



# Benefits Briefing Report

Perspectives on Sustainability  
from a Survey of Employers and Brokers  
(Q4, 2023)

National Employee Benefits Advisory Forum (NEBAF)

## Background & Methodology

The National Employee Benefits Advisory Forum (NEBAF) recently conducted an online information exchange among its members.

This exchange explored members' experiences with and feedback around **sustainability**.

The information in this Briefing is based on an online survey taken by roughly 300 HR decision makers and 300 employee benefits brokers and consultants.

The exchange took place in August 2023.

## Executive Summary

This Briefing reports on employers' and brokers' experiences and expectations with regard to sustainability. For this exchange, we defined sustainability as addressing issues related to climate/environment, diversity/equity/inclusion, health/well-being, and economic prosperity/community.

- Nearly two in three employers say that sustainability is important to their organizations. Brokers see a lower incidence of this; on average, they report that sustainability is important to about half of their clients.
- About three in five employers expect sustainability to be more important to their organizations two years from now. A similar number of brokers think that sustainability will be more important to clients in the next two years.

This exchange delved into four specific aspects of sustainability: climate/environment, diversity/equity/inclusion (DEI), health/well-being, and economic prosperity/community.

- Among the four aspects asked about, both groups report that health/well-being issues are most important, followed by DEI issues. About four in five employers say health/well-being issues are currently important, while brokers estimate these issues are important to about seven in ten clients, on average.
- Health/well-being is also the area where most employers and brokers have seen an increase in importance (more than for other aspects) over the last year.
- Both employers and brokers also most commonly name health/well-being issues as expected to be more important two years from now.

# Sustainability

In a recent exchange, we asked participants about sustainability, its importance to their organizations/clients' organizations, and expected future importance.

The term sustainability has evolved over time, and now is generally thought of as the balance between the environment, equity, and the economy.

For this exchange, we defined **sustainability as addressing issues related to climate/environment, diversity/equity/inclusion, health/well-being, and economic prosperity/community.**

## Did you know?

In 1987, the United Nations formally defined sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

<https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability#>

## Current Importance of Sustainability

We first asked participants about the current importance of sustainability. We asked employers how important sustainability currently is to their organizations, and we asked brokers for what percentage of their clients is sustainability important/very important.

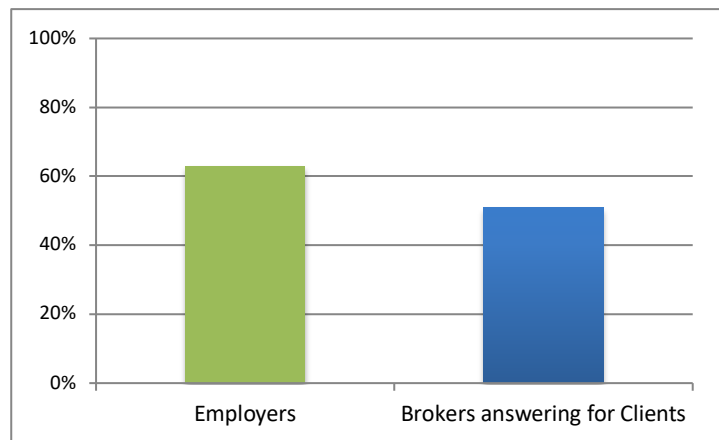
**About two in three participating employers indicate that sustainability is currently important to their organization.**

Larger employers are more likely to say that sustainability is important, compared to smaller employers.

**On average, brokers report that sustainability is important/very important for about half of their clients.**

Results are shown in the chart below.

**Importance of Sustainability**  
*% Saying "Important"*



## Change in Importance of Sustainability

Then we asked both groups how the importance of sustainability has changed in the past year.

**Among employers, nearly three in five report that sustainability is more important than it was a year ago. Very few (4%) say**

## Spotlight on Trends: AccountAbility 7 Sustainability Trends 2023 Report

In July 2023, AccountAbility, a trusted global ESG Consulting and Standards firm, published the results of their Sustainability Trends 2023 Report. Based on research by the firm's Global Leadership, Consulting, Research, and Standards teams, this report identified 7 key trends in sustainability:

1. Navigating the Net Zero Landscape: With an increased volume of net zero commitments, some companies will face risks and other will face rewards for having committed
2. Stakeholder Activism is Getting Louder: Businesses are facing increasing pressure to show action and progress on a range of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) issues
3. Geopolitics, the new “G” in ESG: Organizations will be challenged to address the role geopolitics is playing in the business landscape
4. Building an Effective, Future-Focused Board: Shifting demands and expectations will impact future-focused Boards
5. Next Generation ESG Disclosure and Reporting: A shift from voluntary to mandatory ESG Disclosure will put greater attention on corporate sustainability disclosure practices
6. The Road to a Sustainable Value Chain: Sustainability criteria in supply chains may drive organizational shifts
7. Nature Based Assets Will Drive Valuations: Nature-based assets are increasingly recognized for their significant impact on valuations

To access and read the full report:  
<https://www.accountability.org/insights/accountability-7-sustainability-trends-2023-report-shaping-the-global-business-agenda/>

## Change in Importance of Sustainability (cont.)

sustainability is less important. We don't see any differences based on size of organization.

**Roughly half of brokers tell us that sustainability has become more important for their clients over the past year.**

It's not surprising to see sustainability trending up in importance.

## Expected Change in Importance in Next 2 Years

We also asked participants about their expectations for the future importance of sustainability. We asked both groups how important they think sustainability will be to their organizations/clients' organizations two years from now.

**About three-fifths of employers think sustainability is going to be more important to their organization two years from now.**

Again, few say less important (4%). There are no differences in expectations by size of companies – most companies, no matter the size, expect sustainability to be more important.

Among brokers, we see similar results. **Nearly three-fifths anticipate that sustainability will be more important to clients in the next 2 years.**

## Aspects of Sustainability

We then asked participants specifically about four aspects of sustainability, their importance, and their expected future importance: climate/environment, DEI, health/well-being, and economic prosperity/community.

## Current Importance of Climate/Environmental Issues

We asked participants about the current importance of climate/environmental issues. We asked employers how important climate/environmental issues currently are to their organizations, and we asked brokers for what percentage of their clients are climate/environmental issues important/very important.

**Two in five participating employers say that climate/environmental issues are currently important to their organizations.** One in three say these issues are not that important to them. There are no differences in results by size of organization.

Brokers share similar results; **brokers report that, on average, climate/environmental issues are important/very important for about one-third of clients.** Interestingly, about one in five brokers, those serving primarily small and regional organizations, say they don't know how important these issues are to their clients.

Given recent news around climate change and extreme weather, these results are somewhat surprising.

## Feedback on the National Employee Benefits Advisory Forum (NEBAF)

As part of this exchange, we asked for participants' feedback on this forum - the National Employee Benefits Advisory Forum.

Nearly all employers (91%) and brokers (93%) rated their experiences with NEBAF as 'positive.'

We appreciate the positive feedback, and we continue to grow this community. If you know of anyone who would like to be a part of this forum, visit [www.nebaf.org](http://www.nebaf.org) or email us at [service@nebaf.org](mailto:service@nebaf.org).

## Change in Importance of Climate/Environmental Issues

We also asked employers and brokers how the importance of climate/environmental issues has changed in the past year.

**Two-fifths of employers say that climate/environmental issues are more important to their organization than a year ago.** We don't see any differences based on size of organization.

Brokers report minimal change in the importance of climate/environmental issues among clients in the past year; **only about one in four say climate/environmental issues have increased in importance for their clients in the past year.**

## Expected Change in Importance in Next 2 Years

We asked both groups how important they think climate/environmental issues will be to their organizations/clients' organizations two years from now.

**Among participating employers, more than half expect climate/environmental issues to be more important to their organizations two years from now.** There are no differences in expectations by size of organization.

**Nearly half of brokers think that climate/environmental issues will be more important to their clients in the next two years.** There's some indication that more larger market brokers say this than small market brokers do.

## Current Importance of DEI Issues

We also asked participants about the current importance of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) issues. We asked employers how important DEI issues currently are to their organizations, and we asked brokers for what percentage of their clients are DEI issues important/very important.

More employers say DEI is important than do about climate/environmental issues. **More than three-fifths indicate that DEI issues are currently important.** Fifteen percent report that these issues are not that important to their organizations – these tend to be small organizations.

Brokers also see these issues as being more important to clients. **They tell us that DEI issues are important/very important to about half of their clients, on average.**

## Change in Importance of DEI Issues

We asked both groups how the importance of DEI issues has changed in the past year.

**Among participating employers, about half indicate that DEI issues are more important to their organizations than they were a year ago.** There aren't any differences by size of organization.

## Talking About: Topics You'd be Interested in

We asked participants what topics they would like to see asked about in future exchanges. Here's what some of you mentioned:

### Employers' responses:

*"Administration of state benefits, benefits technology vendors."*

*"AI and impact on benefit carriers."*

*"Cost cutting strategies on medical benefits."*

*"More research in what employees really value, what benefits they will pay for."*

*"Benefit funding strategies, self-funding, etc., Employee wellness, EAP, Employee engagement linkage to benefit strategies, Family friendly benefit features."*

### Brokers' responses:

*"Emerging benefit trends, cost-sharing trends, benchmarking data."*

*"More compliance topics."*

*"Work at home issues. Less private offices and desk sharing issues."*

*"Long term solutions for simplifying health care and making it more cost effective."*

*"Emerging technology trends. Applications of AI and machine-based learning."*

## Change in Importance of DEI Issues (cont.)

**When it comes to DEI issues, about half of brokers report these have increased in importance for their clients in the past year.**

This is about double the number that reported an increase in importance of climate/environmental issues.

## Expected Change in Importance in Next 2 Years

We asked both groups how important they think DEI issues will be to their organizations/clients' organizations two years from now.

**About half of employers think DEI issues will be more important to their organization in the next two years.** There are no differences in expectations by size of organization.

Roughly half of brokers expect that DEI issues will be more important to their clients two years from now.

Employers' and brokers' expectations for future importance are in line with each other, when it comes to DEI.

## Current Importance of Well-being Issues

We asked both employers and brokers about the current importance of well-being issues (including health, physical and emotional well-being). We asked employers how important well-being issues currently are to their organizations, and we asked brokers for what percentage of their clients are well-being issues important/very important.

**Among sustainability aspects asked about, well-being is the topmost important issue.**

**About four in five employers indicate that well-being issues are currently important to them** – and this is consistent across all sizes of organizations.

Brokers also see this as important to employers; **on average, brokers estimate that well-being issues are important/very important for more than two-thirds of clients.**

## Change in Importance of Well-being Issues

We also asked employers and brokers how the importance of well-being issues has changed in the past year.

Well-being issues are clearly trending up in importance. **About two in three employers report that well-being issues have increased in importance since a year ago** (there are no differences based on size of organization) and **about four in five brokers say well-being issues have increased in importance for their clients in the past year.**

There's been much in the news media about mental health, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.

## Expected Change in Importance in Next 2 Years

We also asked participants how important they think well-being issues will be to their organizations/clients' organizations two years from now.

**More than three-fifths of employers think well-being issues will become more important to their organizations in the next two years.** There are no differences in expectations by size of organization.

**More than three-fourths of brokers expect well-being issues will be more important to their clients in the next two years.**

The importance of these issues continues to trend up among both employers and brokers, which will most likely impact the benefits landscape, its offerings, and costs.

## Current Importance of Economic Prosperity/Community Issues

We asked both groups about the current importance of economic prosperity/community issues – particularly as focused on the underserved and underrepresented. We asked employers how important economic prosperity/community issues currently are to their organizations, and we asked brokers for what percentage of their clients are economic prosperity/community issues important/very important.

**About half of employers say economic prosperity/community issues are currently important;** this is slightly more than climate/environmental issues, but fewer than other issues. Economic prosperity/community issues are not important to about one in five employers.

Brokers see these issues as being less important to clients, compared to employers. **Brokers report that economic prosperity/community issues are important/very important to about one in three clients, on average.**

## Change in Importance of Economic Prosperity/Community Issues

We also asked employers and brokers how the importance of **economic prosperity/community** issues has changed in the past year.

**About one in three participating employers indicate that economic prosperity/community issues are more important as compared to a year ago.** We don't see any differences based on size of organization.

Few brokers - **only about one in four - say economic prosperity/community issues have increased in importance for their clients over the past year.**



## Expected Change in Importance in Next 2 Years


We asked both groups how important they think economic prosperity/community will be to their organizations/clients' organizations two years from now.

**About two-fifths of employers expect economic prosperity/ community issues to be more important two years from now.**

We don't find any differences in expectations by size of organization.

**About one in three participating brokers anticipate that economic prosperity/ community issues will be more important to their clients in the next two years.** This is the area of sustainability that brokers expect to increase the least in importance.





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We are continuing to invite Human Resource executives, Finance executives, Brokers, and Consultants to join the **National Employee Benefits Advisory Forum**. If you or someone you know is interested in joining, please visit [www.NEBAF.org](http://www.NEBAF.org) and click Join Us. Or, email us at [service@nebaf.org](mailto:service@nebaf.org) for more information on how to join.