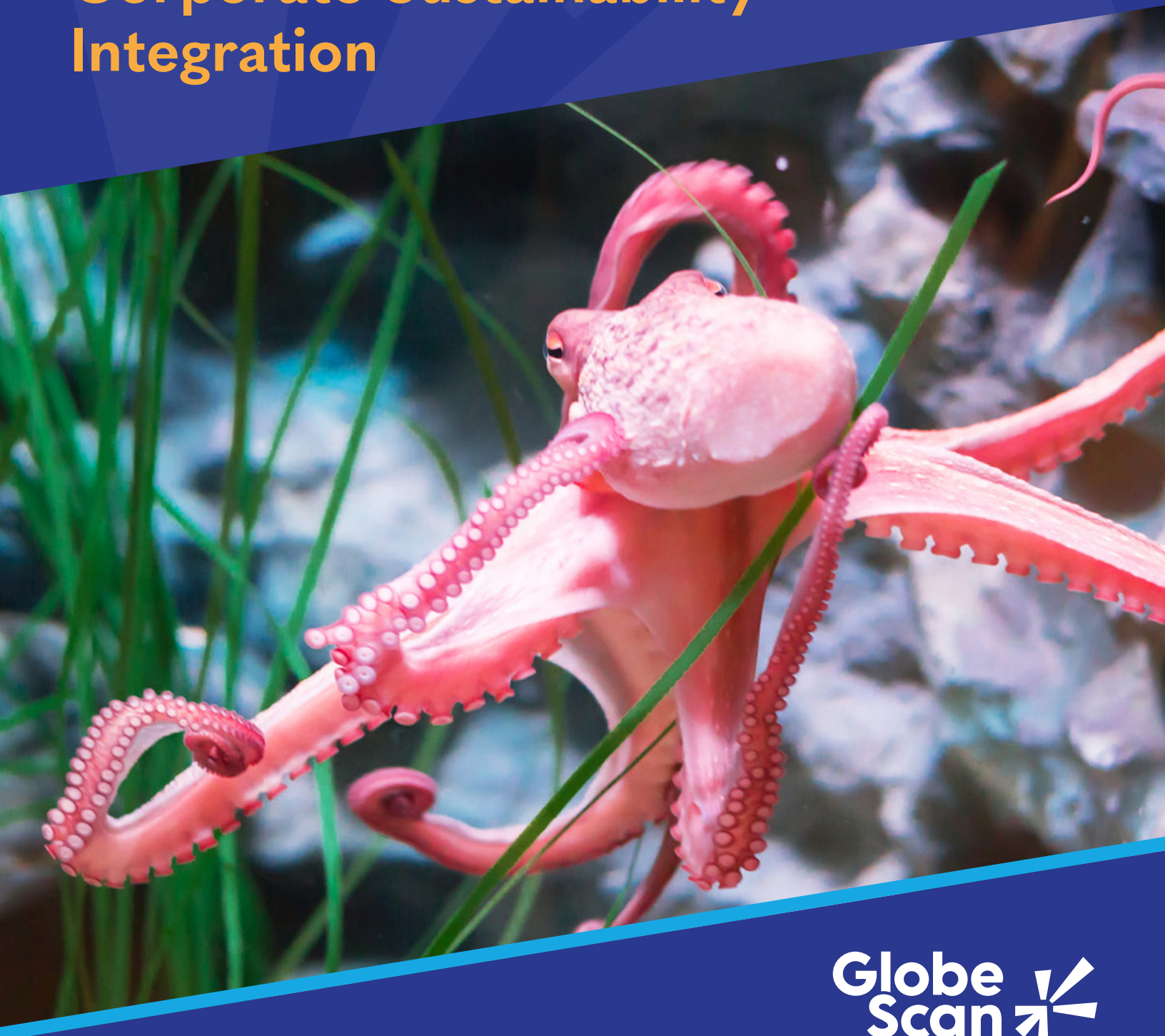
Helping the Octopus Clap:
The Art and Science of Corporate Sustainability Integration



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Report Introduction

Corporate sustainability is evolving at pace. The focus is no longer only on setting ambitious goals and developing strategies. It is increasingly about delivering on those ambitions by integrating sustainability into the way the business operates and makes decisions, leveraging the full enterprise to protect and create value and drive more positive economic, environmental and social impact for society.

As integration is becoming an increasingly important measure of corporate sustainability leadership, we wanted to understand what happens inside organizations when sustainability begins to influence important business decisions. This includes decisions about investment, procurement, product development, risk management, incentives, and business strategy. We also wanted to identify the barriers that sustainability leaders encounter and the practical approaches that can help companies make progress. Given how invisible integration is to those outside the firm, we thought it would be valuable to understand how leading companies do this and to share best practices and create opportunities for other companies to learn from those with experience, thus shortening the integration learning curves.

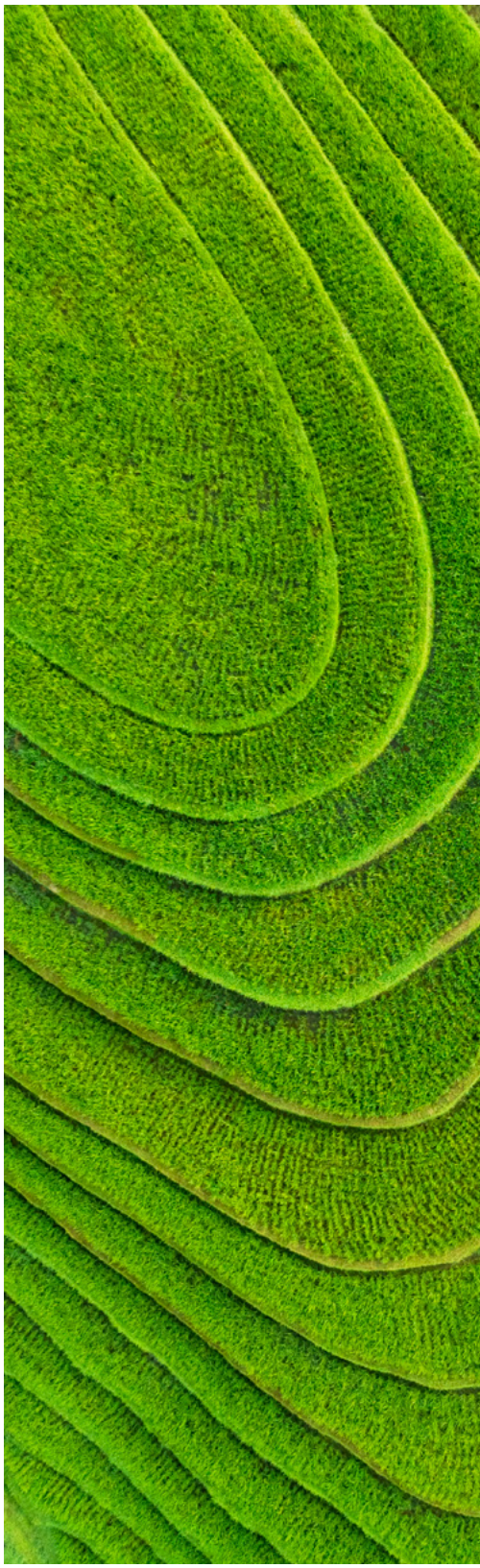
To explore these questions, GlobeScan conducted in-depth interviews with 27 sustainability leaders working across a range of sectors and regions. We asked them to reflect on their experience of integrating sustainability into their organizations, including what worked, what did not, and what they had learned along the way. We analyzed these conversations to identify common barriers, practices, and stages of integration. The findings reflect a wide range of experiences, while recognizing that every company's journey will be different.

A note about the title – one of the remarkable things about integration is the need to create alignment across functions and business units within a company. This requires a great deal of engagement, collaboration, and persuasion to make a company work in ways that deliver greater sustainability performance and impact. It is very much like teaching an octopus with eight tentacles to move in unison. Hence, *Helping the Octopus Clap* serves as a metaphor for the remarkable coordination feat that is corporate sustainability integration.



Executive Summary

Sustainability leaders increasingly describe sustainability as moving from an ambition challenge to an execution challenge. While commitments, targets, and strategies remain important, attention is shifting toward how sustainability is embedded into everyday business decision-making. Drawing on interviews with 27 sustainability leaders across sectors and regions, this paper identifies several common patterns in how sustainability integration develops and what distinguishes organizations that make the greatest progress.



The real test of integration is decision-making

One of the clearest distinctions in sustainability integration is the difference between sustainability being present and sustainability having influence. Sustainability may be visible through governance structures, reporting systems, policies, and targets, yet remain disconnected from the business decisions that drive outcomes. Integration is strongest when sustainability influences consequential decisions related to investment, procurement, product development, risk management, and business strategy.

Integration works best when linked to business value

Organizations make the greatest progress when sustainability is connected to business priorities and decision-making. Sustainability leaders consistently describe the importance of translating sustainability into the language of risk, resilience, growth, competitiveness, customer value, and long-term performance. Integration becomes more durable when sustainability is seen not as a separate agenda, but as part of how the business creates, protects, and captures value.

Integration is fundamentally an organizational challenge

Successful integration requires more than systems and processes. It depends on leadership commitment, shared ownership, organizational capability, and the ability to connect sustainability to business priorities. As integration matures, sustainability leaders increasingly act as translators, facilitators, and orchestrators, helping functions and business units embed sustainability into the decisions they make every day.

Ultimately, sustainability integration is about making sustainability part of how the business operates. The leaders interviewed for this research consistently demonstrated that when sustainability becomes embedded in decisions, accountability, and business systems, it becomes more resilient, more actionable, and more capable of delivering meaningful business and sustainability outcomes.

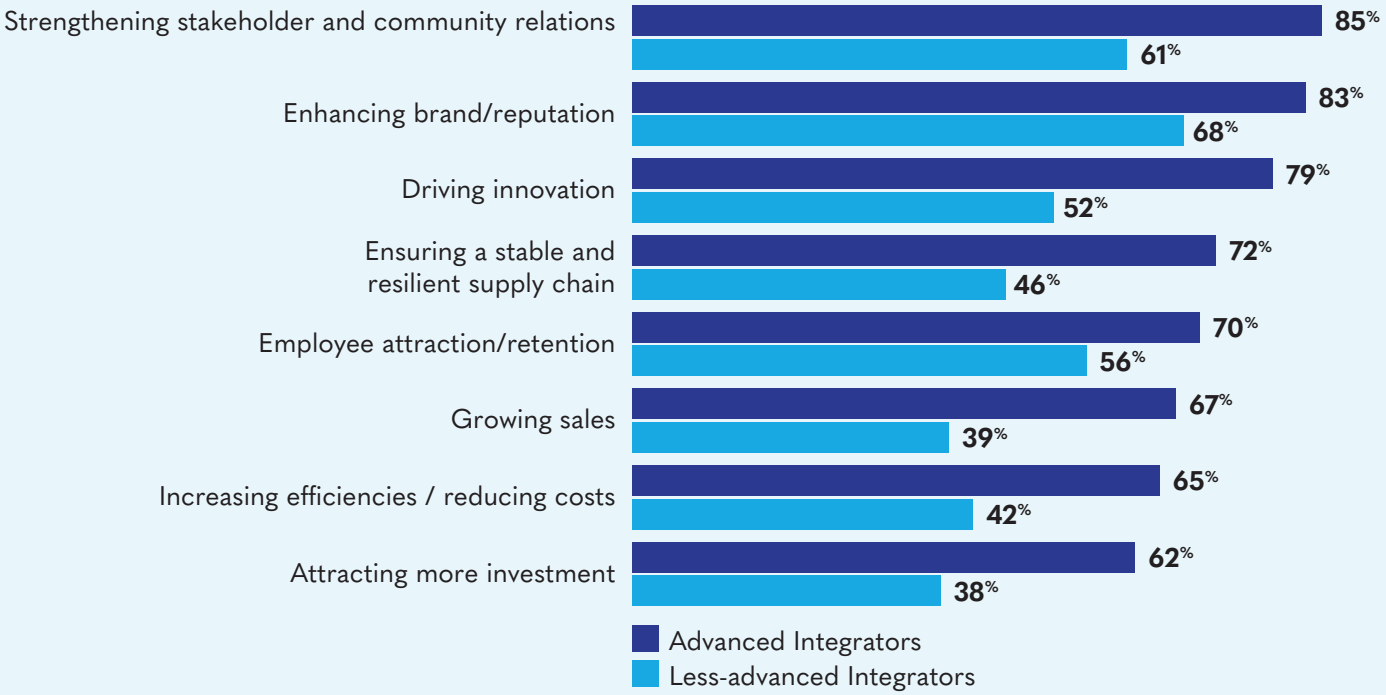
Section 1: Why Sustainability Integration Matters

Corporate sustainability continues to evolve. Currently, there is growing emphasis on delivering business value from sustainability (the so-called "business case for sustainability") as well as driving more impact – stronger environmental and social performance and delivering on sustainability targets.

According to GlobeScan's new Corporate Sustainability Leadership Framework, one of the defining elements of leadership is *integrated delivery*. Stakeholders inside and outside of business are increasingly seeing the quality and degree of integration across the enterprise as a significant dimension of leadership. According to a study of 320 companies in 2025, we found that companies that self-identify as being advanced in sustainability integration are significantly more likely than other companies to realize more business value from sustainability.

Integration as the pathway to value creation

Perceived value from sustainability by companies that have deeply integrated sustainability vs peers who have not, "High value" and "Very high value," 2025



Source: Sustainability Value Triangle report, Accounting for Sustainability (A4S), SustainableIT.org, the ERM Sustainability Institute, GlobeScan, and Salesforce (survey of 320 senior executives globally from November 2024 – January 2025)

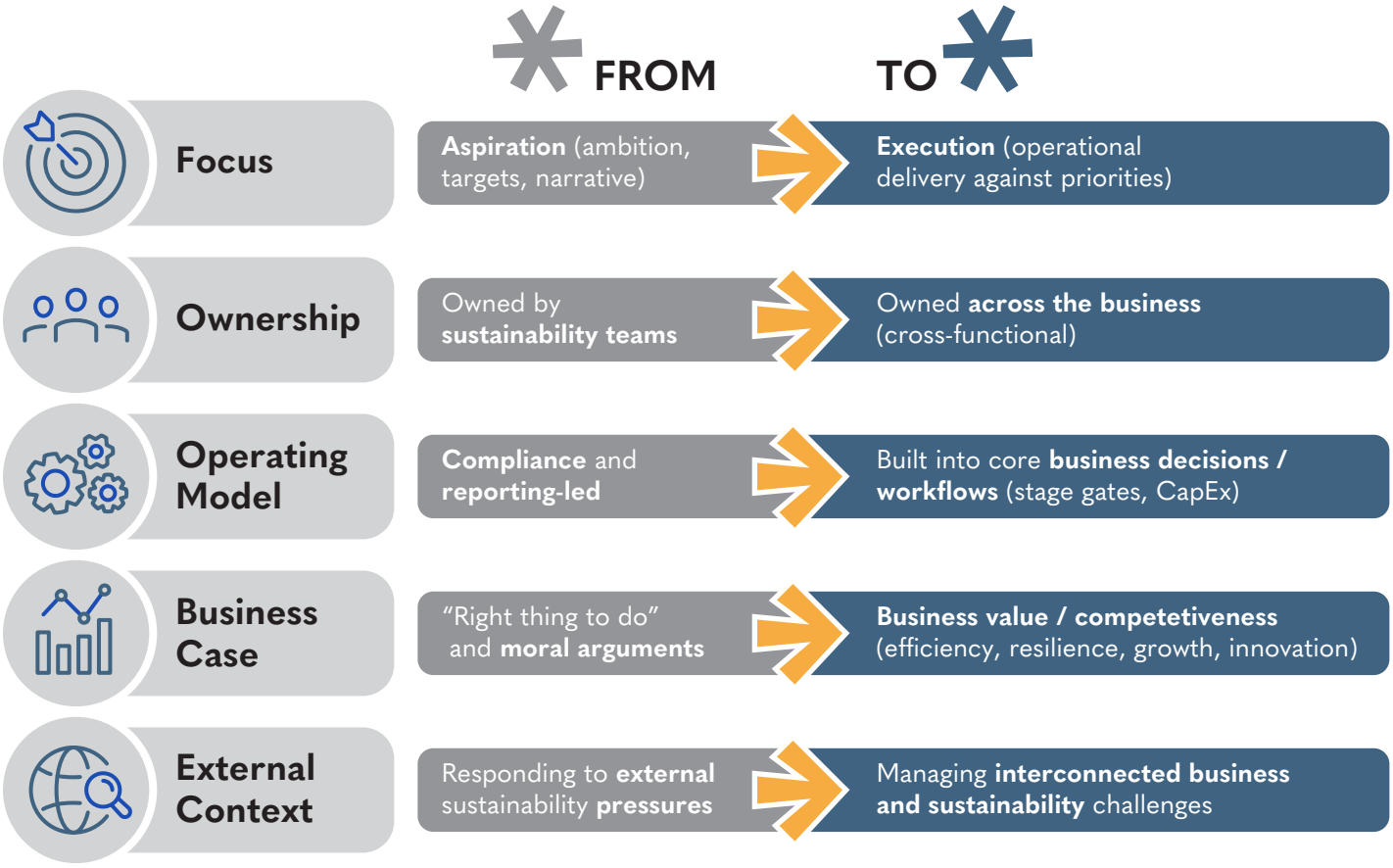
Consequently, we thought it was timely to explore sustainability integration, a key feature of corporate sustainability leadership. What is integration, why is it so critical, what are the barriers to integration, how can we unlock greater integration, etc.? We felt these questions could only be answered by speaking with leading corporate practitioners experienced in driving integration.

As a result, we interviewed 27 heads of sustainability from a range of global regions and business sectors to get a better understanding of the mechanics and best practices of corporate sustainability integration. We are grateful for the generosity of these leaders in sharing their experiences and helping us better understand the roadmap for successful sustainability integration, which, by its very nature, is invisible to most external stakeholders. And yet, integration is fundamental to creating value and accelerating sustainability performance. We hope this research helps the thousands of companies embarking on deeper integration so we can shorten the learning curve and scale impact across the economy.

The challenge of integration is inherently enterprise-wide. Sustainability goals are not achieved by sustainability teams alone. They are achieved when sustainability becomes part of the way the business operates. Sustainability teams play a critical role in translating ambitions into business priorities, building capability, and helping functions and business units take ownership of their roles in delivery. In practice, this means moving beyond sustainability as a separate function, initiative, or reporting exercise and embedding it into the systems, annual objectives, incentives, ownership structures, and decision-making processes that drive the business every day.

This shift reflects a broader change in focus: from defining sustainability ambitions to embedding them into the way the business operates.

How integration is evolving in practice



As sustainability moves from ambition to execution, the nature of the work changes. Progress depends increasingly on building the organizational capability to deliver existing commitments. For many sustainability leaders, helping the business integrate sustainability has become a primary responsibility, requiring sustained internal engagement across functions and business units, as well as decision-making and operating processes.

What is sustainability integration?

For the purposes of this paper, we define sustainability integration as follows:

Sustainability integration is when sustainability shapes real business decisions across core systems, enabling it to drive business value, resilience, and performance.

Integration matters because it connects sustainability to how the business creates, protects, and captures value rather than treating it as a parallel activity.

As sustainability becomes more deeply integrated, it becomes harder to remove. It continues to influence decisions through economic uncertainty, leadership turnover, regulatory change, and shifting political conditions. When sustainability is deprioritized during periods of uncertainty or pressure, it suggests that integration has not yet taken hold.

One of the clearest themes to emerge from the research is the distinction between sustainability being present and sustainability having influence. Many organizations have sustainability committees, governance structures, reporting processes, dashboards, and KPIs. Yet sustainability can be highly visible without significantly influencing the decisions that determine business outcomes. The true test of integration is not whether sustainability is represented in a process, but whether it changes the decisions that emerge from it.

Three tests of real integration

1. **Does sustainability change business decisions?**

   Sustainability influences consequential decisions across planning, investment, procurement, product development, and operations.



2. **Is accountability embedded in the business?**

   Ownership extends beyond the sustainability team into business objectives, roles, incentives, and decision-making.



3. **Does the decision discipline hold under pressure?**

   Sustainability remains visible and considered when organizations face difficult trade-offs and competing priorities.



The New Corporate Sustainability Framework

GlobeScan's New Corporate Sustainability Leadership Framework identifies three pillars of sustainability leadership.

Trust & License to Operate

Earning trust through clarity, transparency, evidence of action, and honest communication about progress, trade-offs, and constraints.

Integrated Delivery

Integrating sustainability into core business strategy, operations, and decision-making, and delivering measurable impact.

System & Market Leadership

Actively shaping the systems, policies, and partnerships required for collective progress, while adapting to local contexts and needs.



Section 2: Barriers to Integration

Sustainability integration is complicated. Integrating sustainability requires companies to change how decisions are made, investments are evaluated, success is measured, and accountability is distributed. While the specific circumstances vary from one organization to another, we identified six recurring barriers that consistently stand in the way of effective integration.

1. **Integration breaks down when trade-offs become difficult**

   Many organizations struggle to maintain sustainability considerations when faced with competing pressures around cost, growth, speed, investment returns, or short-term performance. Sustainability will not always prevail in every decision, but when integration is strong, trade-offs remain visible, deliberate, and accountable rather than being overlooked or ignored.

2. **Sustainability is difficult to translate into business value**

   Sustainability professionals often understand the long-term benefits of sustainability initiatives, but those benefits are not always articulated in the language used for business decisions. When sustainability is not translated into business value and performance, it can struggle to compete for attention and resources.

3. **Sustainability remains outside key decisions**

   Sustainability is frequently absent from the planning, investment, procurement, product development, and performance management processes that shape business outcomes. As a result, sustainability considerations are often added after decisions are made rather than informing them from the beginning.

4. **Ownership and accountability are unclear**

   Integration becomes difficult when sustainability is viewed primarily as the responsibility of a sustainability team rather than a shared business responsibility. Unclear ownership, fragmented accountability, and reliance on a small number of champions can all slow progress.

5. **Capability and culture gaps persist**

   Capability gaps, misaligned incentives, legacy processes and cultural resistance can all slow integration. These barriers vary by company but consistently shape the pace and success of integration efforts.

6. **Structural constraints limit progress**

   Time horizons, regulatory fragmentation, data limitations, supply-chain complexity, infrastructure constraints, and external dependencies can all make integration more difficult. These challenges are particularly evident in areas such as Scope 3 emissions, circularity, climate adaptation, and value-chain transformation.

Rather than suggesting that integration is impossible, these barriers help explain why it requires deliberate and strategic effort. Organizations that make meaningful progress do so by systematically addressing these challenges and embedding sustainability into the way their business operates.

Section 3: The Practice of Sustainability Integration

There is no single formula for sustainability integration.

Organizations differ by sector, business model, leadership style, culture, and structure. Yet despite these differences, a number of recurring practices appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews.

These practices cluster around four areas: anchoring sustainability in the business, integrating it into decisions, building organizational capability, and reinforcing integration through systems and accountability.





Anchoring sustainability in the business

Start from the business, not sustainability

Effective integration begins with understanding where sustainability intersects with the organization's most important priorities, risks, and opportunities. Organizations gain traction when sustainability is framed as a solution to existing business challenges rather than as a separate agenda.

Define success in business terms

Integration moves faster when leaders share a clear understanding of what success looks like, how it will be measured, and how sustainability contributes to broader business objectives. Different functions need to understand what success means for the outcomes they are already accountable for delivering. That requires translating sustainability into language that resonates across the business. Finance, operations, and commercial teams will view sustainability through different lenses (e.g., risk, cost, growth, customer value, etc.). Defining success in terms that matter to the business helps align functions and reduces the need for sustainability leaders to continually re-justify the work.



Integrating sustainability into decisions

Focus on decisions of consequence

Not every decision matters equally. Rather than attempting to embed sustainability everywhere at once, sustainability leaders need to identify the specific points in the organization where sustainability can materially influence outcomes. Companies that make progress focus on the relatively small number of decisions that shape long-term outcomes, such as investment, procurement, product development, growth strategy, or risk management.

Embed sustainability into existing workflows

Rather than creating new sustainability processes, embed sustainability into existing systems, workflows, governance processes, and management routines. The objective is to make sustainability part of normal business practice. This may involve adding sustainability criteria to investment approvals, procurement processes, product development stage gates, planning reviews, or governance forums.



Building organizational capability

Empower people to act

People need more than an understanding of sustainability goals. They need to understand what sustainability means for their role. As integration deepens, capability building becomes increasingly important. This can happen through functional training, guidance for business teams, building sustainability literacy, and supporting decision-making capability across functions.

Influence across the organization

Integration rarely happens through authority alone. Successful sustainability leaders build trust, develop internal champions, and work through existing networks and relationships to drive change across the organization. External voices, like investors, customers, regulators and technical experts, can reinforce the case for action in ways sustainability teams cannot achieve on their own.



Reinforcing and scaling integration

Demonstrate value and build momentum

Progress often accelerates when sustainability delivers visible business benefits. Pilot programs and early wins can demonstrate value. Rather than trying to transform the organization all at once, start small, cultivate, and scale successful approaches over time.

Reinforce through systems and accountability

The strongest integration efforts become embedded in governance structures, incentives, performance management, and planning systems. Embedding sustainability into these systems helps it withstand leadership changes, economic cycles and shifting priorities.

Section 4: The Integration Maturity Journey

How integrated are we? The answer is rarely straightforward.

While the research reveals a recognizable pattern in how sustainability integration evolves, companies often do not follow a single path. Integration looks different depending on business model, sector, organizational structure, leadership, and culture.

The model on the next page helps organizations assess the degree to which sustainability has become embedded in the way they operate, make decisions, and create value.

Importantly, organizations often occupy multiple stages simultaneously. Sustainability may be deeply integrated into some functions, decisions, or sustainability priorities while remaining far less embedded in others. The model should therefore be applied as a diagnostic tool rather than a single enterprise-wide label.



Sustainability Integration Maturity Model

The research suggests that companies move through four broad stages of integration maturity:



Mobilization: Sustainability is visible but still separate from the business.

- Targets, commitments, reporting, and board / committee attention are in place.
- Sustainability is framed through strategy language and corporate ambition, but is not yet embedded in day-to-day business decisions.
- The work is often led by a central sustainability team and pushed by external expectations (investors, regulation, reputation, stakeholder pressure)

Structured Integration: Sustainability enters the formal systems and routines of the business.

- Sustainability is built into KPIs, planning cycles, budgeting, governance routines, policies, and standards.
- Cross-functional working groups and formal coordination structures are built.
- Role clarity improves and sustainability shows up in specific processes and accountabilities.

Operationalization: Sustainability shapes real decisions – and is taken seriously in the business.

- Sustainability is treated as a legitimate factor in consequential business decisions, shaping trade-offs across cost, risk, growth, resilience and performance.
- Ownership is increasingly distributed across the business rather than sitting with the sustainability team alone.
- Accountability is built into roles and performance, making leaders responsible for sustainability outcomes.

Strategic Advantage: Sustainability becomes part of how the business wins.

- Sustainability is built into products and services, customer value, business resilience, and strategic positioning.
- It contributes to growth, innovation, and long-term competitiveness.
- Sustainability helps create, protect, and capture value across the business.

Integration is an ongoing journey

While the maturity model provides a useful diagnostic lens, it is important to emphasize that sustainability integration is an ongoing and often non-linear journey. Unlike many transformation initiatives, sustainability integration has no finish line. The challenge is not simply reaching a higher level of maturity.

Integration evolves as leadership, business conditions and the external context change, requiring companies to continually learn and adapt. These shifts can create friction, but they can also open new opportunities to innovate and strengthen integration.

Section 5: The Evolving Role of Sustainability Leaders

As sustainability begins to change the business, so does the role of the sustainability function. In the early stages of a sustainability journey, the sustainability function is often responsible for building awareness, developing strategy, setting targets, and establishing governance structures. Sustainability leaders spend much of their time creating momentum, building legitimacy, and making the case for action. Sustainability often sits with a central function and a small group of senior leaders.

As integration deepens, however, the work begins to change. Chief Sustainability Officers become less focused on establishing sustainability as a business priority and more focused on helping the organization act on it and deliver on commitments. Ownership expands across the company, and business units take greater responsibility for delivering sustainability outcomes, while boards play a larger role in maintaining continuity and accountability.



The skills required change as integration matures

More mature integration requires deeper business and financial fluency and a greater ability to influence across organizational boundaries. The CSO role shifts from owning sustainability to enabling others to own it, while orchestrating efforts towards shared business and sustainability goals.

Where is Your Organization on the Integration Journey?

Sustainability integration is not a destination. It is a continuous process.

As sustainability moves from ambition to implementation, several questions become important:

- Does sustainability influence your organization's most important decisions?
- How deeply is sustainability embedded? Where does it remain separate?
- What would need to change for sustainability to become part of how your organization creates, protects, or captures value?
- Do your governance structures, incentives, and ownership models help or hinder sustainability integration?
- What capabilities will be needed to drive the next phase of integration?

Understanding where your organization sits today can be the first step toward identifying what comes next.

How GlobeScan Can Help

GlobeScan helps organizations assess and accelerate sustainability integration through:



Integration maturity diagnostics



Leadership alignment and strategy workshops



Stakeholder interviews and organizational assessments



Capability building and ownership frameworks



Practical roadmaps for embedding sustainability into decision-making and business processes

To continue the conversation on sustainability integration, contact us:

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About GlobeScan

GlobeScan is an insights and advisory firm specializing in trust, sustainability, and engagement.

We equip clients with insights to navigate shifting societal and stakeholder expectations, crafting evidence-based strategies that reduce risks and create value for their organizations and society.

Established in 1987, we have offices in Cape Town, Dubai, Hong Kong, Hyderabad, London, Paris, San Francisco, São Paulo, Singapore, Tokyo, and Toronto. GlobeScan is a participant of the UN Global Compact and a Certified B Corporation.

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