



# Insights on New Zealand Sustainability Professionals

2021 Report



# Foreword

Our inaugural 2020 research, which surveyed New Zealand sustainability professionals pre-Covid in February 2020, provided a foundation of insights on the sustainability profession. This year's research, undertaken in January and February 2021, looks back at what has changed in that time.

With the global pandemic having a huge impact on jobs within many industries in the past year, we're aware that the sustainability profession has not been immune. Anecdotally, we've heard about sustainability job redundancies and of some organisations suspending their sustainability agendas immediately after the level 4 lockdowns last year. While this research does not pick up on those who lost their job in 2020, we are aware that many of these people have since gone on to take up sustainability roles in other organisations, or even set up their own business in sustainability, giving them the opportunity to participate in this research in their new role.

While the past year has certainly been hard for many, we also recognise the coming years may continue to challenge businesses as they navigate an uncertain economic future alongside increasing environmental and social issues. Sustainability roles bring foresight to a business – a value which is, and will continue to be, increasingly valued when working with complexity, disruption and change in a Covid world.

This is why it is encouraging that our 2021 research indicates that despite significant workplace disruption caused by Covid, New Zealand organisations are not taking their foot off the sustainability accelerator and are improving the ways in which they support sustainability professionals in their roles.

Five key insights support these findings and are detailed in this report:

1. **Organisations have strengthened their investment in sustainability through Covid-19**
2. **Almost all industry sectors in New Zealand are employing sustainability professionals**
3. **Sustainability drives organisational purpose and addressing climate change is the top priority now and in the future**
4. **Sustainability professionals feel more empowered, are experiencing better work-life balance and greater job satisfaction**
5. **Sustainability professionals are change agents and people skills are critical to development in the role**

These insights are truly heartening and provide a sense of optimism for the future. We can see that the sustainability profession is strengthening and that organisations are continuing to drive genuine sustainability action, despite the potential economic challenges presented in the Covid-19 recovery. Our sustainability professionals' strength is in their softer skills – leadership, communication, problem solving, relationships and influencing – key skills to being an effective organisational change agent in an adaptable world. In a critical year when New Zealand is turning climate legislation into action, sustainability professionals and their organisations are ready to step up.

We welcome your feedback and the opportunity to support your sustainability journey through this research.

**Dr Sarah Holden, Director Oxygen Consulting**

# Methodology

2021 Insights on New Zealand Sustainability Professionals provides a holistic view of the current state of the sustainability profession in New Zealand - the role requirements, wellbeing of those in sustainability jobs, future growth areas and the way in which organisations are structuring sustainability.

This report reflects the results of a survey which ran 18th January - 12th February 2021. The survey was made publicly available to potential participants through the networks of Oxygen Consulting, Auckland University of Technology (AUT), Sustainable Business Council (SBC) and Sustainable Business Network (SBN), as well as a range of social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook.

Target participants for this research included any employed people who currently had 'sustainability' as part or all their role. The scope included anyone in full time, part time or contractual positions within public, private and not for profit sectors. Sustainability professionals who may have been made redundant in the last 12 months did not qualify to participate in this research.

Information was gathered at an industry group level only, with a focus on the sustainability professionals employed in New Zealand organisations. Organisational sustainability strategies and activities were out of scope of this research.

Anonymity of participants was maintained through the aggregation of results. Furthermore, personal information that could be used to identify individuals (e.g. names, email addresses, workplace name), was not collected.

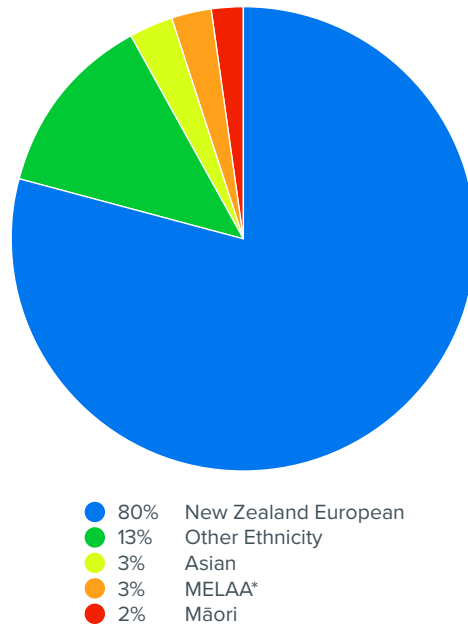
As the second concurrent year of this research, the 2021 sustainability professionals research compares trends and findings with the 2020 research where relevant. 113 people participated in the research in 2021 compared with 130 in 2020.

Wellbeing data was compared against an equivalent AUT general professionals data set for both 2020 & 2021. 441 people participated in this survey group in 2021 compared with 442 in 2020. This was used to compare the New Zealand sustainability industry against New Zealand professionals from a variety of alternate industries.

The research was conducted in accordance with AUT's Ethics Committee processes (AUTEC Reference number 20/393).

# Survey group demographics

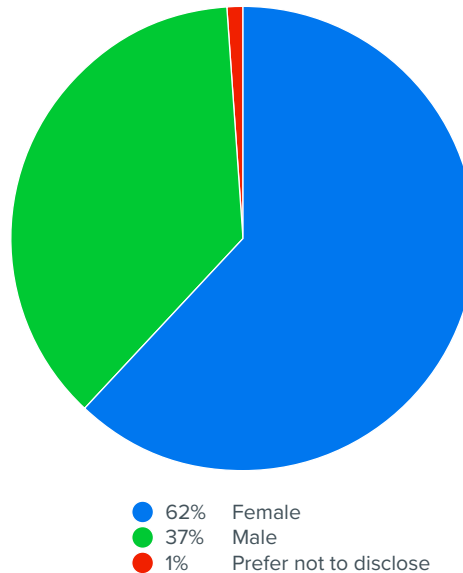
Ethnicity



80% New Zealand European  
13% Other Ethnicity  
3% Asian  
3% MELAA\*  
2% Māori

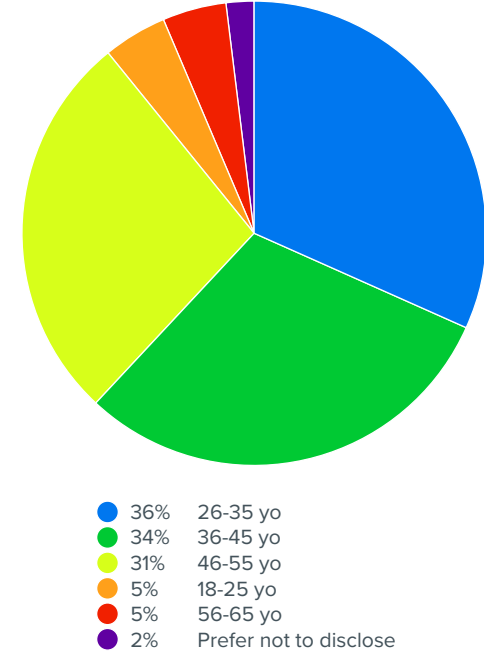
\*MELAA = Middle Eastern / Latin American / African

Gender



62% Female  
37% Male  
1% Prefer not to disclose

Age



36% 26-35 yo  
34% 36-45 yo  
31% 46-55 yo  
5% 18-25 yo  
5% 56-65 yo  
2% Prefer not to disclose

A scenic landscape photograph featuring a range of rugged, snow-capped mountains in the background. A dense forest of evergreen trees lines the shore of a calm lake in the foreground. The lake's surface is still, creating a clear reflection of the mountains and trees. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall scene is peaceful and majestic.

## Five key insights

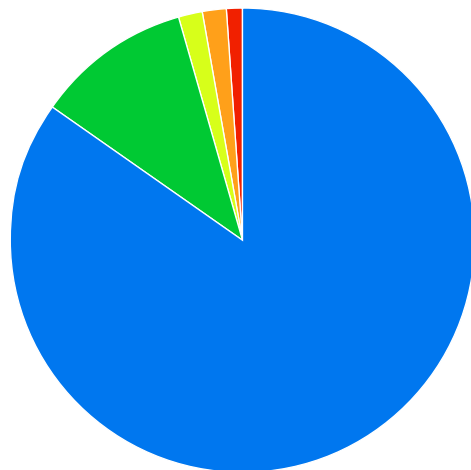
“ The role of a sustainability professional is to give everyone else the eyes to see things differently and to redefine what we mean by success



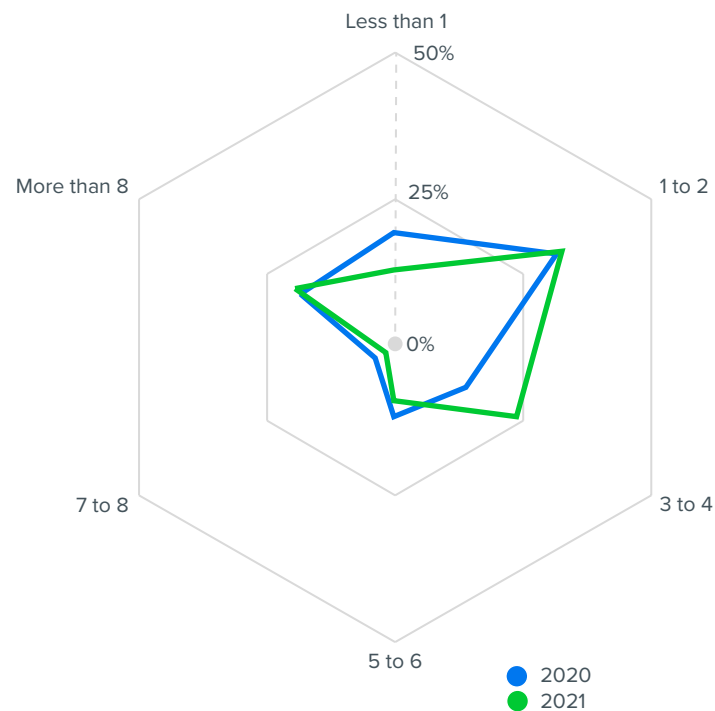
**1. Organisations  
have strengthened  
their investment  
in sustainability  
through Covid-19**

# Despite the events of COVID-19, organisations increased their sustainability roles

Number of roles disestablished

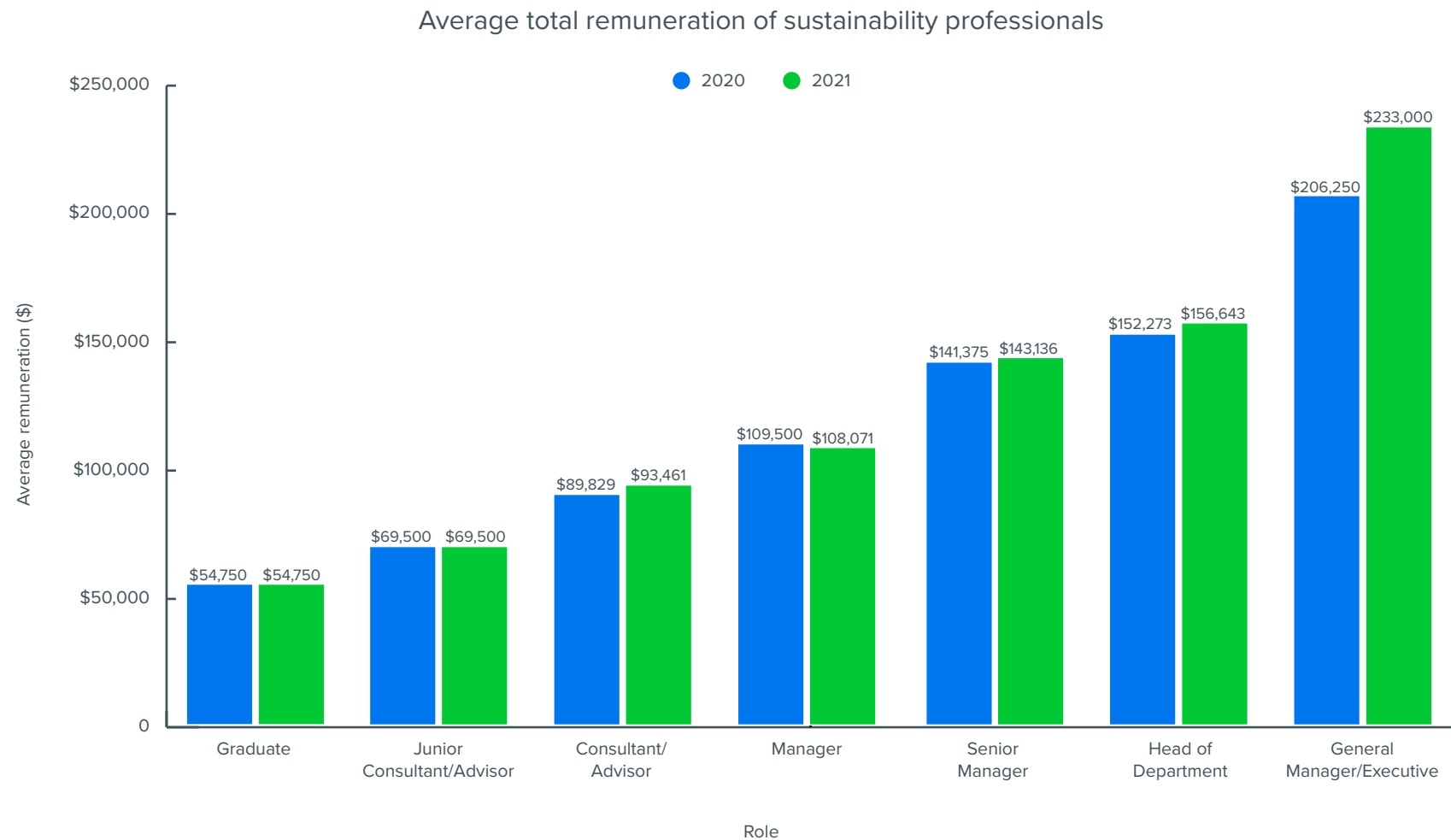


Number of sustainability roles in organisations

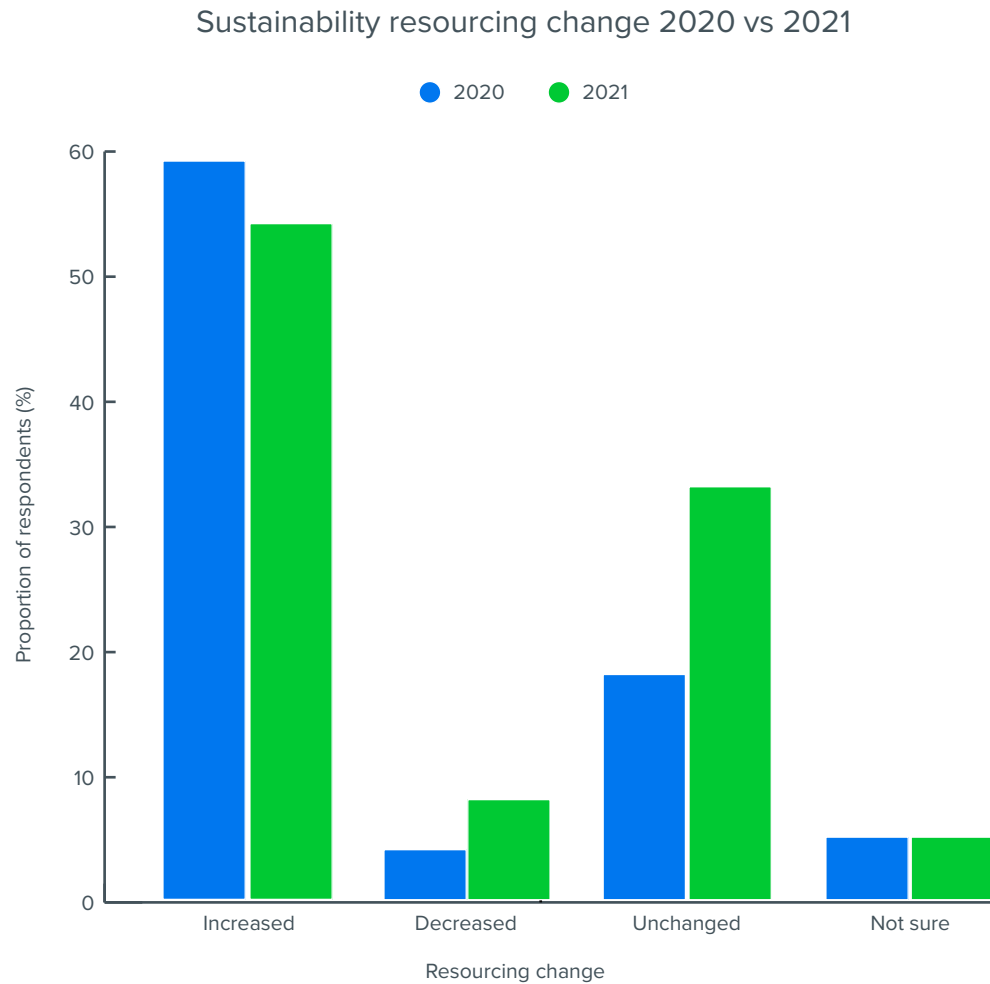


“ COVID meant many had to be let go - but everyone within CSR and sustainability was retained and resourced

# Remuneration pathways remained on par with the previous year



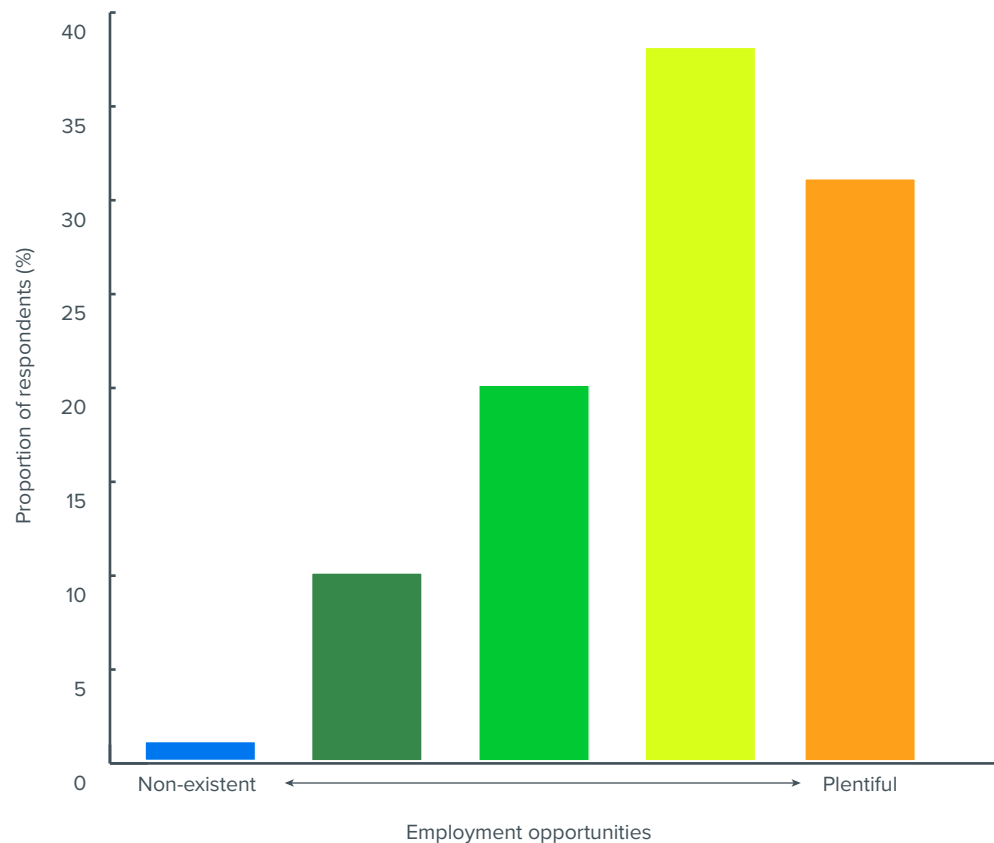
# While more budgets remained unchanged in the past year, the majority of organisations grew their sustainability resourcing



“ Sustainability resourcing has increased significantly in the past year, there is strong support at a board level

# Employment opportunities in sustainability are considered strong

Sustainability employment opportunities in 2021

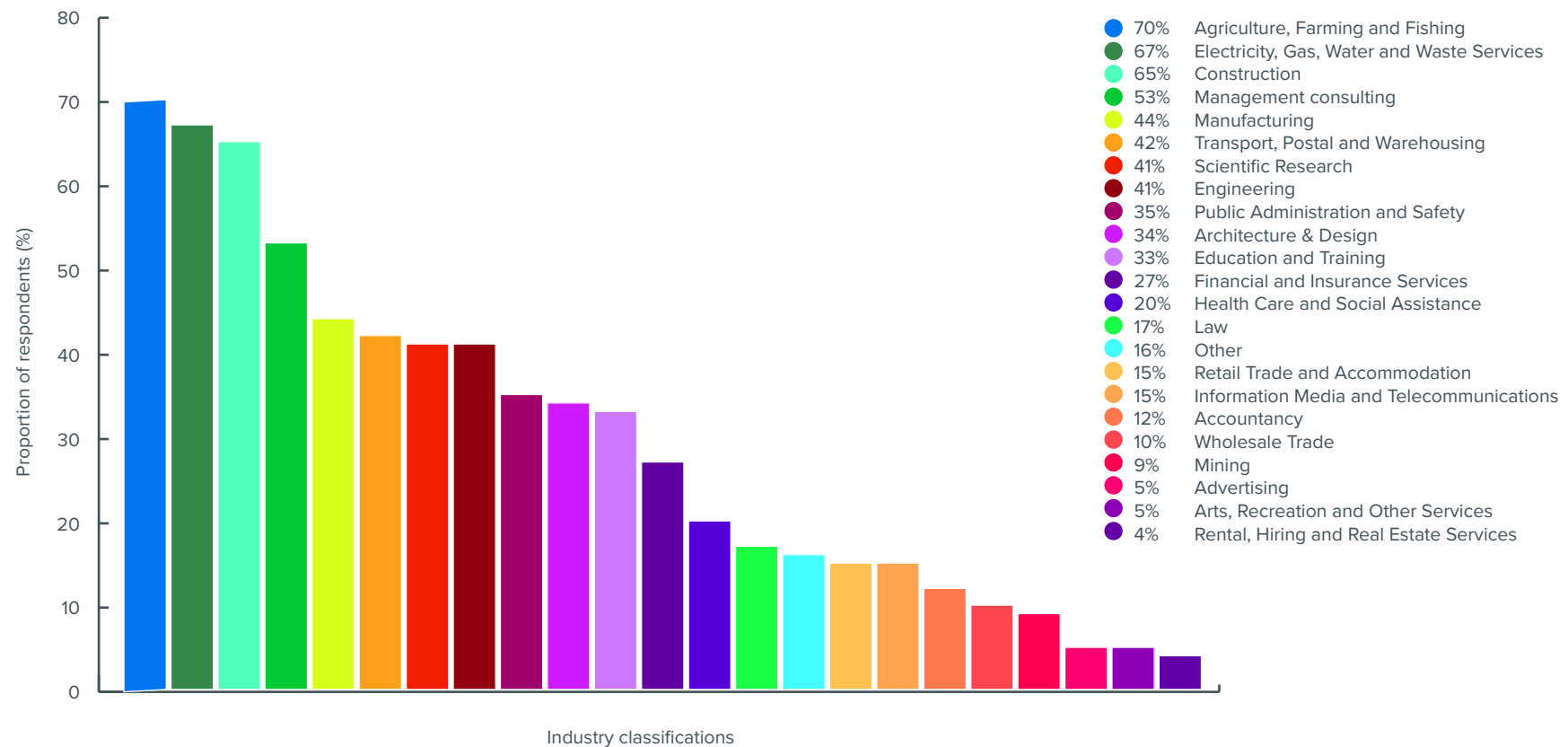


69% of respondents ranked job opportunities 4 or 5 out of 5, where 1 was 'non-existent' and 5 was 'plentiful'

“ I feel there is a realisation that sustainability will no longer be a nice to have and instead will be a must have.

# These sustainability job opportunities may mostly be found in agriculture, utilities and construction

Perceived industry employment opportunities right now



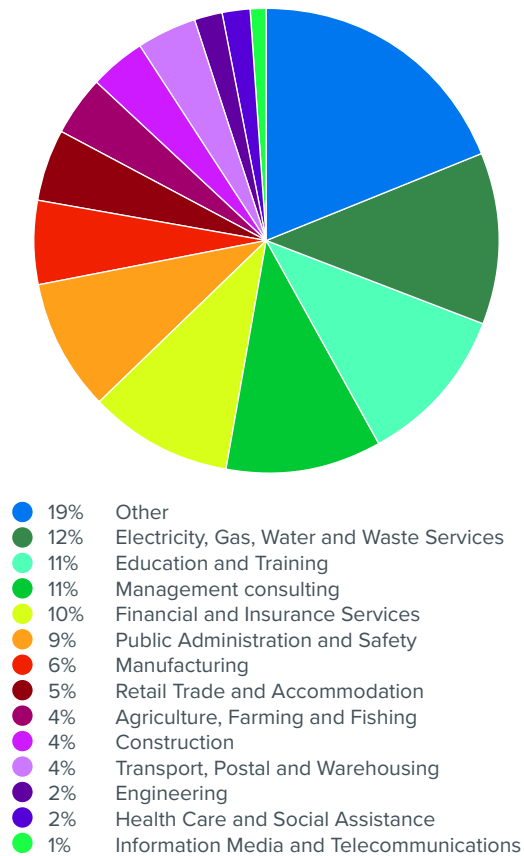


2.

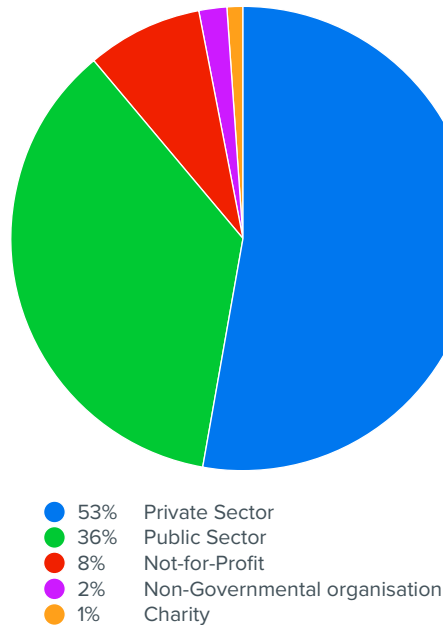
**Almost all  
industry sectors  
in New Zealand  
are employing  
sustainability  
professionals**

# Sustainability professionals are represented across a broad range of industries, primarily within the private sector and found mainly in Auckland and Wellington

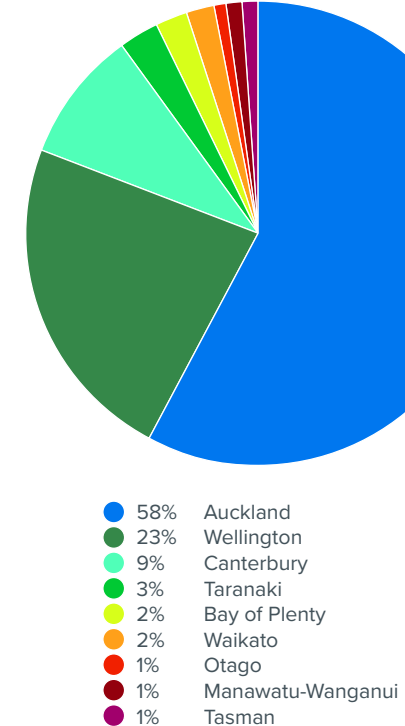
Sectors employing sustainability professionals



Organisational type

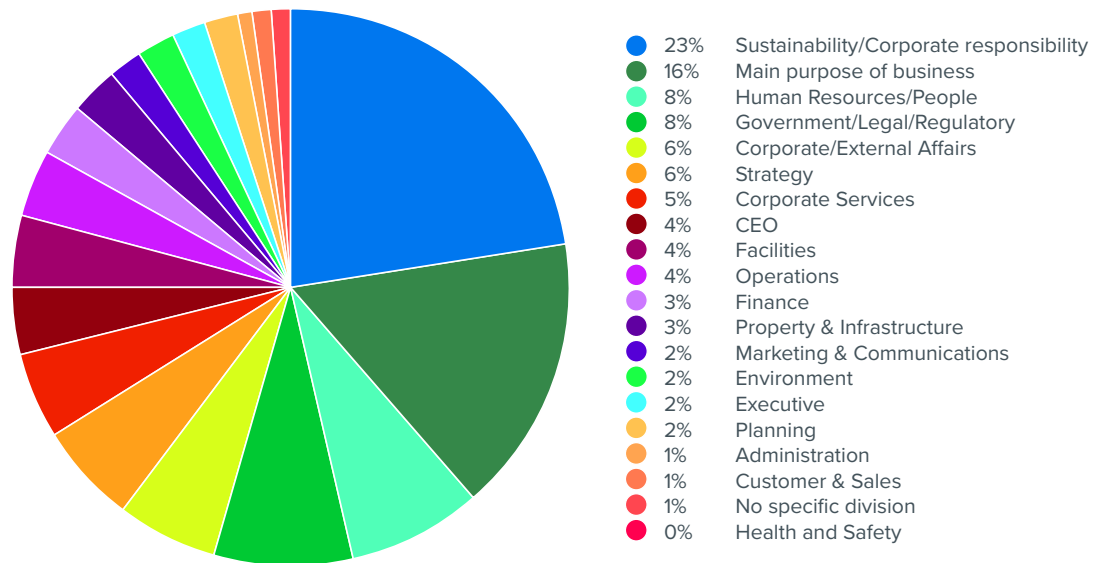


Regional distribution



# Sustainability professionals are located in a wide variety of business units within organisations

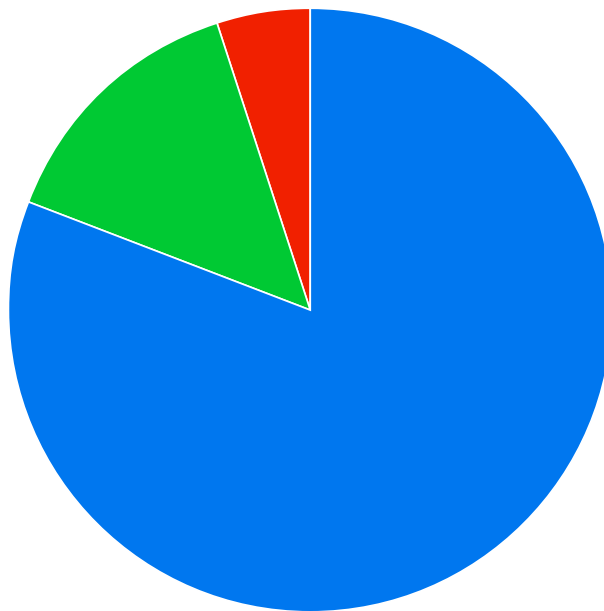
Location of sustainability roles within the organisation



“ Part of the job is to get the function of sustainability built into everyone else’s roles

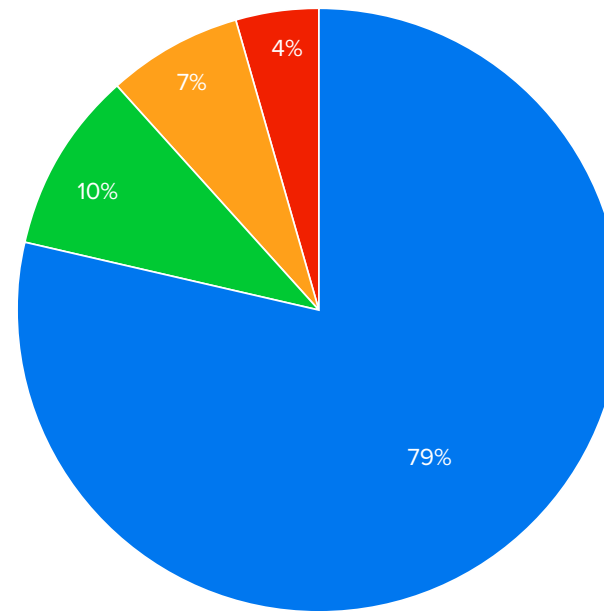
# Most sustainability professionals are in dedicated, full time roles

Individual role capacity within organisation



81% Full time  
14% Part time  
5% Contractor

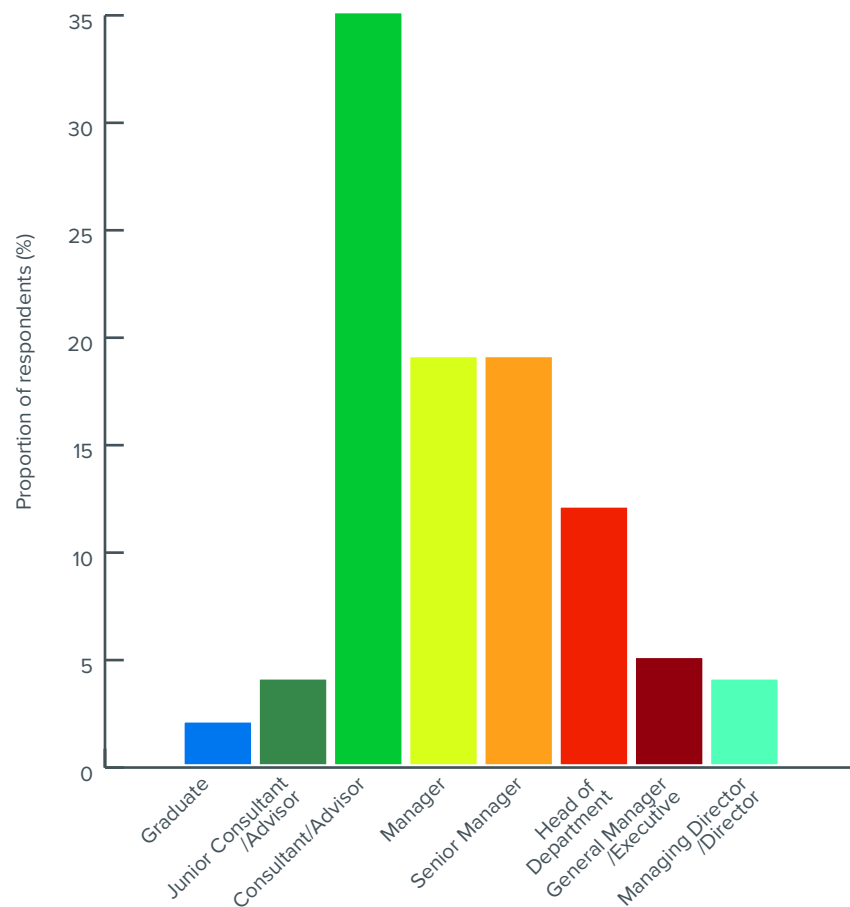
Amount of role focused on sustainability



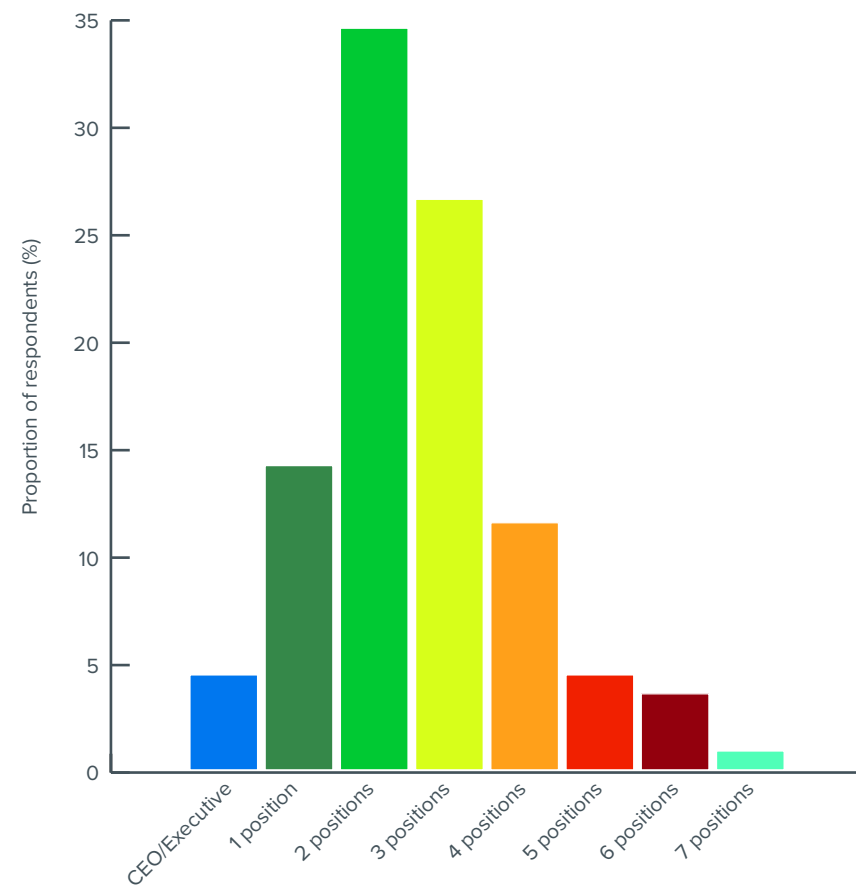
79% 75-100% focus  
10% 50-74% focus  
7% 1-24% focus  
4% 25-49% focus

# Sustainability roles are typically positioned in middle management, two steps from the CEO

Sustainability role management position

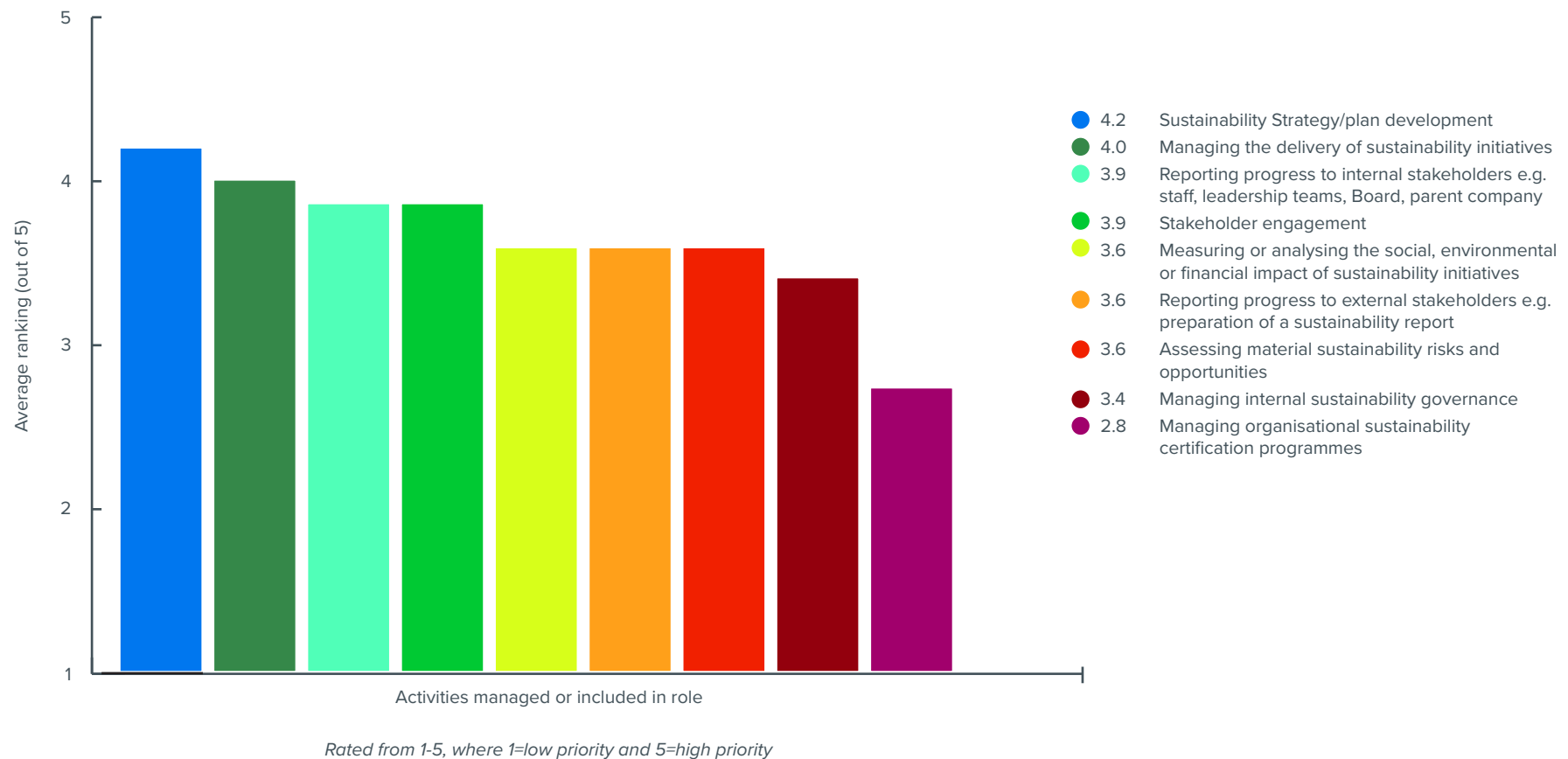


Number of positions removed from CEO



# Sustainability roles are primarily focused on strategy development and implementation

Activities most commonly managed by sustainability professionals

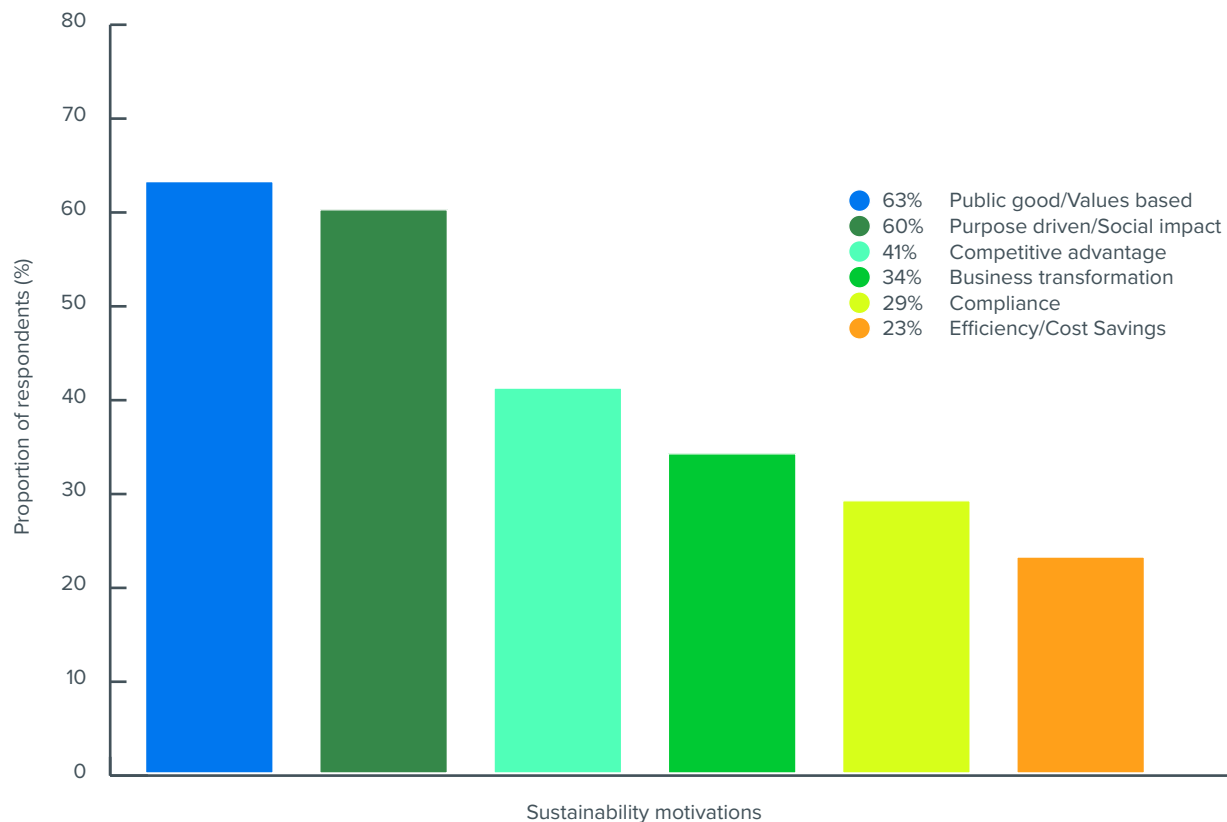




**3. Sustainability drives organisational purpose and addressing climate change is the top priority now and in the future**

# Companies are driven to address sustainability primarily because it is the right thing to do

Motivations for organisational sustainability

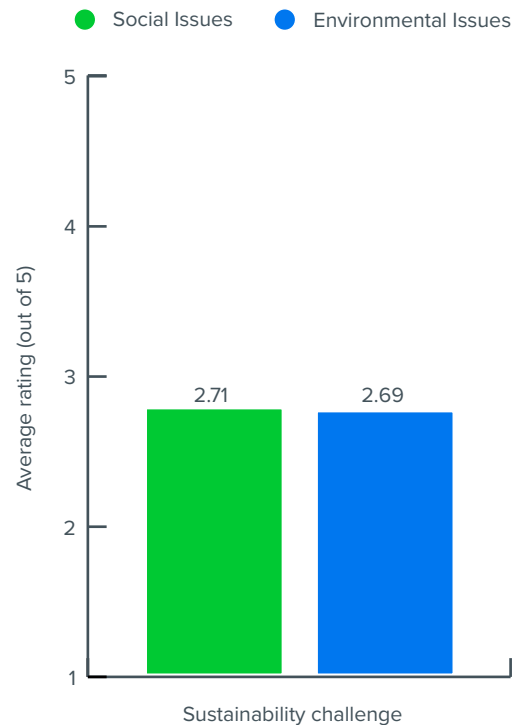


“ Our purpose as an organisation is driven by our sustainability agenda

“ It is our organisation's kaupapa

# They recognise they could be doing much more to address both social and environmental issues

Extent to which organisations are addressing social and environmental problems



Scale: 1 ('nowhere near enough') to 5 ('enough'). Higher score means organisations are doing more to confront environmental/social issues [positive]

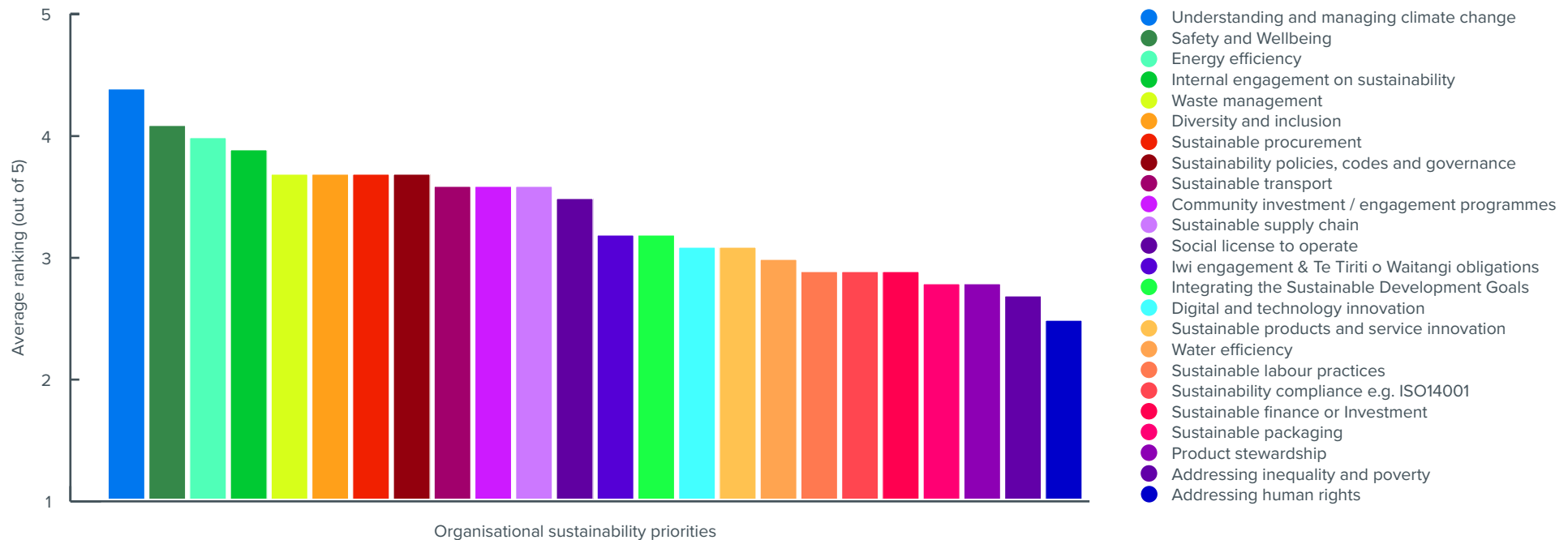
Social issues: "Thinking about the world, do you believe your organisation is doing enough to address current social problems?"

Environmental issues: "Thinking about the world, do you believe your organisation is doing enough to address current environmental problems?"

“ Organisations are increasingly playing a part, but the scale of the world’s sustainability challenges are such that we still need to be doing more

# Addressing climate change is the top sustainability priority for organisations right now

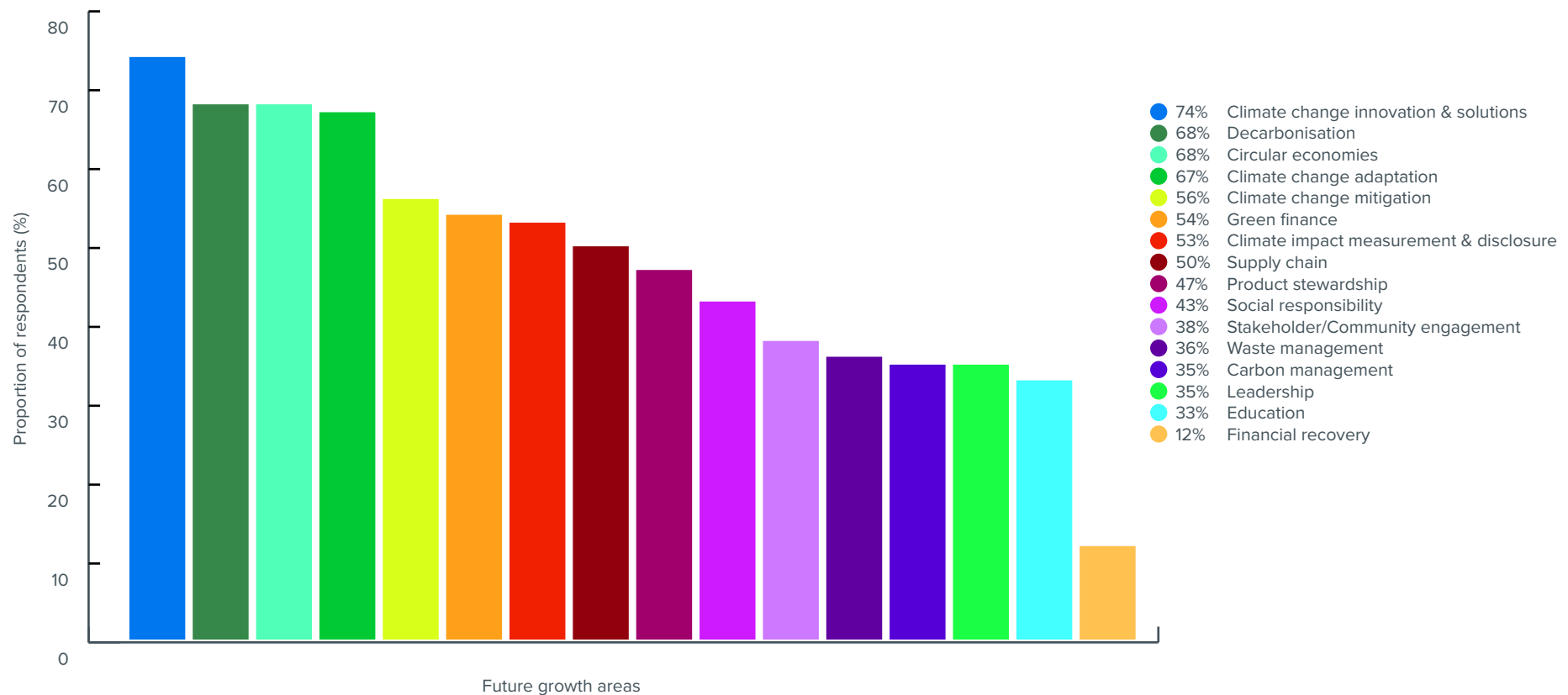
Organisational sustainability priorities



Topics ranked on scale 1-5, where 1 is low priority and 5 is high priority

# It is also the largest future growth area for organisational sustainability

Future growth areas in sustainability

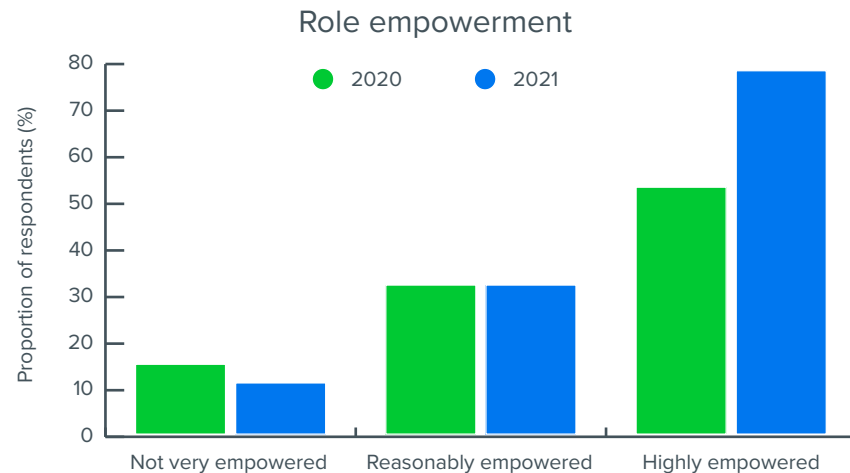


The image features two women sitting on a windowsill in an office environment. The woman on the left is partially obscured by a semi-transparent blue overlay. Both women are smiling and looking towards the right. The background shows a window with a view of another building.

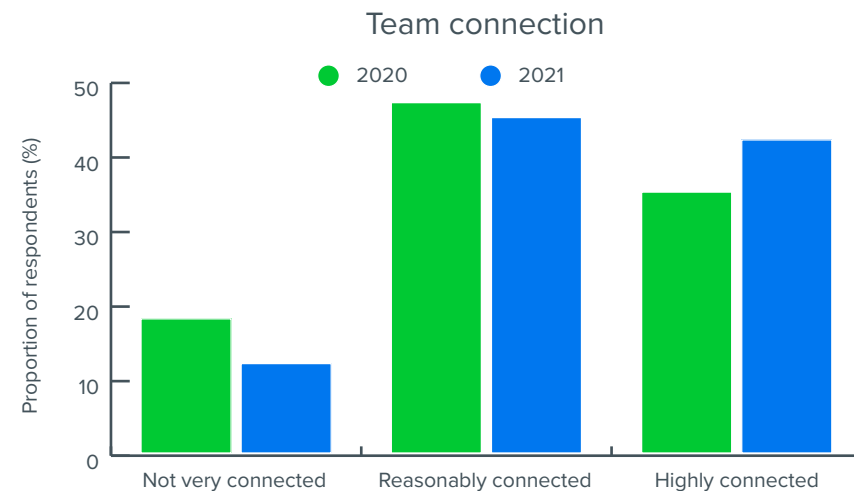
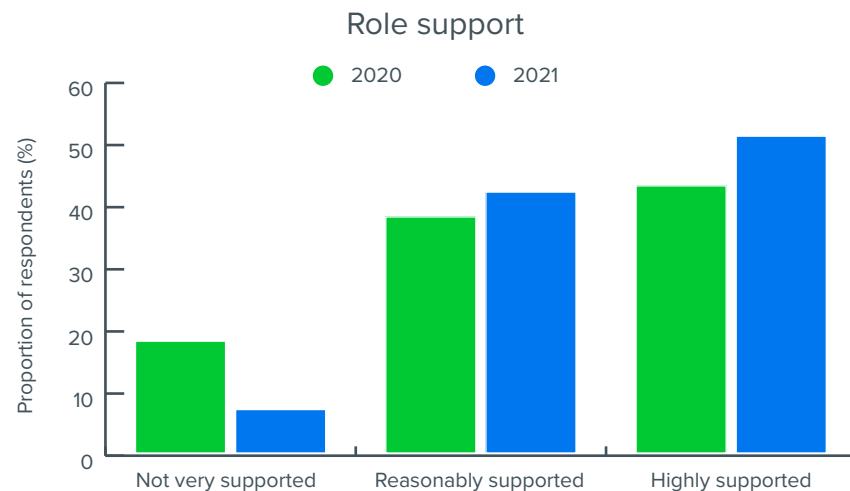
**4.**

**Sustainability professionals feel more empowered, are experiencing better work-life balance and greater job satisfaction**

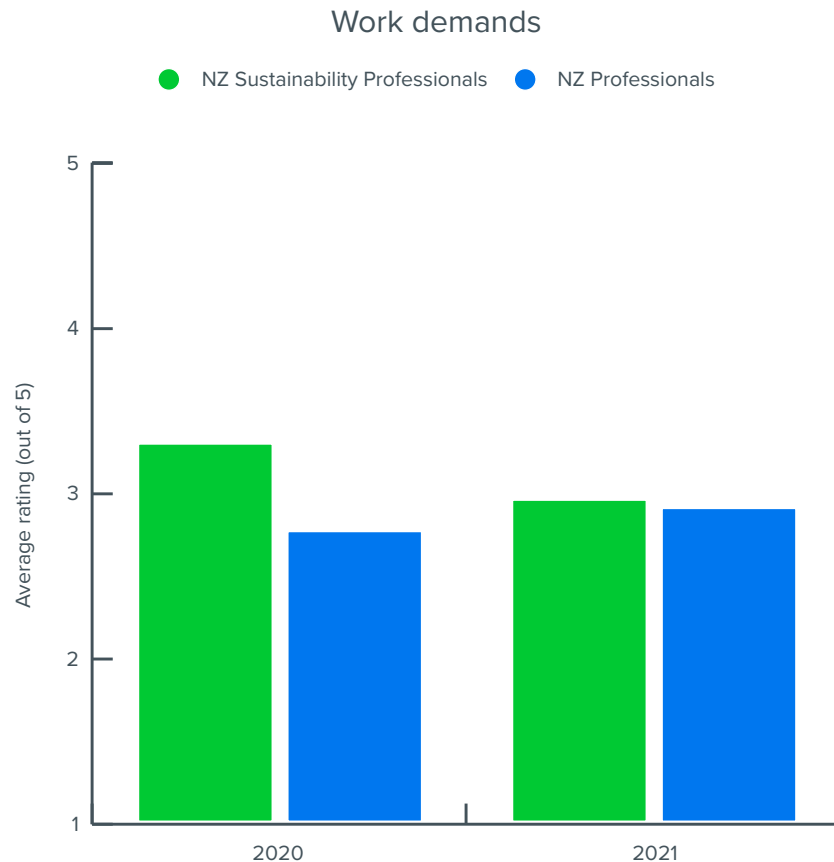
# Sustainability professionals are feeling more empowered, supported and connected to their teams



“ I have the support of my GM and the CEO, I have the budget and tools and am supported in every initiative I have invested in



# Work demands have decreased for sustainability professionals, now on par with other New Zealand professionals

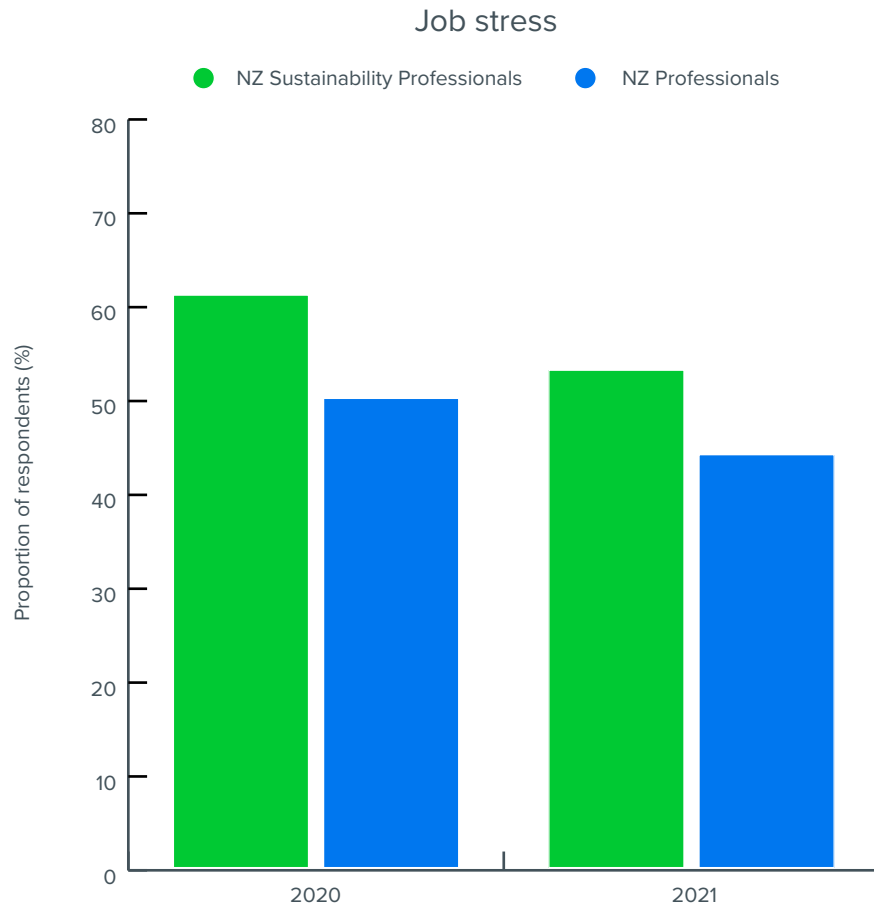


Work demands: (A) I often feel that I am being run ragged from work; (B) I am given too much work to do; (C) I can't complete my work in a normal work-day

Scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with 3.0 being the midpoint. Higher score means higher work demands and job satisfaction.

“ I can set my own objectives, projects and tasks within reasonable boundaries

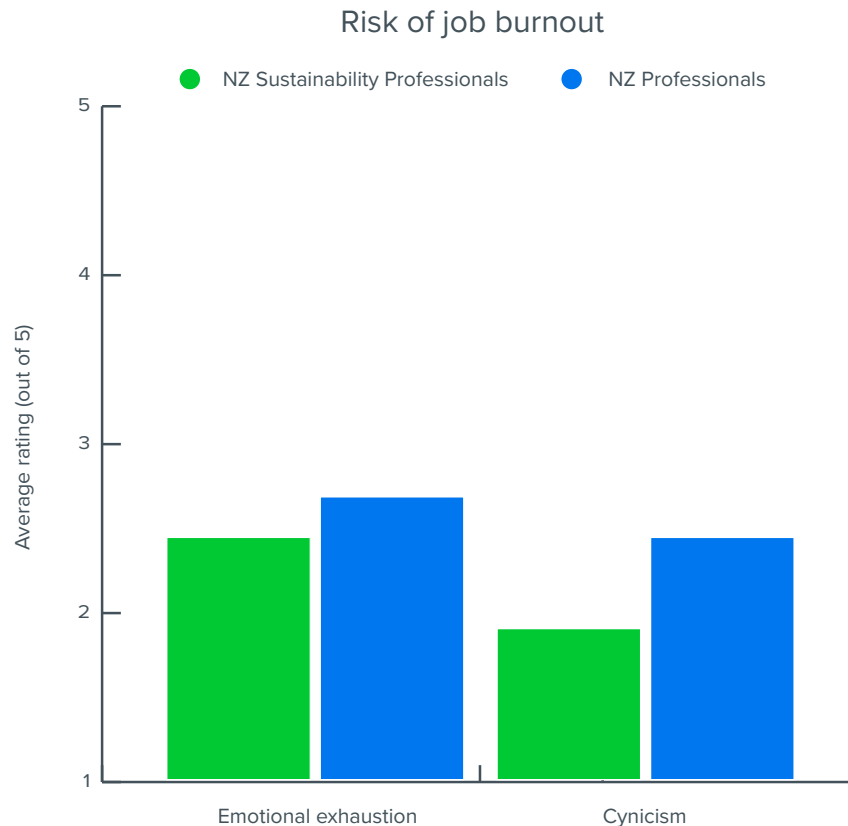
# Job stress has decreased across the board, but sustainability professionals continue to face more pressure than their peers



Scale: 1 (no stress) to 10 (extreme stress) – represented as a percentage. A higher score means more job stress

“ We are required to juggle a huge range of work...our team is excellent at delivery and I believe this sometimes lets us down because the pressure we are under is not obvious

# Despite more stress, those in sustainability roles are at a lower risk of job burnout



*Emotional exhaustion: (A) I feel emotional drained from work; (B) I feel used up at the end of the workday; (C) I feel burned out from my work*

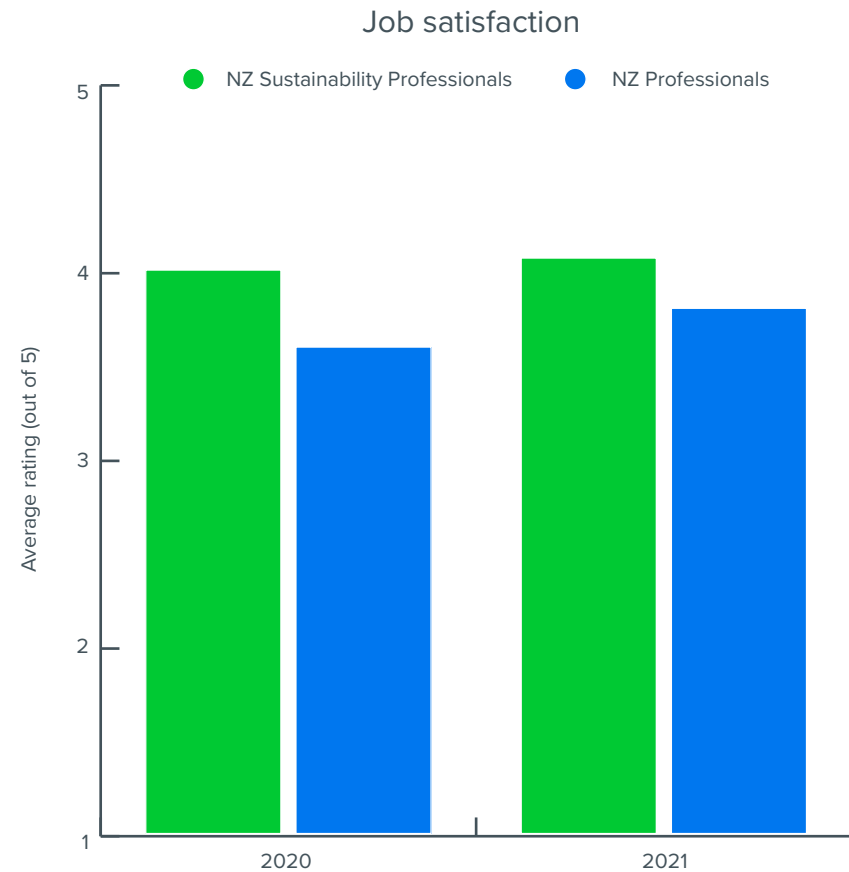
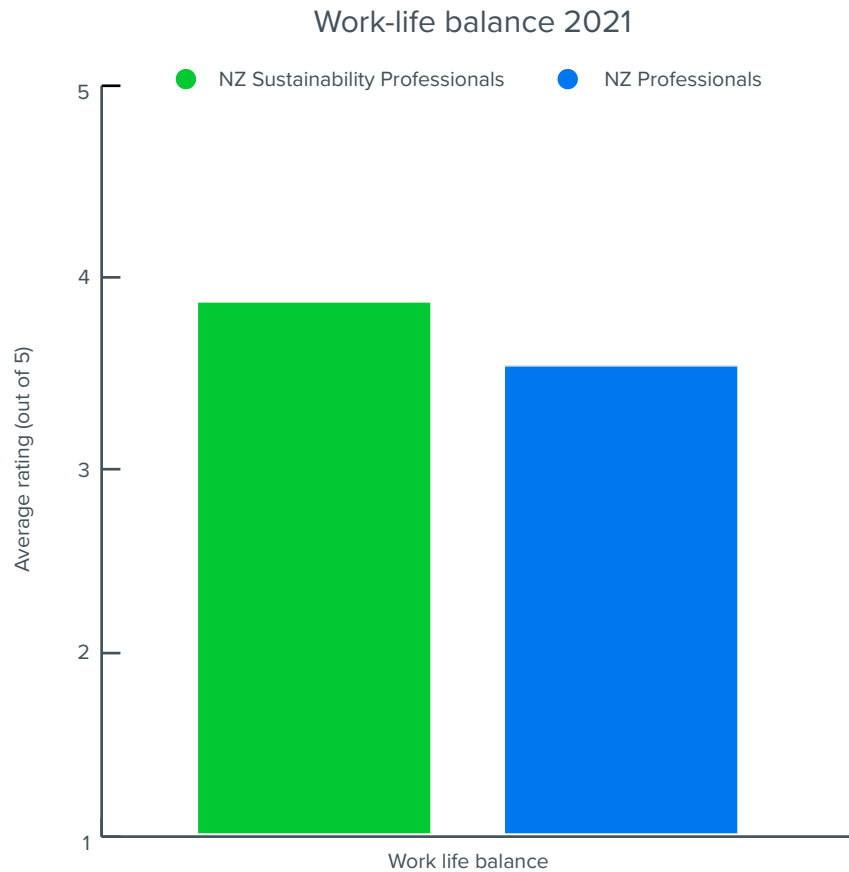
*Cynicism: (A) I have become more cynical about whether my work contributes anything; (B) I doubt the significance of my work; (C) I just want to do my job and not be bothered*

*Scale: 1 (never) to 5 (daily), with 3.0 being the midpoint. Higher score means higher forms of job burnout around emotionally exhaustion and feeling cynical about the work being done.*

“ We have the mandate to get on with the job

“ We have great management support - we are trusted and well respected as a team, so if we make a recommendation we are enabled to make it happen

# With more work-life balance, sustainability professionals are experiencing greater levels of job satisfaction



Job satisfaction: (A) Most days I am enthusiastic about my work; (B) I feel fairly satisfied with my present job; (C) I find real enjoyment in my work

Work-life balance: (A) I am satisfied with my work-life balance, enjoying both roles; (B) Nowadays, I seem to enjoy every part of my life equally well; (C) I manage to balance the demands of my work and personal/family life well

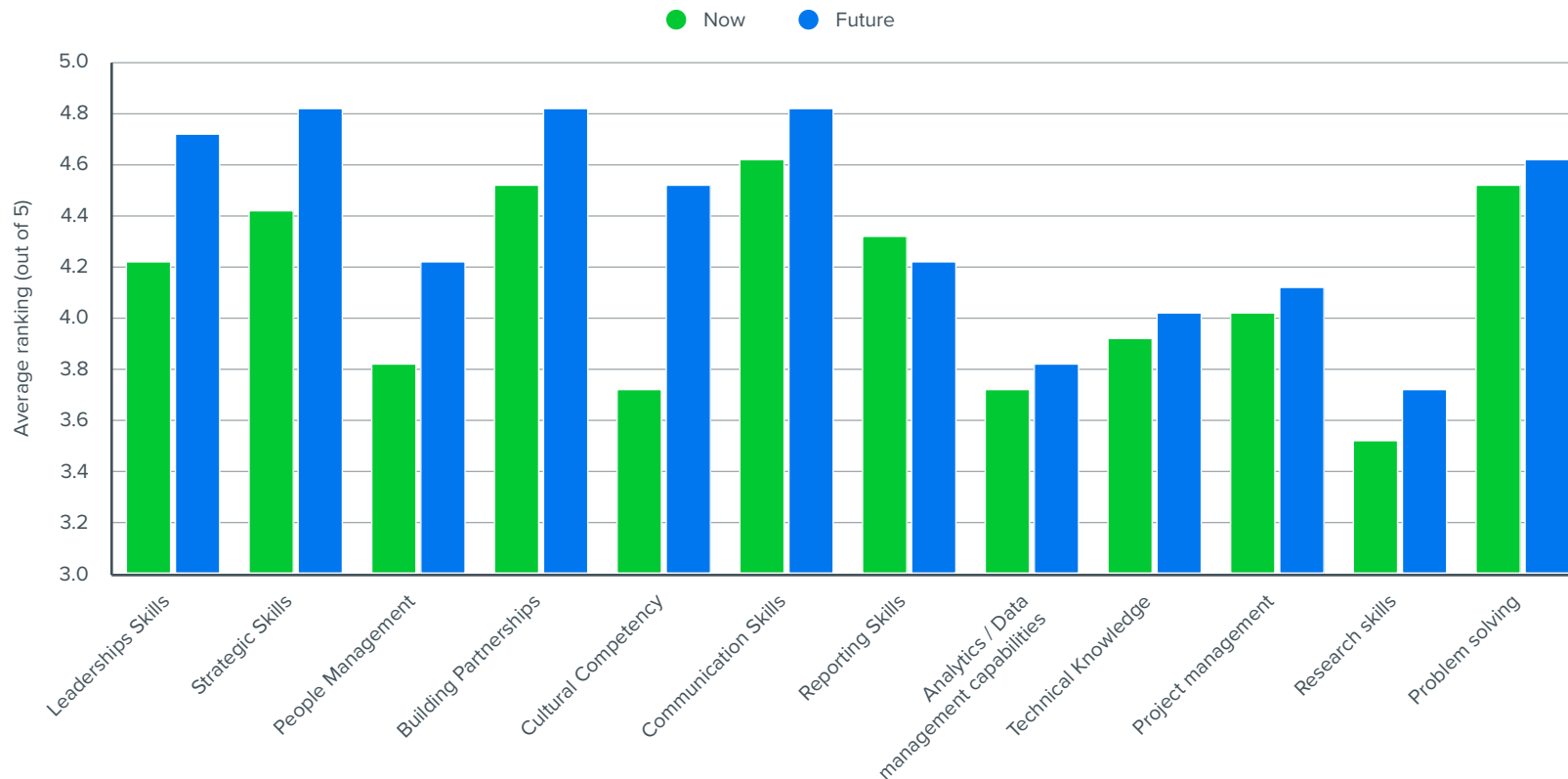
Scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with 3.0 being the midpoint. Higher score means higher work-life balance and job satisfaction [positive].



**5. Sustainability professionals are change agents and people skills are critical to development in the role**

# Growth in cultural competency, leadership skills, people management, and strategic skills are a priority for future sustainability professionals

Prioritised role competencies now versus the future

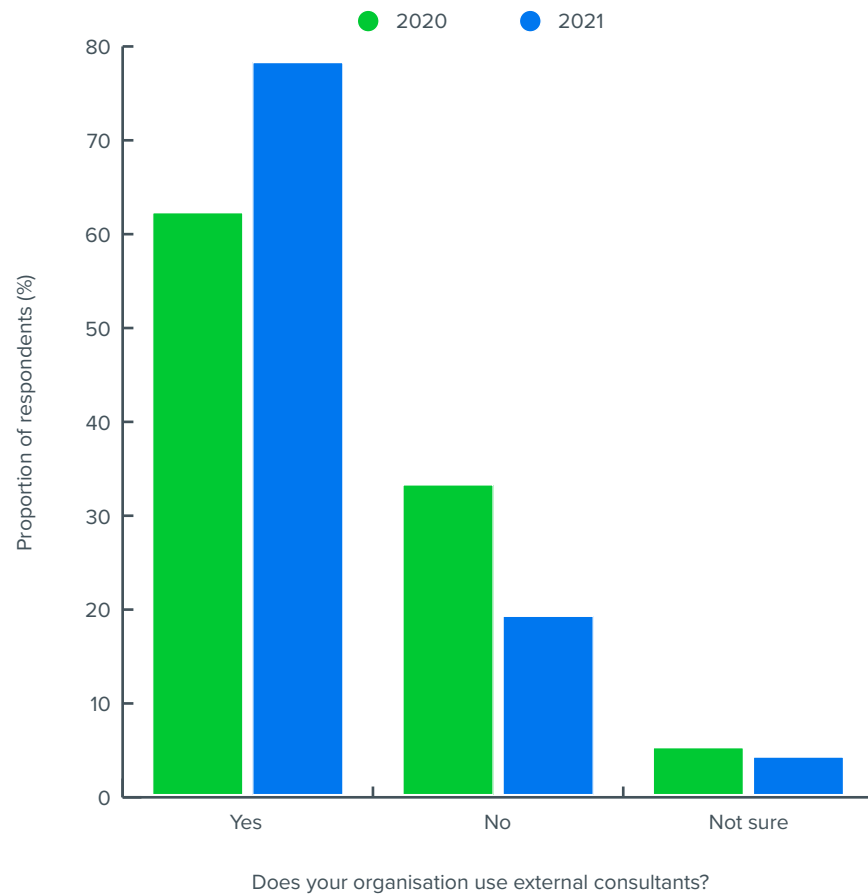


Average ranking from 1 – 5, where 1 is 'low priority' and 5 is 'high priority'

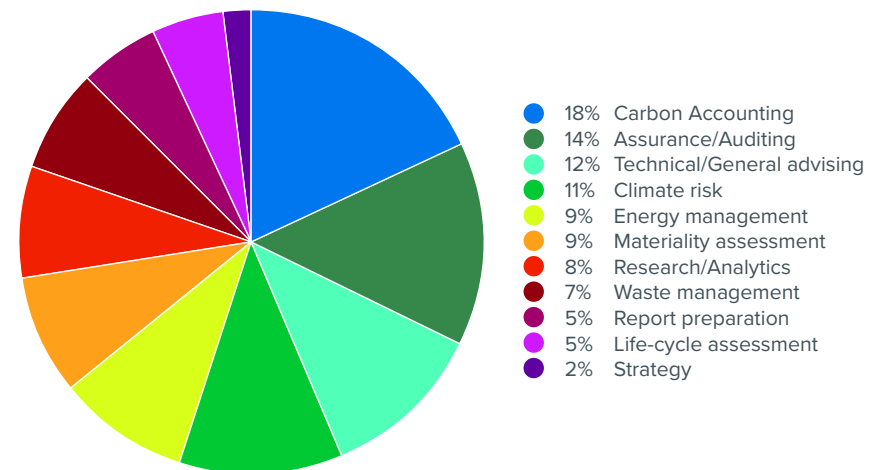
“Diverse voices, backgrounds and experience are really important - both qualitative and quantitative skills are valued

# Organisations are boosting their sustainability activities with more technical support from external consultants

External consultant use 2020 vs 2021



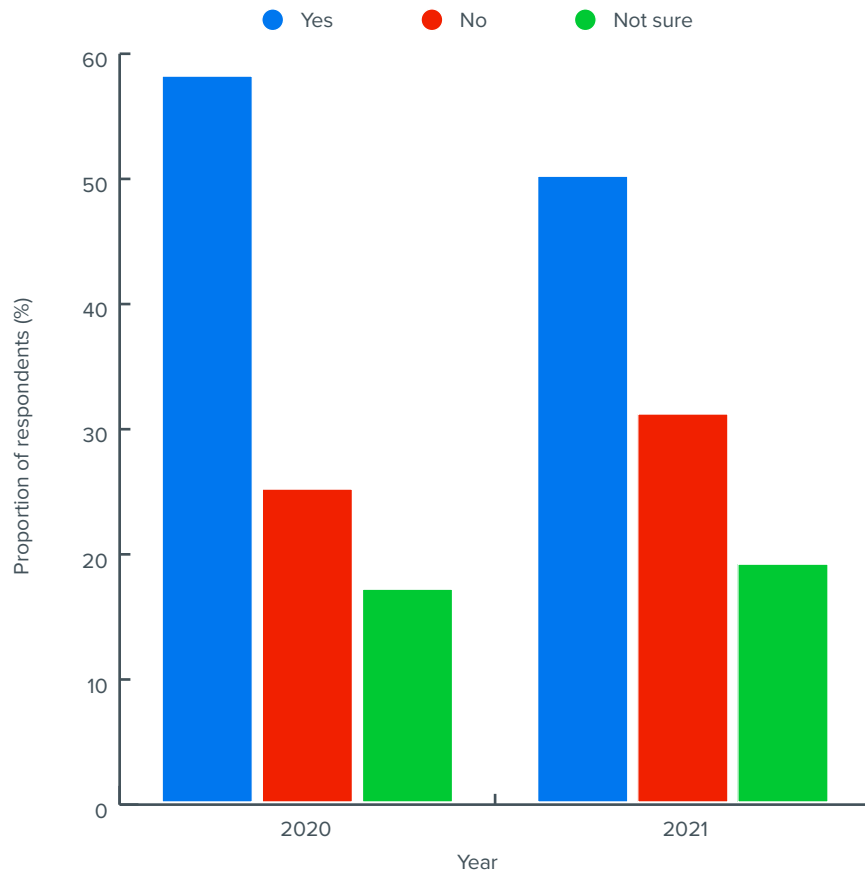
Purpose of external consultant services 2021



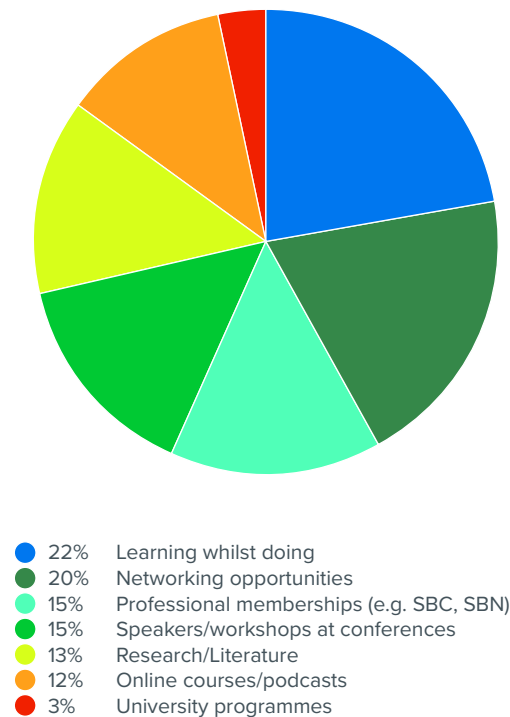
“ Consultants provide specific expertise and technical knowledge

# While having a tertiary degree may be useful in getting into a sustainability profession, it is less of a priority for capability development in the role

Sustainability professionals who believe a tertiary degree is necessary for their role



Key methods of role capability development



“ On the job learning and mentorship is crucial as you develop as a sustainability professional

# Building relationships and being opportunistic are key to progressing in a sustainability profession

## Enablers to progression:



## Barriers to progression:



Word sizing relates to how frequently enabler was identified.

Question: In your opinion, what are the three current enablers/barriers to progression in a sustainability profession?

# Acknowledgements

The following people provided valuable contribution to the development, design and execution of this research and insights report:

## CONCEPT AND LEAD SPONSOR

**Dr Sarah Holden** - Director, Oxygen Consulting

**Magnus Williams** - Sustainability Consultant, Oxygen Consulting

## CONTRIBUTING PARTNERS AND REVIEWERS

**Professor Marjo Lips-Wiersma** – Professor Ethics and Sustainability, Auckland University of Technology

**Dr Peter McGhee** – Senior Lecturer, Auckland University of Technology

**Professor Jarrod Haar** – Professor of Human Resource Management, Auckland University of Technology

**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)**

**Mike Burrell** - Executive Director, Sustainable Business Council

**Robert Perry** – Manager Sustainable Leadership, Sustainable Business Council

**Catriona Robertson** – Communications Manager, Sustainable Business Council

**Rachel Brown ONZM** – Chief Executive Officer, Sustainable Business Network

**Fiona Stephenson** – Head of Communications and Marketing, Sustainable Business Network

## DESIGN AGENCY

**Kieren Smith** – Director, Incognito Design

# Contributing organisations



## OXYGEN CONSULTING

Oxygen Consulting provides organisations with technical advice and guidance on sustainability practices, assisting clients to maximise their long-term business performance by strengthening social, environmental and economic outcomes.

Its services support all aspects of the organisational sustainability journey, including: assessing material risks and opportunities; carbon management and climate disclosure; developing a sustainability strategy and key performance metrics; building sustainability capability and capacity; project management; research and insights, and; reporting and communications.

Oxygen Consulting is a member of the Sustainable Business Council, the Sustainable Business Network, and the Climate Leaders Coalition.

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## AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY (AUT) SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH

The sustainability team at AUT researches at the intersection of engagement, resilience and sustainability action and regularly works with business and NGO's to promote employee engagement in sustainability. Its student research also gives it a strong voice to youth engagement in sustainability. AUT scored high in the Times Social Impact awards and sustainability teaching is integrated throughout all degrees in the Business School. At present the AUT Business School runs 7 sustainability courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Contact: Marjo Lips-Wiersma – Professor of Ethics and Sustainability Leadership: [marjo.lipswiersma@aut.ac.nz](mailto:marjo.lipswiersma@aut.ac.nz); 022 409 3809

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## SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS COUNCIL (SBC)

The Sustainable Business Council (SBC) is a CEO-led membership organisation with over 100 businesses from all sectors, ambitious for a sustainable New Zealand. Members represent more than \$87 billion of collective turnover, 28% of GDP, and nearly 160,000 full-time jobs. The network gives members unparalleled influence and the ability to take large-scale collective action and is aligned with the Climate Leaders Coalition. SBC is part of the BusinessNZ network and is the New Zealand Global Network partner to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development

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## SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS NETWORK (SBN)

The Sustainable Business Network (SBN) is the largest sustainable business organisation in New Zealand, with a network of 600 businesses, social enterprises and councils. SBN is transforming NZ business to meet the world's sustainability challenges, with world-class resources, professional training and deeper connections. SBN provides Kiwi businesses with the tools and connections to regenerate nature, act on climate and design out waste.

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