How to Get Started in Sustainable Finance

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Modern consumers and investors increasingly demand more from their portfolios than just a reasonable rate of return. They want capital that aligns with their values and contributes to positive environmental and social outcomes. This is the essence of sustainable finance, which pairs financial performance with long-term ecological and societal resilience.

The global sustainable finance market has experienced rapid growth in recent years, with sustainable assets under management — the total value of money managed with environmental and social criteria — climbing from $30.7 trillion in 2018 to $35.3 trillion in 2020, a 15 percent increase, according to KPMG. By the end of 2025, that number could reach about $50 trillion, representing roughly one-third of total assets under management worldwide.

Focusing on sustainable finance is a way for financial professionals to work in a dynamic field where they can apply their analytical skills and investment expertise while also helping to drive positive environmental and social change. Pursuing an advanced degree with a sustainability focus is often a key steppingstone for those seeking to enter this growing field.

What Is Sustainable Finance?

Sustainable finance is an umbrella term for the ways in which individual investors, financial institutions, and corporations factor environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into their financial decisions. Rather than focusing solely on short-term returns, sustainable finance integrates ESG into due diligence, valuation, risk assessment, and portfolio construction so capital flows toward economic activities that are environmentally sound and socially responsible.

This approach to investing is both a risk management strategy — helping firms and investors identify climate and other sustainability risks that can impact long-term value — and a mechanism for channeling investment into things like clean energy and sustainable infrastructure.

Although the concept of sustainable finance has roots that stretch back decades, it emerged as a priority for investors with the passage of the Paris Agreement in 2015, which united nearly 200 nations behind targets to limit global warming and increased pressure on the financial sector to align capital with efforts to transition to low-carbon solutions.

Why Is Sustainable Finance Important?

Sustainable finance has multiple potential benefits. For one, it supports the shift toward a low-carbon, more resilient economy by directing capital toward projects that reduce environmental harm and build long-term stability.

Additionally, sustainable investments can yield competitive financial returns. A recent report from research and sustainability data firm ESG Book showed that companies with stronger ESG performance have, on average, delivered higher returns for investors than their peers within the broader market.

Factoring environmental and social considerations into investment decisions can also strengthen an organization’s reputation, signaling to consumers and other stakeholders that it prioritizes environmental and social responsibility, while also pursuing sustained shareholder value.

What It Takes to Work in Sustainable Finance

While there is no single pathway to a career in sustainable finance, aspiring professionals can take a few key steps to break into this growing field:

- **Education:** Earning a master's degree in finance or economics — particularly through a program with a focus on sustainability — can provide professionals with foundational knowledge of financial markets and investment strategies. It also can help individuals deepen their expertise in this niche field, potentially opening doors to more specialized roles and leadership positions.
- **Experience:** Gaining work experience in finance and/or sustainability is often a critical step for those who want to work in sustainable finance. Internships, entry-level roles, and even volunteer work in investment banking, consultancy, or environmental regulation can help budding professionals further refine their analytical skills, industry knowledge, and understanding of ESG principles.
- **Networking:** Building a network of professional contacts can help aspiring professionals expand their access to job opportunities and stay current with emerging trends and developments in sustainable finance. Joining groups such as the Responsible Investment Association (RIA) or the United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) and attending ESG-focused conferences provides individuals with valuable opportunities to cultivate these connections and boost their industry insight.

Sustainable Finance Certificates

Acquiring a relevant certification enables individuals to enhance or specialize their knowledge, and demonstrates to potential employers their commitment to ESG and sustainable finance. Popular industry certifications include the following:

- Corporate Finance Institute: ESG specialization
- Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Institute: ESG investing certificate
- Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB): fundamentals of sustainability accounting (FSA) credential
- European Federation of Financial Analysts Societies (EFFAS): certified ESG analyst (CESGA)

3 Careers in Sustainable Finance

As markets increasingly emphasize ESG considerations, professionals who are skilled in both traditional finance and sustainability are in growing demand. Those with this expertise can pursue any of a number of career paths, including seeking one of the following roles.

ESG Investment Analyst

ESG investment analysts integrate ESG considerations into investment research for institutional investors, asset managers, and banks. They examine ESG data and reports and research organizations' sustainability practices, assess how these factors may influence the company's financial performance, and provide recommendations to portfolio managers and other stakeholders based on their insights.

ESG Financial Analyst

Unlike investment analysts — who often work for financial institutions — ESG financial analysts generally work within corporations, helping them align their financial strategies with their ESG goals. They evaluate the financial impacts of ESG factors on the organization's cash flow, valuation, and overall operations. They may conduct cost-benefit analyses of sustainability initiatives and share information about ESG-related performance with investors.

Chief Sustainability Officer

Chief sustainability officers (CSOs) are responsible for guiding their organization's sustainability strategy and practices. They work with company leadership, employees, investors, and other stakeholders to integrate environmental considerations into the organization's decision-making. They may also engage with policymakers and other external parties to advance a sustainability agenda.

Lead the Future of Responsible Investing

Sustainable finance represents the crucial intersection of financial performance and environmental responsibility. By leveraging their education, experience, industry expertise, and strategic networking, professionals can build rewarding careers that drive both competitive financial returns and meaningful, long-term impact.

If you want to pursue a sustainable finance career, the Master of Finance program at Tulane University's Freeman School of Business can help you get started. The two-semester program offers multiple career tracks, including one in sustainable finance, so you can align your education with your unique professional goals.

Find out how Tulane can help you launch a career in this important field.

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