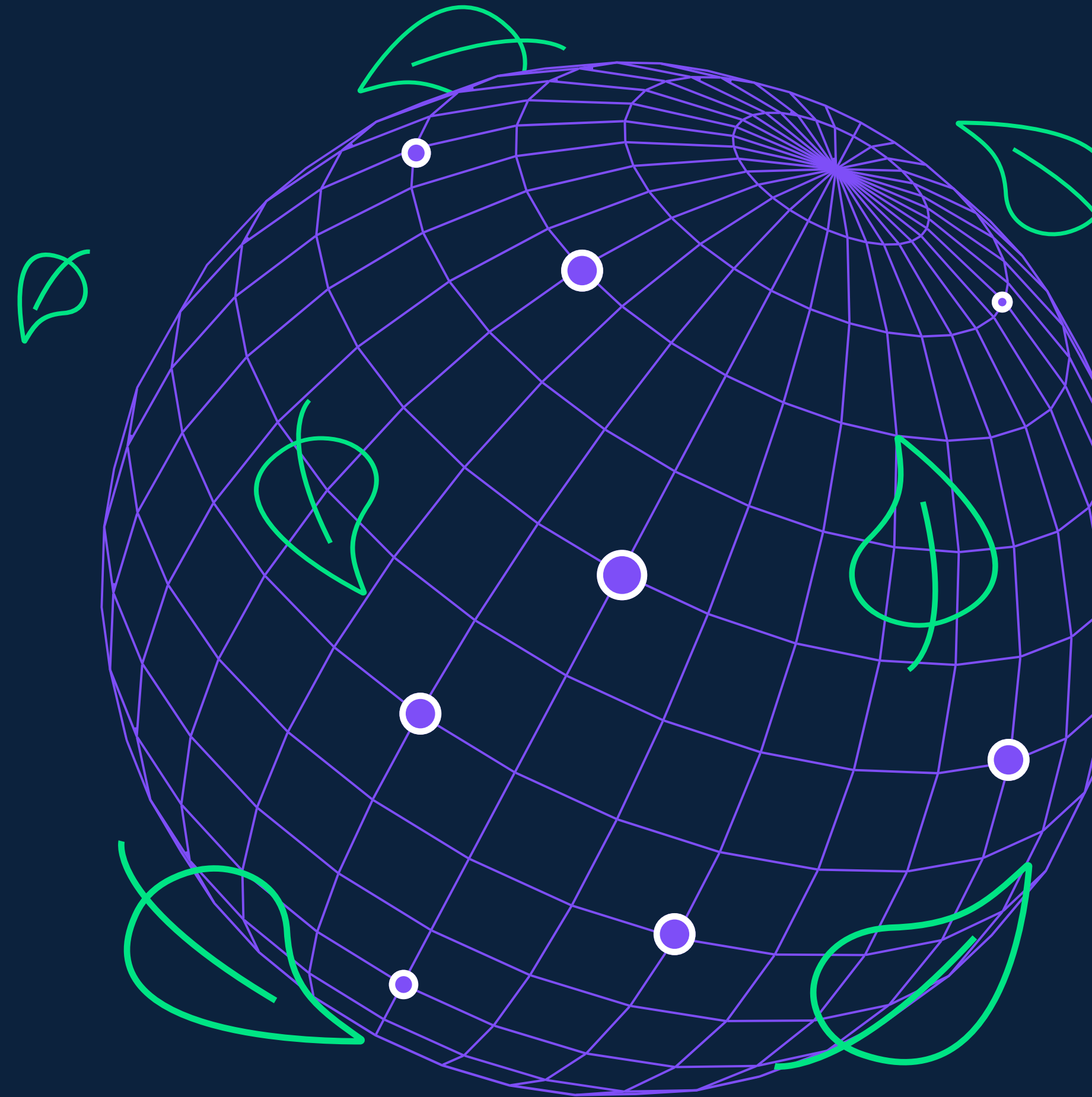


tangent

# The Digital *Sustainability* Gap:

Exploring the  
current landscape of  
→ *digital sustainability*





# Introduction

Earlier this year, we launched our new proposition built around three pillars: people, planet and purpose. Each has a special role to play not only in how we operate as an agency, but, in our opinion, within the industry at large.

When we talk about planet in the context of digital platforms, we're talking about building websites, apps and digital real estate with a greener, future-ready mindset. You'll find more about this within.

Yes, we wanted to discuss the current state of sustainability in today's digital landscape, but we also wanted to prove something – taking this report out of the conjecture space and putting our theories into evidence. Though these findings derive from just one humble survey compared to the global scale of the issue, it's still clear that even among just a small sample the “gap” is alive and well. Which means there's more for all of us to do.

We hope you see some value in the findings within, and, most importantly, we hope you are inspired to make a change. If the latter is the case, we'd be more than happy to help you on your journey – feel free to reach out to myself or any members of the Tangent team.

Many thanks and happy reading,

**Leigh Gammons**

**CEO**

[leigh.gammons@tangent.co](mailto:leigh.gammons@tangent.co)



01

# The rising *sustainability movement*



# The current context around *sustainability*

You might be expecting us to launch straight into doom and gloom. In fact, we're thrilled to be doing the opposite.

In promising news, when we surveyed our sample of enterprise business leaders, each responsible for their brand's digital sustainability and based in the UK, we learned that:



It appears that on a macro level the message is getting through: sustainability is an issue here and now.

Though the stage may indeed be set for progress, as you may have guessed, the story can't end as clear cut as that...

87%

AGREE

that sustainability is  
important to their  
*business*.

82%

AGREE

that sustainability is  
important to their  
*customers*.



# Sample & methodology

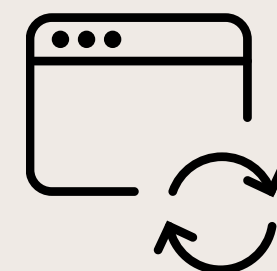
Before we go any further into the stats, it's important you know just who we spoke to, how and why.

We commissioned Disrupt, a third-party research agency, to conduct a 10-minute online survey of 100 digital leaders from UK organisations with turnover of £100m+. This is where we think there is the most opportunity for change and growth in the digital sustainability space.

This cohort are decision makers for their businesses in at least one of the following areas:



Customer facing  
digital *real estate*



Digital  
*transformation*  
strategy

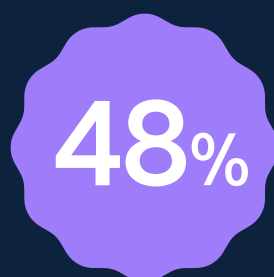


IT & tech  
*management*

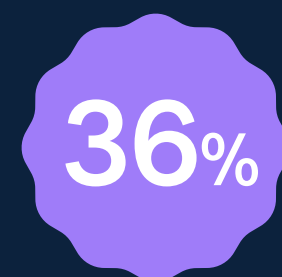
# Company *profiles*



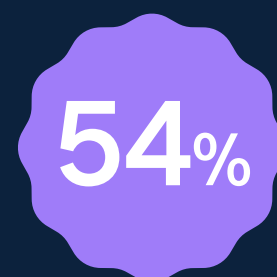
**64%**  
operate  
internationally



Multi-national  
organisation  
with head offices  
in the UK



Operate in the  
UK only



Multi-national  
organisation  
with UK as one  
of many offices

**27%**  
Blue collar

This includes industries like:  
Manufacturing, Automotive,  
Construction, Mining,  
Energy & Utilities etc.

**18%**  
White collar

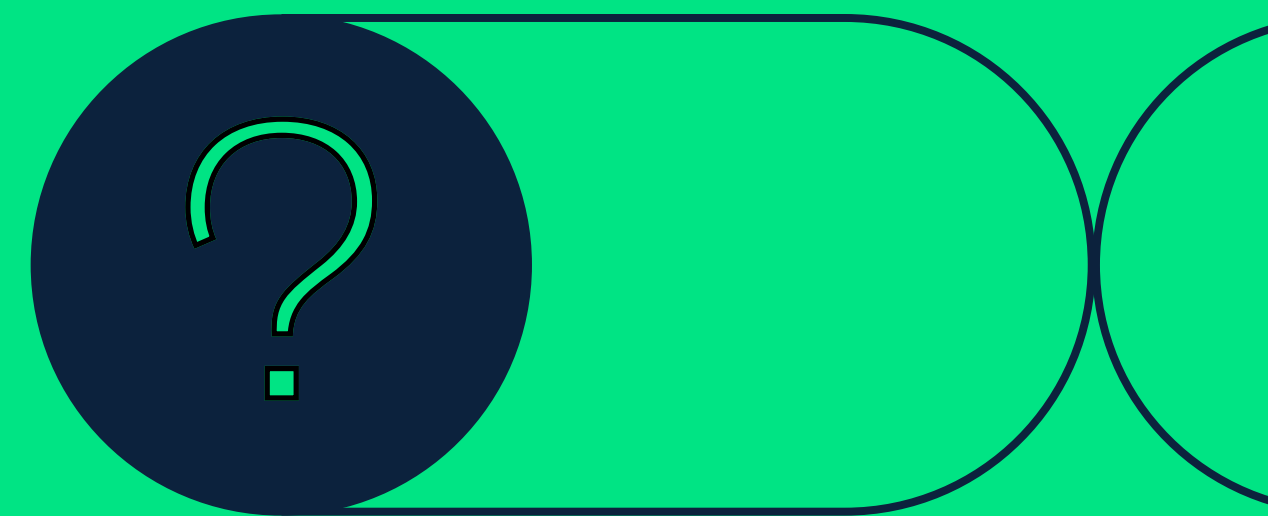
This includes industries like:  
Consultancy, Law, Tax,  
Accounting, Insurance,  
Financial Services etc.

**54%**  
Pink collar

This includes industries like:  
Retail, Wholesale, Travel &  
Tourism, IT Technology,  
Hotels & Hospitality etc.



# Defining *digital sustainability*



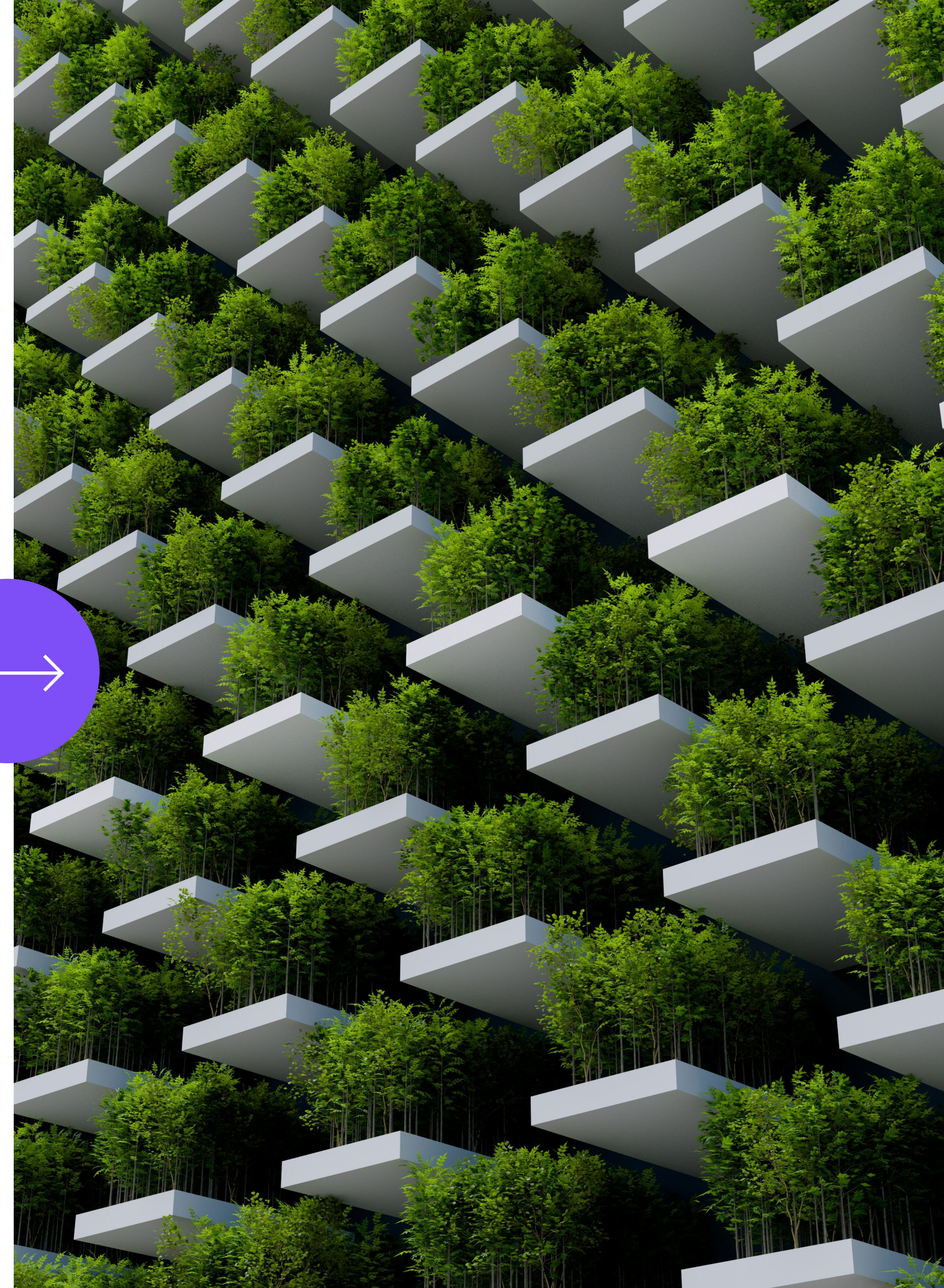
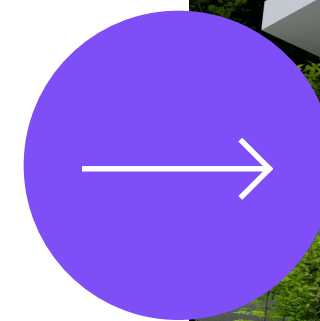


# What is digital *sustainability*?

---

When we talk about digital sustainability, we're referring to the practice of designing, developing and managing digital products and services in a way that minimises their environmental impact while maximising their social and economic benefits. In today's world, where digital technologies are integral to almost every aspect of life and business, the carbon footprint of our digital activities – from data centres to software development – is of critical concern to the environment. It's not overstating it to say the digital landscape is a (very quiet) carbon giant.

For an agency like Tangent, embracing digital sustainability is not just about reducing emissions; it's about future-proofing our solutions, driving innovation, and aligning with the growing expectations of clients and consumers who prioritise responsible, sustainable practices.

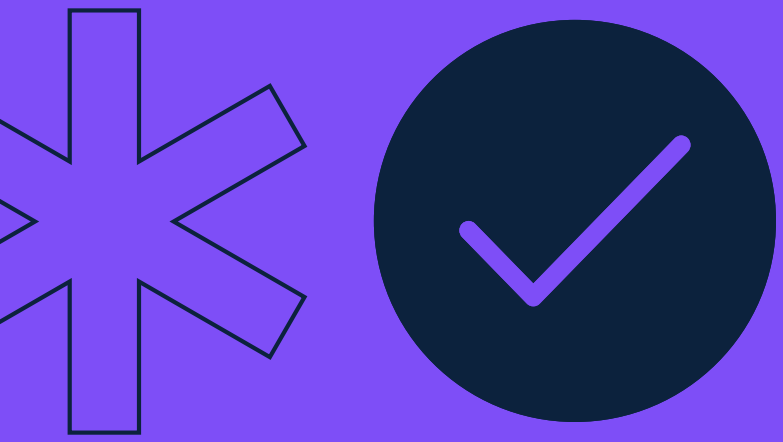




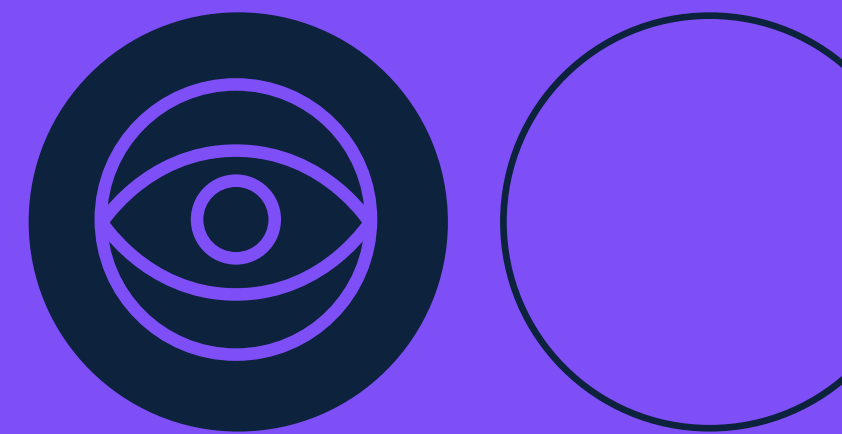
# Why is this topic so *important* to us?

---

Embracing digital sustainability is not just about reducing emissions and fostering a healthier planet; it's about future-proofing solutions, harnessing innovation, and aligning with the growing expectations of clients and consumers who are (evidently) prioritising responsible, sustainable practices more and more.



But what we learned about  
*digital* sustainability showed  
there's *still* a way to go.





# On the surface: *digital sustainability*

So what did we  
discover?

Well, again, in the spirit of  
sharing the encouraging news  
up front, there is some hope.



81%

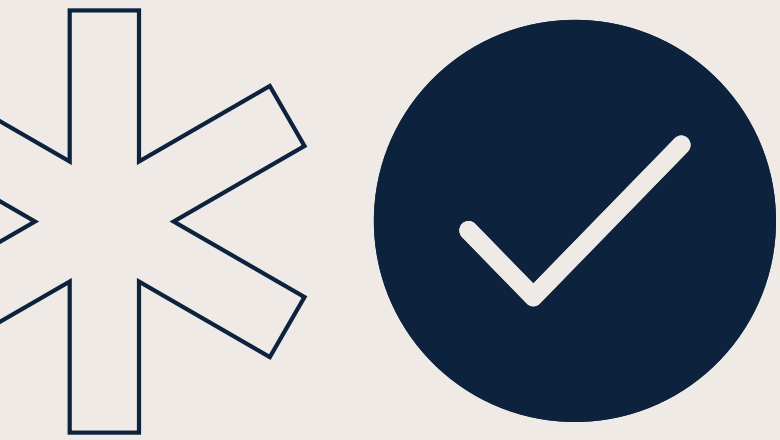
---

agree that digital  
sustainability is  
*important* to their  
business

99%

---

have *already* implemented  
at least one sustainable  
practice within the business  
to date



BUT THE REAL QUESTION IS...

Is (at least) *one*  
sustainable practice per  
business *enough* to  
make *real* change?





03

# Introducing the *digital sustainability* gap



Only half  
51%

have reported having a *'fully developed and implemented'* digital roadmap that covers the next 3-5 years

Only  
46%

place digital sustainability as *'extremely high importance'* on their companies' agenda

Despite the vast *acknowledgement* and *positive steps* already on record, we also learned that:

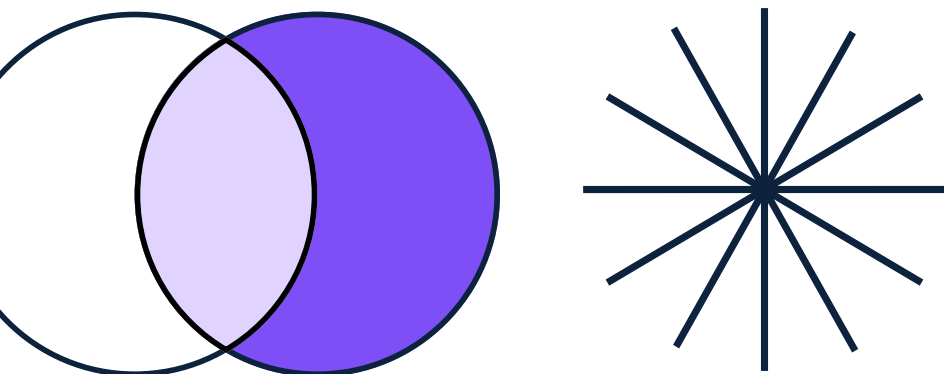
Only  
27%

consider themselves to be industry *leaders* when it comes to digital sustainability

A massive  
90%

report at least one barrier to progress within their company, with *"high costs/limited budget"* the largest obstacle to navigate for 62% of leaders

# The need for *swifter*, concrete change



For us, these stats paint a somewhat concerning picture of the current state of digital sustainability. Despite widespread recognition of its importance, digital sustainability remains a secondary priority for many organisations. We call this the digital sustainability gap: a gulf that separates the widespread acknowledgement of the need for action and the facilitation of change vs. the true volume of action taken and the need for greater, swifter progress.

In reality, the pace of change is too slow, the cost is perceived to be too high and though awareness is on the rise, concrete action is too often delayed or deprioritised leaving a significant space between ambition and achievement.

For the industry to truly move forward, businesses must overcome these hurdles.

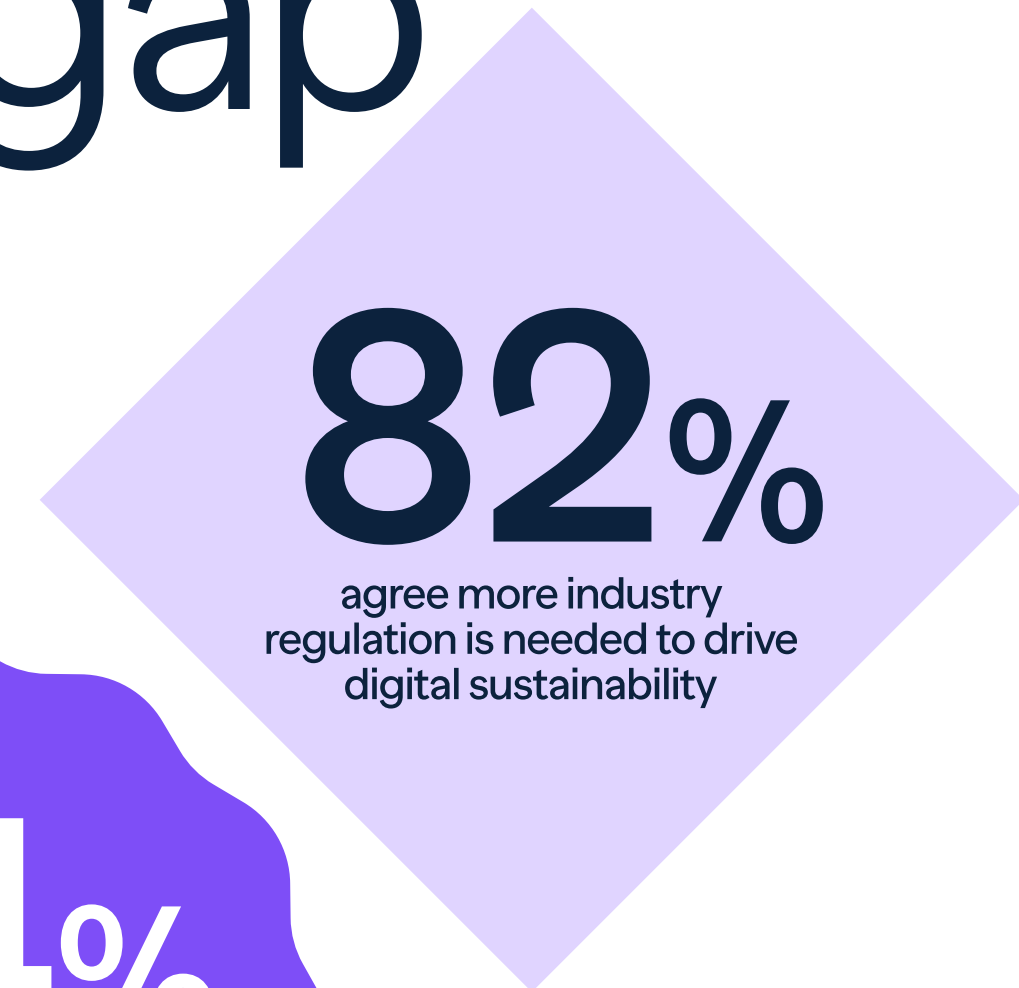
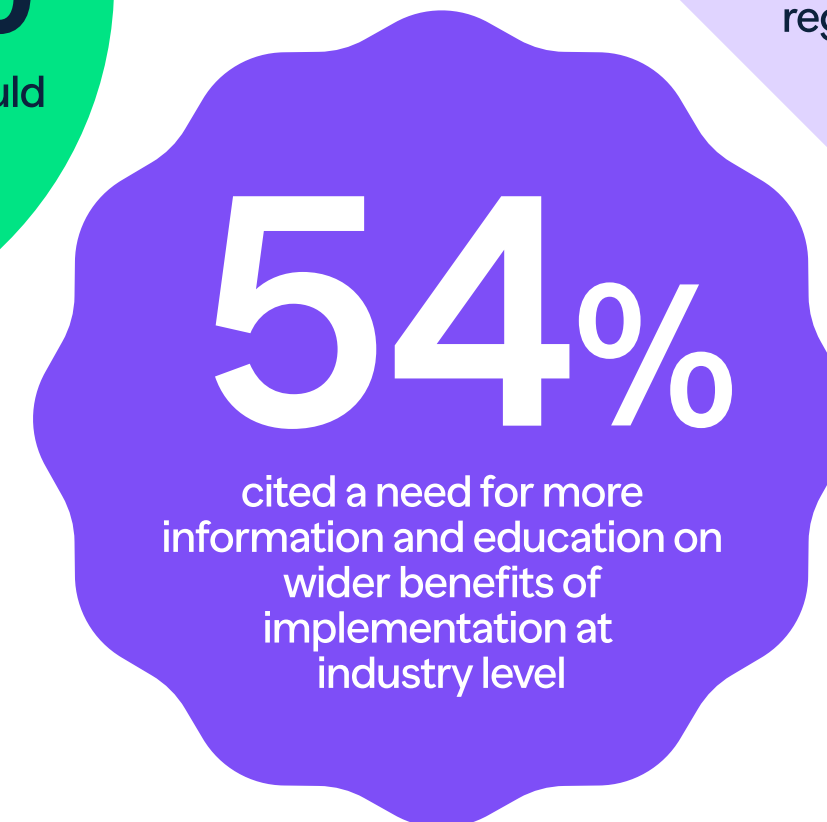
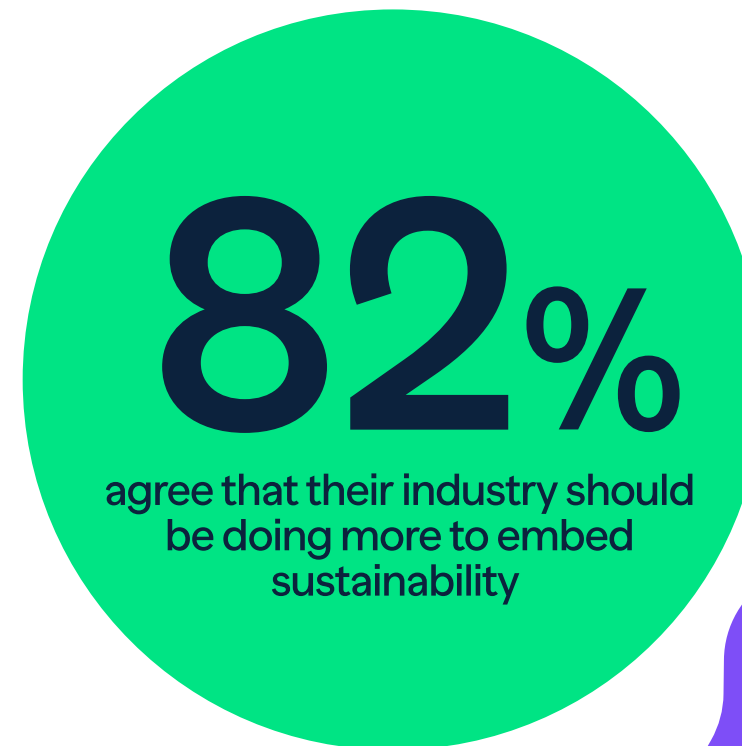
# Another dimension to the *digital sustainability* gap

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Now we've established there is a gap, this evidence is compounded by further results that reveal a demand for more progress made outside of the home turf.

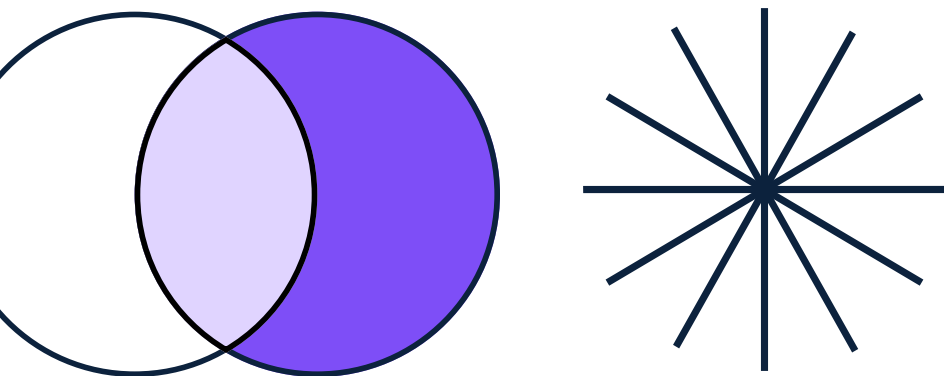


These findings highlight a critical new layer to the digital sustainability gap: while individual brands are making some progress, there is a growing recognition that isolated efforts are not enough.



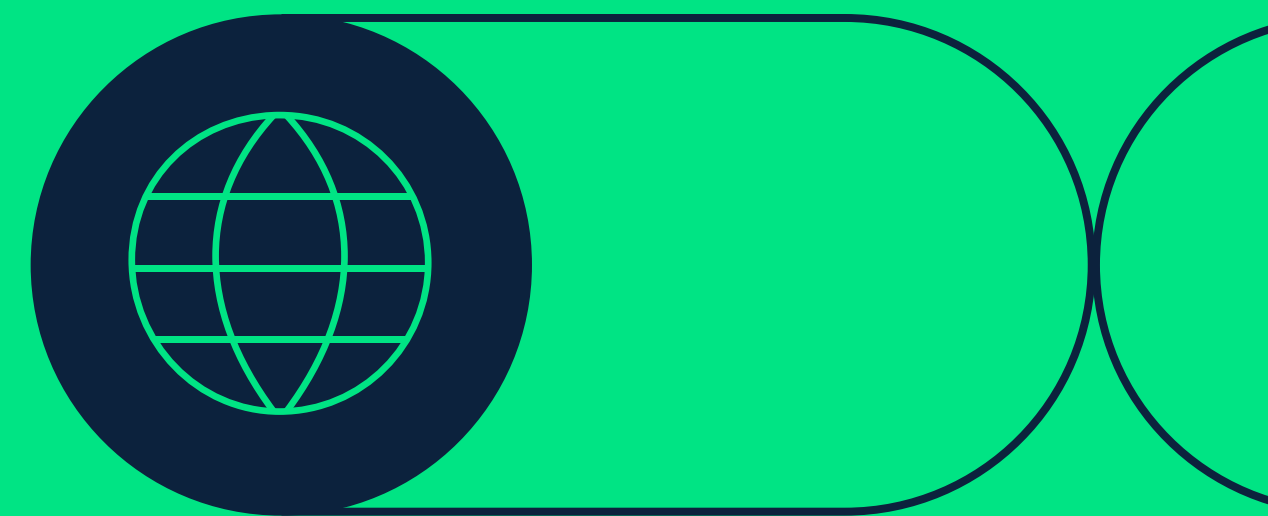


# A bigger *problem* than brands can solve?

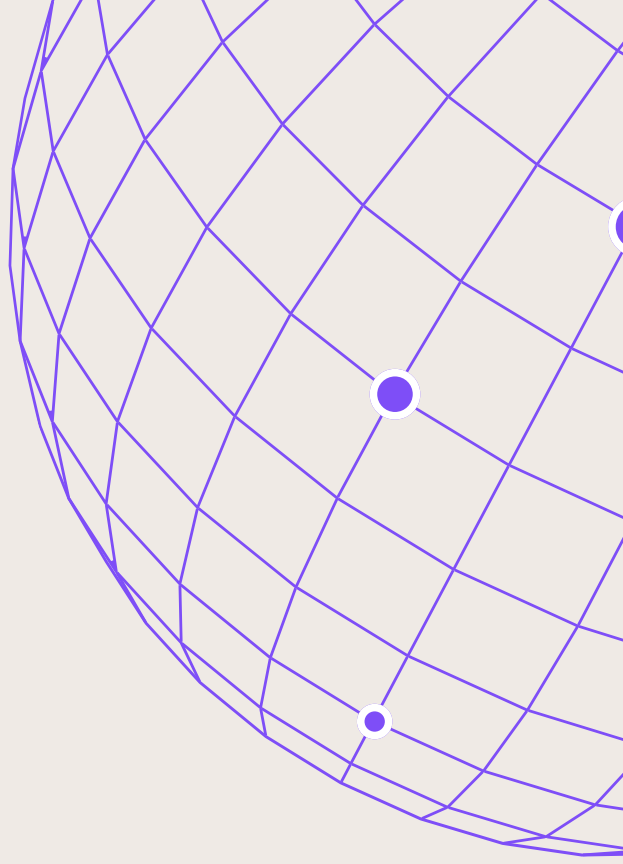


These findings suggest that the challenges extend beyond individual companies to systemic issues that require collective action. Despite some already taking positive steps, many business leaders charged with making progress in this space reportedly still lack the knowledge necessary to fully embrace digital sustainability.

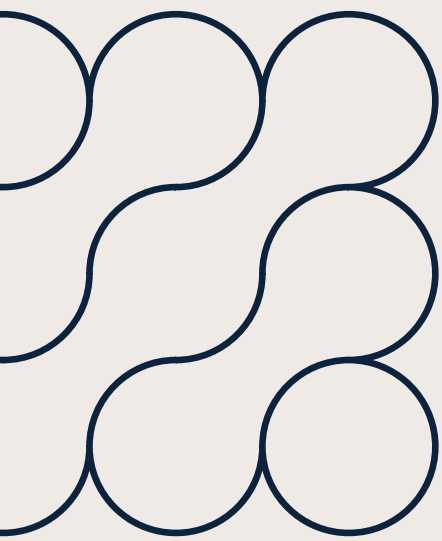
The call for more industry regulation underscores the need for stronger, more consistent standards to guide and accelerate progress – this is something we like to think we’re ahead of, even though regulators may be behind. These insights reveal that achieving meaningful change requires not just isolated initiatives, but a coordinated effort supported by clear regulations and shared knowledge. Without this broader action, the digital sustainability gap will continue to widen, hindering the ability of brands and the industry at large to meet the pressing demands of environmental responsibility.



# The wider landscape of *digital sustainability*

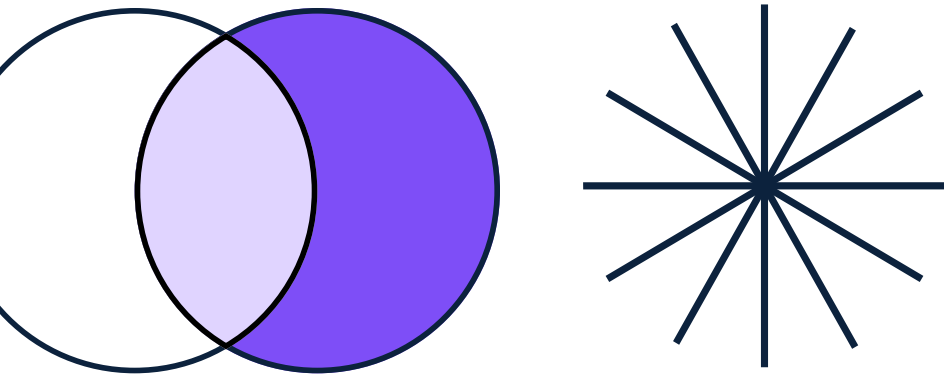


So now the *scene*  
✱ has been set,  
what *else* did we  
→ discover?



# Reaping the *rewards* for greener choices:

What's out there *already*?



When surveyed, a massive (and very encouraging) 99% of digital leaders expressed that they had already implemented at least one sustainable practice in their business. It seems that, yes, the message has finally hit home: the time for action is now.

Moreover, from a longer-term perspective, 51% claimed to have a fully implemented plan for a 3-5 year period, with a further 43% citing that their plan was in development. Realistically quite low figures by way of concrete action in the immediate term.



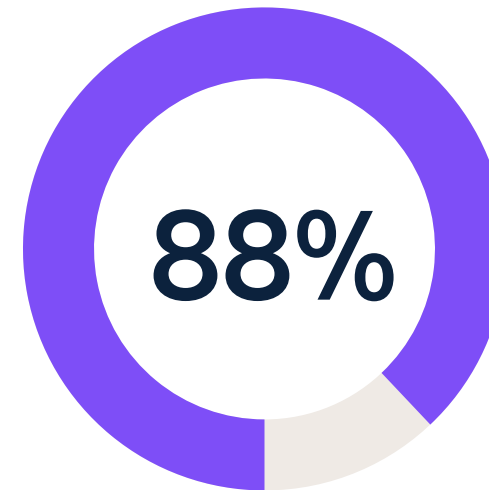
# The grass really is *greener*

For those already taking steps, which include a range of carbon conscious solutions like the use of renewable hosting (71%), carbon offsetting initiatives (63%), eco-friendly user interface design (52%) and adoption of managed service CMS (58%) – there are rewards already starting to show.

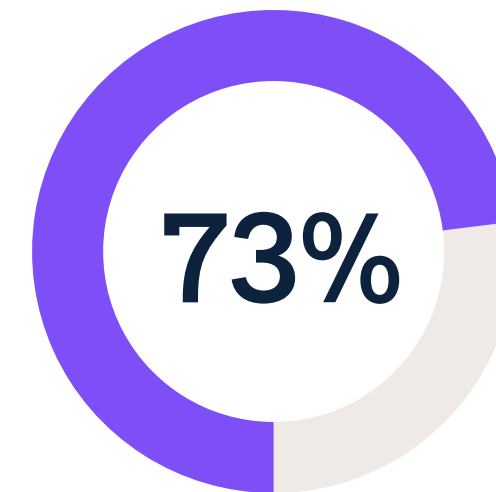
And the benefits don't stop with loyalty. Despite 62% citing high cost/low budget as a barrier to progress, this sample also reported reduced operational costs among the benefits of green initiatives. This means that there are cost savings to be unlocked by engaging with digital practices, not just expenses.

The need for a fully realised digital roadmap has never been more vital. The proof is in the results and, realistically, the surface has barely been scratched by way of improvements to be made, money to be saved and, most importantly, carbon emissions to be countered.

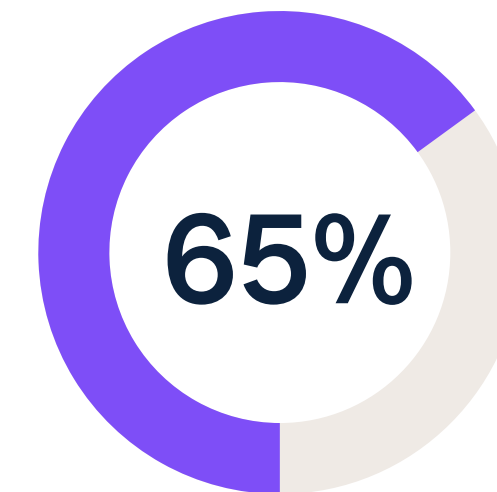
Positive outcomes of green initiatives  
*already* implemented →



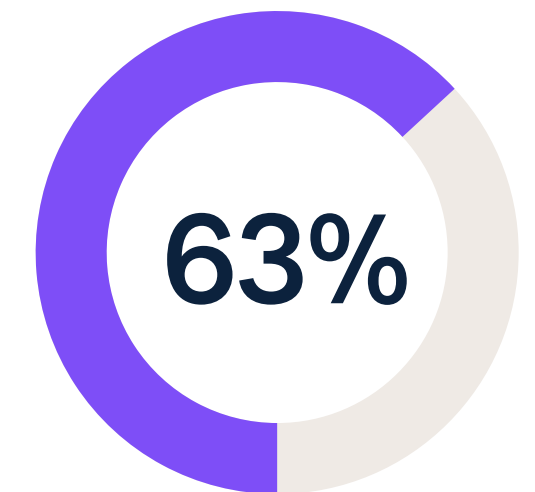
Reported  
improved brand  
reputation



Noticed a  
competitive  
advantage



Noticed improved  
employee  
perceptions



Saw increased  
customer loyalty

# Barriers to *change*:

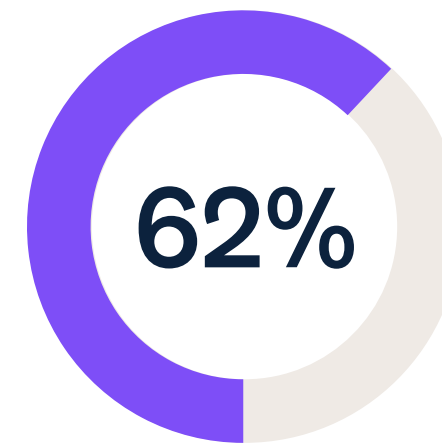
Other *barriers* included

## Where is progress stalling?

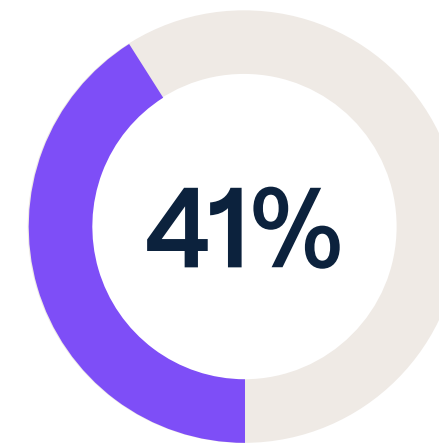
A massive 90% of digital leaders surveyed expressed experiencing at least one barrier to progress in their current roles. Unsurprisingly, “high cost/low budget” was the most common hurdle, with 62% placing this highest on their list.

Encouragingly, low customer demand was the least common barrier, with only 14% expressing that their customers lack the desire to see progress in the realm of digital sustainability. Further reinforcing our earlier theory that the time for sustainability is now.

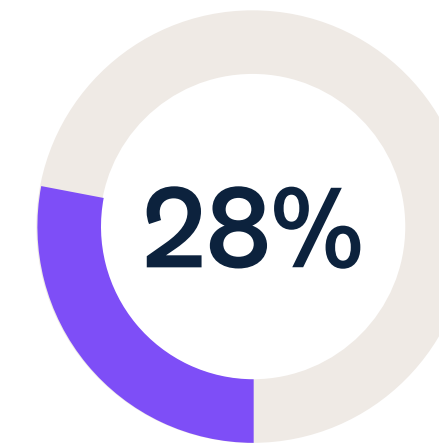
The reality as we see it is that, regardless of the nature of the barrier, only 10% being able to make positive changes in the business unhindered is too small a number.



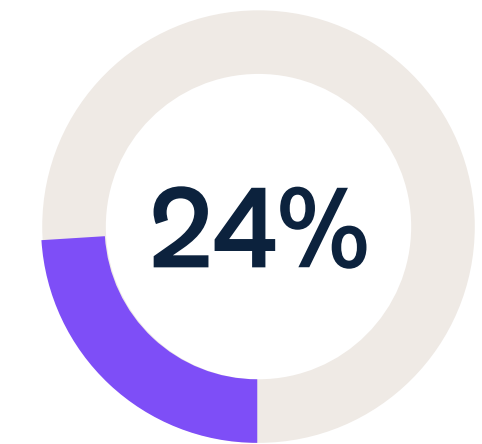
High cost/low budget



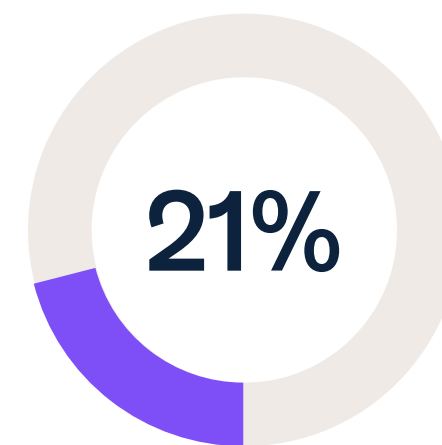
Regulatory challenges



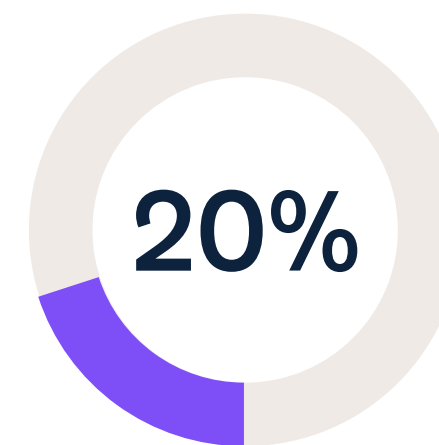
Lack of knowledge/awareness



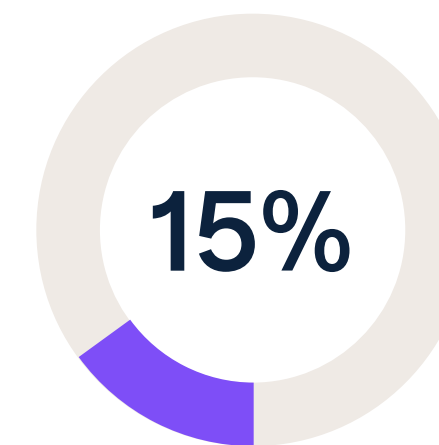
Limited technology/resources



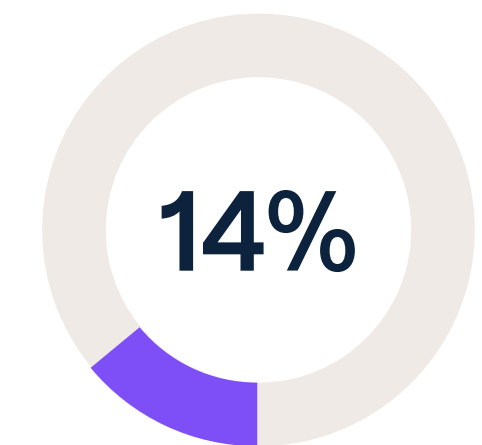
Low senior stakeholder buy-in



Other more immediate priorities



Lack of resource/capacity



Customers lack the desire to see progress



# The AI *paradox*

Notwithstanding well documented evidence that AI can be a huge polluter, 41% of business leaders report that they are using AI solutions to automate their carbon-intensive processes. Of the remaining 59% surveyed that haven't yet fully utilised AI, 83% are 'moderately' to 'extremely' likely to use it in the future.

When asked "What does the future of digital sustainability look like?" many leaders cited AI as part of the solution, rather than the problem.

"More AI to *enable* change and innovation."

"AI driven, highly *automated* and regulated policies with many feedback/control loops and *real time* visibility of all essential processes and variables"

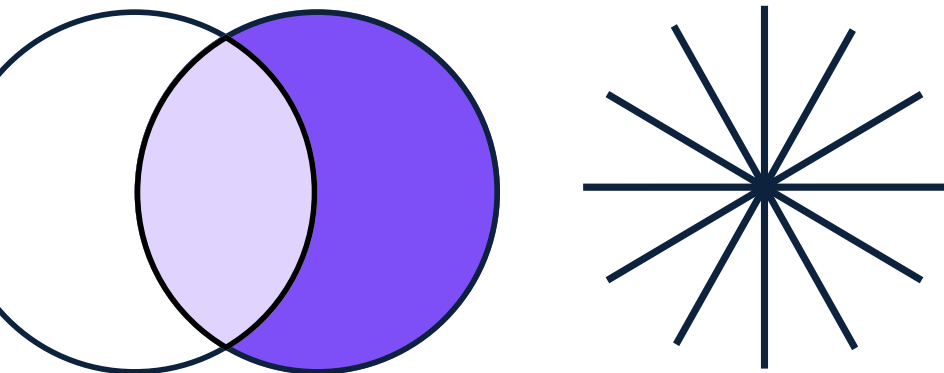
"The future looks *promising* with potential advancement in AI for sustainability, sustainable hardware, *renewable* energy sources and much more."

"AI leading the way with major *efficiency gains* and strategic optimisation."





# The AI *paradox*



Despite this faith in AI's part to play in the future of digital sustainability, there is also a degree of scepticism around the impact of AI.

# 43%

agree the use of AI systems will have a detrimental impact on sustainability efforts

## READ MORE

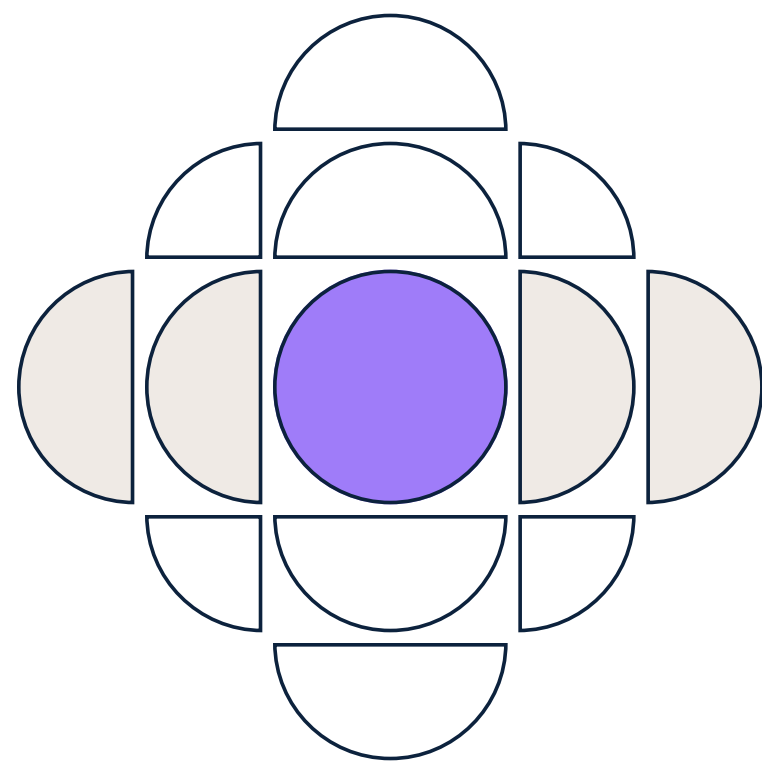
If you're looking to learn more about embracing AI in your business at any stage of the journey - from beginner through to advanced - then take a look at our approach [here](#).

These findings underscore a complex relationship between AI and digital sustainability - a paradox that reflects both optimism and caution. On one hand, AI is seen as a powerful tool that can drive efficiency, optimise processes, and enable innovation, with many leaders viewing it as essential to the future of sustainable business practices. The enthusiasm for AI's potential to automate carbon-intensive tasks and improve real-time decision-making speaks to its transformative capabilities. However, the bipartisan scepticism highlights the uncertainty surrounding its true impact.

This duality raises important questions about the responsible development and deployment of AI. While it offers immense promise, there is a pressing need to ensure that AI-driven solutions are designed with sustainability at their core, rather than inadvertently contributing to the problem. The wider implications of this paradox suggest that the industry must tread carefully, balancing the adoption of AI with rigorous scrutiny to mitigate potential negative consequences. This highlights the importance of a strategic approach where AI is leveraged thoughtfully to bridge the sustainability gap, rather than widening it.

# Tech's contribution and digital *downsizing*:

## The true state of today's MarTech stacks



High levels of MarTech use is reported among our sample of business leaders, with the majority of respondents (28%) claiming to leverage 6-10 tools within their business and a whopping 12% of businesses making use of 16 or more tools.

*What's worrisome about this? Well, firstly, 15% don't even know how many they're using!*

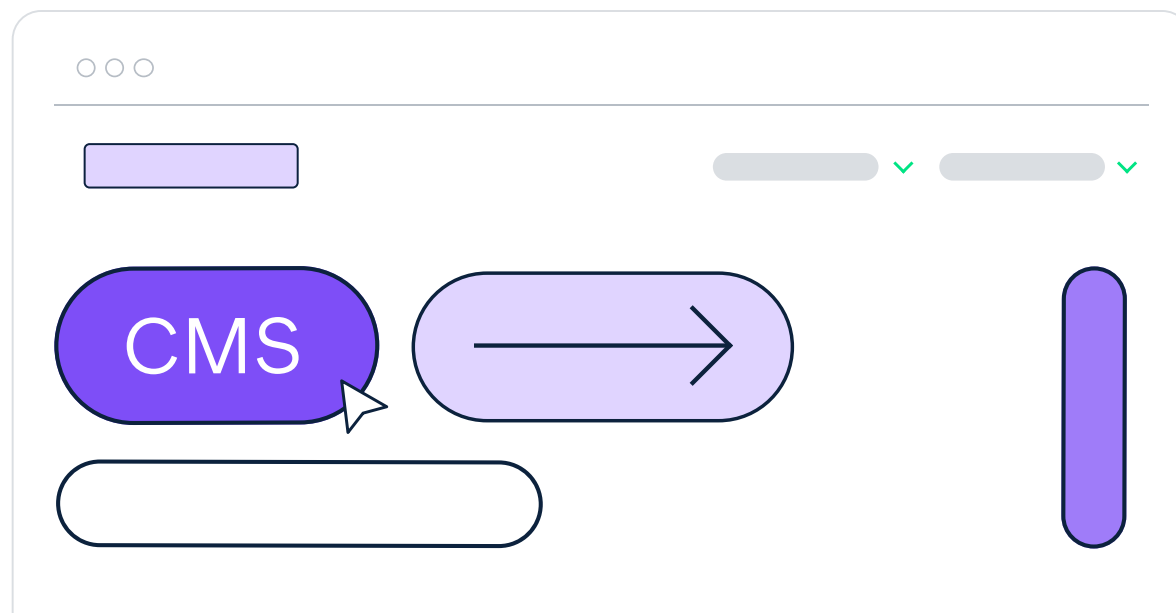
Elsewhere, whilst scale is one notable finding here, it's equally worrisome to learn that use (or lack thereof) is certainly another. Of the 81% that cited knowledge of at least one MarTech solution in use across their business, 44% of that cohort report that they are actively using less than half of the products available to them.

That's a lot of MarTech to have contributing to carbon emissions that are not of real use. It's time to get a grip of the tech stacks at your fingertips, sort the wheat from the chaff and downsize to maximise productivity and save costs.



# Monolithic to *modern*:

## Taking the CMS from legacy to future-ready



When it comes to CMS platforms, there is a lot of choices in the marketplace right now but, in general, composable platforms are considered the greenest choice – in fact, we like to think ours is one of the voices leading the charge in the composable space.

Composable and headless CMS solutions, offered by vendors like Contentful and Umbraco, for example, are increasingly being adopted as a strategic approach to reducing carbon footprints. These systems allow businesses to decouple content creation from its delivery, enabling more efficient, scalable, and flexible digital experiences.

The appeal of this approach is reflected in the 58% of respondents who cited the "adoption of a Managed Service CMS" as a key action they're taking to combat carbon outputs – again, it could and probably should be much higher.

Examples of composable platform options include:



# Monolithic to *modern*:

## Taking the CMS from legacy to future-ready

By leveraging these modern architectural patterns enabled by headless CMS platforms, organisations can reduce the energy consumption associated with traditional monolithic systems like Sitecore, Adobe, Acquia and Oracle, optimising content delivery across multiple channels whilst lowering their overall digital carbon emissions.

Additionally, the composable nature of these solutions means "future-proofed" businesses can integrate best-in-class tools and services tailored to their specific needs, creating a more sustainable digital ecosystem that stands the test of time. As companies continue to seek out innovative ways to enhance their sustainability efforts, the shift towards headless and composable CMS options represents a significant step forward in building greener digital infrastructures.



LEARN MORE

For those who need more information on getting to grips with composable architectures, we have another white paper that can tell you more. You can access the full white paper [here](#).

# Embracing *greener* digital design practices



LEARN MORE

We delivered a talk about the relationship between digital design and the planet at iF Design earlier this year. To learn more about how we're fostering greener design practices, reach out to Nadine or Rich.

**Nadine Clarke**  
Strategy Partner  
[nadine.clarke@tangent.co](mailto:nadine.clarke@tangent.co)

**Richard Trigg**  
Design Partner  
[richard.trigg@tangent.co](mailto:richard.trigg@tangent.co)

In a similar vein to composability, only 52% reported implementing eco-friendly user interface design as a route to tackling carbon. If this means over 45% of businesses are yet to address the carbon outputs of their UI design, then there's definitely a journey to be taken.

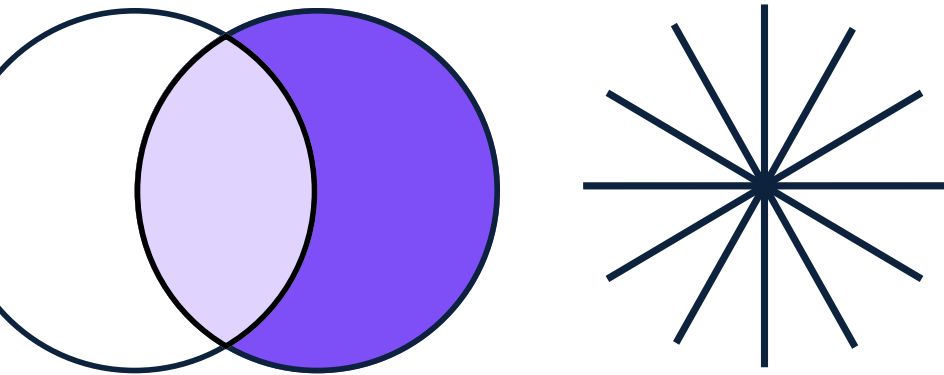
Eco-friendly UI design focuses on creating digital experiences that are not only user-centric but also energy-efficient. This can involve optimising web performance, reducing the amount of data that needs to be processed and transmitted, and simplifying visual elements to lower energy consumption.

By streamlining interfaces, minimising resource-heavy elements like high-resolution images and videos, and prioritising speed and efficiency, businesses can significantly cut down on the energy required to power their digital platforms. This approach not only enhances the user experience by making websites faster and more accessible, but also contributes to a greener digital footprint. As the demand for sustainable digital solutions grows, eco-friendly UI design represents a practical and impactful way for companies to align their digital presence with their sustainability goals, making it an essential component of any comprehensive digital sustainability strategy.



# Carbon *offsetting*:

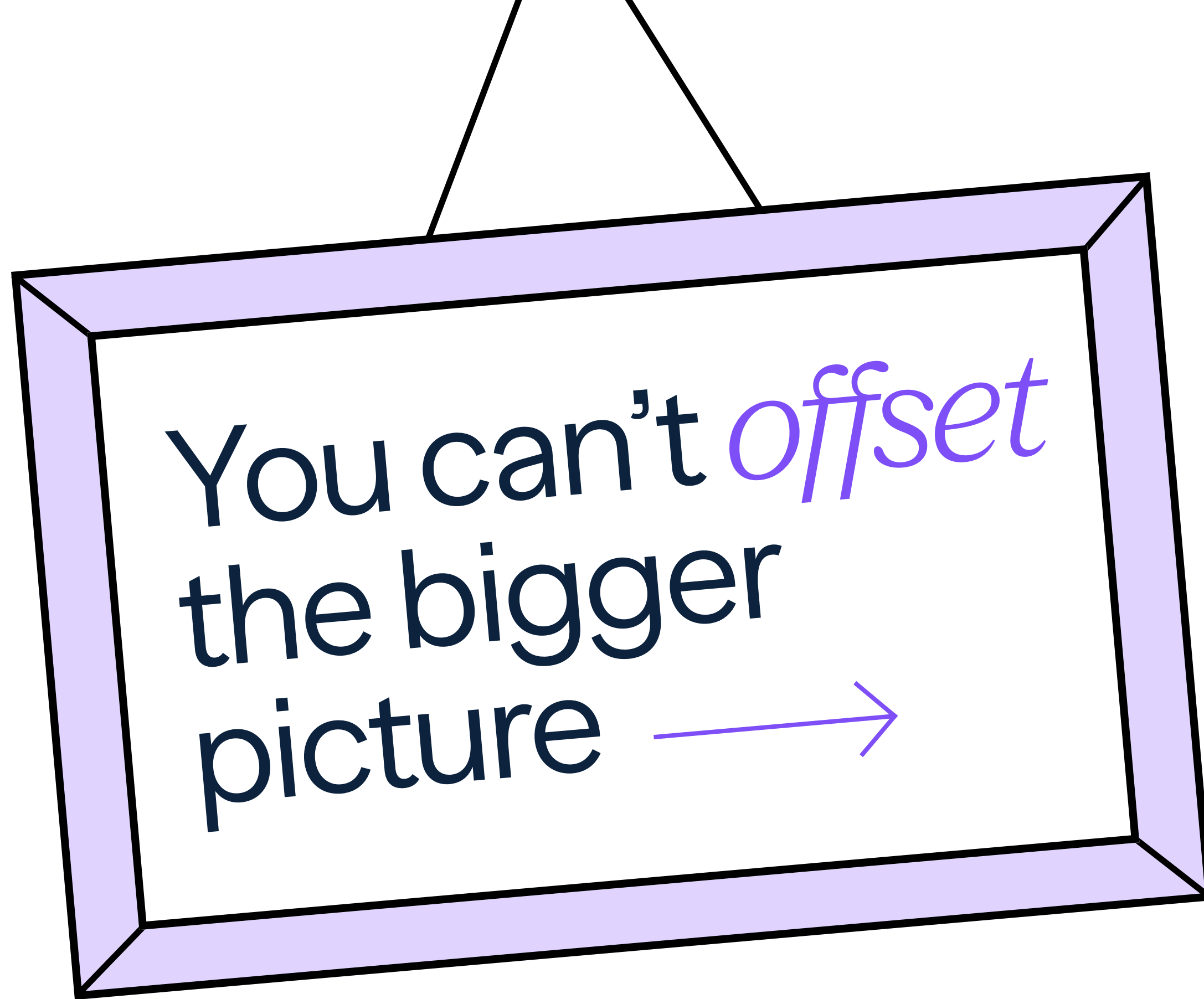
## A crutch we're increasingly guilty of leaning on?



Carbon offsetting is often seen as a positive step toward reducing the overall carbon footprint of businesses. And, let's face it, it's one of the most accessible ways of doing good right now. But is it enough?

According to our findings, 63% of respondents have implemented carbon offset initiatives as part of their sustainability practices. While this is commendable and certainly contributes to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, it's important to recognise that carbon offsetting can sometimes act as a short-term solution rather than a long-term strategy for true sustainability which is the most desirable goal in the realm of digital sustainability.

The core issue with relying heavily on carbon offsets is that it allows companies to compensate for their emissions without necessarily reducing them at the source. Essentially, businesses can continue their carbon-intensive practices as long as they purchase offsets to neutralise their impact. This approach, while beneficial in the immediate term, does not address the root causes of emissions and can lead to complacency when it comes to adopting more sustainable practices, such as reducing energy consumption or transitioning to renewable energy sources.



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Carbon offsetting can give companies a false sense of security, masking the need for more comprehensive and aggressive sustainability initiatives.

The fact that carbon offsetting is so widely adopted—63% compared to the 58% for adopting managed service CMS or the 52% for implementing eco-friendly UI design—highlights a preference for easier, less disruptive solutions over more fundamental changes that could yield greater long-term benefits.

While carbon offsetting is a valuable tool in the sustainability toolkit, it should not be viewed as a panacea. To truly make a difference, businesses must prioritise direct action that reduces their emissions at the source and complements these efforts with robust, forward-looking strategies.

Looking inwards across tech, design, AI and your overall strategy is the best place to make a start.

# What's in a *name*?

## The landscape of sustainability accreditations

It appears brands are realising that, more than ever, they are being held to account. For 79% of those surveyed agree that their customers are starting to take a much greater interest in their brand's sustainability credentials. As such, brands are looking inward at the ways in which their customers perceive them from a green perspective, which is a positive and necessary acknowledgement.

In a world where credentials come in all shapes and sizes and seem to be available to all, even in some cases, the worst offenders, what accreditations stand out among these brands? After all, to affect changes in their own houses, it's logical to expect that many brands will turn to partners who align with their own sustainability motivations.



83%

put their weight  
behind ISO



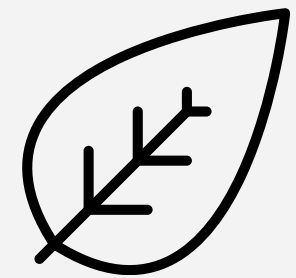
72%

see value in B Corp



64%

appreciate the green  
web foundation  
credentials



74%

cited other credentials and  
policies that can be equally  
as important/effective

READ MORE

All this means now more than ever there's a need for agencies to walk the walk when it comes to sustainability. Something we like to think we're doing well. In fact, we wrote about our journey to B Corp and shared these insights with The Drum, you can read the full story [here](#).

The Drum



# The *checklist* for digital sustainability progress

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There is no silver bullet when it comes to sustainability, especially, digital sustainability. In essence, until the time comes when digital real estate does not produce carbon, we will always be contributing – but there are steps that can be taken to limit and correct unnecessary production before it's too late. And we hope, after reading this report, you'll agree that there is certainly more work to be done across the board.



# A few *questions* to ask yourself now →

01

Is there more work to be done in our business in developing and executing a concrete digital sustainability roadmap?

02

Are there areas in which AI could foster green efficiencies?

03

Is it possible my CMS and web platforms are no longer fit for purpose or could be grounded in the latest, greenest tech?

04

Are heavy, custom designs impacting carbon outputs? And, more importantly, are they truly enhancing the customer experience either way?

05

Are we reliant upon offsetting to improve our green credentials, or are there more tangible opportunities to negate digital impact?

06

Will keeping up with the pressing AI agenda be at odds with our sustainability plans?

07

Are dormant tools in my MarTech stack dragging down our green ambitions?

If you found yourself answering "yes" to any of these critical questions, it's clear there's work to be done, and you don't have to navigate this journey alone. Digital sustainability is no longer just a nice-to-have; it's a necessity for future-proofing your business and protecting our planet.

tangent

# Our final *words*

[Get in touch](#)



As an agency that has put people, planet and purpose at the heart of what we do, we're here to help you bridge that gap between intent and action. Whether your challenges lie in optimising your tech stack, streamlining your design for efficiency, integrating AI responsibly, or developing a robust digital sustainability roadmap in the short, medium or long-term, we have the expertise to guide you toward meaningful change.

The time to act is now. Let's work together to create a digital strategy that not only drives results but also prioritises sustainability at its core. Reach out to our team today, and let's start building a more sustainable digital future - one informed decision at a time.

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