is that some senior sustainability leaders are making moves that are not purely about pay progression. People are sometimes stepping into nonprofits, trade associations, or multi-stakeholder organisations because they want more direct leverage, more purpose, or a different kind of impact. That may mean taking a step back financially, but I think it reflects a broader shift in motivation at the senior end of the market.

So if I were advising candidates, I would say: look beyond salary alone. The real question is whether the organisation has thought seriously about what it wants this role to achieve and whether it is willing to back that with capital, access, and decision-making influence.

To me, the most powerful sustainability roles are the ones where you are in the room early, helping shape business decisions rather than retrofitting sustainability onto plans that have already been made. In that sense, remuneration still matters, but the quality of the remit may now tell you even more about the opportunity than the salary band itself.

Tanith Allen

Managing Director, EMEA
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How Remuneration is Calculated

This Sustainability Census groups every respondent into one of six personas: Junior, Manager, Leadership, SMB Senior Leadership, Enterprise Senior Leadership, and Executive. The personas track seniority loosely, but they rest on percentiles of basic salary rather than job titles or reporting lines. Each one occupies a fixed slice of the pay distribution: Junior covers the lowest **10%**, Manager the band to **30%**, Leadership to **50%**, SMB Senior Leadership to **75%**, Enterprise Senior Leadership to **95%**, and Executive the top **5%.**

Building the personas this way keeps the analysis objective and comparable. A percentile slice means the same thing in every market, so this Census can set the UK, Europe, North America and Asia Pacific side by side without job titles getting in the way. The trade-off is that a persona shows where someone sits in the pay distribution, but does not pin down their exact role. A senior figure in a low-paying organisation can land in a lower band, and a well-paid specialist can sit higher than their title suggests. Read the personas as pay tiers, not as an org chart.

Basic salary carries most of the trends in this report. This Census defines it as base pay before bonuses, benefits and equity. Two further elements sit alongside it for every persona and region: cash bonus and employer retirement contribution, each expressed as a percentage of salary. Together they show reward beyond headline pay, which matters most at the senior end, where variable pay grows fastest.

Every average when it comes to remuneration is displayed as a median, not a mean. Salary data skews upward, and a small number of very high earners (one respondent reported over **£1.1m**) drags an average well above what most people actually earn. The median ignores that distortion and reports the midpoint: the figure a typical practitioner at each level would recognise. The percentile bands and the **5%** distribution charts work on the same principle. Rather than flattening pay into one average, they show the full shape of the market, including how tightly or widely salaries spread within each slice.

This Census reports in-house and consultancy separately at every stage. The two operate as fundamentally different businesses, and their pay behaves differently. Consultancy bonuses run lower at most levels, base salaries cluster more tightly in the middle, and the two diverge sharply at the top. Merging them would bury both patterns and mislead anyone benchmarking one model against the other.

Each region carries a full salary distribution chart, plotted in **5%** percentile steps from the bottom to the top of the market. When this Census zooms into a single persona, those close-ups draw on UK data, where the sample is largest and the trend most stable. The wider regional picture, covering the UK, Europe, North America and Asia Pacific, sits on the distribution pages, so any persona can be read back against its home market.

Responses from Africa and the Middle East, and from South and Central America, were too few to evidence any reliable trend. Publishing them would imply a confidence the data cannot support, so this Census leaves them out and will revisit them as the sample grows.

Percentile banding is a deliberately conservative method. It resists outliers, it travels across currencies and markets, and it favours what is typical over what is exceptional. Where a band rests on a thin sample, particularly at the very top, treat the figure as indicative rather than definitive.

Figure 9.1 Personas explained against their typical salary percentiles

Job Levels Represented

To make sense of the pay scale, we have broken it down into six distinct 'personas' that illustrate how percentiles of the scale are likely to reflect seniority. Each persona describes a distinct tier of sustainability professional, offering practical guidance on where a given role and level of responsibility typically sits within the wider distribution of earnings. The largest disparities tend to occur at the senior leadership level, where the size of an organisation can significantly influence overall remuneration for otherwise comparable roles. For this reason, we have separated these into distinct personas, ensuring the picture they present reflects this important difference.

Junior

Typical Pay Percentiles: **0% - 10%**

The junior level refers to someone in the early stages of their career. The role typically supports sustainability strategy, research, data analysis and reporting, requiring strong analytical skills, clear communication and a foundational understanding of environmental science or the wider sustainability agenda.

Manager

Typical Pay Percentiles: **10% - 30%**

At management level, individuals are typically responsible for developing and delivering sustainability strategies, policies and reporting. They may be specialists or generalists, requiring strong analytical skills, strategic thinking, communication, stakeholder influence and project management experience, while reporting to a senior sustainability lead.

Leadership

Typical Pay Percentiles: **30% - 50%**

Individuals in the leadership category usually report to the organisation's most senior sustainability practitioner, though in smaller or less mature businesses they may be the top sustainability lead. Often titled Senior Manager, they play a key role in shaping and leading sustainability strategy.

Senior Leadership (Typically SMB)

Typical Pay Percentiles: **50% - 75%**

For companies with **fewer than 1,000 employees**, the senior leadership category refers to the most senior sustainability practitioners in the organisation. For individuals in large businesses, this category is where you will find 'Heads of'. In SMB, they typically own the overarching sustainability strategy and often act as the organisation's external voice on sustainability.

Senior Leadership (Typically Enterprise)

Typical Pay Percentiles: **75% - 95%**

For companies with **more than 1,000 employees,** the senior leadership category refers to the most senior sustainability practitioners in the organisation. Individuals may have built their career in sustainability or moved into the field from another business area. They typically own the overarching sustainability strategy and often act as the organisation's external voice on sustainability.

Executive

Typical Pay Percentiles: **95% - 100%**

Sitting on the board or reporting directly into it, executives are the most senior tier of sustainability leadership and the top 5% of earners, typically in large, complex organisations. They hold ultimate accountability for sustainability - embedding it into corporate governance, capital allocation and long-term strategic direction, and answering for performance to the board, shareholders and regulators. These roles usually sit in the C-Suite.

In-House Junior Employees

Typically 0% - 10% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

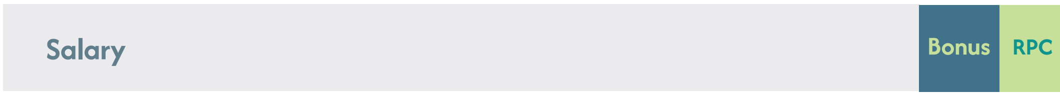
The junior level refers to someone in the early stages of their career. The role typically supports sustainability strategy, research, data analysis and reporting, requiring strong analytical skills, clear communication and a foundational understanding of environmental science or the wider sustainability agenda.

Figure 9.2 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	**Median** Basic Salary	**Highest Range** Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£16,800	**£42,000**	£53,000
Europe (EUR)	€16,600	**€39,000**	€50,000
North America (USD)	$22,600	**$72,000**	$88,700
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$3,500	**S$19,500**	S$36,100

Figure 9.3 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



7% median bonus

United Kingdom	**7%**	North America	**6%**
Europe	**5%**	Asia & Pacific	**15%**

6% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**6%**	North America	**5%**
Europe	**5%**	Asia & Pacific	**11%**

Figure 9.4 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect up to the 10th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing junior level roles.

Consultancy Junior Employees

Typically 0% - 10% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

The junior level refers to someone in the early stages of their career. The role typically supports sustainability strategy, research, data analysis and reporting, requiring strong analytical skills, clear communication and a foundational understanding of environmental science or the wider sustainability agenda.

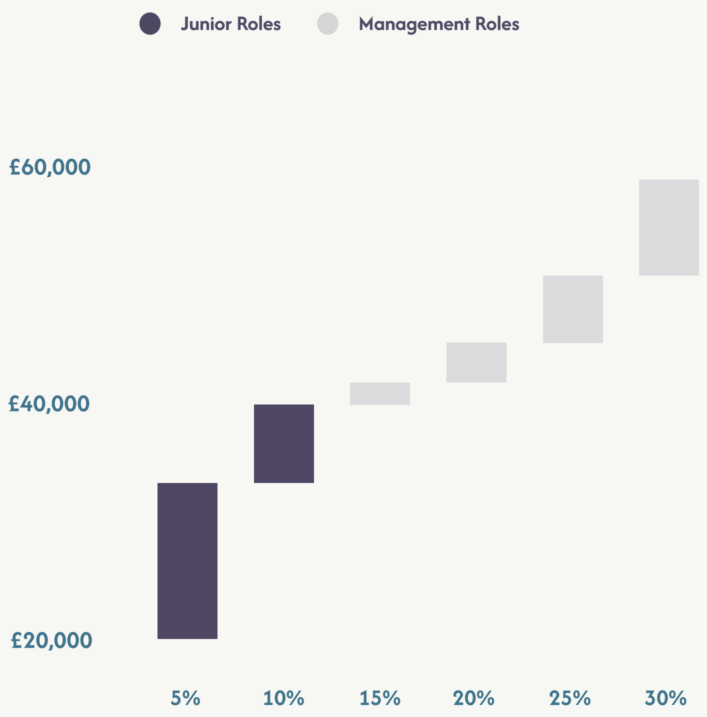
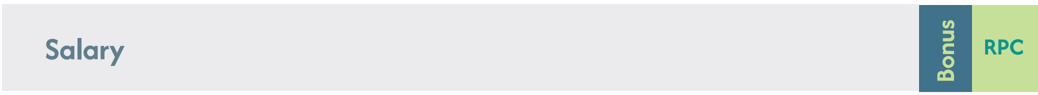


Figure 9.5 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£20,000	**£32,800**	£39,800
Europe (EUR)	€20,000	**€35,000**	€40,000
North America (USD)	$22,000	**$50,000**	$70,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$7,000	**S$8,400**	S$32,700

Figure 9.6 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



4% median bonus

United Kingdom	**4%**	North America	**2%**
Europe	**8%**	Asia & Pacific	**8%**

5% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**5%**	North America	**4%**
Europe	**8%**	Asia & Pacific	**6%**

Figure 9.7 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect up to the 10th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing junior level roles.

In-House Manager Employees

Typically 10% - 30% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

At management level, individuals are typically responsible for developing and delivering sustainability strategies, policies and reporting. They may be specialists or generalists, requiring strong analytical skills, strategic thinking, communication, stakeholder influence and project management experience, while reporting to a senior sustainability lead.

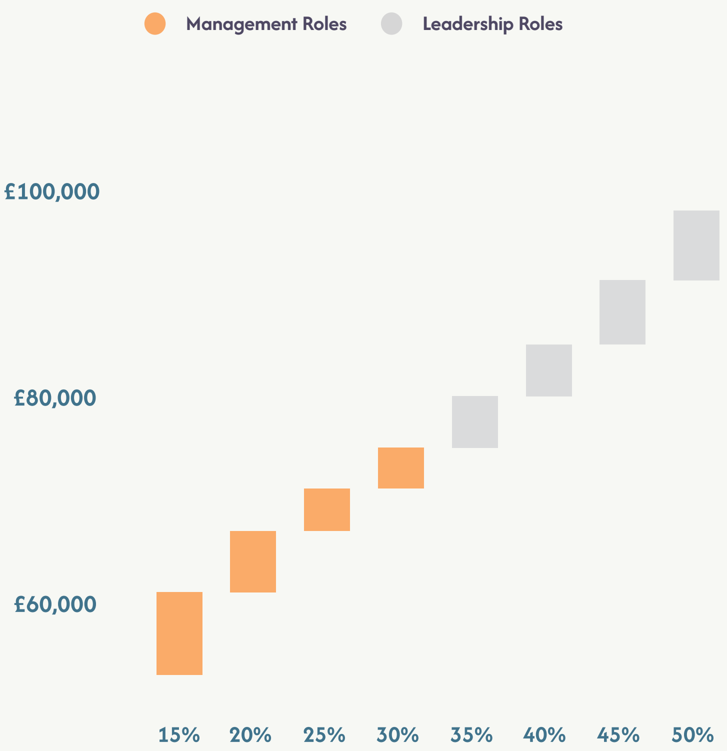
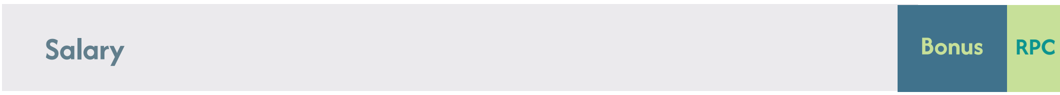


Figure 9.8 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£53,000	**£67,000**	£75,000
Europe (EUR)	€50,000	**€65,000**	€80,000
North America (USD)	$88,800	**$110,000**	$140,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$36,100	**S$63,800**	S$85,000

Figure 9.9 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



10% median bonus

United Kingdom	**10%**	North America	**8%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**10%**

5% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**6%**	North America	**4%**
Europe	**4%**	Asia & Pacific	**9%**

Figure 9.10 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 10th - 30th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing manager level roles.

Consultancy Manager Employees

Typically 10% - 30% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

At management level, individuals are typically responsible for developing and delivering sustainability strategies, policies and reporting. They may be specialists or generalists, requiring strong analytical skills, strategic thinking, communication, stakeholder influence and project management experience, while reporting to a senior sustainability lead.

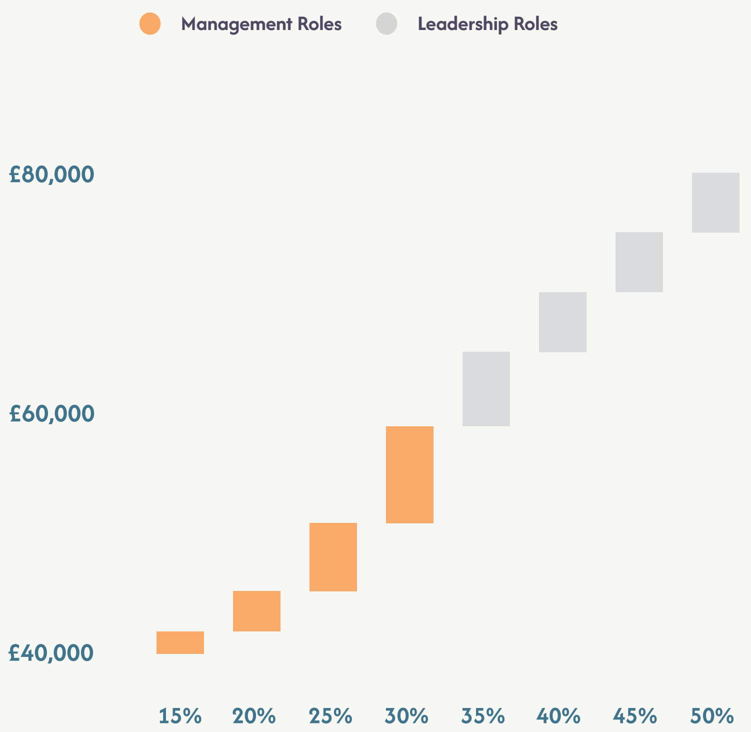
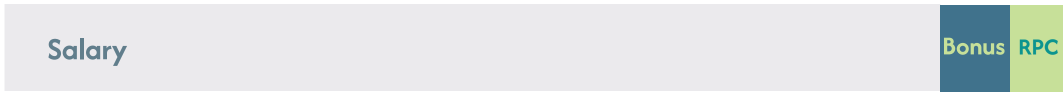


Figure 9.11 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£39,800	**£45,000**	£58,800
Europe (EUR)	€40,000	**€51,000**	€64,700
North America (USD)	$70,000	**$85,000**	$100,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$32,700	**S$58,300**	S$72,700

Figure 9.12 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



5% median bonus

United Kingdom	**3%**	North America	**4%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**8%**

5% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**5%**	North America	**4%**
Europe	**7%**	Asia & Pacific	**14%**

Figure 9.13 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 10th - 30th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing manager level roles.

In-House Leadership Employees

Typically 30% - 50% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

Individuals in the leadership category usually report to the organisation's most senior sustainability practitioner, though in smaller or less mature businesses they may be the top sustainability lead. Often titled Senior Manager, they play a key role in shaping and leading sustainability strategy.

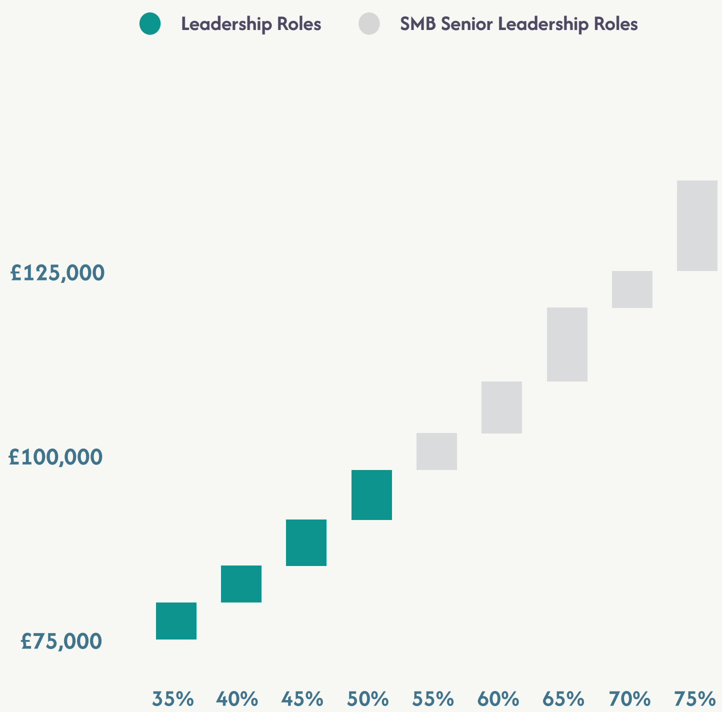
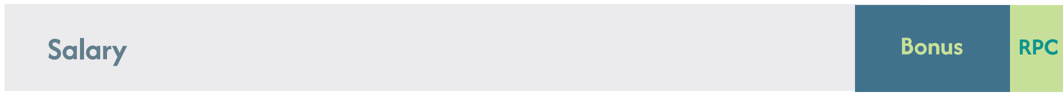


Figure 9.14 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	**Median** Basic Salary	**Highest Range** Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£75,000	**£85,000**	£98,000
Europe (EUR)	€80,000	**€95,000**	€105,000
North America (USD)	$140,000	**$163,000**	$185,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$85,000	**S$106,200**	S$150,700

Figure 9.15 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



15% median bonus

United Kingdom	**10%**	North America	**15%**
Europe	**15%**	Asia & Pacific	**18%**

6% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**7%**	North America	**5%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**12%**

Figure 9.16 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 30th - 50th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing leadership level roles.

Consultancy Leadership Employees

Typically 30% - 50% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

Individuals in the leadership category usually report to the organisation's most senior sustainability practitioner, though in smaller or less mature businesses they may be the top sustainability lead. Often titled Senior Manager, they play a key role in shaping and leading sustainability strategy.

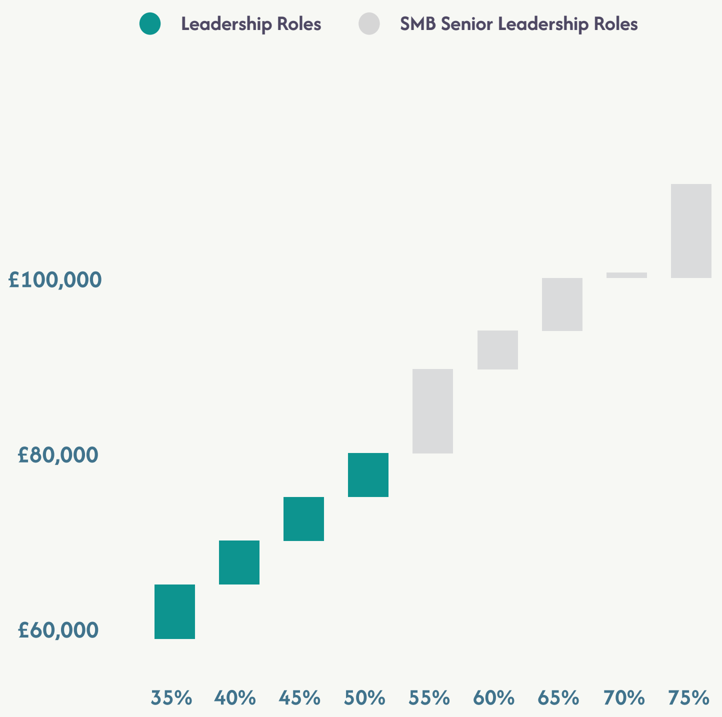
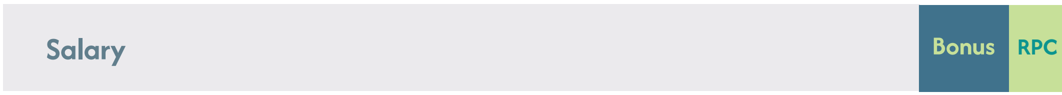


Figure 9.17 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	**Median** Basic Salary	**Highest Range** Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£58,800	**£70,000**	£80,000
Europe (EUR)	€64,800	**€75,000**	€80,000
North America (USD)	$100,000	**$120,000**	$130,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$72,700	**S$91,000**	S$114,300

Figure 9.18 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



9% median bonus

United Kingdom	**5%**	North America	**8%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**15%**

5% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**5%**	North America	**4%**
Europe	**5%**	Asia & Pacific	**13%**

Figure 9.19 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 30th - 50th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing leadership level roles.

In-House Senior Leadership (Typically SMB)

Typically 50% - 75% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

For companies with fewer than 1,000 employees, the senior leadership category refers to the most senior sustainability practitioners in the organisation. For individuals in large businesses, this category is where you will typically find 'Heads of'. In SMB, they usually own the overarching sustainability strategy and often act as the organisation's external voice on sustainability.

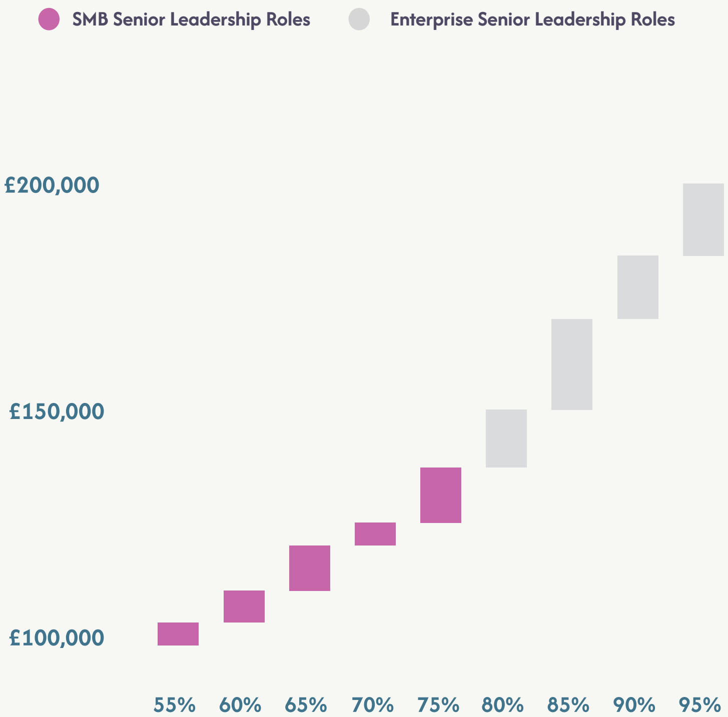


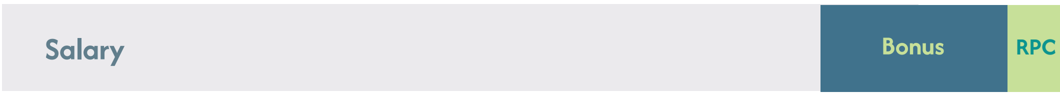
Figure 9.20 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

These results reflect the 50th - 75th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£98,000	**£113,000**	£137,300
Europe (EUR)	€105,000	**€125,000**	€150,000
North America (USD)	$185,000	**$217,000**	$250,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$150,700	**S$232,300**	S$286,300

Figure 9.21 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



20% median bonus

United Kingdom	**20%**	North America	**20%**
Europe	**15%**	Asia & Pacific	**15%**

6% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**8%**	North America	**5%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**10%**

Figure 9.22 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 50th - 75th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

Consultancy Senior Leadership (Typically SMB)

Typically 50% - 75% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

For companies with fewer than 1,000 employees, the senior leadership category refers to the most senior sustainability practitioners in the organisation. For individuals in large businesses, this category is where you will typically find 'Heads of'. In SMB, they usually own the overarching sustainability strategy and often act as the organisation's external voice on sustainability.

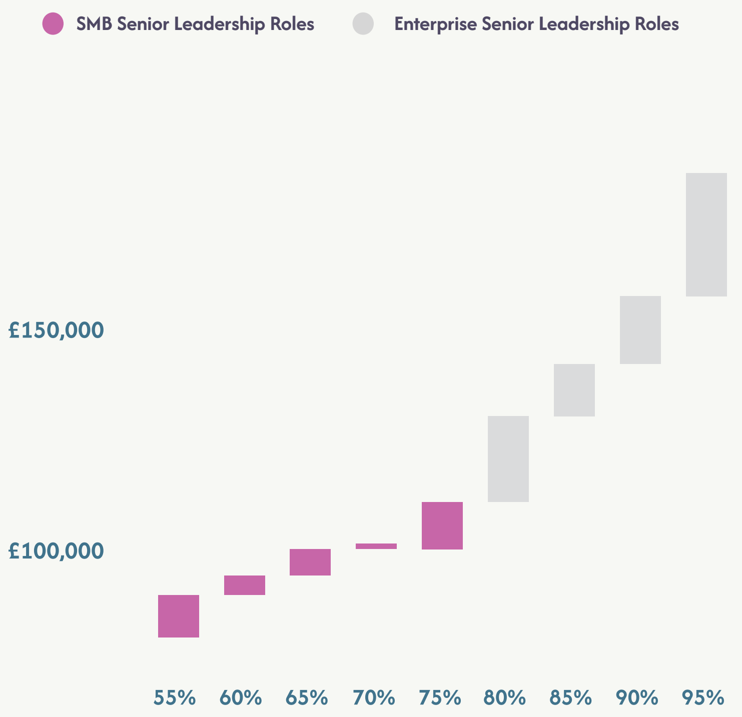


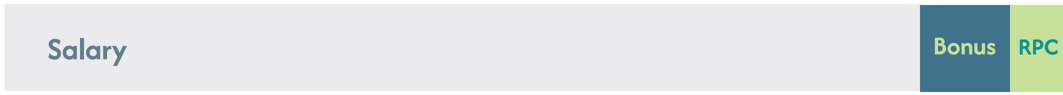
Figure 9.23 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

These results reflect the 50th - 75th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£80,000	**£98,000**	£110,700
Europe (EUR)	€80,000	**€98,000**	€119,500
North America (USD)	$130,000	**$154,000**	$186,500
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$114,300	**S$158,600**	S$213,500

Figure 9.24 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



10% median bonus

United Kingdom	**5%**	North America	**10%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**7%**

5% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**5%**	North America	**4%**
Europe	**8%**	Asia & Pacific	**11%**

Figure 9.25 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 50th - 75th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

In-House Senior Leadership (Typically Enterprise)

Typically 75% - 95% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

For companies with more than 1,000 employees, the senior leadership category refers to the most senior sustainability practitioners in the organisation. Individuals may have built their career in sustainability or moved into the field from another business area. Typically owning the overarching sustainability strategy and often act as the external voice on sustainability.

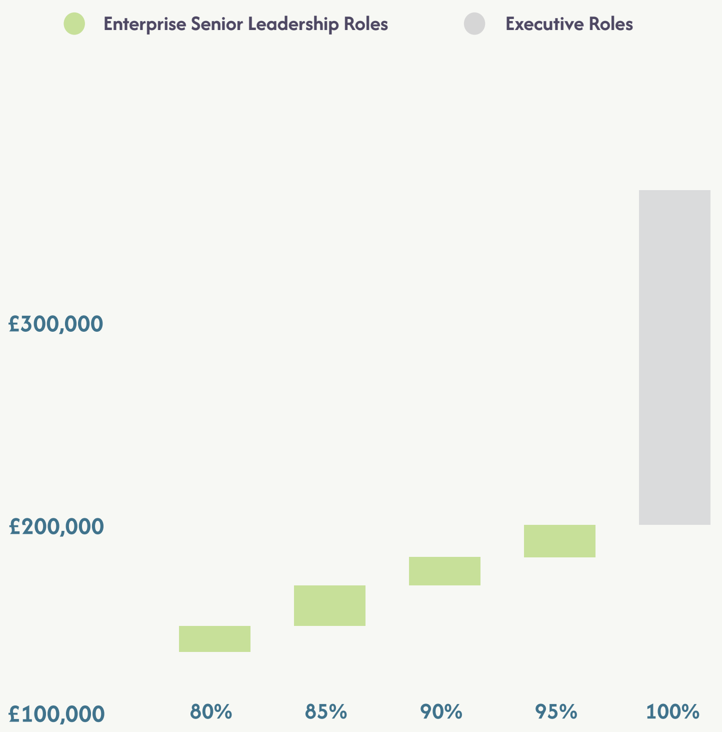


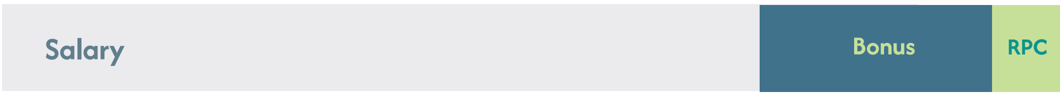
Figure 9.26 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

These results reflect the 75th - 95th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£137,300	**£170,000**	£200,000
Europe (EUR)	€150,000	**€200,000**	€274,400
North America (USD)	$250,000	**$281,000**	$334,800
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$286,300	**S$324,000**	S$376,200

Figure 9.27 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



21% median bonus

United Kingdom	**25%**	North America	**20%**
Europe	**15%**	Asia & Pacific	**15%**

8% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**8%**	North America	**5%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**10%**

Figure 9.28 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 75th - 95th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

Consultancy Senior Leadership (Typically Enterprise)

Typically 75% - 95% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

For companies with more than 1,000 employees, the senior leadership category refers to the most senior sustainability practitioners in the organisation. Individuals may have built their career in sustainability or moved into the field from another business area. Typically owning the overarching sustainability strategy and often act as the external voice on sustainability.

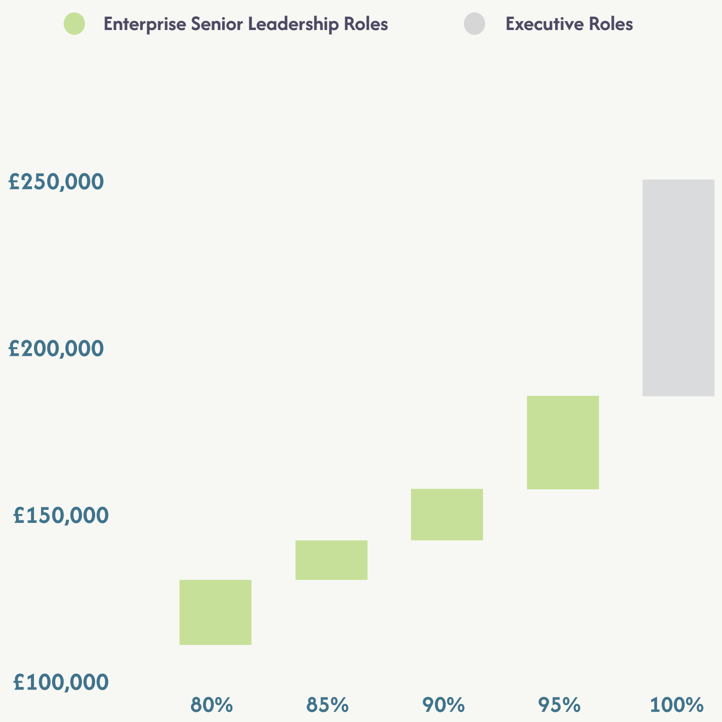


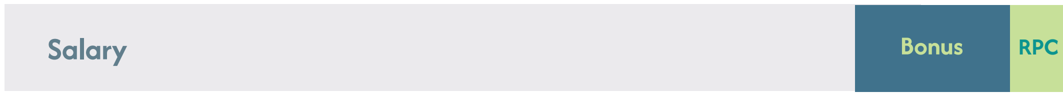
Figure 9.29 Basic salary percentiles against the next level of persona (UK)

These results reflect the 75th - 95th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£110,700	**£142,500**	£185,200
Europe (EUR)	€119,500	**€140,000**	€189,000
North America (USD)	$186,500	**$218,000**	$307,500
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$213,500	**S$273,200**	S$337,200

Figure 9.30 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by regio (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



15% average bonus

United Kingdom	15%	North America	15%
Europe	20%	Asia & Pacific	16%

6% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	5%	North America	6%
Europe	10%	Asia & Pacific	9%

Figure 9.31 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 75th - 95th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing senior leadership level roles.

In-House Executive Employees

Typically 95% - 100% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

Sitting on the board or reporting directly into it, executives are the most senior tier of sustainability leadership and the top 5% of earners, typically in large, complex organisations. They hold ultimate accountability for sustainability - embedding it into corporate governance, capital allocation and long-term strategic direction, and answering for performance to the board, shareholders and regulators. These roles usually sit in the C-Suite.

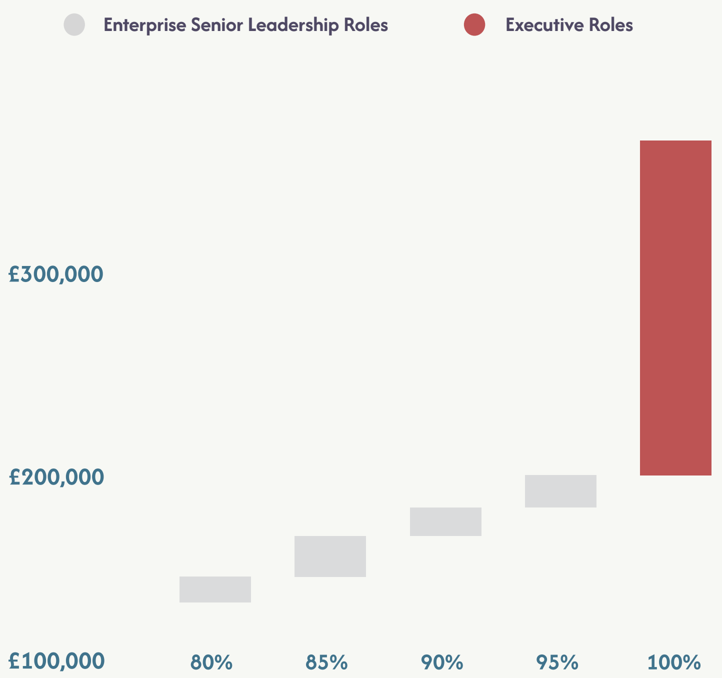
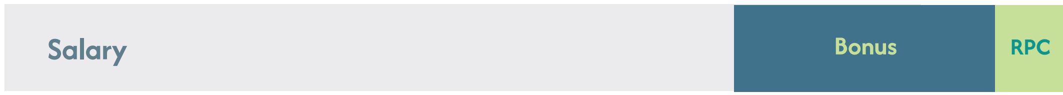


Figure 9.32 Basic salary percentiles against the previous level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£200,000	**£237,500**	£365,000
Europe (EUR)	€274,000	**€302,000**	€381,600
North America (USD)	$334,800	**$410,000**	$1,131,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$376,200	**S$461,600**	S$485,000

Figure 9.33 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



23% median bonus

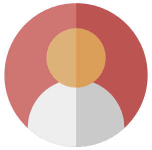
United Kingdom	**25%**	North America	**14%**
Europe	**15%**	Asia & Pacific	**13%**

8% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	**8%**	North America	**5%**
Europe	**10%**	Asia & Pacific	**10%**

Figure 9.34 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 95th - 100th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing executive level roles.



Consultancy Executive Employees

Typically 95% - 100% percentiles of total pay across the Census sample

Sitting on the board or reporting directly into it, executives are the most senior tier of sustainability leadership and the top 5% of earners, typically in large, complex organisations. They hold ultimate accountability for sustainability - embedding it into corporate governance, capital allocation and long-term strategic direction, and answering for performance to the board, shareholders and regulators. These roles usually sit in the C-Suite.

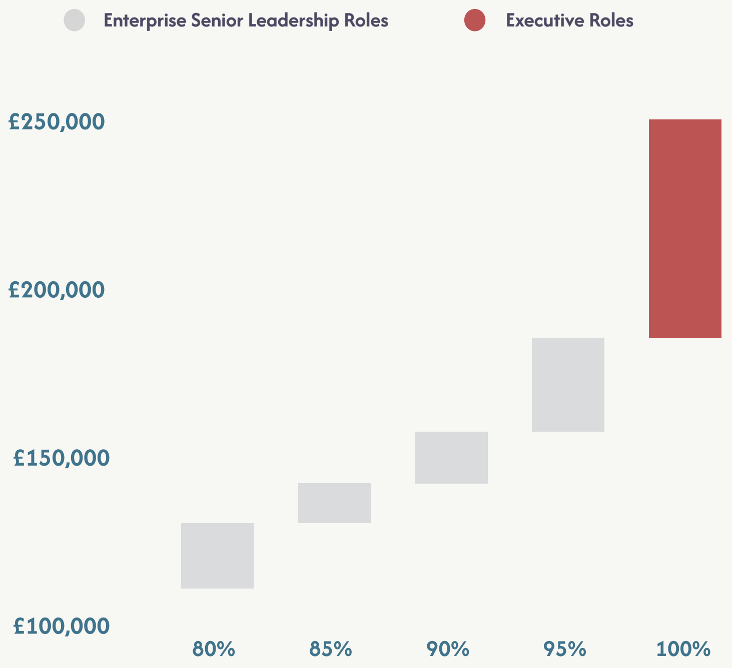
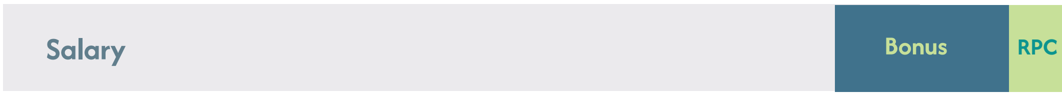


Figure 9.35 Basic salary percentiles against the previous level of persona (UK)

	Lowest Range Basic Salary	Median Basic Salary	Highest Range Basic Salary
United Kingdom (GBP)	£185,200	**£200,000**	£250,000
Europe (EUR)	€189,000	**€205,000**	€250,000
North America (USD)	$307,500	**$442,500**	$1,000,000
Asia & Pacific (SGD)	S$337,200	**S$425,000**	S$500,000

Figure 9.36 Basic salary lower, upper and median amount variation by region (rounded to the nearest hundred)

Global average bonus and benefits as a percentage of total compensation



19% median bonus

United Kingdom	18%	North America	20%
Europe	18%	Asia & Pacific	18%

6% retirement plan contribution

United Kingdom	8%	North America	5%
Europe	10%	Asia & Pacific	5%

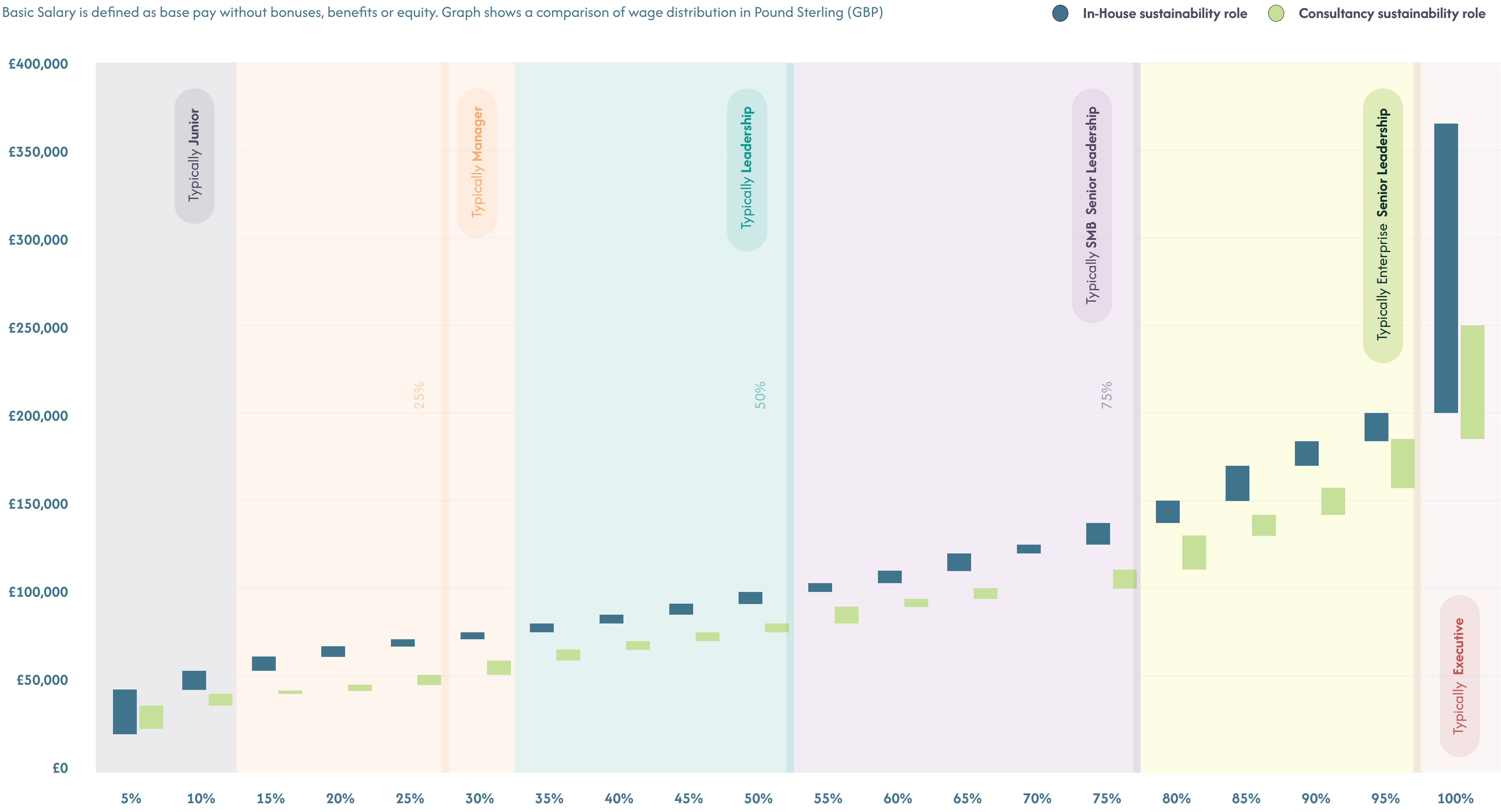
Figure 9.37 Average bonus and retirement plan contribution by region

These results reflect the 95th - 100th percentile of base salary across the Census sample, typically representing executive level roles.

United Kingdom: Basic Salary Distribution

Figure 9.38 Basic Salary Distribution (UK)

Basic Salary is defined as base pay without bonuses, benefits or equity. Graph shows a comparison of wage distribution in Pound Sterling (GBP)



In-House 25th Percentile Base Salary: £71,037
Consultancy 25th Percentile Base Salary: £50,700

In-House Median Base Salary: £98,000
Consultancy Median Base Salary: £80,000

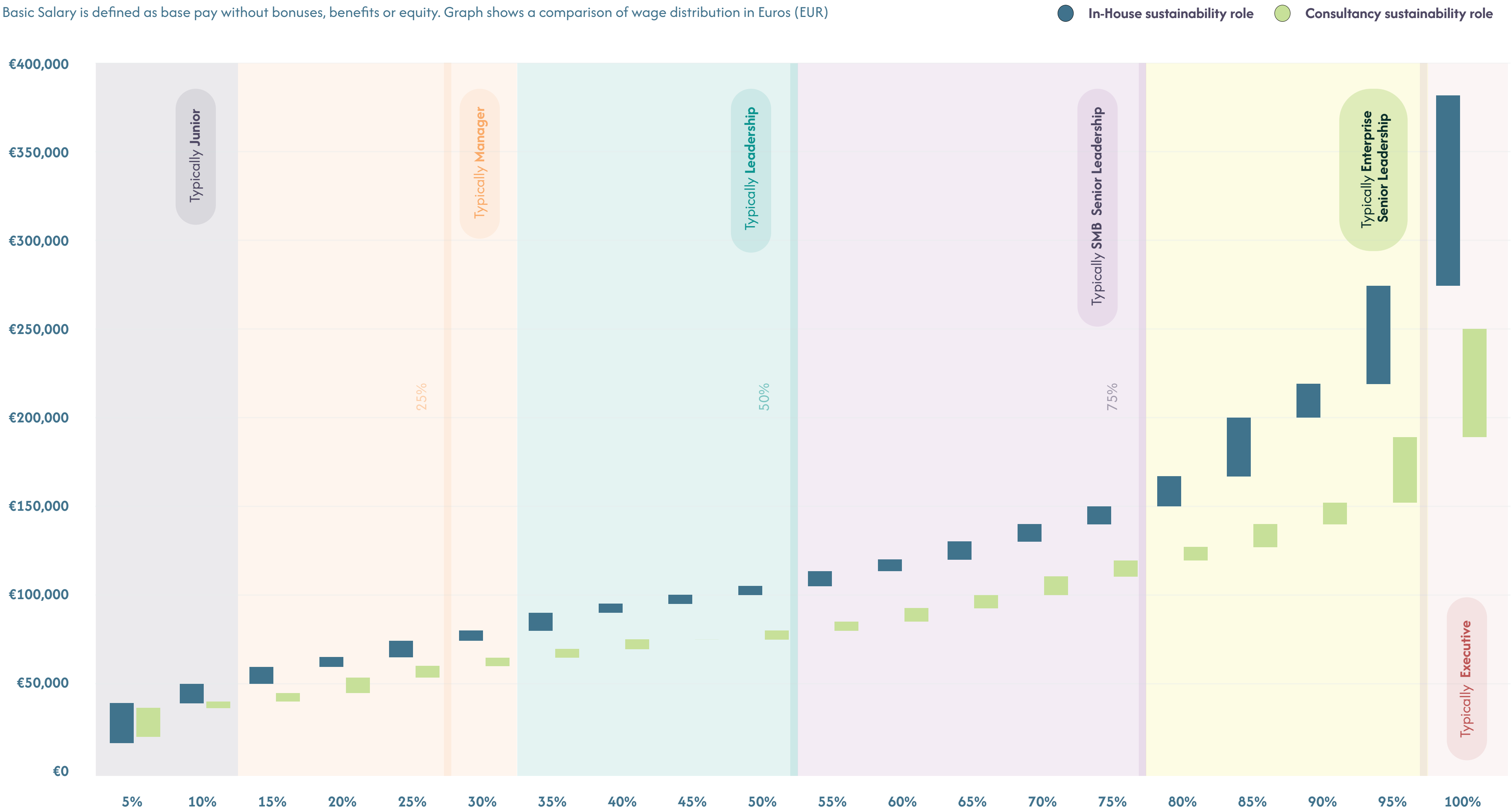
In-House 75th Percentile Base Salary: £137,250
Consultancy 75th Percentile Base Salary: £110,700

In-House 95th Percentile Base Salary: £200,000
Consultancy 95th Percentile Base Salary: £185,200

Europe: Basic Salary Distribution

Figure 9.39 Basic Salary Distribution (Europe)

Basic Salary is defined as base pay without bonuses, benefits or equity. Graph shows a comparison of wage distribution in Euros (EUR)



In-House 25th Percentile Base Salary: €74,250

Consultancy 25th Percentile Base Salary: €60,000

In-House Median Base Salary: €105,000

Consultancy Median Base Salary: €80,000

In-House 75th Percentile Base Salary: €150,000

Consultancy 75th Percentile Base Salary: €119,500

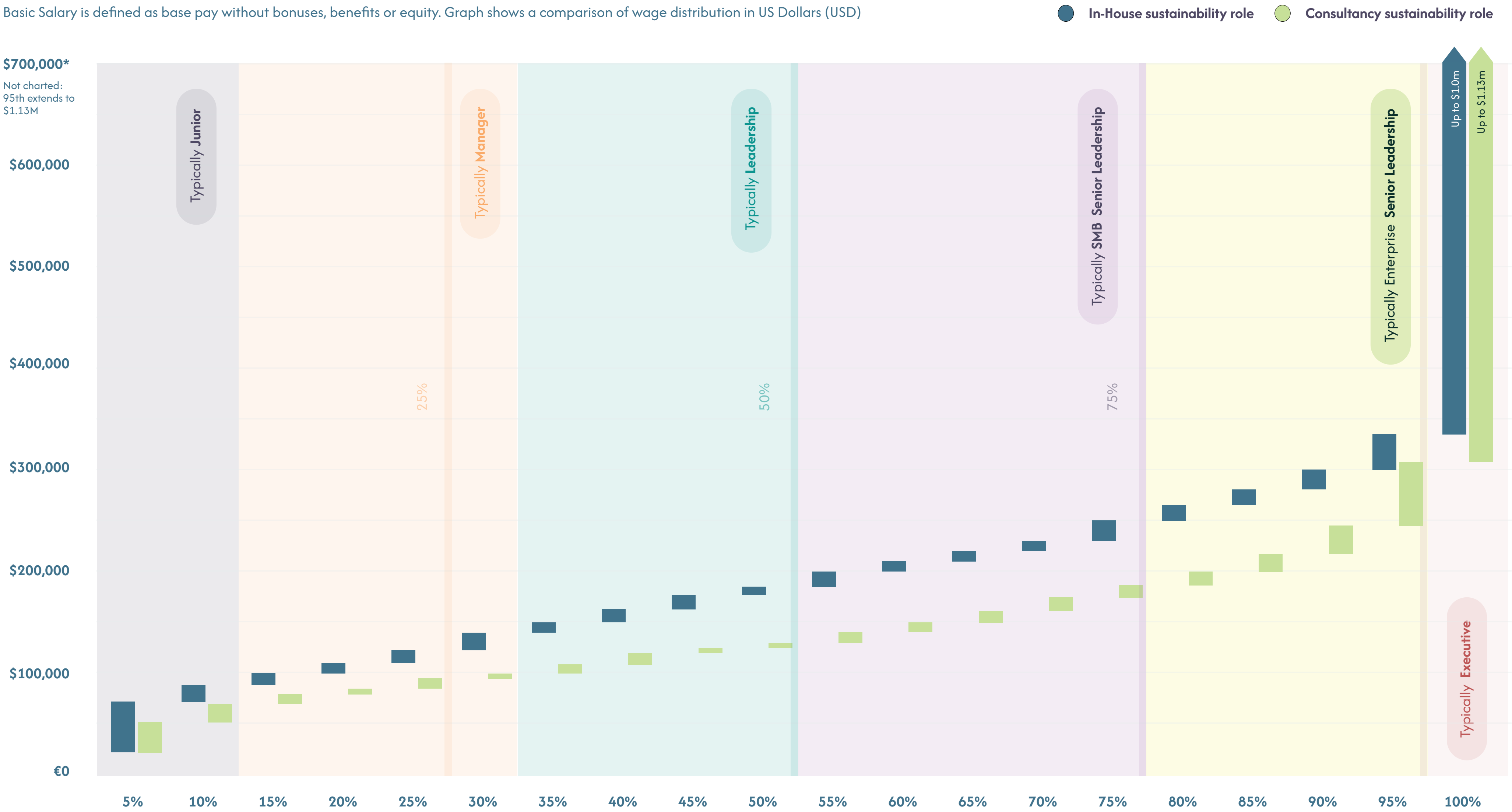
In-House 95th Percentile Base Salary: €274,384

Consultancy 95th Percentile Base Salary: €189,044

North America: Basic Salary Distribution

Figure 9.40 Basic Salary Distribution (North America)

Basic Salary is defined as base pay without bonuses, benefits or equity. Graph shows a comparison of wage distribution in US Dollars (USD)



In-House 25th Percentile Base Salary: $122,750

Consultancy 25th Percentile Base Salary: $95,000

In-House Median Base Salary: $185,000

Consultancy Median Base Salary: $130,000

In-House 75th Percentile Base Salary: $250,000

Consultancy 75th Percentile Base Salary: $186,500

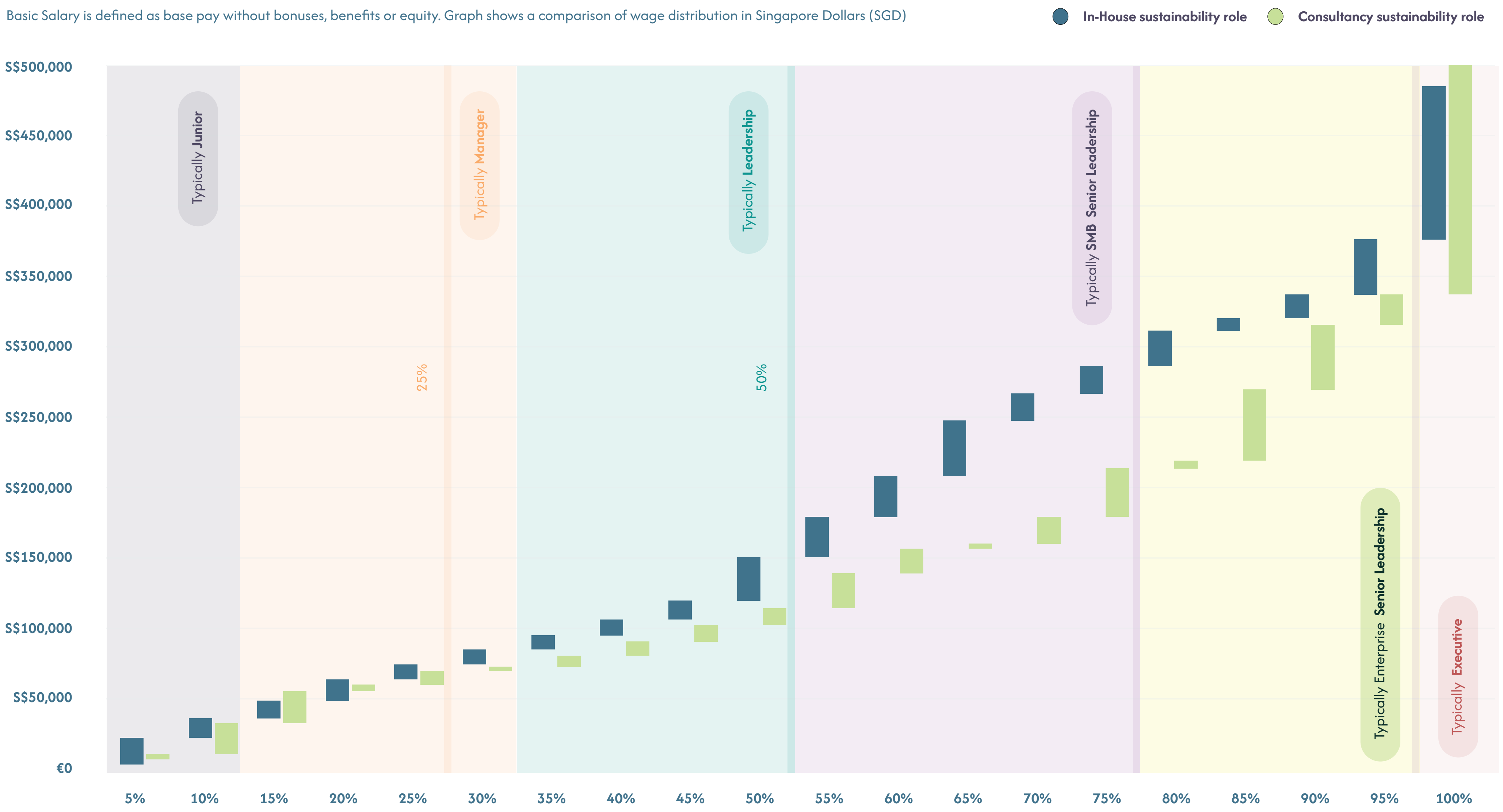
In-House 95th Percentile Base Salary: $334,750

Consultancy 95th Percentile Base Salary: $307,500

Asia & Pacific: Basic Salary Distribution

Figure 9.41 Basic Salary Distribution (Asia & Pacific)

Basic Salary is defined as base pay without bonuses, benefits or equity. Graph shows a comparison of wage distribution in Singapore Dollars (SGD)



In-House 25th Percentile Base Salary: S$74,357
Consultancy 25th Percentile Base Salary: S$69,714

In-House Median Base Salary: S$150,688
Consultancy Median Base Salary: S$114,331

In-House 75th Percentile Base Salary: S$286,267
Consultancy 75th Percentile Base Salary: S$213,534

In-House 95th Percentile Base Salary: S$376,199
Consultancy 95th Percentile Base Salary: S$337,161

Global Compensation Fairness

Across the dataset, employees in financial services, particularly investment & wealth management and private markets, report the highest sense of fair compensation, with many responses clustered in the upper range (8–10). Similarly, sectors like technology, utilities, and consumer goods (especially food and beverage) also skew toward higher ratings, suggesting relatively strong satisfaction with pay. In contrast, construction & the built environment and hospitality show a heavier concentration in the mid-to-lower range (around 4–7), indicating more mixed or lukewarm perceptions.

The least well-compensated sentiment appears in non-profit organisations and parts of public services, where responses are more weighted toward the lower end of the scale, reflecting comparatively weaker feelings of fair pay. Overall, higher-paying, private-sector industries tend to report stronger satisfaction, while public and mission-driven sectors lag behind.

Consultants report a somewhat lower sense of fair compensation than their in-house counterparts, averaging 6.42 against 6.69, with **52.2% of consultants scoring their pay at 7** or above compared to 58.5% of in-house professionals. The gap is most pronounced at more junior levels: senior consultants average 6.89, broadly comparable to in-house peers, while non-senior consultants score just 6.08. This mirrors the gender pay gap finding, where consultancy structures appear to generate greater disparity further down the seniority ladder, and suggests that pay satisfaction in the consultancy market is reasonably strong at the top but less so for those still building their careers.

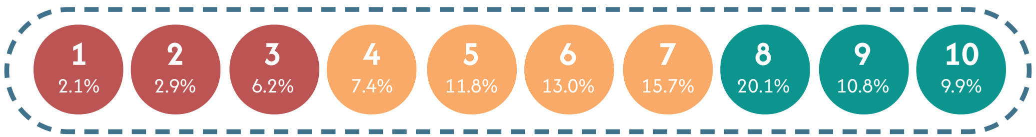


Figure 9.42 Compensation fairness represented as global averages

Data model notes:

No participants from the 'Academia' sector wished to share salary data, so this sector has been removed from the analysis.

'Leisure' had a significantly smaller response of n=7 - this sample has been included, but unlike others, this is not a robust figure.

Happiest with Compensation

Unhappiest with Compensation

Median	Sector
8	Financial Services – Investment & Wealth Management
8	Financial Services – Private Markets & Real Assets
8	Leisure
8	Natural Resources
8	Technology
8	Utilities
7.5	Transport
7	Clean Technology & e-Mobility
7	Construction & Built Environment
7	Consumer Goods – Agriculture, Food & Beverage
7	Consumer Goods – Apparel, Luxury & Home
7	Financial Services – Banking
7	Financial Services – Insurance
7	Health, Hygiene & Pharmaceuticals
7	Hospitality
7	Legal
7	Manufacturing – Auto, Aero & Defence
7	Manufacturing – Packaging, Plastics & Electronics
7	Property & Real Estate
7	Public Services
7	Telecoms
6.5	Retail & Wholesale
6	Media & Entertainment
6	Non-Profit Organisations
6	Professional Services
6	Supply Chain & Logistics

Global Compensation Fairness

How fairly compensated do you feel in your role?

SECTOR	1 Extremely Poorly	2	3	4	5 Neither Poorly nor Well	6	7	8	9	10 Extremely Well	Sector Median
Clean Technology & e-Mobility			4.3%	4.3%	13.0%	26.1%	8.7%	30.4%	8.7%	4.3%	7
Construction & Built Environment		4.6%	6.9%	9.2%	11.4%	13.0%	15.3%	17.6%	13.0%	9.2%	7
Consumer Goods – Agriculture, Food & Bev	2.4%	0.8%	4.0%	4.8%	14.5%	17.7%	18.6%	18.6%	9.7%	8.9%	7
Consumer Goods – Apparel, Luxury & Home	2.4%	1.2%	4.8%	6.0%	13.1%	13.1%	19.1%	16.7%	11.9%	11.9%	7
Financial Services – Banking		5.2%	6.9%	6.9%	15.5%	10.3%	10.3%	25.9%	6.9%	12.1%	7
Financial Services – Insurance		4.3%	4.3%	8.7%	13.0%	8.7%	30.4%	21.7%	4.3%	4.3%	7
Financial Services – Investment & Wealth Mgmt	1.6%	1.6%	6.3%	12.7%	9.5%	7.9%	9.5%	28.6%	9.5%	12.7%	8
Financial Services – Private Markets & Real Assets	3.5%		3.5%	3.5%	5.2%	12.1%	12.1%	24.1%	20.7%	15.5%	8
Health, Hygiene & Pharmaceuticals	1.9%	7.7%	5.8%	3.9%	11.5%	11.5%	15.4%	30.8%	9.6%	1.9%	7
Hospitality		3.5%	6.9%	6.9%	17.2%	3.5%	13.8%	24.1%	10.3%	13.8%	7
Legal		11.1%			11.1%		33.3%	11.1%	22.2%	11.1%	7
Leisure				14.3%		14.3%		57.1%		14.3%	8
Manufacturing – Auto, Aero & Defence	1.8%	5.4%	5.4%	3.6%	12.5%	10.7%	23.2%	21.4%	10.7%	5.4%	7
Manufacturing – Packaging, Plastics & Elec	1.4%	1.4%	8.1%	6.8%	14.9%	10.8%	13.5%	20.3%	13.5%	9.5%	7
Media & Entertainment	7.7%	7.7%	3.9%	11.5%	11.5%	15.4%	11.5%	7.7%	11.5%	11.5%	6
Natural Resources	5.0%		5.0%	5.0%	10.0%	7.5%	12.5%	15.0%	20.0%	20.0%	8
Non-Profit Organisations	8.0%	8.0%	4.0%	4.0%	8.0%	20.0%	24.0%	8.0%	16.0%		6
Professional Services	2.5%	2.5%	12.5%	17.5%	5.0%	15.0%	12.5%	20.0%	7.5%	5.0%	6
Property & Real Estate			2.1%	2.1%	17.0%	14.9%	21.3%	21.3%	12.8%	8.5%	7
Public Services	3.2%	6.5%	3.2%	9.7%	16.1%	6.5%	16.1%	12.9%	12.9%	12.9%	7
Retail & Wholesale	1.9%	1.9%	5.8%	5.8%	23.1%	11.5%	17.3%	15.4%	9.6%	7.7%	6.5
Supply Chain & Logistics	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%	11.1%	22.2%	16.7%	27.8%			6
Technology	1.9%	1.9%	5.6%	3.7%	9.3%	16.7%	7.4%	35.2%	11.1%	7.4%	8
Telecoms				20.0%	6.7%	20.0%	6.7%	33.3%	6.7%	6.7%	7
Transport		6.2%	9.4%	6.2%		3.1%	25.0%	34.4%	6.2%	9.4%	7.5
Utilities		2.1%	8.5%	6.4%	4.3%	6.4%	12.8%	21.3%	23.4%	14.9%	8

Figure 9.43 Compensation fairness satisfaction by sector (global)

Bonuses and Long Term Incentive Plans (LTIPs)

Bonus and Incentive Structures

83.8% of in-house professionals receive a bonus, compared to 72.2% of consultants. Among those who do, the most common performance factors are company performance (cited by 54.2% of all respondents) and individual performance (44.6%). Team performance is cited by 21.3%, and sustainability targets by 11.5%.

Bonus Levels

Among respondents who received a bonus, the median cash bonus was 15% of base salary, with a mean of 24.7%, the latter skewed upward by a small number of very large awards at senior levels.

Bonus as a proportion of base salary varies considerably across the profession. While 35.9% of respondents reported receiving no bonus, this figure warrants some unpacking: around two thirds of this group have no bonus scheme in place at all, while the remaining third are eligible for a bonus but received nothing in the past 12 months. That latter group represents 12.2% of all respondents, suggesting the current operating environment is actively suppressing bonus payouts for a meaningful proportion of the profession rather than reflecting a structural absence of variable pay.

Among those who did receive a bonus, the distribution is reasonably spread, with the largest concentrations in the 6-10% and 16-25% ranges, and a small but notable tail of 5.1% receiving 51% or more of their base salary in bonus.

The global figures mask significant regional variation. US respondents who received a bonus reported a median of 20% of base salary overall, rising to 30% among those in senior roles, broadly consistent with typical Director and VP-level bonus expectations in North America. The lower global averages reflect the influence of European markets, where bonus structures tend to be more modest, with a median of 15% among European respondents.

Sustainability Targets in Wider Organisational Bonuses

Respondents were also asked whether sustainability performance is a factor in determining bonus payments for employees outside the sustainability function. Overall, 32.4% of respondents said yes. 21.7% on a formal and structured basis, and 10.7% informally. A further 8.1% did not know, and 60.3% said sustainability was not a factor at all.

Regional variation is significant. Europe leads on formal integration, with 30.8% of respondents saying sustainability is formally embedded in wider bonus structures, compared to just 9.7% in North America. The UK sits at 26.1% formal, with Asia Pacific at 24.4%.

At sector level, telecoms (67%), insurance (64%) and utilities (56%) report the highest levels of sustainability integration into wider bonus structures, while professional services, technology and media report the lowest levels.

Sustainability-linked remuneration remains relatively uncommon. Despite increasing attention on linking sustainability performance to pay, only 21.7% of respondents report formal integration into wider bonus structures, while 60.3% report no sustainability linkage at all. Just 11.5% cite sustainability targets as a factor in determining their own bonus.

Long-Term Incentive Plans

A Long-Term Incentive Plan (LTIP) is a form of deferred compensation designed to reward employees over a multi-year period, typically three to five years, usually tied to company performance or continued tenure. Unlike a cash bonus, which is paid annually, an LTIP vests over time and is often share-based, meaning its value fluctuates with the organisation's performance.

16.8% of respondents participate in an LTIP. The most common form is share-based (177 participants), followed by share options (80) and cash-based plans (51). Among those with an LTIP, the median estimated annualised value is 20% of base salary, with a mean of 31%, again skewed by high-value awards at the most senior levels.

Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap in sustainability has narrowed since the last Census. Globally, the mean gap stands at 6.4% and the median at 8.6% in 2026, down from 13.5% mean and 14.9% median in 2024. This continues a broader trend of improvement, though not a consistent one: the 2020 report recorded a 10% gap, itself down from 13% in 2018, before widening again in 2024. The 2026 figure represents a meaningful step forward, but the uneven trajectory over time cautions against assuming the direction of travel is permanently and uniformly downward. Total compensation shows a similar pattern, though the median gap widens slightly when bonuses and pension contributions are included, suggesting that variable pay and benefits reinforce rather than offset the base salary gap.

The improvement is particularly pronounced in the UK, where the median gap has fallen from 24.2% in 2024 to 15.0% in 2026, and the mean from 24.9% to 9.9%. Despite this progress, the UK gap remains above the global average on both measures, with a mean of 9.9% against 6.4% globally and a median of 15.0% against 8.6%. This is a notable finding for a region that leads the Census on public EDI commitments. The same tension between stated ambition and measurable outcome that runs through the sustainability data more broadly appears to apply here too.

Where the gap sits varies considerably by context. The most striking finding is the difference between consultancy and in-house roles. In consultancy, the mean gender pay gap is 16.8% and the median 20.6%. Among in-house professionals, both figures are substantially lower at 2.9% mean and 5.7% median. The consultancy gap is more than five times larger than the in-house equivalent at the median. This suggests that the pay structures and progression pathways in advisory firms are generating a significantly larger disparity than those in corporate sustainability functions and deserves closer attention from the consultancy sector.

Global Gender Pay Gap

	Median	Mean
2026	8.6%	6.4%
2023/24	14.9%	13.5%

Median ▼ 6.3pp   Mean ▼ 7.1pp

Figure 9.44 2026 vs 2023/24 global gender pay gap

At junior level, the gap runs in the opposite direction: women earn more than men on average, with a mean gap of -1.7% and a median of -4.9% in favour of women. This mirrors the pattern seen across broader labour market research, where entry-level pay is relatively equal or slightly favours women before the gap opens up at more senior levels, driven by differences in progression, part-time working and access to long-term incentive schemes.

Women are more than twice as likely as men to work part time (5.4% versus 2.4%), and men are slightly more likely to participate in a Long-Term Incentive Plan (26.0% versus 21.1%), a gap that compounds over time and is not captured in base salary comparisons alone. On pay satisfaction, men average 6.67 out of 10 against 6.55 for women, a modest difference but one that should not be ignored in light of the survey's findings outlined above.

The overall picture is one of progress, unevenly distributed. The gap is closing, but it is closing faster in some parts of the profession than others, and the consultancy sector in particular has significant ground still to cover.

The evidence is there to suggest that efforts to promote gender equity are working.

Given the political challenges to equity and EDI in the time since the last census, a narrowing of the gender pay gap should not be underestimated. While the data over time indicates ebbs and flow in this dynamic, this fairly healthy narrowing since 2023/2024 is perhaps a sign of the power of the EDI movement, and the work that individuals and organisations alike have done to raise awareness and drive change in these areas.

Certainly there is still work to do, as evidenced, for example, in the UK numbers which are higher than the global average, but these figures are a hopeful sign that change is possible in even the most challenging of environments.

The inconsistency of this progress over time is interesting, and partly could be a reflection of the changing nature of sustainability roles and their position within a business. Over the last couple of years we've seen sustainability roles merge with other aspects of business – for example - operations, finance, communications and transformation.

It could be that as the discipline itself morphs and becomes more embedded into business in different ways, the individuals with the skills and experience to tackle these adapting mandates come from different careers paths, which more of less favour one gender over another.

In other words, the path into sustainability roles might be changing, which hypothetically could require time to see more consistent patterns in hiring from different groups.

Also interesting to note is the distinct difference between male and female participation in Long-Term Incentive Plans, which could have dramatic longer term financial implications. There could be a number of reasons for this, including the more prominent representation of men in senior roles, and the fact that women are significantly more likely to work part-time than men.

While it's not impossible for part-time employees to participate in LTIPs, the opportunity to do so will very much depend on the eligibility requirements, company size, jurisdiction, and the nature of the LTIP.

For businesses wanting to bring further gender equity to their compensation structure, exploring the requirements for these rewardss could be a great way to positively impact employees who are under-represented in these schemes.

It really is fantastic to see that the gulf between men's and women's compensation has narrowed since the last census. The devil, however, is in the details and thinking about how we can continue to present equitable opportunities as the profession changes.

The evidence is there to suggest that efforts to promote gender equity are working, though we need to continue thinking creatively about how we continue to drive positive change in the face of a dynamic and uncertain landscape ahead.

Emily Goetsch

Research Director,
Acre

10 | Closing Remarks

This section draws the findings together, reflecting on ten editions of the Census and what the data signals for sustainability professionals in the years ahead.

Looking back to the first Census

"The time has come, the Census read,
To talk of many things,
Of budgets – and roles – and reporting lines
Of benefits – and earnings"

When in 2007 we first came up with the idea of a survey examining who worked in what was then called CSR, how much they were paid and what they did, we never envisaged that nearly twenty years later it'd still be going strong. Given this is the tenth report, it seems fitting to go back to the beginning and highlight some of the things that have changed and what haven't.

The original survey focused solely on the UK (we only went international in 2010) and attracted 281 respondents, three quarters based in London and the South East of England. The eight-fold increase in responses tells you something about the growth of the sector and while the majority of UK-based participants are still located in these regions, it's now less than 60%, reflecting the wider embrace of sustainability and opportunities for working remotely. One noticeable difference was the split between female and male respondents – 51/49 in 2007, now closer to 60/40. The other big finding, which didn't come as a surprise, was that men dominated senior positions and were paid higher average salaries.

Hence, one of the most significant (and positive) developments, mirroring broader societal change, is that female representation at director/executive level is now much more in line with the overall composition of the sample. Similarly, the gender pay gap has narrowed particularly among in-house roles.

That doesn't mean the sector can rest on its laurels – there is still more to be done, and the pace needs to quicken, otherwise we risk our public statements around DEI being seen as disconnected from the reality of our own profession.

While some things change, others have remained the same. A noticeable example is where respondents focus their energies. This was always a key question: what do people in the sector actually do? The latest results – split by the now ubiquitous ESG categorisation – highlight decarbonisation, carbon management and the challenges posed by Climate Change (E); Community and Social impact and Just Transition (S); and reporting & disclosure (G).

In 2007, the same topics occupied the top positions. I wonder whether this is cause for celebration or regret?

On the environmental side, I'd argue it's positive the topics remain prominent – it demonstrates that organisations recognise that perseverance and long term commitment of resources are required. Likewise, the continued emphasis on social impact tells a similar story.

Conversely, the never-ending growth and evolution of reporting obligations, while providing work for many, are increasingly regarded as a cost of doing business rather than a driver of change.

From the outset, we were struck by how highly motivated people in the sector were and the desire to align their personal values with what they did at work. This has been a constant and perhaps the sector's greatest strength.

This is allied with a highly academically qualified workforce. The fact that 70% now have a master's degree or higher (versus 46% in 2007), many of which are sustainability-related, testifies to the latter.

And yet, I wonder if this is necessarily a good thing? I say this for two reasons. First, if a master's is becoming a prerequisite, given the cost of these qualifications, is there a danger this acts as a barrier to entry and limits the pool of talent available?

Secondly, will the sector be populated by highly expert, technically knowledgeable people whose understanding of other disciplines is deficient – to paraphrase Kipling, what should they know of sustainability who only sustainability know?

I'd like to conclude by thanking all of those who've been with us for all or part of the journey. It's your support and participation that has made this initiative such a success and one which, I hope, will continue to provide valuable insights in the future.

Paul Burke
Technical Director
SLR

Concluding the Census

SLR is delighted to have partnered with Acre on this tenth edition of the Sustainability Census. The breadth and depth of insight captured in this report provides a valuable and timely perspective on how sustainability is evolving globally, and on the people who are driving that change. At a time of both progress and complexity, this dataset offers an important, evidence-led view of where the profession stands.

The context in which sustainability professionals are operating has rarely been more complex. Economic volatility, political and ideological headwinds, and evolving regulatory frameworks have created a challenging environment in many regions. At the same time, the growth in ambition and activity in others, notably across parts of Asia Pacific, highlights the continued momentum behind the agenda. Taken together, this is a landscape defined by a potent mix of risks and opportunities. What is encouraging, both in the Census findings and in our own client work at SLR, is the clear determination to continue making progress despite these pressures.

A consistent theme throughout this report is the shift from rhetoric to delivery. Organisations are moving beyond broad commitments and increasingly focusing on what tangible progress looks like in practice. This is evident not only in climate mitigation and adaptation, but across the full spectrum of sustainability priorities. Delivering in this way requires a combination of deep technical expertise and a clear understanding of business strategy and stakeholder expectations: an intersection that is becoming ever more critical.

Linked to this is the continued integration of sustainability into the core of organisational decision-making. As the data shows, responsibility for sustainability is no longer confined to a small, centralised team. Instead, it is embedded across functions, with different parts of the business taking ownership for implementation and outcomes. This is a significant and positive shift, and one we expect to accelerate, as sustainability becomes increasingly inseparable from how organisations operate and grow.

Finally, my own experience echoes a key theme in the data: lasting progress is dependent on people. Having the right skills, understanding, and commitment is fundamental to turning ambition into action. The Census shows this profession is fortunate to benefit from high levels of motivation, satisfaction, and intellectual engagement. However, these strengths cannot be assumed. Sustaining momentum will depend not only on strategy and structure, but on ensuring that individuals are supported, developed, and empowered to lead change.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to the survey and to the teams involved in producing this report. Your input provides an essential foundation for understanding where the profession stands today, and where it needs to go next.

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