Shift

How Businesses Are Sustaining Human Rights Progress in a Rapidly Changing World /

About the Business Impact Program /

This report presents insights from Shift's Business Impact Program (BIP) 2026 thematic workshop. The BIP is Shift's flagship membership program for companies looking to strengthen their approach to human rights due diligence. Through a combination of bilateral advisory support from Shift's experts and peer networking, it is a trusted forum where committed participants exchange experiences and explore new approaches. For more information about what the program entails and a list of current members, see our website.

If you are interested in joining, please get in touch on: federico.burlon@shiftproject.org.

Introduction / Reading the Moment Right

This report synthesizes insights from Shift's **Business Impact Program** (BIP) thematic workshop, held in Amsterdam in May 2026, on how to sustain business progress on human rights in rapidly changing, often challenging times. It is written by and for practitioners: a synthesis of what participants shared, intended to help other sustainability and human rights colleagues keep advancing this work in their own organizations. The insights echo exchanges that Shift held with company Chief Sustainability Officers at a roundtable in London, in June 2026. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule, so comments and examples in this report are not attributed to individual speakers.

Participants described a familiar list of immediate pressures: political instability, tariffs, short-termism, reduced budgets, and competing internal priorities. But the conversation kept returning to more systemic issues: rising inequality, understood as a risk to the economic system as much as to any individual company, climate change, and heightened geopolitical tensions. These issues drive and compound the pressures businesses and practitioners feel.

Moreover, these pressures are occurring in a rapidly evolving legal landscape, particularly for companies with significant presence or connections to the European Union's single market, given the growth in mandatory human rights reporting and due diligence legislation and proposals. While most of these legislative expectations are substantially aligned with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), they naturally change the internal environment for human rights and sustainability practitioners.

Against that backdrop, the workshop explored what it takes to keep moving toward a more fully embedded human rights approach within companies. Drawing on Shift's experience and inputs from participants, some of the hallmarks of an embedded approach to meeting the corporate responsibility to respect human rights include:

- clear values backed by properly resourced budgets,
- concrete evidence that business decisions have been shaped by human rights considerations,
- human rights built into management systems rather than relying on particular people,
- real internal demand for the human rights function's expertise rather than resistance to it,
- external transparency through public reporting, accountable action plans and engagement with ESG ratings as a useful if imperfect tool, and
- genuine comfort with hearing directly from workers and communities rather than treating their input as a risk to be managed.

Seen against that destination, the headwinds practitioners are experiencing look less like retreat and more like growing pains. Human rights issues are no longer peripheral. They are now increasingly subject to the same scrutiny as any other strategic business priority. Human rights as a function and a topic within companies is, in other words, growing up.

From two days of discussion and exchange, practitioners arrived at three central insights:

- The headwinds are a sign of arrival, not retreat. Being peripheral gave practitioners latitude to act but limited the impact and durability of that action. Being subject to the same scrutiny as any other strategic priority means aligning more with other functions, but it also creates the chance to drive better practice into the core operations of the business itself.

- Sustainability reporting and due diligence legislation is both a real pressure and a significant opportunity. It pulls time and attention toward compliance and can feel like it narrows the space for creative work. However, it creates leverage points and durable anchors for internal goals that internal advocacy alone rarely achieves. It can also create a role for the human rights function in defining what a credible response to new requirements looks like in practice. This is a theme this report returns to throughout, especially in how practitioners are acting strategically to take advantage of these opportunities.
- Narratives and data combined are consistently the most powerful way to make any case in support of more effective action on sustainability impacts and risks. Stories draw attention and motivate action; data provides credibility and shows that an issue is not an isolated one. Getting the mix and sequence right, for the audience and the moment, is what makes the case for advancing human rights land, and it is the thread that runs through every section that follows.

The sections below set out four approaches practitioners can adopt to keep advancing progress in the current global context:

1. Reposition the Human Rights Function

2. Know Your Audience

3. Act Strategically

4. Build Alliances That Extend Your Reach

Section 1 /
Reposition the Human Rights Function

Legislative change and the mainstreaming described above have not made human rights matter more for business than they did before. However, these developments have changed the terms on which human rights work gets done: more scrutiny, more accountability, and more functions with a stake in getting it right. The workshop returned repeatedly to practical ways practitioners are repositioning the function in response, and evolving their practice to stay credible, integrated and effective.

From siloed expert to integrated service provider

The long-standing question of whether the human rights function should act as a control tower or a pit crew, a guard dog or a guide dog, is one that Shift's own **2012 workshop** on embedding human rights identified   and is still being worked through in 2026. What has changed is the resolution practitioners are landing on. Rather than positioning the function as the decision-maker, practitioners are increasingly framing it as a source of expertise and advice: an enabler of informed decision-making and accountability, described by one participant as "warm heart, cool head." Several described offering the function "as a service," a front-foot framing that shows, rather than argues, how attention to human rights issues makes business sense.

From broad training to targeted behavior change

Rather than broad training programs, participants discussed the need to focus on key high-value behaviors, by aligning three things: the narrative a function tells about its own role, the specific workflow moment where the behavior that the function seeks to influence actually happens, and the targets that reinforce the desired change in behavior.

Narratives shape what people think their job is for, and they can be changed. One example: procurement's narrative shifting from "secure inputs at lowest cost" to "secure inputs at best value" to focus on ensuring quality for a reasonable price. Other narratives worth challenging surfaced in discussion: for example, the view within human resources (HR) that "we only deal with own employees, not third-party labor," that "discrimination and living wages aren't an issue here," or that "we just follow labor law"; and, more broadly, narratives that "we are a good company," or the idea that "human rights is about concerns, not solutions" or that while "climate action is about solutions, social is not."

Workflows and behaviors mean identifying the exact decision-making moment where behavior needs to change, being specific about what needs to change, and picking one or two high-value interventions rather than a broad awareness campaign. In HR, that might be a five-minute video at the CV review stage to promote inclusive hiring; in procurement, a pop-up prompt when a delivery window changes without a corresponding price adjustment. For corporate boards, it plays out as deliberate choices about the right moment and messenger on human rights topics, such as small sessions ahead of formal board meetings, and choosing who delivers a message based on the board's own personalities and culture.

Accountability and targets are what makes a new behavior stick. In procurement, that can mean a balanced scorecard for suppliers, a post-mortem assessment process that links a quality drop back to a human rights driver, or sustainability KPIs sitting at the same level as other procurement KPIs, as at least one participating company had done. In HR, it means being offered help with the data rather than being told what to do, so that HR can bring problems to management itself rather than the human rights function pointing the finger at HR. For boards, it means information reaching them through existing channels such as the double materiality assessment, business decisions, the risk register, and audits, rather than a separate, parallel human rights channel.

Repositioning as AI and data become part of how decisions get made

Increased data availability and AI tools offer opportunities to bring new resources into decision-making and into discussions with other functions. But the workshop discussions highlighted the need for caution: AI tools are only as good as their data inputs, and many are built on data that is easily available at scale but of limited value for human rights risk identification. The human rights function has a role in navigating this: knowing when AI tools built on good quality data meet the need, and when specific qualitative expertise is required to properly identify and evaluate risks. Of course, missing real risks does not serve the business either, particularly where legislation requires effective due diligence.

Section 2 /
Know Your Audience

Repositioning the function only goes so far if the case for human rights does not land. Much of what determines that is not the strength of the argument itself, but whether it is pitched to the right audience, in the right language, at the right moment. This section develops this theme from the concrete level of language and framing through to the more general logic of what makes people receptive to persuasion at all.

Reframing from risk to opportunity, where it helps

Several participants have found more traction leading with positive framing rather than risk. In a just transition example, presenting the issue as an "impact opportunity" generated more engagement than leading with risk and vulnerability. Examples of this in practice included: simplifying the language around what "impact" means; noting how the language of dependencies already resonates for climate and nature, and asking whether it could work for social issues too; and "framing the positive" to overcome pushback about integrating a human rights lens into climate action. This is not a universal prescription, but it connects to a broader point that many human rights practitioners have been emphasising for years: respecting human rights in line with the UNGPs is not just about "doing no harm." It is fundamentally about driving positive outcomes too through effective prevention and mitigation efforts. Shift's 2018 report, **The Human Rights Opportunity,** written in collaboration with WBCSD, provides fifteen case studies of how respecting human rights in company operations advances the SDG agenda.

Beyond the pure business case

Arguments framed around return on investment (ROI) can open doors, but participants were wary of letting them define the purpose of their work. The risk is that human rights become a "compliance commodity," and workers get reduced to a cost line. One useful reframe: when someone challenges the business case for human rights action, ask them for the business case for ignoring the risk, because ignoring it is not necessarily the right thing for the business, especially where it means missing risks that matter from a compliance perspective.

Speaking to different audiences, with the right mix of stories and data

The workshop discussed academic research showing that effective influencing generally requires a mix of stories and data, with the right mix depending on the audience and the issue. Stories may relate to corporate values, specific impacts in specific places, business reputation and legitimacy, or other strategic interests. Participants reflected that managers are often particularly focused on data, whereas senior leaders respond more to narratives that link to strategy, and recognized the need to always think about the right balance between the two. One company's approach illustrates this in practice with three distinct messages for three internal audiences: the company's own values for senior leaders, legal compliance, and a tender-driven business case since public procurement tenders increasingly ask modern-slavery questions directly.

Sitting with discomfort

Part of a company becoming more internally aligned on human rights and ready to meet the requirements of the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) is recognizing where there may be tensions between company objectives. That naturally requires the teams where these tensions come together

— purchasing, sales, and others — to engage with the discomfort in order to work through it, rather than avoid it. Practitioners shared a useful example: the human rights function does not need to resolve these tensions itself or supply the answer for how competing objectives should be balanced. Its role is more modest but still useful: recognizing that objectives will sometimes conflict, resisting the urge to work it out alone, and instead convening the people who need to be in the room to discuss any tensions and resolve them.

Modes of influence

Participants discussed the value in thinking about the classic modes of persuasion articulated by Robert Cialdini: reciprocity, consistency, social proof, authority, likeability, scarcity and unity.[1] Finding the right interlocutors is itself an application of this: a senior sponsor lends authority, allies in other functions build consistency and reciprocity, external voices bring authority from outside, and internal ambassadors who carry personal stories to their peers work through likeability. This showed up in several concrete examples:

- One company built a decision tree for responsible disengagement, covering conflict-affected contexts and heightened due diligence; it looked like a strong tool on paper but initially ran into pushback from legal and procurement, who saw it as reinventing the wheel. The team built its case by pointing to peer companies that had faced legal, reputational or other consequences from disengaging irresponsibly, using social proof to help persuade colleagues internally.
- A second company used an appeal to medical authority to explain an international working hours standard, alongside industry benchmarking to drive internal ambition — authority and social proof working together.
- A third succeeded with peer benchmarking too, even though the internal “myth” was that the company did not benchmark at all — showing how benchmarks can draw senior management attention even where a company has not previously seen this as being of interest.
- And a fourth found that highlighting the reputational risk of inaction, including individual liability, was what landed (authority).
- Relationship-building (likeability) and legislation (authority) came up repeatedly as levers too.

Underlying all these examples is the same shift described in Section 1: practitioners are less often the ones making the final call, and more often the ones equipping someone else, a sponsor, an ally, an external voice, to make the case themselves.

1 Cialdini, Robert. (2021). *Influence, new and expanded*. HarperCollins.

Section 3 / Act Strategically

Beyond framing and audience, participants described a set of more strategic moves: where in the business to enter conversations, how to treat legislation as a lever rather than only a constraint, and how far to fold human rights into existing risk and strategy processes without losing what makes it distinct.

Finding early entry points

One company's work bringing living wage data and frontline stories into facilities management contracting before cost-cutting conversations took over, and another's experience integrating human rights into its climate transition strategy by starting from something concrete rather than the strategic level alone, both illustrate the same value: finding a specific, tangible issue, building understanding and ownership with the teams who will implement it, and only then scaling up. Other entry points surfaced repeatedly: corporate councils and existing governance forums, rather than new structures, and regulatory hooks such as the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive's (CSRD) own workforce reporting requirements, which can open a door into other functions' planning processes.

Legislation as opportunity, not just constraint

There was real concern that legislation is squeezing out space for creative human rights work. But the conversation also surfaced numerous ways legislation creates opportunities to drive positive change. For example:

- Efficiency gains from using a single process for the identification, assessment and prioritization of impacts required under the CSDDD and the impact materiality assessment required under the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS). This can also serve requirements under other legislation such as the EU Forced Labour Regulation (FLR). This involves framing a risk-based approach as something that simplifies, aligns and delivers efficiencies for the business, not merely an additional layer of work.
- The human rights function's skills in effective stakeholder engagement, and its understanding of its own role in human rights due diligence (HRDD) versus reporting, are assets other functions will increasingly need.
- Legislative imperatives like the CSRD/ESRS and CSDDD can help pin down internal goals tied to demonstrating effective implementation, a more durable anchor than purely internal targets, which tend to have less traction and diffuse accountability.
- The human rights function holds critical insight into what "appropriate measures" under the CSDDD will ultimately be judged by, as national enforcement bodies start to assess the effectiveness of actions to prevent and address human rights risks.

Salience as the entry point

Legislation, and the efficiency case it creates, position salience as the entry point into business risk processes, including double materiality assessments (DMA), since the ESRS treat salience as the starting point for the DMA. In practice, many companies still run separate processes that are reconciled afterward. The strategic opportunity is to keep pushing toward salience as the unifying approach, rather than accepting two parallel exercises as the end state.

Greater integration into Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) systems

Severe risks to people are often root causes, early warning signals or accelerants of risks to the business, yet human rights teams are not always in the room when enterprise risks are analysed or managed. Integration is not about collapsing HRDD into ERM; it is about finding entry points such as strategy, the risk register, controls and audit, decision gates and governance forums – where HRDD insight can shape business choices before risks harden into crises. Handled well, this can bring senior attention, stronger escalation routes, and more durable action when budgets tighten. Yet, participants kept returning to the same caution: integration into business systems is only worth it if it improves real decisions, and it should not be allowed to flatten robust assessments of the severity of impacts, informed by stakeholder insight and individual judgment, into a generic risk category.

Section 4 / Build Alliances That Extend Your Reach

A connecting thread across the workshop was the value of building alliances (internal and external) that help human rights practitioners advance their work in the current context. This section focuses on three such partners: public affairs, procurement and HR, and outside experts. What ties the examples together is getting human rights onto each partner's agenda early enough that it shapes their thinking from the outset, rather than being retrofitted.

Public affairs

While today most interaction between human rights teams and corporate or public affairs colleagues happens reactively, participants recognized that building alliances with public affairs can be a powerful lever both to sustain progress on specific issues and to create a wider enabling environment for human rights. As one of the participants put it, "your priorities becoming corporate affairs priorities should be the aim." From a corporate affairs perspective, it is equally important to understand sustainability issues, to "fairly represent the company's interests."

Because building bridges with corporate affairs is a relatively new area for many, the next step is often simply to understand what public affairs is already advocating for, identify where the company's positions might be misaligned with its human rights commitments, and build alignment. Two practical starting points surfaced.

- First, issues that are salient from both a human rights and an operational perspective and a key consideration in new business decisions. For example, one company's work with corporate affairs on "extended producer responsibility" schemes for packaging and waste management in Asia and integrating informal workers into those discussions, and another's engagement with customer governments on problematic surveillance laws were both salient human rights issues and significant business decisions.
- The second practical point is the importance of reviewing the alignment between the positions of the industry associations a company belongs to and its own human rights commitments, particularly given the experience of some companies with the revisions to EU sustainability legislation being driven by lowest common denominator industry association voices that did not reflect individual company positions.

Procurement and HR

Procurement and HR are functions with their own priorities and pressures, not simply audiences to be won over. Practitioners found procurement colleagues most receptive when human rights showed up as clear KPIs and dashboards that reduced administrative burden, or as a factor built into post-mortems when supplier quality dropped. HR colleagues, in turn, engaged most readily around legislative hooks they already had to act on, such as CSRD's own workforce and non-employee worker reporting categories, and when offered help with the underlying data rather than being told what to do.

Experts

Participants highlighted the importance of advisors who can help interpret and implement legislation in purposeful and practical ways: avoiding data rabbit holes, financial tunnel vision, and narrow or duplicative understanding of regulatory requirements, as well as the value of an external voice of authority delivering a message that would otherwise be difficult to land internally.

Conclusion / The Long View

Today's immediate political pressures may well shift with the next election cycle or two while the more seismic shifts happening in geopolitics are likely to continue playing out for some time to come. So, what companies do today should be focused on the medium and long term, not just on current pressures. Embedding human rights into a company's DNA is what makes progress durable across these developments.

The three main insights that ran through the workshop were: that the headwinds practitioners face are largely symptoms of mainstreaming, not retreat; that sustainability legislation is both a real pressure and a significant opportunity; and that narratives and data combined are consistently the most powerful way to make the case for human rights.

The four preceding sections – repositioning the human rights function, knowing the audience, acting strategically, and building alliances – are the practical expression of what embedding looks like across companies in a range of sectors right now.

The current headwinds are themselves signs that the human rights function has not only arrived but is also maturing, with the need to focus more on internal integration and service provision relative to external engagement. The current friction over compliance, roles and turf should be seen as a transitional phase, not a permanent state. Human rights teams should not let themselves be defined by the terms and assumptions that other functions bring to the table: there is more room for continued creativity than it can feel like in the moment. And durability ultimately requires leaning on a mix of growing legal obligations and corporate values, not a choice between them. Coming of age is rarely a comfortable process, but human rights practitioners are already doing the work of shaping what a mature, embedded human rights function looks like.

About Shift

Shift is a non-profit, mission-driven organization working globally to embed respect for human rights into business. We leverage the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to shape the standards, incentives and practices that are needed for a fairer economic system in which everyone, not just the few, can thrive.

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