Is Sustainability the New Health & Safety?

How sustainability is becoming a licence to operate for global industry

sustainability unlocked

Contents

Executive summary

Many organisations have mature sustainability targets and disclosures. What they lack is enterprise-wide capability to meet ambition. Scope 3 emissions — embedded in suppliers, materials, logistics and product lifecycles — expose this execution gap most clearly. These emissions cannot be managed centrally. They depend on decentralised decisions made daily across procurement, engineering, operations and commercial teams.

This is where sustainability begins to resemble the evolution of Health, Safety and Environment (HSE).

HSE became operational not through policy alone, but through systematic, role-specific learning that embedded judgement and behavioural norms across the workforce.

Sustainability is now at the same inflection point.

Organisations that treat sustainability as reporting will struggle under rising scrutiny and volatility. Those that treat sustainability as infrastructure — using learning to build shared language, distributed capability and confident decision-making — will embed resilience into their operating model.

In the following report, we explore this journey to show how learning makes it truly possible to execute on sustainability.

A necessary evolution in sustainability

We do not need the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report 2026* to know we are living in turbulent times. But the report is striking not simply for the scale of perceived risk, but the disconnect it reveals between the short and long term.

Over the next two years, respondents identify geopolitical tension, societal instability and rapid technological change as their most pressing concerns. Look ten years ahead, however, and the picture shifts decisively. The top three global risks are all environmental: extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and critical changes to Earth systems.

This split matters.

Short-term pressure encourages organisations to narrow their focus and make pragmatic, sometimes defensive, choices. We are seeing more companies focused on what hits cash flow now, such as the impact of geopolitics, tariffs, AI disruption, and polarisation. These disrupt markets and the economy, making headlines that highlight reactive behaviours:

Climate hushing is going global. When world leaders spoke at the World Economic Forum's meeting in January, nearly all leaders avoided the climate discussion altogether, while companies are seen to be pulling back on public climate commitments to regain flexibility and avoid scrutiny or accusations of greenwashing.

Sustainability programmes are being deprioritised in favour of immediate concerns around cost, volatility and economic uncertainty.

Regulatory direction is also creating business uncertainty. Short-term chaos from US climate-rule rollbacks makes public commitments a compliance liability, while EU CSRD/Scope 3 rules simultaneously demand compliance from the same large companies operating across both US and EU markets.

The temptation is to kick the climate can further down the road. But environmental risk is not a distant horizon issue. It only looks long term if you sit far from physical assets. For asset-light service businesses, for example, it may still be possible to view environmental risk through a longer-term strategic lens.

For asset-heavy industries, however, like manufacturing, logistics, infrastructure, agriculture, energy or real estate, climate risk is already operational. For companies tied to physical systems, it is balance sheet risk today. Lost output, delayed deliveries, damaged assets, higher insurance and volatile input costs. If your business depends on factories, ports, warehouses, grids, land or transport routes, extreme weather is not theoretical, it is disruption. And it is happening now.

In February 2026, Storm Leonardo brought record rainfall across Spain and Portugal. Roads were submerged, rail lines were closed and ports slowed. The Iberian peninsula faced operational disruption as routes and logistics corridors were affected.

The short-term versus long-term split collapses when water is in your warehouse, a supplier's factory goes offline for weeks, insurance premiums double or coverage is withdrawn, a wildfire forces evacuation of a key site or drought restricts industrial water use. At that point, climate risk is not a disclosure topic, it becomes a profit killer.

So, while some organisations pause, risks compound. Others, meanwhile, continue to build capability — embedding sustainability into procurement criteria, engineering standards, capital allocation and operational KPIs. The result is not only short-term protection, but also a structural advantage. More resilient supply chains, more predictable cost curves, stronger positioning with customers and regulators, better access to capital and higher confidence under scrutiny. They advance while others fall behind.

The gap widens between organisations that treat sustainability as discretionary and those that treat it as operational discipline. We have seen these dynamics play out clearly in our many conversations with clients and partners.

Through 2025, the sustainable finance market continued to grow, albeit with greater rigour and direction. That renewed focus was also tangible at industry events we attended throughout the year. The emphasis was shifting away from ambition alone and towards execution — a theme we explored in our recent insight *Lights in the Fog: Positive signals for sustainability investment*.

Alongside this, a different and increasingly urgent conversation has emerged. Not about targets or narratives, but about how sustainability actually gets done — internally, across functions, and at scale.

More organisations are asking us how to move sustainability out of strategy decks and into daily operations. They are recognising that disclosure alone does not reduce emissions, strengthen supply chains or protect assets. Execution does. And increasingly, they are drawing a parallel with the evolution of HSE.

That comparison is not accidental.

From compliance to culture: The HSE precedent

In its early stages, safety was mainly about having manuals and procedures. Compliance meant proving that they existed. If an inspector asked, the paperwork was there. But people on the ground were still making decisions under pressure without the skills, habits or reinforcement to act differently.

Standards alone could not change outcomes, it had to come down to behaviour.

Following major incidents such as the Piper Alpha disaster in 1988, safety shifted from being a regulatory requirement to becoming an integral part of how organisations operated. Training became systematic and role-specific. Accountability moved into line management. Safety was reinforced continuously, not communicated occasionally.

Today, HSE shapes behaviour on the shop floor, informs leadership decisions, and is refreshed and reinforced across the workforce. It is not debated. It is assumed.

Just as safety evolved after catastrophic events forced behaviour to change, sustainability is now entering its behavioural phase. The question is no longer whether targets exist. It is whether managers and frontline teams can make resilient decisions when trade-offs appear.

This is especially true in manufacturing, heavy industry, logistics and supply-chain-driven businesses, where environmental impact is inseparable from operational reality. In these sectors, sustainability is no longer just a strategic aspiration or a communications narrative. It is increasingly a licence to operate: it is a prerequisite for resilience, trust and long-term value creation.

But making this shift — from targets and compliance to behavioural norms — is not straightforward. It requires organisations to bring together teams across functions with a shared level of understanding and capability. In other words, it requires workforce learning.

The execution gap: Strategy has moved faster than operational capability

In many organisations, sustainability is still concentrated in a central team that creates the strategy. Meanwhile, the decisions that determine emissions, risk exposure and resilience sit in procurement, engineering, logistics, finance and operations.

That structural misalignment is the execution gap, and it is increasingly expensive.

Recent events have shown how environmental risks translate directly into operational and financial disruption:

- In 2025, the total cost of damages caused by natural hazards was calculated at USD$224bn, with the Los Angeles wildfire alone causing damages of USD$53bn, of which USD$40bn was insured, according to Munich Re. Nearly 2,000 businesses were directly affected by closures, supply interruptions and infrastructure loss.
- In 2024, Porsche was forced to cut its sales forecast by more than $1 billion after flooding in Europe shut down a key aluminium supplier.
- Toyota saw operations halted for months in 2022, after extreme flooding in South Africa disrupted production and logistics.

These are not sustainability failures. They are operational failures with environmental triggers. These are real-world examples of what happens when environmental risk is insufficiently integrated into operational decision-making.

Most organisations know environmental risk exists but they often treated it as something to monitor rather than manage, outside quarterly pressures, operational dashboards and daily decision-making. The problem is not awareness, it is positioning. When risk is positioned that way, it remains peripheral until disruption forces it to the centre.

The challenge is no longer identifying the risk. It is embedding the capability to respond to it consistently, across functions and under pressure. Put simply, the challenge is knowing what to do about it. This is where learning becomes decisive.

Learning as the missing operating system

The execution gap is not a motivation problem, it is a systems problem. Sustainability sits in one part of the organisation and decisions sit in another. Procurement negotiates cost, engineering locks in design choices, operations manage throughput and finance allocates capital.

Each decision shapes environmental exposure. Yet few of these roles are trained to recognise that link. This is where learning becomes the missing operating system, the infrastructure that builds consistent understanding and practical judgement across functions that rarely speak the same language:

When procurement teams understand lifecycle risk, they start asking different questions. It's not just about price and delivery times but also about exposure, resilience and long-term cost.

When engineers understand embodied carbon, sustainability becomes part of the design brief from day one. And this is key to lower emissions.

When operations teams understand energy volatility, efficiency is a way to protect margins.

Safety became embedded when people recognised risk instinctively. Sustainability becomes embedded when environmental risk is recognised the same way, not as a reporting obligation, but as part of operational and commercial decision-making.

Scope 3: Where sustainability becomes operational

If there is one lever forcing sustainability out of strategy and into daily practice it is Scope 3 emissions.

For asset-heavy operators and supply-chain-driven businesses in particular, Scope 3 is not simply a reporting category. It is a mirror held up to the operating model.

Most emissions in industrial organisations do not come from company-owned buildings or purchased electricity (Scope 1 & 2 emissions). They sit in suppliers, logistics networks, materials sourcing, product design, asset lifecycles, use-phase impacts and end-of-life treatment (Scope 3 emissions). Often 70–90% of total emissions are created here.

And crucially, this is where operational decisions are made every day.

Unlike Scope 1 and 2 emissions, which can often be managed through centralised energy and facilities decisions, Scope 3 sits in decentralised judgement calls:

- A procurement manager selecting a supplier
- An engineer choosing materials
- A logistics team planning routes
- A plant manager managing waste streams
- A product designer determining durability or recyclability

Each of these decisions may look small but together, they define the organisation's environmental exposure. This is also why Scope 3 has proved so challenging. It cannot be managed by a central sustainability team alone. It requires procurement, engineering, operations, logistics and commercial teams to understand how their decisions contribute to environmental risk — and what alternative choices look like in practice.

This also is why Scope 3 is so powerful. It forces sustainability out of policy documents and into the operating model.

Handled narrowly (owned by a single sustainability or reporting team), Scope 3 becomes a frustrating reporting exercise — a process of chasing suppliers for data, applying proxies, explaining boundaries and defending assumptions. The conversation becomes: "How do we report this?" and not "Why are we making this choice in the first place?". In that model, emissions are measured after decisions are made. The exercise is retrospective, reactive and administrative.

Handled well, Scope 3 looks very different. When Scope 3 is aligned to structured, role-specific learning that is embedded across functions, it becomes a mechanism for enterprise-wide capability building. It is preventive, rather than reactive.

	Before	After
Procurement	Ask suppliers for data at the end of the year	Factor emissions into selection criteria upfront
Engineers	Calculate embodied carbon after a design is locked in	Consider lifecycle impact during specification
Operations	Report volatility after disruption hits	Anticipate exposure in planning

In this model, Scope 3 is no longer just about reporting what happened. It becomes a mechanism for shaping what happens. That is the difference between compliance and capability. And that is where organisational learning turns Scope 3 from an administrative burden into a strategic lever.

And Scope 3 is not just operationally important, it is becoming non-negotiable.

In financial services, regulators have made this explicit. Under frameworks like the PRA's supervisory expectations, climate risk — including financed emissions — must be embedded into core risk processes. Firms are not expected to have perfect data. They are expected to demonstrate capability, transparency and sound judgement.

The same logic increasingly applies across industrial value chains.

Customers are demanding carbon data from suppliers. Major buyers are embedding emissions criteria into procurement. CSRD in the EU mandates Scope 3 disclosure for large companies. California's SB 253 requires large companies operating in the state to disclose Scope 3 emissions. Global supply chains are slowly becoming more climate-transparent whether companies are ready or not.

The bar is shifting from "Do you report?" to "Can you explain and defend your decisions?" It is not enough to publish numbers, companies must explain how those numbers were obtained and how environmental risk influences decisions. This is where "paper shields" break down. Policies, certifications and high-level commitments are necessary, but insufficient. They do not prove competence. When challenged by regulators, customers, auditors or investors, organisations must be able to explain:

- Why specific boundaries were chosen
- How supplier emissions were estimated
- What assumptions underpin the numbers
- How environmental risk is reflected in procurement and design decisions
- How trade-offs are assessed under operational pressure

Without enterprise-wide understanding, sustainability remains fragile — a disclosure that looks robust until it is interrogated.

This is where learning becomes decisive.

Just as HSE training taught people to recognise unsafe conditions and respond instinctively, sustainability learning — particularly around Scope 3 — enables teams to recognise environmental risks as part of everyday operational and commercial decisions in real time.

That is the inflection point. Scope 3 exposes whether sustainability is centralised rhetoric or distributed competence. And when capability is built at scale, sustainability moves from disclosure to discipline, embedded in how the organisation designs, buys, builds and operates.

What this means for different roles and teams

When sustainability stops being a specialist function and becomes a distributed responsibility, it changes three things:

Decision rights:

Environmental exposure is shaped long before data is reported. It is shaped when suppliers are selected, when materials are specified, when contracts are negotiated, when assets are upgraded and when products are designed. That means the people making those decisions carry part of the risk, whether they see it or not.

Accountability:

When environmental risk sits only in ESG reports, it feels abstract. When it sits inside capital allocation, procurement scorecards, engineering standards and performance reviews, it becomes real. Embedding sustainability means aligning it with how performance is measured and rewarded.

Competence:

You cannot expect procurement, engineering or operations teams to integrate environmental risk if they have never been trained to see it. Most professionals were educated to optimise cost, speed, safety or quality. Few were trained to weigh lifecycle emissions, physical climate exposure or transition risk alongside those priorities.

In practical terms, this means clearer ownership, aligned incentives and applied competence across functions. When those three elements align, sustainability becomes part of how the organisation runs. When they do not, sustainability remains a parallel conversation, visible in reports, but absent from daily decisions. That is the difference between aspiration and operating discipline.

HSE and Operations Leaders

For HSE and operations leaders, the parallels with safety are immediate. Both HSE and sustainability involve managing systemic risk in real time across complex environments. Both require consistency across sites. Both depend on frontline judgement under time pressure. And both are tested when production targets and cost pressures intensify.

The challenge is not writing standards. It is enabling people to apply them when production targets, cost pressures and operational disruption compete for attention.

Decision rights sit on the shop floor and in site management. That is where resilience is either built or weakened. Accountability must extend beyond safety to include environmental exposure.

Scope 3 expands the risk lens beyond immediate safety to long-term environmental resilience. Flood risk to facilities. Supplier exposure to climate shocks. Energy volatility. Regulatory tightening.

Learning enables operations teams to connect these macro risks (climate volatility, supplier fragility, energy exposure) to micro decisions on waste management, maintenance schedules, material efficiency, energy practices.

Competence means environmental risk is factored into operational judgement, not treated as an add-on. Without capability, sustainability competes with productivity. With capability, it protects it.

Supply Chain and Procurement

Procurement sits at the epicentre of Scope 3, holding significant decision rights over Scope 3 exposure. Supplier selection, raw material sourcing decisions, and transportation choices shape both environmental footprint and operational risk exposure.

External pressure is accelerating that reality. Increasingly, large customers require emissions data from their suppliers. Carbon disclosure platforms such as CDP and EcoVadis are becoming standard expectations in tenders and contracts. Carbon border mechanisms and supply-chain regulations are emerging in major markets.

This transforms procurement from cost optimisation alone to risk optimisation. That changes both accountability and the capability required. Most procurement professionals were trained to optimise price, quality and delivery. Few were trained to interpret sustainability data, assess lifecycle trade-offs or weigh transition risk.

Sustainability learning enables procurement teams to:

- Interpret and evaluate supplier sustainability data critically and with confidence
- Understand lifecycle trade-offs
- Integrate emissions considerations into RFP criteria
- Engage suppliers constructively rather than defensively
- Identify innovation opportunities within the value chain

Without this capability, Scope 3 becomes an administrative burden, a reporting exercise layered on top of procurement's many tasks. With capability, it becomes a lever for competitive differentiation and that is where supply chain resilience is strengthened, not just measured.

Engineering and Asset Teams

Engineering holds some of the most consequential decision rights in the organisation. Material selection, system design, durability standards and asset configuration determine Scope 3 emissions for years, often decades.

Research from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and the International Energy Agency shows that design-stage decisions determine a substantial proportion of a product's lifetime environmental footprint. By the time emissions are reported, most of the impact has already been designed in. That changes accountability.

Yet many engineers were never trained to think in lifecycle or carbon terms. If environmental judgement is now part of engineering's remit, competence must match it. Learning does not constrain engineering. It expands it.

It equips engineers to:

- Apply lifecycle thinking
- Evaluate embodied carbon trade-offs
- Balance performance, cost and sustainability intelligently
- Anticipate regulatory tightening and market shifts

In this sense, Scope 3 capability is future-proofing.

Sustainability and ESG teams

As sustainability matures, these teams transition from being content owners to system architects. They do not hold most of the decision rights over Scope 3 exposure. Procurement, engineering and operations do. The role of ESG is to clarify where those decision rights sit and ensure they are exercised with environmental awareness. That changes accountability.

Success is no longer measured by the volume of reporting or the elegance of frameworks. It is measured by whether environmental considerations are embedded in capital decisions, supplier selection and design standards across the organisation. And it changes competence.

ESG teams cannot carry Scope 3 alone, and should not have to.

Their role becomes:

- Building shared language across functions
- Designing governance structures
- Enabling capability at scale
- Interpreting regulatory expectations
- Translating external pressure into internal clarity

Learning is the mechanism that distributes that competence. And Scope 3 exposes whether sustainability is embedded across teams or isolated. The maturity of the ESG function is not defined by how much it controls, but by how effectively it enables others to act.

Sustainability and Learning & Development (L&D)

For L&D, sustainability is emerging as a core capability domain — alongside HSE, cyber security and quality management.

The execution challenge mirrors what organisations have already solved in safety:

- A global, distributed workforce
- Operational constraints
- High regulatory expectations
- The need for consistent standards

What changes is the level of accountability. If environmental judgement is now embedded in procurement, engineering and operations, then L&D carries responsibility for ensuring those teams are equipped to exercise it. L&D becomes the infrastructure that supports distributed decision rights.

Digital, modular, expert-led learning becomes essential infrastructure.

It allows organisations to:

- Create role-specific pathways
- Embed sustainability into existing LMS systems
- Track capability development
- Reinforce learning over time
- Build confidence before scrutiny arrives

When regulators, customers or auditors test judgement, the organisation's protection is not the policy. It is the capability of its people. Learning is no longer a support function. It is a resilience function.

Industry lenses: Where pressure is greatest

01

Manufacturing

Material sourcing, energy use and supplier emissions dominate impact. Extreme weather events are already disrupting raw material flows and production capacity. Learning ensures plant managers, engineers and procurement teams share a common understanding of risk and response.

02

Heavy industry

Asset intensity and long lifecycles amplify exposure. Decarbonisation pathways require capital allocation decisions that balance resilience, cost and compliance. Capability enables better long-term investment decisions.

03

Logistics and transport

Route planning, fleet management, fuel choice and supplier coordination sit at the heart of Scope 3 exposure. As fuel volatility and regulation increase, informed operational judgement becomes a competitive advantage.

04

Construction and real estate

Embodied carbon, materials sourcing and lifecycle performance are under increasing regulatory scrutiny. Learning bridges the gap between design intent and on-site execution.

05

Utilities

Grid resilience, transition planning and infrastructure modernisation depend on operational competence as much as strategy. Climate volatility makes this urgent.

The deeper shift

Scope 3 exposes the fact that sustainability cannot be centralised. It must be distributed intelligently, consistently and confidently.

That distribution does not happen through policy. It happens through learning.

Just as HSE became embedded when organisations invested in workforce capability at scale, sustainability — and particularly Scope 3 — will only become operational when organisations treat learning not as an accessory, but as infrastructure.

From insight to infrastructure: How to embed sustainability learning at scale

If Scope 3 reveals where sustainability becomes operational, the next question is unavoidable:

How do you actually build the capability to support it?

Most organisations do not lack frameworks, they lack fluency.

It is one thing to discuss emissions at board level. It is another to decide between two suppliers, to challenge a specification, or to understand what data is good enough. That is where the gap appears.

Closing that gap is less about tools and more about people knowing what to look for and what to do.

Below is a practical blueprint for embedding sustainability learning in a way that mirrors the evolution of HSE — from compliance requirement to operational norm.

1. Start by mapping capability — not content

Before launching training, most organisations skip the most important diagnostic step: understanding what people already know, and where execution risk truly sits.

Common patterns emerge:

- Deep sustainability expertise in a small central team
- Strong financial controls but low confidence interpreting ESG data
- Operational teams accountable for outcomes but under-equipped to act
- Senior leaders fluent in ambition, less fluent in execution

Instead of asking "What content should we roll out?", ask:

- Where are decisions being made that affect Scope 3 exposure?
- Which teams carry risk without sufficient understanding?
- Where does sustainability currently rely on a handful of individuals?

In one organisation we worked with, this kind of mapping revealed that most emissions exposure sat in procurement and engineering decisions, yet training had focused mainly on sustainability and reporting teams. Redirecting learning to those roles changed the quality of supplier discussions within months.

Mapping sustainability capability across functions — operations, engineering, procurement, finance, risk, legal — turns learning from a tick-box exercise into a targeted intervention.

This is the sustainability equivalent of a safety audit. You cannot protect what you have not diagnosed.

2. Standardise language before scaling learning

One of the most underestimated barriers to sustainability execution is terminology.

Words like *materiality, impact, transition risk, embodied carbon and lifecycle emissions* mean different things to different teams.

Left unresolved, meetings meant for decisions become debates about definitions.

Imagine a procurement meeting. The team is discussing a supplier, but the conversation is challenging. People are unsure what counts as transition risk, or whether the issue sits in Scope 3. Nothing gets decided. Now imagine the same meeting where everyone speaks the same language. The supplier is flagged as a high Scope 3 and high transition risk. The next step is clear, let's prioritise engagement and request primary data. The meeting moves on.

HSE became operational when everyone understood what "hazard", "near miss" and "incident" meant — regardless of site or geography.

Sustainability requires the same clarity. Practical steps include:

- Aligning sustainability, finance and operations leaders around core terminology
- Embedding shared definitions into onboarding and training pathways
- Reinforcing a common "dialect" across global teams

Friction is one of the biggest hidden costs of sustainability execution. But fluency reduces friction.

3. Build confidence, not just awareness

Awareness does not change behaviour. Most organisations have already run introductory ESG sessions. The problem is not that people have never heard of Scope 3 — it is that they lack confidence applying it.

A procurement manager may be questioned on a supplier choice: "Why was a higher-cost supplier selected?", "Why did you opt for this supplier when the emissions data was incomplete?" Without confidence the explanation is vague: "They said they were sustainable." That answer does not stand up to audit, customer scrutiny or internal review. In fact, it sounds like greenwashing.

A confident answer would be: "We selected this supplier because they provided primary data for key categories, transport distances are lower, and the lifecycle footprint is materially lower than alternatives. Where data was incomplete, we documented assumptions and requested improvement as part of the contract. I can defend this decision under a CSRD audit."

Same decision. Different level of confidence.

Under regulatory scrutiny, customer challenge or investor questioning, teams must be able to explain:

- Why boundaries were chosen
- How supplier data was assessed
- What assumptions underpin reported numbers
- How sustainability factors influence operational decisions

This requires judgement, not memorisation. Effective learning therefore shifts from, "What is sustainability?", to:

- What does good look like in my role?
- What trade-offs should I expect to face?
- How do I defend my decisions under pressure?

Confidence is what turns sustainability from reputational risk into strategic competence.

4. Design learning around real workflows

One of the biggest execution failures occurs when sustainability learning sits outside daily work. Knowledge fades. Behaviour remains unchanged.

Instead, learning must be anchored to real decision-making environments:

- Procurement reviews
- Engineering design stages
- Capital allocation discussions
- Risk committee meetings
- Plant-level operational processes

Use real scenarios. Simulate real trade-offs. Reinforce learning in the moments where decisions are made, not once a year during reporting season.

Sustainability sticks when it shows up where work happens.

5. Upskill at scale, but not all at once

In large industrial organisations, attempting to train everyone simultaneously creates fatigue and resistance.

Imagine announcing mandatory sustainability training for the entire workforce in the same quarter. Thousands of employees complete modules, but much of it feels generic and disconnected from their roles. Six months later, very little has changed in day-to-day decisions.

Now imagine a phased approach. First, everyone builds a shared baseline: common language, core concepts and the key cross-functional topics. Then procurement and engineering teams develop deeper, practical capability, because their decisions drive a large share of impact. Over time, role-specific learning expands across the organisation. Decisions begin to change in those key processes.

HSE evolved through phased capability building. Sustainability must follow the same path.

This means:

- Creating tiered learning pathways by role and responsibility
- Sequencing depth of knowledge over time
- Starting with shared foundations, then building role-specific capability
- Treating sustainability capability as an ongoing programme, not a project

Execution capability is built over quarters, not launches.

6. Connect learning to accountability

Sustainability stalls when it is discussed but not measured.

Imagine a plant manager who completes sustainability training, but nothing in their targets, budget reviews or performance discussions ever refers to energy use, waste or supplier risk. The training is quickly forgotten, because nothing depends on it.

Now imagine the same role where energy intensity, material efficiency or supplier data coverage are part of operational KPIs, and managers are expected to explain performance in regular reviews. Learning stops being theoretical. It becomes relevant to the job.

Leading organisations are increasingly aligning sustainability capability with performance frameworks, not as a moral gesture, but as a management one.

This might include:

- Linking learning outcomes to operational KPIs
- Integrating sustainability into leadership development programmes
- Including environmental risk literacy in management competencies
- Tracking capability progression, not just completion rates

HSE became cultural when safety performance influenced performance reviews and incentives.

7. Use technology to amplify clarity — not replace it

Digital systems, carbon accounting platforms and data dashboards are essential. But technology cannot substitute for understanding.

Imagine a team reviewing a carbon dashboard. Emissions appear to have fallen by 12%. The numbers look positive, but no one in the room is sure whether the change reflects real reductions, updated emission factors, or gaps in supplier data. The tool is working. The interpretation is missing.

Now imagine the same discussion with teams trained to read and challenge the data. Someone asks where the change comes from, what assumptions sit behind it, and whether the reduction is structural or temporary. The numbers become a basis for decisions, not just reporting.

Too often, organisations deploy sustainability software before equipping people to interpret the outputs. Learning must precede — or at least accompany — system rollout.

Focus training not only on tool usage, but on interpretation:

- What does this data actually tell us?
- Where are the uncertainties?
- How should it influence decision-making?

Technology scales capability — but only if the human foundation is strong.

Protect, equip, mobilise

Embedding sustainability learning can be understood through three stages:

Protect

Identify where knowledge gaps create regulatory, operational or reputational risk. Map capability across the organisation. Level the playing field with shared foundational understanding.

Equip

Build deeper, role-specific expertise. Enable teams to apply sustainability principles within procurement, engineering, operations, finance and strategy.

Mobilise

Translate knowledge into behaviour. Reinforce learning through leadership example, performance frameworks and continuous refreshers.

Compliance creates urgency. Capability creates confidence. Confidence creates culture.

What good looks like in practice

When sustainability learning is embedded well, the effects are visible:

- Procurement teams confidently engage suppliers on emissions performance
- Engineers incorporate lifecycle thinking into design decisions
- Operations managers identify efficiency improvements proactively
- Sustainability teams shift from firefighting to orchestration
- Leadership discussions move from aspiration to informed trade-offs

In organisations that have taken this approach, we consistently see:

- Improved cross-functional collaboration
- Greater confidence under regulatory or client scrutiny
- Stronger alignment between sustainability and commercial strategy
- More resilient supply chains
- Better decision-making under uncertainty

The aim isn't to turn everyone into sustainability specialists. It is about ensuring that sustainability is no longer fragile — no longer dependent on a handful of experts — but embedded across the system.

What organisations expect from learning in 2026

In a business landscape shaped by risk, regulation, and relentless change, the Learning & Development function is no longer measured by the volume of content delivered, but by the relevance, responsiveness, and results it can deliver at scale.

To better understand what's next, Sustainability Unlocked asked clients to identify their learning priorities for 2026. The following details a few of the findings around learning in the context of sustainability.

We asked organisations what approach to learning works best. They responded:

Relevance beats volume

Regulation, transition risk, and sector context matter more than content breadth.

Support beats consumption

Learners want guidance, practice, and AI support in the flow of learning, not just videos.

Proof beats participation

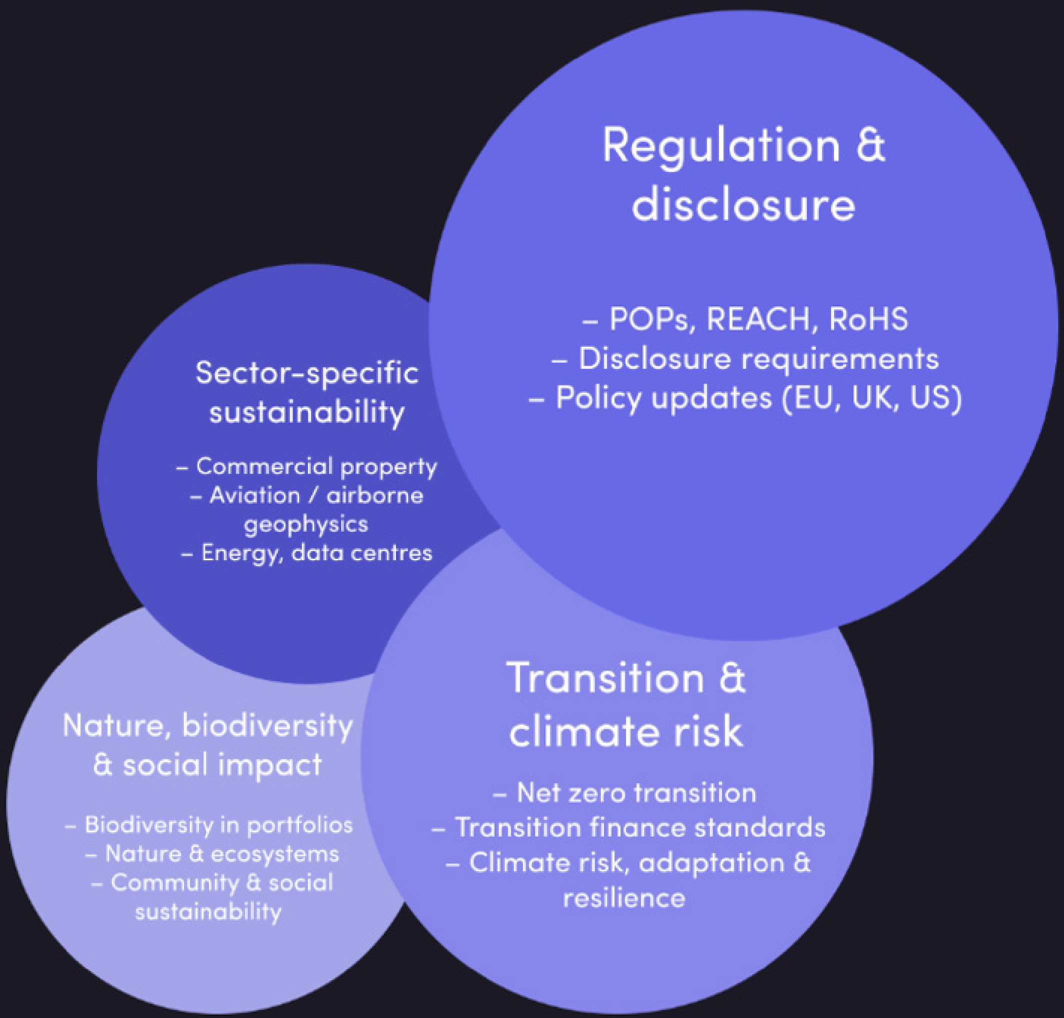
Skills mapping and impact measurement are now essential in proving ROI of learning initiatives.

Sustainability: from awareness to application

Sustainability learning demand is evolving fast: execution-focused topics dominate demand.

When asked what sustainability learning they want more of in 2026, organisations consistently pointed beyond foundational ESG topics towards sector-specific, regulatory, and transition-focused content.

Demand clusters around regulatory change, transition finance, and climate and nature risk, signalling a shift from awareness to application.



Execution-focused topics such as Scope 3 emissions, Biodiversity Net Gain, Product Carbon Footprinting, and regulatory reporting now consistently outrank broader ESG themes, signalling a shift from awareness to application, and from compliance to credibility.

Conclusion: From ambition to operational confidence

Sustainability is no longer a debate about intent. Most organisations know the direction of travel. They understand regulatory expectations are tightening. They recognise that environmental volatility is reshaping supply chains, asset performance and long-term cost structures.

The real blocker is execution.

HSE offers a clear precedent. It did not become embedded because regulations multiplied. It became embedded because organisations invested in workforce capability — building shared language, reinforcing expectations, and equipping people to make safe decisions instinctively.

Sustainability is reaching the same point.

Scope 3 emissions make this clear. Environmental impact sits in everyday decisions: which suppliers are chosen, how products are designed, how materials move, how contracts are written. These are not decisions made by sustainability teams alone. They are made across the business, every day.

Policies and certifications are necessary. But they are not sufficient and on their own, they do not change decisions.

Under regulatory scrutiny, investor questioning or customer challenge, organisations must demonstrate that their decisions are informed, defensible and consistent. That confidence does not come from reports. It comes from capability.

The organisations that will lead in the next decade are not those with the most ambitious statements. They are those that:

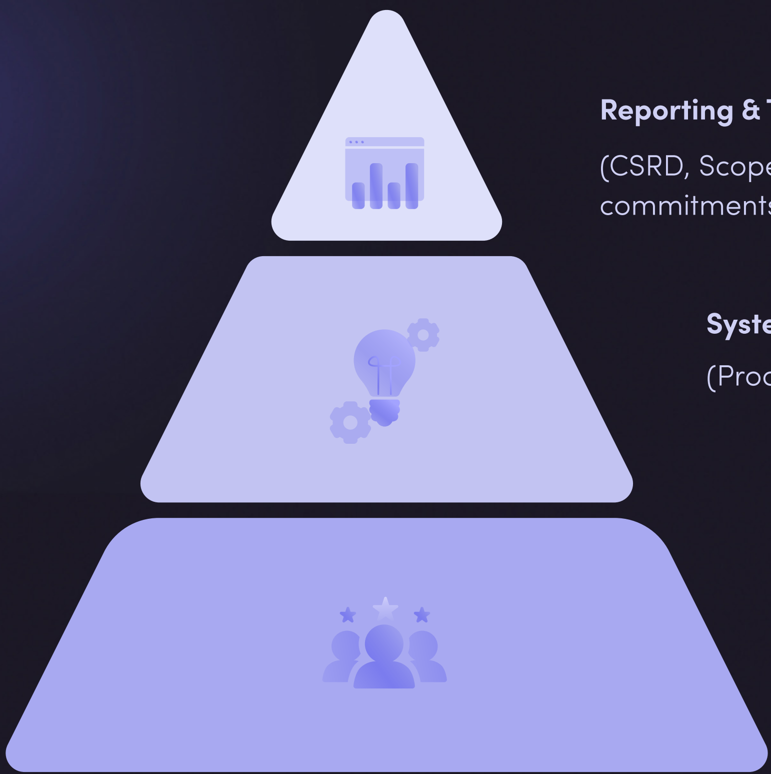
- Treat sustainability as an operational standard, not a communications theme
- Use Scope 3 as a catalyst for cross-functional capability building
- Invest in learning as core infrastructure, not discretionary spend
- Build judgement at scale — across sites, supply chains and leadership levels

In a volatile world, resilience will not be built through strategy alone. It will be built through people — confident, aligned and equipped to translate environmental risk into intelligent, everyday decisions.

That is how sustainability moves from initiative to instinct. From compliance to competence.

And from ambition to licence to operate.

From Policy to Practice: Building Operational Sustainability



Reporting & Targets

(CSRD, Scope 3 disclosure, Net Zero commitments)

Systems & Governance

(Processes, ownership, data platforms)

Workforce Capability

(Shared language, role-specific skills, judgement under pressure)

Without capability at the base, everything above it is fragile.

Protect → Equip → Mobilise Framework

Protect	Equip	Mobilise
Map capability gaps	Role-specific pathways	Embed into KPIs
Standardise language	Scenario-based learning	Reinforce through leadership
Identify execution risk	Scope 3 fluency	Continuous refreshers

Compliance creates urgency. Capability creates confidence. Culture creates resilience.

To explore how Sustainability Unlocked supports execution-ready capability in high-stakes environments, visit:

www.sustainabilityunlocked.com