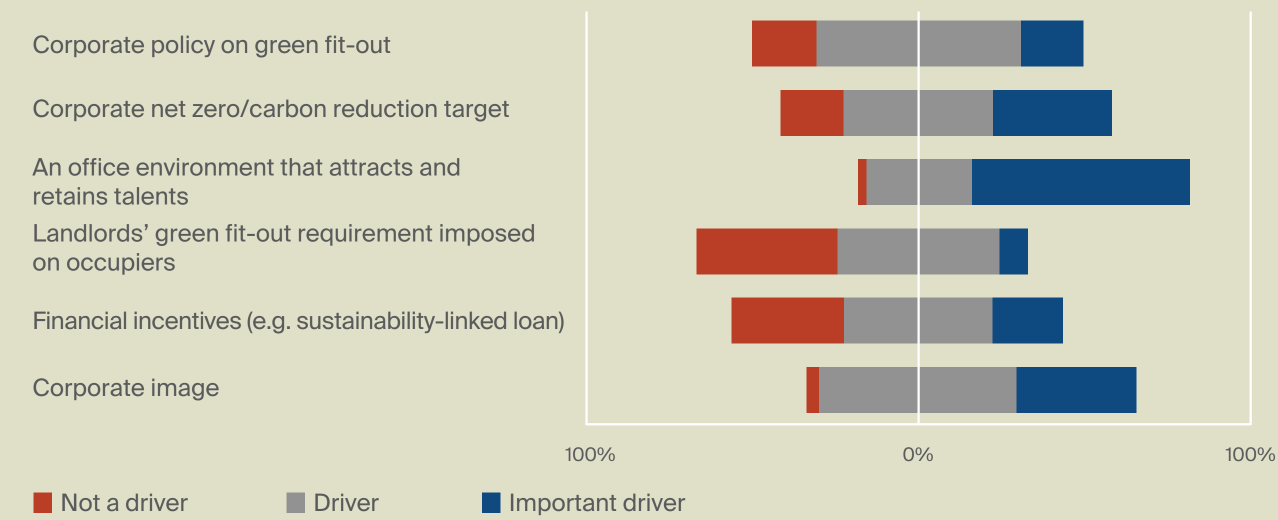
Planting Community and a Sustainability Culture in the Office

The ESG (environmental, social, and governance) movement continues to grow rapidly, reshaping our lives, workplaces, and perspectives on the world around us. Knight Frank is committed to understanding the evolving needs of occupiers and the growing importance of ESG considerations in real estate decision-making. In our Knight Frank Singapore 2024 ESG Occupiers' Sentiment Survey, we analysed the key ESG factors influencing occupiers' decisions. Among the responses, the top driver identified was the creation of an office environment that attracts and retains talent, with 98% acknowledging it as a factor and 64% rating it as highly important.



Following the pandemic, we observed a trend toward quality and sustainability, driven by the expectation that employee focused ESG initiatives will evolve in workplaces alongside ambitious ESG targets, particularly addressing the social aspect of ESG. Goals such as achieving net-zero carbon emissions, enhancing employee well-being, and adopting ESG leases are rapidly becoming the new normal.

With the ESG movement spreading fast and furious, morphing just as rapidly as it spreads into our lives, our workplaces and our understanding of the world around us, it can be overwhelming to find a start point for this journey. We approached it with a simple, modest, and tangible beginning by creating an ESG corner in the workplace, that promotes employee well-being, fosters collaboration, and that embeds ESG principles.

In late-July 2024, in a pop-up trial with Singapore urban farming company, Grobrix[1], a farm wall was installed in the Knight Frank office at Ocean Financial Centre (OFC), where vegetables are grown and harvested every two weeks, accompanied by employee training sessions.

THE FARM WALL

It was strange at first to have a wall of salad leaves and herbs at the client area of the Knight Frank office. However, small, understated benefits slowly started to show in subtle ways. Both Knight Frank staff and visitors to the office were observed to stare at the farm wall from time to time, lost in thought, letting the green wall of calm take them away from their work concerns, their anxieties, problems to be solved, just for a minute or two.

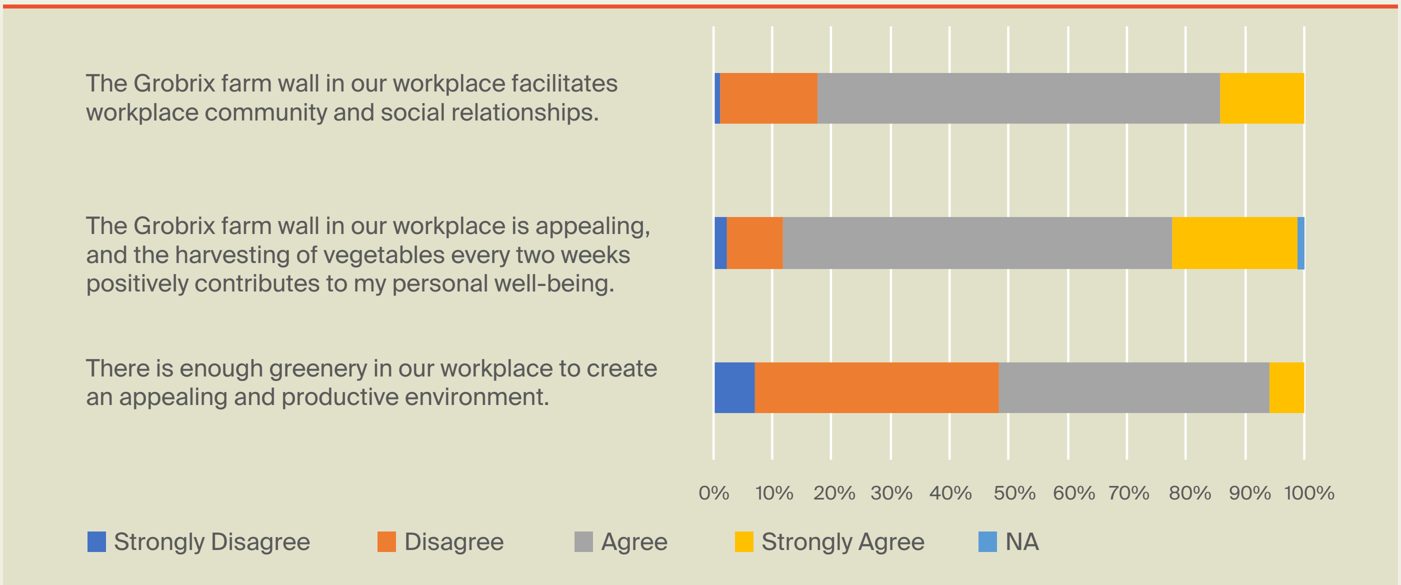
Others looked forward to the harvests where fresh greens could be brought home every two weeks, produce that had grown from seedlings to dinner right in front of their eyes.

THE SURVEY

After three months with the Grobrix farm wall in OFC, an ESG staff sentiment survey was conducted in November 2024 among all Knight Frank Singapore staff that included those stationed at the main office at OFC, as well as those whose designated workplaces were at the Knight Frank Property and Facilities Management office at Orion@Paya Lebar, or in site and property management offices located all over the island.

Among those working at OFC with the farm wall in line of sight daily, only 52% maintained that there is enough greenery in the office to create an appealing and productive environment, suggesting that slightly less than half felt that more could be done. Perhaps the presence of the farm wall created an awareness of evident as well as more subtle benefits greenery brought to an office community, and created a desire for more? This was a distinct possibility as about 87% of the same pool of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Grobrix farm wall in the workplace is appealing, and the harvesting of vegetables positively contributes to individual personal well-being. Similarly, 82% felt that the farm wall promotes workplace community

Exhibit 1: Extracted from the Knight Frank Singapore ESG Staff Sentiment Survey November 2024



Source: Knight Frank Singapore ESG Taskforce

[1] https://grobrix.com/

and fosters social relationships. Apparently, the Grobrix farm wall provided a human focal point for both individual welfare and communal satisfaction.

However, while Knight Frank staff at OFC evidently liked the farm wall, a smaller majority of 58% felt they would like it to become a permanent feature in the office, while the rest of the respondents were ambivalent. This suggests that the ESG journey has only just started and more needs to be done to translate sustainability and social ideals into individual and community beliefs that can be internalised and practiced.

JUST ONE COG IN THE ESG JOURNEY

Having a wall of edible produce might sound like a novelty for a workplace environment, but there is a bigger context to the perceived benefits that were highlighted by staff respondents in the survey. A farm wall should be and is more than just pretty to look at and good to eat. Workplace greenery does not just improve physical spaces. In post-pandemic workplaces, where employees can feel disconnected from their office spaces, interactive gardens provide a reason to gather, collaborate, and interact outside of desks, meeting rooms and video calls. They create opportunities for informal conversation, connection, and some stress relief. These spaces serve as a locus for wellness initiatives and can be integrated into broader corporate strategies focused on employee well-being, developing a sense of belonging and community.

ESG is larger than merely having pockets of green within office environments.

The increasing awareness and adoption of environmental sustainability points towards repurposing, reducing, and recycling resources. About a third of the world's food is wasted[2], and in 2023 Singapore grew just 3.2% of the vegetables consumed locally[3]. So, while harvesting in the office is currently novel and puts only that little bit of food on the table, it is that one small step in the direction of communicating sustainability to a community.
There are also other positives that are not only social but economic in nature, where indoor farming has been linked to employee performance. Research from the University of Exeter, found that greenery in workspaces can increase productivity by up to 15%[4]. When paired with the strengthening of interpersonal relationships and community building encouraged by the farm wall, corporate social objectives of staff stability are being achieved. In Singapore, where green certified buildings are prioritised by many in both the private and public sector, integrating indoor farming can be the next step in enhancing the workplace.

But it is not the only step... As Knight Frank navigates the increasingly complex journey of ESG, on our own turf, more corporate ESG initiatives and ideas will be brainstormed and put into action by Knight Frank Singapore's ESG Taskforce. Soft and hard ideas will be put in place to restore the natural environment, create an inclusive workplace and strengthen our community.

Our approach to ESG is driven by our purpose to work responsibly in partnership to enhance people's lives and environments. ESG is not just an integral part of the way we operate as a business but also how we work with our clients.

So watch this space... this party is only getting started.

[2] https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/people-and-poverty/hunger-and-obesity/food-waste-statistics
[3] Tham, D., June 2024, "IN FOCUS: Will Singapore meet its 30 by 30 food sustainability goal?", https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/vegetables-sea food-singapore-food-price-cost-farmers-security-4442626
[4] University of Exeter, 2014, "Why plants in the office make us more productive", https://news-archive.exeter.ac.uk/featurednews/title_409094_en.html

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