



GreenNEWS #9

The 4 pitfalls that stop sustainability strategies from succeeding – and how SMEs can avoid them

More and more SMEs are committing to sustainability. They develop strategies, publish roadmaps, and set long-term goals. But somewhere between the planning stage and daily operations, many of these ambitions lose momentum.

A strategy, on its own, doesn't reduce emissions or improve efficiency. Without structure and engagement, even the most thoughtful plan remains a document – not a transformation tool. Below, we explore four common reasons why implementation fails, along with practical ways to prevent them.

1. No clear ownership

One of the main reasons strategies don't move forward is that **no one truly owns them**. Sustainability often starts as a project led by one person or team, with little connection to the rest of the organisation. When responsibility isn't clearly defined, action becomes optional – and results remain vague. **Assigning ownership** at the department level ensures that **goals are shared, not outsourced**. Whether it's energy management in production or supplier selection in procurement, every area can contribute meaningfully – but only if people know they're expected to. Ownership gives sustainability a place in the structure, not just in the strategy.

2. Poor organisational integration

It's not unusual for sustainability to operate in a silo. A company might commit to lowering emissions or increasing circularity, while other processes – purchasing, budgeting, product development – remain unchanged. **Without integration, goals lack the support systems** that turn intention into impact. For strategy to become reality, sustainability must be **built into how the business runs**. That means linking goals with operational targets, planning cycles, and internal communication. It also means ensuring that people in different roles understand how their work connects to the company's broader environmental ambitions. **Sustainability** cannot succeed as a parallel project – it **has to become part of the core**.

3. Vague or unrealistic targets

General statements like “go green” or “improve sustainability” **rarely lead to measurable change**. Meanwhile, overly ambitious goals can backfire if they lack a realistic foundation – especially in smaller companies with limited time, data, or capacity to monitor progress. **Start small, stay focused, and be specific**. For example, aim to “reduce packaging waste in product line X by 15% over 12 months.” Clear metrics help teams track progress, identify problems early, and make meaningful adjustments. Once that’s in place, more complex and far-reaching targets become easier to pursue with confidence.

4. Limited employee engagement

Sustainability is often **introduced from the top, without involving the people** who will be most affected by it. When employees aren’t consulted or trained, they may not understand what’s changing – or why it matters. In the worst cases, initiatives are seen as disconnected from reality or misaligned with day-to-day priorities. **Real transformation depends on people**. That means taking time to explain the purpose behind initiatives, encouraging staff feedback, and recognising everyday contributions. Small gestures – like sharing results, highlighting internal improvements, or acting on team suggestions – build trust and momentum. Culture matters as much as tools.

Making strategy work

A good sustainability strategy is not only about where a company wants to go – it’s about how it gets there. **Clarity, coordination, and consistency** are essential. But above all, **companies need to treat strategy as a living process**: something that evolves with experience, adapts to real-world conditions, and grows stronger with every step taken.

The most successful strategies are not those with the biggest ambitions, but those that become part of how the company works – today, not just tomorrow.