



Brands
in **Motion**

Winning the Battle Against **Green** **Fatigue**

How to make corporate
sustainability efforts
real for employees.



New research shows **employees strongly support their employers' missions to create a more sustainable world — even when companies fall short of their sustainability goals.** But a level of fatigue has set in, driven by gaps in awareness and suspicions of greenwashing. Here's how to ensure employees know your corporate sustainability programs and commitments are real.



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Introduction

In recent years, C-suite and executive leaders have greatly elevated the importance of sustainability across their organizations, investing significant time and resources to create more climate-friendly operations and supply chains, to foster climate-driven business innovation and to engage employees along the journey. Today nearly all of the world's largest companies choose to, or are required to, report annually on sustainability progress and goals.

That said, a range of evidence shows company progress on sustainability isn't resonating with all employees — arguably the most important audience, given the outsize impact employees have on sustainability outcomes and ROI. New research from WE Communications finds that, despite well-intentioned efforts by employers, many employees are unaware of their companies' specific sustainability plans. And for those who are aware, there is skepticism about how genuine such plans are and their overall impact. Without focused messaging and effective engagement, talk about sustainability is turning into background noise, leading many employees to experience “green fatigue” or worse — **45% of employees suspect that the companies they work for are involved in some level of greenwashing.**

WE Communications surveyed nearly 2,000 employees from a range of industries across the United States,

United Kingdom and Singapore to gain a regional view on their attitudes toward corporate sustainability programs — those of their own employers and for businesses in general.

Our research illuminates a multitude of disconnects and significant opportunities when it comes to engaging employees on a sustainability journey. Above all, our findings make clear that the corporate sustainability movement has entered a new phase and requires a new approach to ensure employees' long-term engagement. This is a call for businesses to rethink the way they communicate about sustainability, because employees are hungry not just to know specifics about plans, action and progress, but to believe true positive change will be the result: **86% say brands must be committed to reducing their environmental impact.**

This report provides new data that can help brands use internal communications to mobilize and inspire employees, engaging them to not just stay on the climate-transition journey with their employers, but to be active participants and ambassadors. It provides a roadmap for initiating conversations about corporate sustainability in this new era, where climate-driven business innovation is pushing boundaries, and climate adaptation and sustainability are creating new opportunities and driving new markets.

Key Findings



86% of employees say companies and brands should be committed to sustainability and reducing environmental impact.



78% have interest in working in a job related to sustainability, and 24% say this interest is increasing.



But almost **2 out of 3** say employees have very little or no involvement at all when it comes to their employers' environmental sustainability efforts.



And only **38%** say that the companies they work for have made sustainability commitments.



That said, these employees remain largely optimistic and realistic, with **3 out of 4** saying that they "would understand" if their company missed their sustainability targets.



The absence of clarity presents real risk — **45%** of employees believe their company is participating in some level of greenwashing.

Part 1:

The Corporate Sustainability Gap



The road to a more sustainable future is long, and for years the private sector has been working toward that goal by investing significant resources into reaching their time-bound sustainability commitments — from achieving net-zero emissions to reducing Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions across supply chains.

But corporate leaders can't do it alone. To ensure that these investments reach their full potential, executives need to bring their entire teams on board — frontline workers, support staff, and middle and senior managers. Employees can be a company's greatest advocates or their harshest critics, and attracting and retaining talent is of paramount importance, so it's essential that employees understand and embrace the company's sustainability programs and commitments. They also must have confidence that those programs are making a difference in their lives.

It helps that employees are aware of the gravity of the situation. WE's survey found that **92% of employees say climate change is real, and 60% say it's getting worse.**

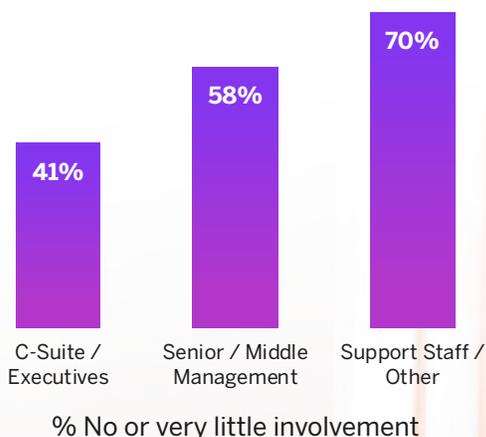
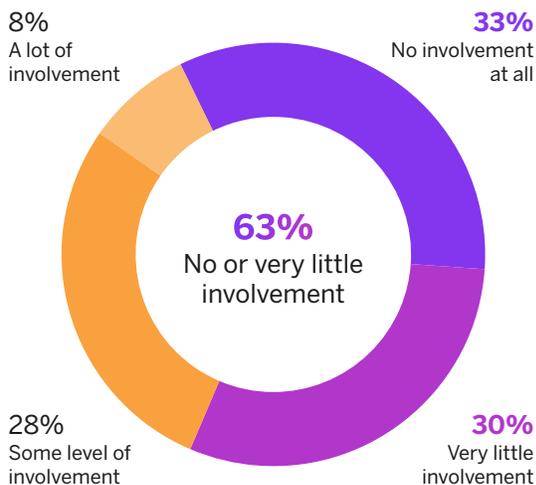
They also expect the private sector to do something about it. **Eighty-six percent of employees say companies and brands should be committed to sustainability and reducing environmental impact.**

However, only 38% of employee respondents could say affirmatively that the companies they work for have made sustainability commitments. That indicates that most companies either have sustainability targets and aren't communicating about them or they don't have any commitments. Brands must take action *and* communicate about it.

Furthermore, WE found a disconnect between leadership and the broader workforce. **Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents say employees have very little or no involvement in their employer's environmental sustainability efforts.** This is highest among frontline, support and more junior-level staff, at 70%.

Only 38% of employee respondents could say affirmatively that the companies they work for have made sustainability commitments.

Level of employee involvement in employer sustainability efforts



And no wonder: Direct participation in sustainability efforts is low. Only 15% of respondents say they are responsible for sustainability impact, strategy or policies, or that they sit on a sustainability committee or group, or even that they participate in company volunteer activities centered on sustainability.

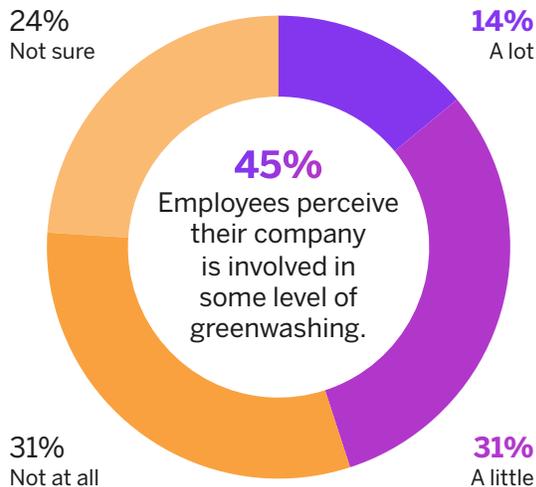
Additionally, this group *significantly* underrepresents frontline, support and junior-level staff — who are 56% of surveyed employees but only 27% of this highly engaged group.

Even more concerning: **45% of employees think that their company is participating in some level of greenwashing** — defined as the act or practice of making a product, policy or activity seem more environmentally friendly or less environmentally damaging than it really is.



Employee perceptions of their company's involvement with greenwashing

To what extent do you believe your employer is involved in greenwashing?



Notably, the employees paying the most attention to their company's sustainability efforts are also the most skeptical. Among employees involved in their company's sustainability efforts, 78% suspect their employer of greenwashing at least a little.

Bottom line: Company communications — both internal and external — on sustainability must be clear, focused and deliver solid proof. Employees need to see tangible evidence that the

companies they work for are making steady and measurable progress toward a more sustainable world. If they don't, they risk succumbing further to "green fatigue" and disengagement.

People are besieged at every turn by headlines and imagery of a global climate apocalypse, with many experiencing "eco-anxiety," "climate fatigue," apathy or just feelings of sheer helplessness. When WE asked how employees feel about climate change, **the top two emotions they expressed were: "powerless" and "anxious."**

Employees want brands to help stem this problem, but so far they aren't confident that corporate sustainability efforts are truly making a difference. When asked if business sustainability efforts are having a positive impact in their lives, **55% say they are either unsure or that they perceive very little or no impact.**

Fortunately, WE's survey also reveals significant good news, and this research provides a roadmap that can help bridge that divide.

Part 2:

The Power of Awareness



As companies work to make their operations and supply chains more climate-friendly, many have set time-bound commitments to reach their sustainability goals — some as soon as 2025. Employees overall take an optimistic attitude toward sustainability strategies and activities that will help companies reach those goals. When asked about such efforts, the most common feelings employees reported were “hopeful,” “encouraged” and “motivated.”

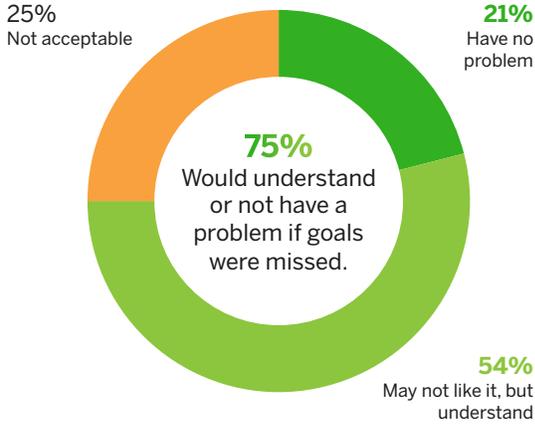
However, as some of those self-imposed deadlines draw nearer, and questions about the likelihood of reaching certain goals emerge, many executives may wonder about the consequences if their companies fail to reach these targets.

The good news is that most people support their employers on their journey, and they take a realistic and optimistic attitude toward their employers' sustainability efforts. Among people who know their company has made a timebound commitment, **75% say they would at least understand if their company missed a sustainability target.**

Most people support their employers on their journey, and they take a realistic and optimistic attitude toward their employers' sustainability efforts.

Employee attitudes toward missed sustainability goals

Which would describe how you would feel if your company falls short of or doesn't achieve their stated sustainability goals?



More good news: When company sustainability programs and commitments are known to employees, optimism and motivation to be on the sustainability journey with their employers increase. Further, our research shows that **88% of employees who know about their companies' time-bound sustainability initiatives say**

their employers will meet some or all of those commitments, whether they are set for 2025, 2030 or beyond.

At first glance, this might appear to be a mixed message: Awareness is associated with more optimism, involvement *and* suspicions of greenwashing? But when one considers the point of view of a highly engaged employee it makes sense. These people are most likely to be attuned to the magnitude of the world's — and their company's — sustainability problems. And they are also the most likely to notice discrepancies or half-measures in company efforts.

Raising awareness with the organization's broader workforce can help fuel employee engagement and evangelism. Our research provides an opportunity to strengthen awareness about sustainability programs and commitments and drive further engagement throughout the organization.



Part 3:

The Employee Sustainability Engagement Playbook



From the initial declaration of a sustainability commitment through longer-term progress updates, companies face an immediate imperative to develop communications that resonate with employees and inspire them to amplify the company's impact.

Partnering with employees also provides leadership with the actionable insights they need to ensure that these initiatives will have long-term success and impact. After all, **employees are at the front lines of an organization's operations and are often in the best position to identify a wide range of**

opportunities for improvement — from small efforts to reduce waste to large-scale efficiencies and more eco-friendly vendor partnerships. At the same time, leadership can communicate how these initiatives contribute to the organization's overall business goals.

WE's research identifies **five key strategies for engaging employees** and bringing the entire organization along for the journey, from plans and commitments to actions and celebrations of sustainability milestones.



1. Get Specific and Make It Real

As they go about their daily work lives, employees want to see concrete evidence that their employers are serious about their sustainability plans. When WE asked senior and middle managers and support staff to name which actions would make them more engaged in sustainability efforts, **the No. 1 answer was: “provide employees with sustainable workplace tools, services and products.”** This is consistent with the findings of our 2022 Brands in Motion research, which finds that people want brands to deliver results they can see and feel — they want them to “make it real.”

Notably, the least popular action is asking employees to share social or digital content and campaigns. Our research makes clear that **the work needs to start with company leadership.** Employees want to participate in their companies’ efforts toward making a greener world, but first they need to see tangible actions from the companies they work for. The message from employees: *Make it tangible, make it real and make it simple.*

Companies have an opportunity to significantly increase engagement by surrounding employees with the proof points that show how their day-to-day work is changing based on the company’s sustainability efforts — from creating screensavers that say the monitor is sleeping to conserve energy to filling the supply cabinet with products from companies with climate-friendly track records.

But it doesn’t end there — it’s also important to share news about the remarkable advances in sustainability technology. Provide clear data on how innovations that are part of their daily work lives enable the organization to drastically reduce their carbon footprints while continuing to operate at full capacity. Only the leaders who prove their companies are doing the work have the credibility to ask employees to share the news on social media.

Real Inspiration

WE asked senior and middle managers and support staff what would make them more engaged in their employers’ sustainability efforts. Their top four answers:

1. Provide employees with **environmentally sustainable workplace tools**, services and products.
2. Show employees **how sustainability efforts are changing employees’ day-to-day work** and/or their work environment.
3. Offer employees **time off to volunteer** or participate in sustainability activities.
4. Share **regular updates** with employees on progress toward meeting goals.

How Sustainability Gets Real:

As a company known for producing some of the best-known healthcare brands, Johnson & Johnson Consumer Health recognized that you can't have healthy people without a healthy planet, which is why it launched the [Healthy Lives Mission](#) in 2020 — a 10-year, \$800 million pledge to improve the sustainability and impact of its products and brands. To ensure that the commitment to this initiative was woven throughout the organization, the company emphasized empowering employees by starting a network of 200 Healthy Lives Champions around the world in different markets and functions to train them on the science and healthcare aspects of sustainability.

Johnson & Johnson Consumer Health also knew that **translating its goals into concrete examples would be an important part of achieving organizationwide buy-in**. It started by focusing its planet work on eight of its leading brands, eventually serving as tangible proof for the rest of the company that small changes can have big impact. Leadership shared news of this approach on [LinkedIn](#) and explained that lessons learned from each brand would inform future implementation strategies across the portfolio. In doing this, the company saw firsthand that being vocal about goals and progress not only helps win the hearts and minds of leadership and employees, but it also creates more opportunity to impact change.



2. Step Into the Spotlight

When WE asked employees in organizations that have made sustainability commitments what would improve their opinion of their company's climate-friendly strategies and activities, their answer was clear: external validation.

Employees say that **seeing their employer's sustainability efforts showcased or praised by outside organizations is the No. 1 factor that improves their opinion** of these efforts. This includes seeing their company's sustainability initiatives showcased in national media, talked about on social media and positively reviewed by organizations not related to their company.

Help others help you by maximizing your ROI from external partnerships. Initiate dialogues with the nonprofit environmental organizations that your organization supports. Would they be willing to speak about your company on their social channels? Amplify the company's new clean-energy initiative?

Most businesses with more mature sustainability programs are seeking recognition through myriad sustainability rankings and awards, such as those conducted by Newsweek, Forbes, Fortune and Dow Jones. But these efforts can be disparate and lacking in strategy if there is not a centralized approach that enables the entire organization to agree on the priorities.



How Sustainability Gets Real:

Walmart is the world's largest retailer, and the bulk of its emissions come from its supply chain rather than its stores or distribution centers. The company had an opportunity to significantly reduce its Scope 3 emissions globally by encouraging suppliers to reduce their emissions. Walmart called in the experts, partnering with World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and CDP to create [Project Gigaton](#), which offers suppliers measurable, science-based actions to reduce their climate footprint in areas such as energy use, waste, packaging and transportation. **By working with highly respected environmental organizations, Walmart could assure its suppliers the program would yield scalable results.** At the same time, the company itself could lead an internal

sustainability transformation for more sustainable practices to reduce waste and transition to clean energy across its retail stores, corporate offices and in the field. Walmart also could communicate to the public that it is serious about its goal to reduce or avoid 1 billion metric tons (a gigaton) of greenhouse gases from the global value chain by 2030. [WWF](#), [EDF](#) and [CDP](#) each promoted the program on their channels, spreading the word about Walmart's very real effort to create a healthier planet. To convey the "why" behind the creation of Project Gigaton and drive engagement among employees, Walmart's then-sustainability SVP Laura Phillips [wrote a blog post](#) to highlight the impact possible by working with others. To date, more than 4,500 suppliers have formally signed on, resulting in 750+ million MT of emissions reduced or avoided.



3. Don't Fear the Deadlines

Sustainability goal deadlines that once felt like the distant future — 2025, 2030 — are now just a few years away, and many leaders are realizing that, despite their best intentions and well-laid plans, in some cases their company won't achieve its goals. Missed targets, failed initiatives, flawed calculations — setbacks like these are painful to face. But as our research shows, employees will give you the benefit of the doubt — if you are open about where you fell short.

WE asked employees what they would want to see from brands and businesses if they missed their sustainability targets. They made clear that they want clarity and honesty — along with a plan showing how the organization will course correct. The top two answers: “provide a plan to get back on track” and “communicate transparently about where the company fell short.”

This finding also reveals an important divide. Compared with people who report to them, C-suite and executive leaders view these actions as significantly lower priorities, by a factor of 14 to 19 percentage points.

Getting back on track

Actions that should be taken if sustainability goals are not met:

Provide a plan to get back on track

C-Suite / Executives

36%

Senior / Middle Management

51%

Support Staff / Other

55%

Transparent communication on where the company fell short on commitments

C-Suite / Executives

33%

Senior / Middle Management

48%

Support Staff / Other

47%

There is a significant communications opportunity for leaders prepared to bridge this disconnect by delivering focused and transparent progress reports. Our research shows that employees are understanding, so companies have a great opportunity to be vulnerable to these setbacks and use this open dialogue as springboard to re-energize the entire team to work toward these goals.

How Sustainability Gets Real:

In 2010, Procter & Gamble (P&G) pledged to stop using ingredients that contribute to deforestation by 2020. But in 2019, with the deadline looming, the company announced that it would fall short of this goal, drawing criticism and increased demand for action from internal, external and shareholder audiences. Although many other brands stayed silent about equally disappointing results, **P&G leaders took the opportunity to lean into transparency and be vocal and accountable about the company's evolving sustainability journey.**

Chief Sustainability Officer Virginie Helias issued a Responsible Forestry Report that restated and accelerated the brand's commitments, company investments and measurable positive impacts of the company's efforts to eliminate deforestation and the degradation of intact forests. Through clear accountability on learnings, activating new plans against commitments and reporting updates on the company's Sustainable Forestry Progress, P&G has built credibility among employees and stakeholders — and validated a commitment for the long run.



4. Show That *Everyone's* Job Contributes to Sustainability

Data shows employees want to be part of their employer's purpose strategy, especially when it comes to sustainability. **Seventy-eight percent of employees have an interest in working in a job related to sustainability, and 24% say this interest is increasing.**

What many employees don't realize: They *already* have a green job. When an organization is developing and executing environmentally friendly operations and supply chains, *everyone* in the company works in sustainability.

Leaders have an opportunity to communicate this — to help employees understand that they don't need to be engineering the company's solar energy

strategy or designing rooftop gardens to be working toward sustainability. Every team member has a role to play — whether they are in operations, marketing, finance, customer service or any other department.

Internal communications that help employees break out of the siloed ways people have traditionally thought about sustainability will give them a deeper understanding of how their work fits into the organization's broader picture. But it can't just be about recycling bins. Successful companies use creative ways to connect employees with larger-scale — and often more abstract — programs.



How Sustainability Gets Real:

Microsoft employees around the world, not just those with jobs focused on environmental sustainability, are core to the company's sustainability mission. The company works to connect, skill and activate employees on sustainability.

Connect: Microsoft's volunteer-led sustainability community, the Sustainability Connected Community, includes more than 9,000 employees around the world. This community has found creative ways to use their diverse experience, skills and passion to help the company achieve its sustainability commitments. As just one example, hundreds of SCC members contributed to a crowd-sourced "Employee's Guide to Sustainability," with

recommendations employees can use to make sustainability part of their jobs.

Skill: Microsoft launched all-employee training on sustainability that is grounded in science and data. This is a start to developing sustainability fluency across the company and enabling a shared understanding of the company's sustainability efforts.

Activate: Harness the innovation and energy of employees and provide channels to contribute to Microsoft's sustainability commitments. Campaigns like the companywide Ecochallenge provide concrete actions for employees to take actions to be more sustainable both at home and at work. The annual Hack for Sustainability is sponsored by company leaders and provides the resources and space for employees to propose new ideas and approaches.



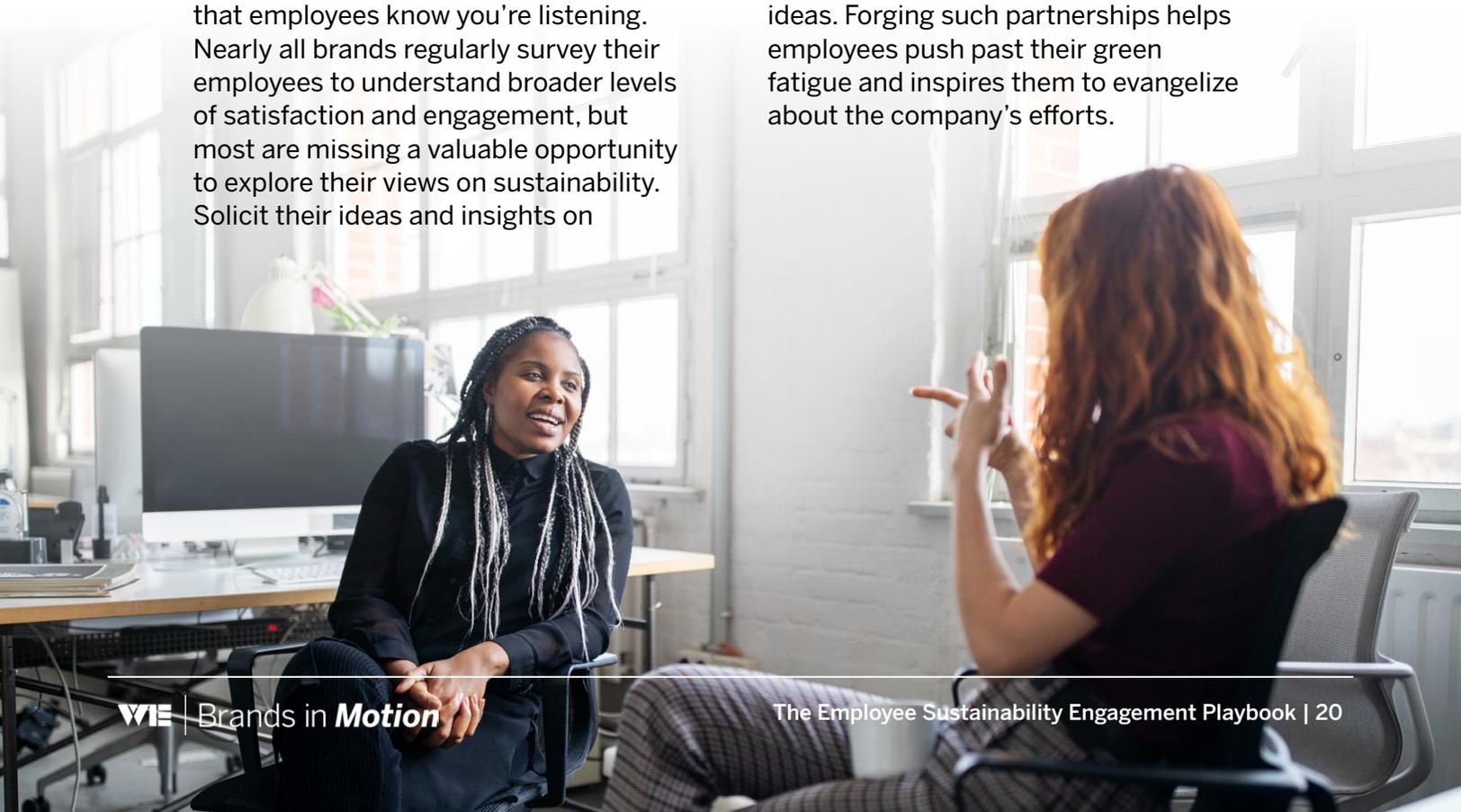
5. Make It Personal

Technology not only creates more environmentally friendly organizations and generates business opportunities, it also offers new and innovative ways to connect — from virtual town halls to newsletters to company chat platforms. But our research finds that comms professionals shouldn't neglect the tried and true. The senior and middle managers and support staff WE surveyed say the **No. 1 way that they want to hear about sustainability efforts is in an email from a company leader**, with 58% ranking it in their top three preferred forms of communication. This oft-forgotten tool provides employees with an immediate personal connection — when employees see the CEO's or CFO's name in their inbox they pay attention, and rightly so.

But communications can't only be top-down. It's equally important to ensure that employees know you're listening. Nearly all brands regularly survey their employees to understand broader levels of satisfaction and engagement, but most are missing a valuable opportunity to explore their views on sustainability. Solicit their ideas and insights on

sustainability commitments through surveys and forums. Provide a platform to share what matters most. Be nimble enough to go deep into new or emergent areas that employees are expressing an interest in. Such pulse checks can create valuable educational opportunities to explain why the company is focusing on one initiative versus another. For example, in WE's survey, employees say "waste" is the sustainability issue that's most important to them. This presents an opportunity for leaders to not only discuss how the company is tackling the waste issue, but also to explain why other large-scale initiatives — such as managing supply chains — are equally (if not more) effective.

With the right communications mix, leaders can initiate healthy dialogues with employees that show they respect their work, their opinions and their ideas. Forging such partnerships helps employees push past their green fatigue and inspires them to evangelize about the company's efforts.

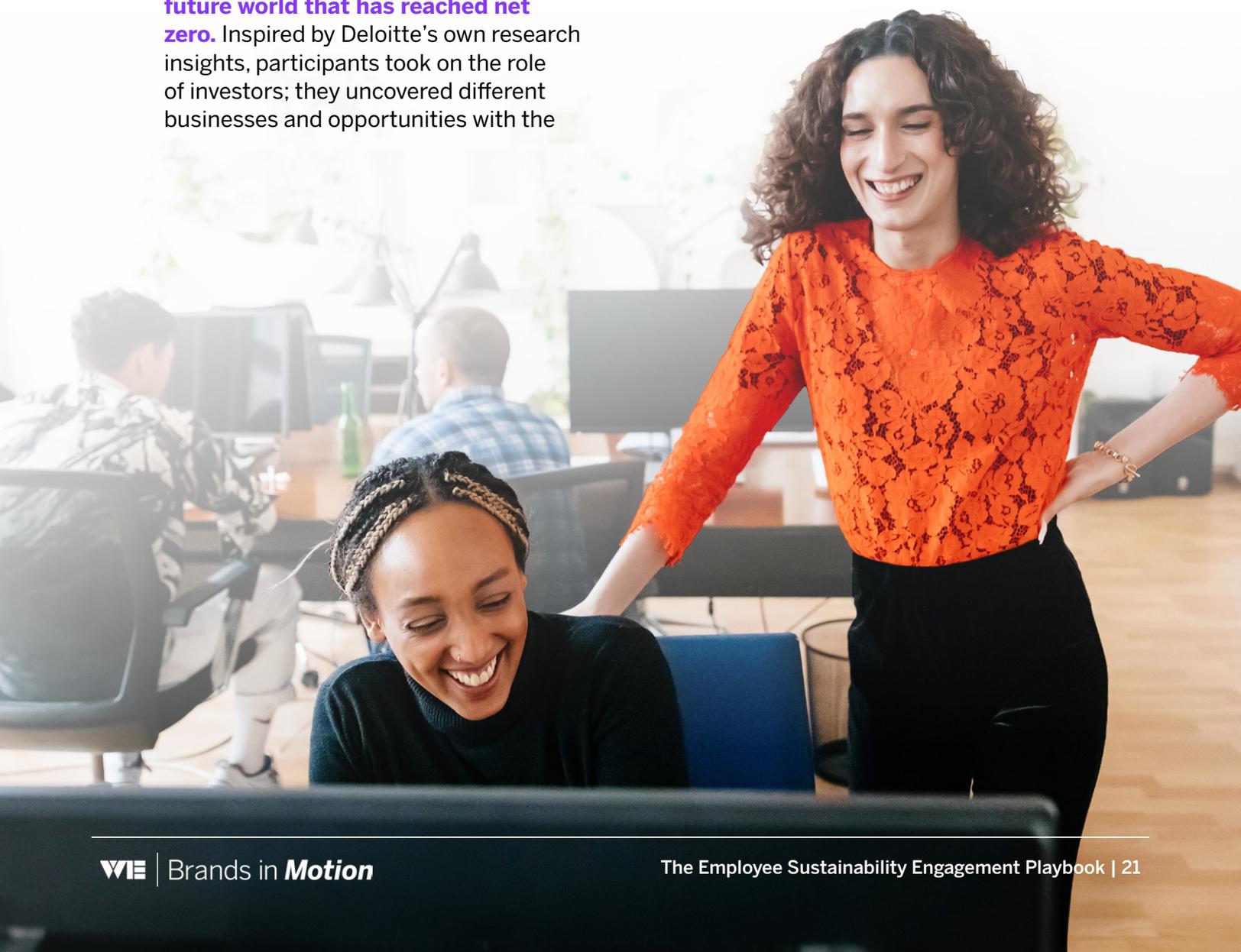


How Sustainability Gets Real:

To many employees, the complexities of climate action can be overwhelming and disconnected to their day-to-day work. Deloitte UK took a creative approach to make that connection with employees by creating a personal and hands-on experience, [Enter Net Zero](#), to show how they individually can create change and consider the possibilities that a net-zero future can bring. Partnering with an entertainment company, **Deloitte UK created an immersive experience for employees to play an active role in an imagined future world that has reached net zero.** Inspired by Deloitte's own research insights, participants took on the role of investors; they uncovered different businesses and opportunities with the

strongest ESG credentials and grappled with the challenges of being an investor faced with a de-carbonized economy.

To drive awareness and excitement among employees, Deloitte UK published an interview on the company's [Perspectives blog](#) with experience director Ollie Jones and released a movie-like [Enter Net Zero trailer on YouTube](#). As a result, Enter Net Zero has engaged more than 1,200 people across internal and external audiences at all levels of seniority.



Closing Thoughts

Sustainability commitments are now a business imperative, and companies are stepping up to meet the challenge with more fervor than ever. For some companies, however, a communication gap with employees is muddling those efforts. **Employees overwhelmingly say they want their companies to achieve their sustainability targets, but too few have a clear sense of what their employers are doing** — and many aren't sure if their employers are doing anything at all.

Through our research, WE sees an opportunity to boost and sharpen brands' internal communications and engagement around sustainability. The employees WE surveyed say they are hungry for realistic and specific information that corporate commitments and progress are tangible and accessible. **Consistent with WE's 2022 Brands in Motion research, this study finds that people want to see businesses deliver clear action plans with solid proof and tangible results — in other words, to “make it real.”**

With **WE's playbook for employee sustainability engagement**, companies can apply five strategies to bridge the communications gap between corporate leadership and employees:

- Get specific and make it real
- Step into the spotlight
- Don't fear the deadlines
- Show that everyone's job contributes to sustainability
- Make it personal

A sustainable future is essential, and having an informed and inspired workforce may just prove to be the secret weapon for companies doing their part to create a greener world.

Appendix

Survey Methodology

This survey was conducted among 1,993 employed people across a range of industries and roles in three markets: the United States, the United Kingdom and Singapore. The survey was conducted by YouGov in February 2023 using an email invitation and online survey approach.

Survey respondents have been classified into one of three subgroups according to their self-reported level within the organization they work for:

- C-Suite and Executive Management: 150 (8% of total)
- Upper and Middle Management: 700 (36% of total)
- Frontline, Support and Junior Staff: 1,143 (56% of total)

This white paper is part of WE Communications' Brands in Motion global reports. Now in its seventh year, Brands in Motion has surveyed 100,000+ consumers and B2B decision-makers on how perceptions shift over time.



Your Brand in **Motion**

Our world is constantly changing. Brands in Motion provides the data-driven tools that enable brands to develop the agility to respond to disruptions and the stability to build an enduring legacy.

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