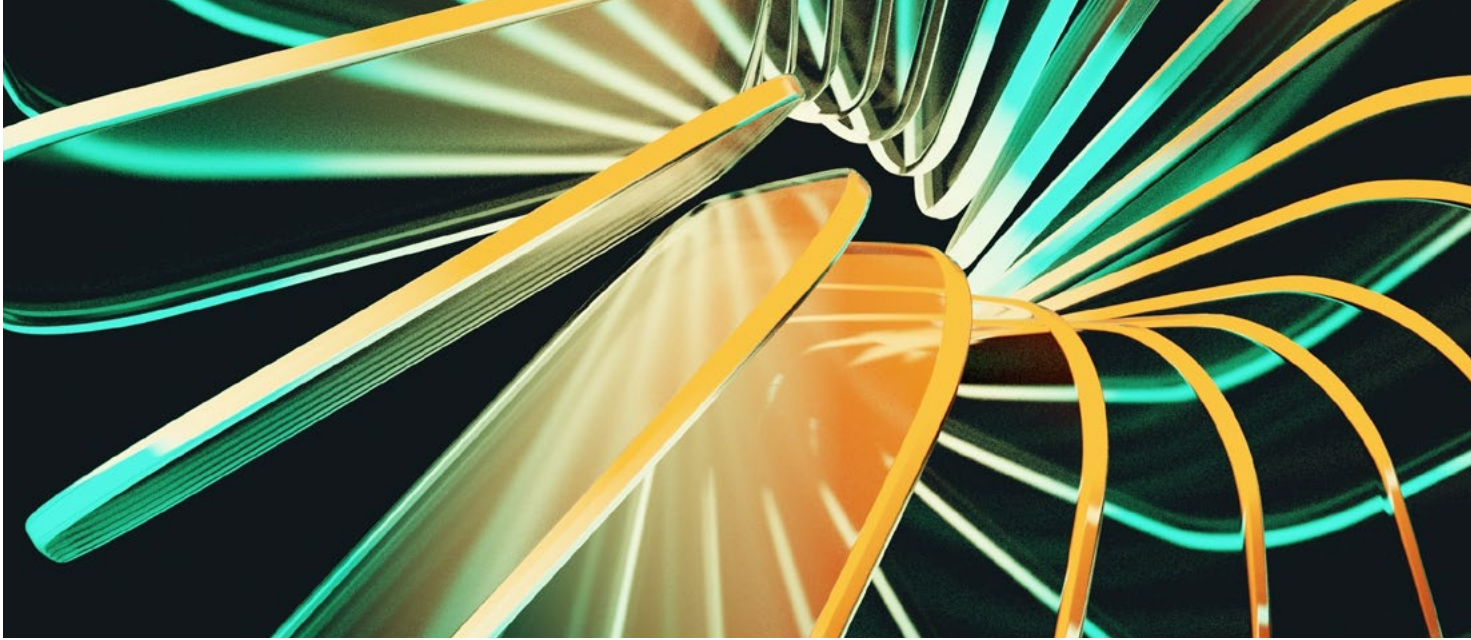


## Building socially sustainable legal teams

**Cultivating a socially sustainable workforce is essential for organisations aiming to address the needs of the present while ensuring that future requirements are not compromised. Social sustainability can boost productivity and engagement, enhance brand appeal, promote innovation, secure supply chains and decrease regulatory, workforce, financial and reputational risks.**

To explore how in-house legal teams can build socially sustainable workforces, Ashurst Reach – together with the ACC – recently ran our third national roundtable series. The participants represented a broad range of sectors, including government, transport, health, education, mining, energy, property, construction, retail, financial services, technology, professional services, not-for-profit, hospitality and tourism. Feedback from participants provided great insights into the most highly valued social sustainability factors and focused on four key areas: culture, hiring practices, personal development and training, and DEI.

The participants also considered how these issues and their impacts are playing out in different ways for different generations. With five generations of Australians now in the workforce, and Millennials and Baby Boomers having almost equal representation, finding solutions that work for people of all ages is an important factor in any socially sustainable workforce.



## Setting the scene

Before holding the national roundtable events, we surveyed over 100 Ashurst Reach consultants for their insights into social sustainability. We asked them to rank 10 socially sustainable factors in the order they most valued. As shown in figure 1, at the top of their list was work-life balance, closely followed by staff health and wellbeing initiatives, and workplace safety. The surveyed cohort also highly rated upskilling practices and ethical sourcing.

**Figure 1 - Ashurst Reach consultant survey results**



At each of the roundtable sessions, we asked the participants to also rank these factors. As shown in Figure 2, in the Perth, Sydney and Brisbane sessions, workplace safety was most highly valued and in Melbourne, work-life balance topped the list. Rating second in Melbourne and Brisbane was health and wellbeing, in Perth it was work-life balance, and in Sydney the group was equally split between health and wellbeing and work-life balance. Across the country, upskilling and DEI initiatives were also highly valued.

**Figure 2 - Roundtable survey results**

Social sustainability factor ranking	PER	MEL	SYD	BRIS
Workplace safety, including psych safety	1	3	1	1
Work-life balance, including flexibility	2	1	2	3
Health and wellbeing	3	2	2	2
Upskilling, including L&D programs	4	4	3	6
DEI initiatives, including hiring practices	6	3	6	4
Labour rights	5	7	4	5
Sustainable hiring practices	7	6	5	6
Ethical sourcing	8	5	6	6
Community engagement	9	8	6	6
Other				



# Culture

In the corporate setting, social sustainability is underpinned by culture and effective leadership. Success factors include clearly sharing the organisation's vision and values, helping people understand how their work and purpose fit into that context, promoting team connectivity and communicating effectively in person and online in a way that works for everyone.

Many of the roundtable participants also spoke of the importance of respecting people's lives and commitments outside of work, including the right to disconnect. In three sessions, participants observed this cultural attribute contributes to psychological safety and is enhanced when leaders model the promoted behaviours. Some of the examples shared included being conscious to avoid emailing after hours or using delayed delivery, not working on days off or talking openly about being unavailable for work to meet their own personal commitments.

# Hiring practices

In the roundtable sessions we were pleased to hear about many initiatives designed to enhance hiring practices, including:

- re-examining recruitment practices and re-imagining contracts to improve diversity
- recruiting for cultural fit, aptitude and soft skills – for example one GC hired an immigration lawyer into a general government role based on their enthusiasm and passion for helping people, which has been a great success
- assessing which roles could be done part-time or flexibly and how the business could support this, then articulating that in job advertisements
- acknowledging that people of all backgrounds, levels of experience and ages want flexible hours for a variety of reasons
- being aware of conscious and unconscious bias in the hiring process, with one participant telling a story about being asked “don't you want someone younger and more energetic?” and others sharing that they remove names and universities details from CVs during the selection process
- establishing diverse recruitment committees, with those who are not part of the recruiting team checking for cultural fit
- undertaking a review of language used in job ads to identify any gender bias, with one attendee sharing that their organisation uses the Work180 AdPortal tool to achieve this
- adjusting the interview approach to suit the role – for example, if a role involves having time to consider questions before providing advice, one GC provides

an advance list of questions to interviewees to improve inclusion of neurodiverse people, and, if strong presentation skills are needed, the GC gives interviewees a case study and asks them to present in the interview, and

- responding to questions about flexible working practices in detail, which are increasingly being asked during interview.

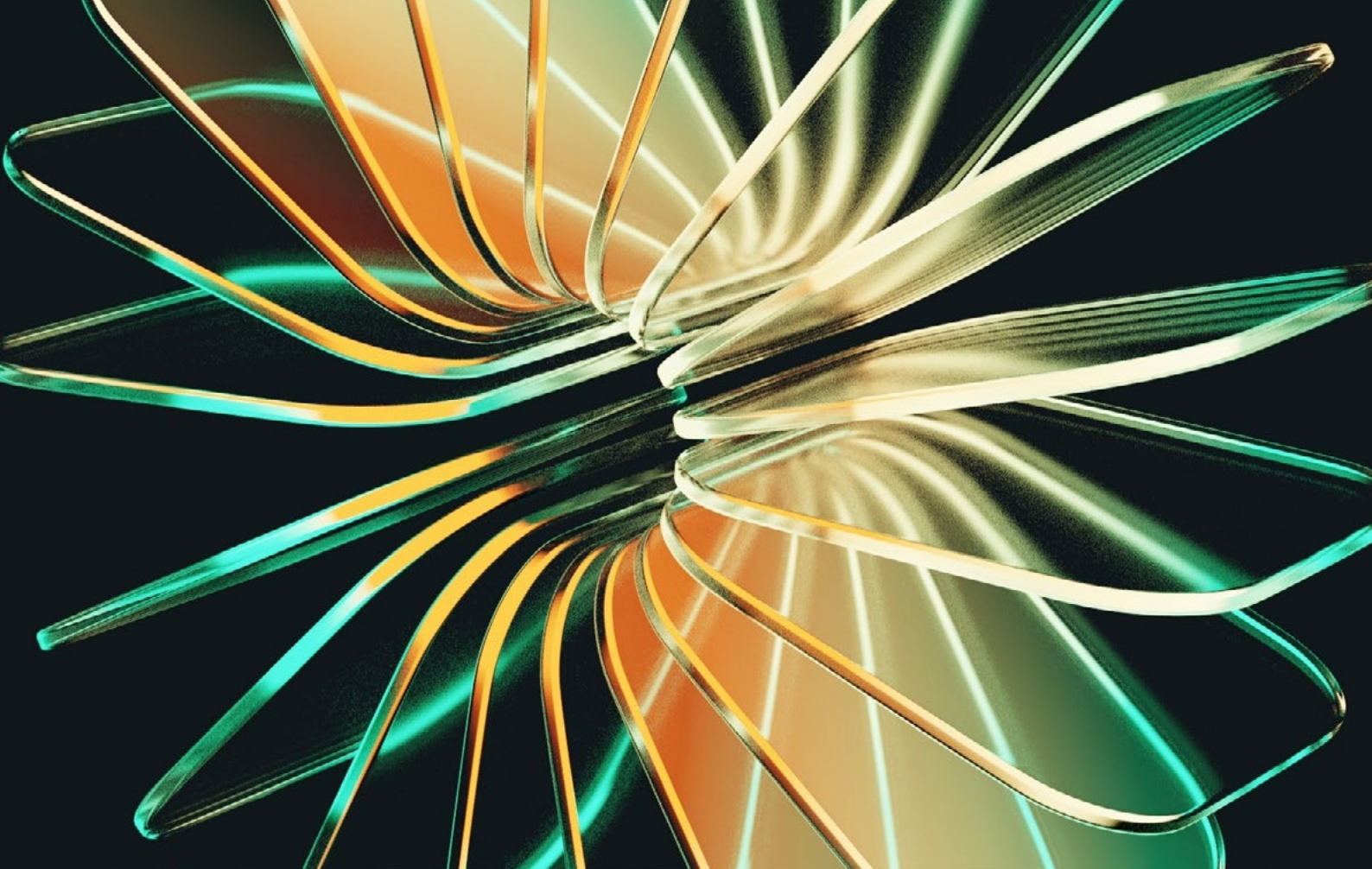
# Personal development and training

The roundtable participants agreed on the importance of personal development and training. They also acknowledged the importance of organisations identifying transferable experience to support social mobility and investing in boosting inherent skills, such as critical thinking, learning potential and adaptability.

Interestingly, there were several comments about the importance of promoting informal learning touchpoints and connectivity by encouraging staff to spend time in the office with other lawyers. In a few sessions, participants observed that junior staff learn a lot from overhearing conversations and from observing networking in action, including with internal clients.

Participants shared many ideas and successful initiatives, including:

- seconding lawyers into other areas of the business to improve leadership and commercial skills
- providing opportunities for scholarships and reverse secondments
- investing in in-house adjustment service capability to support employees with disabilities
- investing in education for managers and employees on how to speak about diversity and use inclusive language
- advocating for bystander training that includes practical tips for de-escalating problematic situations
- improving AI take-up more widely across an organisation, with one participant sharing that their organisation has a workplace-wide two hour session each week that is specifically focused on learning about new technology, and another participant talking about the ChatGPT homework everyone was asked to do, which was then discussed in a team meeting, and
- using creative ways to engage employees in diversity discussions and learning opportunities, with one example being Pride Week emails that explained the journey of LGBTQI+ rights in countries in which that organisation operates in.



## DEI

It was clear from anecdotes shared at the roundtables, that DEI remains a significant issue for many legal teams.

Some participants noted that their team's gender balance was driven by the organisation's industry. Others gave examples of age-related biases playing out, for example they had heard comments suggesting that people over 50 were not interested in career progression or would not be a good fit in IT projects. Participants also acknowledged that there is a long way to go in recognising cultural blind spots. For example, people from different cultural backgrounds having different communications styles that can lead to unconscious bias.

## The takeaways

In a business context, social sustainability involves identifying and managing business impacts, both positive and negative, on people – employees, clients, local communities and other stakeholders – in a way that meets the needs of today without compromising the needs of tomorrow.

The insights we gained from our survey results and the national roundtable sessions highlight the importance of building socially sustainable legal teams and provided some guidance on the issues that are top-of-mind for many lawyers.

Several clear themes emerged, including the need to overcome conscious and unconscious bias, particularly in relation to age, to invest in the learnt and innate skills needed today and tomorrow, and to find new ways to meet the wide range of flexible working preferences. One of the key drivers to a socially sustainable workforce is ensuring workplaces have a safe, values-driven culture with leaders that communicating effectively and 'walking the talk'.