

2021 sustainability REPORT

The Meaning, Changing Perceptions, and Expanding Agendas

Sustainability is transforming the way professionals live and work globally.

GetSmarter surveyed **546 professionals from 65 countries** to create a report that explores how sustainability will impact your skills, career, and business.



It's undeniable, the need for sustainability is more urgent than ever. It offers business and society a solution to some of our biggest modern challenges, but more than this, sustainability is key to ensuring a resilient future for all.

Using our unique data and insights, this report will show you *why*, and more importantly, *how* this shift towards sustainability will affect you and your organization.

Sustainability is defined by our ability to meet present needs without compromising those of future generations.¹ But many businesses and governments are struggling to strike the balance. The global population is expected to grow to 9 billion people by 2050,² yet there is already limited access to land, water, and natural resources. The concentration of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere is the highest it's been in human history,³ and forests are being destroyed on a scale of one football field lost every second.⁴

Alongside the environmental crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on consumption patterns and work habits. What this means for businesses is that **sustainability agendas are about to be pushed like never before**, with increasing pressure from stakeholders, regulators, and society to do good.

As a future-focused professional, it's important to understand the crucial business benefits that sustainability offers. It's well-documented that **sustainable initiatives improve a company's financial performance, optimize innovation, and achieve major cost savings**. Customers are also choosing to support brands that align with their personal values.⁵

Though the initial outlook may look challenging, the opportunities are vast. It's now time to bridge the gap between acknowledging the urgency and acting on it. The professionals and organizations who do both will be uniquely positioned to create value for both people and planet, and drive profit with purpose.

Through our report findings, you'll gain insight into the top sustainability priorities within business, what's driving the need for change, and how you can best prepare.

- Sustainability addresses *modern* challenges and redefines business

Traditionally, sustainability has focused on the direct effect climate change has had on the environment, but now there's an increased emphasis on social equality and responsible governance within business models and systems such as sustainable supply chains, circular economies, and ethical labor practices. Sustainability is now a significant driving force in all industries, and it's helping to influence everything from blockchain and big data to the way smart cities are designed.

What is sustainability?

Defined simply, **sustainability is about acting responsibly now to safeguard our future communities and the environment**. However, sustainability is not the same thing as environmentalism. While environmentalism is part of it, the concept of sustainability is much broader. **It's the integration of environmental health, social equity, and economic vitality to create thriving, healthy, diverse, and resilient communities** for this generation and generations to come.⁶

The *focus* of sustainability



Globally, sustainability is understood as having three different focus areas: environmental, social, and governance. These are also the main criteria by which most sustainable agendas and development plans are measured. Environmental sustainability considers how an individual or a company performs as a steward of nature. It's defined as the responsibility to conserve natural resources and protect global ecosystems to support health and wellbeing.⁷ Social sustainability examines how a business manages relationships with suppliers, employees, customers, and the communities where it operates. This includes reporting on diversity, equity, and inclusion. And lastly, sustainable governance deals with responsible leadership, internal controls, audits, executive pay and the rights of the shareholders, among others.⁸ It can be defined as the process in which a company implements sustainability strategies across the business, manages goal-setting and reporting processes, strengthens relations with external stakeholders, and ensures overall accountability.

These are *the meanings of sustainability* that resonate the most with the GetSmarter survey respondents, in order of importance:

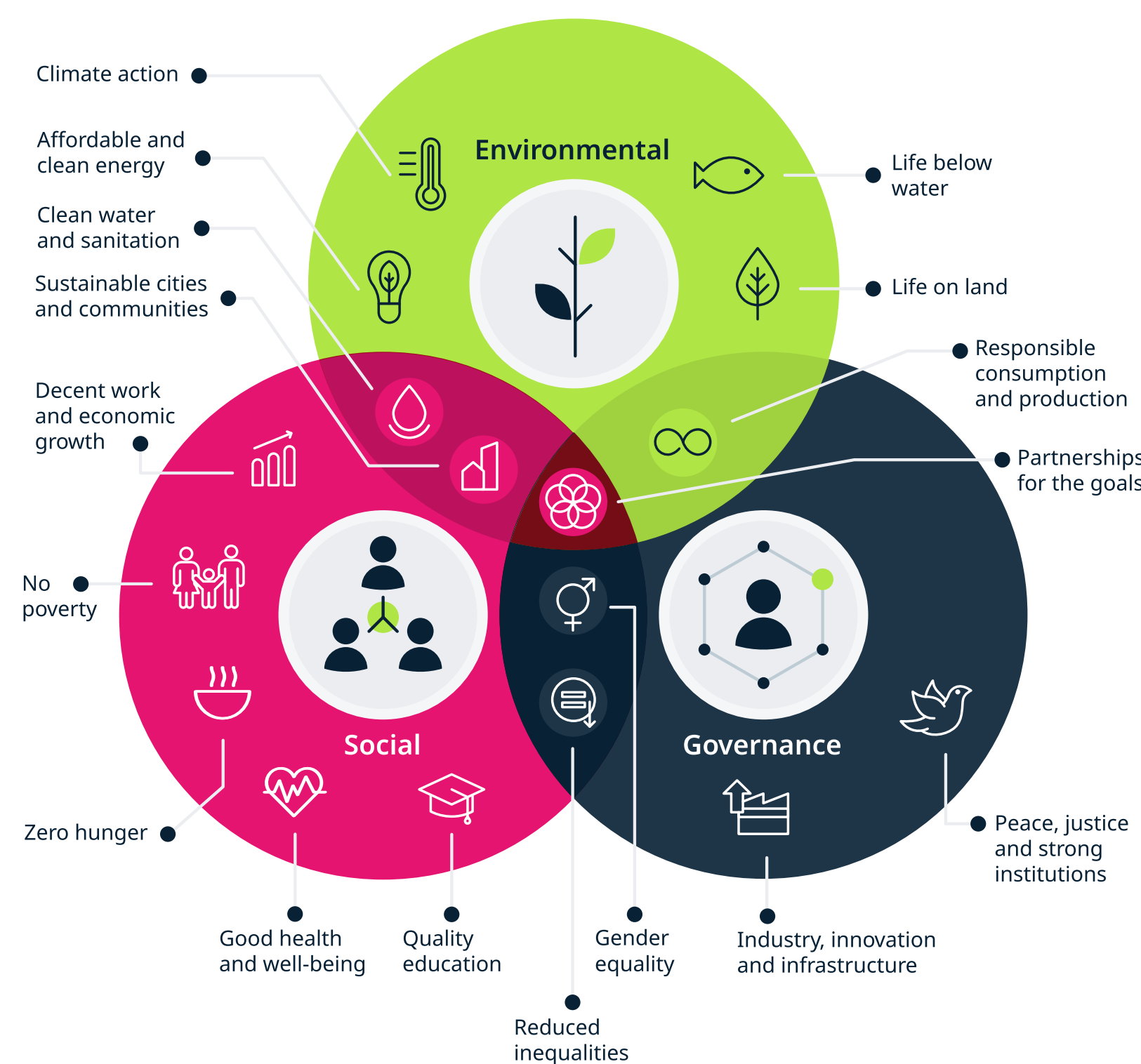
-  Responsible consumption and production
-  Affordable, clean energy
-  Clean water and sanitation
-  Sustainable cities and communities
-  Climate action

- Sustainability addresses *modern* challenges and redefines business

How is sustainability measured?

Our research found that the most common factors that are used to report on sustainability dovetail with the globally-accepted standards, which are the **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** that the United Nations first adopted in 2015.⁹ These goals also straddle the **environmental, social, and governance (ESG)** categories used widely in the corporate world. The ESG criteria are a set of standards for a company's operations that sustainability-focused investors use to screen investments.

What are the *Sustainable Development Goals* and *ESG* Pillars?



The SDGs are interdependent and interconnected goals, and some of the SDGs work across more than one of the three ESG categories. Businesses apply varying importance to the ESG pillars depending on the industries they're in, their commercial goals, and their future growth plans. The global sustainability agenda defines businesses as an essential partner in addressing the SDGs, both in providing finances and creating products and services that address sustainability.¹⁰

Businesses need to ensure they work towards the SDGs that are most applicable to their business. Every company requires a bespoke sustainability development plan, but currently, most businesses report on three primary issues.

GetSmarter's survey reveals that the **top three sustainability factors** which businesses currently report on are:

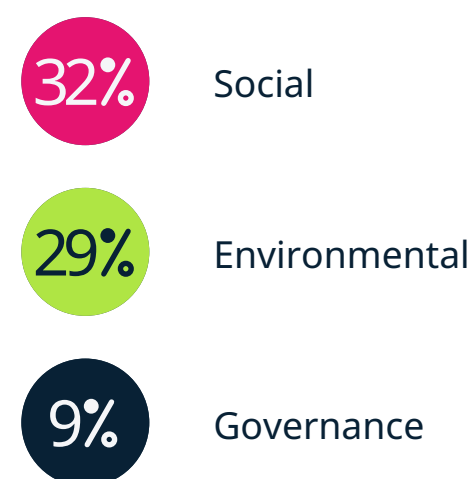
- 19% Climate change and energy
- 14% Diversity and inclusion
- 12% Environmental impact (air, water, waste)

On a business level, there's plenty of motivation to use the globally accepted SDGs and ESGs, as long as the correct industry-specific ones are used as benchmarks. **Companies with high ESG ratings consistently outperform the market in both the medium and long term.**¹¹

- Sustainability addresses *modern* challenges and redefines business

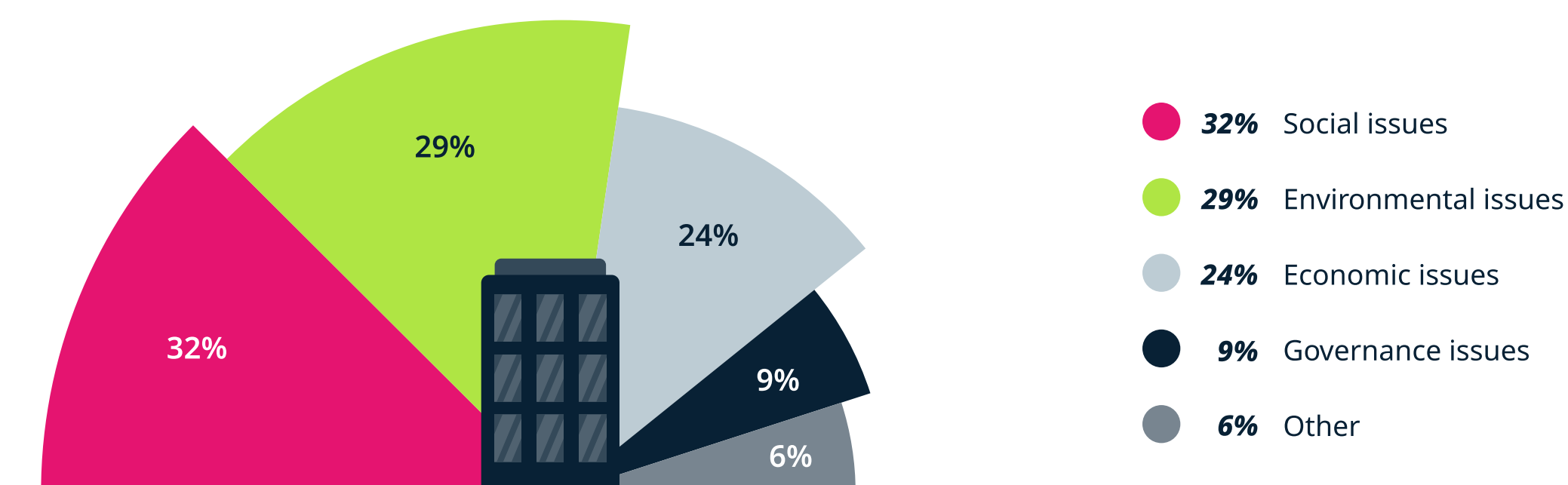
What are the ESG priorities for businesses?

GetSmarter's survey shows that the *growth in businesses' sustainable practices* is focused mainly on social issues followed by environmental challenges. This echoes the rise in social equality and climate change issues globally:



According to our research, businesses' interpretation of sustainability is aligned with those on an individual level, and both have been affected by the pandemic and climate change. **The largest ESG priority for businesses focuses on social issues**, and external research shows that the pandemic has amplified existing inequalities, especially within diversity, equity, and inclusion.¹² As a result, more individuals are prioritizing it within their business needs.

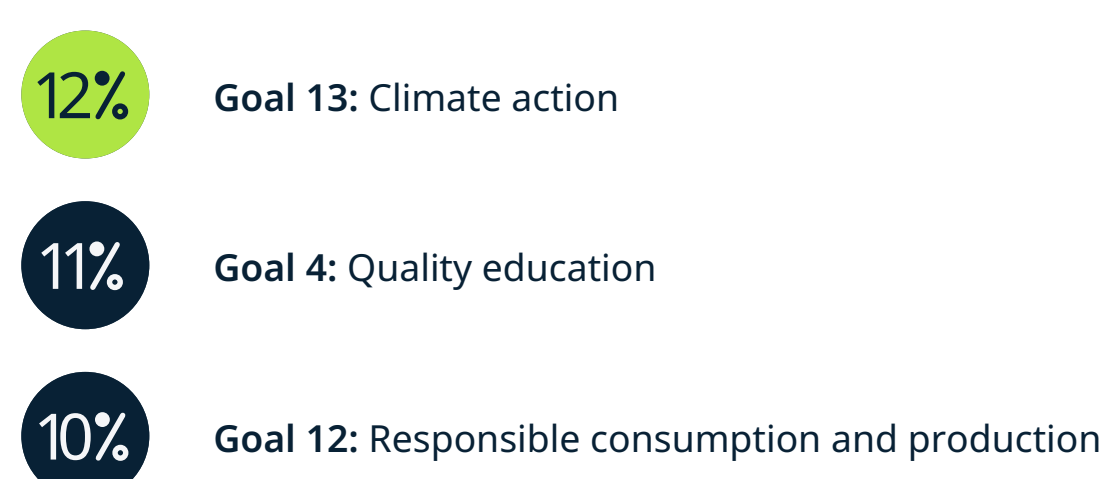
What are your business ESG *priorities*?



The second priority deals with environmental issues: people are sharing how they want to live more sustainable lives, and this has been heightened during the pandemic. Working from home has emphasized our impact on the environment, from the resources we consume to the waste we generate. This trend also raises another vital point: the drivers of altruistic motivation and the climate emergency are linked. As the danger of climate risk increases and the effects become more evident globally, individuals will be motivated to do more in terms of sustainability. This means the urgency behind sustainability and altruistic motivation will increase with the pressure of climate change.¹³

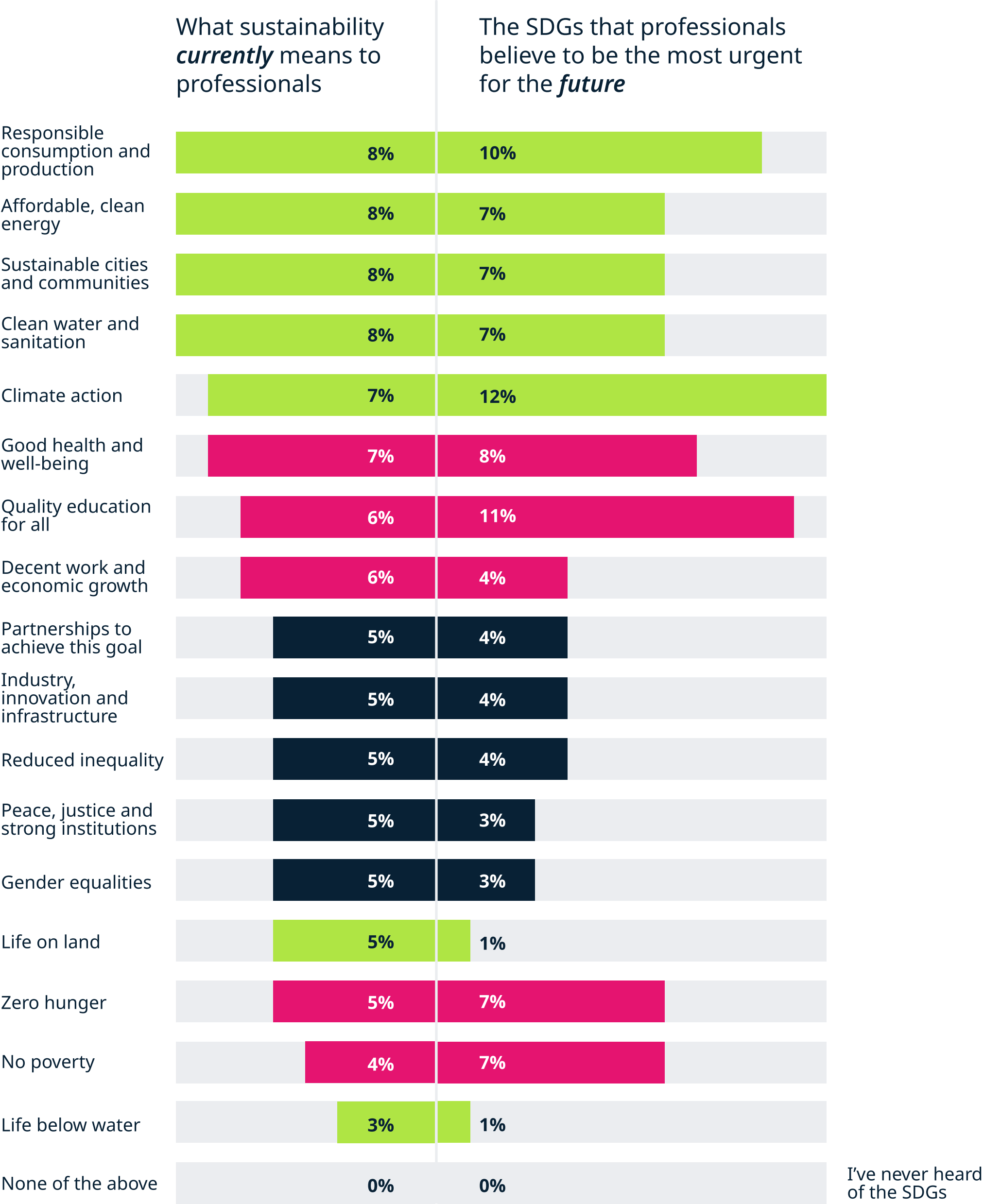
The urgency of sustainability

The most urgent SDGs for *building a resilient future* according to the GetSmarter survey are:



● Sustainability addresses *modern* challenges and redefines business

As a working professional, how do you see the *focus on sustainability goals* changing?



Our survey reveals that most respondents place a different urgency on SDGs in a current setting versus which ones they interpret to be most important in building a resilient future. There are two notable survey patterns. First, the importance of climate action and socially-led drivers for the future, like ending poverty and hunger, has jumped to the top of the list. The second pattern aligns with **the rise of the climate emergency**. The year 2019 was the second-hottest on record, and 6.7 million people were displaced from their homes due to the increase in natural disasters linked to climate change.¹⁴ Every species on this planet is now threatened by these rising dangers; climate change is no longer a discussion point, it's the world's biggest crisis. Like sustainability, the climate emergency has several definitions, but they all define a drastic call to action to stop climate change's adverse and potentially irreversible effects on the environment. It's becoming a mainstream media description, and several publications, such as *The Guardian*, have changed their language to replace 'climate change' with 'climate emergency' as they found the original phrase to be too passive for such an alarming reality.¹⁵

The effect of the climate emergency on sustainability agendas is clear: it has spurred urgent action for authentic, lasting changes – both in individuals and on a corporate level.

Learn how to use key industry frameworks to help you establish a sustainable business.

Read more

- Sustainability addresses *modern* challenges and redefines business

Doing good for society can't just be a marketing strategy; it's now a necessity. Today, consumers are showing their power by holding businesses accountable for socially conscious business decisions. Nearly 80% of consumers indicate sustainability is important to them, and 60% are willing to change their shopping habits to reduce environmental impact.¹⁶ Based on this, not embracing sustainable business practice poses a serious business risk.

Sustainability is also driving the growth of impact investments. These are investments made to create beneficial and measurable social and environmental impact alongside a financial return. Early in 2020, Blackrock, the world's largest money manager in the world with over US\$7 trillion in assets under management, announced that sustainability has become a crucial part of their investment criteria.¹⁷

These drivers have already influenced change: the last few years have seen a marked increase in corporate sustainability commitments.¹⁸ From starting carbon-neutral goals like net zero through to pivoting products and services, many leading businesses have realized that sustainability is not just a checkbox to be ticked for Corporate Social Investment (CSI) or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); it needs to be part of their core of operations.¹⁹

Businesses that can see climate change – and sustainability – as an opportunity will be best placed to unlock innovations, ignite unexpected collaborations, and help build a better society for all.²⁰ The real question that this effort poses: what are the sustainability changes you should make in your company to unlock these opportunities, and how should they be implemented for best results?

Collaboration will be your solution to achieving the SDGs



66% of people say that individuals, private companies, and the public sector ***need to work together for success*** in sustainability.

Our survey insights show that **business partnerships are vital in tackling sustainability challenges**, and, as an added benefit, they can also offer a competitive advantage. While the results showed that only a low percentage of respondents (5%) recognised SDG 17 (Partnerships) as a top priority, most respondents (66%) believe that **delivering successful sustainable development is a joint responsibility** for governments, non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, companies, and individuals. A real-life example of this is the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). As a global firm that engages with business, government, and the social sector, BCG focuses intensively on SDGs. However, they place particular emphasis on SDG 17 to achieve their company goals, as it's through partnerships that they succeed in sustainability.²¹

One of the most critical factors within sustainability collaboration is the role of education. ***View our course portfolio.***



Education, which is just after climate action, is highlighted as the UN's second most urgent SDG.

Upskilling is a vital social requirement, and crucial for the development of sustainability and its execution at a business level. Upgrading skills may unlock new career opportunities, but could also have a bigger positive impact within new partnerships. Empowering professionals and organizations to upskill will inspire a collective and transformative move towards sustainable practices.

- *Individuals* are driving sustainability goals

A pandemic-affected world has accelerated change, shifting responsibilities from the company to the individual: now that many people are working from home, they are making more choices and taking on more responsibilities. Our results show that 63% of respondents are making lifestyle choices with sustainability in mind, which is a 10% increase from 2020. The lessons learnt at home are helping to drive the sustainability agenda in business.

The younger generations *aren't* leading the sustainability revolution



44% of **sustainability professionals** are part of Generation X, 23% are millennials, and 2% are part of Generation Z.

Older generations play an active role in sustainable practice, both as professionals and consumers. Members of Generation X are more likely than millennials to consider sustainability factors when investing,²² and the older generations are more conscious of their shopping habits. For example, in a detailed study of over 4,000 adults in the United Kingdom, the over 55 age group was more likely to recycle waste (84%), avoid single-use plastic and buy only seasonal fruit and vegetables (47%) than any other age group.²³

Women are leading the charge in sustainability



Women live **more sustainable lifestyles** than men (34% versus 24%), and have a **higher altruistic drive** to learn more about sustainability.

Women's main motivation for sustainability: to positively contribute to the environment, society, and the future of humanity. This echoes external research, and one study has called it the 'Eco Gender Gap'. Market research found that 71% of women try to live more ethically compared to 51% of men.²⁴ GetSmarter research reveals that there are **more female sustainability professionals**, and compared to men, more women want to move into sustainability-focused roles. It shows that women have a **bigger appetite for upskilling** that would land them in sustainability-focused roles (9%) as opposed to men (3%). Women, on average, also have **a higher education level in sustainability**, which empowers them to get more roles in the field. This rise of the female sustainability steward is set to play a pivotal role in the development of sustainability agendas.

Discover how you can lead a more sustainable lifestyle, and how women are driving this movement.

[Read more](#)

- *Individuals* are driving sustainability goals

Who is the sustainability professional?

Sustainability professionals are highly educated individuals with 41% having at least a master's degree and a further 34% have a sustainability-focused university-accredited certificate.



- Businesses have to *adapt* to become sustainable

The climate emergency and the rise in social inequality is accelerating the need for positive change, and those companies that are adapting earlier are benefiting. Sustainability needs to be woven deeply into the DNA of your business and the products or services you provide as it offers the potential to reduce costs, harness innovation, and improve employee retention.²⁵ Becoming a purpose-driven company will help meet the altruistic drive of employees that want to positively contribute to a sustainable future.

The benefits don't end there: research shows that organizations that align their service or product to the changing demands of a growing sustainability-focused audience tend to gain a higher market share.²⁶ There is also a potential PR advantage: you can improve both brand exposure and appeal by promoting your authentic sustainable activities.²⁷

To create a successful sustainability roadmap, businesses need to attract and place talent with the right skills in key decision roles, and understand that every industry faces different ESG challenges. These two trends will help you establish your sustainability agenda:

Sustainable changes made at home are now driving changes at work



56% of professionals are more likely to *stay in a company* with a sound sustainability agenda.

● Businesses have to *adapt* to become sustainable

Positive changes in individual habits and awareness are now transferring into workplaces with a 5% increase in highly sustainable practices. Awareness means that individuals are more likely to hold their businesses accountable. As the GetSmarter survey shows, most of the respondents say they will remain with employers with successful sustainability agendas. That turns a company's sustainability agenda into an **employee retention and loyalty tool**.

Understand how sustainability is changing the way you train, attract, and retain employees for the workplace.

Read more

ESG sustainability challenges will vary according to industry

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for sustainability in business. While the SDGs and ESG are universally acknowledged, the implementation stage for every business is different based on the industry needs. So, what does that mean for business leaders, key decision-makers, and individuals that want to upskill? **Corporate sustainability plans need to be customized.**

What are the *biggest* ESG challenges in different industries?

	Environment	Governance	Social
Education / training	41%	24%	35%
Banking, financial services or insurance	24%	55%	21%
Media, communication, marketing or advertising	41%	23%	36%
Manufacturing / industrial	60%	20%	20%
Information technology or services	59%	23%	18%
Healthcare or biotech	25%	44%	31%
Government / public sector	20%	47%	33%
Real estate / construction / building	64%	9%	27%
Energy	90%	10%	0%
Transport	30%	50%	20%
Non-profit organization (NGO)	0%	44%	56%
Retail or wholesale	67%	11%	22%
Engineering	43%	43%	14%
Hospitality / tourism	67%	17%	16%
Legal services	67%	33%	0%
Other utilities (eg water, sewage, telecomms)	67%	0%	33%
Agriculture / forestry	33%	0%	67%

Investors increasingly believe that companies who perform well on these criteria are less risky, better positioned for the long term, and more prepared for uncertainty.²⁸ The first step in meeting these challenges? Placing the right people in the right roles, and giving them the skills and scope to make the changes that are needed.

- Hybridized skills can *future-proof* your career and business

On an individual level, the new focus on sustainability increases the need for hybridized roles, sustainability consultants, and rapid upskilling for key positions. Here are three trends that show how upskilling in sustainability can influence careers, and organizations as a result.

Altruism is the biggest driver in upskilling

Our research reveals that 56% of respondents say that they want to upskill to positively contribute to the environment, society, and the future of humanity.

Specialized skills can propel careers



21% of professionals saw a positive impact on their career and earning potential, and 11% started their own business *after developing sustainability skills*.

There are opportunities in sustainability for all experience levels if you have the necessary skills and accreditation. Our survey reveals that 21% of the respondents saw a positive impact on their career and salary after completing a specialized sustainability-focused course or training program. Beyond this, 11% of respondents either became sustainability consultants or started sustainability-focused businesses.

If you'd like to assess which skills will help you step into a career in sustainability, use the GetSmarter [Career Navigator](#) tool.

Career Navigator

Hybridization can insure your future value



Sustainability is a *daily consideration* for 45% of professionals in their current role, and 47% work in jobs that are *linked or are entirely focused* on sustainability.

GetSmarter's [Future of Work Is Here](#) report shows that hybrid jobs are fast increasing in popularity as they rely on judgement and creativity alongside a combination of skills and they're resistant to the automation trend. The research found that while there has only been marginal growth in sustainable teams, sustainability responsibilities are being absorbed into existing roles, which means more hybridized roles have been created. While half of the GetSmarter respondents said they didn't foresee any sustainability-focused team growth in their organizations over the next 18 months, 45% indicated that sustainability is already a day-to-day consideration in their current role, and 47% already work in jobs that are linked or are entirely focused on sustainability. Crucially, most of these changes have occurred over the last two years, which shows **the rapid growth of the sustainability movement**.

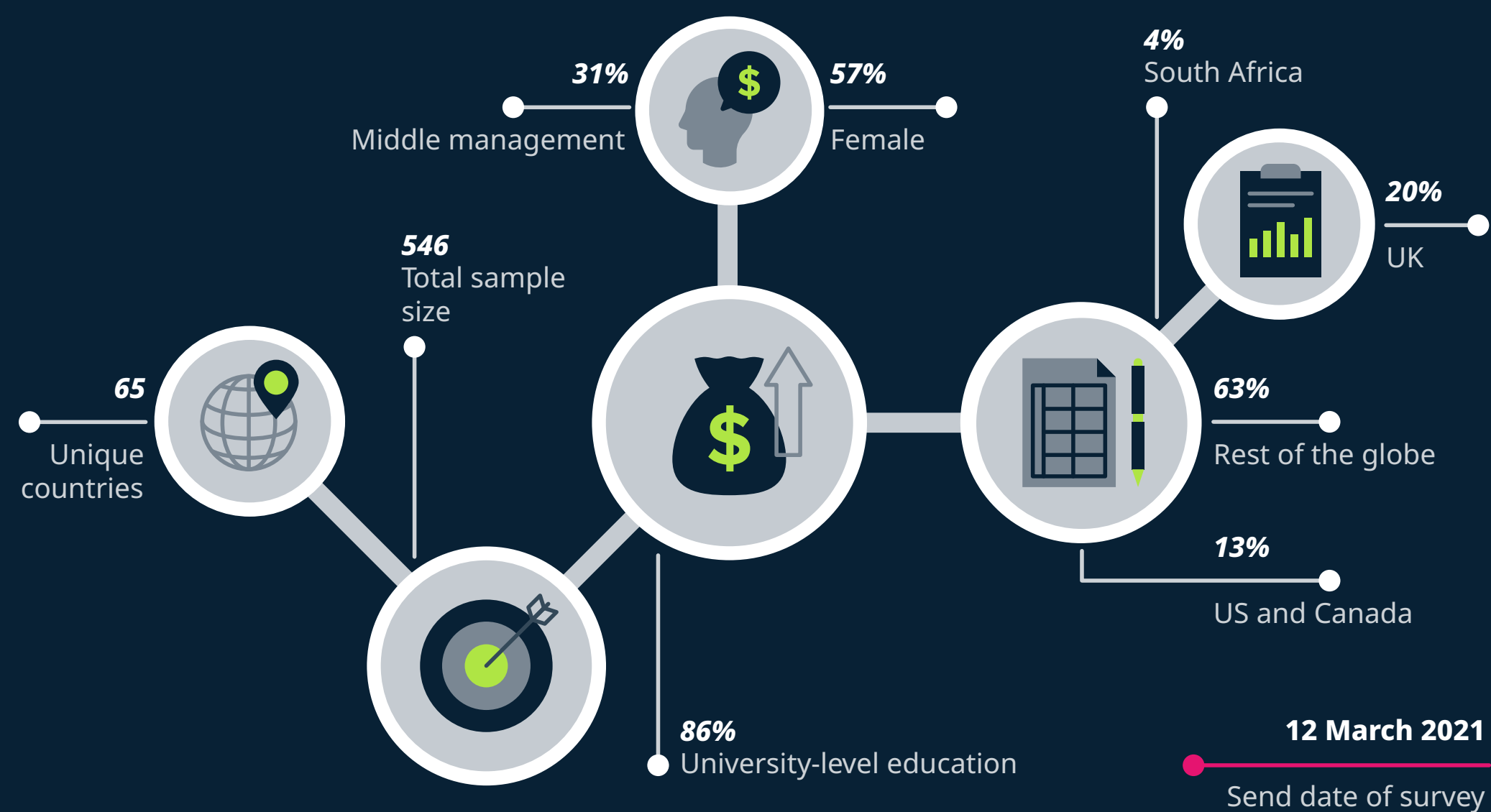
In the years to come, jobs will be transformed or redefined in terms of their requirements and working methods, and 'green' initiatives are likely to result in multiple new professions.²⁹ Developing sustainability skills offer career opportunities and help enhance a company's sustainability agenda.

● Conclusion

The world is changing fast and it's being influenced by climate change, social inequality, and governance. Sustainability is the answer to all three factors, and the right skills and a sustainability agenda are needed for lasting positive changes. Education and collaboration are crucial for the future of sustainable development, and by reskilling and upskilling, everyone – and the planet – benefits. As your education partner with the widest selection of [sustainability courses](#), GetSmarter is here to equip you with the knowledge you need to make a bigger, better impact on the world.

Research method

This survey was sent to past students, current students, and those who had registered interest in doing a sustainability-related course. The survey was conducted in March 2021, and yielded 546 respondents with an interest directly or indirectly in sustainability. The sample breakdown was as follows:



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