

The CSO at a Crossroads

Three Paths Forward for
Sustainability Leaders

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About This Report

This report was written by Laura Gitman and David Korngold, with additional guidance and insights from Aron Cramer and Christine Diamante. Any errors that remain are those of the authors. Please direct comments or questions to web@bsr.org.

It was developed based on one-on-one interviews with 31 Chief Sustainability Officers representing companies in North America, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. It was further informed by our daily ongoing interactions with sustainability leaders of all levels, business executives from other company functions, boards of directors, and stakeholders. The four authors also contributed their insights, reflecting on more than 80 years of collective experience in corporate sustainability.

Disclaimer

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31

One-on-one interviews with 31 **Chief Sustainability Officers**.



30+

The four authors also contributed their insights, based on 30+ years of experience working with business to create a just and sustainable world.

Executive Summary

This report synthesizes findings from **interviews with 31 Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs)** conducted during the summer of 2024 and spanning North America, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. It traces the evolving role of the CSO amidst a backdrop of rapid changes in the sustainability landscape and proposes three potential paths ahead.

It highlights the significance of the CSO position, which has evolved from an entrepreneurial role into a professional and integrated function embedded in corporate governance, compliance, and accountability. CSOs in recent years have faced both heightened expectations and pressures. The current moment is characterized by a dichotomy: the CSO role is more visible and valued than ever, yet it risks becoming overly focused on compliance at the expense of innovation and strategic foresight.

Main Findings

1. Rapid Change and Turbulence

The sustainability field has matured, transitioning through phases of voluntary adoption, ambition, turbulence, and now professionalization and regulatory integration. Today, CSOs face multiple crosscurrents, including the backlash against “ESG” in the US, increased attention to regulatory compliance, and the work of making tangible, credible progress on existing commitments—all coupled with an aversion to making ambitious new commitments. Today’s CSOs face more opportunity, more relevance, more executive visibility, and equally more pressure than ever before.

2. Professionalization and Integration:

Many CSOs reported improvements in organizational structure, allowing sustainability to transition from a peripheral appendage to a central corporate function. They are finding success by leveraging the increased pressure to integrate sustainability into core business operations, adapting specific expertise to the unique needs of the business, and carving out time for compliance and reporting while increasing resources to deliver strategic impact.

3. A Crossroads and Three Paths Ahead

The report describes the CSO at a crossroads, and it argues that this is a crucial moment to shape an affirmative vision for the role. It identifies three potential paths for CSOs ahead. As CSOs assert their influence, they can illuminate new business opportunities, advocate for systemic change, and ensure that sustainability remains a priority at the highest levels of corporate decision-making.



The Steady Manager
Focused on compliance, efficiency, and risk management, delivering incremental improvements.



The Integrated Strategist
Actively influencing corporate strategy and integrating sustainability into core business functions.



The Transformative Change Agent
Driving innovation and reshaping business models to address sustainability challenges holistically.

In closing, the report emphasizes the urgency and scale of global challenges and the pressing need for visionary leadership in sustainability. The CSO is well-equipped to transform their organization for business resilience and to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable future.

It has been a challenging few years for CSOs, but the function is now professional and integral in the day-to-day management of global companies. Yet CSOs have never been satisfied with the day-to-day, and they have a unique role to play if they can blaze a new path ahead. By asserting their influence, they can illuminate new business opportunities, advocate for systemic change, and strengthen sustainability as a priority at the highest levels of corporate decision-making.

Letter from the President and CEO

Amid the great turbulence in the world of just and sustainable business, it has been alternately worrying, delightful, and perplexing to see stories in the media about the role of the CSO.

Headlines like “Chief Sustainability Officers are burning out. Has the role become unsustainable?” and “Companies are laying low on ESG as backlash intensifies” are pervasive, suggesting a dire state of affairs. From the time when the CSO position first emerged, my colleagues and I have predicted that more and more influence would flow to the CSO, given the importance of the mandate. We never predicted that CSOs would also be media sensations!

All the debate over the nature of the role, its real impact, and whether it was growing (as one story put it) prompted us to go right to the source: we

interviewed more than 30 CSOs from our member companies around the world to see what makes them proud, frustrated, inspired, and worried. As it turns out, almost everyone we spoke with is experiencing all these emotions, often on the same day.

As one CSO remarked, “My dream was that sustainability should be mainstreamed. It happened earlier than I expected. The downside of focusing now on what is required is compensated by the pride in having achieved this. But now it is more of a corporate role, like Risk, etc. At the beginning, it was innovative, something special.”

This report will examine how we reached the current state, how CSOs are finding success through professionalization and integration of the function, and how they can continue to shape and empower their role with a vision that will create strategic impact and meet the urgency of the moment.

What is clear is that the role is at a crossroads, as are many of the great leaders who inhabit it. They have more authority than ever, and they find themselves managing more than creating. The issues under their purview are being addressed at the seniormost levels of their companies, and this means more focus on business impact, sometimes at the expense of societal impact. Sustainability is in the spotlight, with regulators, media, and some fierce opposition, which means playing defense as much as playing offense.

Is the role providing the platform for change that led most CSOs to get into this area in the first place? It seems to depend a bit on the day when you ask the question, though the interviews we conducted were—to our surprise and delight—not as negative as the headlines would have you believe.

We should celebrate the fact that the current state of the CSO role, and individual CSOs themselves, reflects the increased importance that just and sustainable business plays inside companies. This is something that BSR and its network of changemakers have been fighting for over the years, if not decades.

That said, we are indeed at an important juncture. As the role has matured and been elevated, there is a risk that some of what makes the role uniquely important is being lost. Time spent looking backward to report on performance is lost to the crucial task of staying on top of profound changes. The need to deliver business value is necessary, but it won't be sufficient if too little time is available to listen to external voices that see the world differently than the view from the C-suite. The laudable effort to ensure that existing goals are met cannot interfere with the basic truth that more ambition is needed if we are to achieve a more equitable economy that addresses the accelerating climate crisis.

What is most exciting about the CSO role is that these questions should not present binary choices. Instead, they offer a dynamic way of seeing the world and synthesize what's important today, what's expected by key partners, and what's needed to work toward the vision of the world—and business—that we can be proud of.

We heard from over 30 leaders who embraced this role because of these possibilities; they believe in the power of business, and they know that business

as usual won't get the job done. As the second half of the "decisive decade" looms, this is a time to reclaim and reframe the role, building on new relevance and influence, and utilizing the unique tools, skills, and perspectives that are often only held by the CSO.

This report will examine how we reached the current state, how CSOs are finding success through professionalization and integration of the function, and how they can continue to shape and empower their role with a vision that will create strategic impact and meet the urgency of the moment. To enable candid discussions, we agreed that all comments would be anonymized.

We found the insights from this collection of amazing leaders to be very valuable, and we hope you do as well.

I look forward to continuing these discussions with you and to working together toward a more just and sustainable future.



Aron Cramer
President and CEO, BSR

Chapter 1

The Sustainability Field Has Matured After Periods of Rapid Growth and Turbulence

The turmoil for sustainability leaders today has been described as existential, and it is therefore useful to place the current moment in a broader context. Today’s concerns in the field follow a two-decade period of a slowly growing understanding of and support for sustainability, followed by a rapid increase in activity at the start of the 2020s, and more recently, new questions and challenges.

Figure 1

BSR View of the Sustainability Field 2015–2024

Period	Phase	
2015-2018	Mainstream Voluntary Adoption	After years of experimentation, momentum grows, and many companies begin to embrace voluntary frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, Sustainability Accounting Standards Boards (SASB), and the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD).
2019-2021	Ambition and Commitments	Investor, media, and public attention on social and environmental challenges drives a rapid increase in private sector vision and strategic action. Many companies sign on to ambitious commitments like Science-Based Targets or racial equity principles, often linked with new investment strategies. The Business Roundtable releases a letter that “redefines the purpose of a corporation” toward serving “all stakeholders.” Sustainability teams grow in size and authority.
2022-2023	Turbulence	Progress stalls amidst criticism and economic uncertainty. Companies become more cautious in their vision and commitments. Increased regulation gets some companies off the sidelines and gives rise to a compliance mindset for others. Political and legal backlash accelerates in the US, alongside growing enforcement of greenwashing rules.
2023-2024	Professionalization and Regulatory Adoption	New regulatory mandates, clarity on business impact, a focus on implementation, and a revived awareness of the strategic importance of sustainability lead companies to maintain core sustainability efforts. Even as companies are reluctant to adopt new commitments and “stick their necks out,” many invest in teams, expertise, and governance in response to disclosure requirements that demand increased rigor, business integration, and executive/board oversight.

20 Years of Slow Evolution—And Then Rapid Change

Twenty years ago, DuPont became the first US public company to appoint a CSO: Linda Fisher, a former deputy administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency. Her full title was VP Safety, Health, and Environment and Chief Sustainability Officer. The Weinreb Group—an ESG recruiting agency—published its first CSO survey in 2011 and found only 29 US public companies with CSOs. By 2023, this grew to 183 companies, representing enormous growth, but still a fraction of companies. Globally, Acre began its survey in 2007 using the term Directors or Heads of CSR. By its 2023/2024 Sustainability Census, which surveyed 1555 in-house sustainability professionals, 36 percent of accountability for sustainability now sits with the CSO.

Momentum built slowly in the early 2010s. In the late 2010s, companies engaged with emerging global guidance and private sector platforms centered around COP15, adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and myriad voluntary commitments on topics like human rights, climate, nature, and diversity. The evolution was slow and steady. Then came the sustainability “boom”

between 2019-2021, when CSOs felt like celebrities—in demand, relevant, and increasingly powerful. They led growing teams, made ambitious commitments, and devised innovative plans. Over the past few years, however, this situation drastically changed.

Current CSO Role

Today, CSOs face multiple crosscurrents, including the US backlash against anything with the tag “ESG,” increased attention to regulatory compliance, and the real work of making tangible, credible progress on existing commitments—all coupled with an aversion to making ambitious new commitments. This shift has been hardest for those CSOs who enjoyed the entrepreneurial freedom they experienced with “first mover” companies, where sustainability was seen as an innovation factor in an open field and not primarily a function of compliance or enterprise risk management. Indeed, a few CSOs recalled the daring bygone years in the field and expressed that they now feel a sense of dissatisfaction.

Nevertheless, CSOs generally now see more opportunity, more relevance, more executive visibility, and equally more pressure than ever before. In a sense, this shows that the role has come of age, finally facing many of the same dynamics that other C-suite roles experience.

Figure 2

Recent Changes in the Focus of the CSO Role, According to CSOs



Relative Increase in Focus

- Regulatory and compliance orientation
- Accountability
- Quantity and quality of data
- Scrutiny
- Risk avoidance
- Board oversight



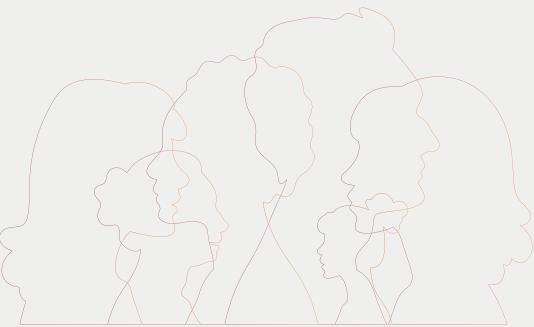
Relative Decrease in Focus

- Strategy
- Innovation
- Entrepreneurship
- External collaboration
- Commitments
- Visibility

The CSOs we interviewed generally appreciate and embrace the fact that the bar has been raised for delivery of business value as well as the achievement of broader impact, smarter and consistent use of data, and improved business integration (as highlighted in Figure 2). Yet they also recognized the potential downsides from the diminution of attributes shown as “decreased” in Figure 2.

In the next section, we’ll review how CSOs are finding success in defining the function and looking ahead to a more strategic, impactful future that builds on a stronger foundation.

Inside the Mind of the CSO



How are CSOs feeling about these changes? Some feel invigorated to finally have the level of integration that they have sought for years; others feel dismayed, stuck, or even bored at the lack of bold progress; many feel whipsawed. On balance, however, the CSOs we interviewed were quite positive.



64 percent of respondents feel that regulation enables meaningful, strategic impact. Respondents in North America were especially positive, with 71 percent ranking the role of regulation highly compared to 50 percent in Europe. This points to the value of regulations in mobilizing companies (especially in the US, which has often been considered “behind” Europe on sustainability).



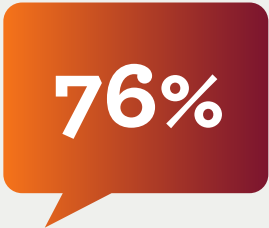
83 percent of respondents feel that increased involvement by other C-suite executives helps advance ambitious sustainability objectives, with slightly more positive attitudes in the US. This indicates that despite concerns that executives might try to tamp down sustainability efforts, sustainability leaders continue to see other executives as positive partners.



Only 50 percent of respondents spend 70 percent or more of their time on “high-impact” work, including 64 percent in the US and 40 percent in Europe. This tepid response may indicate that CSOs feel caught in compliance or less strategic work, though this effect is less pronounced in the US, where CSOs are leveraging new regulations to push companies up the maturity curve. Notably, 26 percent of respondents say they spend less than half their time on “high impact” work.



Respondents were evenly split as to whether they spent more or less time on “high-impact” work now compared to three years ago. However, anecdotally, the reported amounts of “increase” tended to be relatively small or moderate, while the reported amounts of “decrease” were dramatic.



76 percent of respondents feel they have been able to advance sustainability in the face of “backlash,” with consistent responses across geographies. This figure indicates that while “backlash” has altered the field, sustainability leaders have made progress.



71 percent of respondents indicated that three years from now, it is likely they will be in a sustainability role within a company. This figure indicates some shakiness in continuity in the field, though it does not portend the mass exodus that some fear.

“The environment used to be tolerant of bold goals that drove innovation and impossible thinking and inspired us to push further and faster. There was inherent forgiveness about the journey full of imperfection around progress, and I don’t feel that anymore. As a practitioner, now I feel incredibly cautious, conservative, and muzzled; put your head down and do the work but don’t celebrate too much. Creativity and innovation are being drawn between the lines; it’s much more pragmatic now.”

“There’s more compliance, and we’re busier and busier on reporting and assurance. The positive element is that there is stronger ownership by parts of the business to meet disclosures and we’re continuously upskilling on sustainability across the business.”

“The net of all of this has been a sharper focus on being super intentional on what we’re saying, no empty claims and less of whatever semantics people were using for that day or week.”

“My goal is to be CEO, and no matter what role I am in, sustainability will be central.”

Chapter 2

CSOs Are Finding Success in Increased Professionalization and Integration of Sustainability

Sustainability has moved from being an isolated outpost on the corporate periphery to a professional, structured function central to corporate strategy and governance.

From 2023 to 2024 alone, the number of company sustainability reports citing the CEO as ultimately responsible for ESG strategy nearly doubled from 18 percent to 32 percent. “Integration” and elevation have been goals for years, and they are finally being realized.

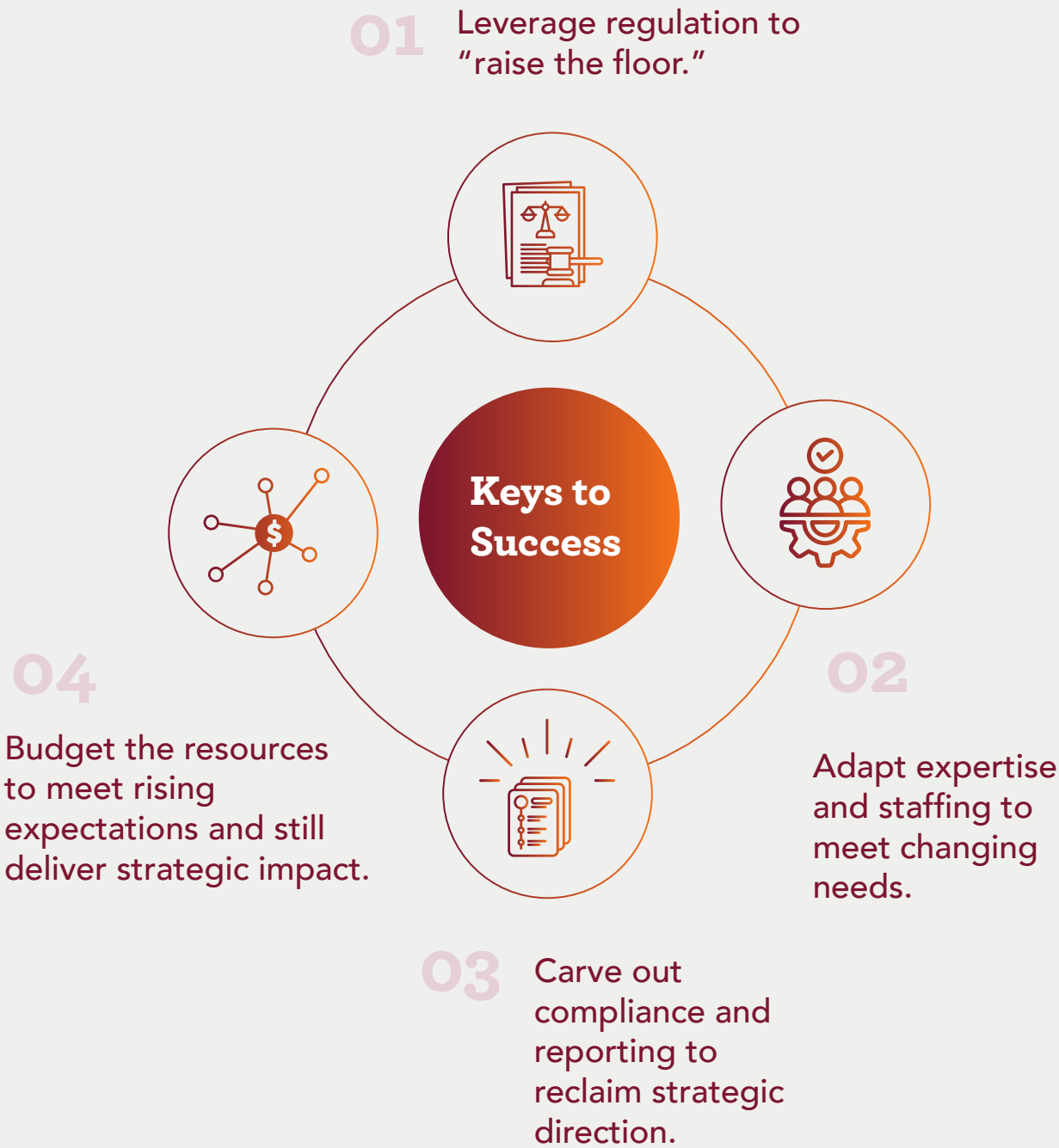
This professionalization and integration come in spite of, and perhaps in

some ways because of, the recent backlash. The combined impact of backlash and regulation has led the field to deemphasize eye-catching communications and audacious commitments in order to avoid anti-ESG critiques, accusations of greenwashing, or even legal liability. Instead, companies have emphasized more cautious strategies, implementing existing commitments, and mandatory

disclosures—all of which tend to involve more internal engagement and sign-off. In this environment, CSOs have bolstered their efforts by pointing to new regulation and links among sustainability and business objectives. It is also helpful for executives and boards to see management and oversight of sustainability-related risks and

opportunities topics as just another part of good governance and business.

BSR’s experience—and that of the CSOs we interviewed—point to several keys to success in the professionalization and integration of the sustainability function.



Keys to Success

01



Leverage regulation to “raise the floor.” Sustainability leaders are using heightened regulatory mandates to garner resources and integrate sustainability into risk, compliance, finance, and other core functions. For example, BSR and sustainability leaders fought for years to make the case for budget holders to invest in basic materiality assessments. Currently, comprehensive double materiality assessments are becoming ubiquitous in response to regulatory requirements in Europe. Regulations also incentivize new cross-functional investments in other areas like climate risk, decarbonization, and human rights. Finally, much of the current “pain” is focused on building long overdue infrastructure such as robust data gathering, governance, board oversight, and due diligence processes that meet regulatory and compliance standards.

02



Adapt expertise and staffing to meet changing needs. Five to ten years ago, sustainability teams were typically comprised of sustainability generalists. In some cases, people without any sustainability experience were drafted into the team. CSOs have since added significant dedicated topical and technical expertise to strengthen performance on priority subjects and deepen ties to other parts of the business. For example, one CSO cited that the key to their success is “having dedicated teams on sustainability within product areas and having product people on my team.” Beyond the core team, CSOs cited the importance of educating colleagues, not on general “Sustainability 101” but on the specific impacts, risks, and opportunities relevant to their areas of responsibility.

03



Carve out compliance and reporting to reclaim strategic direction. CSOs who own compliance and reporting tend to express fatigue and frustration that they are not applying their unique capabilities. As many companies are in the process of aligning roles and responsibilities, we believe that CSOs should not wholly own the sustainability reporting and compliance process. Instead, they should act as internal subject matter experts, with Finance, Legal, Operations, and other functions taking primary responsibility for data gathering, reporting, and regulatory compliance. These latter functions are often equally or better equipped with expertise and vendor relationships to align internal efforts, especially when they benefit from added funding and an ESG Controller. It also enables compliance and reporting to fit into existing governance and oversight infrastructure, which is deliberately separate from strategy. CSOs who have been able to delegate those responsibilities tend to express greater satisfaction, ability to drive performance, and opportunity to deliver positive strategic impact in areas in which they are uniquely qualified.

04



Budget the resources to meet rising expectations and still deliver strategic impact. CSOs increasingly find themselves subject to the expectations of a “traditional” corporate function, but without the financial, human, and strategic resources to meet those expectations. By highlighting the compliance needs and business impacts of sustainability, many CSOs have been more successful in securing the resources needed to hire subject matter, technical, legal, and data experts. At the same time, those resources should be additive, not simply diverted from other areas of strategic impact.

“A different profile is needed. In the beginning, you needed innovative people to make commitments and put energy into convincing senior management. Now, it’s more working with finance, risk, etc. to maintain your position and still be considered the expert.”

“Having co-champions in sustainability who are doing the day-to-day work of the business is invaluable. Companies who think they can lob this work over to the sustainability team aren’t working efficiently; companies with the most integrated approach are the most successful.”

“I’m hopeful that reporting transitioning to finance becomes routine for companies. This will free up resources in our sustainability team to take on a more forward-looking development role on the agenda of next ESG issues to impact the company. We’ve got to do this in a way that provides business value: less on compliance and more business innovation mindset.”

“Now that the CSO is considered a formal function like Sales or Finance or Human Resources, people expect the same quality of delivery. However, it’s still not shaped to perform as a fully-fledged function. What is needed is the right structure and clear governance mechanisms to make it a formal function. Today, we still lack the resources to do it.”

Taken together, it is impressive to see CSOs respond to the challenges of the moment by leading the professionalization, integration, and enhanced rigor of today's sustainability function.

At the same time, a sole focus on stabilizing the sustainability role and meeting compliance will not enable companies to deal with strategic risks and opportunities for companies or the imperatives for society.

It is time for sustainability leaders to reassert the vital business and societal role of sustainability.



In September, BSR published [Between Two Worlds: Sustainable Business in the Turbulent Transition](#), an update of our [Doing Business in 2030 scenarios](#). The

report analyzed four potential scenarios, each describing a range of alternative futures evolving from drivers that will define the next decade of business. The way we respond to global change will define whether and how business will rise to the challenge of decisive climate action, achieve the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), create meaningful employment that sustains people and communities, and apply new technologies in ways that society can embrace.

The updated look ahead offers new guidance on what companies—and CSOs—can expect to see and navigate over the second half of the 2020s, which dawned as “the decisive decade,” to inform the creation of effective and resilient business strategies.

Key insights include:

- 01** We Need to Rapidly Turn the Ship on Climate and Nature Even While Preparing for the Impacts Already Underway
- 02** We Should Be Careful About “Techno-Solutionism,” and Instead Develop and Deploy Technology More Wisely
- 03** We Need to Address the Tensions Between Growth and Environmental Goals
- 04** Companies Have an Important Role to Play in Promoting Truth, Democracy, and Cooperation

Chapter 3

Now Is the Moment to Reassert an Ambitious Vision of the CSO

The changing context makes it more consequential than ever to intentionally shape the CSO role for maximum impact.

The CSO role has become more senior, professionalized, and relevant in new ways due to the rise of regulation. These are positive developments for a role that previously tended to be isolated with limited influence in decision-making and operating outside a company’s strategic and governance functions.

With new opportunities for impact, new regulations, and new pressures, most companies have moved past, “Do we need a dedicated sustainability professional?” to “What should be that person’s role?” In answering

this question, some companies opt for a model that focuses attention on delivering against what is required, as much or more than what is possible.

Additionally, the focus on “professionalization” in the field has focused CSO attention toward delivering business value. This is an important step forward. That said, it can also create a bias against groundbreaking longer-term opportunities that may not deliver short-term business value. The final factor is the “outside in” perspective: as the urgency of global problems

continue to intensify, the importance for the CSO to anticipate changes and push for more transformative change will become increasingly critical.

At BSR, we see three potential paths for the future CSO:



These archetypes are not mutually exclusive; individuals and companies may blend pieces of each archetype or see an evolution of the role over time.



“It is hard to maintain the balance between regulation and a visionary approach to impact. At the moment, responding to regulation is what we need to do.

I hope this is temporary and that in the next 2-3 years sustainability is operationalized, with the right people in the right places. Once it’s stabilized, we can get out of the weeds and back to a visionary approach.”

The Future CSO:

Three Typologies



The Steady Manager

The Steady Manager leads an established sustainability organization that prioritizes risk management, smooth relations with business functions, ensuring compliance, and efficient efforts to advance a small number of priorities within the existing business model.

The company has a tightly focused set of established sustainability priorities and programs tied to overall material issues.

This CSO model works to support the existing corporate strategy and business model, rather than applying sustainability considerations to shape (or redefine) that strategy. This typology approaches sustainability in a similar way to how safety and quality are often handled: as critical topics to be managed with the aim of making continuous improvements, while mitigating risk and avoiding negative publicity. This model can deliver change and improvement, which is more likely to be incremental than transformative. Leaders operating within this model can position a company to be a solid performer, or a fast follower of industry leaders.

The Steady Manager model comes with some risks beyond limited ambition.

Companies embracing this approach are more likely to find themselves reacting to changes driven by others. They may fall behind peers and miss out on opportunities to leverage sustainability for innovation, top-line growth, and talent attraction. Internally, other company leaders may recognize that this type of CSO does not have the influence to advance a substantial agenda, thereby limiting their ability to win the support of colleagues. In the event of public challenge or controversy, this CSO may not have a sufficiently robust network, or reservoir of trust, to navigate successfully.

Despite its shortcomings, this model might be the right fit for many companies. For example, it may be appropriate for companies that are smaller, reliant on low-risk business models, operating in low-risk geographies or value chains, or less affected by business, technology, or sustainability disruptions.

“In a way I am back to what it was like before sustainability was popular in the company, when we were under the radar because we had no buy-in. We were convinced then that it would be necessary to work in the shadows to be ready for when the company would have to do something. We are back to this mode.”

“We don’t have the time to mess around—we’re halfway through the decisive decade and we have nothing to show for it.”

The Future CSO:

Three Typologies



The Integrated Strategist

CSOs in this model have a voice in influencing corporate strategy, within existing paradigms and business models. The Integrated Strategist incorporates sustainability considerations into core business decisions, and they are seen as an important leader.

The Integrated Strategist has a strategic, forward-looking business role that delivers real value for their company, its resilience, and its societal impact.

These CSOs are empowered with a clear mandate and have adequate resources to pursue it. They will likely lead select major sustainability efforts on material issues seen as relevant for core business interests. This CSO routinely collaborates as a trusted partner and peer with departments such as risk, procurement, human resources, and marketing. They bring the company's voice to engagements with civil society, media, business and industry networks, investors, and other stakeholders. The Board relies on the CSO to "see around the corner" to understand where potential disruptions may be looming.

Companies must commit significant resources and executive support for this CSO to be successful. Their success can create significant value in managing risks and supporting business opportunities through the short and medium term. Furthermore, these CSOs deliver strong sustainability performance that positions the company as a leader in their space, including in the eyes of customers, investors, governments, and talent.

"The CSO role can only spend so much time on verification, quantification, and looking backwards. You should be doing sense-making and opportunity spotting."

"We've been able to move sustainability from the periphery into more of an enabler for long-term growth."

"We are increasingly expected to be connected to the business itself, to be part of the assessments, opportunities, and risks. Like whether nature-based solutions can be a new business strength for the company, and more than just a stand-alone biodiversity strategy. Or if we expand in new regions, how do we address the social issues in a way that is less about risk and more about opportunity? So, the demand for the role is more and more the profile of a business person, and not solely a social and environmental person."

"We want our role to be about value creation—risk is important—but how do we move to value creation. That's where I'd like to take it, but it's easier said than done."

The Future CSO:

Three Typologies



The Transformative Change Agent

The Transformative Change Agent has a mandate to explore ways to influence and potentially reshape the company's fundamental business strategy, governance, and products and services.

This leader uses sustainability to inform overall business innovation and to reorient the company's business model to address core sustainability challenges. Those challenges might include clear and proximate factors, as well as longer-term and emerging considerations like the rise of disruptive technologies, the impending limits of planetary boundaries, and changing social conditions and perspectives.

Making good on this model requires a different leadership mindset. The Transformative Agent will utilize futures and scenario planning, engage on public policy issues, and gather insights and inputs from external experts and stakeholders. They will appreciate and embrace the value of collaboration, including efforts to work with unlikely

partners. Ultimately, this suggests an increased comfort with, and appetite for, risk-taking.

This model will likely only be adopted by a small subset of companies. It assumes that the CSO is not only a member of the leadership team, but an "equal" with other C-suite leaders, who would also be presumed to embrace a vigorous approach to sustainability. Given the pressures from public capital markets, this model might be more likely to emerge in private companies, or in companies with ownership structures whose charters explicitly embrace long-term time horizons or social and environmental aspirations in addition to shareholder value.

“Now a good CSO would have a lot of influence with the execs on business transformation. It becomes a change management role influencing everywhere. Those that have come up in the technical side may lack that leadership, making the role much more challenging.

We're excited to see the role of precompetitive collaboration. We are dealing with systemic issues; businesses existing in silos won't have that impact. We are at the crux of a foundational shift, and it will be exciting to see where we can turn challenges into opportunities.”

Chapter 4

Closing Thoughts

Sustainability is often characterized as a “journey.” For many companies, this journey is about slow and steady progress on an incremental path; for others, it is about moving with swiftness and agility toward a future that can and will be radically different.

As elucidated in [Between Two Worlds: Sustainable Business in the Turbulent Transition](#), recent years have seen several dramatic changes. The physical impacts of climate change have become more intense, and palpable.

A groundswell of activism catalyzed attention to issues of social justice and equity. Shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflicts, and the launch of ChatGPT, abruptly reshaped the operating context for business. Meanwhile, inflation and macroeconomic uncertainty created economic headwinds for individuals and the private sector.

Under all three CSO typologies, BSR sees the CSO as an increasingly valuable, accepted, and professionalized role inside companies, helping to better manage the basic impacts, risks, and opportunities of a changing and uncertain world. For many companies, that is enough, and the “Steady Manager” is an approach that serves them well.

However, for the sake of both societal and business resilience and progress, we believe now is the moment to capitalize on the potential of the CSO as an “Integrated Strategist” and “Transformative Change Agent.”

Now is the moment to reassert the CSO as a visionary business leader and to reactivate the ambition and entrepreneurialism needed to accelerate progress on the biggest challenges for business and society.

CSOs have the distinctive ability to use sustainability as a prism through which their companies, and business more broadly, can understand their relationship with the outside world. That prism can help focus business energy and resources on pursuing innovative ways to improve their companies in the name of economic, social, and environmental progress. CSOs are uniquely positioned to understand the intersection of business and society, to see connections between issues, and to consider today’s problems while looking ahead to the future.

We need new business models, transformative partnerships, and lots of big, new ideas put into practice. We need to harness all the private sector’s ability to deliver real progress. Now is the moment to reassert the CSO as a visionary business leader and to reactivate the ambition and entrepreneurialism needed to accelerate progress on the biggest challenges for business and society.



BSR™ is a sustainable business network and consultancy focused on creating a world in which all people can thrive on a healthy planet. With offices in Asia, Europe, and North America, BSR® provides its 300+ member companies with insight, advice, and collaborative initiatives to help them see a changing world more clearly, create long-term value, and scale impact.

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