

**What do the next five years
hold for sustainability?**
Sustainability Leaders Panel
Wave 5 Research
June 2026





Climate change, biodiversity loss, rising inequality and geopolitical volatility are no longer hypothetical future risks. They are already shaping the context in which organisations operate, bringing new urgency to conversations about the path forward, while creating clearer focus for action on social, ecological and economic stability. At the same time, advances in AI are opening up new ways of working, and bringing new challenges, transforming how organisations innovate, make decisions, and interact with their customers, suppliers and employees.

Sustainability (and corporate responsibility and CSR before it) has always evolved to reflect the broader system in which businesses operate, so it is no surprise that the role of sustainability continues to evolve. While debate and scrutiny have intensified, so too has the level of engagement, encouraging new conversations on the role of regulation, stewardship, and corporate strategy in driving meaningful, long-term change.

Together, these dynamics point to a period of significant transition, so how do sustainability leaders see the next five years unfolding?

Is sustainability set to become more embedded and influential, or less visible and more contested? What forces will have the biggest impact in shaping strategy and organisational priorities? Will future progress hinge as much on enterprise-wide sustainability literacy as on the expertise of specialists and, if so, what capabilities will be most critical to develop? What will matter most to building trust and credibility?

These are among the many questions explored in this survey, which provides a forward-looking perspective on how businesses are preparing for a period of significant transition. It draws upon the views of an international, cross-sector group of 69 senior executives, the vast majority of whom have more than 10 years' professional experience working in sustainability.

About the Sustainability Leaders Panel (SLP)

The SLP is a joint initiative of [Echo Research](#), [Good Business](#) and [Mishcon de Reya](#). Twice a year, we survey an international, cross-sector group of senior sustainability executives to explore and share peer-to-peer insights on how they are managing emerging issues and challenges.

Previous waves of research have explored topics including the impacts of rising regulation, and how recent political headwinds have affected boards' engagement with, and management of, sustainability matters, and the changing role of sustainability professionals.

If you have feedback or questions on the insights we share here, would like to suggest questions for future surveys, or would like to participate in the panel, please contact [Matt Painter at Echo Research](#), [Claire Jost at Good Business](#) or [Dan Gray at Mishcon de Reya](#).



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Recent headlines suggest sustainability is on the back foot: political pushback, regulatory uncertainty and anxiety about the pace of change. So, it would be reasonable to expect businesses to be scaling back. However, results from wave 5 of the Sustainability Leaders Panel suggest something more nuanced. The story is one of profound change, rather than stasis.

52% of panellists expect sustainability to become a primary strategic driver over the next five years. At the same time, a meaningful minority (16%) expect a decline in importance, reflecting waning organisational appetite.

Either way, sustainability is unlikely to continue in its current form. It is either becoming more integrated and structural, or less visible and less important. Externally, these trajectories may look similar, but the outcomes will be very different.

Risk, value and reputation

Risk is now seen as the strongest driver of sustainability action, more than revenue creation from sustainable products, access to capital or cost. The most significant threats are systemic, including geopolitical fragmentation, transition risk and supply chain disruption, while opportunities centre on resilience, customer attraction and talent.

At first glance, this suggests a move to a defensive rather than growth-focused phase. But the picture is more nuanced. Value and risk are becoming more tightly linked. Managing risk increasingly depends on demonstrating value, and vice versa. And reputation remains a powerful motivator: 73% expect sustainability to become more important in shaping corporate reputation. Clear transition plans, robust data and strong stakeholder engagement are cited as critical to building trust and signalling credibility.

Follow the money

Most respondents expect sustainability investment to increase. The largest rises are in data quality and reporting (62% expect increased investment), and supplier engagement, particularly Scope 3 emissions (58%). By contrast, investment in decarbonisation and adaptation is expected to remain unchanged (51% and 62% respectively indicating this).

So, climate transition is still a priority, but incremental investment is flowing into measurement and reporting systems rather than accelerating transformation. At the same time, many panellists want to see clear and evidenced transition plans linked to strategy and capex (90% indicate this is important). Decarbonisation will be contingent on whether that investment materialises.

Data, AI and the future of sustainability leadership

Data is both a priority and a constraint. While 91% identify consistent data as important for a credible sustainability strategy, only 20% of respondents describe their sustainability data as integrated and audit ready. For many, it remains fragmented or basic. And while 61% of respondents "agree somewhat" that data quality is likely to improve sufficiently to support critical business decisions, 29% either don't know or are unsure, and 45% identify data quality as the main barrier standing in the way of more effective adoption of technology in delivering sustainability outcomes.

This suggests a looming challenge. AI will begin to transform sustainability within the next one to two years, with more than 50% of respondents expecting material changes over this time horizon across a range of different dimensions. This creates a narrow window: if AI will deliver value, underlying data quality must improve, otherwise new technologies risk amplifying existing weaknesses.

Trust and the AI gap

While respondents expect AI to transform sustainability, just under half (49%) see the responsible use of AI itself as a core sustainability issue. The environmental impacts of AI, privacy and bias are important, but the role of AI in determining customer outcomes, product development, employment and purpose is still not seen as a key sustainability priority.

If sustainability is about managing broader social and environmental impacts, then we would argue that AI should sit within its scope. The fact that this connection is not yet widely made raises an important question: if sustainability professionals are not addressing the implications of AI, who will?

Sustainability professionals: an ever-evolving role

The role of the sustainability professional is shifting from technical expert towards change leader. The most important skills identified are stakeholder engagement, change leadership, digital and AI literacy, and systems thinking, alongside growing emphasis on organisation-wide capability.

This suggests sustainability professionals will become connectors linking functions, embedding sustainability into decision-making, and enabling change rather than owning delivery outright. Influence and adaptability are critical as responsibility becomes more distributed across organisations.

Where next?

This is a story of transition, not retreat. Sustainability is becoming less distinct as a standalone function and more embedded in how businesses operate. It is increasingly framed through risk, but remains closely tied to value, reputation and trust.

For sustainability leaders, this means operating differently: working across boundaries, building capability in others, and navigating a landscape shaped as much by data and technology as by policy. We expect this will strike a chord with readers navigating these challenges daily within their organisations.



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From the vantage point of a specialist legal practice, the strongest message in these survey results is that sustainability is no longer being pulled from the periphery to the core of strategy and governance by purpose. It is being pushed there by risk.

Respondents are clear that risk management is now the dominant driver of change, ranking well ahead of value protection, cost reduction and revenue creation. Physical climate risks, AI advances, accelerating regulation and legal liability for harms are all expected to have a big impact on sustainability strategy in the years ahead, while geopolitical fragmentation, transition risk and supply chain disruption are seen as major threats to business value.

All this makes the governance signal in the data especially important. Notable here is not so much that sustainability reporting is expected to expand across a wider range of topics, but rather the organisational developments that this is expected to trigger. As well as enhancing data quality and board oversight, this includes strengthening enterprise-wide sustainability literacy, supported by sustainability professionals with strong skills in change leadership and stakeholder engagement.

Taken together, these are strong signs that organisations are attempting serious integration – hardwiring sustainability into the mainstream control architecture that traditionally underpins enterprise risk management, reporting and assurance, and board-level decision-making.

But there is clearly still a lot of work to do.

On the upside, respondents clearly believe sustainability will become more strategic, more important to reputation, and more dependent on enterprise-wide capability. They are also highly attuned to the need for narrative discipline – recognising that trust depends on honest storytelling rooted in verifiable data and credible action.

On the downside, only 1% expect to see a major increase in resources. With majorities expecting funding for decarbonisation, adaptation, nature and biodiversity, capability building, and community investment to remain flat, this suggests that strategic intent and narrative maturity are running ahead of operational follow-through.

From where we sit, that is more than just a management challenge; it is a legal and reputational liability, because it is exactly the gap that regulators, litigants and activist investors are trained to identify and exploit.

There is evidence of blind spots, too.

While climate transition overwhelmingly dominates the priority list, nature and biodiversity remain grossly underweighted as strategic priorities and threats to business value. That is increasingly hard to square with recent research. The UK national security assessment, for instance, links nature loss and ecosystem degradation to cascading impacts ranging from crop failures and intensified natural disasters to economic instability and interstate conflict.

Respondents are also likely underestimating litigation risk. While expectations are high that companies and their directors will be held accountable for misleading sustainability claims, and liable for harms caused, only 9% view litigation and liability as a significant threat to value. This gap matters, indicating that litigation is also seen as a standalone risk, rather than a foreseeable consequence of weaknesses in governance, substantiation, due diligence and board oversight.

Ultimately, the question for organisations and their boards is not simply whether they recognise sustainability as a source of systemic risk; it is whether they are governing it as such in practice. In an increasingly volatile, regulated and litigable environment, those are very different things, and bridging that gap requires legal rigour as much as managerial will.



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What will a sustainability leader look like in 2030? To borrow from William Gibson, the future is already here, it is just not evenly distributed yet.

For much of the past decade, leaders have focused on building sustainability programmes, setting targets and keeping up to speed with reporting requirements. None of this is going away.

But our latest survey suggests that, now, they are shifting their attention from what their organisations commit to, towards how they build the capability to deliver.

While sustainability maturity remains uneven, leaders increasingly expect sustainability to drive corporate strategy over the next five years. The most mature organisations are already treating sustainability as a catalyst for evolving their models of value creation, not just a compliance requirement.

From ownership to enablement

Strikingly, 9 in 10 believe future progress will depend as much on organisation-wide sustainability literacy as on specialist expertise. This means commercial teams and functional leaders building sustainability into their everyday decision-making.

2030's sustainability leader will still need technical expertise. But this may be less vital than an ability to influence, lead change, build coalitions and draw a direct line between sustainability outcomes and business success.

Many will report directly to the CEO and will have to arbitrate the demands of increasingly influential, activist regulators, customers and other stakeholders.

The organisation's reputation could depend on it

Tomorrow's sustainability leader will also be a reputation leader. Majorities expect sustainability to play a greater role in consumer choices, career decisions and stakeholder trust.

This won't be easy. Most agree that sustainability issues are becoming more divisive, while pressure to scale back diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and net zero initiatives is growing. More than 1 in 4 expect the global political context to become less supportive.

In this environment, credibility is king. Balanced, honest storytelling, supported by meaningful stakeholder engagement and robust performance data, will be vital to maintaining trust and support in the years ahead. Some things don't change.



Key takeaways

52% say that sustainability will become a primary driver of corporate strategy in the next five years. Those who categorise their organisation's current level of sustainability maturity as Leading or Integrated are significantly more likely to say this than those in Advancing or Foundational organisations.

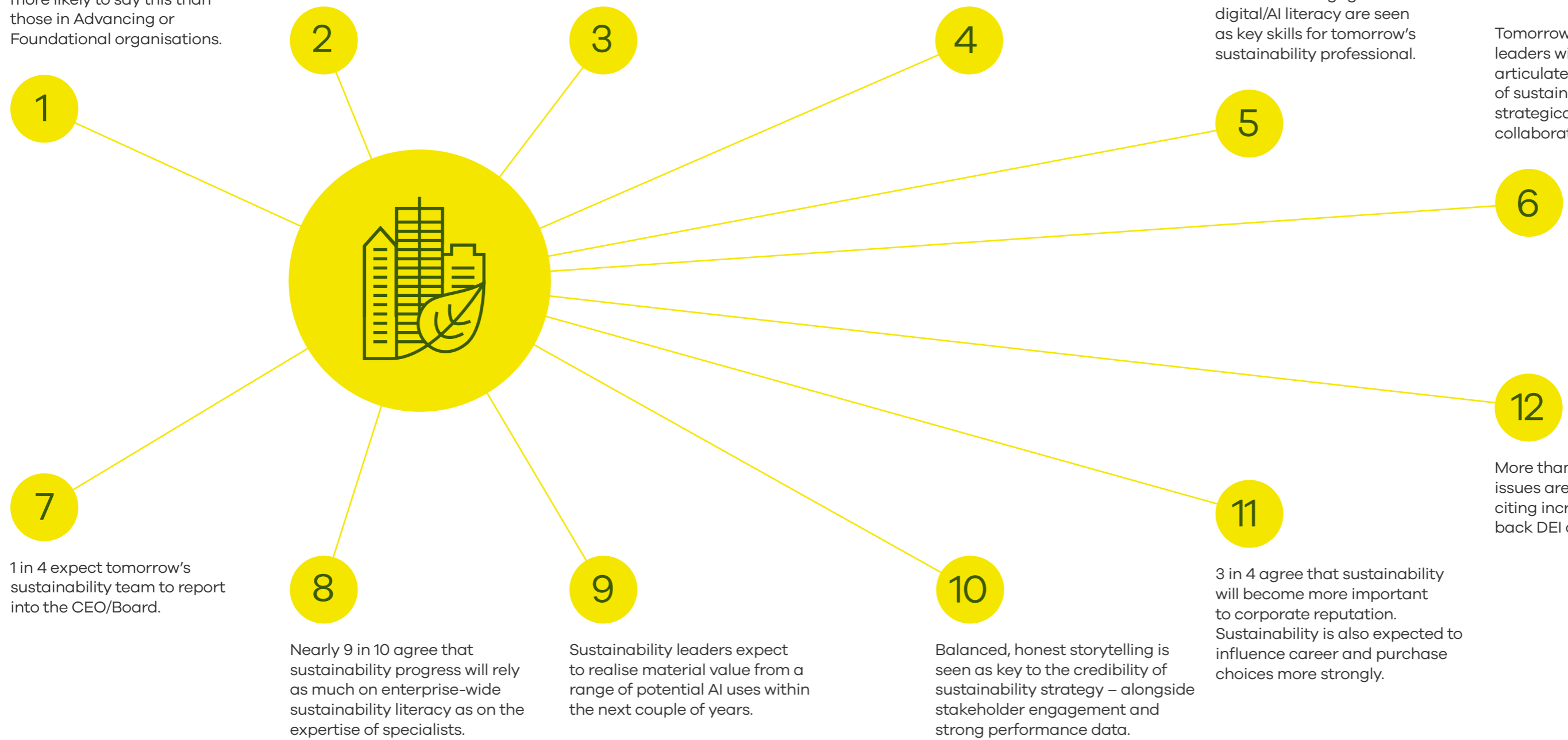
2 in 5 expect their organisation to devote more activity to sustainability, driven by the growing importance of sustainability expertise across the organisation.

Climate transition/ decarbonisation will be the top priority for nearly 4 in 5 sustainability leaders, followed by AI governance and sustainable supply chains/ human rights.

Macro factors including physical climate risks, advances in data and AI, and accelerating regulatory change are expected to impact sustainability approaches.

Change leadership, stakeholder engagement and digital/AI literacy are seen as key skills for tomorrow's sustainability professional.

Tomorrow's sustainability leaders will be able to articulate the business value of sustainability, influence strategically, and lead collaboratively.



1 in 4 expect tomorrow's sustainability team to report into the CEO/Board.

Nearly 9 in 10 agree that sustainability progress will rely as much on enterprise-wide sustainability literacy as on the expertise of specialists.

Sustainability leaders expect to realise material value from a range of potential AI uses within the next couple of years.

Balanced, honest storytelling is seen as key to the credibility of sustainability strategy – alongside stakeholder engagement and strong performance data.

3 in 4 agree that sustainability will become more important to corporate reputation. Sustainability is also expected to influence career and purchase choices more strongly.

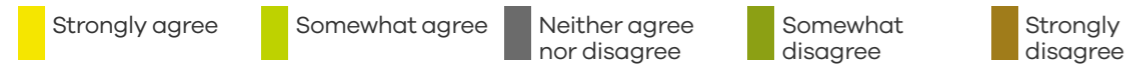
More than 2 in 3 say sustainability issues are becoming more divisive, citing increased pressure to scale back DEI and net zero initiatives.

Survey results

Strategic direction and the role of sustainability

More than half agree that sustainability will be a primary driver of corporate strategy in the next five years

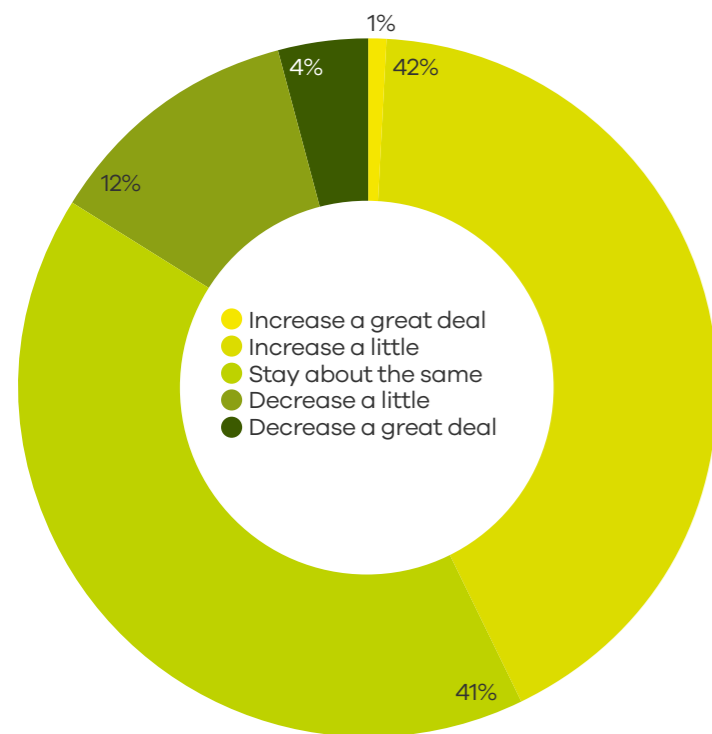
Agreement is much higher among respondents who already view sustainability as being fully integrated into strategy and governance, and/or a key driver of business model innovation



Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: Over the next five years, sustainability will be a primary driver of corporate strategy in our organisation.
Base: All respondents (n=69)

2 in 5 expect sustainability activity to increase, primarily driven by the growing importance of sustainability expertise across the organisation

The small minority who expect less sustainability activity mainly attribute this to declining organisational appetite

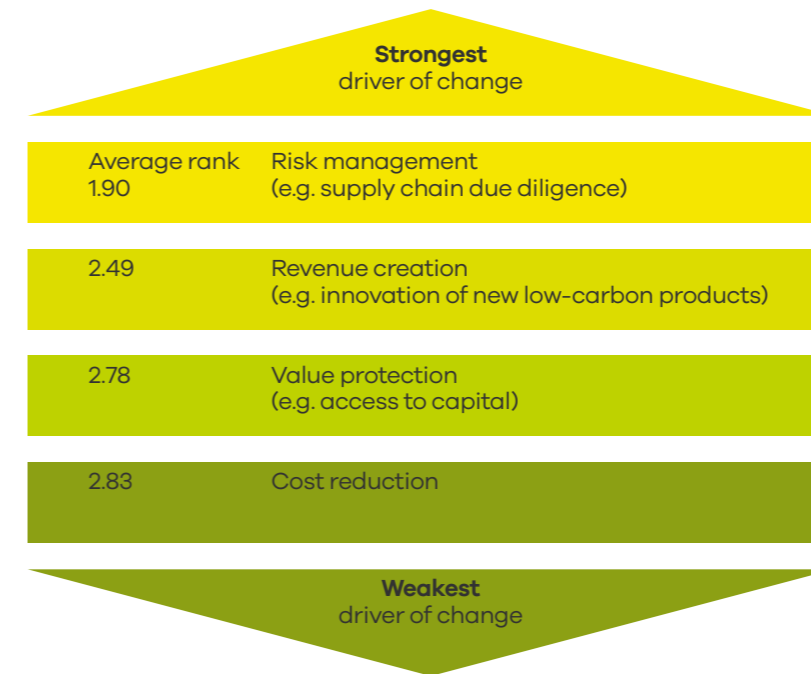


Q2. How do you expect the level of activity your organisation explicitly devotes to sustainability (resources, staffing, visibility on board agendas etc.) to change over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Q3. Why do you expect your organisation's level of explicit sustainability activity to decrease over the next five years?
Base: Those who expect their organisation's sustainability activity to decrease (n=11)

Q4. Why do you expect your organisation's level of explicit sustainability activity to increase over the next five years?
Base: Those who expect their organisation's sustainability activity to increase (n=30)

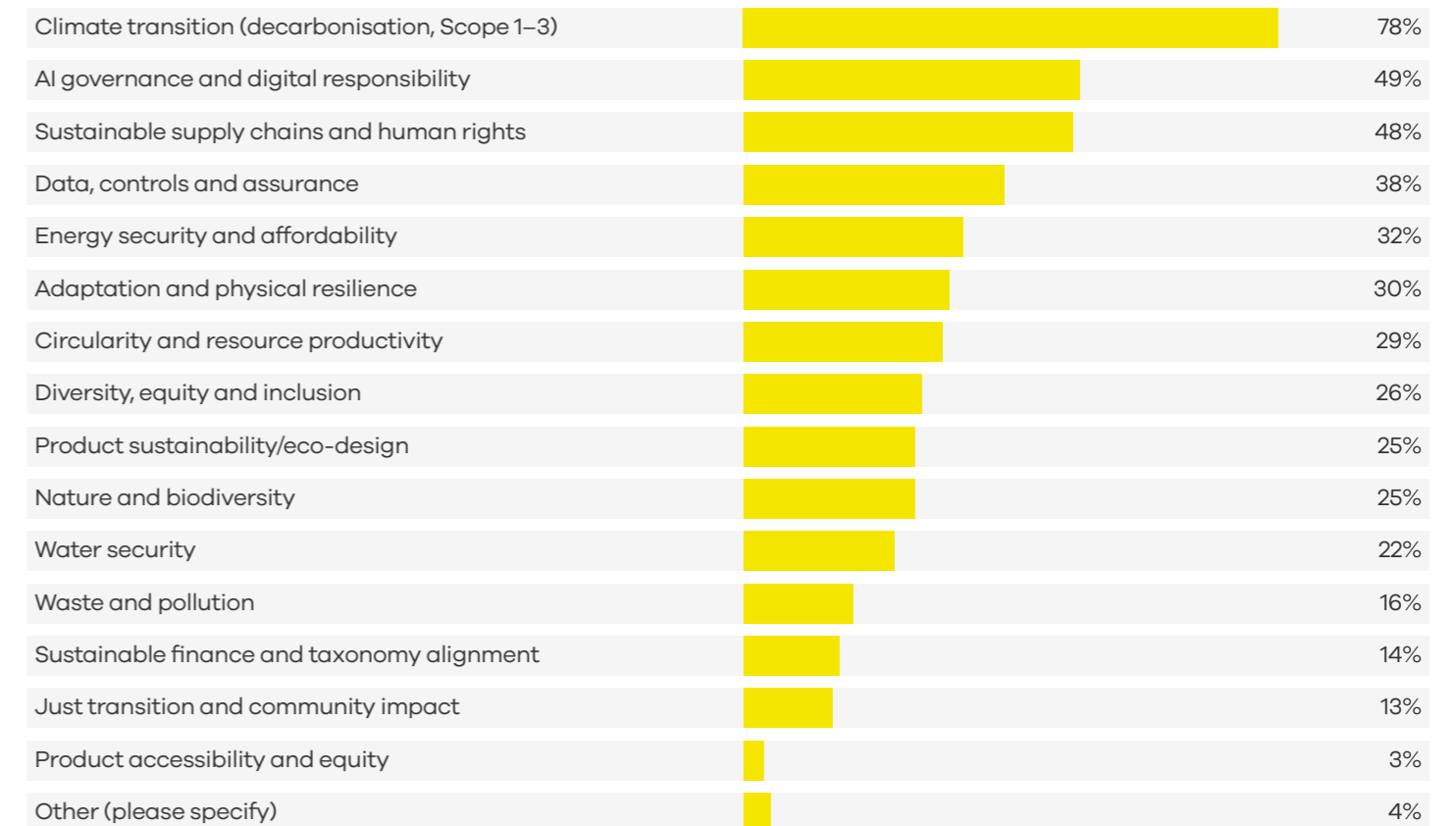
Risk management is by far the strongest driver of sustainability change



Q5. Now, please think about what will drive change in your organisation's approach to sustainability over the next five years. Rank order these factors from 1 (strongest driver of change) to 4 (weakest driver of change).
Base: All respondents (n=69)

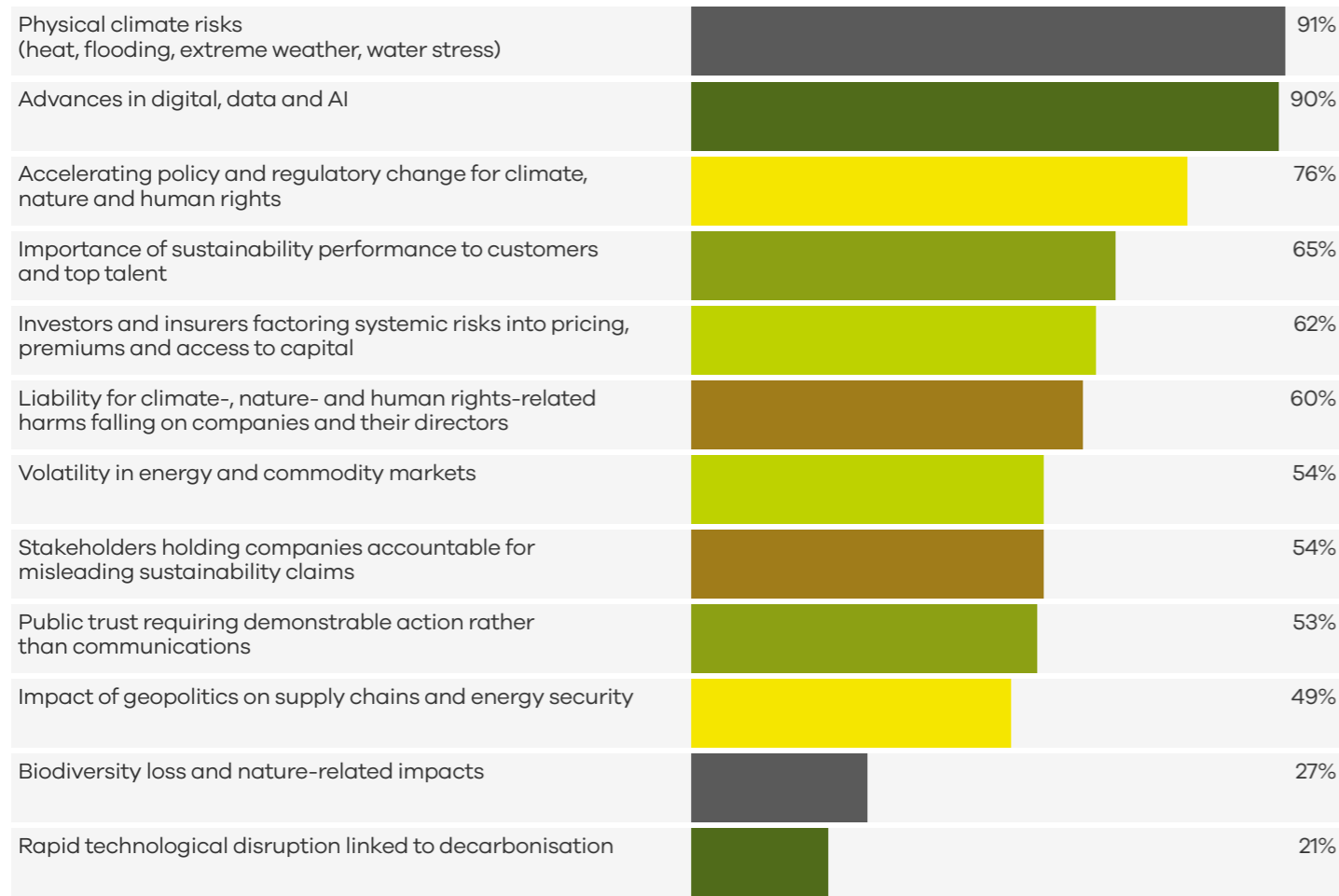
Decarbonisation will be the top priority for nearly 4 in 5 sustainability leaders

AI governance and sustainable supply chains/human rights are priorities for around half



Q6. What do you expect to be the biggest sustainability priorities for your organisation over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

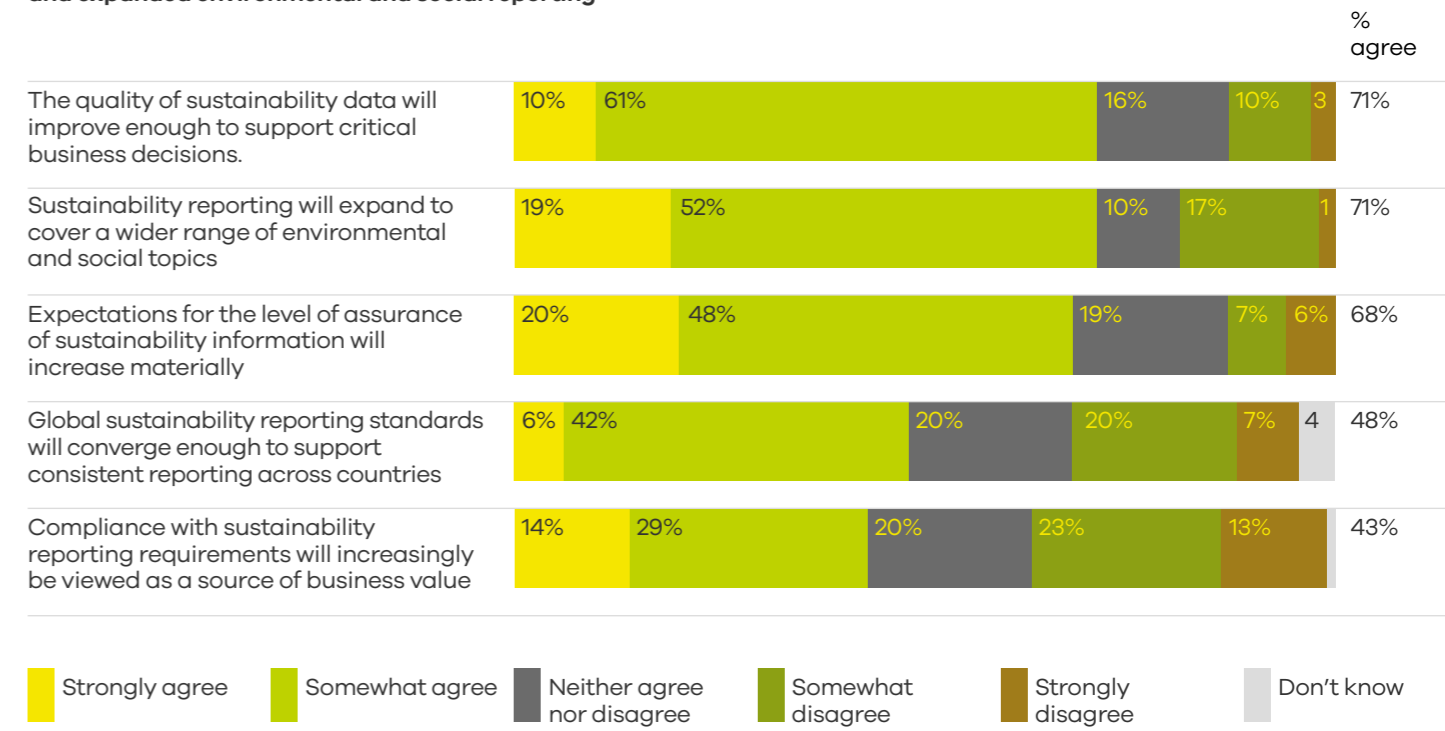
Macro factors including physical climate risks, advances in data and AI, and accelerating regulatory change are expected to impact sustainability approaches



Q7. Which of these macro forces do you expect to have the biggest impact on your organisation's approach to sustainability, over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Regulation, reporting and standards

Sustainability professionals expect to see better business-critical data, and expanded environmental and social reporting



Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements about sustainability regulation, disclosure and assurance in the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

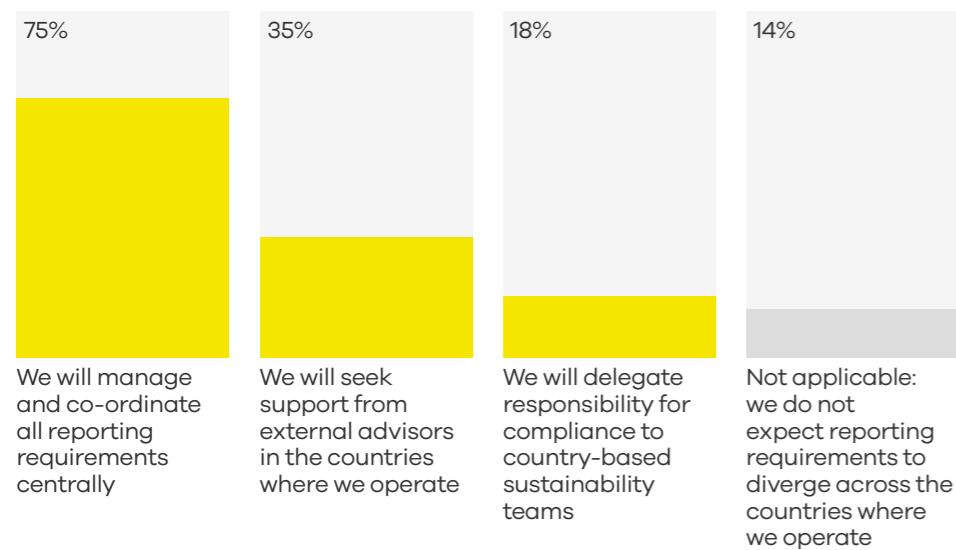
Organisations are improving their reporting readiness by enhancing data management, updating governance and preparing for external assurance



Q9. In which of these ways, if any, is your organisation preparing for future disclosure and reporting requirements?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

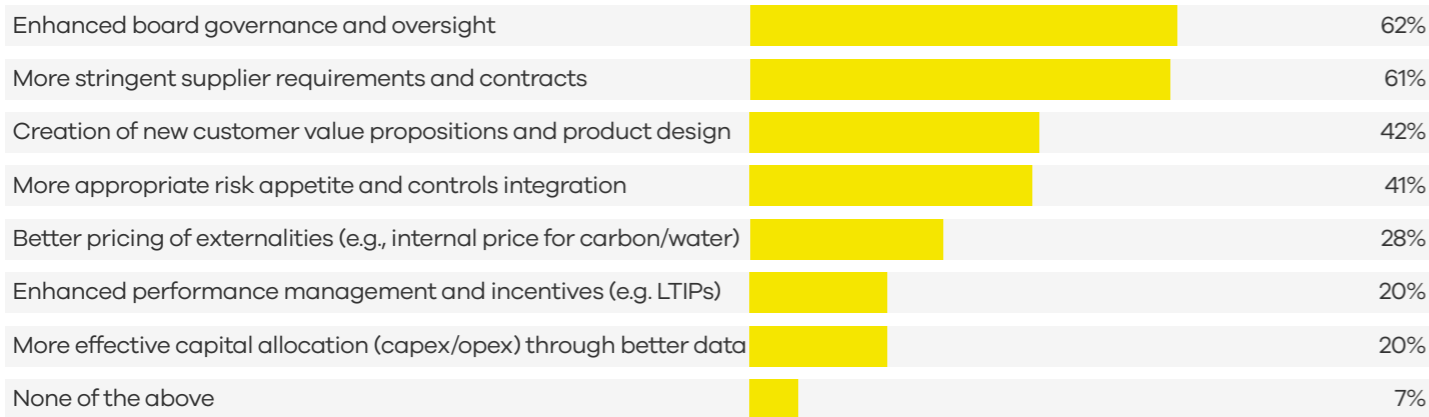
Three quarters of organisations operating in more than one country plan to manage reporting centrally

Fewer than 1 in 5 plan to delegate compliance to local teams



Q10. In which of these ways, if any, does your organisation plan to manage divergent or conflicting reporting requirements between countries?
Base: Those who operate in more than one country (n=57)

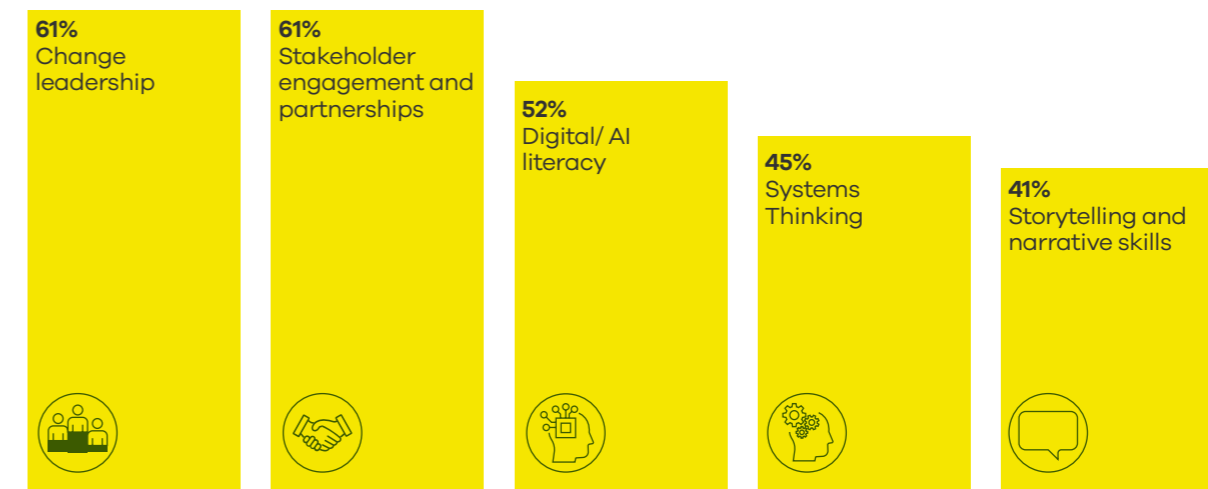
Sustainability leaders expect that increased disclosure requirements will lead to enhanced board governance and more stringent supplier oversight



Q11. In what ways, if any, do you expect increased sustainability disclosure requirements to accelerate transformation in your organisation over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

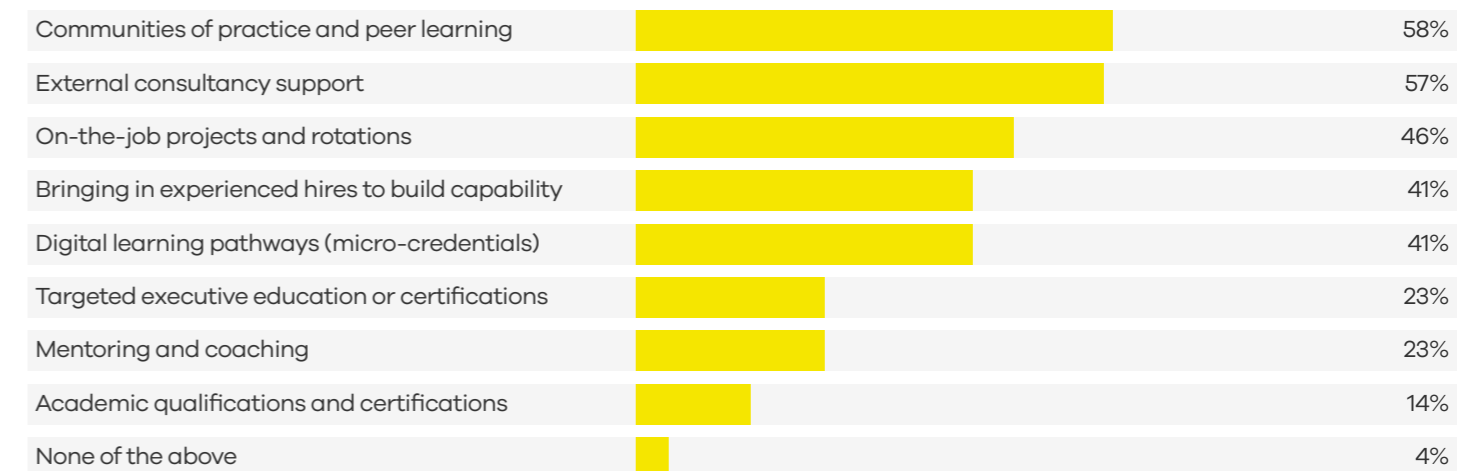
Skills and organisational capability

Change leadership, stakeholder engagement, and digital/AI literacy are seen as key skills for tomorrow's sustainability professional



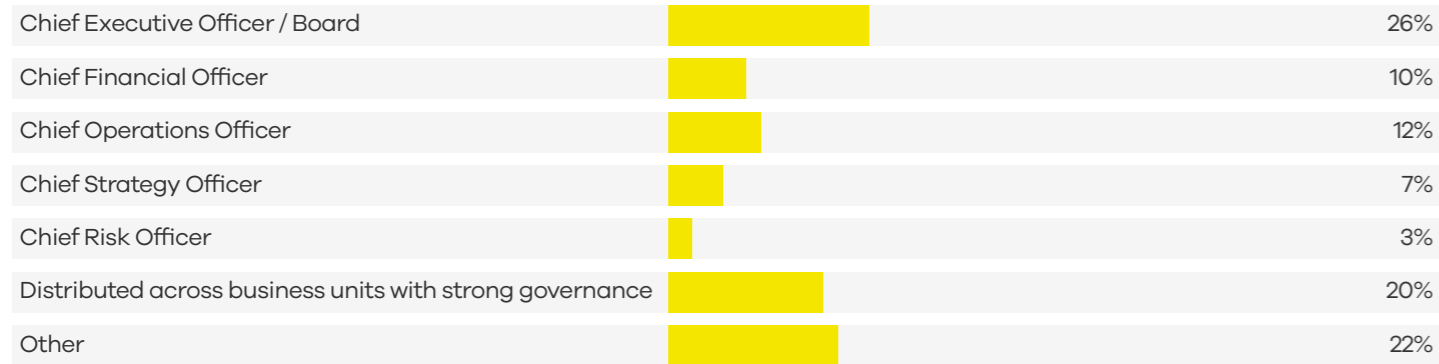
Q12. What do you think the most important capabilities will be for a sustainability professional, in the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Sustainability leaders expect to tap into communities of practice, peer learning and consultancy support, rather than academic or executive qualifications



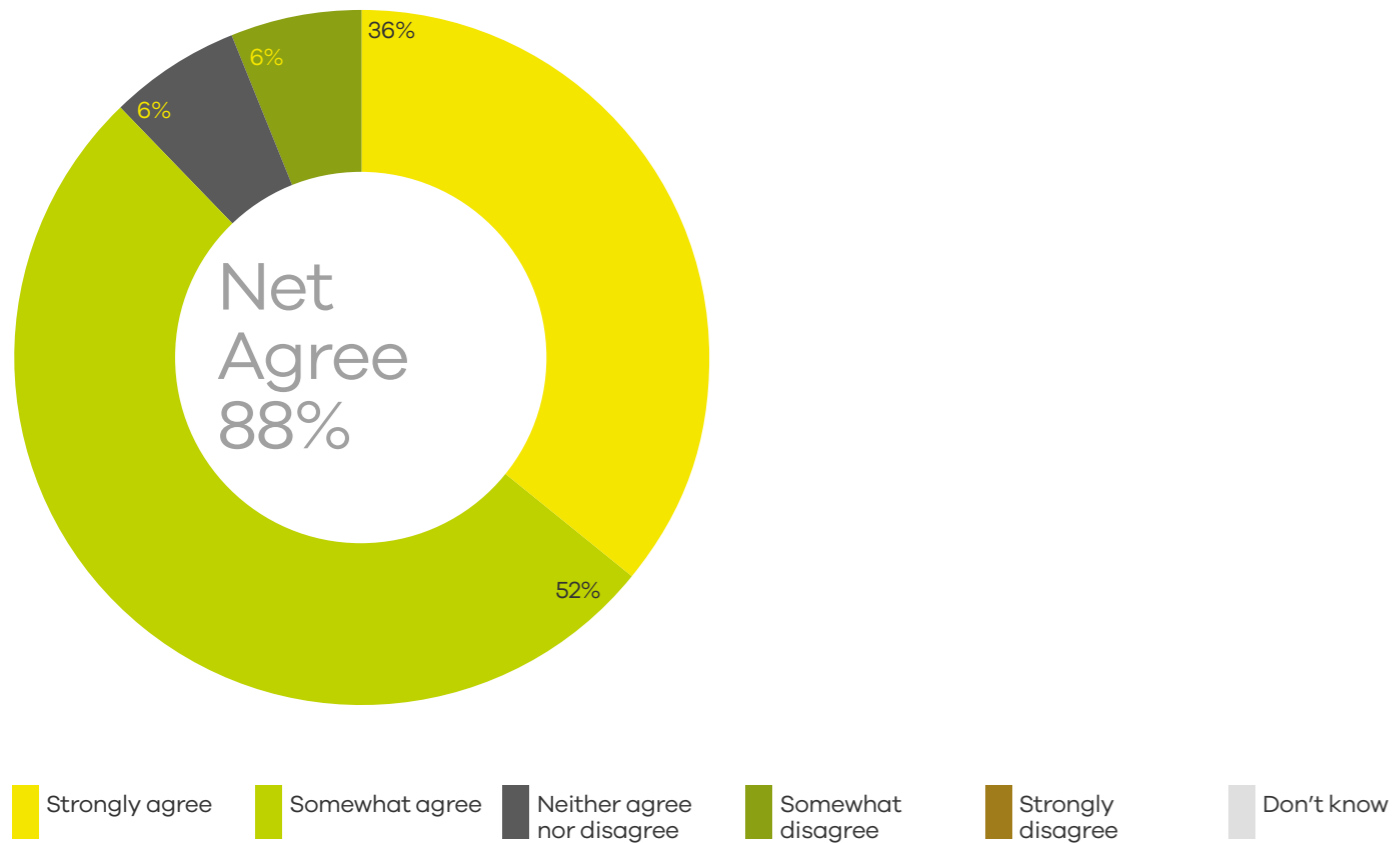
Q13. Which of the following sources of new sustainability skills and knowledge do you expect your organisation to tap into?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

1 in 4 expect tomorrow's sustainability team to report into the CEO/Board
1 in 5 expect to see distributed governance



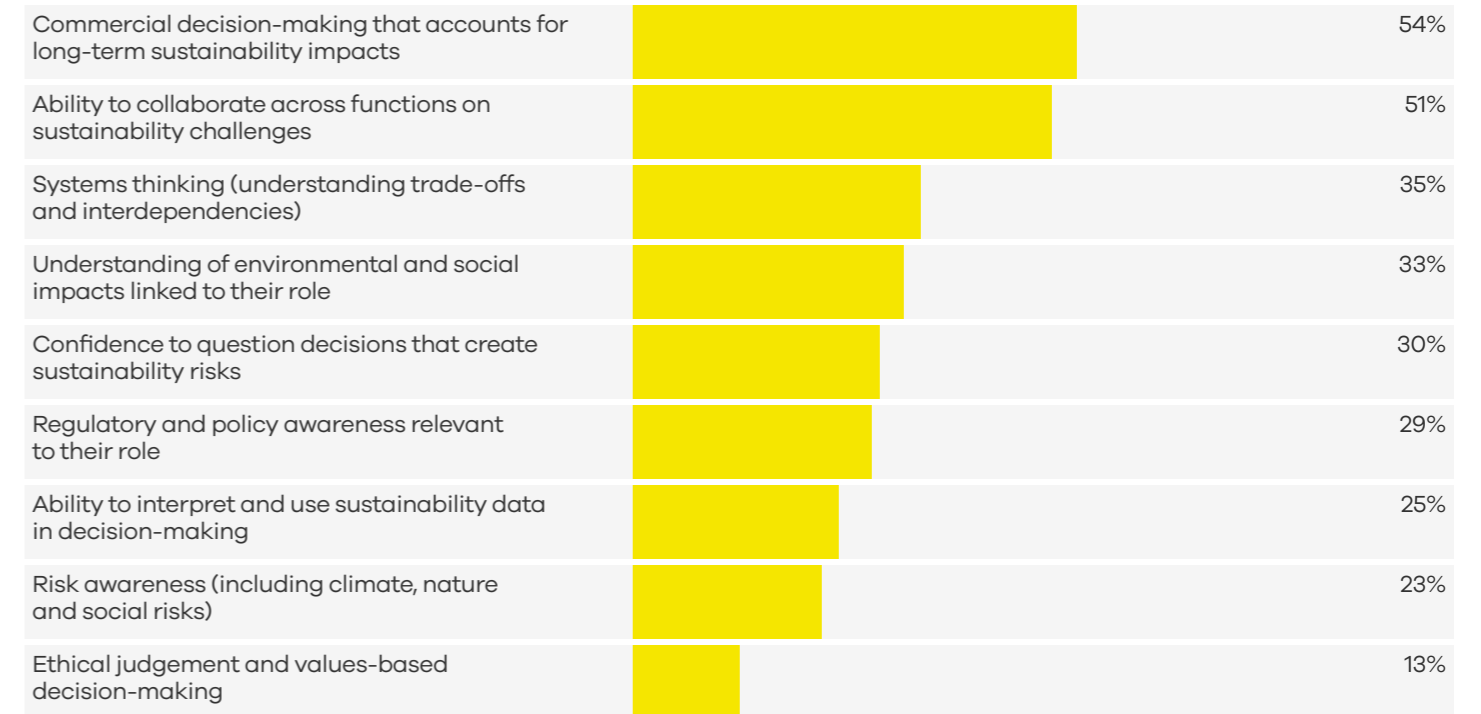
Q14. In five years' time, who do you expect the sustainability team or function will be reporting into?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Nearly 9 in 10 believe enterprise-wide sustainability literacy will be key to progress



Q16. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
In future, sustainability progress will rely as much on enterprise-wide sustainability literacy as on the expertise of specialists.
Base: All respondents (n=69)

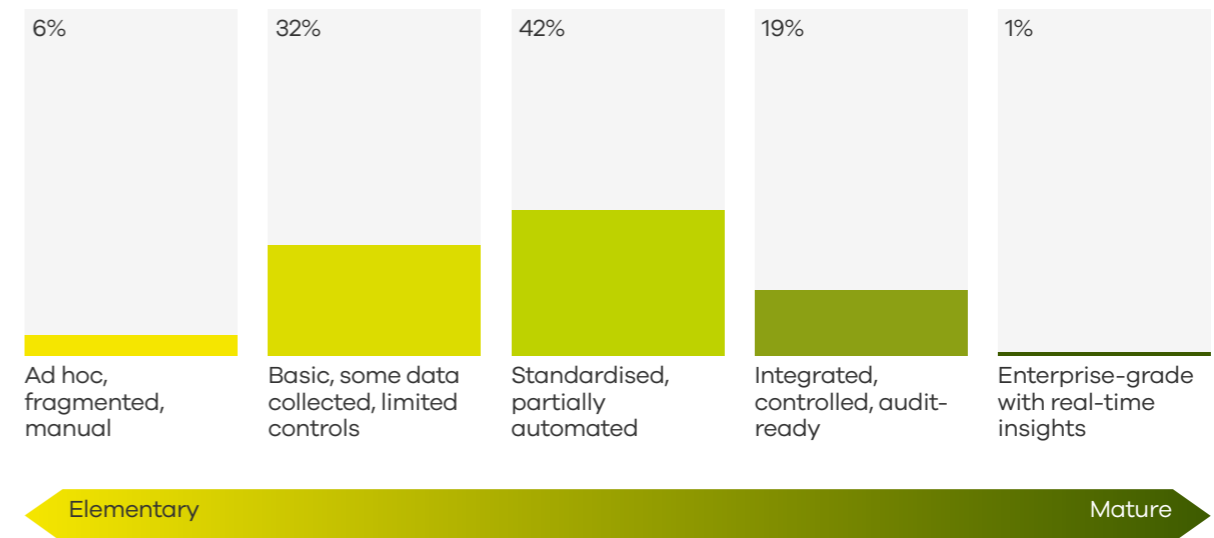
Progress will hinge on colleagues embedding sustainability impacts in commercial decision-making, and collaborating across functions



Q17. Which skills or competencies will people across your organisation most need in future, to support sustainability progress?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Data and technology

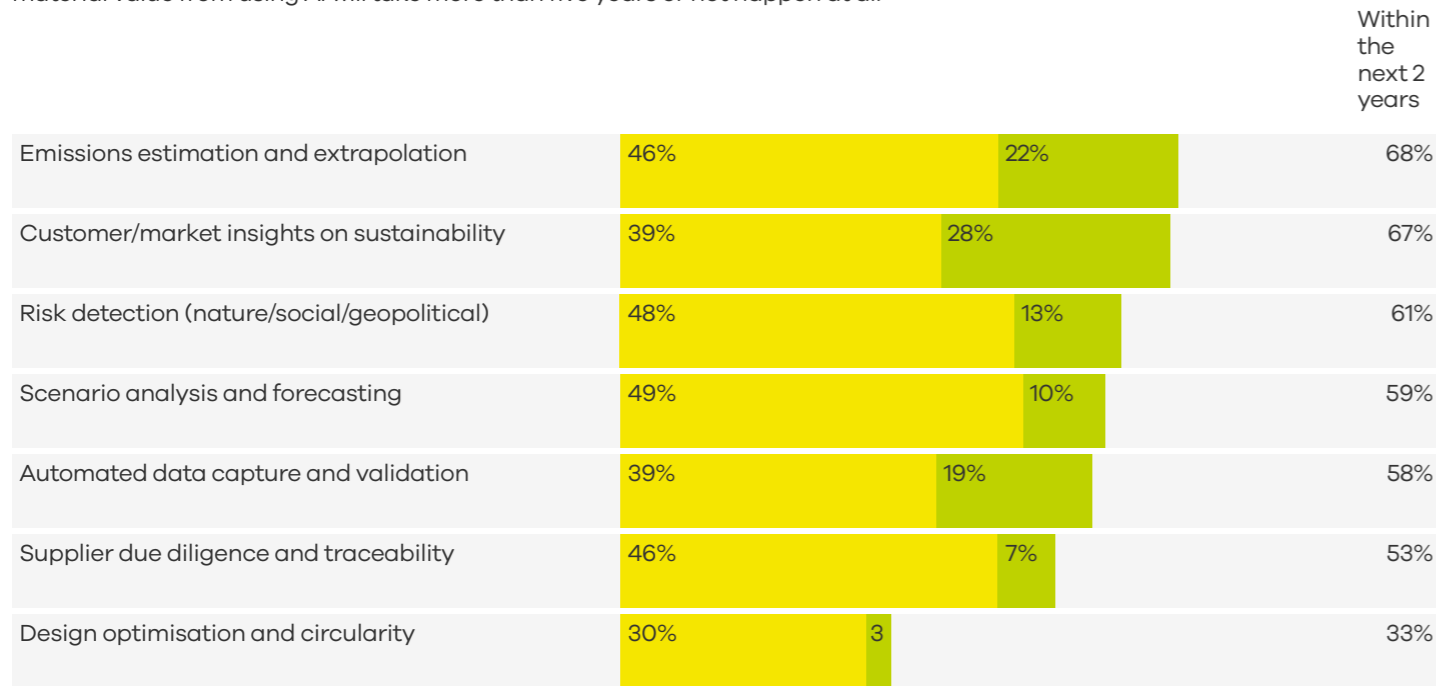
Management of sustainability data is predominantly basic and standardised; few report integrated or enterprise-grade capability



Q18. How mature is your current approach to sustainability data collection and management?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Across most dimensions, over half of leaders expect to see value from AI use this year, or in the next 1-2 years

The exception is design optimisation and circularity, where 3 in 10 leaders think seeing material value from using AI will take more than five years or not happen at all

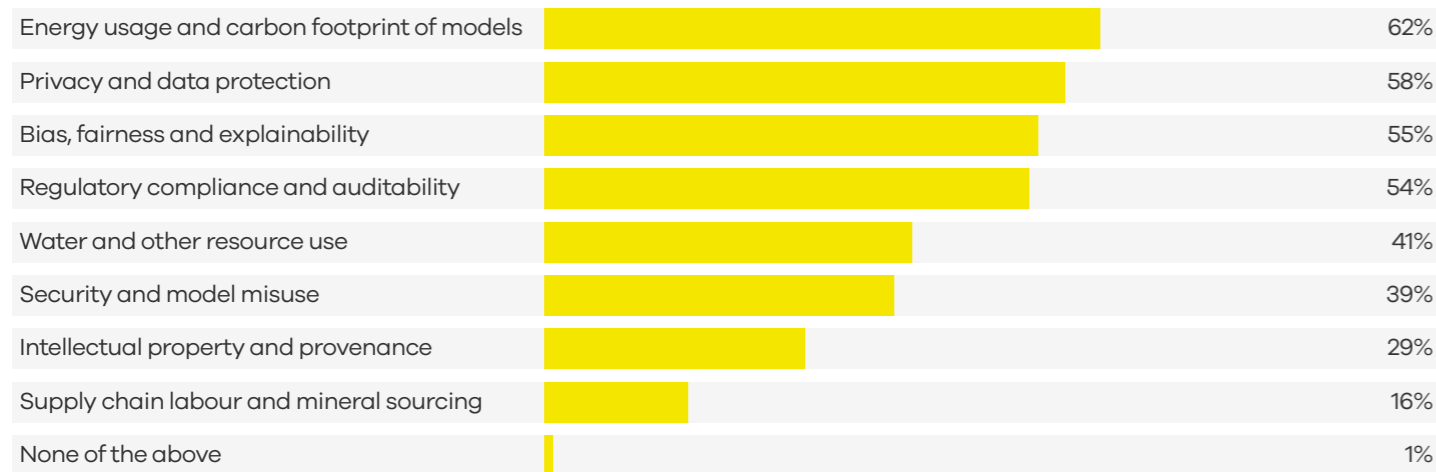


1-2 years (light green) This year (dark green)

Q19. When, if at all, do you expect your organisation to see material value from potential uses of AI to gather better sustainability data across each of the following dimensions?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

The chief concern about using AI to support sustainability is energy use/carbon footprint

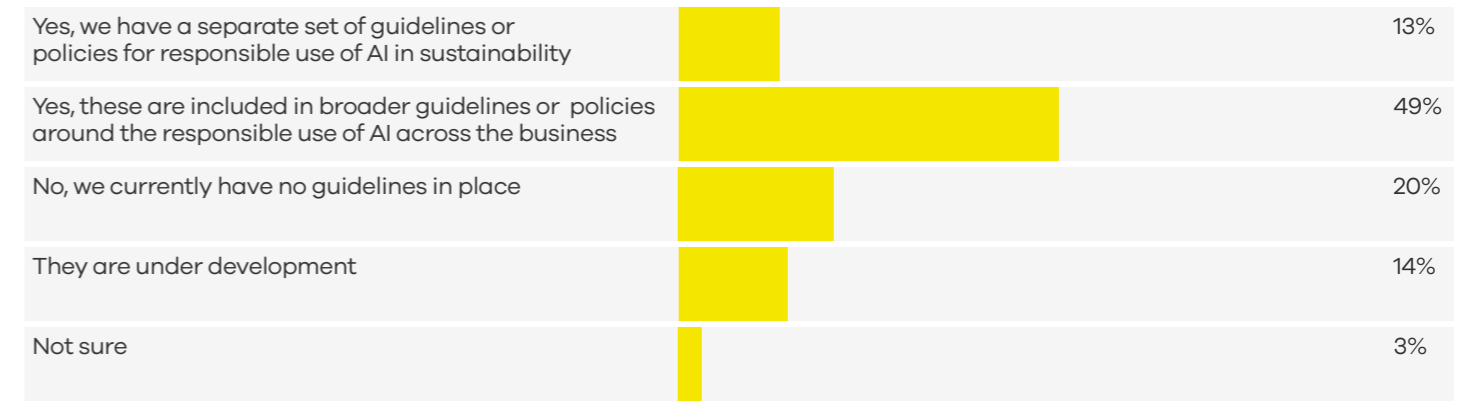
This is closely followed by privacy, bias/fairness and regulatory compliance



Q20. Thinking about the use of AI in your organisation to support sustainability outcomes, which of the following are concerns for you?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

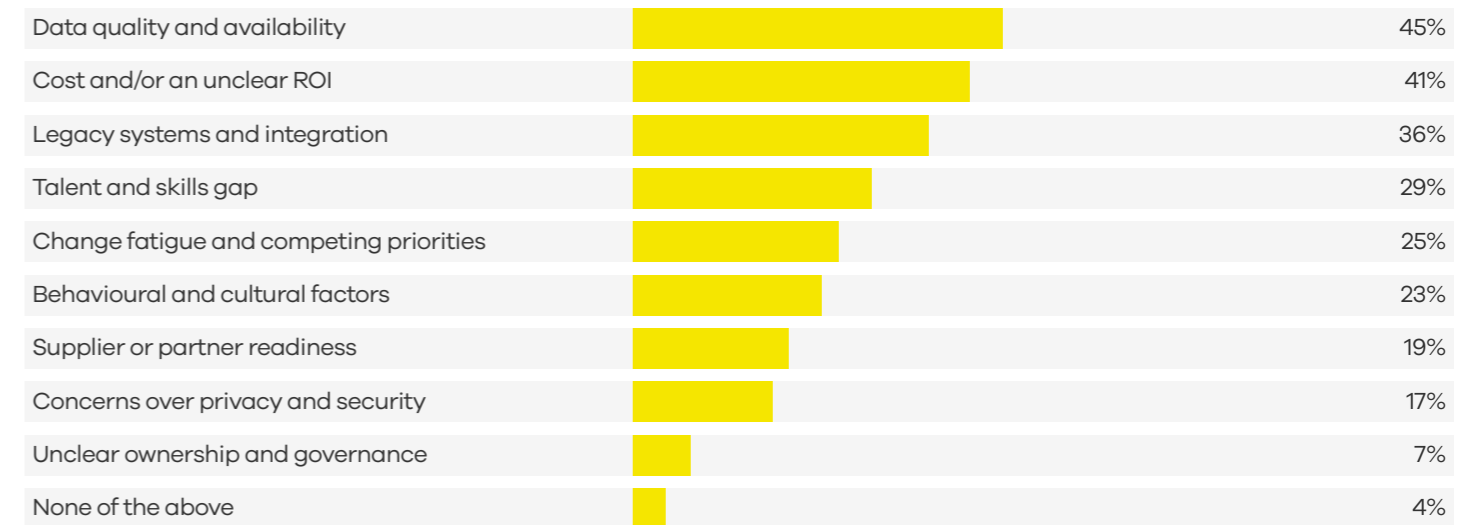
Most companies have guidelines for AI's use on sustainability; typically, these fall within broader policies

1 in 3 currently have no guidelines, or are developing them



Q21. Does your organisation currently have guidelines in place for the responsible use of AI in relation to sustainability?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

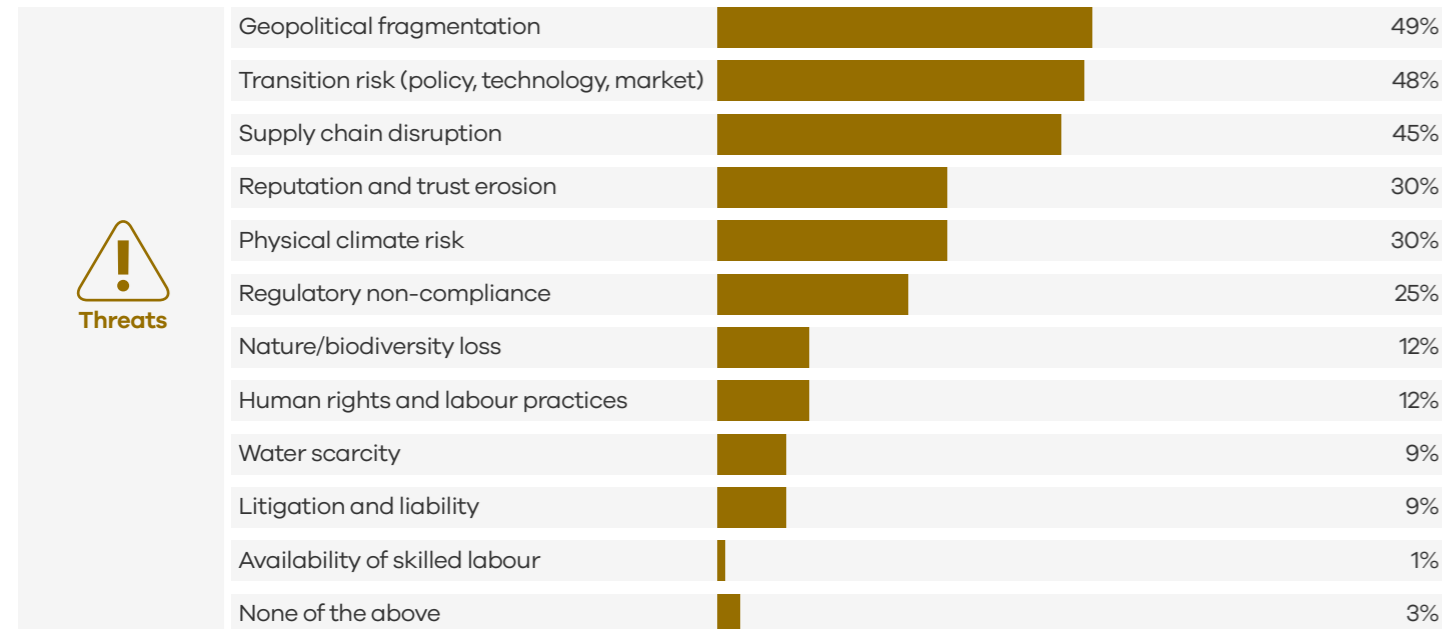
A range of barriers curtail the use of tech for sustainability, led by data quality and cost



Q22. What are the biggest barriers to your organisation using technology more extensively to support better sustainability outcomes?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Risk, opportunity and resource allocation

Geopolitics, transition risk and supply chain disruption are viewed as the biggest sustainability-related threats to business value



Q23. Which of these sustainability-related risks, if any, do you see as the biggest threats to business value over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

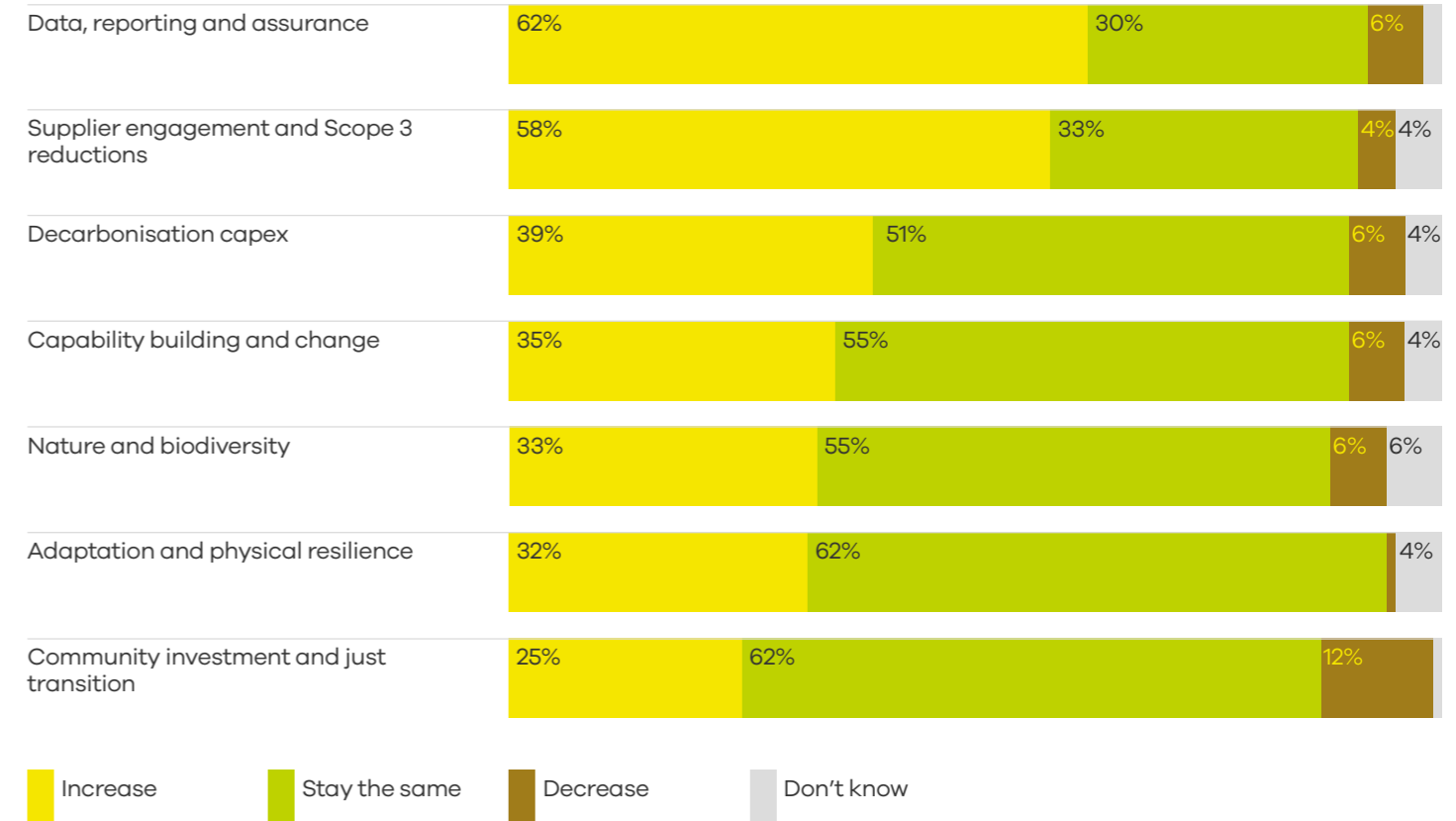
Sustainability leaders see opportunities to create business value through resilience and securing customers and talent



Q24. Which of these sustainability-related opportunities, if any, do you see as the biggest sources of business value over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Majorities of sustainability leaders expect to commit more resources across data reporting and supplier engagement

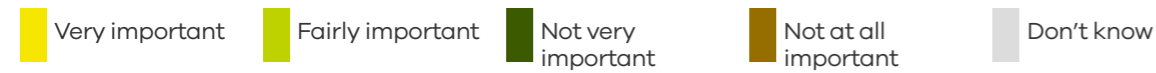
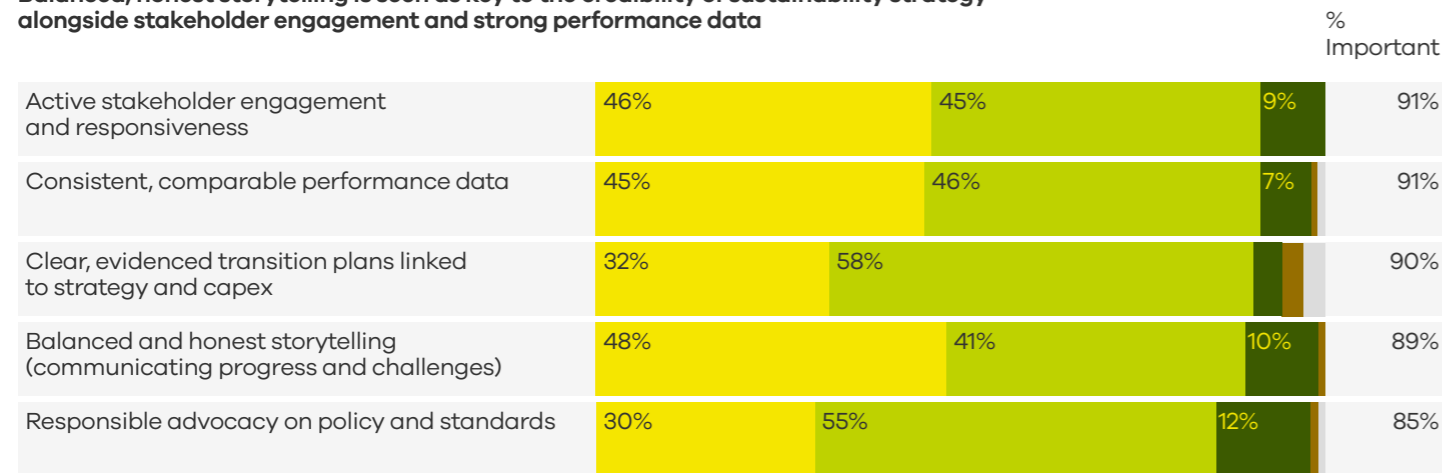
Few expect resources to decrease across any of the areas tested



Q25. How do you expect the resource your organisation commits in these areas to change over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

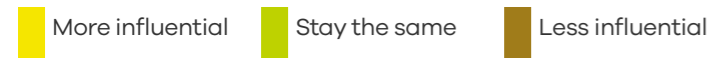
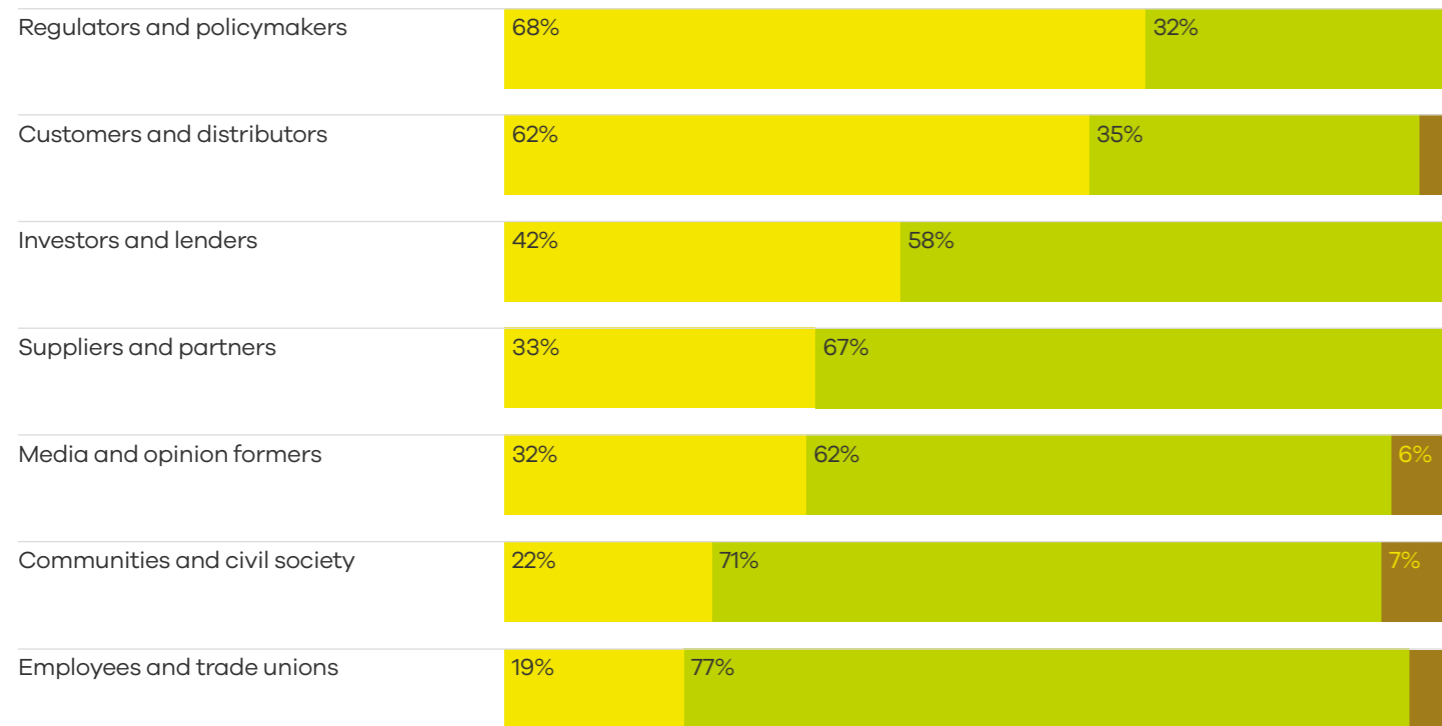
Reputation, stakeholders and trust

Balanced, honest storytelling is seen as key to the credibility of sustainability strategy – alongside stakeholder engagement and strong performance data



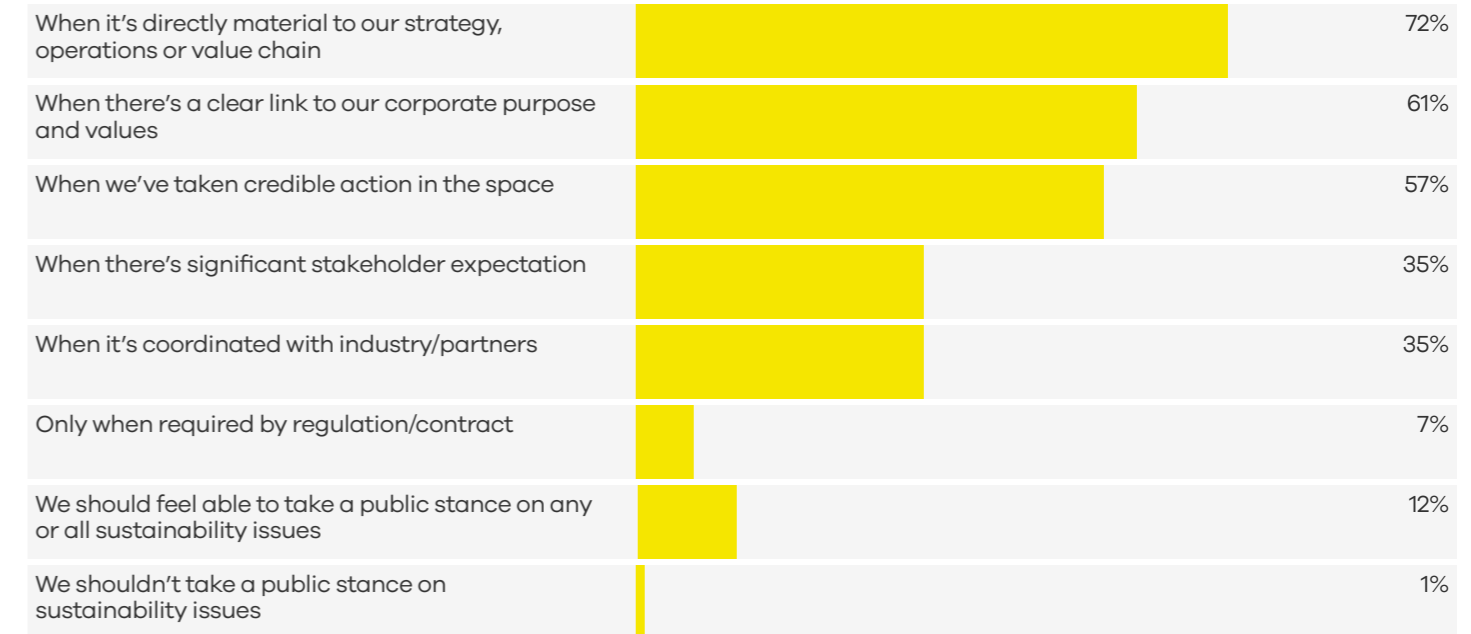
Q26. How important are each of the following factors to the credibility of your organisation's sustainability strategy over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Sustainability leaders expect regulators and policymakers, and customers and distributors, to exert more influence over the next five years



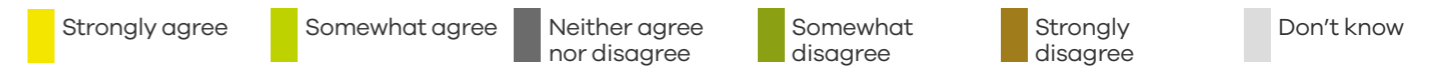
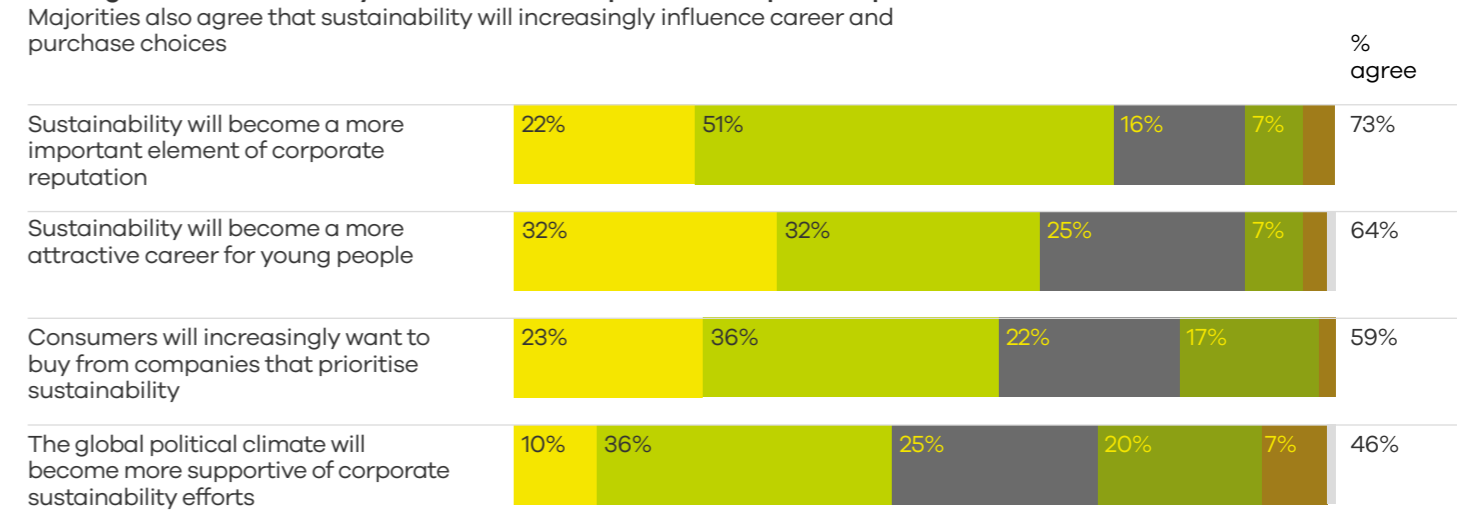
Q27. Over the next five years, do you expect the influence of these stakeholders on your organisation's sustainability policies and practices to increase, decrease or stay the same?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Sustainability leaders support taking a public stance when it is strategically material, linked to purpose and values, and backed by credible action



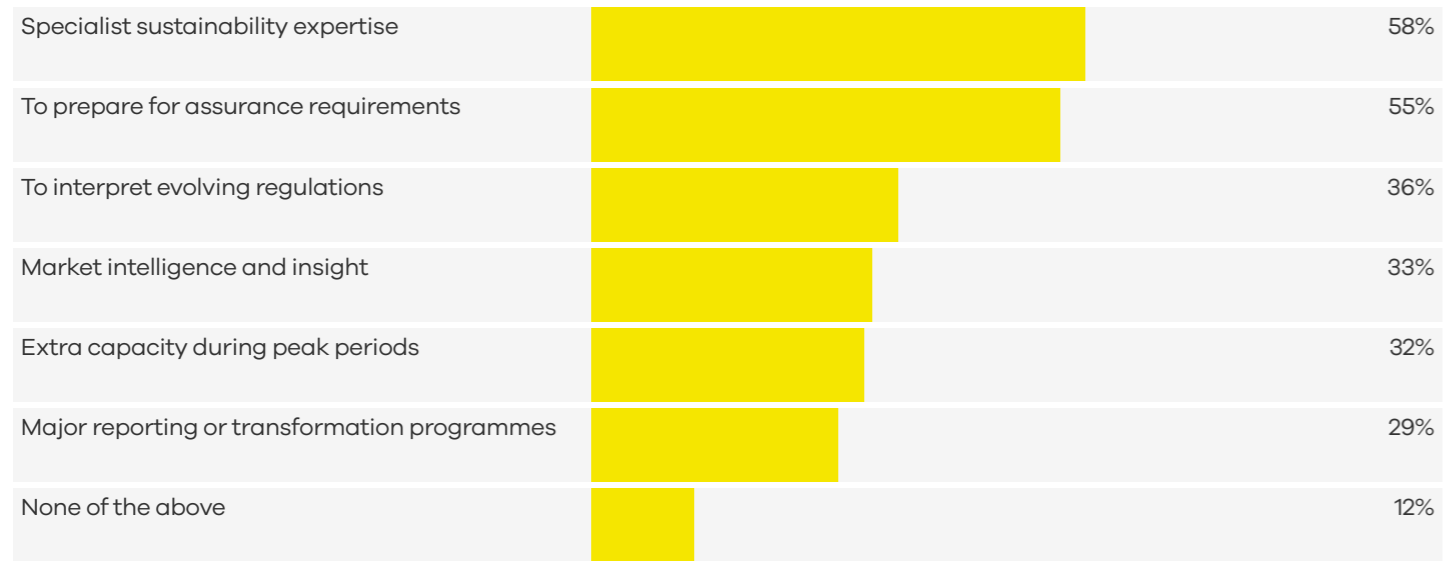
Q28. Under what circumstances do you think your organisation should take a public stance on sustainability issues?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

3 in 4 agree that sustainability will become more important to corporate reputation



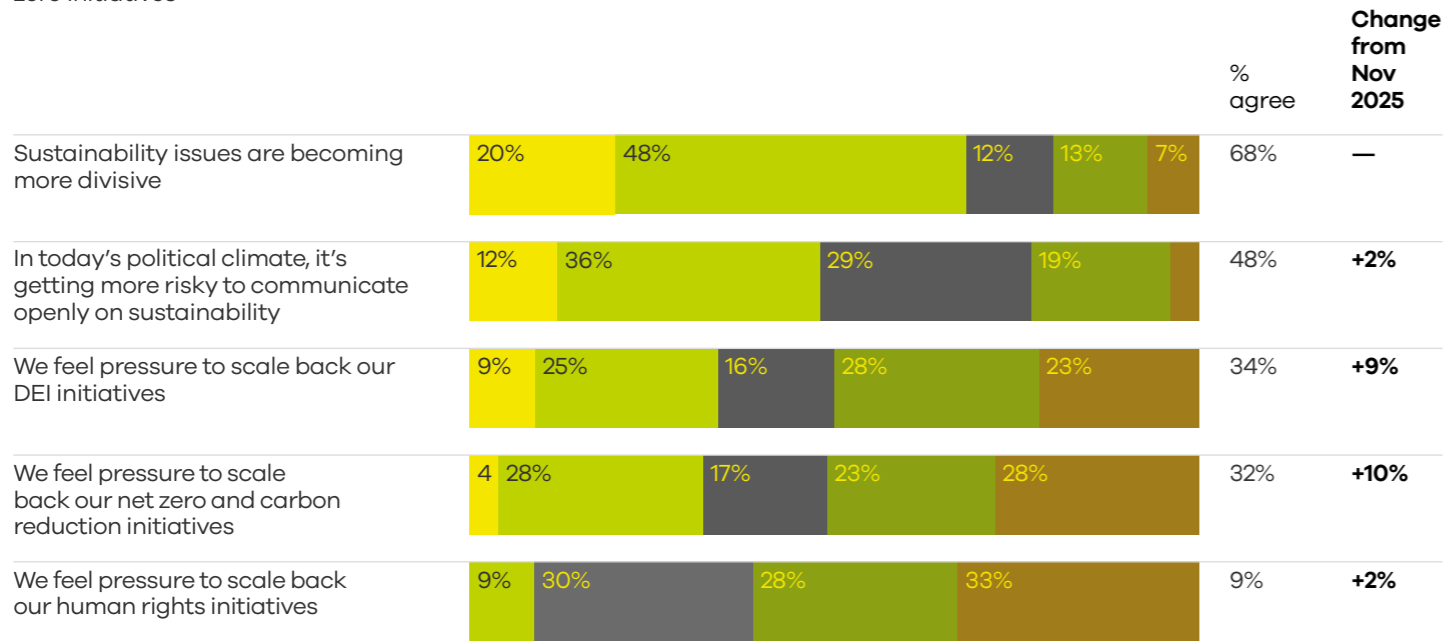
Q29. Thinking about the next five years, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

Majorities expect to hire specialist sustainability expertise and support for assurance in the next five years



Q31. Do you expect your organisation will use consultants and advisors to support your sustainability activities in any of these ways, over the next five years?
Base: All respondents (n=69)

More than 2 in 3 say sustainability issues are becoming more divisive
Sustainability leaders cite increased pressure to scale back DEI and net zero initiatives



■ Strongly agree
 ■ Somewhat agree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Somewhat disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree

Q32. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements?
Base: All respondents (n=69)



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