



# **ESG Supergroup: The best practice guide to sustainable IT**



## Executive summary

This guide is designed to help organisations navigate IT sustainability in the face of challenging macroeconomic conditions, complex supply chains and ongoing leaps in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.

As digital technologies become increasingly integral to day-to-day business operations, their environmental impact - particularly in terms of energy consumption, resource usage and e-waste - has grown exponentially.

Business and technology leaders are subsequently seeking clear, practical advice on how to align their technology strategies with broader environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals, as well as Net Zero targets.

### The purpose of this guide is to:

- **Raise awareness about the environmental footprint of IT**, dispelling myths and highlighting key facts upon which organisations can act upon.
- **Provide actionable best practices and checklists for reducing energy consumption**, managing e-waste and making responsible technology choices from 'cradle-to-grave'.
- **Encourage a culture of education, accountability and continuous improvement across all levels of the organisation** - making sustainable IT everyone's responsibility.
- **Offer unbiased and up-to-date resources** that can be adapted to different business contexts.

This sustainable IT guide has been designed with, and for, CIOs, CTOs and their executive peers who are already committed to ESG goals but are seeking pragmatic advice to deepen their impact. It could also be useful for senior executives and board members to better understand the importance of sustainable IT, and for procuring managers and employees whose actions are instrumental to building and maintaining a culture of sustainability.

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# 01

## Introduction

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### Why sustainable IT matters

## Introduction: Why sustainable IT matters

In the face of continued macroeconomic and geopolitical turmoil, the measure of business success is changing.

In capitalist markets, the focus has been primarily on economic gains; how can organisations move faster, grow market share, improve top or bottom line and deliver more value for stakeholders and shareholders.

Climate change and the increasing rate of destruction of natural biodiversity ecosystems continues to throw this economic philosophy into sharp relief. The [Paris Accord agreement](#), and subsequent national and international summits, make it clear this is a global crisis impacting every individual, and organisation.

And yet, the push and pull is such that sustainability, and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) standards, in particular, have become sensitive, politicalised topics. With the unprecedented changes in global governments, ESG funds have been pulled back, [corporate endeavours on ESG \(and DEI\) diluted](#), Net Zero goalposts delayed and the recommencement of fossil fuel endeavours and funding.

The HotTopics [ESG Supergroup](#), a community of global technology leaders, believes that sustainability must become good business practice and part of BAU.

In line with [Brundtland's \(1987\) definition of sustainability](#), we believe we must all strive to 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. But what does this mean when we apply that principle to technology?



## The hard facts: AI, IT and environmental sustainability

- **Digital technologies are responsible for approximately 1-2% of global emissions.** Despite this, technology's potential contribution to the global transition to Net Zero emissions could be as much as a 15% global reduction by 2030, according to research from the World Economic Forum.
- In 2022, **data centres** consumed approximately 460 terawatt-hours (TWh) of electricity globally, **accounting for about 2% of total electricity usage**. This is projected to more than double by 2026, driven largely by AI and cryptocurrency workloads, according to the [International Energy Agency \(IEA\)](#).
- AI applications are more energy-intensive than traditional online services. For example, ChatGPT queries typically require **almost ten times the amount of processing power** compared to a standard Google search, according to [Goldman Sachs](#).
- A 2023 [study](#) from AI platform Hugging Face and Carnegie Mellon University estimated that **generating an AI image can use as much electricity as charging your smartphone**.
- Data centres use substantial amounts of water for cooling. As one such example, **Google's hyperscale data centers averaged approximately 550,000 gallons (2.1 million litres) of water per day over the past year**.
- Training large language AI models (LLMs) can consume vast quantities of water. Training GPT-3, for instance, is estimated to have used around 700,000 litres of freshwater, according to [researchers at the Universities of Colorado Riverside and Texas Arlington](#).
- Approximately **20% of data centres in the U.S. are located in areas already experiencing water stress**, exacerbating local water scarcity issues.
- Cloud service providers are increasingly investing in renewable energy sources to power their data centres. For instance, Meta recently signed a 20-year deal to support the revival of a nuclear power plant in Illinois, USA, aiming to meet the energy demands of AI technologies. OpenAI has reportedly been exploring nuclear energy for its own data centres.
- Cloud data centres are increasingly implementing advanced cooling technologies and energy-efficient designs, which can be more sustainable compared to traditional on-premise setups.
- Only 1 in 7 unicorns (privately-held companies valued over \$1bn) has a climate target. Approximately 96% of unicorns are said to be digital-only.

## Supporting quotes from the HotTopics community

***"You won't be able to find staff to work for you, you won't be able to find customers to buy from you and you won't be able to find investors to put money into your business if you don't get on top of this problem."*** CIO, public sector (referencing ESG commitments)

***"Aligning sustainability and data strategies can provide valuable insights and efficiency opportunities across an organisation. Employee engagement is also crucial to successful sustainability efforts."*** CDIO, higher education

***"We've drafted a sustainability policy which is now mandated as part of the commercial process. If you want to be a vendor, you have to sign up to be Net Zero."*** Former CIO, healthcare

***"Last year, we moved almost all of our infrastructure into [hyperscaler]. That had a massive impact on reducing our carbon footprint."*** CIO, retail

***"To train an LLM, it's the equivalent of the electricity consumed by five US households. [AI] produces the equivalent of the lifetime of five vehicles in CO2 emissions... It's really difficult to get that right kind of commitment between [commercial and energy objectives]"*** IT executive, energy sector

***"Every single one of our meeting rooms is a hybrid meeting room so we can reduce the amount of people having to travel just simply to be in the room"***, CIO, non-profit.

## What every organisation and technology leader should know about sustainable IT

Driving progress on sustainability requires not only technical solutions but also a focus on driving behaviour change and change management, ensuring all staff understand and are motivated to support the company's wider ESG or sustainability goals. This is particularly important in the face of a lack of shared definitions on many of the core principles of ESG.

Central to this effort is measurement, including robust carbon accounting and tracking of technology usage, which provides the data needed to inform decisions and demonstrate impact (much of which can fall into organisations' CSR reports).

To guide practical action, the ESG Supergroup believes organisations should focus on the following categories when looking at IT sustainability:

- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**
- **Hardware and the circular economy**
- **Technology procurement**
- **Cloud and data centre**
- **People and behaviour change**
- **Sustainable buildings**
- **Data management and retention**

For each category, it is essential to understand the underlying sustainability challenges ('what to know'), the solutions ('what to do'), and clearly articulate who is responsible ('who should act').

By combining clear measurement, practical action and compelling narratives to gain buy-in internally, organisations can build a culture where sustainability becomes everyone's responsibility – and progress is visible and measurable.

# 02

## Artificial Intelligence (AI)

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# Artificial Intelligence (AI)

## What to know:

- AI's environmental impact is growing, especially as organisations continue to move to cloud and energy-intensive large language models (LLMs).
- There is industry concern about whether AI is driving sustainable outcomes or creating new sustainability challenges.
- AI's impact on natural resources brings about questions on ethical use, explainability and fairness.
- Technology vendors are updating their sustainability targets in response to AI's energy demands.
- At the same time, the pace of change is such that LLMs, and SLMs, are becoming more energy and cost-efficient over time (Editor's note: see China's Deepseek).

Separately, AI is emerging as an [opportunity to improve energy efficiency](#) - managing complex energy grids, improving forecasting and deploying renewable energy.

## What to do:

- Use AI where the business gains justify the environmental degradation, aiming for the least impact.
- Consider alternatives to LLMs; SLMs, for example, have less data parameters and are thus more energy-efficient.
- Explore measurement tools that examine AI's impact: for instance, tracking compute usage, energy sources and quantifying carbon impact at a more granular level (per LLM or API call, for example).
- Prioritise green development practices, such as limiting model training cycles, reducing data redundancy and selecting energy-efficient models by default. (Editor's note: research indicates that companies adopting green IT solutions experience up to a 20% reduction in operational costs).
- Consider the use of Agentic AI and automation to speed up simple business processes and reduce waste.
- Evaluate suppliers' sustainability credentials, particularly for AI and cloud services (ask them to provide the necessary data where possible).

- Be wary of rising prices - and implement internal pricing mechanisms to optimise AI usage.
- Educate staff and colleagues on the environmental benefits of using AI versus more conventional software.
- Share best practices and case studies with peers on driving efficiencies.

## Who should act:

- IT leaders (for technology selection and implementation).
- Business leaders (for aligning AI use with broader ESG goals).
- All employees (for awareness and responsible usage).



# 03

## Hardware and the circular economy

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# Hardware and the circular economy

## What to know:

- Hardware devices can contribute significantly to an organisation's carbon footprint. Manufacturing alone contributes significantly to emissions during a device's lifecycle.
- Extending the life of IT equipment is one of the most effective ways to reduce environmental impact. Research shows that adding just two years to a laptop's life can cut its carbon footprint by nearly 30%. Many employees are open to using devices for longer if they understand the environmental benefits – a 2024 study found that 75% of staff are willing to keep devices longer with the right information and support.
- E-waste is the fastest-growing waste stream globally. In 2022 alone, 62 billion kilograms of e-waste were generated, yet only 22% was properly recycled. E-waste can be a vital source of scarce resources, such as rare earth elements.
- A newly formed tech-sector driven consortium ([The NextPath Device Consortium](#)) in the UK is putting guidance on how organisations should consider device disposal at the point of procurement, thereby how they contribute to the organisation's ESG goals, reduce e-waste and provide social value through digital inclusion initiatives.
- Adopting circular economy principles (reuse, refurbishment, recycling) can unlock environmental and social value. Unused devices can be repurposed to support digital inclusion efforts and reduce e-waste.
- Scope 3 emissions, which are often hidden in the supply chain, are heavily influenced by hardware choices. Measuring and managing these should be a key procurement consideration (see section below).
- To drive ROI, recoup the residual value of devices at End-of-Life (EOL) through IT asset disposal services. This value can be added back into your organisation.

## What to do:

- Procure responsibly: Include sustainability criteria in hardware tenders and push suppliers for evidence of circular design, modularity and end-of-life recovery programmes.
- Measure impact: Use lifecycle assessment tools such as BT's [Digital Carbon Calculator](#) and [Carbon Network Dashboard](#) to baseline emissions and track real-time energy usage from IT equipment.
- Embed reuse: Default to refurbished, or remanufactured, devices where possible. New device purchases should be justified by performance needs rather than hardware refresh cycles.

- Design for circularity: Consider Device-as-a-Service (DaaS) models that support upgrade, repair, and return options while reducing capex and waste.
- Unlock your existing 'resource bank': Audit the existing device stock across offices and store rooms. Recover, refurbish or responsibly dispose of these devices through certified partners. Where viable, donate surplus devices to support digital inclusion programmes, from the likes of [Good Things Foundation](#).
- Adopt the appropriate standards: Follow ISO frameworks like [BS ISO 59010:2024](#) to guide circular IT procurement and product stewardship.
- Track and report: Align device lifecycle tracking to Scope 3 emissions and ESG dashboards. Quantify cost savings, emissions reductions and reuse volumes to show clear ROI.
- Overcome internal barriers: Address common challenges like linear budget cycles, a lack of trust in refurbished technology and low awareness of circular benefits through continued education and leadership commitment.

## Who should act:

- IT and procurement – to manage lifecycle, apply standards, and work with vendors on circular models.
- ESG and sustainability leaders – to integrate emissions tracking into ESG reporting, particularly Scope 3.
- All employees – to care for devices, extend lifespans, and return unused tech for reuse or responsible disposal.

# 04

## Technology procurement

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# Technology procurement

## What to know:

- Supplier selection can significantly influence ESG outcomes.
- Legacy technologies often draw huge power and as such are less energy-efficient.
- Technology leaders are judged on the TCO (total cost of ownership) and return on investment (ROI) of their investments. While complex, sustainable IT can drive cost savings, reduced risk and enhanced brand reputation.

## What to do:

- Vet suppliers for sustainability and ethical practices, including through sustainability assessment frameworks like CDP, EcoVadis and SBTi.
- Leverage third-party tools which help measure must also be used in the procurement process to enable responsible and sustainable decision making.
- Work with vendors to ensure they are acting sustainably. If the organisation is a mature procurer, leaders may also wish to include ESG contract clauses within procurement contracts mandating that, if a solution is sold, it enables a carbon reduction over the term of the contract.
- Leaders may wish to include an EOL clause to ensure that technology is passed on to a responsible third-party which ensures that technology is kept out of landfill and is reused. For example, leaders can follow the guidance from the tech-sector driven consortium, NextPath Device Consortium, on how to dispose of devices which can maximise ESG goals, minimise e-waste and achieve high social impact.
- Procurement teams must set basic standards like mandating reporting to CDP, EcoVadis or having Net Zero targets approved by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) as part of the procurement decision making process to make sure that the contract is carried out in a sustainable way.
- Make refurbished technology the default option; new devices must be justified.

## Who should act:

- IT and procurement teams (for supplier selection).
- Business leaders (for policy and oversight).

# 05

## Cloud and data centre choices

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# Cloud and data centre choices

## What to know:

- Cloud and data centre providers vary in sustainability claims and impact.
- A reliance on hyperscalers (large cloud providers) can complicate ESG and sustainability efforts due to their energy use and sourcing.
- Legacy technologies consume more power - and thus hinder sustainability goals through inefficiencies and higher maintenance costs (which also impacts staff workloads and financial spending).
- There is a question to what extent data centres are modernised to efficiently run AI workloads.
- Big Tech has slowly backed away from [carbon neutral claims](#), and in some cases pushed back against pre-existing Net Zero targets.

## What to do:

- Assess the sustainability of cloud and data centre providers.
- Demand data from your supplier to help model your organisation's carbon usage. (e.g. energy consumption, waste management and the use of recycled materials or renewable energy).
- Consider the environmental impact of moving workloads between providers - while there may be initial benefits of migrating, a 'lift and shift' approach could potentially increase carbon footprint if workloads are not optimised.
- Identify and decommission redundant workloads (unused or underutilised apps, servers, storage).
- Stay informed about industry developments and regulatory changes.

## Who should act:

- IT (for cloud/data centre strategy)
- Business leaders (for risk and vendor management).

# 06

## Sustainable buildings

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# Sustainable buildings

## What to know:

- Buildings remain a significant source of carbon emissions, particularly Scope 1 and 2 emissions related to heating, cooling, lighting and on-site IT equipment.
- IT leaders can influence building performance by integrating digital infrastructure (networks, sensors, endpoints) with facilities management systems.
- Modern smart building technology enables real-time monitoring of energy, occupancy, air quality and noise levels—data which can inform emissions reduction and space optimisation.
- Unified KPIs across IT and facilities can drive better building decisions and progress tracking against ESG targets (e.g. BREEAM, LEED certifications).
- Longer-term, organisations must consider the adaptation requirements of their built environments (buildings and offices, for example). This goes to show the importance of regularly conducting a business continuity (BC) impact assessment.

## What to do:

- Work with facilities teams to connect IT systems with Building Management Systems (BMS), creating unified oversight and control across your estate. Treat your network as a sensor, leverage existing LAN (e.g. Wi-Fi access points) to surface real-time data on energy usage, occupancy, air quality and noise.
- Establish sustainability KPIs that directly tie building performance to IT usage, such as the percentage of total energy attributed to IT, the adoption rate of green solutions and the digitisation of workplace processes.
- Leverage digital twins to model and optimise energy usage, maintenance schedules and space utilisation. Centralise performance insights via real-time dashboards that consolidate building and IT data.
- Mandate environmental impact assessments for all new workplace or IT projects. Track and reduce the downstream emissions of infrastructure choices, space design and energy draw, ensuring Scope 1 and 2 impacts are visible, measured and reduced.

## Who should act:

- IT leaders
- IT sustainability champions
- Facilities and workplace managers



# 07

## People and behaviour change

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# People and behaviour change

## What to know:

- Achieving ESG goals requires engagement and action from all staff, not just senior leadership or IT.
- Behaviour change is needed to embed sustainability as part of daily operations, given not only differing levels of understanding but also possible inertia and resistance to change.
- While technology is not solely responsible for reaching ESG or sustainability goals, the CIO, CTO or CDO have critical roles as ESG champions which drive change from the boardroom down. It's critical there is no leadership vacuum on how the organisation reaches these goals.

## What to do:

- Promote awareness and training on ESG best practices.
- Include sustainability awareness through onboarding and induction training for new employees.
- Set metrics to gauge behaviour (e.g. training completion, device return rates).
- Give internal working groups the autonomy and authority, acting against measurable goals to show progress is being made and the efforts of the individual are making a difference.
- Establish Responsible AI working groups or councils to oversee AI initiatives and ensure they align with broader sustainability goals.
- Enhance use of collaboration technologies to enable people to work together without being in the same location.
- Provide targeted training for IT and procurement teams on sustainability tools and frameworks.
- Consider incentives to drive change (for instance, some organisations have incentivised senior technology leaders through bonus structures).
- Use internal communications and forums to share progress and challenges.

## Who should act:

- All staff (for daily behaviors).
- Leaders (for setting tone and expectations).



# 08

## Data management and retention

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# Data management and retention

## What to know:

- Organisations often retain vast amounts of redundant, outdated or trivial (ROT) data; such as email archives, duplicated files and old project folders. These contribute to unnecessary carbon emissions and data storage costs.
- While storage may seem cheap, excess data increases backup times, slows systems, complicates migrations and undermines sustainability goals.
- Unlike other IT emissions sources, carbon and financial costs often diverge: deleting old data may not save much money immediately, but it significantly reduces emissions over time.
- Retaining less data also helps with compliance (e.g. GDPR), improves organisational agility and simplifies cloud or infrastructure transitions.

## What to do:

- Conduct regular audits to identify and delete ROT data across shared drives, cloud storage and legacy systems.
- Implement data lifecycle policies, including auto-archiving or deletion of unused data after defined time periods.
- Educate employees on the environmental and operational benefits of good data hygiene.
- Encourage departments to clean shared repositories ahead of migrations or cloud optimisation work.
- Align retention and deletion policies with regulatory compliance frameworks.
- Integrate data management into broader ESG dashboards and reporting to track carbon savings.

## Who should act:

- IT and data management teams.
- Legal, compliance, and records management.
- All staff (to reduce ROT data and follow good data hygiene practices).

# 09

## The practical checklist

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### Leadership action for sustainable IT

## The practical checklist: Leadership action for sustainable IT

### ✓ **Know your enterprise footprint**

Measure your environmental impact across data centres, cloud usage, devices and employee practices. Factor in not just Scope 1 (direct) emissions, but also Scope 2 (purchased energy) and Scope 3 (supply chain, vendor, and employee-related emissions).

### ✓ **Set ambitious but achievable goals**

Define clear sustainability KPIs aligned with your organisation's ESG commitments.

Set goals that push for genuine change, like reducing carbon intensity per workload or cutting emissions from travel and device refreshes. Validate your Net Zero targets via SBTi, the corporate climate action group.

### ✓ **Optimise efficiency across systems**

Streamline your technology stack: reduce and shutter redundant workloads and optimise software development practices. Lower compute demand will result in lower energy draw, while technology leaders should also look to introduce sustainable software architecture that promotes performance optimisation (e.g. idle resource reduction, coding standards, software modularity).

Separately, minimise unnecessary energy consumption by turning off unused IT equipment, reducing printing, embracing smart workplace technologies and encouraging responsible technology usage habits.

### ✓ **Embrace green IT innovation**

Tap into emerging technologies which enable low-energy operations; AI for smart energy usage, carbon-aware software development and circular IT practices like hardware recycling and reuse.

### ✓ **Maximise the cloud's potential**

Move away from energy-hungry on-premise systems to more efficient public cloud infrastructure. Many hyperscalers already run on renewable energy, offer sustainability dashboards to track usage and which enable economies at scale.

## ✓ **Leverage managed services**

Managed services can reduce your carbon footprint by consolidating infrastructure and driving economies of scale. Let partners take care of the back-end, while you focus on strategic sustainability outcomes of your organisation.

## ✓ **Promote hybrid and remote collaboration**

Encourage hybrid meetings and remote work as defaults. Reducing business travel and commuting significantly lowers Scope 3 emissions, especially when scaled across multi-region organisations and teams.

## ✓ **Harness data for actionable ESG insights**

Use analytics to track your organisation's sustainability performance. Good ESG data doesn't only help with reporting—it empowers better decisions, reveals efficiency gaps and builds trust with stakeholders.

## ✓ **Partner vetting**

Complete due diligence checks on the third-party service partners that provide IT equipment and IT services to your business to ensure that they have ESG and sustainability as a top objective for their company.

## ✓ **Make sustainability everyone's responsibility**

Sustainability isn't just an IT or CSO task, it's a shared mission. Embed green IT thinking into procurement, vendor selection, hiring, employee incentives/bonuses and day-to-day decision-making across the business.

# 10

## Further reading

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## Further reading

### HotTopics links:

- <https://hottopics.ht/insights/c-suite-sustainability-leadership-cio-and-cto-insights>
- <https://hottopics.ht/insights/who-is-responsible-for-sustainability>
- <https://hottopics.ht/insights/partnering-for-a-more-sustainable-future>
- <https://hottopics.ht/insights/empowering-it-to-support-esg-strategies>

### External links:

- <https://kpmg.com/uk/en/home/insights/2024/12/why-sustainable-it-programme-is-critical.html>
- <https://kpmg.com/uk/en/home/insights/2024/09/struggling-to-meet-net-zero-commitments.html>
- <https://www.computerweekly.com/opinion/Gartner-Embracing-sustainable-IT-infrastructure>
- <https://sustainabilitymag.com/articles/ibm-survey-sustainable-it-requires-a-strategic-approach>
- <https://www.flexera.com/blog/it-asset-management/cutting-carbon-in-computing-practical-tips-for-sustainable-it/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/dec/12/tiktok-carbon-footprint>
- <https://www.computerweekly.com/opinion/IT-Sustainability-Think-Tank-Lessons-from-2024-and-priorities-for-2025>
- [https://trellis.net/article/microsoft-pg-unilever-and-walmart-among-239-companies-miss-net-zero-deadline/?utm\\_source=pocket\\_shared](https://trellis.net/article/microsoft-pg-unilever-and-walmart-among-239-companies-miss-net-zero-deadline/?utm_source=pocket_shared)
- [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/684aa1f81c8d5c94e201ab63/Barriers\\_to\\_Circularity\\_Recommendations\\_Paper.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/684aa1f81c8d5c94e201ab63/Barriers_to_Circularity_Recommendations_Paper.pdf)

### External groups and resources:

- [SustainableIT.Org](#)
- [BCS \(digital inclusion\)](#)
- [Government Digital Sustainability Alliance](#) (greening IT delivery body)
- [Climate Council](#)
- [SustainableIT.Org](#)
- <https://post.parliament.uk/global-societal-challenges-and-technology/>
- [Whitepaper from Arup](#)
- <https://www.gartner.com/en/chief-information-officer/topics/sustainable-technology>
- [Greening Government Commitments 2021-2025](#)
- [Government Buying Standards \(ICT\)](#)
- [Greening Government ICT and Digital Services Strategy 2020-2025](#)
- [Greening Government Commitments Annual Report 2023 to 2024](#)

- UK Government Digital Sustainability Alliance: [Government Digital Sustainability Alliance \(GDSA\) – UK Government Sustainable ICT](#)
- Aurora- Impact of Datacentres on the GB Power System: Key Messages

## ESG & sustainability references for some of the major IT service partners:

- HP : [Sustainable Impact | HP® Official Site](#)
- Microsoft : [Environmental Sustainability | Microsoft CSR](#)
- Dell : [ESG Resources](#)
- Apple : [Environment - Apple](#)
- Samsung : [Samsung Sustainability & Environmental Strategy | Samsung UK](#)
- Amazon : [Sustainability Report](#)
- Google : [Sustainability Report](#)
- BT: [BT Group Climate Transition Plan](#)



# 11

## Keeping up-to-date

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## Keeping up-to-date

We invite you to join the ESG Supergroup—a collaborative community dedicated to advancing technology-driven sustainability best practices.

By joining the ESG Supergroup, you'll have the opportunity to share your expertise, learn from peers, and help shape the future of sustainable business. Your insights and experiences are invaluable in ensuring our guide remains current, practical, and impactful.

To contribute or suggest updates for future versions of this guide, simply reach out to our editorial team or participate in our regular Supergroup forums. We welcome new perspectives and case studies, and we're committed to making this a living resource that reflects the latest thinking and real-world solutions.

Together, we can drive meaningful change and set new standards for technology-enabled sustainability.

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