



Briefing - Green Skills Lab: insights and lessons

Background

The [Green Skills Lab](#), delivered in 2023, was Business in the Community's (BITC) first action-learning programme. It is a structured set of workshops that assists businesses in creating actionable plans that address the culture and competencies needed to deliver a just transition to net zero and achieve climate resilience.

The cohort included executives, sustainability leaders, and human resources professionals from various industries including construction, real estate, waste management, and corporate social responsibility. Together, they explored how their organisation's current and future workforces can be better equipped to address sustainability challenges. The solutions regarding workforce planning and organisational design, to address the green skills gap, were explored collectively, creating a dynamic peer-to-peer learning environment.

Dr Alex Hope, Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor of the Newcastle Business School at

Northumbria University and North-East Board Member of BITC, acted as an independent observer of the Lab and published the [research paper](#) '*Navigating Towards a Just and Sustainable Future: Evaluating the Impact of the BITC Green Skills Lab*'. Through seven semi-structured interviews, the report examines the workshop's influence on catalysing organisational change, the barriers to implementation, and offers recommendations for improving the effectiveness of BITC's Labs.

This briefing aims to distil the findings from the academic study, highlighting insights on the value of the BITC Green Skills Lab model, and outlining the lessons learned, which will inform BITC's activities in 2025. Further insights from participants, which will advise other organisations on how to apply the learnings from the Green Skills Lab, can be found in the [Green Skills Lab Blueprint](#).

Insights on value provided through the Green Skills Lab

Organisational readiness

The Lab encouraged organisations to reassess their internal processes and ensure that green skills were embedded

within their operational planning. Some participants were very much at the beginning of their journey towards acquiring green skills, with one participant revealing, *“Green skills weren’t even on our radar before this”*.

The workshops created space for businesses to reflect on their own practices and indicate areas for improvement. One participant commented *“The Lab came at just the right point for us. We were already looking at how to align our sustainability and social goals, and the Lab gave us the tools to move forward”*.

For participants who had already begun integrating green skills into their operations, the Lab focused on deepening their sustainability commitment and taking practical measures to embed this within organisational strategies. Participants reflected that the Lab helped emphasise the importance of cohesive planning and revealed gaps in their internal coordination: *“We’re trying to have some coordination and alignment between what we’re doing internally and externally”*. Another participant mentioned they *“needed to join the dots (...) to make sure that*

we were walking the walk as much as I was talking the talk”.

Peer learning and facilitation

A significant feature of the Green Skills Lab was peer learning and the opportunity to engage with participants from different industries. Despite the contributors varied backgrounds, they found the experience enriching, as they were facilitated to share best practices and discuss how to collectively overcome common challenges. It was observed by a participant that *“peer-to-peer learning was invaluable, especially for those of us just starting out on green skills”*. As the report states, this outcome supports the wider literature regarding organisational learning, highlighting that peer learning is valuable in contexts where the solution emerges through experimentation and adaptation, such as sustainability¹.

Outside of workshops, participants were encouraged to use platforms such as private groups on LinkedIn and Microsoft Teams to share learnings. The paper outlined that it would be beneficial to formalise the use of these mechanisms in

the future i.e. submitting reflection exercises.

Although peer-to-peer learning was mostly praised, one participant remarked, *"It was sometimes hard to bridge the gap between those of us who've been doing this for years and those who were just starting out"*, emphasising the importance of diligent facilitation. Another reflection on the cross-sectoral Lab composition was the need for industry-specific support. Different industries can face distinctive challenges that require tailored solutions, and these challenges were not always fully addressed in peer-to-peer learning. For example, participants from sectors with higher carbon footprints need specific guidance with incorporating green skills ideas into complex supply chains and regulatory environments.

Lastly, the facilitation of the Lab should be adapted to increase experiential learning. Including hands-on activities, such as simulations, would enable participants to apply their new skills in practical situations, increasing retention and confidence.

Long-term sustainability goals & innovation

For many participants, the Green Skills Lab also encouraged reflection on their long-term sustainability strategies. One participant stated that it *"...gave us the framework to think long-term, beyond just meeting our immediate goals, to how we can sustain these efforts over time"*. This shift towards thinking long-term can be beneficial to those who have found it challenging to maintain momentum.

These long-term goals draw attention to the importance of organisations creating an internal culture of innovation and adaptability. Several participants shared successes in applying skills gained from the Lab to generate both environmental and social value, such as implementing green apprenticeship programmes or internal process innovation. When employees are encouraged to take responsibility for sustainability initiatives, they can adapt creatively to the evolving demands of a changing world, which is an essential skill required for a just transition and often improves the performance or quality of a service or productⁱⁱ. BITC could support innovation by incorporating more tools and

frameworks around design thinking approaches unique to sustainability challenges.

Implementing green skills over the long term can be complex. Participants highlighted the need for ongoing support from BITC, noting *“we’re going to need more than just one-off workshops to make this work. Sustained engagement from BITC will be key to keeping us on track.”* A formal alumni could help maintain momentum. This could take the form of follow-up sessions, ensuring progress is sustained well beyond the programme.

Lessons learnt

Participants found that the Green Skills Lab provided valuable insights, however, various barriers to implementation occurred.

Business short-termism

Several participants alluded to the challenge of long-term sustainability goals and short-term organisational priorities. One participant described that their organisation had difficulty balancing their immediate business needs with their commitment to net-zero – *“We had expected*

to develop a green skills matrix in six months, but operational pressures delayed us”.

Financial and time constraints were highlighted as key obstacles in turning the knowledge gained from the Lab into tangible action. Businesses need guidance demonstrating the long-term benefits of green skills to improve internal buy-in and view sustainability initiatives as a wise financial strategy rather than a financial trade-offⁱⁱⁱ.

Clear terminology

The lack of unified language across industries and consistent terminology surrounding green skills and just transition stood out as another significant barrier. This barrier is magnified when trying to make green skills accessible and relevant to employees, such as expanding green skills knowledge to a workforce unfamiliar with sustainability terminology. A participant mentioned, *“Just transition isn’t a term we use, so there was some resistance when we started to introduce it”.* These themes echo Phoenix Insights' report on resourcing the net zero transition, which found a lack of clarity on what defines a ‘green job’, deterring people from applying for roles as

they did not understand what the term meant^{iv}.

Internal alignment

Internal collaboration between departments is important when embedding a green skills plan within an organisation. This can be a slow process for organisations with complex structures. A participant noted *“It’s a struggle to get everyone on board when sustainability isn’t seen as a priority by all departments”*. The broader organisational culture hadn’t fully aligned with the goals of the sustainability team, making it difficult to integrate green skills more comprehensively into their operations.

Building on insights in 2025

BITC’s future Labs can offer guidance, tools, and frameworks to build a stronger business case for sustainability, enabling organisations to communicate more effectively about the long-term benefits of responsible business green skills initiatives. This could include training on cost-benefit analysis and return on investment modelling, supporting participants when consulting internal stakeholders and

securing the resources needed for effective implementation.

Nature & Resilience Lab

BITC acknowledges the usefulness of the Lab in collectively progressing action on emerging issues. The Nature & Resilience Lab will encourage employees to scope their impact and dependencies on nature and fundamentally evaluate business resilience. The programme covers the recommendations of the Taskforce for Nature-related Financial Disclosures and best practice biodiversity commitments from Science Based Targets for Nature.

Building on experimental learnings from the pilot, BITC has extended the duration to 12 months, so businesses have enough time to progress real-time projects specific to their operations and challenges.

Similarly, to remove accessibility barriers, BITC published its [Nature & Resilience factsheet](#) which unpacked definitions around nature, biodiversity and resilience. This permits non-sustainability to join the Lab, increasing internal alignment.

Responsible AI Lab

The Responsible AI Lab promotes forward thinking in business, as new advanced digital technologies emerge. The workshops will cover AI across themes of responsible business, cybersecurity, workplace, society and environment.

The Lab will build on learnings from the pilot. Briefing papers will be prepared by academics before the workshops for participants, detailing problem statements and distilling the vast amount of information on the topic to inform participants and subsequent discussions.

Executive engagement

Another outcome of the Green Skills Lab has been an increase in resource allocation, in business, for sustainability initiatives, due to heightened leadership awareness and engagement. Continued leadership support is required to keep the momentum going, especially when faced with competing short-term financial pressures. Offering tailored workshops that highlight the financial and reputational benefits of green skills, reinforces the link between sustainability and long-term business resilience. Participants noted that

the successful integration of sustainability into core organisational strategies relied heavily on having committed leaders. BITC has the opportunity to deepen engagement with executives through its Leadership Council.

Sector-specific peer-learning

To overcome sector-specific challenges, BITC can create spaces and case studies tailored to the unique issues faced by different industries. This approach will enable participants to apply the knowledge gained through the Lab more practically and constructively within their operational contexts. This will be beneficial to all participants, but especially industries with high carbon footprints or complex supply chains. BITC set up the Construction Sector Network in 2024, which brings together representatives from the sector and wider value chain – including housing associations – to share key learning priorities and challenges. The group will meet quarterly, with the next session taking place in February 2025. Given the strong link between green skills and social value, there is a likelihood that this group will focus on green skills in future sessions.



Next steps:

- Join our [Nature & Resilience Learning Group](#).
- [Contact us](#) to discuss participation in BITC's AI Lab.
- Engage C-Suite in [BITC Leadership Council](#).
- [Get in touch](#) to join the Construction Sector Network.

ⁱ Pfeffer, J. & Sutton, R. I. (2006). Evidence-based management. Harvard Business Review.

ⁱⁱ Linde, M. E. (1995). Toward a New Conception of the. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 101.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cote, C. (2021, April 13). Making the Business Case for Sustainability. Retrieved from Harvard Business School Online: <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/business-case-for-sustainability>

^{iv} Phoenix Insights. (2024, October 16). Retrieved from

https://www.thephoenixgroup.com/media/skxey3zi/resourcing_the_net_zero_transition_23_oct.pdf