



## Engaging Colleagues and Employees in Sustainability (Action guide)

### Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often do not have a dedicated team or individual focusing on net zero, but the role is given to an existing employee. Without the proper knowledge, time and training it can be challenging for this individual to gain the necessary internal support to implement net zero actions. Many SME sustainability goals can only be reached when everyone in the company contributes. While the sustainability lead can guide strategy and coordinate efforts, real impact comes from collective engagement, from everyday decisions in procurement, operations, sales, HR, to senior leadership sign off.

However, many colleagues may feel disconnected from sustainability because the topic seems technical, abstract, or irrelevant to their role. This guide outlines practical steps for sustainability leads or managers to engage colleagues in accessible and motivating ways.

### Why employee engagement matters for climate action

- **Behaviour change drives impact:** Many workplace emissions reduction opportunities rely on employee behaviour, from energy use to travel habits to waste management.
- **Accountability sits across the whole organisation:** Emissions are generated in every part of a business, and each team contributes in different ways and holds different pieces of the puzzle. To make real progress toward net zero, every team and individual needs to be engaged and empowered to act.
- **Organizational alignment enables progress:** Clear understanding and buy-in across departments, especially from senior leadership, helps secure decisions, approvals, and investments needed to advance net-zero actions.
- **Culture and morale strengthen commitment:** Employees increasingly prefer employers committed to climate action, and engagement strengthens team purpose.<sup>1</sup>
- **Cost savings:** Small collective actions (reducing waste, saving energy, smarter travel) lead to significant savings for SMEs.

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<sup>1</sup> Rožman, M., Štrukelj, T. (2020). Organisational climate components and their impact on work engagement of employees in medium-sized organisations. Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja. 34. 1-32. 10.1080/1331677X.2020.1804967.

## Key Actions

### 1. Translate sustainability into everyday language

Many staff feel excluded by complex sustainability terms, so clarity is essential.

- Avoid technical terms and instead explain concepts in role-relevant language.
- Use simple, relatable examples (e.g., “reducing waste = saving money”)
- Share visions and stories (e.g., how net zero matters for your business or community).

### 2. Build a tailored business case narrative for your SME

- For example on:
  - **Cost reduction:** Show how energy efficiency, waste reduction, or low-carbon operations could cut long-term costs.
  - **Risk resilience:** Emphasise how climate action can mitigate your risks like supply chain disruption or shifting investor demands.
  - **Revenue & competitiveness:** Highlight that customers increasingly demand sustainability and that a net-zero profile can win new business.
  - **Regulatory readiness:** Point out how acting now can put your business ahead of upcoming regulations or compliance requirements.
- Use internal data wherever possible (your energy expense, waste costs, procurement data) to make this concrete.
- Share external benchmarks or case studies that resonate with your business model or sector.
- Revisit and refresh your business case as you update sustainability goals so it stays relevant to leadership and front-line teams.

#### Supporting statistics to use

<i>Business benefit</i>	<i>Relevant statistic / Insight</i>
<b>Customer demand &amp; revenue</b>	In a recent SME Climate Hub global survey <sup>2</sup> , 61% of SMEs said they take climate action to meet customer expectations, and 51% cited winning new customers as a motivator.
<b>Regulation &amp; Compliance</b>	60% of SMEs see compliance with current or future regulations as a key motivator for climate action. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Rising renewable energy adoption</b>	12% of EU SMEs generate renewable energy onsite, and 23% purchase energy from a renewable energy supplier. <sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> SME Climate Hub. [Small businesses are accelerating climate action in response to customer demand.](#) (2025)

<sup>3</sup> EU. [Eurobarometer survey shows that more than 90% of SMEs invest in resource efficiency.](#) (2024)

<b>Cost savings</b>	Over 67% of UK SMEs who benefit financially from sustainability measures report reduced operational costs. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Strategic alignment</b>	46% of UK SMEs reported that net zero actions align with their broader business strategy or purpose. <sup>5</sup>
<b>SME emissions scale</b>	SMEs across the world account for up to 60% of global business emissions. <sup>6</sup>

### 3. Connect sustainability to each department's work

Employees engage when they see how sustainability affects their daily tasks. Create short “role-based climate tips”, for example:

- *Procurement*: choose lower-impact materials.
- *Operations*: optimize process efficiency.
- *Finance*: track energy or waste costs.
- *HR*: add sustainability to onboarding.

Spotlight examples of colleagues already doing this well. Shape sustainability as a shared responsibility rather than an add-on.

### 4. Create simple ways for employees to contribute

- Identify colleagues who show interest in sustainability and invite them to contribute.
- Ask for their input when setting priorities or choosing practical initiatives.
- Encourage them to share ideas for reducing waste, improving energy use, or redesigning everyday processes. Consider gamifying this such as having an energy treasure hunt whereby employees compete to find inefficiencies in energy usage.
- Keep involvement informal when appropriate: short conversations, quick polls, or small working groups are enough for SMEs.

### 5. Communicate progress openly and regularly

- Share short updates during existing meetings (e.g. weekly standups, monthly updates, or team check-ins). Regular, light-touch communication helps keep sustainability visible.
- Provide regular updates to senior leadership, summarizing progress, risks and resource needs. Leadership visibility is essential for ongoing support and decision-making.

<sup>4</sup> [The Willow Review](#). (2025)

<sup>5</sup> British Business Bank. [Smaller businesses and the transition to net zero](#). (2023)

<sup>6</sup> World Economic Forum. [Fast-Tracking SME Sustainability Could Accelerate Global Climate Targets and Unlock Economic Value, Says New Report](#). (2025)

- Highlight small wins and business benefits from the actions (e.g., reduced printing, lower energy use, new supplier choices).
- Be transparent about challenges so employees understand the journey.
- Include sustainability progress in annual reporting, even if simple. This formalizes accountability and helps track improvements over time.

## 6. Keep engagement simple: recognition without formality

- Offer informal appreciation when colleagues contribute ideas or help a project succeed.
- Share positive examples in team meetings or internal chats.
- Thank individuals publicly when their actions lead to improvements.

## 7. Use training resources that already exist

Many colleagues want to help but don't know where to start:

- Direct employees to the [Climate Change Basic Guide](#), an easy way to learn the basics.
- Encourage teams to browse the [Action Space](#) for short, practical courses and guides.

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## Potential Costs

Possible costs include:

- Time spent coordinating engagement activities or running training.
- Small budget for recognition, materials, or communication tools.
- Investment in better equipment or tools that support sustainable habits (e.g., recycling bins, energy-efficient office devices).

Most engagement actions, such as role-based tips, recognition, communicating wins, or forming a Green Team, cost little or nothing to implement. Small, people-focused actions can drive meaningful progress without major investment.