



EMPOWERING **SUSTAINABILITY**

A call to action for Chief Sustainability Officers



WHITE PAPER

EMPOWERING SUSTAINABILITY

PROJECT TEAM

Authors

Bryn Chighizola, PhD

Director of Organizational Research,
Korn Ferry Institute

Andrew Lowe

Senior Client Partner,
Sustainability Practice Lead for EMEA

Cheryl D'Cruz-Young

Senior Client Partner, Global Energy &
Global Sustainability Practice

Scott Atkinson

Senior Client Partner, CEO & Board
Services, Global Sustainability Practice

Kate Shattuck

Managing Partner,
Global Impact Investment Practice

Timothy Smith

Principal, Global Industrial Markets,
Sustainability Practice Lead for APAC

Matthew Magill, PhD

Organizational IP Scientist,
Korn Ferry Institute

Annamaria Scaccia

Director of Communication,
Korn Ferry Institute

Contributors

Jean-Marc Laouchez

President, Korn Ferry Institute

Georgie Horn

Senior Associate, Sustainability, EMEA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Korn Ferry extends its thanks to the senior leaders interviewed for this paper, whose insights shaped our understanding of the evolving sustainability landscape. Some CSOs spoke on the record, while others chose to remain anonymous but gave permission to be quoted.

Nicola Acutt

Chief Sustainability
Officer, NetApp

Allyson Anderson Book

Chief Sustainability
Officer, Baker Hughes

Kate Brandt

Chief Sustainability
Officer, Google

**Carlos Alberto Vargas
Castolo**

Chief Sustainability
Officer, Grupo HYCSA

David Clark

Chief Sustainability
Officer, Amcor

Linda Freiner

Chief Sustainability
Officer, Zurich

Jane Goodland

Chief Sustainability
Officer, LSEG

Rhian Kelly

Former Chief
Sustainability Officer,
National Grid

Soroush Kheradmand

Global Head of
Sustainability,
SchneiderElectric

Anna Turell

Former Chief
Sustainability Officer,
Decathlon

Calvin Lee Kwan

Managing Director of
Sustainability & Risk
Governance, Link Asset
Management

Olga Martynov

Chief Financial &
Sustainability Officer,
TM Forum

Robert Metzke

Chief Sustainability
Officer, Phillips

Ivanka Mamic

Senior Vice President of
Sustainability, bp

Katherine Neebe

Chief Communications
Officer, Duke Energy

Nicole Trimble

Founder and Principal,
Braided Rivers

INTRODUCTION

Record-low water levels, mass coral bleaching, and extreme heat waves are no longer isolated or infrequent events. They sit among many other symptoms of a disrupted environment that is reshaping global industries and supply chains. With the world facing such unprecedented challenges, organizations are making climate resilience and sustainability central to their strategy.

While environmental issues affect everyone, Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) are uniquely positioned to lead. Yet, driving true organizational sustainability is complex, demanding both ambition and pragmatism, collective action, and long-term strategy embedded across the business.

To explore how sustainability has evolved since [our last report](#), Korn Ferry conducted new qualitative research with CSOs across industries. What we found is that while their mandates are broad, environmental sustainability has emerged as the dominant focus. As Anna Turell, former CSO of French sporting goods retailer Decathlon, noted, “Arguably everything sits beneath the climate agenda—it is quantifiable, relatively easy to understand, and there is momentum on this issue.”

Drawing on insights from seasoned leaders, we offer practical, forward-looking guidance to help CSOs and senior executives accelerate impact and lead with clarity amid growing climate risk.

WHY NOW IS DIFFERENT

Business leaders are more attuned than ever to the financial stakes of climate change. According to Capgemini’s 2025 investment outlook, [62% of executives plan to increase their sustainability budgets—a 10-point jump from last year](#)—with increased investment in climate technologies like hydrogen, renewables, nuclear, and carbon capture. This trend reflects a growing view of sustainability as a source of business value, compliance, and efficiency.

Among CSOs, the focus is shifting to measurable results and bottom-line impact. When sustainability leaders drive growth through product innovation and meet new customer demand—while also delivering cost savings or efficiencies—they shift the conversation from politics to business performance. In doing so, they become more agile and effective under pressure.

REGIONAL VARIABILITY

Sustainability has become a strategic necessity, yet progress varies widely by region. These examples reveal why global perspective, local agility, and decisive action are needed:



NORTH AMERICA

In North America, shifting political priorities and economic pressures threaten sustainability momentum. In the U.S., the CSO role is evolving, driven by regulation, tech, supply chains, and stakeholder pressure. Under scrutiny, CSOs need to align cost, risk, and strategy, linking environmental impact to financial return. More and more, they are.



EUROPEAN UNION

The EU continues to lead the world in sustainability with initiatives like the Green Deal, setting ambitious targets for climate neutrality.



ASIA-PACIFIC AND MIDDLE EAST

In Asia-Pacific and the Middle East, efforts range from the UAE's "Net Zero by 2050" pledge to China's solar investments and sharp fossil fuel cuts in major economies like India, South Korea, and Vietnam. Elsewhere in Asia, energy strategies reflect diverse realities, shaped by development, geography, and resource access. There's no single path, but scalable solutions are emerging to drive growth and cut costs.



HOW CSOs DEFINE ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

“Sustainability is there without having to say it.”

– Nicola Acutt, NetApp CSO

“[It’s the] ability to meet the needs of our current generation but not at the expense of future generations.”

– Ivanka Mamic, bp Senior VP of Sustainability

“[It] means doing what we do—better.”

– Carlos Alberto Vargas Castolo, Grupo HYCSA CSO

“It is doing business in a way today that safeguards the future of the company and society. It is a forward-looking, long-term lens, sustainability is about the how.”

– Linda Freiner, Zurich CSO

“It is about organizational transformation—how you ensure your organization is set up to be sustainable and resilient for the future.”

– Anna Turrell, former Decathlon CSO

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR **SUSTAINABLE IMPACT**

Organizational sustainability is about long-term value delivered not just to shareholders, but for employees, customers, communities, and the planet. Sustainable supply chains, for example, can strengthen brand reputation and resilience, while remote work offers flexibility, cuts costs, and reduces energy use.

Creating that value requires constant evaluation of risks and opportunities that align with market differentiation, near-term wins, and long-term success. A recent Morgan Stanley report shows [85% of executives now see sustainability as a source of value creation, not just risk mitigation](#). This shift suggests a broader understanding that relevance, innovation, and resilience depend on embedding sustainability into strategy.

Organizational sustainability demands change, but change is not defined by tidy, episodic steps. It's marked by breakthroughs, setbacks, and shifting contexts. "There is a lot of speculation about how sustainability will evolve," a CSO at a FTSE 100 financial services firm told Korn Ferry. "Through my career, change hasn't been linear, and I believe we're still heading in the same direction—albeit we may see differences across the world." Still, they added, "I believe most jurisdictions will continue to integrate sustainability."

To drive progress, companies need to adopt a future-focused perspective anchored in bold targets, scenario planning, and continuous reassessment. Collective transformation, culture, and talent are the building blocks of lasting sustainability.

COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

As sustainability becomes a global priority, organizations must move their focus from short-term performance to long-term transformation. They would need to rethink capital allocation, embrace innovative technologies, and promote cultural change. The CSO of a Fortune 500 utility firm described how their company moved from a short-term directive—expanding reliance on polluting "incumbent energy"—to a long-term strategy centered on renewable resources. This kind of pivot advances sustainability goals while unlocking long-term market value.

“[You] have to really start with the basics and work it into the culture of the company and communicate why. It is hard to be credible in the marketplace if you haven’t built that culture internally.”

- Linda Freiner, Zurich CSO

CULTURE

Technology alone isn’t enough. Driving sustainable transformation requires deep shifts in both culture and talent. Culture change starts with everyday actions and clear communication. Linda Freiner, CSO of global insurer Zurich Insurance Group, suggests organizations should have “both a bottom-up and top-down approach.” “[You] have to really start with the basics and work it into the culture of the company and communicate why,” Freiner told Korn Ferry. “It is hard to be credible in the marketplace if you haven’t built that culture internally.”

Leading organizations use scenario planning and backcasting—that is, charting a path from their 2050 goals to present-day initiatives—to treat sustainability as a necessity. They also embed sustainability into decision-making, linking it to incentives and accountability. For example, sustainability metrics are increasingly integrated into executive scorecards, investment committees, and bonus structures. Ivanka Mamic, bp’s Senior Vice President of Sustainability, reinforced the value of aligning incentives with desired behaviors. “Remuneration has sustainability in it,” Mamic told Korn Ferry. “It is part of the way we are rewarded and recognized, ensuring everybody has a stake.”

TALENT

Talent strategy is just as critical. Climate literacy and systems thinking, such as understanding the circular economy and resilience planning, enable both leaders and employees to make smarter decisions, solve tougher problems, and manage risk. Organizations should recruit “T-shaped” talent—employees with functional experience who collaborate across silos—and look for individuals with humility, curiosity, courage, risk tolerance, and resilience, all qualities needed to navigate uncertainty and drive innovation.

David Clark, CSO for global packaging manufacturer Amcor, Inc., shared how their R&D team was once tasked with a sustainability challenge they believed was impossible—at least initially. About two years later, they not only innovated solutions but also integrated the solutions across the organization. The team took pride in their work, proving what’s possible when curiosity, persistence, and collaboration align. And their success was rooted in culture and talent consciousness.

MANAGING SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGY **THROUGH AI**

Emerging technologies like AI and machine learning are reshaping sustainability strategies, offering powerful tools to accelerate climate action. Generative AI can optimize operations, reduce waste, and unlock emissions reductions—potentially cutting global energy-related emissions by up to 4% by 2035, according to the International Energy Agency.

CSOs are increasingly embedding AI into their climate roadmaps, identifying use cases that deliver measurable value while

expanding sustainability teams to manage new risks around energy use, data ethics, and responsible development. Efficiency gains in models and infrastructure, coupled with clean energy procurement, are helping mitigate AI's environmental footprint.

Yet, the challenge is real. Data centers powering AI are projected to consume ~1,000 TWh by 2026—comparable to Japan or Russia—though they will represent a modest 3% of global electricity demand by 2030. The paradox is

clear: as AI becomes more efficient, it also becomes more accessible, driving up total usage.

CSOs must navigate this tension by demanding transparency and progress from AI providers, enforcing strict efficiency standards, and aligning AI adoption with climate goals. Beyond emissions, AI raises critical questions around equity, governance, and trust—issues that will increasingly define brand reputation and stakeholder confidence.

“There is a real topic around the social aspect of AI, governance, and ethics that are to be explored in the coming years. We are only at the very start of these, but they will be determining topics for companies to reduce reputational risk and elevate their branding and perception.”

- Sorouch Kheradmand, Global Head of Sustainability at Schneider Electric

WHAT IS **REQUIRED** BY CSOs?

Today's CSOs are far more than sustainability advocates. They are strategists, futurists, and connectors—what Robert Metzke, Senior Vice President and Global Head of Sustainability at health tech company Royal Philips, calls the “Chief Sensemaking Officer.” They bring focus and consistency without sacrificing depth, anchoring the organization through constant change. As one CSO of a luxury clothing brand said, the role manages “both upwards and downwards and finding clarity in the change.”

The role has evolved since its inception. While some leaders come from policy or technical backgrounds, many now sit at the top of the enterprise, honing their political instincts and governance fluency. They're doubling down on enterprise leadership, focusing on influence, communication, and strategic thinking skills.

In a world of nonstop information flow, CSOs need to hold “different and sometimes conflicting information sets, such as business strategy, market

context, emerging risks, and wider ecosystem externalities alongside sustainability priorities,” says Anna Turrell, Decathlon's former CSO. The most effective CSOs blend business acumen with systems thinking and stakeholder diplomacy, translating complex science into actionable strategy, anticipating long-term risks, and turning information into direction.

“By actively listening to the business and its stakeholders, CSOs are better able to synthesize this information in order to manage the inevitable trade-offs and tensions that come with taking a business through change.”

- Anna Turrell, former Decathlon CSO

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN CSOs

From our research, these three core roles define today's successful CSOs:

1. Connectors

CSOs act as boundary spanners, bridging internal silos and external stakeholders. Olga Martynov, TM Forum's Chief Financial & Sustainability Officer, says they serve as the organization's "connecting tissue," aligning sustainability with enterprise strategy while engaging peers, value chains, communities, and regulators to drive collective progress. Their job, Martynov told Korn Ferry, is to "make it all synchronized and working in the right direction."

2. Collaborators

Strategic yet grounded, CSOs balance vision with pragmatism. They lead with patience, humility, and humor, building consensus and trust amid complex and competing priorities.

3. Catalysts

CSOs are agents of change, leading with curiosity, resilience, and critical thinking. They inspire innovation and problem-solving while navigating the inevitable setbacks that come with transformation.



THE CSO EVOLUTION

FROM ADVOCATES TO ENTERPRISE LEADERS

ORIGINS

The Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) role is still young, first formally appointed by DuPont in 2004. “Sustainability as a profession is ... very new,” Mamic told Korn Ferry. “It’s important to recognize how far we have come in a relatively limited amount of time, but it still does need nurturing.”

THEN

Early CSOs were often siloed in philanthropy, HR, or corporate communications, with limited influence and little connection to core business strategy.

NOW

Today’s CSOs are embedded in enterprise strategy. Some even hold the title “Chief Strategy & Sustainability Officer.” They bring business acumen, technical depth, and a data-driven mindset. Their role spans operations, finance, risk, and innovation, aligning purpose with performance.

NEXT

The CSO’s strategic seat is secure, but the role will continue to evolve. “The forcing mechanisms are real, and climate will keep changing, so it will have a place at the table,” says Allyson Anderson Book, CSO at Baker Hughes, an energy tech company. With sustainability central to value creation, the question isn’t whether CSOs belong at the leadership table, but whether they should be leading it.

FROM STRATEGY TO ACTION: A TOOLKIT FOR CSOs

Sustainability requires both vision and execution. As the CSO role expands, so does the need for practical tools with measurable impact. This toolkit equips leaders with eight actionable steps to embed sustainability into their organization:

1. **Tailor the message**
2. **Build cross-functional depth**
3. **Plan for multiple futures**
4. **Nuture curiosity**
5. **Lead with humility and resilience**
6. **Embrace change as a dynamic process**
7. **Channel collective energy into impact**
8. **Anchor with governance**

1

Tailor the message.

Align sustainability storytelling to stakeholder priorities and values. For risk-averse investors, emphasize how sustainability mitigates threats to earnings. For innovation-minded executives, spotlight new markets and efficiency gains. Use clear metrics and case studies to make the case compelling. Make sure the message appeals to a wider audience and the mutual benefits are clear.

2

Build cross-functional depth.

Leading CSOs draw from careers in finance, operations, policy, and technical domains. They combine strategic insight and business expertise with strong influence and communication skills. Encourage rotations across departments or sectors to build enterprise-wide understanding and connect sustainability to business outcomes.

3

Plan for multiple futures.

Use scenario planning, backcasting, and systems modeling to anticipate disruption. Model the impact of carbon pricing, tech breakthroughs, or climate shocks, then map pathways to long-term targets. “One of the biggest mindsets [barriers] is short-termism,” says Nicole Trimble, founder and principal of the consultancy firm Braided Rivers. “Yes, it is a big cost, but in the future, [it] saves.”

4

Nurture curiosity.

Curiosity—defined as the desire to explore and discover new things—is [a powerful engine for learning](#). Korn Ferry research shows that when people are curious, [they retain more and adapt faster](#). Encourage a culture where employees ask questions, explore uncertainties, and treat small failures as learning opportunities. Leaders should model humility and openness, admitting what they don’t know and adapting as conditions change.

5

Lead with humility and resilience.

Sustainability transformation is “constantly dealing in shades of grey,” said the CSO of a luxury clothing brand. CSOs should promote humility, valuing diverse viewpoints, listening to employees, and revising assumptions. Resilience—the ability to adapt and bounce back—should be a core competency, supported by training, “learning sprints,” and cross-functional workshops to help staff navigate ambiguity and change.

6

Embrace change as a dynamic process.

Transformation is a dynamic and continuous process that requires resilience, adaptation, and alignment. Organizations should conduct regular change-readiness assessments to identify barriers, align across departments, and form governance structures to track progress and adjust strategies in real time.

7

Channel collective energy into impact.

Purpose-driven employees are an organization’s greatest asset, but their efforts should align with business goals. One-off initiatives programs are valuable, but without coordination, they risk fragmentation. Strong governance and measurable goals help translate individual energy into organizational impact. CSOs who champion the long-term business case for sustainability can direct and scale this momentum.

8

Anchor with governance.

To align top-down strategy with bottom-up innovation, CSOs should establish robust oversight structures like a sustainability board committee or a sustainability risk office to coordinate activities. Embed sustainability into KPIs and incentives so that purpose-driven projects are aligned with enterprise objectives and hold business line leaders accountable.

CASE STUDY:

PROVING FINANCIAL GAIN FROM SUSTAINABILITY

At Link Asset Management, sustainability is a lever for financial performance, not a side agenda.

In response to rising insurance premiums from extreme weather, Link launched Asia's first sustainability-linked insurance program, directly tying climate adaptation to premium outcomes. By using GIS tools, topographical mapping, and site-specific diagnostics, Link identified climate vulnerabilities and implemented targeted upgrades—flood barriers, drainage systems, and IoT sensors.

These resilience measures translated into quantifiable risk reductions. Through transparent engagement with insurers, Link secured an 11.7% premium reduction in 2025, plus a 7.5% performance-linked discount, along with improved terms and multi-year commitments.

This initiative reframes climate adaptation as both value protection and value creation. It proves that when sustainability is strategically designed, it delivers immediate financial returns and long-term resilience, speaking the language of capital.

“As sustainability leaders, we often talk about long-term risk and stakeholder value, but unless we can tie our work directly to financial performance, we risk being sidelined,” said Dr. Calvin Lee Kwan, Link's managing director of Sustainability & Risk Governance. “This program was our way of proving that resilience is not just a risk conversation, it is a value driver. It is time we design sustainability initiatives that speak in the language of capital, not just purpose.”

“It is time we design sustainability initiatives that speak in the language of capital, not just purpose.”

- Dr. Calvin Lee Kwan,
Manager Director of
Sustainability at Link

A CALL TO ACTION FOR CSOs AND SENIOR LEADERS

This is a defining moment for organizational sustainability—one that challenges leaders to rethink purpose and unlock long-term value for stakeholders, society, and the planet. As the CSO role evolves, leaders should step fully into their positions as connectors, collaborators, and catalysts, driving transformation within their organizations and across industries. “Creating consistency across the entire spectrum of a company, you unleash the power of purpose,” Metzke told Korn Ferry.

To succeed, CSOs need to lead with curiosity, humility, and resilience. They need to cultivate cultures of innovation, align bold visions with business strategy, and deploy tools like scenario planning, backcasting, and collective action to navigate the complexities of sustainability transformation.

The path forward requires courage, collaboration, and continuous learning. We offer a roadmap for leaders, but the real work lies ahead. Sustainability transformation may be complex and demanding, but it’s also a profound opportunity to shape a better future for all. With bold leadership and collective action, sustainability becomes a source of lasting competitive advantage—and hope for generations to come.



REFERENCES

Capgemini Research Institute. (2025). *Navigating uncertainty with confidence: Investment priorities for 2025*. Capgemini.

Gruber, M. J., Gelman, B. D., & Ranganath, C. (2014). States of curiosity modulate hippocampus-dependent learning via the dopaminergic circuit. *Neuron*, 84(2), 486–496.

International Energy Agency. (2024). *Electricity 2024: Analysis and forecast to 2026*. IEA.

Korn Ferry Institute. (2023). “Change: The key to sustainability.” Korn Ferry.

Korn Ferry Institute. (2021). “Learning agility from the inside out.” Korn Ferry.

Korn Ferry. (2020). “The rise of the chief sustainability officer.” Korn Ferry.

Morgan Stanley Institute for Sustainable Investing. (2024). *Sustainable signals: Understanding corporates’ sustainability priorities and challenges*. Morgan Stanley.



READY FOR MORE?

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

Business advisors.
Career makers.