SUSTAINABLE SQUARE | Squarely

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR ESG TEAMS

The ESG Effort Map

What to automate, what to get expert advice on, and what to own.

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Not all ESG work deserves the same response

Layla's cycle

PROLOGUE

It is the second week of the reporting cycle. Layla, head of sustainability at a listed group in the GCC, opens the spreadsheet her team has used for three years. It has more than 200 rows, one for every disclosure.

Every row looks the same. Same font, same colour, same deadline column. Row 14 asks for total electricity consumption. Row 15 asks for the company's exposure to climate transition risk. On the spreadsheet, they are equals.

By week six, her two analysts have spent most of their time sending reminder emails. By week ten, the climate risk section is still empty, the auditor has questions about last year's Scope 3 estimate, and the board wants a draft in a fortnight.

Layla's team is not short of effort. It is short of a way to tell the work apart.

Layla is fictional, but if her cycle sounds familiar, this guide is for you.

The problem with a flat list

Layla's spreadsheet is not unusual.
Most reporting cycles start with a long list of disclosures, a deadline that feels closer than it is, and a team that is already stretched.

The list, however, hides a problem, as it treats every item as equal. A unit conversion and a climate scenario analysis sit side by side, as if they need the same people, the same time and the same care. They do not.

ESG data is unusually diverse, and some of it arrives monthly, some once a year. Some is a number on a utility bill, some is a narrative about governance, some is a ratio that depends on how you define both halves. All while the frameworks behind it keep moving, locally and internationally.

When teams treat all this the same way, three things tend to happen:

01 **Effort spreads evenly,** so the hardest work gets the same attention as the easiest.

02 **Experts lose time chasing data** instead of allocating their time to judge and review it.

03 **Judgment calls get squeezed** into the final weeks, when there is least time to get them right.

This guide offers a simple way out. It sorts ESG work by two questions, and gives each type of work the response it deserves.

Who this guide is for, and how to use it

Written for the people who carry the ESG reporting cycle.

Head of sustainability or ESG manager	You run the cycle, you own the deadline, and you feel every delay.
CFO or finance team	IFRS S1 and S2 are designed to be reported alongside the financial statements, and you are increasingly asked to stand behind the numbers.
Investor relations or company secretary	You field ESG questions from the exchange, investors and rating providers, and need answers you can defend.
Data owners in HR, operations, procurement and facilities	You provide the numbers, often without seeing where they end up or why they matter.
Banks and financial institutions	You report on your own operations, your financing and your sustainable finance instruments, often to several audiences at once.

It works whether you are preparing your first report or your fifth. First-time reporters get a map for setting up. Experienced teams find where their hours are leaking. And it works whether you report in-house, with advisors, with a platform, or with all three.

The method has three steps

01

List

Pull every task from your last cycle: disclosures, calculations, reviews, approvals and meetings. If it took time, it goes on the list.

→

02

Place

Ask the two test questions on page 4 for each task, and plot it on the matrix. Borderline tasks are worth a team discussion.

→

03

Respond

Give each quadrant its response and an owner. Then plan your cycle around it, so Advise work happens early and Own it work gets time before drafting.

THREE WAYS TO READ IT

In ten minutes
Read page 4 and the opening of each quadrant page. You will know where your biggest gap is.

In one sitting
Read it end to end, including the expert notes and the examples.

As a team
Print the worksheet on page 12 and map last cycle's tasks together in one working session.

Ready to map your cycle?

Start with the worksheet on page 12. Want a second opinion? Book a 30-minute session with our advisors and bring your task list. **Get in touch:** info@sustainablesquare.com

Two questions place every ESG task

AXIS 1 · RECURRENCE

How often does this task come back?

Some ESG work is a heavy lift you do once and then maintain. Some comes back, in full, every single cycle.

TEST QUESTION

Will I do this again, in full, next cycle?

Very little in ESG is truly one-off. Templates, assessments and strategies all need revisiting as regulations and your business change. "Once, then reviewed" means the heavy lift happens once, followed by lighter reviews.

AXIS 2 · JUDGMENT

How much expert judgment does it need?

Some ESG work has one right answer, and a clear method gets you there, while some depends on who is doing it.

TEST QUESTION

Could two qualified people reach different answers? If yes, the task is judgment-heavy.

Judgment is also a measure of expertise. The more judgment a task needs, the more it matters who does it.

Four quadrants with four responses



Own it is the signature quadrant: the work that never goes away, and where platform and expertise meet.

Why judgment, and not impact?

We also considered impact: how critical a task is to the quality of your report and your wider ESG journey. But most high-impact tasks turn out to be judgment-heavy, and judgment says more about who should do the work.

Click a quadrant to jump to its page.

When Layla tried the two questions on her 200 rows, the spreadsheet split into four very different piles. The pages that follow take them one at a time.

Template it: build once, review yearly.

Work with a clear method that you set up once and then maintain. The effort lies in doing it properly the first time.

Layla's cycle

PART 1

Layla's template was three years old. It had served her well, until the exchange updated its ESG guidance and the group acquired a new subsidiary. Neither appeared in her 200 rows. Nobody had been asked to check.

Ask yourself

01 Is there a recognised structure or checklist for this?

02 Once built, will it mostly stay the same next year?

03 Would a mistake here be easy to spot and fix?

Typical tasks

Disclosure gap list
What your frameworks and exchanges require, and what you already cover.

Disclosure mapping
Each requirement linked to a topic, a data point and an owner.

Baseline data collection
The first full collection of your numbers, the reference for every later year.

Data owner set-up
Who provides, reviews and approves each data point.

KPI definitions
One agreed definition per metric, so "employee" means the same thing every year.

COMMON MISTAKE

Treating the template as finished

Frameworks change, regulators and exchanges issue new guidance, and businesses restructure. A template nobody reviews slowly drifts out of date, and nobody notices until the report is being drafted.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE

Build it once, review it every cycle

Use a proven structure. Review it at the start of every cycle. Plan for a short review, not a rebuild.

SUSTAINABILITY EXPERT'S NOTE

Why a template needs yearly review

New framework versions, new exchange guidance and changes to your own structure, such as a new subsidiary or a merged business unit, all change what you need to report. A short review at the start of each cycle keeps the template accurate and keeps last year's data comparable.

IN PRACTICE

Petromin

Petromin's first standalone sustainability report covered all eight of its business verticals, with 149 disclosures at holding level and around 127 for each subsidiary. When the group re-organised into four clusters the following year, the reporting structure was adapted while the previous year's data was kept for comparability.

→ ***With the template fixed, Layla looked at where her team's hours were actually going.***

HOW WE HELP

Sustainable Square sets up disclosure mapping and data ownership during onboarding. In Squarely, the pre-mapped disclosure library and user assignment at disclosure and data-point level give you this template from day one.

Automate: let a system run it.

Work that repeats every cycle and follows a fixed method. It needs accuracy and consistency, not interpretation. This is where most hours disappear, and where they are easiest to win back.

Layla's cycle

PART 2

Layla asked her analysts to log a normal week. Most of it went on chasing: reminders to facilities, follow-ups with HR, a utility bill that existed only as a photo on someone's phone. The sustainability expertise she had hired them for was barely used.

Ask yourself

01 Do we do this the same way every time?

02 Could a clear rule produce the right answer?

03 Does it involve chasing, copying, converting or checking?

Typical tasks

Chasing data owners
Reminders and follow-ups.

Collecting data
Structured data collection forms, not spreadsheets and email.

Unit conversions
Litres to cubic metres, kWh to MWh.

Scope 1 and 2 emissions calculations
Applying verified emission factors.

Data quality checks
Completeness, units, plausible ranges, year-on-year changes, evidence attached.

Evidence and audit trail
Supporting documents stored, every edit and approval recorded.

COMMON MISTAKE

Keeping experts on this work

When advisors and sustainability leads spend their days on reminders and conversions, the judgment-heavy work waits until it is urgent.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE

Let a system run it

Keep people for the exceptions: the figure that suddenly doubles, the missing invoice, the data owner who has left the company.

SUSTAINABILITY EXPERT'S NOTE

What a data quality check covers.

Is every required data point filled in? Is it in the right unit? Does it fall within a plausible range? Is a large change from last year explained? Is the evidence attached? Automated checks catch the routine issues, so reviewers can focus on the ones that need a conversation.

IN PRACTICE

Alizz Islamic Bank

Alizz Islamic Bank runs its reporting on Squarely, with 41 platform users across 13 ESG topics and more than 160 disclosures. At that scale, reminders, deadlines and validation cannot run on email.

→ *Freeing up those hours raised a harder question: what should the team be doing instead?*

HOW WE HELP

Squarely runs this quadrant: structured data collection forms, reminders and deadline alerts, automated Scope 1 and 2 calculations, AI-powered first-layer data validation before consultant review, and evidence storage with full audit trails.

Advise: get the foundations right

Foundational decisions that shape everything after them. They do not repeat every cycle, but when they happen they need deep expertise. Getting them wrong costs you in every cycle that follows.

Layla's cycle

PART 3

Layla's material topics came from an assessment run three years earlier, before the group changed its strategy. Every data point her team collected traced back to that list. If the list was out of date, so was everything built on it.

Ask yourself

01 Does this set the direction for the next few years?

02 Could two experts reasonably disagree on the answer?

03 Do we need knowledge we do not have in-house?

Typical tasks

Materiality assessment
Which sustainability topics matter most to your business and your stakeholders. In our experience, a full refresh is needed about every 2 years, with a lighter review each cycle.

First climate risk and scenario analysis
How climate change could affect your business under different futures.

IFRS S1 and S2 readiness
Where you stand against the ISSB standards, and what it takes to close the gap.

Target setting
Emissions and other targets that are credible, measurable and achievable.

Sustainability strategy and policy
Your priorities, commitments and governance.

COMMON MISTAKE

Treating these as one-off projects

They do not end with a document. Their value lies in what they feed: the topics you track, the data you collect and the targets you report against every year.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE

Expert advice, then build it in

Bring in expert advice for the heavy lift. Then build the outputs into your template and your platform, so they flow into every cycle.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTMENT EXPERT'S NOTE

Materiality, single and double

Financial materiality asks how sustainability matters affect the company's prospects and value. This is the lens of IFRS S1 and S2. Impact materiality asks how the company affects people and the environment. This is the lens of GRI. Double materiality considers both. The lens you choose shapes everything you report.

CLIMATE CHANGE EXPERT'S NOTE

Climate scenario analysis

IFRS S2 requires companies to assess their climate resilience using scenario analysis. It tests your strategy against several plausible climate futures, for example a fast low-carbon transition or severe physical warming. The first analysis is the hardest: choosing scenarios, time horizons and the risks to assess. Later cycles update it rather than rebuild it.

→ ***Some decisions only need making every few years, others need making every single cycle.***

HOW WE HELP

This is Sustainable Square's advisory work: materiality assessments, climate risk and scenario analysis, IFRS S1 and S2 readiness, target setting, and sustainability strategy and policy.

Own it: platform and expert, every cycle

Work that repeats every cycle and needs interpretation every time. It cannot be fully automated, and it cannot be handed to an expert once and forgotten. It is the core of credible ESG reporting.

Layla's cycle

PART 4

Week ten. The auditor's question was simple: how was last year's Scope 3 figure estimated, and why had it fallen by a third? The analyst who built it had left. The method lived in a spreadsheet nobody could fully explain.

Ask yourself

01 Do we need to make estimates or assumptions each cycle?

02 Does someone need to interpret a requirement, not just follow it?

03 Will an auditor, investor or regulator scrutinise this?

Typical tasks

Scope 3 emissions
Choosing categories, methods and estimates, and improving them each year.

Interpreting framework requirements
How a disclosure applies to you as IFRS, GRI and exchange guidance evolve.

Sustainable finance framework reporting
Allocation and impact reporting for green, social or sustainability-linked instruments.

Preparing for assurance
The evidence, methodology notes and explanations an assurance provider asks for.

Narrative disclosures
Explaining your performance, not just listing it.

COMMON MISTAKE

Splitting the work

Platform data goes one way and expert review goes another and they only meet in the final draft. This quadrant works when data and expertise sit in the same place, every cycle.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE

Platform plus expert review

The platform holds the data, the evidence and the audit trail. Experts make the judgment calls and document them.

→ ***Own it is where most of the scrutiny lands. Two topics come up in almost every cycle.***

HOW WE HELP

Squarely holds the data, evidence and audit trail, and its AI-assisted auto-drafting from validated data produces a first draft, never a final one. Sustainable Square advisors bring the methodology, review the judgment calls and refine the draft, or support your own reviewers.

Inside Own it: the calls that need an expert

Two topics that need judgment in every cycle, and the question every team asks about its report.

CLIMATE CHANGE EXPERT'S NOTE

Scope 3 in brief

Scope 3 covers the emissions in your value chain, both upstream and downstream. The GHG Protocol sets out 15 categories. For many companies Scope 3 is the largest part of the footprint and the hardest to measure, because the data sits with suppliers and customers. Methods range from spend-based estimates to supplier-specific data, and most companies refine their approach over several cycles.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTMENT EXPERT'S NOTE

Sustainable finance frameworks

When a company issues a green, social or sustainability bond or loan, it usually publishes a framework explaining how the proceeds will be used, typically aligned with the ICMA principles for bonds or the loan market principles for loans. Investors then expect regular reporting on how the proceeds were allocated and what impact they had.

THE GREY ZONE

Where does the report sit?



The report itself sits between Own it and Advise. A platform can produce a strong first draft from validated data, but every report needs human review before it goes public: from your own experts, an advisor or an external reviewer.

Unless your team is very experienced, we recommend an external opinion on the draft. A report is a judgment on your whole year, not a calculation.

→ *One last question remained: would this map still hold next year?*

A task's place is not permanent

The matrix shows where a task sits today, not where it sits forever. As your team, data and systems mature, tasks move.

Layla's cycle

ONE YEAR ON

A year later, Layla's map looked different. Her Scope 3 method, built with advisors in year one, was now something her team ran every cycle with expert review. And the new subsidiary had turned a settled template back into an open question.

As your ESG maturity grows, tasks move from advisor-led towards automated

Take Scope 3 emissions. With each cycle, more of the work moves from your advisors to your own team, and then to your system.

FIRST INVENTORY

Advise

Choosing categories, methods and boundaries for the first time.

LATER CYCLES

Own it

The method is set, but the estimates and data still need judgment every year.

AS DATA MATURES

Automate

As supplier data improves and methods settle, parts of it, such as applying emission factors to spend data, can move to Automate.

Change can also push tasks back

A new regulation, an acquisition or a restructure can turn a stable template into an Advise question again. For example, when Petromin reorganised into four clusters, a settled reporting structure became a design question again.

Template it a settled structure

↓ an acquisition or a restructure

Advise a design question again

Revisit your matrix at the start of every cycle.

Put it to work

Map your own reporting cycle in a single working session.

Layla's cycle

THE ENDING

This time, Layla started the cycle with a different first meeting.
Her team spent one session sorting last year's tasks into four quadrants.

Reminders and calculations moved into the platform; the materiality refresh was booked for month one, not month nine; the Scope 3 method got a named owner and a written methodology. The report draft went to an external reviewer ahead of time.

The spreadsheet still had 200 rows, it just stopped pretending they were equal.

Your turn

01
List

Write down every task from your last reporting cycle. Aim for 20 to 30 tasks.

02
Place

For each task, ask the two test questions and plot it on the matrix.

03
Assign

Give each task an owner and the response for its quadrant.

04
Check

Where did most of your hours go last cycle? If Automate tasks took up your experts' time, that's your first win.

Before your next cycle starts

- [ ] **Template** reviewed against the latest framework, regulatory and exchange changes
- [ ] **Data owners** confirmed, including new joiners and leavers
- [ ] **Automate tasks** running in a system, not in inboxes
- [ ] **Advise work** scheduled early, before data collection starts
- [ ] **Own it judgment calls** assigned to named reviewers, with time set aside before drafting
- [ ] **Matrix revisited** has any task moved quadrant since last cycle?

Want a second pair of eyes on your map?

Book a 30-minute session with our advisors. Bring your worksheet, and leave with a clear view of where your next cycle should start. **Get in touch:** info@sustainablesquare.com

Price it: from reported to priced.

Your reporting cycle runs smoothly? Then your data can do more than meet a deadline.
Pricing it turns your report into a financial story that your CFO, lenders and investors can act on.

Layla's cycle

EPILOGUE

Two cycles later, Layla's report went out on time, and every figure could be traced back to its source. The CFO read it, closed the file and asked a question nobody had asked before: what is all of this worth to us?

Layla's team had learned to tell the work apart. Now they had to put a price on it.

Three ways your ESG data creates financial value

01

Make more profit

Lower energy bills, fewer accidents and cheaper insurance, and premium pricing for greener products.

Shows up in:
cost of sales, operating costs, revenue

02

Pay less for capital

Lenders price risk. Well-evidenced ESG performance can unlock better rates on loans and green financing.

1% lower rate on a $2B loan = $20M saved a year

Shows up in:
financing costs

03

Raise company value

Investors reward companies whose ESG risks are visible and well managed.

15x more indexed capital for MSCI AAA-rated companies than CCC-rated ones

Shows up in:
valuation multiple, cost of equity

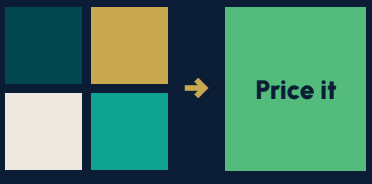
Sources: MSCI, "Sustainable companies attracted more indexed capital" (September 2025): AAA vs CCC, normalised for market capitalisation, data as of 31 March 2025.

You have already done the hard work of collecting and checking your data. Pricing it is how that work starts paying you back.

COMING NEXT

The Pricing ESG Guide

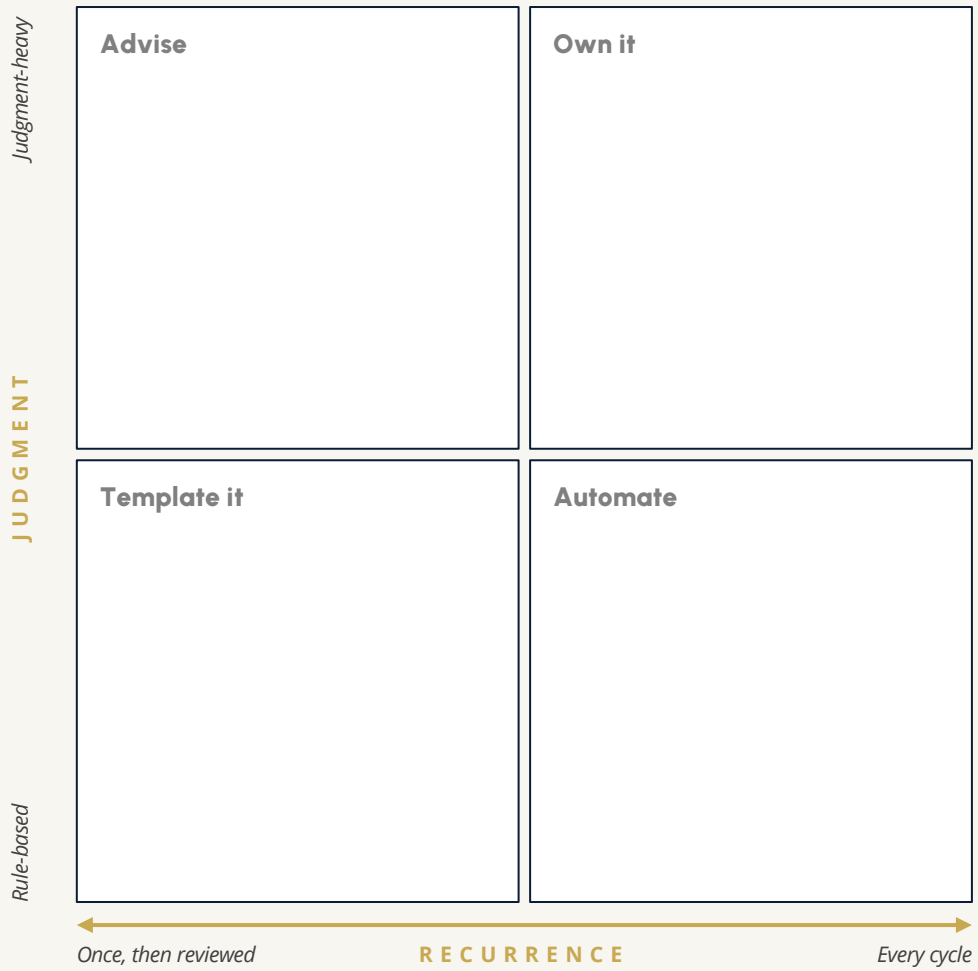
Our next guide shows which ESG issues to price first, how to put a number on them with your finance team, and how to tell the story to investors.



Want to start sooner? Talk to Sustainable Capital Advisory, part of the Sustainable Square group: info@sustainablesquare.com

Your ESG Effort Map: worksheet

Print this page. Plot each task on the matrix, then record it in the table.



Task	Comes back in full every cycle?	Could two experts disagree?	Quadrant	Owner

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About Sustainable Square

Sustainable Square is an ESG advisory, technology and capital advisory firm supporting organisations across the GCC and the region since 2012. Our advisors lead reporting, materiality, climate and IFRS S1/S2 readiness.

Squarely

Squarely, our ESG reporting and operational platform, lets your teams assign, collect, review and trace every data point in one place, cycle after cycle.

Map your cycle with our advisors.

Get in touch: info@sustainablesquare.com | sustainablesquare.com | squarely.tech

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