

# Sustainability Hiring in a Time of Transition:

How Early- to Mid-Career Talent Can Stand Out



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Dear Colleagues,

The Bard MBA is pleased to share this report, *Sustainability Hiring in a Time of Transition*, from the BIG Innovations Group Cooperative. BIG is a worker-owned cooperative consulting firm comprised of faculty, alumni and students from the Bard MBA. The report explores how the sustainability profession is evolving amid economic uncertainty, rapid technological change, and shifting regulatory expectations. While sustainability roles remain well above pre-2020 levels, the period of rapid job growth has slowed, and employers are redefining what they need from early- and mid-career professionals. As this report makes clear, organizations are moving beyond ESG reporting toward execution-oriented roles that integrate sustainability into core business strategy, operations, and financial performance. Success in this new landscape requires professionals who can pair purpose with practical business fluency, technical confidence, and the ability to drive change across complex institutions.

The Bard MBA in Sustainability was created to prepare leaders precisely for this moment. The program challenges the traditional profit-first paradigm that still dominates much of management education. Instead, Bard equips students to build and lead mission-driven organizations that address social and environmental challenges while achieving long-term financial success. Students gain the full MBA toolkit — finance, marketing, operations, economics, and strategy — and learn to apply these disciplines to real-world issues such as climate risk, circular supply chains, clean energy transitions, stakeholder governance, and equitable business models. This integrated approach directly reflects the report’s finding that business fluency and subject-matter depth are must-have complements to sustainability knowledge and vision.

The competencies and career pathways described in this report — from regulatory fluency and data-driven decision-making to cross-functional diplomacy and influence without authority — closely mirror the preparation Bard MBA students receive and the roles our alumni now hold across finance, energy, food systems, supply chains, the built environment, and mission-driven enterprises. Supported by individualized career planning and a deep professional network, our graduates are equipped to navigate a more competitive hiring market and contribute meaningfully from day one. We hope this report serves as a valuable guide for employers, educators, and professionals alike, and underscores the importance of business education that is systems-oriented, execution-focused, and grounded in the urgent work of building a more sustainable and just economy.



Dr. Eban Goodstein  
Director, MBA in Sustainability at Bard College

# Executive Summary

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Over the past decade, companies have steadily expanded sustainability hiring as regulatory expectations, investor scrutiny, and market demand for accountability increased<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, universities and professional programs have scaled sustainability-related degrees and certifications, fueling an expanding force of early- to mid-career talent motivated to address environmental and social challenges.

Today, however, the hiring landscape is evolving. For the last year, the overall U.S. economy has been in a “low hire” mode in almost all sectors, with private sector layoffs accelerating in early 2026 ([Fortune, 2026](#)). In sustainable business, regulatory uncertainty and AI-enabled optimizations are reshaping sustainability talent needs, specifically leading companies to seek more strategically integrated roles ([Trellis, 2026](#)). Sustainability remains a tenant of driving business value, and new job listings for sustainability-related roles in 2025 were still at almost twice the level of 2020. In short, the work continues.

Nevertheless the period of rapid employment growth in the sector has come to an end, at least for the near future ([Deloitte, 2025: Figure 3](#)). The plateau in hiring is especially challenging for entry level positions whose work is being disrupted by the integration of AI. Additionally, sustainability positions demand subject matter expertise, which can take years of experience to develop. These shifts have widened the gap between sustainability education and available early-career opportunities, creating uncertainty for job seekers.

This paper uncovers what leading U.S. companies and investors value in early- and mid-career sustainability talent. It concludes with how candidates can position their skills, experience, and mindset to succeed in an increasingly execution-driven, business-integrated sustainability function. Firsthand perspectives from sustainability executives and hiring leaders from top U.S. corporations and investment firms provide context for students, educators, and employers on today’s market demand for sustainability talent. Special attention has been paid to the structural dynamics redefining the field including AI adoption, emerging regulations, and shifting business priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Between 2019 and 2022, companies with emissions-reduction commitments grew from roughly 300 to over 2,000 companies, accompanied by a fivefold rise in mid-career sustainability roles. ([Deloitte, 2025](#))

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Readers of this paper will explore the key forces that define the competencies required of early- and mid-career sustainability professionals in today's rapidly transforming employment landscape.

### Five Themes Emerge:



**Theme 1: Regulatory and reporting fluency** in a rapidly changing policy and framework environment is a top priority.



**Theme 2: Translating sustainability insights** into actionable, business-aligned solutions is a core expectation.



**Theme 3: Data skills, subject matter expertise, and storytelling** are considered crucial skills for success.



**Theme 4: AI is a powerful enabler of analysis and efficiency**, particularly when paired with human insight and collaboration.



**Theme 5: Cross-functional fluency and collaboration** drives implementation.

The sustainability function now requires professionals to balance evolving reporting and compliance obligations with rising expectations for business-integrated execution, demanding both broad business fluency and deep expertise in relevant functional areas. Data literacy, AI fluency, and technical competencies are increasingly baseline expectations, while human judgment and relationship-building differentiate high-impact practitioners. Over time, the ability to influence across functions and adapt within complex organizational environments becomes essential for sustained career progression.

# Introduction

U.S. corporate sustainability roles are evolving, and hiring trends are adapting accordingly. Our research reveals a growing misalignment between candidate expectations and employer realities in the U.S. sustainability labor market. Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting, data collection, and disclosure-focused roles remain prevalent, particularly for early-career professionals, and continue to serve as important entry points into the field.

However, employers increasingly expect sustainability talent, even within reporting-oriented positions, to connect their work to broader business execution, translating sustainability objectives into operational decisions, financial performance, and risk mitigation. This disconnect is most pronounced among candidates who underestimate the importance of technical fluency, sector-specific expertise, and cross-functional collaboration in addition to core ESG capabilities.

Interviews with leading U.S. employers and supporting desktop research suggest that this shift reflects an expansion, not a replacement, of traditional ESG roles. Rapid regulatory change, heightened investor and consumer accountability, and the adoption of AI-enabled tools are reshaping how sustainability work is performed. While reporting and disclosure functions remain foundational, organizations are increasingly seeking professionals who can move beyond data collection to interpretation, strategic alignment, and implementation. Sustainability teams are being asked not only to measure performance, but to mobilize change—linking subject matter expertise to business strategy, coordinating across functions, and driving measurable outcomes.

**For early- and mid-career professionals, success increasingly depends not on broad sustainability awareness alone, but on pairing purpose-driven motivation with execution-ready skills that align with organizational and market realities.**

# The Changing Work of Sustainable Business Teams

Sustainability positions originally focused on voluntary ESG reporting, program management, data collection, and reputation, are now expanding to include execution-oriented roles influencing cross-departmental strategy, operations, and long term value creation. Outside of core teams, sustainability skills and mindsets are also becoming increasingly valuable in functions such as procurement, engineering, and design.

Three factors driving this transformation are:

- **Voluntary and mandatory reporting remain varied across markets creating a fragmented landscape.** In 2025, U.S. federal rules were weakened, while ESG and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regulations continue to tighten in some U.S. states, and EU regulations are entering implementation and enforcement phases ([ADP, 2025](#); [European Commission, 2025](#); [PWC, 2025](#)). Additionally, as investors and consumers demand greater accountability for sustainability commitments, voluntary reporting methodologies continue to set de facto market standards and shape capital flows, supply chain expectations, and competitive advantage even where regulation lags ([Trellis, 2025](#)).
- **AI is changing how sustainability teams handle data collection, analysis, stakeholder engagement, and reporting.** Automation and advanced analytics are beginning to enable smaller, lower-budget teams to process large datasets, streamline reporting, and surface insights faster. As a result, sustainability roles are less siloed on data aggregation and instead, are increasingly focused on interpretation, decision-making, and action.
- **Sustainability is increasingly embedded within core business functions.** From finance to procurement to operations and product development, this integration reflects both a strategic effort to link sustainability more directly to execution and, in some cases, a deliberate consolidation of centralized sustainability teams. As headcount within dedicated ESG functions contracts, responsibility is being distributed closer to operational decision-making. This shift elevates sustainability from a standalone reporting exercise to a business-integrated lever for performance, resilience, and competitive advantage.

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Early- and mid-career professionals face distinct challenges in this environment. A [Deloitte](#) study has raised concerns about the future of positions for individuals with 1-3 years of career experience, saying that many entry-level tasks that develop core collaboration and professional skills are being squeezed out with certain tasks, like data cleaning and report drafting, being delegated to AI, risking learning opportunities for the future leadership workforce.

**The pace of regulatory change and AI adoption has upended traditional career pathways by increasing baseline technical and business knowledge expected of these roles. Similarly, mid-career positions, or those with some project leadership and execution experience, are being forced to adapt while already in motion. Organizations that fail to align hiring with these new realities risk under-leveraging sustainability capabilities of early- to mid-career candidates, while professionals who lack clarity on these shifting expectations may struggle to remain competitive as job candidates.**

These realities matter because sustainability talent plays a direct role in how companies manage risk, respond to regulation, and create long-term value for shareholders, customers and the communities they serve. Understanding how sustainability roles are changing, and why, has become essential for sustainability professionals navigating the next phase of their careers.

The themes that follow synthesize the capabilities U.S. corporate employers consistently identify as critical to effectiveness in this evolving landscape. Each theme also leads to insights into practical guidance for sustainability job seekers.

# Key Insights for Job Seekers



**Theme 1:** Regulatory and reporting fluency in a rapidly changing policy and framework environment is a top priority.

Today's regulatory and reporting expectations are requiring sustainability teams to seek out both sustainability professionals who are skilled at navigating the complex and often conflicting reporting frameworks and those who will help to identify potential business strategies to stay in compliance with laws and investor demands.

The growing patchwork of mandatory disclosure rules and emerging global and U.S. EPR laws have organizations racing to determine what information they are required, or not required, to disclose. Reporting timelines and implementation expectations vary across both required and voluntary laws and frameworks. Although deep expertise in policy is not expected, the ability to confidently understand potential impacts of shifting expectations on business is essential.

According to a director at one large retail company, **“So much of sustainability...is driven by the three-legged stool of consumer shifting, policy shifting, and corporate shifting as well. I would expect [candidates] to have a baseline understanding across those.”**



## *Practical Tips for Job Seekers*

### Track the Regulatory Landscape Proactively

Job seekers should develop a habit of monitoring emerging sustainability regulations and policy developments that affect their target sectors, including climate disclosure rules, supply chain due diligence requirements, and Extended Producer Responsibility laws. Subscribing to updates from organizations such as the [Science Based Targets Initiative](#), [Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures](#), and [European Commission](#), along with reputable industry briefings, can help candidates anticipate compliance requirements and understand how policy shifts translate into operational and strategic business decisions. Demonstrating awareness of regulatory trends signals readiness to navigate risk, advise stakeholders, and contribute to forward-looking sustainability strategies.

### Develop a "Major & Minor" Focus

Instead of emphasizing a generalist skillset, job seekers should deepen their specialization in one area (the "major") while maintaining broad literacy in others (the "minor"). This makes their value proposition clearer to hiring managers by showing they bring expertise to bear. For career transitioners, acquiring sustainability strategy knowledge can bolster current expertise as a "minor." This is precisely the kind of expertise that is desired in today's expansion of sustainability careers. Furthermore, interview data suggests that finding a focus is one key to getting noticed. Rochelle March, co-founder and principal at PPWA, says that one mistake she sees candidates make is trying to be everything to everyone. Instead, her advice is to **“focus on what makes you special and different.”**



## **Theme 2: Translating sustainability insights into actionable, business-aligned solutions is a core expectation.**

Sustainability teams are shifting from a primary focus on data collection and executive-level alignment to executing sustainability change and delivering business value. Connecting sustainable strategies to supporting core business goals is key to success. Trellis research shows that sustainability teams who develop business strengthening strategies are 83% more likely to achieve successful outcomes from sustainable initiatives (Trellis, 2025). Employers increasingly value candidates who frame sustainability challenges as solvable business problems rather than abstract ESG issues and can translate sustainability principles into clear business language. IT sustainability leader Marissa McInnis emphasizes that candidates should have **“the ability of understanding and translating sustainability principles into business vernacular.”** This means early- to mid-career professionals should stay curious and creative with turning insights into business action.

Employers are looking for candidates to show their knowledge and enthusiasm to support an organization’s efforts on sustainability goals but also uphold obligations to consumers, investors, and internal stakeholders—combining the two is what solves modern day business challenges.



### ***Practical Tips for Job Seekers***

#### **Convert Business Problem-Solving Experience into Sustainability Value**

Career transitioners should work to clearly demonstrate how the process they used to develop a particular solution (e.g., logistics solutions or engineering innovation) parallels the approach required to create its sustainable equivalent.

Jordan Sabine, a sustainability manager at a large food retailer shares,

**“Translating past experience and being able to tell stories about HOW you tackled a problem, even (or especially) if it wasn’t a sustainability problem, is really valuable when applying for sustainability roles, or any role at a company.”**

Additionally, sustainability job seekers may find it beneficial to expand their search beyond pure sustainability teams when looking for roles. It is becoming increasingly common for the word "sustainability" to be left out of job titles that nevertheless are expected to drive better social and environmental outcomes along with business success. Because of the shift towards a more business-integrated approach, sustainability acumen and ideas can be utilized to improve outcomes of specific functional areas such as procurement, operations, and communications, to name a few.



## Practical Tips for Job Seekers

### Follow Global Business, Climate Policy, & Sustainability News

Staying on top of the issues that matter to business is a key way that sustainability job seekers can differentiate themselves, particularly with the sometimes dizzying pace of change in recent months. At the same time, sustainability has always been an ever-shifting and dynamic field that relies heavily on policy and current events to shape action.

Charlotte Fildes, KPMG's Head of Talent for Global ESG, believes,

**“What makes candidates stand out in today's market is really their ability to see ESG and sustainability not as a compliance exercise or something that's purely regulation-driven, but really as a transformation opportunity - one that can drive resilience, competitiveness, and long-term value.”**

That means those who can connect the dots and have the **“capability of seeing what's on the horizon”** are highly valued by companies, according to Marissa McInnis, a sustainability leader in the IT sector. Candidates will do well to connect headline news with the impacts on business and sustainability efforts. In addition to following the headlines, many large news outlets offer newsletters on sustainability topics, such as [Climate Forward](#) from the New York Times. Setting keyword alerts on Google News can also help deliver relevant news stories via email.

Across these contexts, U.S. corporate hiring demand increasingly favors professionals who can translate technical and sustainability innovations into clear commercial and investment outcomes, particularly in investor-facing and growth-stage environments.

Demand is strongest for roles in ESG compliance, clean energy, supply chains, packaging, textiles, nature-risk management, and regenerative agriculture ([EnableGreen, 2025](#)).

Within private capital contexts, employers are seeking talent with fluency in capital structures, risk management, and impact measurement to support investment decision-making and portfolio value creation ([Acre, 2026](#)).



### **Theme 3: Data skills, subject matter expertise, and storytelling are considered crucial skills for success.**

There is a significant need for data fluency, technical expertise, and storytelling as crucial competencies for early- to mid-career sustainability professionals. Strong quantitative skills, for example in greenhouse gas (GHG) accounting, signal an ability to navigate complex datasets across distributed operations. Equally important is the capacity to translate data into clear business narratives. One professional from a leading U.S. airline described data skills that include the ability to **“translate those data findings into compelling business cases, to a wide range of audiences.”**

Notably, several sources also emphasize that because sustainability teams are often constrained by time, budget, and organizational complexity, they must adapt to using imperfect data to inform practical actions. Employers therefore prioritize professionals who can use incomplete information to inform recommendations and drive operational change ([Optera, 2025](#); [EnableGreen, 2025](#)).

Employers value candidates who proactively build technical depth and seek out continuous learning in relevant areas of interest. Technical certificates and training programs can strengthen subject matter credibility. Employers prize the initiative of candidates who are proactively bolstering their experience through additional learning, such as certificates and training programs. While typically seen as a “nice to have” and dependent on the specifics of the role, job seekers can use these certifications to fill potential gaps in their resume or to highlight a skill they are building.

Those lacking direct experience working with sustainability data can benefit from building foundational analytics literacy, such as advanced Excel, basic coding in R or Python, and data visualization, to understand how datasets are structured, analyzed, and interpreted. In corporate sustainability and consulting contexts, familiarity with greenhouse gas (GHG) accounting remains valuable.

**However, as AI-enabled platforms increasingly automate calculations and reporting, the competitive advantage for candidates lies less in performing manual computations and more in understanding the underlying methodologies, assumptions, and limitations behind the outputs.**



## Practical Tips for Job Seekers

### Master Foundational Technical and Presentation Tools

No matter the role or industry, basic quantitative literacy is becoming a must have skill, especially for early-career professionals who are expected to take on more tactical work of corporate sustainability. Dian Grobler, Director of People and Culture at BSR, advises that to close skill gaps in data, candidates should have **“quite advanced VLOOKUP skills, know how to do pivot tables, and have a good understanding of getting the info out of very large data sets.”** This is particularly important due to the complexity of cross-department and multi-tiers of sustainability data.

Candidates should not underestimate effective use of content, storytelling, and language in presentations either. If technical data or strategic ideas are presented poorly, they lose credibility in a corporate setting. For those lacking these demonstrable hard skills, Excel or PowerPoint training options are readily available and cost-effective. Beyond the basics, there are industry-specific software packages and applications to master that can require a deeper level of research to find. Talking with industry professionals and exploring industry conferences can help uncover these more niche skillsets.

While business acumen is essential, letting authentic passion for sustainability show through helps professionals stand out as a "committed to the mission" candidate. Demonstrating motivation through action, curiosity, reciprocity and follow-through helps candidates stand out as “future-ready” talent rather than idealists alone. Hiring managers consistently noted that passion signals long-term engagement and resilience in a field defined by complexity and change. Dian Grobler of BSR shares, **“We are a mission-driven organization, so that means that values are really important for us. We want people that care about the environment, we want people that care about sustainability, that care about justice.”**

Early- and mid-career professionals who balance credibility with purpose are better positioned to drive impact and earn trust.



### **Theme 4: AI is a powerful enabler of analysis and efficiency, particularly when paired with human insight and collaboration.**

As companies hurry to understand the potential of AI and apply it to sustainable business, candidates can distinguish themselves by showing their ability to learn, adapt, and implement AI solutions. While AI has seemingly dominated the headlines and the job market, it is important to note that there is still significant variation in where companies are along the adoption curve. Some are just beginning to introduce AI chat-based tools to their workforce, while others have already introduced advanced agentic workflows across reporting, scenario planning, and increasing stakeholder engagement ([BSR, 2025](#)). Still, according to Rochelle March of PPWA, AI is **“definitely becoming a must-have skill.”** The ability to navigate AI tools for sustainability related projects is important for this work to be efficient. For example, supply chain managers aiming to decrease waste across their supply chain can use generative AI to forecast demand and minimize overproduction.

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At the same time, top sustainability professionals encourage candidates to maintain strong human-centered critical thinking, such as situational judgment, and contextual decision-making. For example, BSR explains sustainability-related risks and concerns that AI can **“mask inaccuracies or bias”** and **“teams that encourage experimentation, embrace AI, give feedback, and create a safe space for learning are seeing faster uptake. Such training also includes ensuring that teams understand the inherent challenges with AI data quality and learn how to mitigate them”** (BSR, 2025).

A top consulting firm encourages candidates to cultivate AI literacy and an appetite for experimentation with the technology, but not without bringing their own critical eye and judgement to the table. As Laura Rainier of Gartner put it, **“Having a foundation in the various AI tools emerging is really important... [but] what makes us human actually matters more than ever.”**

This human-centered approach aligns with broader hiring trends. As AI adoption accelerates, employers will prioritize skills such as empathy, collaboration, and critical thinking capabilities that technology cannot replace (Deloitte, 2022). Early-career professionals who combine technical efficiency with human judgment are better positioned for emerging sustainability roles. According to Laura Rainier, **“An important differentiator is somebody who is fit for the future, which means they’re able to work with people, to negotiate, to have empathy.”**



### *Practical Tips for Job Seekers*

#### **Experiment with AI While Applying Human Judgment & Expertise**

Early-career sustainability professionals are expected to demonstrate some AI fluency while maintaining clear human ownership with necessary oversight. There was broad agreement among interviewees that job seekers would benefit from experimenting with AI to build a comfort level on the capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses of the tools. Employers value candidates who use AI to automate repetitive tasks, such as emissions calculations or data normalization, but maintain total ownership of the output, spotting AI hallucinations, and ensuring it is grounded in the critical thinking and "human context" that AI lacks.

**Positioning AI as an efficiency and productivity tool, rather than a decision-maker, signals readiness for business-critical sustainability roles.**



## Theme 5: Cross-functional fluency and collaboration drives implementation.

Private sector employers are prioritizing sustainability professionals who have the ability to understand business priorities across departments. For example, moving to reusable packaging may require balancing between sustainability goals and product performance, supplier cost and availability, or time-to-launch pressures. Ultimately, effective implementation depends on deep understanding of the stakeholder teams' core roles, challenges, and KPIs. As one sustainability leader at a major consulting firm noted, achieving sustainability goals requires rethinking traditional measures of progress, noting **"we have to redefine business success to reach sustainability goals"**.

Equally as important is the ability to collaborate, influence, and translate sustainability goals into terms relevant to other cross-functional teams. As sustainability becomes embedded across business units, rather than housed in standalone roles, candidates with experience coordinating and executing strategies across departments stand out.

These candidates should demonstrate how understanding KPIs of a particular team was leveraged to drive a cross-department initiative. A Deloitte study suggests some companies may develop sustainability as cross-company advisors or a centralized hub-and-spoke model with deep technical experts, demonstrating that sustainability leverages cross-functionally ([Deloitte, 2024](#)).

Experts emphasize that skills such as active listening for understanding priorities, and framing sustainability as a tool that supports existing goals, allow contributors to influence without formal authority and build shared ownership.



### Practical Tips for Job Seekers

#### Master "Influence Without Authority"

A critical skill in sustainability is diplomacy - the ability to "read a room" and find middle ground between competing interests (such as legal, finance, and procurement). Since sustainability teams are often small, it is critical to build alignment and influence stakeholders across the organization outside of direct reporting lines. Charlotte Fildes, of KPMG, explains that they need people **"who have that ability to influence stakeholder behaviors and are really able to translate sustainability commitments into a value-driven conversation."**

#### Leverage the "Zigzag" Career Path

Career transitioners especially can take heart in interview data indicating the value of non-linear work experience. Skills gained in diverse sectors (like NGOs or different corporate departments) provide the cross-functional perspective needed for today's sustainability roles. For career transitioners, these moves signal adaptability, systems thinking, and the ability to operate across silos rather than a lack of focus. A handful of interviewees spoke to the value of the "zig-zag" career and its credibility and impact over time in subject matter expertise and execution across functions. Charlotte Fildes of KPMG advises, **"What may feel like a sideways move now, may actually end up being a differentiator for someone further down the line."**



## Practical Tips for Job Seekers

### Prioritize Networking & Mentorship

While networking is standard issue advice for job seekers, it can be especially beneficial in sustainability because of the aforementioned importance of developing interpersonal “soft skills.” Early- to mid-career sustainability professionals should focus on building relationships with individuals who are invested in their long-term growth. Sustainability mentors can help navigate today’s shifts in how sustainability functions and the heightening expectations of early-career positions.

Effective networking is a two-way street—one professional from a leading U.S. airline stresses that bringing **“authentic actions that show how you provide value to those relationships”** builds longer term connections. Using networking as an opportunity to share capabilities and to collaborate may also help professionals build tangible experience and create meaningful impact.

One of [Trellis Sustainability 30 Under 30 All-stars](#) shares, **“Build your network, seek mentorship and don’t hesitate to pursue innovative ideas.”** Attending in-person events around shared interests can help facilitate these more genuine and less transactional interactions. In addition, many interviewees are connected with their early-career hires through fellowships like [Climate Corp](#) or [Environmental Defense Fund](#) positions; fellowships act as a structured pathway to mentorship and experience building.

While these themes define sustainability hiring today, the dynamics of these themes vary by organizational context. Corporate roles, particularly within large enterprises, tend to prioritize implementation skills, regulatory navigation, and the ability to coordinate across functions such as finance, procurement, operations, and legal. Investor-facing roles place greater emphasis on analytical rigor, financial literacy, and defensible data interpretation to support investment decision-making and risk assessment.

Growth-stage organizations, meanwhile, often seek professionals who can operate as generalists with executional agility, whereas larger organizations increasingly favor specialists who can embed sustainability expertise within established business units. Sectoral differences further shape expectations, with particularly strong demand in sustainable finance, renewable and clean energy, ESG compliance and reporting, and technology-enabled supply chain and product innovation roles.

# Conclusion: Closing the Gap Between Talent & Impact

The findings presented in this paper highlight a decisive shift in how sustainability talent is defined, developed, and deployed within the U.S private sector. Collective shifts in the hiring environment require sustainability professionals at all levels to demonstrate a core set of competencies:

- **The ability to translate sustainability into business value;**
- **Fluency in data analysis or technical domains;**
- **Cross-functional diplomacy and collaboration;**
- **An understanding of evolving global and domestic regulatory landscapes; and**
- **The exercise of critical human judgment in an AI-enabled environment.**

For students and early-career professionals, these shifts signal both challenge and opportunity. The path is no longer defined by broad sustainability knowledge alone, but by the ability to align purpose with execution and conviction with credibility. Sustainability issues are business challenges that continue to remain relevant and expand demand for qualifications mentioned here.

Companies and business leaders must thoughtfully invest in talent development to build the pipeline of professionals equipped to deliver impact today and adapt to the field's rapidly evolving future.

For educators and employers, the findings point to a shared responsibility: to better align training, hiring, and career pathways with the realities of a rapidly evolving field.

**Closing the gap between sustainability talent and impact will require continued collaboration across academia, industry, and capital markets – but the demand for skilled, execution-ready sustainability leaders has never been clearer, nor more consequential.**

# Appendix

## About BIG Innovations Group Cooperative

BIG Innovations Group is a worker-owned consulting cooperative specializing in social and environmental sustainability strategy. Operating at the intersection of research, business, and systems change, BIG supports organizations in addressing complex sustainability challenges through execution-oriented, business-integrated solutions.

BIG served as the research and writing partner for this white paper, leading interview design and execution, qualitative synthesis, and analysis of employer insights.

Powered by a multidisciplinary network of 45+ consultant member-owners, including faculty, alumni, and students affiliated with Bard College's internationally recognized MBA in Sustainability, BIG brings applied expertise in sustainability strategy, circular economy, responsible supply chains, and impact measurement. The cooperative's nimble, low-overhead model enables effective engagement across projects of varying scope, from targeted analyses to multi-year strategies.

To learn more about BIG Innovations Group Cooperative or to explore potential collaboration, visit <https://biginnovationsgroup.coop> or follow the cooperative on [LinkedIn](#).

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## Methodology & Interview Synthesis

This report was informed by both qualitative interviews and desktop research. Fourteen qualitative interviews with sustainability leaders and hiring managers surfaced trends and expectations across sectors including Client Services, Food & Supply Chain, Technology, Finance, and Retail. The semi-structured interviews were 30-45 minutes each; interview questions remained consistent throughout the series. Desktop research and market analysis supported interview findings with context on hiring trends and the near term focus of corporate sustainability initiatives. To synthesize, we identified recurring themes and insights by coding interview responses, notes, and article summaries into common themes. Interviewee names and companies were anonymized in our synthesis for privacy and as a measure to eliminate bias when drawing conclusions.



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