



Social Impact and Sustainability Professionals at a Crossroads

Profiles and Practical Steps to
Build Workforce Resilience

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Introduction

In the last few years, companies have faced a turbulent operating environment that has reshaped how they approach social impact and sustainability commitments. From protecting existing commitments, navigating retrenchment, or even finding a new normal, those responsible for these approaches have faced an era of uncertainty and change.

BSR conducted research to examine the experiences of professionals working in the corporate social impact and sustainability field, identifying interventions at the individual and company level to support long-term success. There will be continued shifts when it comes to global regulation, legal restrictions or expansions, and stakeholder expectations in relation to corporate social impact and sustainability, so thoughtful individual and institutional approaches are needed more than ever.

Social impact and sustainability strategies are a source of business resilience. BSR's insights validate that companies underinvesting in professionals leading this work face greater risks of talent attrition, inconsistent execution, and reduced ability to anticipate and respond to evolving regulatory and stakeholder expectations. By embedding cross-functional responsibilities and providing appropriate resources with strategic ambitions, companies can reduce business risks by preserving critical institutional knowledge and enhancing their capacity in an increasingly complex operating environment.

The research findings demonstrate that corporate social impact and sustainability professionals' ability to continue advancing this work amidst these shifts depends on both their personal commitment and the operational conditions surrounding the work.



Meet the Profiles

Through mixed-methods research*, BSR conducted an anonymous survey of 56 corporate social impact and sustainability professionals from across North America, Europe, and Asia, representing a range of functions and seniority, along with four confidential follow-up interviews. This research identified four distinct profiles that reflect how practitioners experience their work. While the demographics and career backgrounds of these profiles vary, three common factors consistently shaped respondents' experiences: **voice** (the ability to influence decisions and speak candidly), **organizational support** (the level of backing and resources available), and **strain** (the degree of stress one experiences within the role).

These factors reveal the multifaceted ways corporate social impact and sustainability professionals navigate today's operating environment and provide insight into the conditions that help them thrive, or struggle, in their field.

The four profiles below illustrate the relative levels of voice, organizational support, and strain experienced by respondents, highlighting the distinct combination of factors that shape how social impact and sustainability professionals experience their work.



Profile Type	Anchored Advocates	Overextended Strategists	Steady Contributors	Fatigued Pragmatists
At a Glance	Driving company ambitions from a position of stability.	Acting as both the architect and steward of the work.	Sustaining progress within company boundaries.	Committed to the work while adapting to company constraints.
Voice	High	High	Moderate	Low
Organizational Support	High	High	Moderate	Low
Strain	Low	High	Moderate	High

*More information about the research in the Appendix: Methodology section.

Amongst all Respondents

Key findings from the survey responses.



Fatigued Pragmatists emerged as the most common profile, followed by Steady Contributors.



#1 Personal values ranked first for what sustains professionals in their work.



77.5% intend to remain in the role or field over the next 2-3 years.



75.5% believe it is their company's place to address social issues.



Demographics Breakdown

While the profiles were based on professionals' reported experiences of voice (ability to influence decisions and speak candidly), organizational support (the level of backing and resources available), and strain (the degree of stress one experiences within the role), demographic

information was captured to contextualize additional patterns emerging from the findings. The breakdowns below demonstrate how respondents across gender, race/ethnicity, and geographical location were represented within each cohort.

Profile	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Location
Anchored Advocates	Majority identified as women (67%); no respondents identified as men in the sample.	Predominantly identified as White (78%) of those respondents who provided race/ethnicity information.	Evenly split between Europe (33%) and the United States (33%), with additional representation from Australia (11%).
Overextended Strategists	Primarily identified as women (50%), with one-third identifying as men (33%).	Most commonly identified as White (33%), with additional representation from respondents identifying as Hispanic/Latine/o/a/x (17%) and East Asian (17%).	Predominantly based in Europe (50%).
Steady Contributors	Evenly divided between respondents identifying as women (39%) while 23% identified as men .	Most commonly identified as White (39%), with additional representation from respondents identifying as Black, Hispanic/Latine/o/a/x, East Asian, and Other backgrounds (each 8%).	Distributed across Europe (31%) and the United States (23%), with additional representation from Asia-Pacific (8%).
Fatigued Pragmatists	Half identified as women (50%), while 14% identified as men .	Predominantly identified as White (64%), with smaller representation from respondents identifying as Black (7%) and South Asian (7%).	Primarily based in the United States (57%), with limited representation from Europe (7%).

Note: Percentages reflect respondents within each profile. Not all survey participants disclosed demographic information. Distributions should be interpreted as descriptive of the sample rather than representative of all professionals within each profile.

Profile Deep Dives



Anchored Advocates

Anchored Advocates are social impact and sustainability professionals with the strongest combination of room to act with company backing. They are better positioned to absorb internal and external setbacks while maintaining the work as a structural priority. They can deploy their influence to expand who informs the work, not just sustain their own success.

Profile Pattern (visual)

- Voice: High
- Support: High
- Strain: Low

Common Experiences:

- Build initiatives and processes from scratch.
- Break down external issues and turn into practical business actions.
- Innovate to find creative solutions and pathways for emerging challenges.
- Serve as the primary or sole representative to validate the work.
- Operate in companies that emphasize reporting as the priority effort.

Business Implication:

If companies rely too heavily on a small group or a single individual to conduct social impact and/or sustainability work, innovation and progress can become a person-dependent effort that is shaped by too few perspectives.

If this sounds like you...

Consider where your influence could develop or support others and when you are defaulting to solving problems on your own rather than creating shared ownership.

Featured Quotes:

"I know the aim I want to reach. If one path is closed, I find another way."

"Of course we have discussions, and of course I need to be conscious of political debates and all this. But at the same time, I feel I can do what I need to do."

"I see the great value of the work I can do and the positive impact I'm aiming for. I get to build new structures and new things."





Overextended Strategists

Overextended Strategists are highly committed social impact and sustainability professionals with a strong voice and organizational backing. They often see the gaps most clearly and feel the most responsible for moving the work forward even when the company may not fully understand the degree of capacity required to do it well.

Profile Pattern

- Voice: High
- Support: High
- Strain: High

Common Experiences:

- Carry specialized knowledge that others rely on, making them central to the work's momentum.
- Take ownership and multitask within their role, often at a personal cost.
- Usually, serve as the head of their team or the main point person for their subject area.
- Work in companies where leadership supports the goal but not always the investment needed to get there.

Business Implication:

Without stronger and more dedicated resources, companies risk making their in-house social impact and sustainability roles more fragile. Long-term strategy becomes vulnerable if these individuals are expected to stretch beyond their capacity, become burned out, and/or leave.

If this sounds like you...

Keep a running list of resource gaps that could be shared as evidence-based reasons for additional support and names of internal colleagues who have expressed interest or initiative toward supporting advancement of the work.

Featured Quotes:

"My influence has been in elevating the importance of [the gaps], and then actually building the new processes we need."

"People are very supportive of the end state... They're less supportive of what it actually takes to get there."

"I really want the team to build more knowledge so they can answer questions and help spread out the workload."





Steady Contributors

Steady Contributors are pragmatic and reliable social impact and sustainability professionals, who maintain the work by operating within the boundaries of what their companies are willing to support. Their steadiness can come from different places: for some, it is a protective strategy in response to environments where pushing harder could create risk in their roles; for others, it reflects comfort with the current level of company efforts or less direct insight into the need for deeper change. This makes Steady Contributors more complex than a simple “middle-of-the-road” profile as their consistency can preserve institutional knowledge and prevent backsliding but also allow companies to mistake stability for sufficient progress.

Profile Pattern

- Voice: Moderate
- Support: Moderate
- Strain: Moderate

Common Experiences:

- Keep the work moving within the bounds of the company’s constraints.
- Tend to be attuned to what aligns with leadership perspectives.
- Focus on regulatory compliance and stakeholder expectations rather than strategic transformation.
- Must justify why the company needs to expand beyond its traditional priorities.
- Experience personal or professional risk when raising concerns.

Business Implication:

Steady Contributors are operationally stable but environmentally reactive. They are more accustomed to implementing than strategizing, which can result in the deferment of emerging issues until they become urgent.

If this sounds like you...

Utilize periods of stability to develop and/or improve processes to better prepare for future shifts and reduce the burden of potential reactive work.

Featured Quotes:

“It’s not about trying to do everything in this moment, but more about continuing to move forward.”

“Progress is happening, but it is driven by client demand. We are not pursuing new sustainability initiatives unless there is a clear connection to those expectations.”

“It’s more about keeping our heads down and getting the work done.”





Fatigued Pragmatists

Fatigued Pragmatists are experienced social impact and sustainability professionals who still care deeply about the work but are operating under conditions in which the role structure does not provide enough to sustain progress. They are often feeling exposed, having to narrow their expectations to survive rather than shaping the work.

Profile Pattern

- Voice: Low
- Support: Low
- Strain: Low

Common Experiences:

- Carry responsibilities without the authority or resources needed to move them forward.
- Spend more time reacting to crises and internal barriers than building proactive strategies.
- Care deeply about the mission but have learned to align with company constraints.
- Continuously dilute or reframe the work to keep it “acceptable”.
- Experience performative or unstable support from leadership.
- Feel that their personal commitment is the primary reason for the advancement of the work.

Business Implication:

Fatigued Pragmatists have the highest turnover risk which translates to potential loss of institutional knowledge. While in their position, their experiences can result in less proactive work and greater probability of inconsistent execution.

If this sounds like you...

Look for opportunities to simplify or sunset activities that no longer contribute significantly to company priorities or initiatives.

Featured Quotes:

“I’ve often had to be in the driver’s seat, the passenger seat, and the back seat all at once.”

“You don’t even have time for solutions because you’re just firefighting—always in reactive mode instead of proactive.”

“If leadership truly believed this work was sustainable, the sponsorship, funding, and clear ownership would all be there.”



Building the Conditions for Social Impact and Sustainability Professionals' Resilience

Although participants emphasized that personal commitment and values sustained the work of many social impact and sustainability professionals, their ability to continue advancing the work depends on the conditions around them.

The following four steps are designed to support companies in strengthening these conditions in ways that meet the needs and build resilience among social impact and sustainability professionals across all four profiles.

Institutionalize Responsibility Beyond Individual Ownership

As mentioned previously, many companies see the importance of embedding social impact and sustainability within their organizational infrastructure. However, companies should ensure that the implementation of this work is not siloed with one or a few individuals but rather becomes a shared organizational responsibility. Across profiles, professionals described being multifaceted, acting as translators, advocates, implementors, and educators simultaneously within their roles.

Institutionalizing responsibility means embedding social impact and sustainability considerations into business priorities and cross-functional decision-making, strengthening the continuity of the work during periods of internal or external shifts rather than sole dependence on individuals.

Implementation considerations:

- Establish executive sponsorship that is actively supportive of incorporating social impact

and sustainability priorities while developing business case language.

- Spread accountability for advancing commitments across various departments, teams, and roles.
- Ensure institutional knowledge is regularly documented and shared rather than concentrated on individual roles.
- Communicate regulatory and/or stakeholder shifts related to social impact and sustainability initiatives (e.g., newly enacted legislation, human rights regulations, stakeholder activism, disclosure requirements).

A little over half (55%) of professionals feel pressure to prove the business case more than peers in other functions.

Build Respective Organizational Capacity, Not Just Commitment

Strong commitments are only the foundation for enduring conditions to conduct social impact and sustainability work. Professionals frequently described environments where leadership was aligned with goals but underestimated the operational needs (e.g., staffing, budget) to deliver on those ambitions.

Companies need to regularly assess whether the current expectations and available resources compare to the reality of the role. If the accurate capacity is not met, professionals are not only strained in trying to accomplish their work but also in meeting regulatory benchmarks for the company.

Implementation considerations:

- Align company goals and workload expectations with available staffing and budgets.

- Expand functionality by utilizing cross-functional support and/or external partnerships (e.g., consulting firms, community organizations).
- Clearly define who is responsible for each stage of an initiative so work keeps moving forward.
- Proactively assess whether new regulations and/or stakeholder expectations will require additional resources.

Around half (52.5%) of professionals have considered stepping back, disengaging, or exiting the work, while a similar share (46.7%) report feeling worn out or weary after their work.



Provide Safe Channels to Raise Emerging Risks and Challenges

Companies are better positioned to anticipate and respond to emerging shifts when social impact and sustainability professionals can openly surface emerging risks and concerns. From the research findings, the majority of respondents reported their senior leadership trusted their judgement in their subject area. On the other side, respondents reported feeling anticipation of backlash before making recommendations and managing a sense of conflict between their personal values and company decisions.

Companies should provide channels where social impact and sustainability professionals have the opportunity to raise issues without fear of retaliation or reputational harm. This would be particularly fruitful as the first line of discussion around emerging issues that could affect long-term business priorities.

Implementation considerations:

- Engage with professionals early enough to shape strategy rather than only reviewing decisions once they've been made.

- Develop clear pathways for professionals to elevate emerging risks to both subject leadership and company leadership, where relevant.
- Provide opportunities for scenario planning to work through critical perspectives and constructive challenges as part of decision-making rather than having professionals work on managing them alone.
- Reinforce through leadership communications and actions that raising difficult issues and flagging landscape shifts are expected as part of the role.

68.9% feel pressure to remain calm, optimistic, or “educational” in hostile contexts.



Strengthen Infrastructure Capabilities for the Work

Many social impact and sustainability professionals serve as the company's institutional memory and subject area experts. These individuals are sometimes the first, only, and/or one of few starting or advancing the work inside the company. While this expertise is essential and companies typically see the significance of bringing in professionals to conduct this work, companies can become vulnerable when progress depends on the stewardship of a small number of individuals.

Building resilience over time requires transforming the knowledge and skills of the individual into sustainable processes that can endure the moving tide of both internal transitions and external landscapes.

Implementation considerations:

- Establish key timelines and phasing of major reporting and program development to keep consistency across approaches over time.

- Conduct post-implementation rollout audits that walk through development, process, and lessons learned.
- Develop regular social impact and sustainability knowledge opportunities (e.g., case studies, training, conference attendance) to expand expertise outside of specialized teams.
- Identify significant stakeholder relationships to ensure that more than one staff representative maintains communication.

52.5% considered stepping back, disengaging, or exiting this work.



Conclusion

The four profiles presented demonstrate that there is no single experience of corporate social impact and sustainability work. Some professionals have strong influence and support compared to others operating under limited support and varying levels of voice and strain. Despite these differences, one finding was consistent across profiles: resilience is a company outcome, not an individual responsibility.

Companies can develop a stable foundation for social impact and sustainability professionals through institutionalizing responsibility, building

organizational capacity, creating safe channels to raise risks, and strengthening infrastructure capabilities. These actions create conditions for professionals to thrive in their roles in addition to staying productive in advancing the company's commitments.

Social impact and sustainability strategies require companies to intentionally invest in the professionals moving this work forward. By doing so, companies strengthen their workforce and their ability to navigate the road ahead.

Appendix: Methodology

BSR partnered with Mindbridge to develop mixed-methods evaluation tools that would be concise and low-burden to reduce the threshold for getting professionals to engage while refining questions to ensure they were methodologically sound to measure characteristics, such as role burnout or stress. The study combined an anonymous survey with a confidential and optional follow-up interview to understand the nuances of the survey responses. Survey and interview questions were optional for participants to answer to ensure comfortability.

Between March and April 2026, the team collected 56 survey responses and four one-on-one interviews with social impact and sustainability professionals representing companies across multiple industries and job functions. Throughout the analysis, participants' information remained anonymous and de-identified.

Survey responses were converted into numerical scores using response scales. Questions phrased in the opposite direction were reverse-coded so higher scores consistently reflected greater levels where appropriate. Individual survey responses were combined into three composite scores: voice (five measures), support (seven measures), and strain (nine measures). Separate measures of burnout, engagement, and retention were calculated to examine outcomes rather than included as part of profile development.

The survey data was analyzed using measures of cluster analysis to identify patterns amongst the professionals' experiences. Results were then validated and contextualized against the qualitative interview responses. This process resulted in four professional profiles that reflect a distinct combination of voice, support, and strain.



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