Science-Based Targets Are Becoming a Commercial Requirement – Not Just a Sustainability Commitment

For many organisations, sustainability has moved from the margins of corporate responsibility into the centre of commercial strategy.

The shift is no longer theoretical. It is already visible in procurement conversations, supplier engagement programmes, investment decisions and customer expectations. Increasingly, businesses are not simply being asked whether they have a sustainability policy. They are being asked whether they can evidence credible emissions data, demonstrate a realistic decarbonisation pathway and show how climate risk is being managed across their operations and supply chain.

This is where the Science Based Targets initiative has become so significant.

Science-based targets are no longer simply a marker of environmental ambition. They are becoming a practical indicator of commercial readiness.

The organisations that succeed in the next phase of the net-zero transition may not be those with the boldest sustainability statements. They will be those that can turn climate commitments into credible, measurable and commercially relevant action.

From Voluntary Framework to Market Expectation

The Science Based Targets initiative was established through a collaboration between CDP, the United Nations Global Compact, the World Resources Institute and WWF. Its purpose is to help organisations set greenhouse gas reduction targets aligned with climate science and the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Unlike self-declared net-zero ambitions, science-based targets are assessed against recognised methodologies. Organisations are expected to develop measurable reduction pathways across Scope 1, Scope 2 and, where material, Scope 3 emissions.

That distinction matters.

In a market where sustainability claims are subject to growing scrutiny, independent validation provides a level of credibility that internal commitments alone often cannot. For investors, lenders, customers and procurement teams, this credibility is increasingly valuable.

The real commercial question is no longer simply: “Do you have a net-zero target?”
It is becoming: “Can you demonstrate that your target is credible, actionable and embedded into the way your business operates?”

Climate Credibility Is Becoming Commercial Credibility

ESG has evolved significantly over the past decade.

What was once often treated as a communications, compliance or reputation issue is now influencing tangible commercial outcomes. Businesses are increasingly assessed on how well they understand climate-related risks, how resilient their operations are likely to be, and whether their transition plans are credible.

This is especially relevant in supply chains.

Large organisations with ambitious emissions reduction commitments cannot deliver those commitments through internal action alone. For many businesses, the majority of emissions sit outside their direct operations, across suppliers, logistics, purchased goods and services, product use and wider value-chain activity.

That means Scope 3 is becoming one of the defining challenges of corporate climate action. It also means suppliers are being drawn into the conversation much earlier and much more directly.

For SMEs, this creates both risk and opportunity. Businesses that can provide robust emissions data, demonstrate credible improvement plans and engage constructively with customer sustainability requirements are likely to strengthen their position in future procurement processes. Those that cannot may increasingly find themselves at a disadvantage.

The next competitive divide may not be between organisations that care about sustainability and those that do not. It may be between organisations that can evidence their sustainability performance and those that cannot.

What Supplier Engagement Is Already Showing Us

This shift is already visible in practice.

Synergize Consulting has experienced this first-hand through its engagement with Leonardo UK, one of the UK’s leading aerospace, defence and security organisations.

As part of Leonardo UK’s supplier sustainability programme, Synergize was invited to participate in a dedicated Supplier Sustainability Workshop focused on science-based targets, decarbonisation planning and the practical steps suppliers can take to strengthen sustainability performance.
Following the workshop, Leonardo’s sustainability leadership team invited Synergize to participate in a structured supplier engagement programme alongside sustainability specialists and programme partners. The objective was clear: to help suppliers understand

where they are on their SBTi journey today, what credible commitment looks like in practice, and how to develop a realistic roadmap towards implementation.

The importance of this approach should not be underestimated.

Rather than simply imposing sustainability requirements on suppliers, leading organisations are increasingly recognising that Scope 3 progress depends on collaboration, capability building and long-term partnership across the value chain.

This is a significant development for UK industry.

It suggests that sustainability is no longer a standalone corporate initiative. It is becoming a shared operating requirement across customers, suppliers and partners.

Why SMEs Will Be Critical to Net Zero Delivery

Much of the public debate around climate transition focuses on multinational corporations, major infrastructure programmes and government policy. But the delivery of net zero will depend heavily on the role of small and medium-sized enterprises.

SMEs make up the overwhelming majority of UK businesses and sit at the heart of virtually every major supply chain. If large organisations are to make meaningful progress on Scope 3 emissions, they will need suppliers, service providers and delivery partners to improve sustainability performance as well.

This is why science-based targets matter beyond the boardrooms of major corporates.

For SMEs, sustainability can sometimes feel like a large-enterprise agenda: complex, resource-intensive and difficult to prioritise against immediate commercial pressures. Yet the reality is changing. Customer expectations, procurement requirements and supply-chain reporting obligations are bringing ESG performance much closer to day-to-day business development.

Many SMEs are also well placed to respond.

Their size can enable faster decision-making, closer integration between strategy and operations, and greater agility in implementing change. Where larger organisations may struggle with complexity and organisational silos, SMEs can often embed new ways of working more quickly.

The challenge is not simply ambition. It is capability.

Businesses need to understand their emissions baseline, identify material sources of carbon, engage suppliers and customers, and develop practical plans that balance sustainability objectives with commercial realities.

For many SMEs, the opportunity is not to become sustainability specialists overnight. It is to become more resilient, more transparent and more competitive partners within increasingly sustainability-conscious supply chains.

Navigating the Transition Without Losing Commercial Focus

The UK's transition to a lower-carbon economy is not without complexity.

The current policy and market environment reflects an ongoing tension between ambitious net-zero commitments, energy security, affordability, industrial resilience and economic competitiveness. Renewable energy investment is central to the UK's growth agenda, but debates continue around domestic energy production, infrastructure readiness and the pace of transition.

Businesses cannot afford to view climate strategy purely through a political lens.

Governments may debate policy mechanisms and timelines, but investors, customers, lenders and supply chains are continuing to raise expectations around emissions transparency, climate governance and transition planning.

This is where frameworks such as the SBTi provide value. They give organisations a science-led, internationally recognised structure for setting targets and planning reductions, even as the external policy environment evolves.

For business leaders, the point is not to treat sustainability as separate from commercial performance. It is to understand where sustainability, resilience and competitiveness now intersect.

From Target Setting to Transformation

The first phase of corporate climate action was dominated by commitments.

The next phase will be judged by implementation.

Stakeholders are increasingly less interested in broad sustainability pledges and more interested in evidence of action. That means credible governance, operational decarbonisation, investment planning, supplier engagement, emissions reporting and clear accountability.

This is where many organisations will face the real test.

Setting a target is important. But the commercial value comes from embedding climate considerations into business decision-making: procurement, operations, facilities, logistics, finance, technology, reporting and customer engagement.

In practice, sustainability must become a business capability rather than a reporting exercise.

That capability can create value in multiple ways. Energy efficiency can reduce costs. Better data can improve decision-making. Stronger supplier engagement can reduce risk. Credible ESG performance can support customer retention, investment conversations and future procurement opportunities.

The strongest organisations will be those that connect environmental performance with commercial discipline.

A Blueprint for Future Competitiveness

Science-based targets are becoming one of the clearest signals of credible corporate climate leadership.

But their importance goes beyond sustainability.

They are increasingly relevant to how organisations compete, how they access supply chains, how they respond to customer expectations and how they demonstrate long-term resilience.

For UK businesses, especially SMEs, this represents a critical moment. The organisations that act early will be better positioned to understand their emissions, respond to procurement requirements, build stronger customer relationships and contribute meaningfully to wider decarbonisation goals.

Those that delay may find that sustainability expectations have moved from optional to essential before they are ready.

The future of ESG will not be delivered by large corporations alone. It will depend on thousands of businesses across the supply chain developing the data, governance and practical capability to turn climate ambition into measurable progress.

Science-based targets are not simply an environmental commitment.

They are becoming a blueprint for future competitiveness.

Harry Bains
Chief Executive Officer
5th June 2026