Most Sustainable
Workplace

UK
GBC

Shifting the
Foundations
of Sustainability

Confronting Cultural Inertia and the Limits of
Technical Solutions in the Built Environment

Contents

Definitions

Autonomy is a sense of volition and self-direction, where individuals feel in control of their own actions and make choices that align with personal values and interests, driven by personal meaning rather than external pressures.[1]

Competence is the experience of mastery and achievement in tasks, where individuals feel effective, confident in their abilities, and capable of pursuing and meeting challenges.[1]

Employee is an individual who is formally hired by an organisation to perform specific tasks and contribute to organisational objectives, working under agreed terms in exchange for compensation.[2]

Employee Engagement is the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in both their work and workplace. Highly engaged teams outperform the rest in business outcomes critical to the success of an organisation.[3]

Pillars (MSW Pillars) represent fundamental human psychological needs which, when fulfilled, significantly enhance motivation and engagement, and are a strong predictor of action.[1] The Pillars are grounded in psychological evidence, forming the foundation of the Most Sustainable Workplace framework and the tools integral to it.

Organisation is a structured group of individuals and resources brought together to achieve specific goals, typically operating with formalised roles, responsibilities, and governance.[4] Small organisation typically has fewer than 50 employees; medium employs between 50 to 250 employees; large has over 250 employees and is often divided into departments or divisions.[5]

Relatedness is the need to form meaningful relationships, feel understood and valued by others, and experience a sense of connectedness to both individuals and a broader context, providing a sense of belonging.[1]

Senior Leadership are the highest-ranking individuals in an organisation who set strategic direction, make executive decisions, and shape organisational culture. This group often includes the C-Suite and Directors.[6]

Sustainability is the practice of meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own, involving an integrated approach to environmental, social, and economic factors.[7]

Themes (MSW Themes) underpin the Pillars as nine specific attributes, which help identify gaps and plan targeted programmes to enhance employee engagement with a sustainability strategy.

Workforce is the collective body of employees within an organisation, representing all levels, roles, and functions that contribute to organisational productivity and culture.[8]

Workplace is the physical or virtual environment where employees conduct their work, shaped by organisational policies, culture, and practices.[9]

Foreword

Businesses and organisations are run by people – and people care about our planet. It's something we've underestimated, yet something very powerful. Our tendency in business to 'sanitise' or tune out what is real, instead working with the comfort and fluency of business language: planning, delivery, reporting. Sustainability professionals and organisations who promote sustainable solutions and business practices – like UKGBC – have done very well at tuning into the language of business. However, beyond the business language is a clear need for culture change and a mindset shift to really turn the dial on sustainability action and achieving different outcomes.

We underestimate the talent and leverage of employees, and the job of leadership of organisations is to unleash that talent and passion for a different future.

This report reinforces how much people care about sustainability and how connected they are to nature. It shows the potential for change just waiting to be unleashed in businesses across our industry, and the role that employee activation – alongside strong, visionary leadership – can play in driving sustained and systemic change.

At UKGBC, we now have a body of evidence to support the work we do on learning and leadership, and to back-up our instinct that great change can be achieved through understanding and connection between people. With the help of this report, we'll continue to offer bold and innovative events, resources, courses, programmes to our members and industry to radically transform the sustainability of the built environment.

Elfrida Hamilton-Russell
Learning and Leadership Director
UKGBC

Executive Summary

Despite the growing number of sustainability commitments and targets set by organisations within the built environment sector, a significant gap remains between these ambitions and the actions needed to achieve them. This research report focuses on the disconnect between organisational intentions, practical implementation, and measurable impact – the 'action gap'. Bridging this gap is essential if we are to accelerate progress on climate change goals and embed meaningful sustainability practices within organisations.

Understanding the Action Gap

The report explores the underlying causes of the action gap in sustainability efforts and potential pathways for closing it. Without a clear understanding of why this gap persists, organisations risk failing to meet their sustainability targets, investing in poorly targeted learning and development initiatives, and making unsubstantiated sustainability claims. This not only undermines progress but also erodes trust among stakeholders.

This research covered 1,699 employees from 18 UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) member organisations in Architecture & Design, Engineering, Industry Bodies & Organisations, and Property Consultancy & Management.

The report explores the factors that contribute to the **action gap in sustainability efforts,** aiming to uncover the underlying reasons for its persistence and identify potential pathways for closing it

4

The key findings include:

High Interest but Latent Motivation:

94% employees who said sustainability was important to them

78% employees who wanted to do more about sustainability at work

The 'action gap' is in fact one of multiple dimensions

- **High Interest but Latent Motivation:** Although 94% of employees said sustainability is important to them, and 78% wanted to contribute more at work, this strong interest does not always translate into action. Unlocking this latent motivation is key to driving meaningful change.

- **The Existence of an Action Gap:** Undoubtedly an 'action gap' exists, varying significantly in scale and nature. The barriers to sustainability action are influenced by factors such as organisational size, sub-sector, employee seniority, and job function.

- **Dimensions of the Action Gap:** The report identifies multiple dimensions of the 'action gap':

  - Organisational Intent vs. Actual Impact: A discrepancy often exists between public commitments and actual delivery.

  - Personal Concern vs. Action: Employees may care deeply about sustainability but lack the resources, knowledge, or support to act on it effectively.

  - External Messaging vs. Internal Practices: There is often a disconnect between an organisation's sustainability messaging and the internal practices experienced by employees.

  - Hierarchical Differences: Senior leaders and junior employees perceive and experience the 'action gap' differently, highlighting the need for tailored approaches.

- **Differences Across Organisations:** Strengths and barriers to action on sustainability differ significantly across sub-sectors and organisation sizes. Seniority and job function are critical determinants of these barriers, making them focal points for developing effective strategies.

Shifting the foundations of sustainability

The report advocates for a shift from viewing employee engagement as a process to focusing on the outcome of - **a motivated, engaged and active workforce** that is genuinely committed to sustainability. Fostering intrinsic motivation is essential, and the evidence in this report suggests that employers would be 'pushing at an open door' if they can create the right conditions within the organisation. In practice, this requires:

- Acknowledging that the transition to a sustainable built environment is complex and cannot rely on generic approaches to learning and development. **A broader set of tailored interventions** is needed, responding to the specific strengths and barriers identified in this report.

- Leveraging a data-driven approach to understand the unique characteristics of the 'action gap' within each organisation, allowing for **targeted interventions** that address specific needs and challenges.

- Recognising the role of **seniority and job function** in shaping common barriers that create the 'action gap', which should be central to any organisational change strategy.

- A stronger focus on cultural change, with senior leaders and sustainability teams **creating conditions for action** and shared responsibility for sustainability goals.

- Enhancing **corporate reporting, transparency and governance** through honest communication about sustainability targets, supported by consistent metrics around culture and the reality of the employee experience. Transparent reporting builds trust with stakeholders by making organisational efforts visible and verifiable.

Sustainability in the built environment requires transformative change that permeates entire organisations. Across the industry, it is recognised that every action results from individual or collective decisions shaped by values, practices, culture, and context. These choices determine organisation's ability to transform sustainably and build resilience for the future. Achieving this requires a strong focus on people and culture, along with improvements in how these factors are understood, planned, and evaluated. While the scale of change needed is significant, so are the opportunities. By unlocking the latent motivation within the workforce, organisations can drive meaningful progress and innovation.

The Role of Industry Bodies

The **UKGBC** has been instrumental in supporting its member' sustainability efforts and is continuing to make a valuable contribution to the industry. The report suggests opportunities for UKGBC to enhance its offerings through providing a broader set of resources and interventions that address the diverse cultural conditions and practices within sub-sectors of the built environment. It also has an important leadership role in promoting transparency and cultural change across the industry.

Introduction

The UN Secretary General has described this decade as "[the one] in which the battle for 1.5°C will be won or lost", underscoring the imperative for global climate action. The built environment sector alone accounts for 13% of global GDP and two-thirds of global wealth[10]. It faces mounting pressure from governments and stakeholders to implement technical and regulatory solutions. Whilst the sector contributes 40% of the world's energy-related carbon emissions[10] and half of total global resource use[11], its potential for positive impact remains to be fully realised.

While organisations such as the UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) have long championed the sustainability agenda within the built environment and progress has been made in many areas, a persistent gap remains between intentions and actions. Research by Accenture reveals that 93% of G2000 companies with net-zero commitments will likely miss their targets[12], and study by Microsoft points to the fact that organisations are often better at developing sustainability strategies than embedding them in daily operations[13]. Whilst extending beyond the built environment, these findings highlight a critical need for organisations to strengthen the link between sustainability goals and practical implementation.

Although, various complex and systemic factors shape progress in addressing climate change and biodiversity loss, an often-under-utilised lever for change is the power of employee engagement and workplace culture. With a global workforce of 3.3 billion, employee engagement represents an extraordinary potential to drive essential change where mobilised by senior leaders. In the UK alone, the construction sub-sector employs 2.1 million people[14], highlighting the scale of opportunity for employee action on sustainability. Research indicates that where employees feel a genuine commitment to sustainability, organisations achieve a 16% higher engagement rate[15]. Thus, an engaged workforce is not only beneficial to business performance but essential for advancing on sustainability.

Given the global and sectoral pressures, a transformative opportunity exists for organisations to leverage employee engagement and workplace culture as pathways to drive sustainability. This report explores how embedding sustainability within organisations – through a motivated, engaged and active workforce – can bridge the gap between organisational ambition and tangible action. Focusing on UKGBC member organisations, we aim to understand how sustainability commitments translate into employees' day-to-day experiences, and how the barriers to employee engagement contribute to the disconnect between intention and action.

The built environment sector accounts for

40% of global energy-related carbon emissions and **50%** of resource use yet a **persistent gap between intentions and actions remains**

Bridging the Action Gap Through Organisational Change

The human and cultural transformations required have not received sufficient time and attention.

Metrics of progress and success largely measure activity, not impact

Gallup[3] and Microsoft[13] have found that workforce engagement is critically low, with only 10% of employees in the UK engaged in their job versus 23% worldwide. Our research in this report and the 2024 Most Sustainable Workplace Index Report.[16], highlighted employee engagement, motivation and activation, together with lack of transparency, as fundamental barriers to meeting sustainability goals in organisations. At the same time, our research also reveals that leaders aiming to build engagement around sustainability would be 'pushing at an open door' – their employees care about sustainability and want to do more at work. This enthusiasm is a valuable asset, as it presents each organisation with the opportunity to leverage the latent motivation that exists within the workplace and drive change from within. In this context, engaging employees on issues that resonate with them is both a logical and an important strategic step forward.

In recent years, the rise of hybrid working has introduced new dynamics to employee engagement and workplace culture. As many employees split time between office and remote work, organisations have an opportunity to leverage this flexibility to foster stronger connections to purpose-driven goals, including sustainability. By integrating sustainability into daily roles across varied work environments, organisations can enhance employee motivation not only towards environmental targets but also for overall job satisfaction and commitment.

The human and cultural transformations required within organisations and across industry to align intention with action have, however, not received sufficient time and attention. Organisations have yet to clearly define a cultural vision and people strategies relating to sustainability or remove systemic barriers to employee action through their implementation. Common approaches to workplace engagement often rely on solutions that fail to deliver the cultural shift necessary to effectively embed sustainability:

- Organisations often focus on educating employees about sustainability, but this alone does not translate into meaningful behavioural change, as employees are left with insufficient time, support and certainty to integrate information into their everyday responsibilities.

- Many organisations lack insight around how cultural and systemic conditions experienced by employees shape action on sustainability. Without this understanding, they cannot make necessary adjustments to employee engagement.

- Training completion rates and basic feedback are frequently used as metrics of success, despite the fact that these largely measure activity not impact. There is insufficiently robust measurement of progress and coverage within corporate sustainability reporting when it comes to people and culture.

Reliance on technological, operational and communication strategies to deliver sustainability ambitions is prioritised with insufficient weight placed on human and cultural transformation. Few organisations can articulate the future culture and character of the organisation where sustainability is genuinely embedded at their core.

While substantial resources are invested in traditional capability building and engagement approaches, a shift is needed to understand whether these programmes truly address the unique challenges specific to industry, sector, organisation, and even individual job function. By applying evidence from psychology, organisations can start to see pathways towards a human-centric approach based around a motivated, engaged and active workforce and a culture of sustainability woven into its DNA. Initiatives by UKGBC and Most Sustainable Workplace are already engaging with various organisations to address this issue, and the early indications are encouraging.

This report looks specifically at employee engagement in sustainability amongst UKGBC member organisations. By virtue of their UKGBC membership, all participating organisations have an existing commitment to sustainability. The start point is therefore not questioning intent, which is clear. Instead, we focus on understanding the extent to which their commitments have filtered through into the day-to-day experience of employees. We look into the barriers to employee engagement that are underpinning the 'action gap'. We start from the principle that net-zero and sustainability is a whole-business issue and cannot be achieved without the majority of employees being motivated, engaged and active in sustainability.

It is key that sustainability practitioners and senior leaders acknowledge that achieving lasting impact requires both human and technical approaches. The key outcome must be a motivated, engaged and active workforce and creating the cultural conditions that support them. The evidence and tools are readily available to help reverse inertia across the built environment, and senior leadership need to ground their approach in an evidence-based framework. By understanding employee perspectives through such a framework, organisations can develop insight and shape pathways that focus interventions and allocate resources more effectively.

Establishing a foundation for progress must be underpinned by ambition and transparency. Most corporate sustainability reports lack the meaningful metrics on people and culture that are required to evaluate progress and risk by internal and external stakeholders. There is a need for increased transparency across industries and supply networks regarding these aspects, to promote open dialogues about the human-centred transformation essential for achieving the desired sustainable change.

Sustainability is a whole business issue and cannot be achieved without the majority of employees being motivated, engaged and active in sustainability

Methodology and Analytical Approach

This research project aimed to understand how the cultural conditions and organisational practices are shaping the 'action gap' on sustainability within the built environment sector. Specifically, it sought to gain insight into the current barriers to building a motivated, engaged and active workforce and explore ways to support employees in contributing to sustainability targets within their roles.

This research adopted the Most Sustainable Workplace (MSW) framework as the core structure to gather data and examine the sustainability 'action gap' within UKGBC member organisations. The MSW framework focuses on building internalised and intrinsic motivation as a pathway to employee engagement, drawing on evidence-based models from psychology and human behaviour including Self Determination Theory[1], the Transtheoretical Model[16] and the role of nature connection in supporting pro-environmental behaviour.[17]

The MSW framework is structured around Pillars and Themes (Figure 1), which form the foundation of the diagnostic questionnaire used in this research. The questionnaire comprises 46 statements. Each is ranked by responders on a scale from 1 to 7 reflecting the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement. Results were then converted into scores out of 100, in alignment with our MSW Index Score headline metric, and mapped against our MSW Maturity Model. Seven maturity levels, defined separately through statistical analysis based on data from MSW "From the Ground Up" report.[16], provide a heatmap to contextualise the scores and enable benchmarking. The levels of the Maturity are presented visually throughout the report, using colours from dark red to highlight the lowest results, to dark green for the highest results (Figure 2). These evaluate the effectiveness in engaging and activating employees on sustainability across organisations, sub-sectors and peer groups.

Figure 1: The Most Sustainable Workplace framework

3 Pillars   **9 Themes**
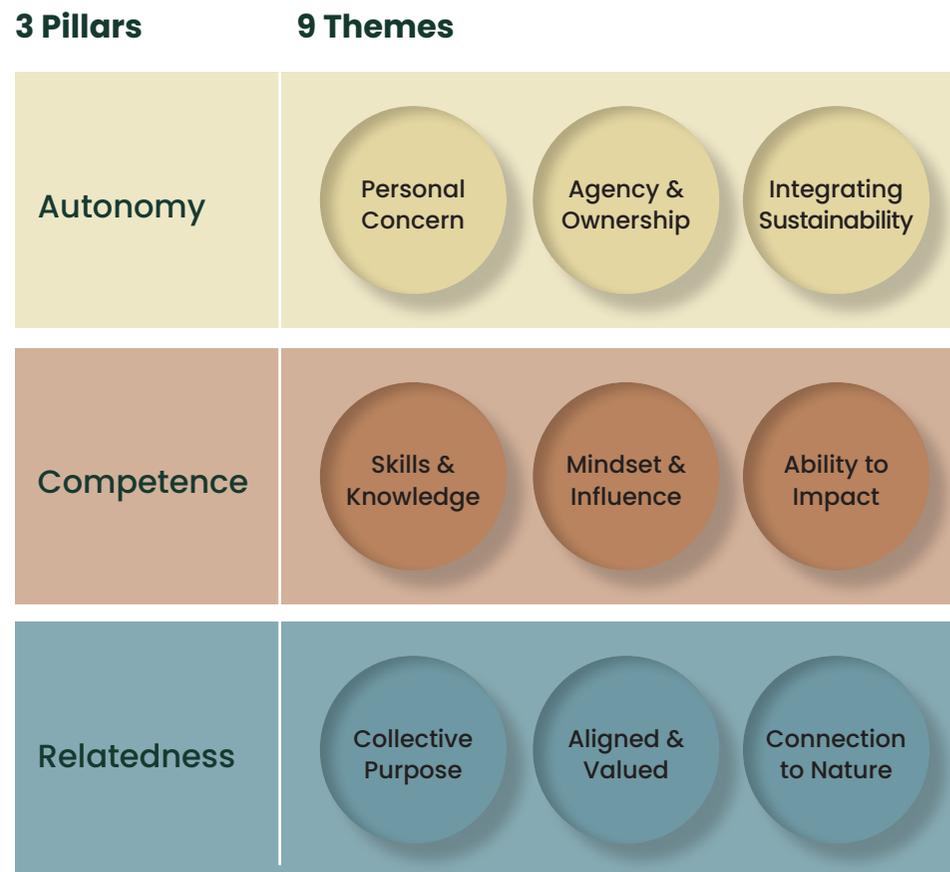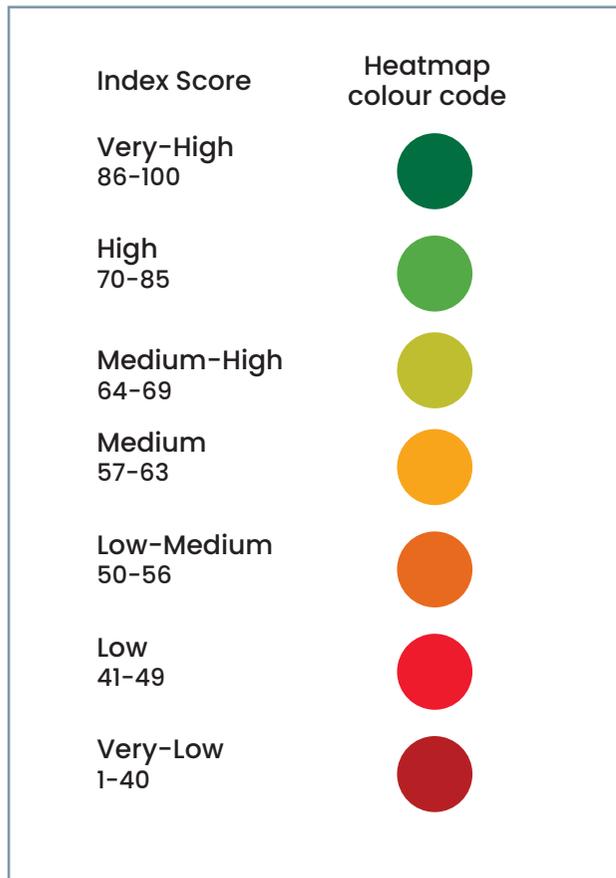
Autonomy	Personal Concern	Agency & Ownership	Integrating Sustainability
Competence	Skills & Knowledge	Mindset & Influence	Ability to Impact
Relatedness	Collective Purpose	Aligned & Valued	Connection to Nature

Figure 2: The Most Sustainable Workplace Maturity Model and Associated Colours

Index Score	Heatmap colour code
Very-High 86-100	(dark green)
High 70-85	(green)
Medium-High 64-69	(yellow-green)
Medium 57-63	(amber)
Low-Medium 50-56	(orange)
Low 41-49	(red)
Very-Low 1-40	(dark red)

After the invitation was shared with UKGBC members, 18 organisations opted to participate, and the diagnostic questionnaire was then distributed to their employees. Each organisation was allocated an anonymised letter-code from A to S. The cohort included small, medium and large organisations (see Definitions), representing four key sub-sectors within the built environment defined by their core business type: Architecture & Design, Engineering, Industry Bodies & Organisations, and Property Consultancy & Management. Responses were received between May and June 2024. This achieved an average response rate of 40.3% per organisation and overall response rate of 15.3%, which was substantially influenced by low response rates in two large organisations. A breakdown of responses received according to organisation size and sub-sector is included in Table 1 and Table 2. Within organisations, data collected was tagged by division and location, which were specific to organisations, and by seniority, which was standardised into five groups: Junior/Graduate/Admin, Manager/Supervisor, Senior Manager, Director, and C-Suite/Senior Leadership.

Table 1: Number of Responses by Sub-Sector Across the Cohort

Built Environment Sub-Sector	Number of Organisations	Total Number of Employees	Number of Responses Received
Architecture & Design	7	1636	691
Engineering	3	2085	358
Industry Bodies & Organisations	2	66	46
Property Consultancy & Management	6	7292	604
Total	18	11079	1699

## Table 2: Number of Responses by Organisation Size Group Across the Cohort

Size of Organisation	Number of Organisations	Total Number of Employees	Number of Responses Received
Small	3	69	34
Medium	3	259	143
Large	12	10751	1522
Total	18	11079	1699

The data was analysed at the cohort, sub-sector, organisation, seniority, division and location levels, using the Pillars and Themes of the MSW framework. The principal statistical methods included:

- Means to identify overall trends and comparisons,

- Standard Deviation to assess variance within populations,

- Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine if there were significant differences between populations,

- Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test to determine which groups differ significantly based on the Average Score.

The statistical analysis confirmed a broadly 'normal' population distribution, where the mean, median, and mode are all the same, resulting in a bell curve shape (Figure 3). The normal distribution is important because statistical methods assume that data is normally distributed. If data deviates, the analysis accuracy might be compromised.

Figure 3: Distribution of Average Scores Across the Cohort
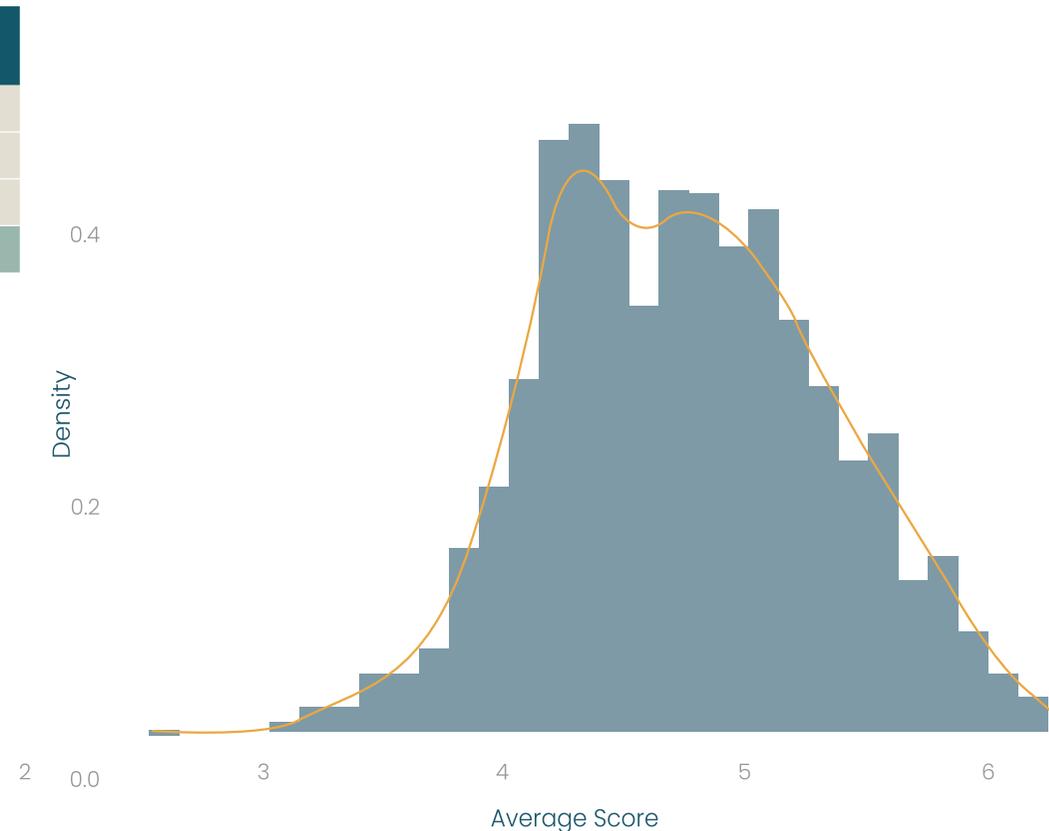
To complement findings in this report, benchmarks are referenced from our "2024 Most Sustainable Workplace Index Cross-Industry Report: *From the Ground Up*"[16], which analysed the factors driving employee engagement in sustainability across 1400 respondents from seven industries ('All Sectors' benchmark), including the built environment ('Built Environment' benchmark). Findings from this report are referenced throughout, providing context and comparative insight beyond the 18 organisations and four sub-sectors featured in this project.

While this research provides valuable observations, a few limitations should be acknowledged. With a focus on UKGBC members, who often pay more attention to sustainable practices, the results may not fully reflect the broader range of organisational perspectives, particularly those with lesser engagement in sustainability.

Larger sample sizes generally provide more reliable and valid results. With an average response rate of 40.3% per organisation, the data offers a representative overall sample for many organisations. Therefore, companies with a higher number of participants are likely to have more reliable scores, whereas organisations with fewer participants may yield results with greater variability.

The sample is also skewed towards larger organisations, and although broad patterns were identified, some finer organisation-specific nuances impacting sustainability may not have been captured. Additionally, since data is self-reported, inherent biases may affect responses, influenced by individual values and perceptions.

Finally, the findings represent a snapshot in time, which may shift as organisational cultures or external factors evolve. Recognising these limitations helps contextualise the findings and encourages mindful use of the insights across different organisations.

The **average response rate** per organisation was
40.3%

13

Insights and Key Findings

64 — UKGBC Study Average

55 — MSWI 'All Sector' benchmark

57 — MSWI 'Built Environment' benchmark

The data captures how the dynamics within sub-sectors and companies shape workplace engagement and culture in relation to sustainability and underline the argument for a nuanced approach to people and culture within sustainability strategies. The research shows how core business type (sub-sector), company size, seniority level, and division significantly impact employees' perceptions and engagement with sustainability. This highlights the need for tailored strategies that consider these factors to effectively accelerate sustainable practices within organisations.

The diagram above illustrates the average Index scores from the UKGBC cohort, comparing these with the average scores from our 2024 MSW report across seven industries[16], and also specifically within the built environment subset of that study. The colours represent the scaled heatmap scores depicted in the Methodology and Analytical Approach section. The primary finding is that the average of UKGBC participants in this study outperformed both the 'All-Sector' and 'Built Environment' benchmarks from our cross-industry report. This suggests higher levels of engagement and motivation towards sustainability among employees in the UKGBC member organisations.

The average UK Green Building Council participants in this study **outperformed** both the 'All-Sector' and 'Built Environment' benchmarks from our cross-industry report
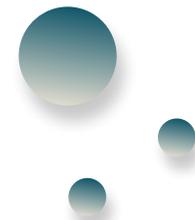
Looking at the analysis behind these figures, a number of further findings become clearer:

People care about sustainability and want to do more at work
With 94% of employees reporting that sustainability is important to them and 78% actively wanting to increase their involvement, the key finding in this research is that substantial latent motivation exists within the workforce to act on sustainability. This aligns with the results of our cross-industry report *"From the Ground Up"* [16] and presents an opportunity for leaders to activate and engage their workforce.

UKGBC participants have more engaged and active employees
The average score for UKGBC members participating in this study was 64 (out of 100), compared to 57 for 'Built Environment' benchmark and 55 for our 'All-Sector' benchmark[16]. This indicates that the levels of motivation and engagement in sustainability as a predictor of action are higher amongst UKGBC members than both the built environment overall and general population.

There are clear trends around strengths and barriers
The analysis based on Pillars found that 'Relatedness' is the strongest performing Pillar, while 'Competence' and 'Autonomy' emerged as barriers (Figure 4). This would suggest that the 'action gap' could be reduced through interventions focused on:

- Building skills and employees' confidence in their ability to effect positive change, and

- Supporting employee to develop their sense of what sustainability means to them personally and professionally together with interventions that align this with organisational priorities and increase sense of agency.
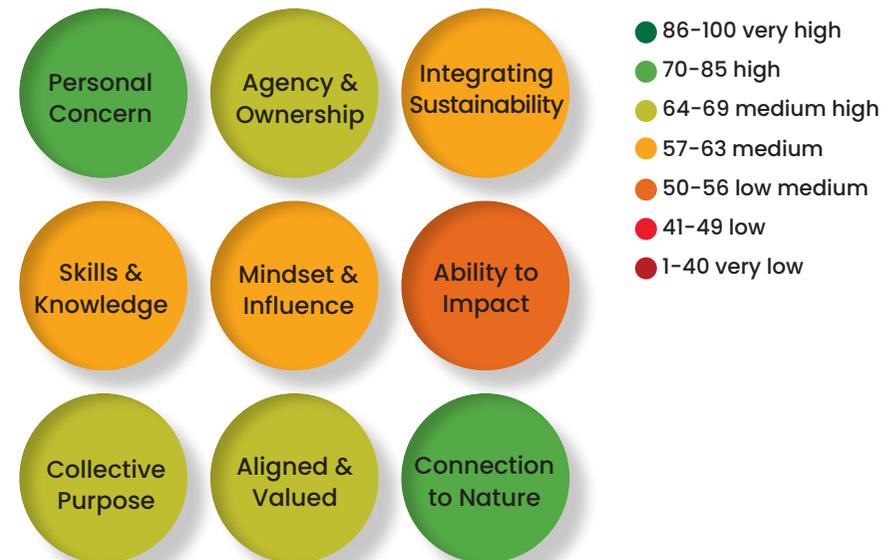
Figure 4: Cohort-Wide Pillar Averages for Participating Organisations

Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
65	60	68

15
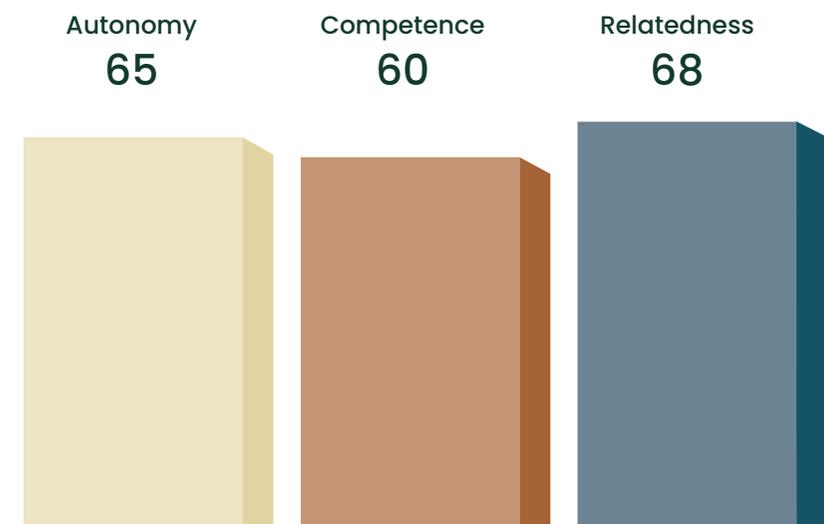
The analysis of the Most Sustainable Workplace Themes (Figure 5) provides further evidence of strengths and barriers to engagement on sustainability. At a cohort level, this provides the headline insight into overall trends within UKGBC member organisations.

Key strengths identified were 'Personal Concern' and 'Connection to Nature', showing that employees care about sustainability and feel a sense of personal connection to environmental issues. However, barriers like 'Integrating Sustainability', 'Ability to Impact', 'Mindset & Influence', and 'Skills & Knowledge' indicate challenges in embedding sustainability in the roles and responsibilities, with insufficient time and resource dedicated to the process of integrating it within roles. The results also highlight the challenge around 'Competence' relating to the deficit in both technical and soft skills, which provide employees with the confidence and mindset to influence change and make a meaningful impact.

Figure 5: Cohort-Wide Theme Averages for Participating Organisations

Personal Concern

Agency & Ownership

Integrating Sustainability

Skills & Knowledge

Mindset & Influence

Ability to Impact

Collective Purpose

Aligned & Valued

Connection to Nature

- 86–100 very high
- 70–85 high
- 64–69 medium high
- 57–63 medium
- 50–56 low medium
- 41–49 low
- 1–40 very low

Sub-Sector Specific Dynamics

64

Architecture & Design

68

Engineering

72

Industry Bodies & Organisations

60

Property Consultancy & Management

- 86-100 very high
- 70-85 high
- 64-69 medium high
- 57-63 medium
- 50-56 low medium
- 41-49 low
- 1-40 very low

Participating organisations were identified within four sub-sectors. The analysis showed that the population within each sub-sector is statistically different. This provides insight into how the factors affecting employee action on sustainability are influenced by different professions and roles played within the built environment.

Whilst the sub-sectors share some common strengths in 'Personal Concern' and 'Connection to Nature', the barriers to employee engagement vary. There are undoubtedly different cultures within these sub-sectors and findings show how the cultural conditions and ways of working shape the levels of motivation, engagement and likely action within each. In particular, Industry Bodies & Organisations achieved highest results suggesting employees within these organisations are more engaged in sustainability. Conversely, the lowest score was for Property Consultancy & Management indicating that employees are typically less motivated and engaged in sustainability within this sub-sector. Therefore, the pathways to closing the 'action gap' on sustainability would need to respond to these trends based on the organisation's sub-sector.

The following heatmaps highlight strengths and barriers based on the nine Themes within each sub-sector, with colours representing the Index scores out of 100, as detailed in Methodology and Analytical Approach. Green indicates higher and more positive scores and red highlights areas requiring significant attention.

Architecture & Design

Making it into the 'Medium-High' maturity by virtue of a rounded decimal point, the Architecture & Design sub-sector faces particular challenges around perceived competence amongst employees. Whilst a deficit in 'Skills & Knowledge' contribute to this, the largest barrier is a sense that actions lack a tangible impact. These findings can equally be seen in research from the RIBA report[19] that found over half of those architects surveyed felt their practice lacked the skills to deliver sustainable design.

Personal Concern

Agency & Ownership

Integrating Sustainability

Skills & Knowledge

Mindset & Influence

Ability to Impact

Collective Purpose

Aligned & Valued

Connection to Nature

● 86-100 very high
● 70-85 high
● 64-69 medium high
● 57-63 medium
● 50-56 low medium
● 41-49 low
● 1-40 very low

Engineering

The Engineering sub-sector demonstrated an increased sense of sustainability being integrated within roles, being a core part of culture and how the business was run. Similarly to Architecture & Design, the key barriers this sub-sector faces are around competence, with the need to build skills and developing a sense of confidence amongst employees that they can make a difference within their work and deliver tangible impact.

Personal Concern

Agency & Ownership

Integrating Sustainability

Skills & Knowledge

Mindset & Influence

Ability to Impact

Collective Purpose

Aligned & Valued

Connection to Nature

Industry Bodies & Organisations

As the top-performing sub-sector in this study, Industry Bodies & Organisations scored higher across all but one Themes compared to their peer groups, showing particular high levels of engagement in areas related to alignment, integration and a shared purpose. The key gap relating to 'Ability to Impact' suggests that establishing feedback loops to demonstrate tangible impact is key to building and sustaining employee motivation and driving further action.

Personal Concern	Agency & Ownership	Integrating Sustainability
Skills & Knowledge	Mindset & Influence	Ability to Impact
Collective Purpose	Aligned & Valued	Connection to Nature

Legend:
- 86-100 very high
- 70-85 high
- 64-69 medium high
- 57-63 medium
- 50-56 low medium
- 41-49 low
- 1-40 very low

Property Consultancy & Management

The Theme scores for this sub-sector present a mixed picture, where personal interest and passion for sustainability remain strong albeit with multiple barriers limiting action within the workforce. The results highlight a gap between personal intent and workplace action, driven by lower scores in areas such as a shared purpose, misalignment in organisational functions and limited integration of sustainability within roles.

Personal Concern	Agency & Ownership	Integrating Sustainability
Skills & Knowledge	Mindset & Influence	Ability to Impact
Collective Purpose	Aligned & Valued	Connection to Nature

The Influence of Organisational Size

74
Small Organisations

67
Medium Organisations

63
Large Organisations

● 86-100 very high
● 70-85 high
● 64-69 medium high
● 57-63 medium
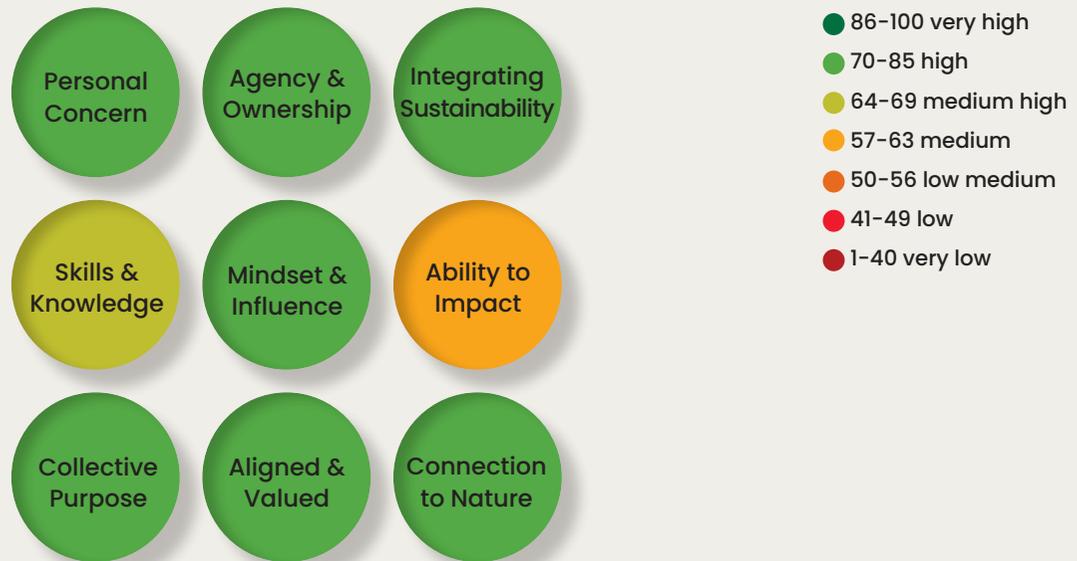● 50-56 low medium
● 41-49 low
● 1-40 very low

The study findings indicate that the factors driving employee action on sustainability are influenced by the size of the organisation – the larger the organisation, the less engaged the workforce is to deliver sustainability objectives.

Although the numbers of participating organisations were skewed towards large (12) as opposed to medium (3) and small (3), the analysis confirms statistically significant differences for employees working in small, medium and large organisations. A notable factor within these results is the fact that whilst two of the three small organisations were in the Industry Bodies & Organisations sub-sector (which has the potential to influence the results), the small organisation in Property Consultancy & Management also scored comparably high.

'Autonomy', 'Competence' and 'Relatedness' Pillars score consistently higher for small organisations. In fact, scores for each Pillar decrease as organisations get larger, with the most significant differences in 'Autonomy' and 'Relatedness', and with results in 'Competence' being more consistent. This indicates that as organisations become larger, the 'action gap' widens, mainly due to factors linked to personal autonomy, agency, and culture.

Small Organisations

The three small organisations scored consistently higher across all Themes related to employee motivation, engagement and action in sustainability. Alongside modestly higher scores in 'Skills & Knowledge' and 'Mindset & Influence', the most significant increase compared to medium and large organisations is in cultural alignment, sense of 'Collective Purpose' and closer integration of sustainability within core roles.

|		
Personal Concern	Agency & Ownership	Integrating Sustainability
Skills & Knowledge	Mindset & Influence	Ability to Impact
Collective Purpose	Aligned & Valued	Connection to Nature

- ● 86-100 very high
- ● 70-85 high
- ● 64-69 medium high
- ● 57-63 medium
- ● 50-56 low medium
- ● 41-49 low
- ● 1-40 very low

Medium Organisations

Medium-sized organisations displayed mixed scores, sharing similarities with both smaller and larger organisations. They achieved consistently high scores in personal interest and feeling more 'Aligned & Valued' in the workplace, similar to the smaller organisations. However, the key Themes of 'Skills & Knowledge', 'Mindset & Influence', and 'Integrating Sustainability' are evident in creating an 'action gap' within these organisations.

Personal Concern	Agency & Ownership	Integrating Sustainability
Skills & Knowledge	Mindset & Influence	Ability to Impact
Collective Purpose	Aligned & Valued	Connection to Nature

Large Organisations

Larger organisations often find it challenging to engage, empower, and activate their workforce at scale, reflected in a mixed picture of scores. The personal link to sustainability and nature is strong, yet the core Themes that translate this interest into workplace action score lower than for medium and smaller organisations. Larger organisations encounter similar challenges to medium-sized organisations in areas such as 'Ability to Impact,' 'Skills & Knowledge,' 'Mindset & Influence,' and 'Integrating Sustainability.' However, what also becomes evident is a decline in 'Collective Purpose' and 'Aligned & Valued.'

Personal Concern

Agency & Ownership

Integrating Sustainability

Skills & Knowledge

Mindset & Influence

Ability to Impact

Collective Purpose

Aligned & Valued

Connection to Nature

- 86-100 very high
- 70-85 high
- 64-69 medium high
- 57-63 medium
- 50-56 low medium
- 41-49 low
- 1-40 very low

Distinctive Organisational Characteristics

Participating organisations showed a wide range of scores, from a low score of 57 to a high score of 79 (Figure 6). Whilst clear trends are evident within sub-sectors and size of organisations, this points to the influence of unique organisational factors on employee motivation, engagement and action on sustainability. In essence, the results show that organisational culture and ways of working play a crucial role in determining the levels of employee engagement in sustainability.

Figure 6: Comparison of Individual Organisation Scores Across the Cohort
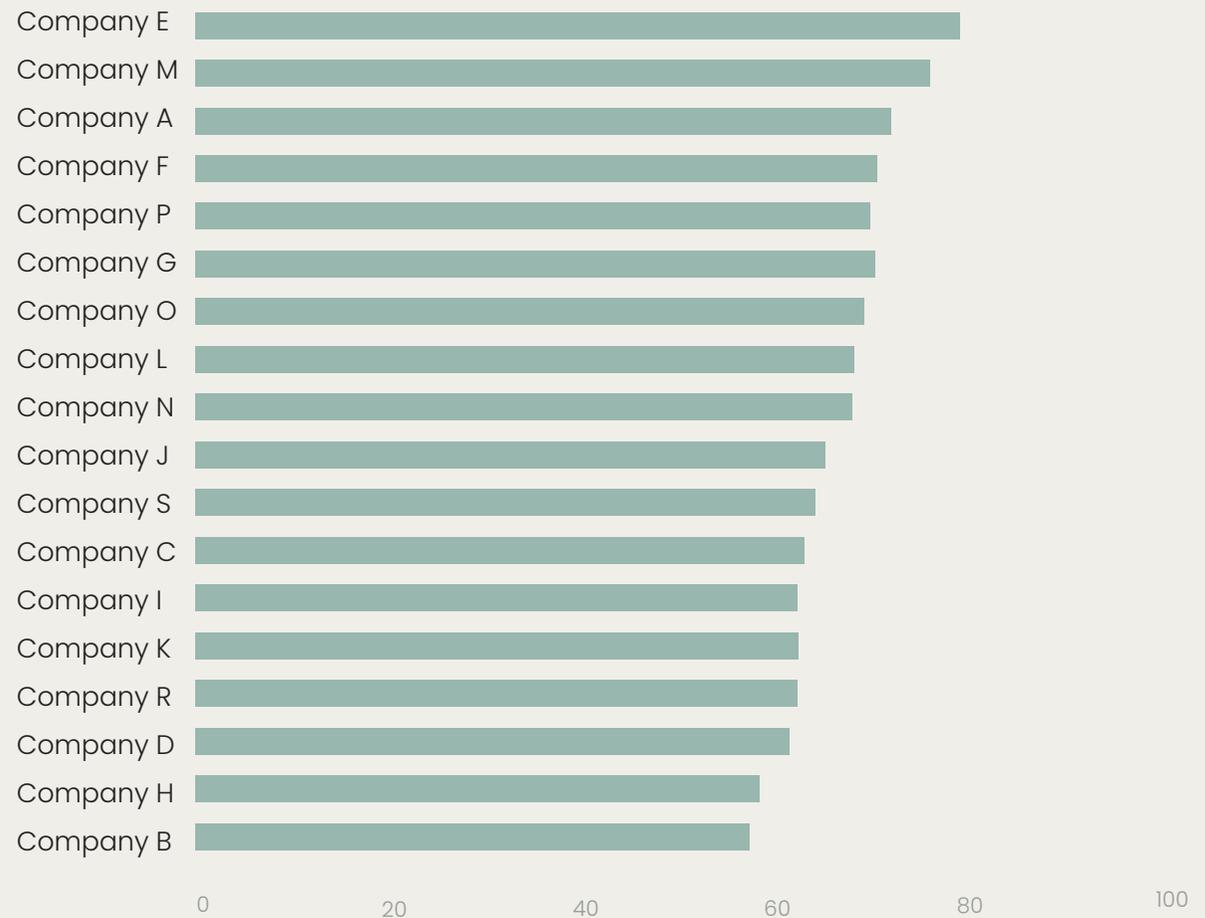
What is more, the data suggests that each organisation is distinct from a statistical perspective (Figure 7), and specific strengths and barriers shape employee engagement in sustainability. Factors such as prevalent leadership style, organisational structure, communication practices, working conditions, and company policies and procedures all influence the organisational culture. This again is a reminder that any blanket approach to engaging employees should be reconsidered.

De-coding symbols in the boxplot:

- **Middle line** inside each box (median) represents the median employee engagement score for each company.

- The **height of the box** (interquartile range) shows the range where the middle 50% of employee engagement scores fall. A tall box means more variation in the scores and a shorter box means most scores are closer together and more consistent across employees.

- **Whiskers** show the range of typical employee engagement scores for each company. Longer whiskers mean more variation in engagement and shorter whiskers indicate that most employees' scores are similar.

- **Dots** beyond whiskers (outliers) represent outlier scores, suggesting some individuals or groups within these companies have significantly higher or lower engagement scores than their colleagues.

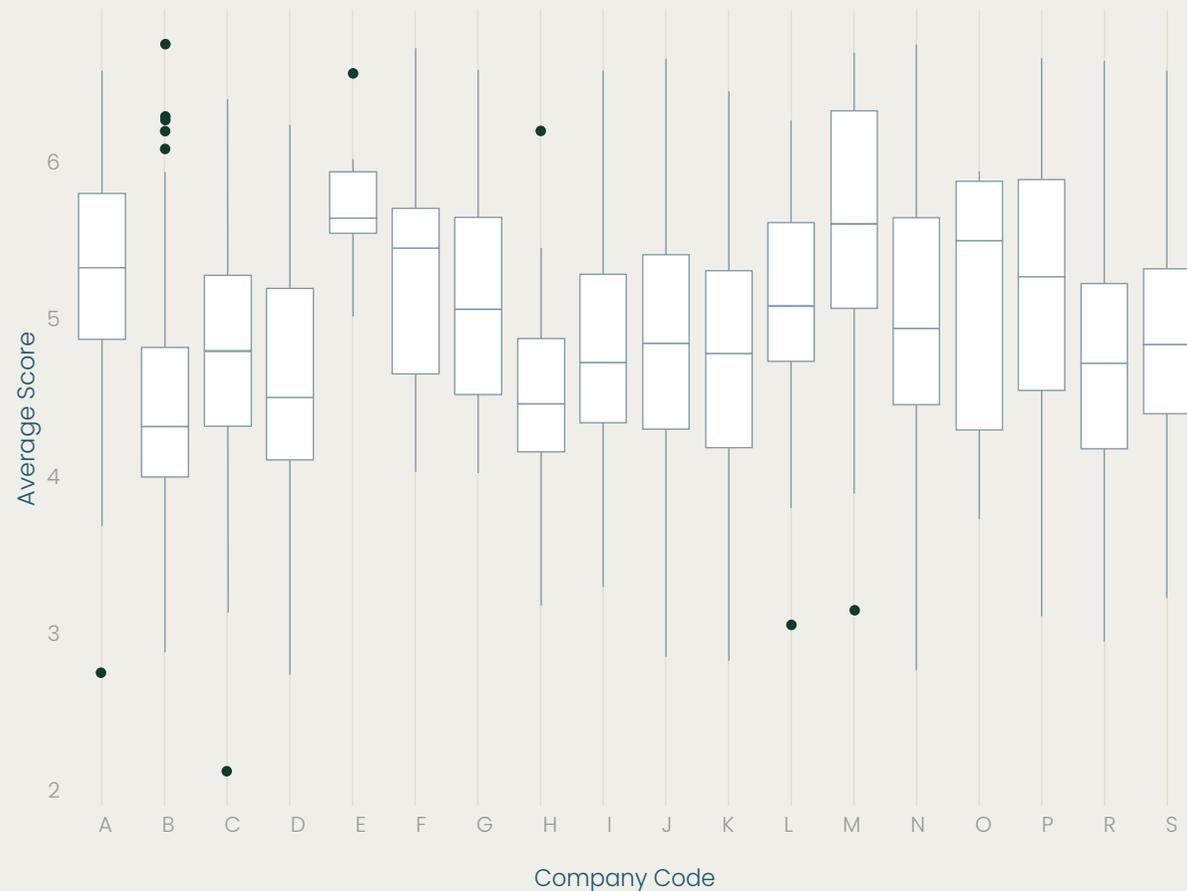## Figure 7: Variation in Average Scores Across Participating Organisations

Figure 8: Average Theme Scores for Organisations I and K within Architecture & Design Sub-Sector

A closer look at two large companies within the Architecture & Design sub-sector - Organisations I and Organisation K - illustrates that whilst we can learn from common trends, there are important differences between organisations.

Both organisations received the same Most Sustainable Workplace Index scores. At the Pillar level, some consistent patterns emerge with 'Relatedness' scoring the highest across both companies and 'Competence' receiving the lowest scores. When comparing Themes, similarities are noticeable (Figure 8). For both organisations, 'Personal Concern' and 'Connection to Nature' were the highest scoring Themes. However, Organisation I saw its lowest scores in 'Integrating Sustainability' and employees' 'Ability to Impact' the workplace. In contrast, Organisation K achieved higher scores in 'Ability to Impact' and its lowest overall scores appeared in 'Integrating Sustainability' and 'Aligned & Valued'.

These findings suggest that while building skills, knowledge and the confidence is essential to unlock employee action in sustainability across both organisations, tailored approach is needed if they are going to address specific barriers that exist.

Organisation I (MSWI Score: 63)

Organisation I could focus on addressing individual barriers to developing ownership, agency and confidence in employees' ability to deliver tangible impact.
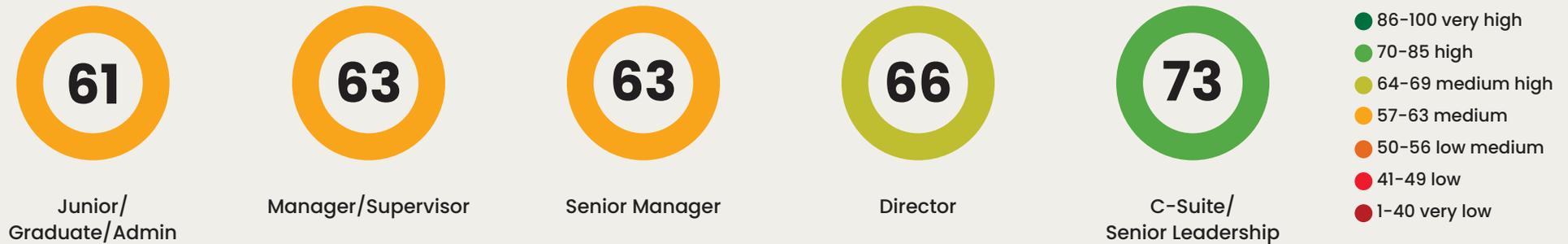
Organisation K (MSWI Score: 63)

Organisation K might focus more on removing cultural barriers through interventions that help integrate sustainability into daily operations and aligning sustainability objectives and commitments with the way the organisation functions in practice, including rewards and recognition systems.

The above findings underscore the unique nature of each organisation and the conditions affecting employee engagement with sustainability. Whilst we can see trends across sub-sectors and sizes of organisations, nuanced differences suggest the need for company-specific strategies and tailored approaches to improve sustainability integration, employee empowerment, and overall culture around sustainability.

Seniority Levels and their Influence

61

Junior/
Graduate/Admin

63

Manager/Supervisor

63

Senior Manager

66

Director

73

C-Suite/
Senior Leadership

- 86-100 very high
- 70-85 high
- 64-69 medium high
- 57-63 medium
- 50-56 low medium
- 41-49 low
- 1-40 very low

The analysis shows that the employee experience at senior levels of organisations is more aligned with building motivation, engagement and action than at Junior and Manager levels. In other words, there are greater barriers to engagement and action for Junior, Manager and Senior Manager colleagues compared to their more senior counterparts (Directors and C-Suite).

A closer look at what is driving these differences highlights disparities between more Junior levels and Senior ones across all Pillars. Senior leaders score higher in 'Autonomy', 'Competence' and 'Relatedness' than their less senior colleagues. The most significant differential appears in 'Autonomy' and 'Relatedness', suggesting that the Junior groups feel less connected within the workplace and experience less control in sustainability-related decisions compared to C-Suite roles, indicating that they feel the least empowered group to make impactful choices.

Figure 9: Average Theme Scores by Seniority Levels Across the Cohort

	Junior	Manager	Senior Manager	Director	C-Suite
Personal Concern	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Agency & Ownership	🟠	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟢
Integrating Sustainability	🔴	🔴	🟠	🟠	🟡
Skills & Knowledge	🟠	🟠	🟠	🟠	🟠
Ability to Impact	🔴	🔴	🔴	🔴	🟠
Mindset & Influence	🔴	🟠	🟠	🟡	🟢
Collective Purpose	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟢
Connection to Nature	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Aligned & Valued	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟢

It is therefore crucial for leaders to **measure their success** by not only creating the strategy but also by enabling the **conditions, support, and opportunities** for the rest of the organisation to contribute to sustainability

Zooming into the Themes (Figure 9), there are both commonalities and differences across seniority levels. 'Personal Concern' and 'Connection to Nature' stand out as the strongest Themes across all groups, indicating the extent to which employees care about sustainability, wish to do more in the workplace and feel connected to nature, which is consistent throughout the organisations. Equally, 'Skills & Knowledge' is a consistent barrier. In contrast, 'Ability to Impact' scored as the weakest Theme, particularly for Junior colleagues, suggesting they feel disempowered and limited in their capacity to influence sustainability or make a tangible difference in their roles.

Junior and Manager level employees generally scored lower across most Themes, with the greatest disparities compared to more senior colleagues appearing in 'Mindset & Influence' and 'Integrating Sustainability'. This indicates a sense of separation between sustainability and business-as-usual within the core operations, along with lower confidence in driving change in sustainability. Both seniority groups report higher barriers to action, and feel less empowered and confident in their ability to influence sustainability.

As seniority increases, scores improve significantly, with Directors and C-Suite leaders showing stronger results, particularly in Themes like 'Agency & Ownership', 'Collective Purpose', and 'Aligned & Valued', which reflect a greater ability to integrate sustainability into their roles and an increased sense of alignment within the organisation.

Whilst senior leaders appear more motivated and engaged with fewer barriers to action, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of their efforts is limited if they do not create the conditions needed for their less senior colleagues to take action.

This points to a hierarchical dimension with the 'action gap', where intentions are set at senior levels but substantial barriers to action exist within the core operational levels where projects and programmes are executed. It is therefore crucial for leaders to measure their success by not only creating the strategy but also by enabling the conditions, support, and opportunities for the rest of the organisation to contribute to sustainability.

Regional and Functional Influence

Analysis of three companies with multiple locations or offices showed that there is not a statistical difference between locations within a single company, suggesting that the location does not have a meaningful impact on the average score.

In contrast, company divisions play a more significant role. Divisions within the same company show significant differences, indicating that specific job functions and departmental priorities influence how sustainability is perceived and integrated. This is to be expected, as divisions have specific skill bases, communities, dynamics, and working practices. Whilst the divisions were specific to each company, the results consistently show that each division has distinct characteristics and, as a result, employees in different divisions experience varied barriers in closing the 'action gap'.

This underlines the importance of a bespoke or tailored approach to understanding the needs of employees and culture within each organisation, rather than applying a blanket solution.

Specific job functions
and departmental priorities
**influence how sustainability is
perceived and integrated**

This underlines the importance of
a bespoke or **tailored approach**

Interpretation and Implications for Practice

A latent motivation within the workforce that provides strong foundations for organisations to **raise their ambitions in employee engagement in sustainability**

Our research explored the existence and nature of an 'action gap' in sustainability amongst 18 UKGBC member organisations, focusing on the key outcome of enhancing employee motivation, engagement and active involvement.

Whist the majority of employees report that sustainability is personally important to them (94%) and express desire to increase their active contribution to sustainability at work (78%), the findings also identify a gap in the number of employees who are motivated, engaged and active in sustainability. This is a fundamental challenge, given that a "net-zero transition must include every part of the business".[12]

Organisations participating in this study outperform both the Most Sustainable Workplace Index 'Built Environment' and 'All-Sector' benchmarks, which is a positive outcome for UKGBC. This indicates that the UKGBC membership strengthens employee engagement in sustainability. Membership provides organisations with access to extensive resources, training, and a community that can support employees in making more meaningful contributions toward sustainability goals. Additionally, UKGBC membership is a clear statement of commitment to sustainability, which may help build a culture of sustainability internally and a supportive peer network externally, further contributing to employees' motivation in their sustainability efforts.

The finding that 78% of respondents actively want to do more on sustainability at work demonstrates that senior leaders are 'pushing at an open door'. There is a latent motivation within the workforce that provides strong foundations for organisations to raise their ambitions in employee engagement in sustainability. For UKGBC members, the challenge is therefore not one of convincing organisations to set clear intentions or cajoling employees to care about sustainability, but one of creating conditions that enable employees to act on what they already care about and want intrinsically to do more of.

The crucial first step for organisations who want to commit to this more human-centric approach to sustainability is shifting the focus from 'engagement as a process' to 'engaged as an outcome'. By using the Most Sustainable Workplace framework, this report offers insight into the factors driving employee engagement and action. It demonstrates why organisations must challenge the assumption that an approach based on providing more technical information to employees is an effective solution in isolation, and instead consider a broader range of interventions and approaches to organisational change. The findings point to pathways to change based on leveraging existing strengths and removing barriers.

In addition to the clear statement that employees care about sustainability ('Personal Concern'), a high proportion of employees and senior leaders reported a strong 'Connection to Nature'. Yet, regardless of the evidence of nature connection supporting pro-environmental behaviour[18] and wider benefits including wellbeing, discussions around nature remain relatively limited compared to the more prominent focus on carbon emissions and climate change. Despite the fact that the built environment sector is inherently place-based, integrating nature into sustainability practices is largely confined to specific parts of the industry. This raises an interesting cultural challenge for the industry to bring the protection and regeneration of nature to the forefront and leverage the existing strong affinity for nature amongst employees.

Whilst we see in the results that 'Competence' is a key barrier, this goes beyond just technical 'Skills & Knowledge'. A lack of confidence in overcoming challenges and lack of belief that they can make a tangible impact on sustainability appear to be discouraging employees from pursuing sustainable initiatives at work. Many feel they cannot affect change or influence the organisation's sustainability approach. Addressing this may require broader interventions such as mentorship programs, collaborative spaces for ideas exchange, and involving employees in sustainability strategy discussions and decision-making processes. Creating forums for employees' insights to shape company objectives can boost confidence and empower employees to feel more competent in driving meaningful change.

The findings also highlight that 'Integrating Sustainability' into daily responsibilities is a barrier, meaning it is seen as separate from business-as-usual. This separation is particularly challenging in large organisations where many roles are highly specialised, and employees indicate they lack the time, support and permission to embed sustainability within their work. As a result, when demands intensify, employees are likely to prioritise delivering business-as-usual over an 'add-on' of sustainability. This highlights the need for an honest conversation in organisations as to whether sustainability is genuinely "part of everything we do", as often claimed in marketing materials. A broader set of interventions may be required to create the time, resources and support needed to integrate sustainability within job roles, goals and performance management processes.

From a strategic perspective, the study findings emphasise how important it is for organisations to develop genuine insight into the actual barriers to employee engagement and action, rather than relying on the assumption that providing more technical information will be sufficient to drive the necessary change. There are broader possibilities that come into view when applying an evidence-based framework grounded in psychology to uncover drivers of action on sustainability. Furthermore, developing consistent and comparable metrics is essential to address how effective organisations are in supporting employee engagement and action in sustainability. By gaining understanding of the needs and characteristics of specific employee groups, companies can adopt more targeted approaches to engage and activate employees in sustainability.

Lack of confidence in overcoming challenges and **lack of belief that they can make a tangible impact** on sustainability appear to be **discouraging** employees from pursuing sustainable initiatives at work

Larger organisations demonstrate lower levels of engagement, which is significant for a sector dominated by large firms that drive major projects and influence property market

Without this insight, organisations risk poor Return on Investment from inadequately planned interventions and increased risk of falling short on publicly committed sustainability targets. A shift towards the more refined and mature strategies outlined in this report, coupled with alignment to change management approach of 'Empower', 'Equip', and 'Engage' advocated by PWC[20], is required to effectively address these challenges. In this way, organisations can better generate employee engagement with strategic sustainability goals, fostering a workforce that is both informed and empowered to take action.

The following paragraphs reveal how employees' roles, specific areas of work, organisational size, seniority and workplace environment shape their motivation, engagement and action in sustainability.

Sub-Sector Specific Impacts

The findings highlight variations across the four sub-sectors: Architecture & Design, Engineering, Industry Bodies & Organisations, and Property Consultancy & Management. Whilst it is expected that cultures and ways of working vary between sub-sectors, the data explains how these differences shape employees' capacity to effectively and proactively engage in sustainability.

Purpose-driven organisations, such as the UKGBC, are seen as leaders in this space. Their clear focus on sustainability coupled with a less profit-centric operational model means they attract more sustainability-oriented employees, which is likely to contribute to higher engagement scores. In contrast, Property Consultancy & Management scored the lowest across all three Pillars and all nine Themes, with particularly low scores in 'Integrating Sustainability', 'Collective Purpose', and 'Aligned & Valued'. These findings prompt questions about the extent to which the more 'transactional' cultures and practices in Property Consultancy & Management align with sustainability goals, whether they are perceived as 'walking the talk' and if their work feels less directly connected to tangible sustainability actions than in other sub-sectors.

Impact of Organisation Size

Our analysis shows a clear trend – larger organisations demonstrate lower levels of engagement, which is significant for a sector dominated by large firms that drive major projects and influence property market. The key challenge for large organisations is to truly embed sustainability and consciously shift how they engage their employees. As organisations grow, so does the scale and complexity of change to deliver transformation around sustainability. In large, multi-site, multi-national organisations the complexity of challenge is defined by ambitious targets sometimes distributed across thousands of employees, most of whom hold clearly defined, functional roles and responsibilities. Higher levels of engagement within smaller organisations are perhaps unsurprising, as employees in these settings may have a more direct influence on the delivery and outcomes and, in the case of this research study, also included both Industry Bodies & Organisations.

Thus, a challenge for the sector is to retain the conditions conducive to employee engagement and ownership, as the organisations grow in size. A critical starting point is to identify the appropriate level for interventions, balancing efficiency with opportunities for participation, ownership, and connection among colleagues.

In this context, it is also important to consider the role of dedicated sustainability (or ESG) teams in large organisations. Whilst these teams signal commitment, certain risks may also arise. First, there is the potential for the unintended consequence of reducing ownership of sustainability within the wider workplace as employees may defer to central teams rather than actively driving sustainability initiatives. Second, central sustainability teams with multiple internal and external roles may face pressure to generate revenue, which may divert focus away from addressing the barriers to wider employee engagement and activation, highlighted in this report. These risks suggest that organisations need to assess whether the way central sustainability teams are operating is effectively bridging or widening the 'action gap' on sustainability throughout the organisation as a whole.

Impact of Distinctive Organisation Characteristics

Whilst we can see trends from the analysis of MSW Pillars and Themes across sub-sectors and sizes of organisations, the differences in scores received by organisations in this study emphasise the importance of tailored strategies to address employee engagement within the unique context of each organisation. Whilst cultures vary across companies, our data shows that these cultural differences directly influence employees' experiences and their level of engagement and action on sustainability. If senior leaders are committed to developing an empowered workplace culture and fostering engagement on sustainability, they need to gain a deeper understanding of their employees' perspectives, motivations and barriers to action. Ultimately, the ability of individual organisations to create and navigate pathways to cultural change will determine how effectively the built environment sector responds to the findings in this report.

Role of Seniority

Seniority results mirror the insights from our "*From the Ground Up*" report[16], pointing to particular challenges at junior and middle seniority levels. These roles provide the operational core of many organisations within the built environment sector and middle management holds substantial potential to influence project delivery. It is the level at which operational solutions are often identified and implemented, making this group a key focus for organisational support.

If senior leaders are committed to fostering engagement on sustainability, they need to gain a deeper understanding of their **employees' perspectives, motivations and barriers to action**

Furthermore, the results carry implications for senior leaders, as their experiences and perceptions are not consistently reflected across the organisational levels. Here, the 'action gap' appears hierarchically, reflecting the divide between the senior levels, where intentions are set, and the junior and middle levels, where strategy is operationalised and action is crucial to bring strategies to life.

An important and honest conversation about the effectiveness of leadership is necessary, followed by extending the scope of senior leaders' roles to creating conditions that enable action on sustainability for their colleagues. As such, seniority must be central to design and implementation of employee engagement strategies within an organisation-specific context.

Regional and Functional Considerations

With the tailored approaches discussed in relation to unique organisational characteristics, the analysis suggests that despite the outliers amongst some locations and offices within organisations, location does not significantly influence employee engagement in sustainability based on this data set.

Alongside seniority, divisions might hold the key to a targeted approach to employee engagement that can be applied at scale. By focusing on divisions, organisations can integrate sustainability more effectively and in alignment with the functional or matrix structure, through which many organisations are managed. In most cases it is the people working in divisions who, with the right support and challenge, are best placed to evolve their particular area of the business to create value for both the organisation and the planet.

Developing Transparency and Accountability

The organisations participating in this study are members of the UKGBC, which signals a shared commitment to sustainability. Some have net-zero target that will have been communicated to investors, shareholders and clients as evidence of their ambition. However, the range of scores received via the Most Sustainable Workplace Index highlights differences in how effectively these organisations create the conditions for a motivated, engaged and active workforce on sustainability. If achieving net-zero requires action and transformation across the entire business, as highlighted by Accenture[12], then organisations with the lowest scores and a less engaged workforce face a substantially greater risk of missing their targets compared to those with their higher scoring peers.

This report outlines how barriers to employee engagement shape the scale and nature of this risk. The findings suggest a need to refocus on the human-side of sustainability, creating further opportunity to strengthen the Governance element of ESG in relation to people within organisations. This means moving beyond marketing and 'green' image management, to elevating people and culture within corporate sustainability reporting. Establishing consistent and comparable metrics - such as those used within this study - will be paramount to enabling this shift. It means bringing:

- Greater transparency in the delivery on sustainability in organisations, across industries and throughout supply networks,

- Enhanced visibility of risk around achieving targets, and

- Improved ability to validate and showcase the fulfilment of claims to stakeholders.

Where gaps exist between sustainability targets, public statements, and the extent to which employees are motivated, engaged and active internally, there remains an 'action gap' that risks compromising the organisation's delivery of sustainability commitments.

The workforce is ready to be engaged on sustainability and to establishing a common approach to measuring employee engagement in sustainability is essential. Embedding these metrics into corporate sustainability reporting would bring about greater transparency, help mitigate risk to shareholders, customers and employees, and ultimately drive a more meaningful change at scale.

Shifting the Foundations

The way we experience our environment - both built and non-built (or natural) - affects every aspect of our lives. The industries and organisations that design and curate it have a profound responsibility to current and future generations to address the environmental and social challenges we face.

Sustainability and ESG are foundational for protecting the planet and advancing humanity's wellbeing. These concepts must guide every organisational action and decision, forming a bridge that connects people, places, and a sustainable future. Our study highlights the need for an honest conversation about whether current organisational strategies for people and culture are sufficient to meet the sustainability objectives.

This report outlines the factors contributing to the 'action gap' on sustainability, which spans multiple dimensions - the gap between:

- Organisational intent and its actual impact,

- Employees' personal concern and their ability to act on them at work,

- External messages claiming "sustainability is part of everything we do" and internal practices,

- Hierarchical disparity between strategic intent and the reality of its operationalisation.

Our study suggests that this gap may be less pronounced among UKGBC members. Current approaches to employee engagement - such as information-centric training, engagement measured by participation rates or feedback - are still insufficient and not fit for purpose. These methods lack the depth required to identify the root causes of the 'action gap' and fail to offer the actionable insights and evidence needed to close it.

Organisations need to move from generic solutions to tailored, evidence-based frameworks that integrate and align diagnostics, insight, action and measurement to enable continuous improvement towards sustainability. Real progress at both industry and organisational levels will be made when leaders understand and address their specific challenges and barriers.

This report shows that employee engagement is influenced by who people work for (organisation and type), what they do (type and division) and their position in the organisation (seniority). This suggests that organisation-specific, tailored approaches to employee engagement on sustainability are crucial and should be designed around seniority and function/division. Without bespoke solutions, interventions may be poorly targeted, reducing their Return on Investment and increasing the risk of unfulfilled commitments.

In this context, the key considerations for the UKGBC include:

- Reviewing the current suite of learning and training programmes against the broader set of interventions required to address the gaps identified within this report,

- Identifying and addressing the unique needs of different sub-sectors and organisations within support to members,

- Supporting the development of organisation-specific and function-specific pathways that focus on building a motivated, engaged and active workforce as an outcome,

- Exploring the potential to enhance transparency around people and culture through cross-industry initiatives and by integrating it into already established sustainability reporting frameworks.

Both this report and broader industry research underline the importance of culture and people in the delivery of sustainability goals. According to PWC survey "84% of respondents say cultural change is vital for sustainability transformations to succeed".[20] Beyond organisational benefits, industry-wide opportunities and positive outcomes are highlighted by organisations such as RIBA[19] and EngineeringUK.[21] Building resilience at this level can help insulate the sector against future challenges. Closing the 'action gap' offers benefits that can reach beyond the immediate impact on the built environment industry. When employees feel valued and empowered to act on topics they are personally invested in, whether they work on-site or follow a hybrid working pattern, they are more likely to actively engage and contribute positively to the organisational culture.

Many organisations lean towards quick fixes and the industry often tries to 'innovate' through purchasing decisions and relies on industry accreditations such as BREEAM as a path to sustainability. However, sustainability and ESG must drive a long-term cultural change. **This shift requires acknowledging that the transformation is, and will be, extensive and complex, involving both technical solutions and people's individual and collective journeys. In many cases, it demands substantial adjustments in the day-to-day management of the business.**

Organisational transformation is inherently complex. Changing business models, service delivery, systems, and processes typically requires balancing with the demands of daily operations, calling for extra capacity, time and flexibility to manage effectively. This report highlights particular challenges for the larger firms and raises some important questions about the roles and focus of central sustainability teams, and how they may need to evolve to empower and support transformation throughout the wider organisation.

To achieve systemic change across the industry, it is essential to encourage collective progress in addition to supporting individual organisations journey. Common metrics that encourage transparency substantiate impact and promote honest cross-sector conversations are critical. Organisations that make public sustainability commitments face potential risks to their reputation, performance and resilience, if they fail to motivate, engage and activate employees meaningfully around the issue. Therefore, corporate sustainability reporting needs to evolve to include metrics that reflect people and culture. Consistent use of comparable metrics, like those introduced in this report, underpin transparency, encourage openness and evaluate progress in closing the 'action gap', benefiting organisations and industry as a whole. The UKGBC can play a pivotal role in facilitating the creation of industry pathways towards improved transparency and providing direct support to its members. A good place to start is to analyse and then reduce the gap between external communication on sustainability and the internal employee experience. Aligning employees' personal concerns with their work can bring multiple benefits and increase meaningful engagement.

A common denominator across the built environment industry sector, sub-sectors and organisations is the recognition that everything happens as a result of an individual or collective decision or choice, which are shaped by values, established practices, context and cultural norms. It is these decisions and choices that determine whether an organisation can sustainably transform and build resilience to ensure longevity and future security. This will not happen without attention to the important role of people and culture in sustainability and a rapid improvement in how it is understood, planned and evaluated within organisations. The scale and pace of change required are significant, but so are the opportunities that can arise from unlocking the latent motivation for change that undoubtedly exists within the workforce.

Works Cited

[1] R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*, 1st Edition ed., The Guilford Press, 2017.

[2] CIPD, "Employment status: UK employment law," Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023. [Online]. Available: https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/employment-law/employees/. [Accessed 4 October 2024].

[3] Gallup, "Indicators. Employee Engagement.," 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.gallup.com/394373/indicator-employee-engagement.aspx. [Accessed 28 October 2024].

[4] OED, "Organization," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/organization_n?tab=meaning_and_use. [Accessed 2 October 2024].

[5] GOV.UK, "Small to medium sized enterprise (SME) action plan," GOV.UK. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2 May 2023. [Online]. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fcdo-small-to-medium-sized-enterprise-sme-action-plan/small-to-medium-sized-enterprise-sme-action-plan. [Accessed 2 October 2024].

[6] HBR, "Reinventing Your Leadership Team," *Harvard Business Review*, https://hbr.org/2022/01/reinventing-your-leadership-team, January-February 2022.

[7] UN, "Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: *Our Common Future* [Brundtland Report].," New York, 1987.

[8] CIPD, "Workforce planning," Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/workforce-planning-factsheet/. [Accessed 2 October 2024].

[9] CIPD, "Organisational culture," Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.cipd.org/uk/views-and-insights/cipd-viewpoint/organisational-culture/. [Accessed 2 October 2024].

[10] WBCSD, "Building a global action agenda for built environment market transformation," 5 October 2023. [Online]. Available: https://www.wbcsd.org/news/building-global-action-agenda-built-environment-market-transformation/. [Accessed 12 September 2024].

[11] Ö. Çimen, "Construction and built environment in circular economy: A comprehensive literature review," *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 305, no. 127180. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.127180, 10 July 2021.

[12] Accenture, *"Accelerating global companies toward net zero by 2050. New research shows progress and key steps necessary to speed efforts,"* Accenture, 2022.

[13] Microsoft, *"Accelerating the Journey to Net Zero. A UK Blueprint for Carbon Reduction,"* Microsoft, 2021.

[14] Statista, "Number of people employed in the construction industry from 1st quarter 1997 to 2nd quarter 2024," August 2024. [Online]. Available: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1385957/uk-construction-workforce/. [Accessed 3 September 2024].

[15] HR, "Commitment to sustainability boosts employee engagement," 11 April 2021. [Online]. Available: https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/news/commitment-to-sustainability-boosts-employee-engagement/. [Accessed 28 August 2024].

[16] MSW, *"2024 Most Sustainable Workplace Index Cross-Industry Report: From the Ground Up,"* Most Sustainable Workplace, 2024.

[17] J. O. Prochaska and C. C. DiClemente, "Transtheoretical therapy: Toward a more integrative model of change.," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, vol. 19, no. 3, p. 276–288. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0088437, 1982.

[18] C. McPherson Frantz and S. F. Mayer, "The importance of connection to nature in assessing environmental education programs," *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, vol. 41, pp. 85-89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2013.10.001, June 2014.

[19] PWC, "Three pillars: from sustainability ambitions to sustainable results. Why 'change management' is essential for your sustainable ambitions," 17 July 2023. [Online]. Available: https://www.pwc.nl/en/topics/blogs/why-change-management-is-essential-for-your-sustainable-ambitions.html. [Accessed 15 August 2024].

[20] EngineeringUK, "Spotlight on sustainability," 19 April 2023. [Online]. Available: https://www.engineeringuk.com/blog/spotlight-on-sustainability/. [Accessed 29 September 2024].

[21] RIBA, *"A Decade of Action. RIBA Members and the Sustainable Development Goals,"* 2020.

Most Sustainable Workplace

The Most Sustainable Workplace provides organisations with actionable insights to embed sustainability within organisational culture. Our evidence-based frameworks and consistent metrics form the foundation for engaging employees in sustainability and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions. By focusing on employee motivation, engagement, and activation, we support organisations in building a workforce that drives sustainable impact from within. Through strategies tailored to unique organisational conditions, we help close the sustainability 'action gap' and enable organisations to transform towards a culture of sustainability.

Most Sustainable Workplace Index

The Most Sustainable Workplace Index is a comprehensive diagnostic and benchmarking tool designed to help organisations measure and track their progress in employee engagement on sustainability. Leveraging data-driven insights across key metrics, it identifies organisational strengths and highlights areas for improvement in fostering a motivated, sustainability-oriented workforce. By providing clear metrics, the index guides leadership in aligning employee actions with sustainability goals and offers a transparent framework for evaluating long-term impact, ensuring organisations stay on course in their sustainability journey.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our thanks to the UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) for their partnership and support in making this research possible. This collaboration has offered valuable insights into the barriers to greater action on sustainability within the workforce and the importance of aligning culture and ways of working. We are grateful for the opportunity to explore the ways in which the built environment sector can evolve toward greater sustainability.

We would also like to express our gratitude to all the participating organisations for their time, insights, and commitment to this study. Your contributions have been instrumental in shaping the findings. We hope that the insights shared in this report prove valuable in your ongoing efforts to embed sustainability within organisational culture.

ASHFOLD

BIDWELLS

BURO HAPPOLD

CAST INTERIORS

Gensler

GERALDEVE
A NEWMARK COMPANY

Hawkins\Brown

JLL

MAPP

MAX FORDHAM

MCGREGOR COXALL

MONTAGU EVANS

Perkins&Will

SCAPE

STRIDE TREGLOWN

tp bennett

TROUP BYWATERS +ANDERS

UK GBC

Most Sustainable Workplace

To contact us please email:

hello@mostsustainableworkplace.com

www.mostsustainableworkplace.com