

EDHEC, ESMT Berlin, and POLIMI launch first-ever barometer of responsible practices in European startups

Key findings:

- 81% of surveyed start-ups took some action on at least one of the four following pillars: Environment, Social, Governance, or Civic
- Out of those 81%, only 28% use performance indicators to measure the impact of their actions
- Twice as many start-ups measure the impact of their responsible practices under pressure from their ecosystems

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Paris, 16 October 2025—EDHEC Business School is proud to release the results of the inaugural [European Responsible Start-up Practice Barometer](#) in partnership with [INNOVA Europe](#). Founded in 2022 by EDHEC, ESMT Berlin, and POLIMI Graduate School of Management, INNOVA Europe is a coalition¹ of ten European universities focused on creating an ecosystem of sustainable European entrepreneurship for societal and environmental transition. More than ever, start-ups play a key role as catalysts for innovation and transformation.

EDHEC and INNOVA surveyed 433 European start-ups² to understand their attitudes to responsible practices and the associated obstacles and drivers. The barometer aims to provide a real-life assessment of the will to implement such practices, their implementation methods, and their monitoring in the European entrepreneurial ecosystem. It is also designed to provide stakeholders (schools, incubators, investment funds, etc.) with the information they need to better support start-ups in addressing the challenges of corporate responsibility.

Responsible practices: A worthy goal, but still not a priority

While 93% of the surveyed startups said they incorporate responsible practices into their operations, only 81% of them actually took action on at least one of the four defined pillars: Environment, Social, Governance, and Civic. As a complement to the three standard ESG pillars, the barometer includes a 'civic' pillar that encompasses initiatives beyond strict business objectives, such as community investment, educational or community project support, participation in local regeneration or social innovation initiatives, and more.

- **Social:** Nearly 4 out of 5 start-ups have social initiatives, in particular initiatives to promote employee well-being (61%) and responsible marketing (63%).
- **Governance:** 78% of surveyed start-ups have good governance practices.
- **Environment:** 67% of start-ups have environmentally responsible practices. They are the most frequent starting points for responsible policies: 39% of start-ups committed to only one pillar choose the environmental pillar first.
- **Civic:** Only 51% of startups prioritize this pillar. Nearly a quarter of start-ups say it won't be a priority in the coming year.

¹ Aalto University, EDHEC Business School, ESMT Berlin, ETH Zurich, IE University, Kyiv School of Economics, London Business School, POLIMI Graduate School of Management, Rotterdam School of Management, and University College Dublin

² A description of the survey method is provided on page 3

A lack of financial resources (69%) and insufficient time (58%) are the main obstacles preventing start-ups from taking responsible action, though the challenges vary across countries.

- In France, lack of time is cited far more often (66%) than in Germany (42%) or Italy (36%).
- In Italy, 64% of start-ups say responsible practices compete with other business priorities — compared with just 25% in France and 37% in Germany.
- In Germany, financial constraints dominate: 79% cite limited resources as their primary obstacle, versus 69% in France and 43% in Italy.

Most start-ups believe that responsible practices are useful but not quite strategic enough at present: 42% see real added value, 40% think there are some benefits, and 18% see no value whatsoever. Finally, **responsible practices are not set aside because no one believes in them, but rather because they are often seen as less strategic and come after other priorities with limited resources.**

Measuring the impact of responsible actions remains a weak spot

While 81% of the surveyed start-ups have already taken action on at least one of the four pillars of corporate responsibility, only 28% use performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the impact of these actions. However, assessing progress, communicating transparently, or adjusting strategy over time can be difficult without monitoring.

The monitoring level can vary depending on the start-up's maturity, its sector, or the pillars it takes into account:

- 64% of start-ups in the expansion phase monitor their KPIs, compared to 27% of start-ups who are currently in the prototyping phase
- 46% of start-ups in the energy and environment sector and 47% in the inclusion and social impact sector monitor indicators — rates that are above average but still modest given these sectors' natural focus on impact.
- Social impact and the environment are the two most monitored categories

The study reveals that the monitoring of actions is hindered by a lack of financial resources (27%), time (25%), in-house support issues (19%), and a lack of expertise (18%).

Stakeholder pressure: a real driver of change

Twice as many start-ups (40% compared to 17%) monitor the impact of their ESG indicators when pressured to do so by their ecosystem (customers, investors, incubators, etc.). But such external pressure is very uneven. One out of every two start-ups has never been asked about its responsible practices, which shows a dynamic that is still developing rather than a generalised trend.

- Amongst self-financed start-ups, 38% have been questioned about their responsible practices, mainly by customers (17%), incubators (14%), and business partners (11%).
- During Series A, stakeholder pressure becomes standard practice: 83% of start-ups get questions on the subject, mainly from impact investors (41%), traditional investors (31%), and customers (28%), who are a constant driving force.

Incubators and investors play a central role in systematically incorporating responsible practice impact monitoring into their selection, support, and assessment criteria. If it becomes structural, the requirement will have a knock-on effect in the ecosystem, enabling start-ups to be transparent with their stakeholders and unite their teams around shared, responsible objectives.

"Often relegated to a communications or regulatory compliance issue, responsibility is still having trouble becoming a strategic priority, even if the intention is there. It's a demanding approach, but one that provides real leverage for differentiation and long-term performance. We're convinced that the European entrepreneurial ecosystem has the capacity to transform the requirement into a distinctive marker and assert a singular vision of entrepreneurship," explains Yasmine Machwate, head of incubators at EDHEC Business School.

That is precisely the ambition of the INNOVA Europe coalition, which is working to boost the transformation by mobilising its full academic partner ecosystem. Its levers for action include:

- The INNOVA Europe competition, a European springboard that highlights and supports committed founders;
- The barometer, which measures the dynamics of responsible entrepreneurship every year and sheds light on European-scale trends;
- The creation of exchange and networking programmes between innovation hubs to spread best practices and encourage European collaboration.

Methodology

The study was conducted between January and April 2025 and included 433 European start-ups, primarily based in France (55%), Italy (25%), and Germany (14%), representing nearly half of the continent's population. A minority of start-ups (6%) are located in the following other countries: Spain, Ireland, Luxembourg, Monaco, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Most start-ups surveyed are in the early stages of development: 33% are in the prototyping phase, 39% are in the early-stage, 22% are in the growth phase, and only 6% are in the expansion phase. In 81% of cases, the respondents were the founders or co-founders.

##

Press Contact

Lynn Davy – lynn.davy@edhec.edu – +33 07 68 89 98 42
Head of International Media Relations, EDHEC Business School

About EDHEC Business School

EDHEC Business School, a leader in management education in Europe since 1906, has been ranked 7th Best Business School in Europe by the Financial Times for three straight years. EDHEC's 2024-2028 strategic plan – Generations 2050 – reflects the school's commitment to driving the world's most significant economic, social, and environmental transformations through impactful education and research. Our "raison d'être" is to make a positive impact on the world.

EDHEC profile

- 9400 undergraduate students, 175 professors and researchers, 14 centres of expertise, 130 nationalities
- A portfolio of transformative higher education programmes: Bachelor (BBA and BSc), Master in Management, Master of Science (MSc), MBAs (Full-time, Executive MBA and MBA Online), PhD in Finance, EDHEC Executive Education (for managers, executives, and entrepreneurs), EDHEC Online (created in 2018) for distance learning
- 3 French campuses that offer rich student experiences in Lille, Nice, and Paris, as well as 3 entrepreneurship campuses: the Jean Arnault Campus in Roubaix, EDHEC Entrepreneurs at Station F,



the world's largest start-up campus in Paris, and Techforward in partnership with Eurecom and Institut les Mines-Telecom at Sophie Antipolis in Nice

- Triple-accredited for the highest quality in business education by AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA

Learn more at: <https://www.edhec.edu/en>.