edX Enterprise

THE 2024 EDX AI SURVEY

Harnessing AI for a More Sustainable Future

HOW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE CAN HELP BUSINESSES UNLOCK PROGRESS ON CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY

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A New Use Case for AI

In today's rapidly changing world, the need for more sustainable business practices is greater than ever before. Increasingly, leaders are focused on serving not only shareholders, but all stakeholders — including a company's workers and customers, the communities it impacts, and the environment more broadly.[1]

In addition to environmental considerations becoming a key driver for business decisions, leaders are also investing more in the "S" of ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) practices. In other words, to operate sustainably, companies must consider their long-term impacts not only on the environment, but also on the people they impact.

At stake is the well-being of millions of people as well as the health and future habitability of our planet. By one estimate, climate change is costing the world over $16 million per hour in damage to infrastructure, property, agriculture, and human health. If no action is taken, the global costs of climate change damage could reach up to $3.1 trillion per year by 2050.[2]

Unfortunately, progress toward a more sustainable future is slow,[3] and many businesses lack the skills and resources to keep up. But with Artificial Intelligence (AI) transforming the workplace at large, it is emerging as an innovative tool with which to tackle some of the greatest societal and environmental challenges of our time.[4]

When it comes to environmental sustainability, AI can predict energy and resource usage, help companies develop sustainable products, and analyze climate data. AI also has the potential to support the human side of sustainability by identifying ways to improve employee well-being.

To better understand how AI will shape sustainable business practices, edX partnered with Workplace Intelligence to survey 600 U.S. C-suite leaders, along with 1,800 non-executive knowledge workers from the U.S., UK, Canada, Germany, France, Spain, India, Singapore, and Mexico. This report unpacks the study's key findings, including why many companies are struggling to achieve sustainability goals, how AI can provide critical solutions, and what is needed to bring both the C-suite and the workforce up to speed.

Among executives who responded to the survey, 75% say their company won't be able to achieve its sustainability goals without AI. This new case for AI is supported by the finding that at organizations that have already implemented AI for this purpose, 96% of the C-suite report that it's improved their progress toward sustainability goals.

While this is promising, still, nearly two-thirds (65%) of executives say they have no idea how to operationalize AI to support sustainability. There is clearly a growing need for training and development in this area, and the good news is that 84% of employees and 92% of the C-suite are eager to learn.

As corporate leaders look to the future of work, harnessing AI[5] and forging more sustainable practices are emerging as clear priorities. In the coming decades, executives and workers alike will face a changing planet, encounter radical new technology and contend with new, urgent societal demands. It's critical that companies take today to learn how to build a better tomorrow, including how AI can help them get there.

Key Findings

ACCORDING TO SURVEY RESPONDENTS:

BUSINESSES ARE INCREASINGLY EXPECTED TO PRIORITIZE SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES.

76% of the C-suite say their company is under pressure from investors or other stakeholders to focus on sustainability.

LEADERS WANT THEIR COMPANIES TO DO MORE TO ACHIEVE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL GOALS.

87% of the C-suite think their company needs to set more ambitious sustainability targets.

WHEN LOOKING FOR WORK, EMPLOYEES SEEK ORGANIZATIONS THAT CREATE VALUE FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS.

65% of employees say they'd be more likely to take a job with a company that has strong sustainability goals and practices.

AI IS EMERGING AS A KEY TOOL FOR BUSINESSES TO BUILD MORE SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES.

96% At companies using AI to support sustainability, 96% of the C-suite say it's improved their progress toward sustainability goals.

LEADERS BELIEVE AI IS ESSENTIAL TO ACHIEVING THEIR SUSTAINABILITY GOALS.

75% of the C-suite say their company won't be able to achieve its sustainability goals without AI.

DESPITE THEIR INTEREST, THE C-SUITE DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO USE AI TO IMPROVE SUSTAINABILITY.

65% of executives admit they have no idea how to operationalize AI to support sustainability at their company.

WORKERS AND LEADERS ARE BOTH EAGER TO LEARN HOW AI CAN SUPPORT ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL GOALS.

84% of employees and 92% of the C-suite would like to learn more about how AI can support sustainability.

UNLIKE THE C-SUITE, EMPLOYEES HAVE HAD LITTLE ACCESS TO TRAINING ON HOW AI CAN IMPROVE SUSTAINABILITY.

72% of the C-suite — but just 30% of employees — say they've taken training on how AI can support sustainability.

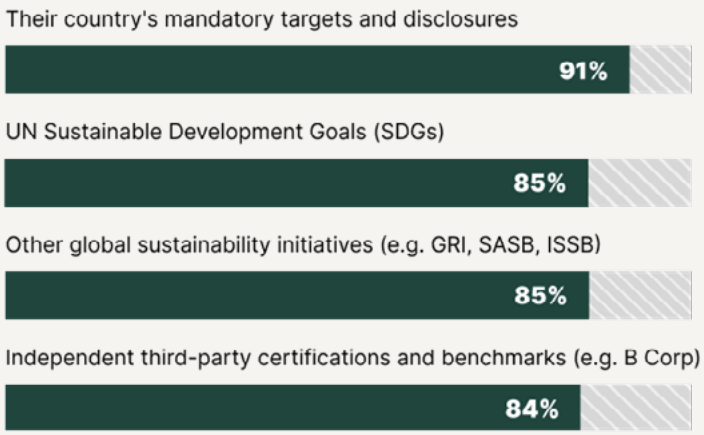
The Pressure Is Mounting for Companies To Operate More Sustainably

With concerns growing over the environmental and social impacts of businesses in many areas of the globe, corporations face rising expectations. Customers are more likely to buy from sustainable companies.[6] Employees are drawn to work for them. Investors want to support them.

Leaders are feeling this, with 76% of C-suite respondents saying that their company is under pressure from investors or other stakeholders like customers and employees. And they recognize that prioritizing environmental and social goals can actually bolster their bottom line — 90% agree that investing in sustainability will help them be successful in the long run.

Workers especially want to see their employers focus on sustainability impacts and are eager to support these efforts. Over nine out of 10 (92%) employee respondents say it's important for businesses to support sustainability and 82% want to help their company achieve its sustainability goals.

The majority of C-suite respondents say their company is either currently following sustainability regulations and initiatives or will within the next year, including:



These considerations also guide them in the job market, with 65% saying they'd be more likely to take a job with a company that has strong sustainability practices and more than one-third (38%) saying they would take a pay cut to work for such a company.

Businesses Are Struggling To Move the Needle on Key Sustainability Issues

In response to mounting pressure, many corporations are stepping up to the plate. The strong majority of C-suite respondents (89%) say their company has set sustainability goals or targets. However, 87% admit that their company needs to set more ambitious targets, underscoring that current goal setting may be falling short. Another 61% feel their company isn't doing enough to address sustainability and more than half (53%) are embarrassed by their company's efforts.

Most C-suite respondents acknowledge that there are real challenges to achieving these goals — more than three in four (76%) reported obstacles that stand in their way, including:

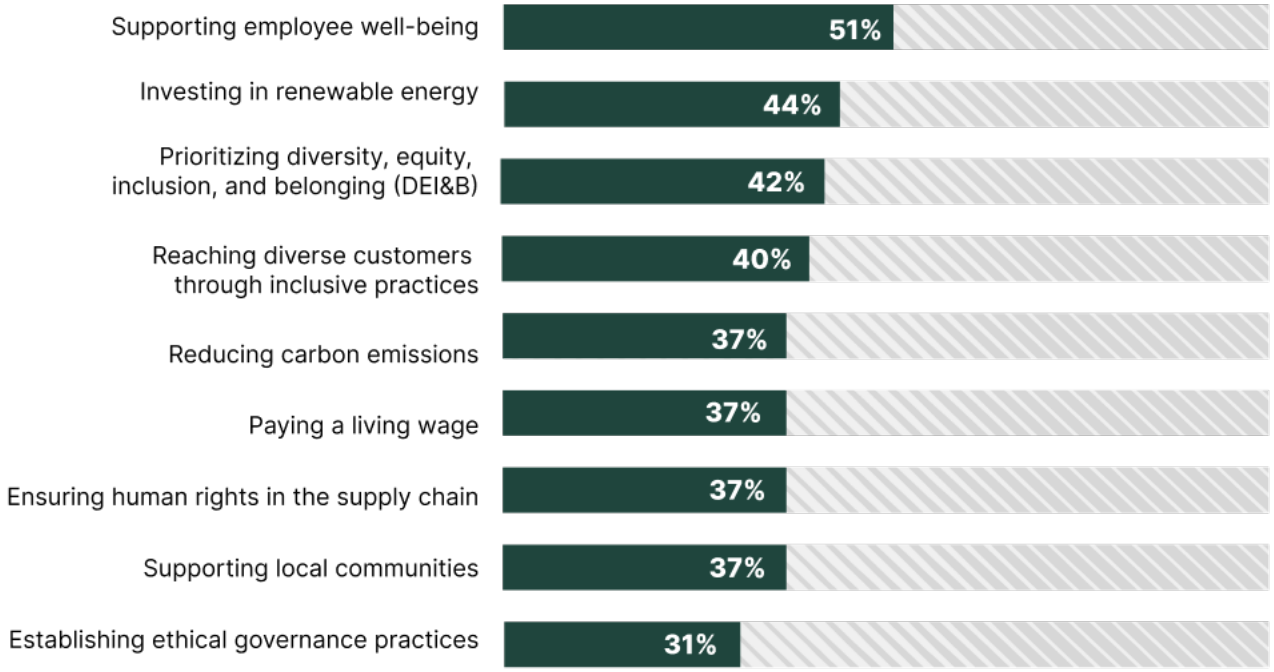
- Challenges with knowing what to track and prioritize
- Not having the right systems in place to collect data on these issues
- A lack of key skillsets among the teams leading sustainability initiatives

92%

OF EXECUTIVES ARE STRUGGLING TO FIND TALENT WITH SUSTAINABILITY SKILLS

In fact, 92% of C-suite respondents say that their company is struggling to find talent with sustainability skills, a sign that many workforces don't yet have the competencies needed to meaningfully advance broader environmental and social impact goals.

When it comes to addressing specific sustainability issues, many businesses seem to be lagging. Apart from supporting employee well-being (51%), C-suite respondents reported that less than half of their companies are prioritizing other issues across the sustainability spectrum. Employers are falling behind on "E," "S," and "G" actions alike, including reducing carbon emissions, paying a living wage, and establishing ethical governance practices. **Few C-suite respondents say their company is prioritizing the following sustainability issues:**



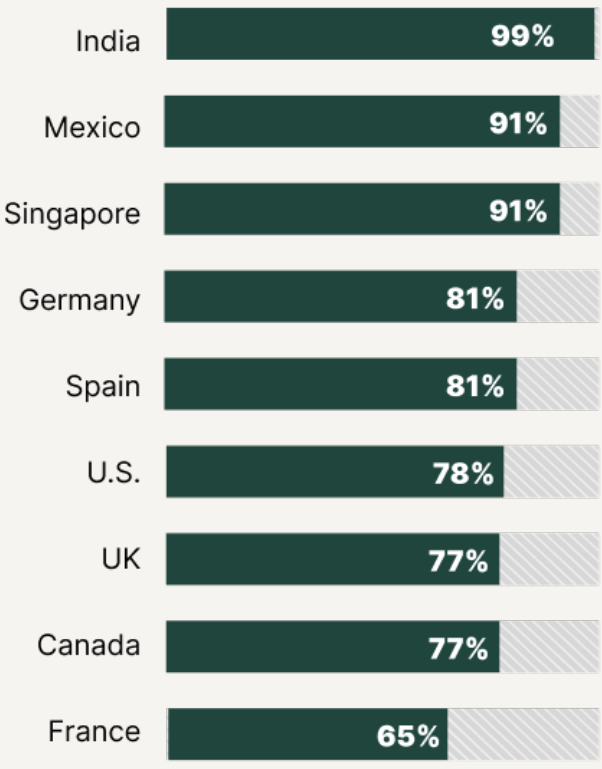
The overall lack of progress is leading some executives to question their role at their own organization. Nearly six out of 10 C-suite respondents (59%) say they are considering quitting their job to work for an employer that's taking more action around sustainability. Unsurprisingly, this rises to 78% among Gen Z executives (those born after 1996), signaling that younger leaders are especially looking for opportunities where they could have more impact.

Could AI Finally Unlock Progress for Corporate Sustainability?

In last year's survey, we explored how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping the world of work, including how it's redefining the role of both executives and entry-level knowledge workers.[7] In our latest research, we assessed how views on this have shifted over the past year and investigated whether AI could support the growing call for more sustainable business practices.

GLOBAL AI USAGE

The survey revealed some interesting differences between respondents globally. Nearly all employees in India say they use AI, with Mexico and Singapore not far behind. In France, however, only around two-thirds of workers report using AI.



AI remains a key tool for innovation and a priority for skills building at many organizations, and this year's survey revealed that its impact will only continue to expand. Large majorities of C-suite respondents agree that AI skills will become more important over the next 1–2 years (84%) and that it's important for them to improve their own skills in this area (97%).

Many survey respondents are already leveraging AI tools — 81% of employees and 98% of executives say they currently use this technology in their roles and nearly all (95% and 99%, respectively) expect they'll need to use it within the next five years.

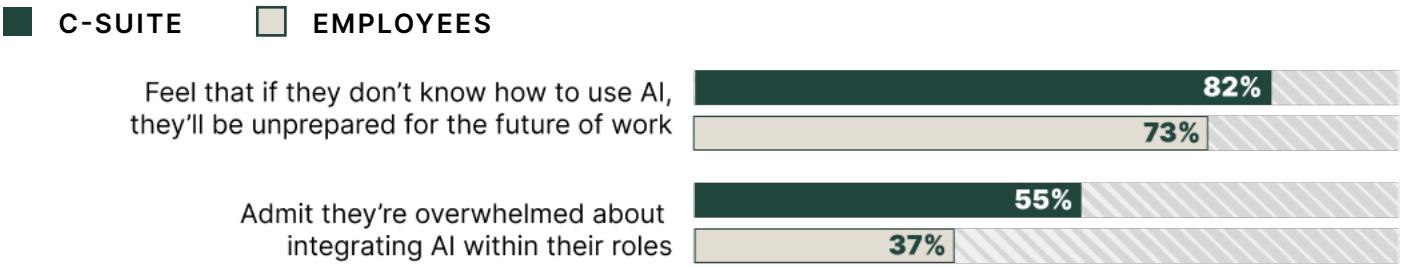
Overall, the survey revealed significant shifts around accepting and adopting AI. This year, more than four in five (82%) employee respondents report taking at least one step to adapt to AI — a big jump from 58% the year before. And more than half (54%) say their company expects or encourages them to make use of the technology — also a significant increase from 29% who said the same last year.

The rising expectations for AI run all the way up to the top of the corporate ladder. Among the 367 CEOs who took part in this year's survey, 61% say AI should completely automate or replace "most" or "all" of their role, a 12% point jump from 49% of CEOs last year.

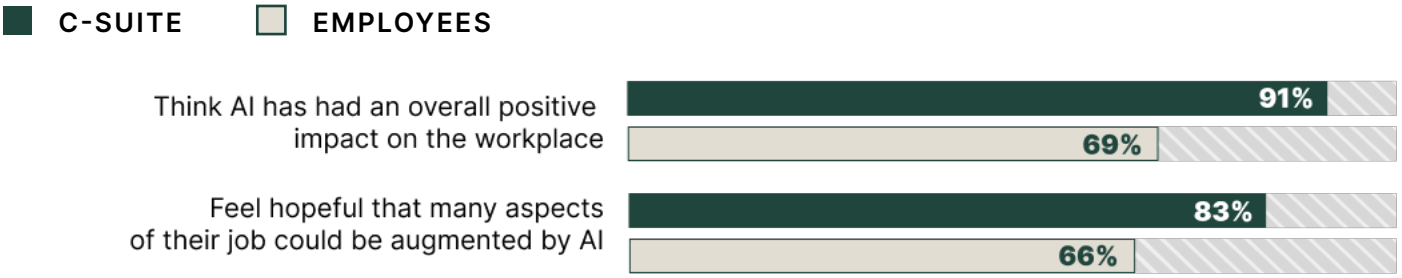
Despite Apprehension, Most People Are in Favor of Using AI at Work

There's no denying that some individuals feel uncertain about what it will mean to regularly employ AI in the workplace. Aside from fearing that the rapidly advancing technology could directly threaten their jobs, employees and C-suite leaders alike worry they might fall behind or be unable to successfully integrate AI into their work**. According to survey respondents:**

THE NEGATIVES



THE POSITIVES



GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON AI

With 99% of employee respondents in India using AI in their jobs — significantly more than in any other country — they tend to have stronger feelings about AI, both positive and negative:

- Employee respondents in India are the most optimistic about AI — 90% think AI has had a positive impact on the workplace (compared to 69% overall).
- However, they're also the most overwhelmed about integrating AI within their role — 62% feel this way vs. 37% of employees overall.
- They're also much more willing to take a pay cut if AI took over some of their job tasks (70% vs. 40% of respondents overall) and more open to having AI do their entire job (59% vs. 29% overall).

How Using AI Can Support Sustainable Practices

AT COMPANIES USING AI TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABILITY, 96% OF C-SUITE RESPONDENTS SAY IT'S IMPROVED THEIR PROGRESS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

While much of the current interest in AI centers around machine learning, generative tools, and task automation, there are many areas of opportunity for it to accelerate progress and drive innovation on some of the most important issues of our time. When it comes to sustainability, for example, AI can help:[8]

PREDICT RESOURCE AND ENERGY USAGE

IDENTIFY POLLUTION SOURCES

MONITOR SUPPLY CHAIN ACTIVITIES

DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS

ANALYZE CLIMATE OR OTHER SUSTAINABILITY DATA

TRACK REGULATORY CHANGES

LESSEN THE BURDEN ON EMPLOYEES TO GAIN SPECIALIZED SUSTAINABILITY SKILLS

EVALUATE AND SUPPORT EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

REDUCE BIAS IN HIRING, CAREER PATHING, AND COMPENSATION

While some of these tools and applications are relatively new, companies that are using AI to improve sustainability practices are already seeing success. In fact, nearly all C-suite respondents (96%) whose companies are using AI for this purpose report that it's improved their progress on sustainability goals and initiatives.

Overall, executives are seeing the value in applying AI tools to solve sustainability challenges. Nearly all C-suite respondents (96%) believe that businesses should use AI to support their sustainability efforts and 91% say that it will be key in helping their own companies achieve their goals.

While executives are clearly in favor of using AI to power social and environmental efforts, the path forward isn't so simple. Three in four C-suite respondents (75%) say their company won't be able to achieve its sustainability goals without AI, but 65% admit they have no idea how to use it. It seems that leaders recognize the opportunity AI offers here, but are not yet sure how to take it — a sign that more learning opportunities are needed to reduce confusion and help spring businesses into action.

THE RISKS OF AI AS A SUSTAINABILITY TOOL

Ninety-one percent of C-suite respondents agree that the benefits of using AI to support sustainability outweigh the risks. These risks can include algorithmic biases when using AI for hiring, skill degradation among employees, legal uncertainties as legislation around AI evolves, and potentially higher energy consumption.

65%

OF EXECUTIVES HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO OPERATIONALIZE AI TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABILITY

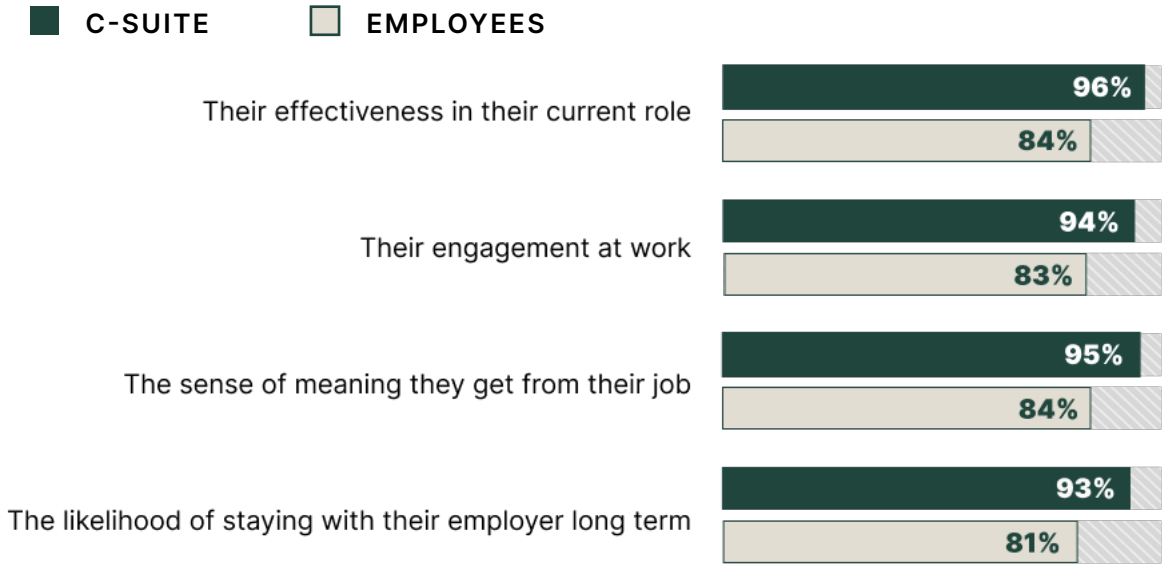
75%

OF EXECUTIVES SAY THEIR COMPANY WON'T BE ABLE TO ACHIEVE ITS SUSTAINABILITY GOALS WITHOUT AI

Employees and Executives Are Eager To Support Sustainability Efforts, but Workplace Learning Programs Aren't Keeping Up

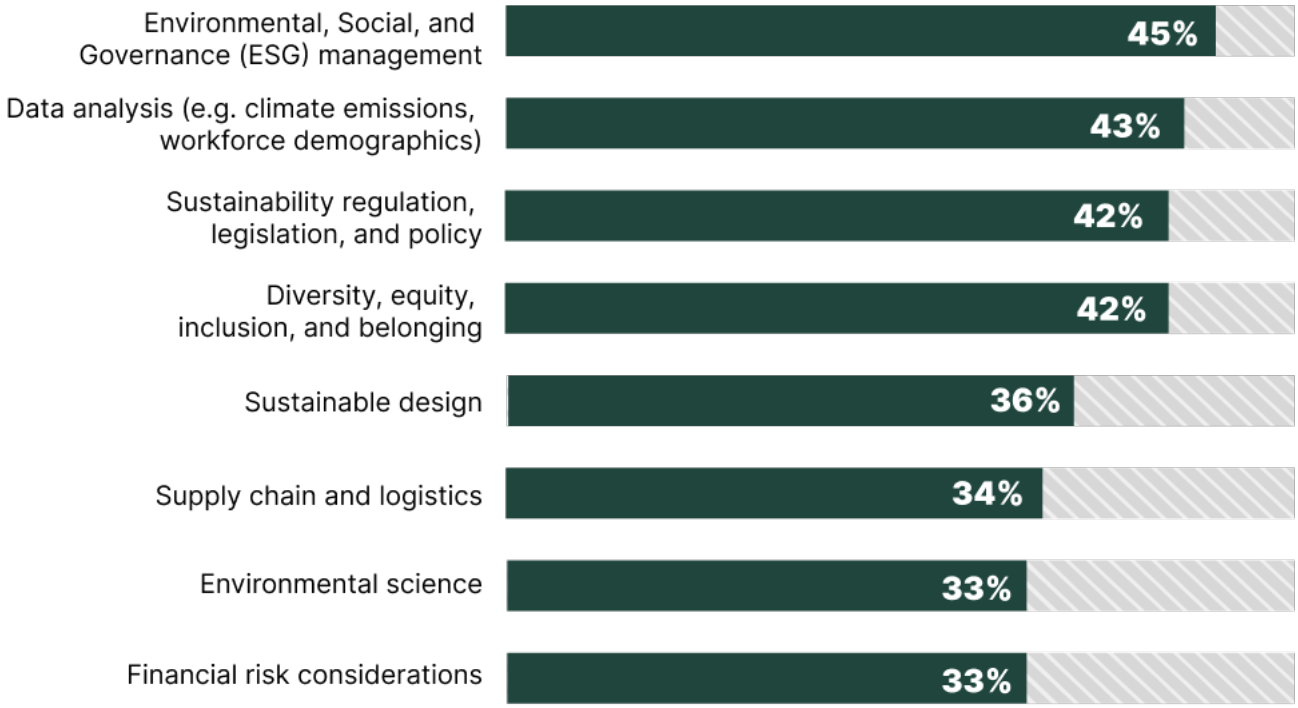
Today, there is a rapidly growing need for sustainability-related skills across the entire workforce. Most C-suite respondents (78%) predict that these skills will become more important over the next 1–2 years, but 92% say their company is struggling to find employees who possess them. There is a clear gap between the sustainability competencies that will be needed in the future and those that exist today, and employees and executives alike are aware they don't yet have what it takes.

But it's not for lack of interest — 94% of the C-suite and 82% of employees who responded to the survey believe it's important they improve sustainability skills for their own roles. **They also cite numerous benefits of furthering their knowledge in this area, noting that doing so would increase:**



However, sustainability training and resources are lacking — especially for workers. While 89% of employee respondents are interested in developing sustainability skills, only 45% (or fewer) of the C-suite say their company provides learning opportunities on the topics shown in the figure below. What's more, just 35% of employees say they actually use the sustainability training their employer provides.

Few C-suite respondents say their company provides training on the following sustainability topics:



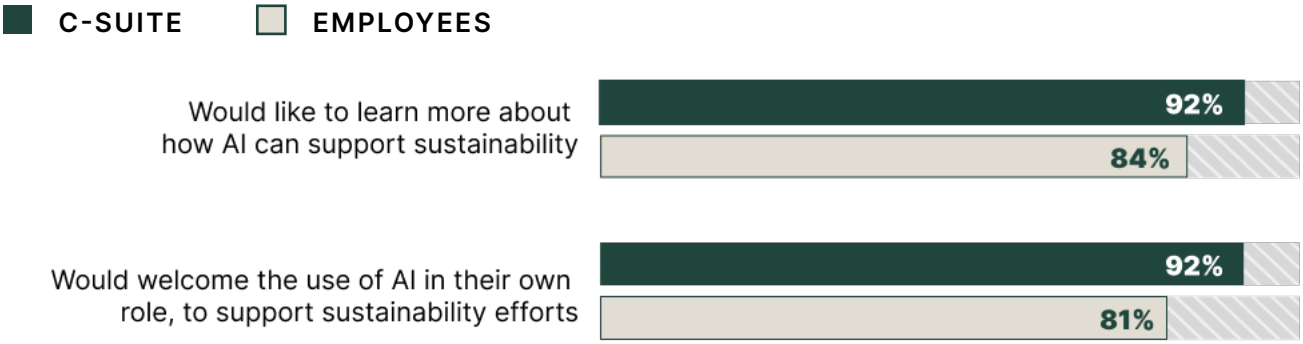
In stark contrast, 90% of C-suite respondents say they've received sustainability training, underscoring the lack of access employees have to educational resources about these topics. Fortunately, 69% of executives say that over the next 1–2 years, their company's investment in learning and development for sustainability will increase, signaling that this kind of training is becoming a priority for many organizations.

90% OF THE C-SUITE HAVE RECEIVED SUSTAINABILITY TRAINING, VERSUS JUST 35% OF EMPLOYEES.

Why Companies Should Invest in Learning Programs That Support AI as a Sustainability Tool

As corporations prepare their employees for the future of work, the intersection of AI and sustainability is likely to be crucial. Employees and executives who learn these skills today will be poised to usher in the more sustainable, agile, and resilient workplaces of tomorrow.

Workers and C-suite leaders alike want to learn and use AI skills to support, improve, and accelerate sustainability efforts:



While there are some educational resources currently available on how AI and sustainability skills can overlap, employees are largely being left behind. Nearly three out of four C-suite respondents (72%) say they have taken training on how AI can support sustainability, but only 30% of employees say the same.

However, an additional 55% of employee respondents say they would like to take training on this topic, a sign that they view these learning opportunities as valuable for their own professional futures, as well as the future of our planet.

THE GLOBAL VIEW ON AI AND SUSTAINABILITY

The survey revealed that employees in India — the most frequent users of AI — are most in favor of using it to support sustainability (98%), with respondents in Singapore (93%) and Mexico (92%) not far behind.

The Untapped Potential of AI to Support a More Sustainable Future

The world of work is rapidly evolving, thanks in part to accelerating social, technological, and environmental change. One of the greatest challenges of the coming decades will be how companies not only keep up with but contribute to a more sustainable future. Employees and executives alike want to be part of that journey and are eager to learn the skills needed to drive meaningful progress.

For corporate leaders looking to align their business with stakeholder-focused approaches, AI is emerging as a powerful tool. The path toward a more sustainable future is a complex one, but building a foundation of understanding, skills, and resources is a key first step. Learning and development programs that offer sustainability and AI training — as well as points of connection between the two — will be essential in building the skills needed for the future. And it's crucial that not only leaders receive these development opportunities, but that they take their teams along with them.

Methodology

Research findings are based on a survey conducted by edX and Workplace Intelligence between May 31 and June 24, 2024. In total, 2,400 full-time employees completed the survey, including 600 C-Suite respondents (also referred to as "executives" or "leaders") from the U.S. and 1,800 knowledge workers in non-executive roles (also referred to as "workers" or "employees") from the U.S. (33%), UK (8%), Canada (8%), Germany (8%), France (8%), Spain (8%), India (8%), Singapore (8%), and Mexico (8%). Respondents were invited to take part in the survey via email and were provided with a small monetary incentive for doing so.

Respondents were provided with the following definition prior to answering any questions on sustainability: "Corporate sustainability is a business approach that considers the environmental, social, economic, cultural, and ethical impacts of a company on its stakeholders. These stakeholders can include a company's workers, its customers, the communities in which it operates, and the environment more broadly."

About Workplace Intelligence

Workplace Intelligence is an award-winning thought leadership and research agency focused on the world of work. We help companies, and their executives, tell their workplace story in a meaningful, relevant, and impactful way using primary data, insights, and interviews. For more information, go to our website (workplaceintelligence.com) and subscribe to our Insider newsletter (workplaceintelligence.com/newsletter).

About edX

edX is the global online learning platform that fuels the world's ambition. edX was developed in 2012 by Harvard and MIT to make the world's best education available to everyone. Today, edX connects over 89 million people with online learning to meet every professional moment.

edX For Business is a comprehensive upskilling and reskilling solution, chosen and trusted by enterprises across the globe. Designed to engage every level of an organization, it offers an expansive portfolio of outcomes-based online learning programs taught by top universities and industry leaders, including curated academies in artificial intelligence, supply chain management, data analytics, sustainability, and leadership. Find out why employees of more than 60% of the Fortune 500 have trained with edX at edX.org/enterprise.

Endnotes

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