

# Circular Economy Needs Leadership

The crucial Role of Internal Champions  
in the Transition to a Circular Business



BY  
LINTER  
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# Foreword

Circular economy is rapidly gaining economic relevance. Unstable raw material prices, regulatory requirements, and fragile supply chains are forcing companies to develop resource-efficient business models. At the same time, circular approaches offer new market potential, cost savings, and competitive advantages. However, many companies still face significant challenges in putting these approaches into practice.

Numerous circular initiatives remain in the concept, pilot, or trial phase, and scaling is progressing slowly or not at all. Many obstacles lie at the operational level. What are the specific challenges, and how can they be overcome? These questions are the focus of this report. Our goal is to support companies in their transformation to a circular economy, identify innovation potential, and facilitate implementation in practice.

From April to October 2024, we spoke with over 50 company representatives and asked them: What obstacles hinder the development and scaling of circular products, processes, and business models? And what measures would accelerate change within the company?

We present the findings in this report. They also formed the basis for a design thinking process in which we developed practical formats to support companies in their transition to the circular economy.

A key finding of our analysis is that the transition to the circular economy is driven by special individuals – the champions of organisational change. Promoting these key players through networks and skills development is essential to driving sustainable transformation in companies.

**Dr. Daniel Schraad-Tischler**

Director, Sustainable Social Market Economy  
Bertelsmann Stiftung

**Dr. Susanne Kadner**

Co-Founder  
CIRCULAR REPUBLIC





# Executive Summary



- **Status quo: Circular economy gaining relevance, implementation stagnating:** Circular economy is gaining importance as a competitive advantage. Resource scarcity, uncertain supply chains, and geopolitical risks are making circular value creation models increasingly relevant for companies. Nevertheless, efforts are often limited to pilot projects, whereas broad scaling fails to materialize.
- **Insufficient expertise, lack of best practice exchange, and no career incentives:** There is a lack of practical know-how for designing circular processes. Silo structures and, in many cases, insufficient strategic anchoring prevent cooperation within and beyond the company. The absence of exchange on best practices increases uncertainty, due to a shortage of success stories and peer-to-peer learning. In addition, circular economy projects are often seen as “goodwill initiatives” – without clear career prospects and targeted skills development, the commitment of those involved in the company remains limited.
- **Existing support offerings fall short:** Many companies use online formats to promote circular economy skills, but these are often ineffective. The content is too generic and does not address industry-specific challenges. Without practical advice for implementation, they remain theoretical and offer little added value. There is no systematic approach to translating circular economy theories into concrete transformation strategies.
- **Internal champions, who are the driving force behind successful transformation, often receive too little support:** These change agents, known as transformation promoters, build bridges and networks and multiply positive effects. They translate circular economy concepts into practical strategies, connect employees, and overcome resistance in order to strategically anchor the circular economy. However, currently there is no systematic approach to identifying and promoting them – without targeted support, enormous hurdles remain for building effective promotor networks.
- **Success factors for building circular economy promotor networks:** Internal champions and promoters must be specifically identified and equipped with the right skills and strategic influence. Strong persuasion and leadership skills are essential here to overcome internal and external resistance. Career incentives must be created so that the circular economy can also be culturally anchored as a competitive advantage. The establishment of internal networks and short paths to C-level management enable the scaling of circular economy initiatives. Finally, cross-company networking is needed to share best practices and establish industry standards.



# Content

## Status Quo ..... 5

Circular Business Models Are Gaining  
Economic Importance ..... 5

Despite Growing Economic Relevance,  
the Transition to a Circular Economy Is  
Stagnating ..... 6

## Three Key Challenges Are Slowing Down the Establishment of Circular Practices ..... 8

Organizational Barriers Delay the Circular  
Economy Transformation from Within ..... 9

The Lack of Best Practice Sharing  
Leaves Companies Without Inspiration  
for Implementing Their Own Measures ..... 11

Engagement in Circular Economy  
Is Not a Career Asset ..... 12

## Current Measures to Embed Skills Fall Short ..... 13

Existing Offerings Focus Heavily  
on Online Formats ..... 14

For the Circular Economy to  
Take Hold in a Company, Two Key  
Requirements Must Be Fulfilled ..... 18

## Internal Champions Are the Driving Force Behind Change ..... 20

Internal Champions Are a Proven  
Tool for Driving Innovation and Change  
Within Organizations ..... 21

Internal Champions Drive Circular  
Economy in Practice, Connect Industries,  
and Act as Multipliers ..... 23

Internal Champions Are Effective – but  
There Is No Systematic Approach to Their  
Development, Networking, and Support ..... 24

## Empowering Internal Champions – Five Key Actions ..... 26

Identifying Internal Champions ..... 26

Develop Persuasive Power and  
Leadership Skills ..... 27

Create Personal Motivation and  
“Aha” Moments ..... 28

Build Internal Networks and Secure  
Top Management Support ..... 29

Establish Cross-Company Networks ..... 30

## Call to Action: Building a Critical Mass ..... 31

## Methodology ..... 32

## Acknowledgments and Outlook .... 33

## Sources and Imprint ..... 35



# Status Quo

## Circular Business Models Are Gaining Economic Importance

While circular economy has long been viewed primarily from an ecological perspective, economic arguments are increasingly coming to the fore. Resource scarcity, fragile supply chains, and geopolitical uncertainties make a shift to circular value creation indispensable. Companies that embrace the circular economy early on reduce their dependence on volatile global markets and secure competitive advantages.

## External Pressure from Geopolitical Challenges, Supply Chain Uncertainty, and Regulation Is Increasing

The fragility of international trade structures has become increasingly apparent in recent years. Events such as the blockade of the Suez Canal, the war in Ukraine, and the semiconductor crisis in Taiwan have exposed the vulnerability of linear business models. The close interdependence of multinational supply chains has a particularly strong impact: while some industries are able to cushion geopolitical shocks, in many sectors they lead to significant economic downturns [1]. In addition, Germany as an industrial location is heavily dependent on imports of relevant raw

materials such as metal ores and rare earths. At the same time, regulatory pressure is increasing. The European Commission is tightening requirements for resource efficiency and material cycles with measures such as the Ecodesign Regulation (2024) and the third Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP) planned for 2026. In Germany, the Nationale Kreislaufwirtschaftsstrategie (National Circular Economy Strategy) will begin implementation in 2025.

## Circularity as a Lever for Resilience, Predictability, and New Value Creation Potential

In addition to these external factors, circular business models open up significant economic opportunities. Rising raw material prices and global price pressure require innovative strategies to reduce costs. Companies with circular structures are more resilient, less dependent on raw material markets, and can pursue more stable pricing strategies [2]. In addition, “as-a-service” models enable recurring revenues and can replace the classic “sell & forget” product strategy.



Due to the dramatic rise in raw material prices in the early 2000s, we were faced with the decision of either sacrificing our quality and wearing ourselves out competing with cheap foreign suppliers, or simply ceasing to be competitive. Circular economy offered us a third way: by taking back our water meters, we have secured constant access to raw materials and at the same time significantly strengthened our relationship with our customers.

**Wilhelm Mauß**

Managing Director of  
Lorenz GmbH & Co. KG

The transformation to a circular economy is therefore not merely a response to external challenges, but a key lever for economic stability, predictability, and new value creation potential. Those who act early will secure long-term advantages in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

## Despite Growing Economic Relevance, the Transition to a Circular Economy Is Stagnating

Although the economic importance of circular economy is growing significantly and is being facilitated by geopolitical conditions, the transition often remains limited to pilot projects. A comprehensive transition is not yet apparent.

## The Relevance of Circular Economy in Business Discourse Is Growing Rapidly

Circular economy is increasingly seen in politics and business as the key to solving pressing challenges such as raw material scarcity, climate change, and economic resilience. At the same time, the number of circular economy-related projects in companies has risen steadily – 77% of companies in Europe now address the topic in their sustainability reports or strategic initiatives [3,4]. This development underscores a growing awareness of and commitment to transformation.

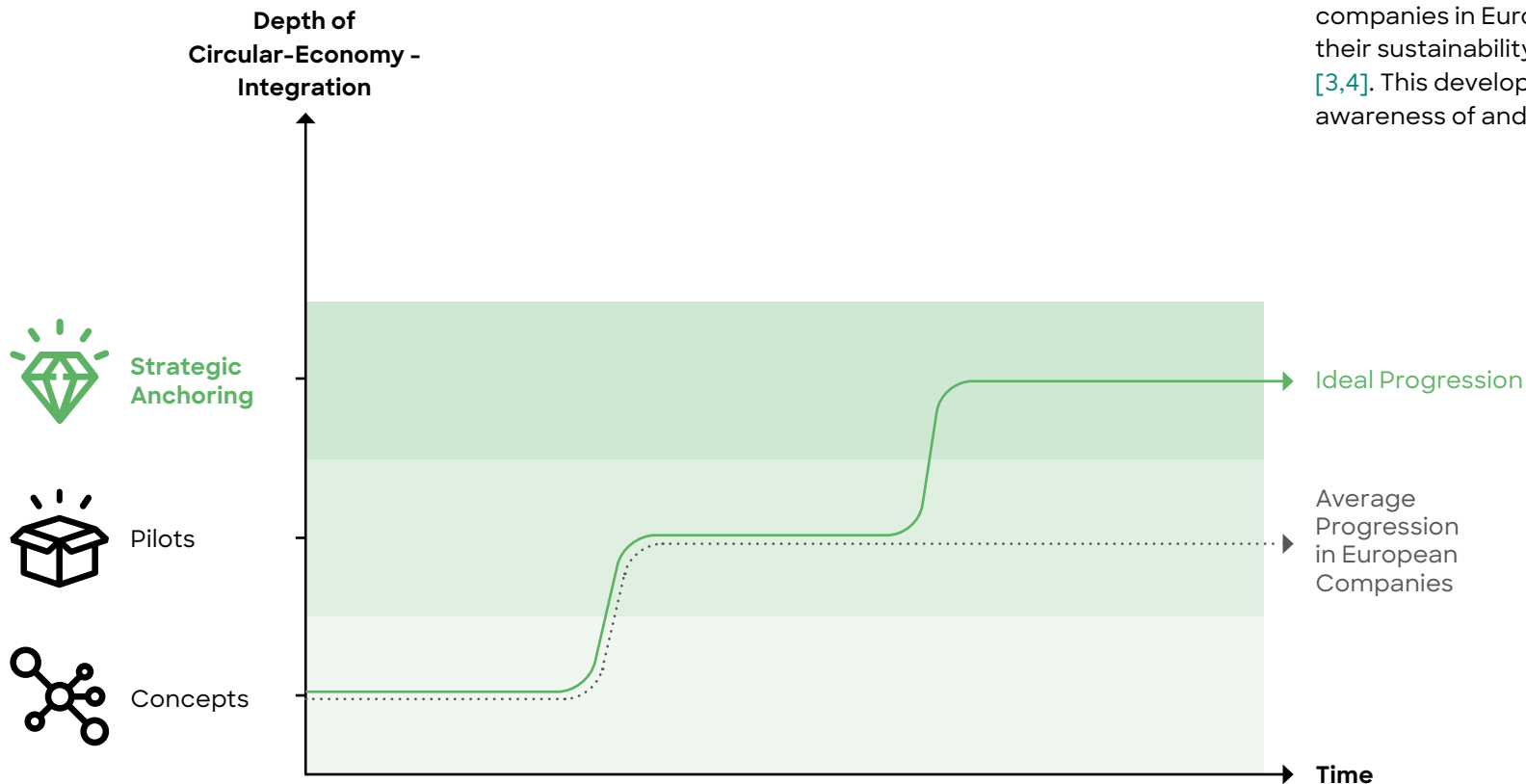


Figure 1: The circular economy transformation is stuck in a “pilot stage.”

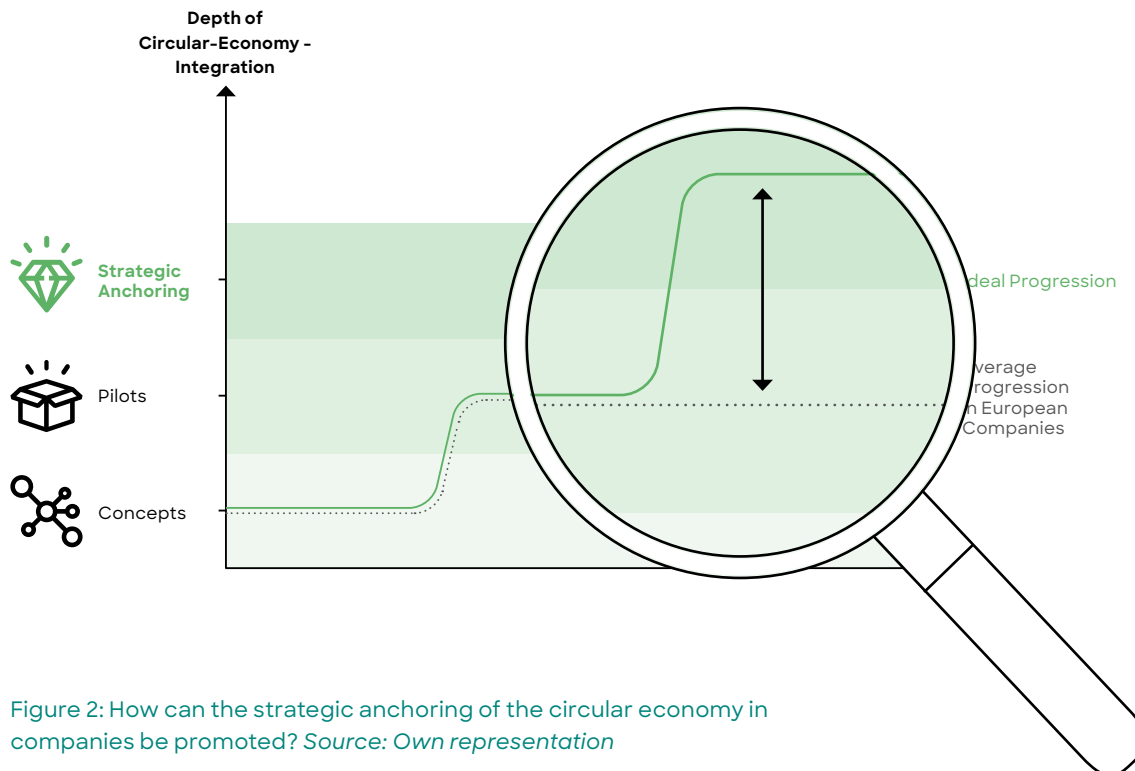
## No Macroeconomic Transformation in Sight

Despite growing awareness of the circular economy, implementation in companies is lagging behind expectations. Only 22% of companies can report at least one of the circularity indicators defined by the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) [4], suggesting that many initiatives do not progress beyond the concept or pilot phase and are not scaled up.

At the same time, overall material consumption continues to rise. In the EU, annual per capita material consumption is 18 tons, and in Germany it is as high as 21 tons, which is almost three times the sustainable maximum of 8 tons [5]. Although the secondary material rate in the EU reached its highest level to date in 2023 at 11.8%, the slow increase from 10.7% in 2010 means that progress remains sluggish [6]. This confirms the impression of a stalled transformation.

Although there are positive developments in the implementation of circular economy approaches, the necessary strategic anchoring is not yet widely evident.

The central challenge, therefore, remains:



**What is preventing companies from scaling up and strategically anchoring the circular economy? And what is needed to overcome these hurdles?**



# Three Key Challenges Are Slowing Down the Establishment of Circular Practices

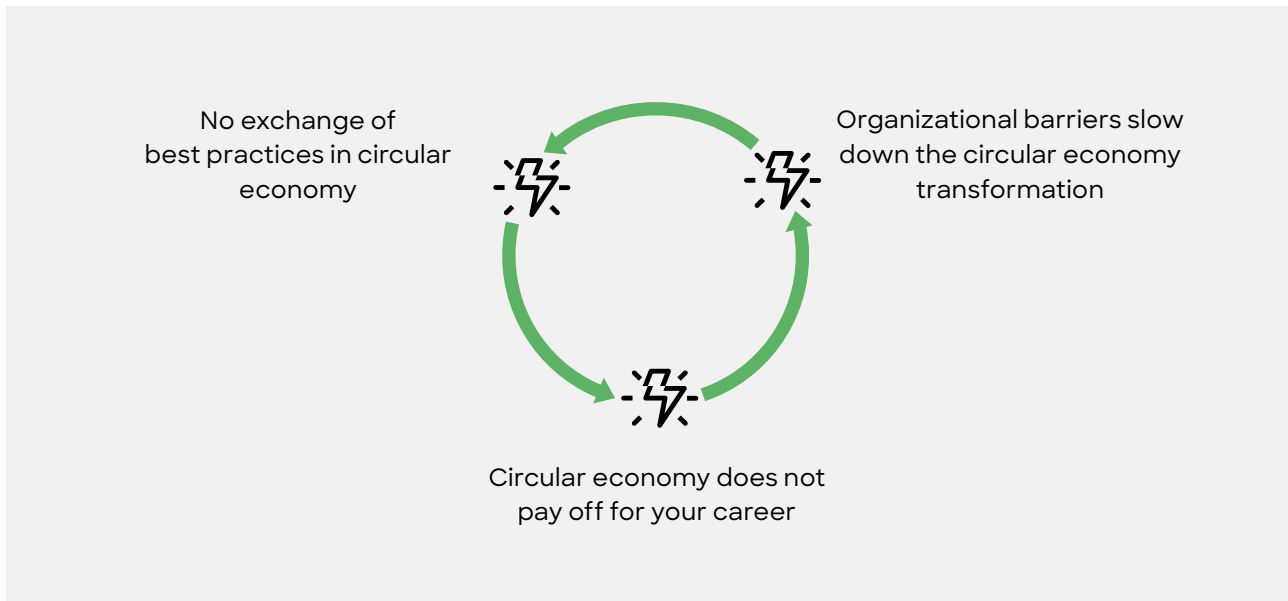


Figure 3: Three problems hinder the establishment of circular practices in companies.

Source: Own representation

The transition to a circular economy is hampered by three operational obstacles rooted in organizational structures, corporate culture, and career opportunities within companies.

These issues prevent the effective integration and company-wide scaling of circular economy practices.





## Organizational Barriers Delay the Circular Economy Transformation from Within

Despite numerous efforts, companies face significant organizational challenges in implementing the circular economy. These hurdles are similar to change processes in other areas of business. However, they are particularly pronounced because the circular economy affects almost all areas of a company and requires comprehensive and well-coordinated structural adjustments.

### **Not Only Are the Necessary Skills Lacking, but Existing Capabilities Are Often Underutilized Due to Insufficient Internal Collaboration**

Many business processes and structures have been geared toward linear economic practices for decades and require profound changes for a successful transition to the circular economy. In a circular economy, the product life cycle does not end with the sale, but potentially also includes take-back, dismantling, and reprocessing. A lack of internal expertise in the technical implementation, strategy, and management of circular economy projects leads to unclear responsibilities and initiatives that are difficult to implement.

In addition, these requirements often exceed the capacities of individual departments and require cross-departmental cooperation. However, the established linear corporate culture with hierarchical structures and rigid processes hinders necessary cooperation. Such silo structures make it difficult to integrate circular economy practices within the company and along the value chain. Awareness of the cultural changes required to move toward circular business models is often insufficient. These internal barriers, which inhibit the implementation and scaling of circular economy measures, are shown in Figure 4.

## The Circular Economy Transition Is Often Not Prioritized

The frequent lack of cultural anchoring of circular economy is reinforced by a lack of strategic decisions in favor of circular business models. Decision-makers are reluctant to prioritize measures that receive little support in existing businesses or departments. Circular approaches are therefore often perceived as additional tasks rather than an integral part of the core business.

Sustainability departments, often tasked with circular economy initiatives, typically hold limited strategic influence, as their efforts are focused more on regulatory compliance than on business model innovation. Without clearly anchoring the circular economy in corporate strategy, there is a lack of long-term support and company-wide acceptance. As a result, initiatives remain isolated, rarely progress beyond the concept or pilot phase, and fail to have a systemic impact.

### Organizational challenges

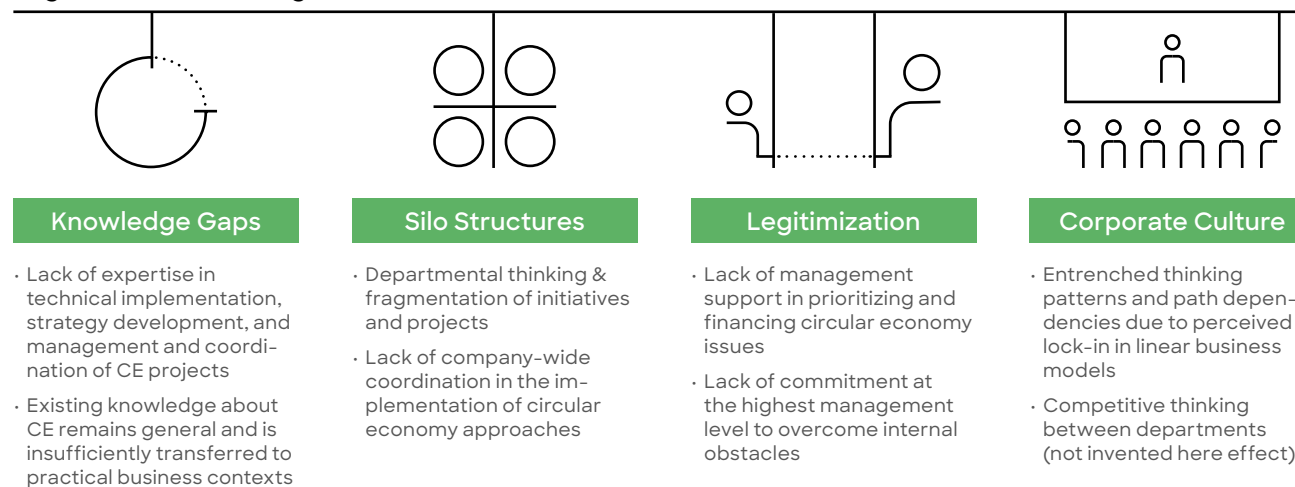


Figure 4: Four factors are hindering the circular economy transformation from within.  
Source: Interview data from CIRCULAR REPUBLIC and the Bertelsmann Stiftung.



In my work with numerous companies from a wide range of industries, it has become clear time and again that sustainability departments often lack the necessary strategic clout to drive circular economy issues forward within their companies. In addition, they often lack the necessary budget for implementation. In my view, it therefore makes much more sense to place circular economy in the innovation or even strategy departments. From there, it can gain momentum much more quickly.

**Susanne Mira Heinz**

Initiator, *Circular Thinking*

## The Lack of Best Practice Sharing Leaves Companies Without Inspiration for Implementing Their Own Measures

A key bottleneck in implementing the circular economy is the limited exchange of practical, real-world best practices. Companies lack concrete case studies that illustrate successful circular economy strategies, as well as compelling success stories – both technically sound and emotionally engaging – that demonstrate practical benefits and economic relevance. In addition, peer-to-peer learning, i.e., the direct exchange of experience between employees of different companies, is hardly established.

Without tangible role models, companies often do not have sufficient guidance and inspiration to launch their own circular economy initiatives. The lack of access to success stories and proven measures leads to uncertainty and a hesitant approach to circular economy issues. Implementation problems come to the fore, and obstacles are perceived as insurmountable. However, practical and context-specific examples could create confidence in the potential of the circular economy and serve as an important motivation to actively drive the transformation forward.



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External stimuli and best practices are incredibly valuable sources of inspiration—they literally spark ideas. It is essential to see what other companies are already successfully implementing and what success factors are behind circular models. A good example can often be the decisive impetus for a change in thinking.

**Carola Wennemann**

Strategy Project Manager  
Webasto

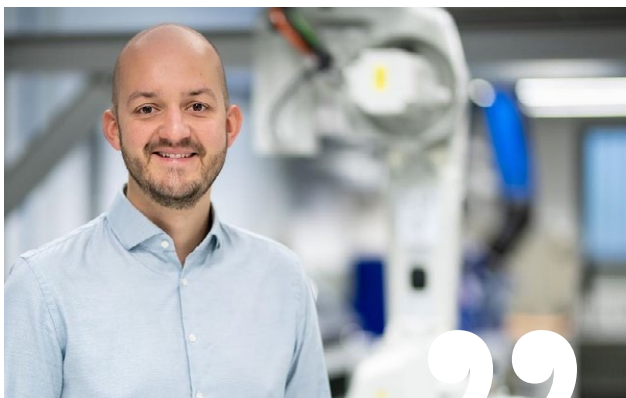


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You need easily understandable use cases that clearly pay off in order to convince people in the company of circular economy. These “aha” moments are indispensable. The board of directors must understand that those who fail to act now are leaving business opportunities untapped.

**Thomas Fetting**

Group Director  
WILO SE



A committed peer group with concrete ideas on circular economy provides a solid foundation for tackling implementation challenges together and across company boundaries. The exchange of knowledge – especially about mistakes and challenges – offers valuable learning opportunities. At the same time, active community management within the company plays a decisive role in successfully putting the transformation into practice.

**Stefan Opitz**

Head  
CIRCO-Hub, efa – Effizienz-Agentur NRW



The widespread implementation of circular economy requires more than just the usual “true believers.” Commitment in this area must become interesting and tangible for all employees. Only then can the circular economy be brought out of its niche and anchored throughout the entire company.

**Dr. Saskia Juretzek**

Head of Sustainability  
Tengelmann Twenty-One KG

## Engagement in Circular Economy Is Not a Career Asset

Motivations to implement circular economy are complex and often differ between employees and organizations. In many companies, it is primarily personally committed individuals who drive circular economy initiatives, often without any measurable benefit to their careers. Individuals' commitment is often based on personal conviction and a sense of purpose, while business incentives such as new business areas, regulatory requirements, and competitive pressure play a secondary role. These projects are often seen as goodwill efforts, disconnected from the core business and only little strategic relevance. The lack of connection between individual and organizational motivation means that the circular economy is not being promoted as a high priority. Career-oriented employees avoid circular economy initiatives because they contribute little to professional development. As a result, they remain limited to voluntary engagement and often fail due to a lack of broad-based support.

To become firmly established, circular economy must be promoted beyond personal motivation and become a career driver.

It requires top talent – the industrial leaders of tomorrow – who recognize its strategic importance and see the circular economy as an opportunity to distinguish themselves, similar to the introduction of roles such as “agile coach” or “digital transformation manager.”



## Current Measures to Embed Skills Fall Short

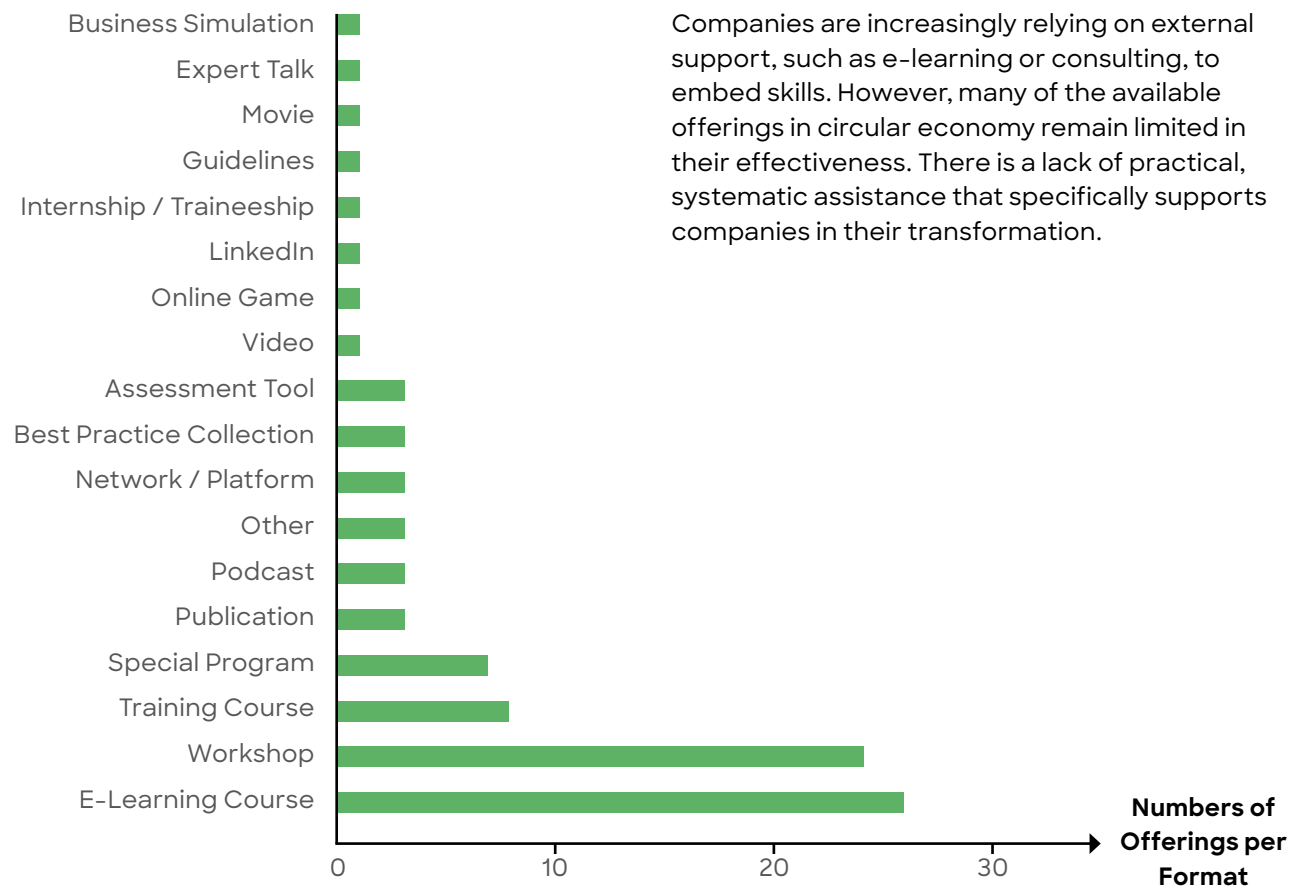
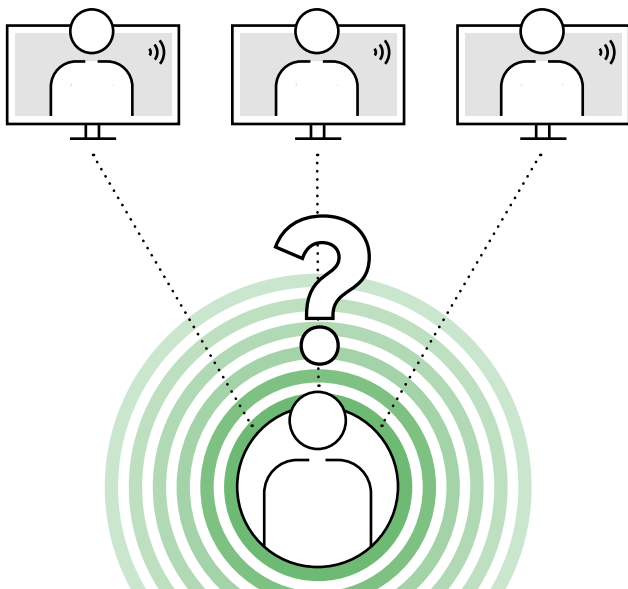


Figure 5: E-learning dominates the market for support services.  
Source: CIRCULAR REPUBLIC; Bertelsmann Stiftung (own database)

## Existing Offerings Focus Heavily on Online Formats

The market for learning offerings is particularly fragmented and confusing. The most common form of external support offerings in the circular economy context are e-learning courses. Of the 92 offerings evaluated in the circular economy sector, 55, or just under 60 percent, are online-based. Companies have difficulty finding high-quality, well-curated content that meets their specific requirements. Although online offerings are widely applicable, the content is often too general to provide practical help. In addition, there is a lack of clear quality criteria or rankings to select the best learning resources.



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We need good examples and success stories that show how circular economy can actually be economically successful. Cross-company working groups have been very helpful in developing the right narratives here. Actively sharing experiences with other experts is extremely important. This creates multipliers that develop into valuable networks, both internally and externally.

However, this only works to a limited extent digitally. Personal conversations and connections are important for building trust and sharing knowledge. This is a basic prerequisite for actually driving change in practice.

**Mark Edler**

Head of Corporate Sustainability  
*Weidmüller*

In the context of purely online offerings, there are generally four problems that reduce the effectiveness of these formats. There is often a lack of a clear overview and reliable sources to help companies develop the necessary skills. Standardized training courses designed according to the “one-size-fits-all” approach prove to be ineffective, as they do not take into account the different knowledge levels and requirements of employees in different functions and hierarchical levels. Such an approach falls short, as not every employee needs the same knowledge to drive the circular economy forward.

There is also a lack of interactive and practice-oriented learning formats. Traditional online offerings, which are limited to the mere communication of facts, do not encourage concrete commitment and therefore do not promote the direct application of what has been learned. In addition, time constraints and the inadequate integration of learning resources into everyday working life make it difficult to train employees and implement new circular economy concepts in their daily work.

### Challenges with online offerings

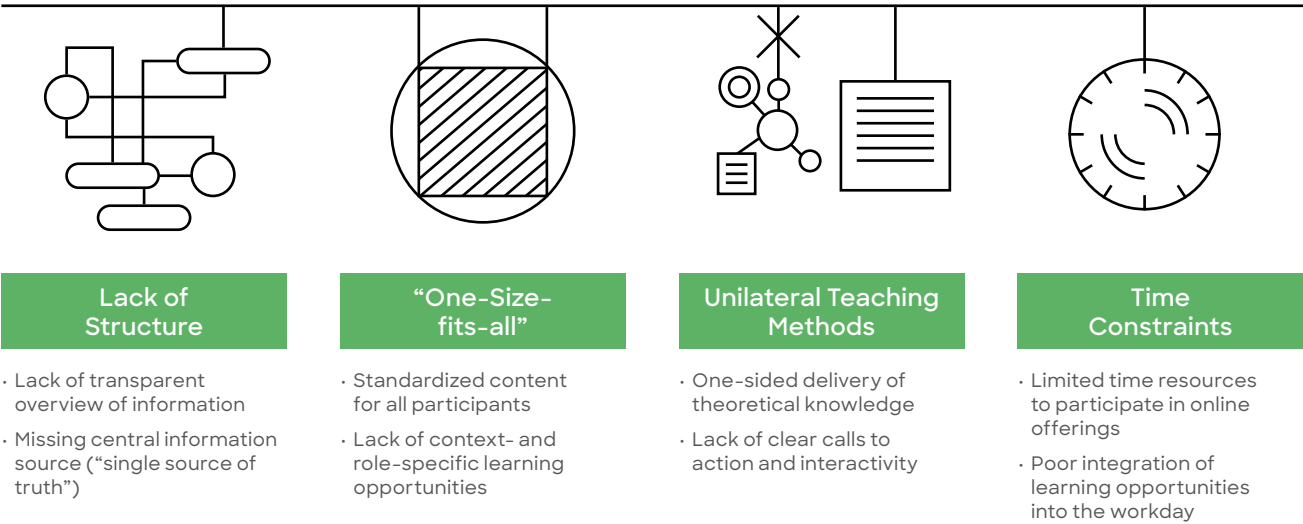


Figure 6: Shortcomings of Common E-Learning Approaches.  
 Source: Interview data from CIRCULAR REPUBLIC and the Bertelsmann Stiftung



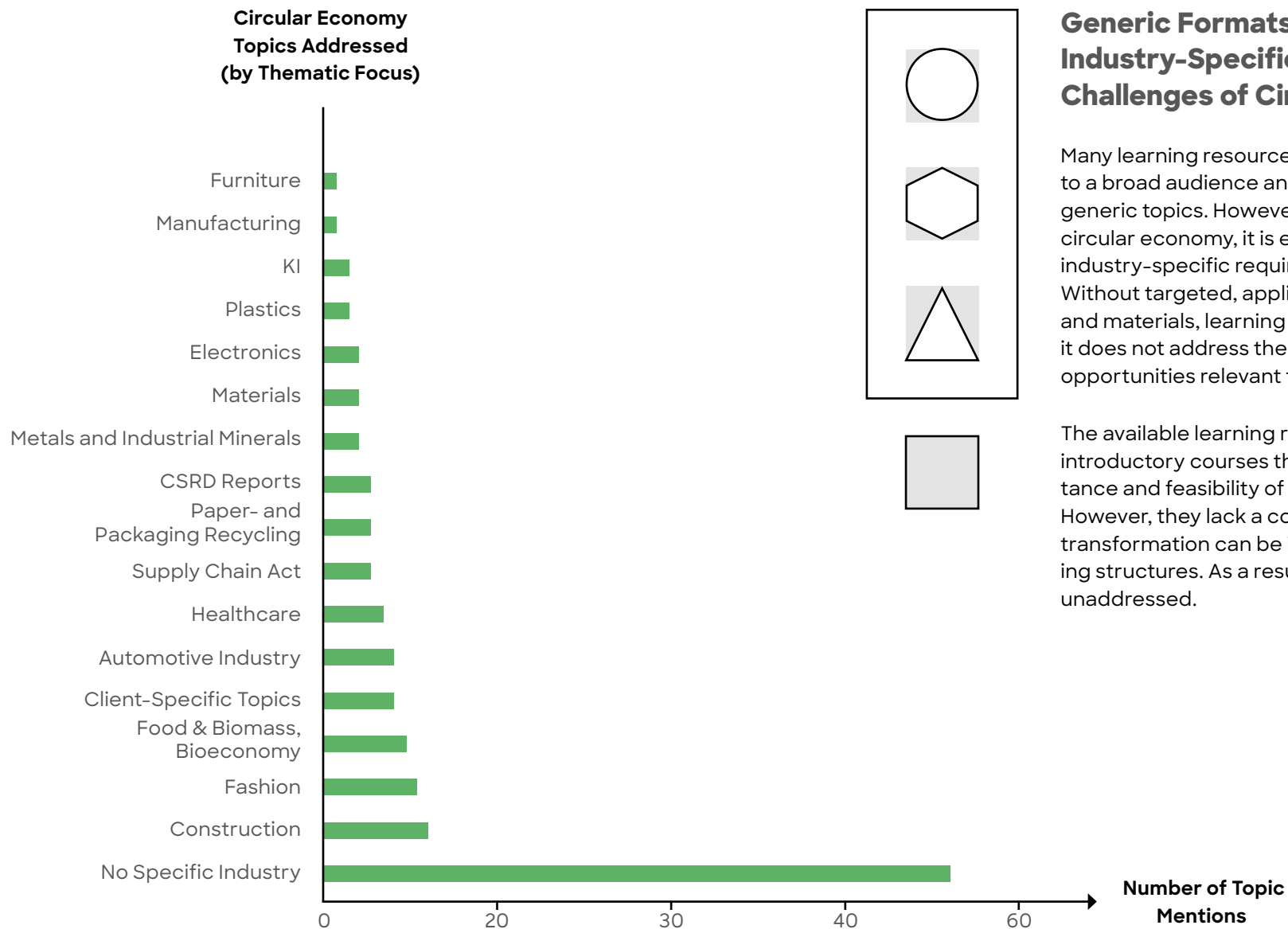


Figure 7: Online offerings are mostly generic and lack an industry-specific context.  
Source: CIRCULAR REPUBLIC; Bertelsmann Stiftung (own database)

## Online-Only Offerings Do Not Provide Sufficient Support for the Transfer of Circular Economy Theory into Business Practice

Formats that actively involve employees in the transformation process and promote a sustainable mindset are essential but more difficult to scale. As a result, many programs focus on one-way delivery of basic concepts and facts, without adequately supporting the practical transfer into the workplace. Of the 92 formats analyzed, the majority rely solely on one-sided knowledge delivery or presentations (see Figure 8).

A comparison between the existing barriers to effective circular economy transformation and the available learning resources reveals a clear gap: Online formats have become widespread due to their broad reach, but they primarily focus on the basic incentives for adopting a circular approach. However, companies do not fail because of a lack of awareness – they struggle with implementation, which requires overcoming structural and organization-specific hurdles.

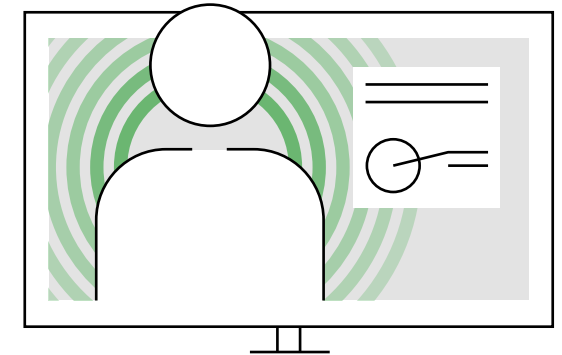
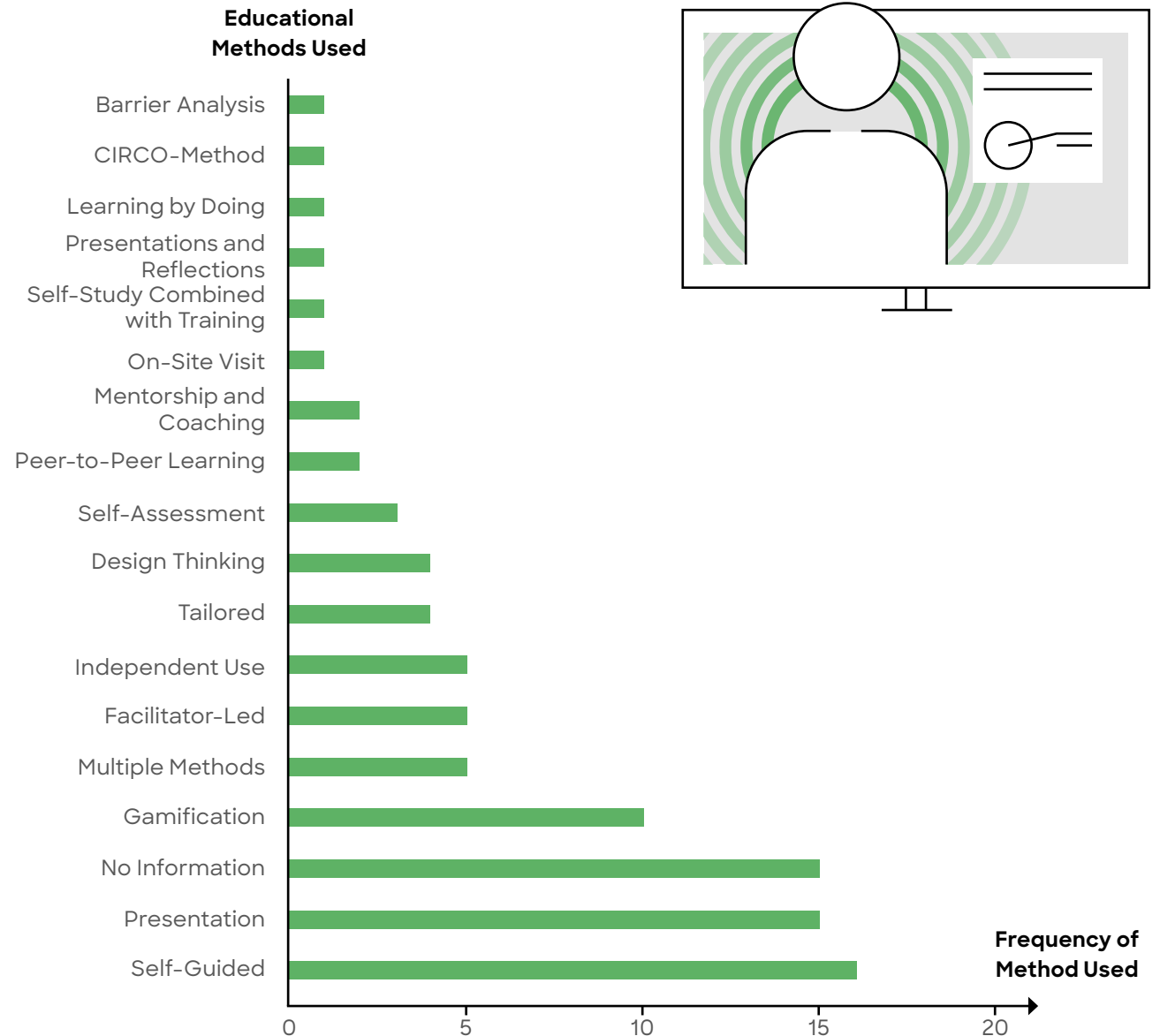


Figure 8: The most common form of knowledge delivery is based on static (non-interactive) presentations. Source: CIRCULAR REPUBLIC; Bertelsmann Stiftung (own database)



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To successfully drive a profound transformation like the shift toward a circular economy, more than factual knowledge is needed—it requires real behavior change and new leadership skills. Change works when new competencies can be applied in practice through real-world tasks. In our experience, implementation-focused live trainings (online or offline) are essential to practice, reflect on, and sustainably integrate new behaviors into everyday work.

**Tobias Stetter**  
Managing Director  
Orange Elephant

## For the Circular Economy to Take Hold in a Company, Two Key Requirements Must Be Fulfilled

A central challenge lies in a structural dilemma: Individual consulting and workshops offer tailored solutions, but only have an impact on a limited number of employees. Online formats, on the other hand, provide broad reach within the organization but are often ineffective and rarely lead to lasting change. What companies need are formats that are both scalable and impactful – a gap for which adequate solutions have so far been largely missing.

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## The Dichotomy Between Scaling Impact and Scaling Reach Must Be Overcome

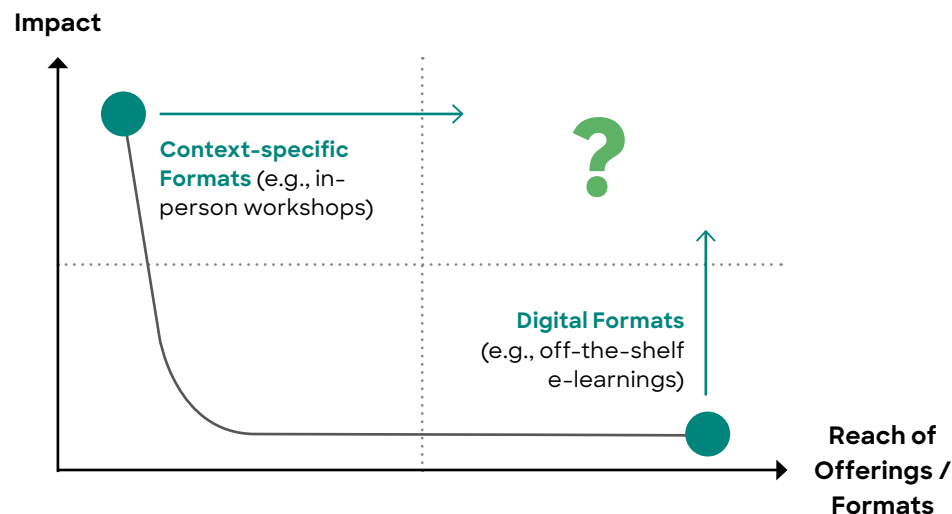


Figure 9: Formats are needed that achieve both broad reach and high impact within the company. Source: Own illustration

# 2.



## People Are at the Heart of Transformation – Greater Impact Through Networks

Successful transformation toward a circular economy requires putting people at the center of scaling strategies. Change can only succeed when diverse actors – within and beyond the organization – collaborate intentionally. Strategically minded leaders set the foundation by prioritizing the transformation and providing resources. Operational networkers drive cultural change and make the shift tangible. Middle managers translate strategic goals into practice, while external catalysts spark innovation. The success of circular economy does not depend on digital solutions alone – it depends on the people shaping the change through collaboration, exchange, and strong networks that turn knowledge into real transformation.



To advance circular economy within companies, we need to tap into the talent pools of large organizations and empower these individuals to act as internal change agents. Transformation happens through people who create energy and momentum—and who understand how to drive change from within. Communication, networking, and individuality play a central role in this process—one-size-fits-all solutions rarely lead to success. In fact, what's really needed is leadership development, far more than just the transfer of factual knowledge about circular economy.

**Jela Götting**

Managing Director  
*Tengelmann Twenty-One KG*



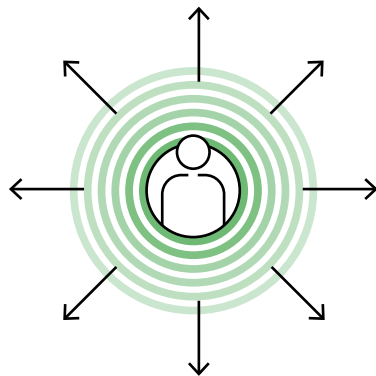
Not Another Online Academy – we all know how hard it is to make time for e-learning in the middle of a busy workday. Two success factors are key when it comes to learning about circular economy: First, it has to be enjoyable. Second, it needs to lead to action quickly. Learning happens among peers and in real-life settings—that's why combining learning with a strong network is essential. Only those who learn through practical application can translate abstract theories into the reality of their own organization and truly drive circular economy forward.

**Dr. Manuel Braun**

Senior Director  
*Systemiq*



# Internal Champions Are the Driving Force Behind Change



Successful circular economy transformations are often propelled by specific individuals within companies who go above and beyond in their commitment to the cause. In innovation research, such individuals are referred to as promoters. The concept describes actors within organizations who work “actively and intensively” beyond expectations to drive deep, structural change [7]. Numerous conversations with circular economy leaders in companies show that promoters can serve as powerful catalysts for embedding circular economy strategies within organizations.



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To effectively and scalably drive the transition to a circular economy, approaches that place people at the center are essential. Closed workshops and individual training have their limitations, and online learning doesn’t always achieve the necessary depth. Companies have diverse needs that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot address.

Methods like “train-the-trainer” models are crucial for contextualizing and passing on knowledge, applying it where it

can have the greatest impact. Such approaches help create a critical mass of advocates within companies – internal tipping points. This is the only way to sustainably scale impact within an organization.

**Hilde van Duijn**

Managing Director  
*Circle Economy Foundation*



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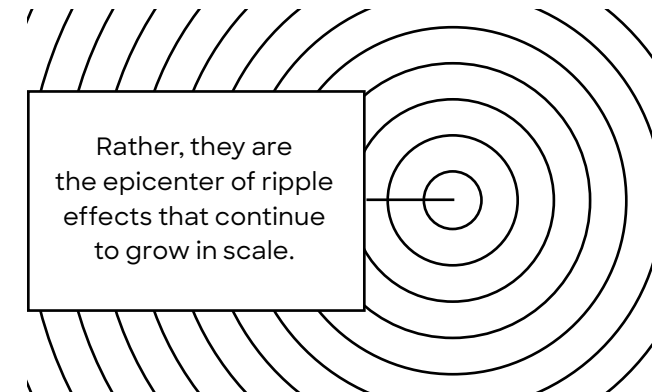
A major breakthrough in implementing circular economy practices was the introduction of a SPoC system – Single Points of Contact. These SPoCs function like cogs in the wheel of a company’s circular economy transformation. They are individuals who understand the organization, know its processes, and often hold key positions that might not be obvious at first glance – such as assistants or fleet management coordinators. It’s often these seemingly modest roles that wield the greatest influence. These individuals are essential for anchoring the topic within the organization, sparking

enthusiasm, crafting compelling narratives, and creating a sense of: “I want to be part of this—I want to live this culture.” This approach helped us overcome barriers and deeply embed circular economy within the company.

**Prof. Simone Sommer**  
*Hochschule Pforzheim*

## Internal Champions Are a Proven Tool for Driving Innovation and Change Within Organizations

Champions, or promoters, are key individuals who hold an organizational role in innovation processes, actively support them, and help overcome both knowledge and motivation barriers [8]. Promoters do not merely act as subject matter experts.



Their enthusiasm and competence spread throughout the organization and beyond by inspiring colleagues and enabling them to integrate new concepts and approaches into their own areas of work. This creates a self-reinforcing transformative dynamic.

The academic literature commonly distinguishes between three types of promoters, each of whom can drive innovation through a mandate from leadership.

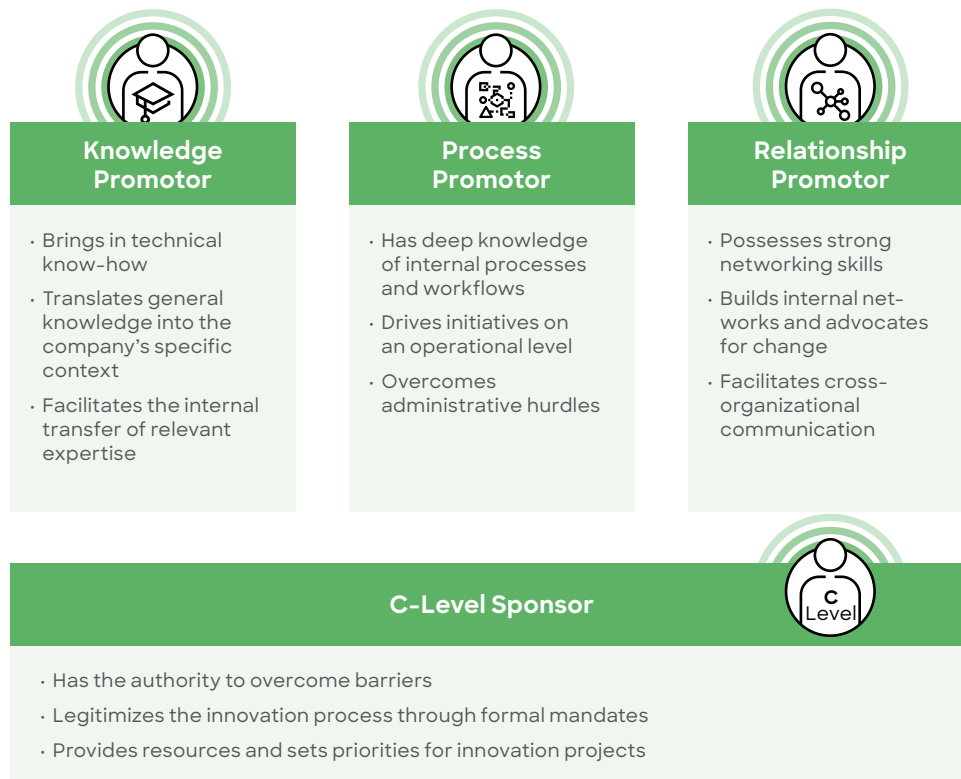


Figure 10: Overview of Different Types of Promoters.  
Sources: Based on [9], [10], [11], [12]

This redefines the idea of scalability: A small core of promoters can, through this ripple effect, create a wide network of engaged individuals. In doing so, change becomes tangible, practical, and sustainable. Promoters generate quick impact and build organic reach for circular economy topics within the company.

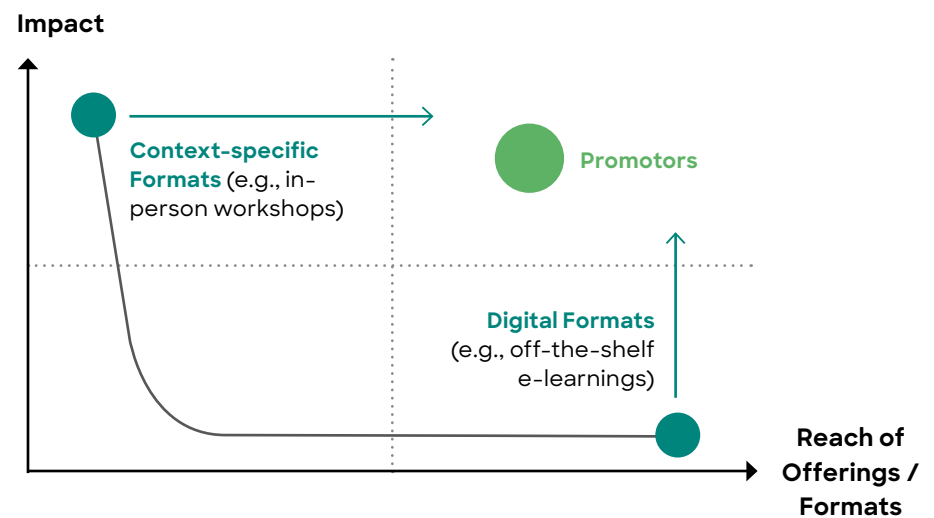


Figure 11: Promoters Bridge the Gap Between Reach and Impact - Enabling Both to Scale. Source: Own Illustration

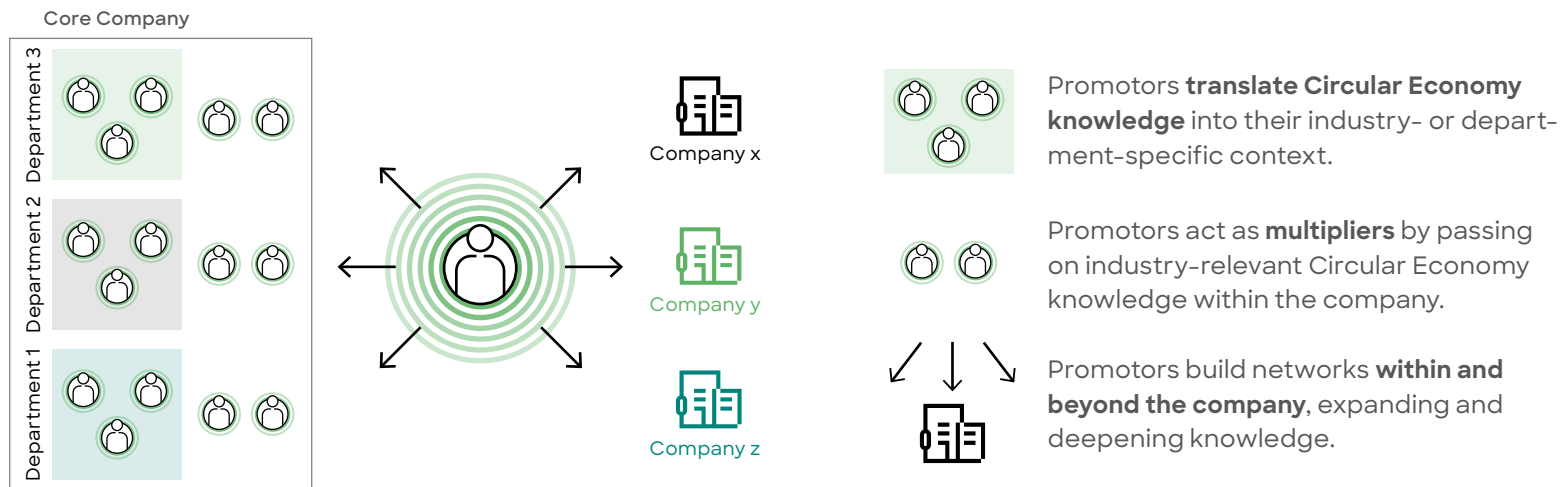


Figure 12: Circular Economy Promoters Translate Theory into Practice, Act as Internal Multipliers, and Connect Industries.

Source: Own illustration

## Internal Champions Drive Circular Economy in Practice, Connect Industries, and Act as Multipliers

Champions and promoters are not only individuals with a formal mandate – they are also those who have the skills and motivation to earn that mandate and make circular economy a core focus of their career. They are successful not in spite of, but because of their commitment to circular economy.

In the context of circular economy, a consolidated category of promoters is emerging – Circular Economy Promoters – which brings together the three operational promotor roles. They take on three key functions:

- **Bridge-builders between theory and practice:** They translate abstract concepts into concrete actions, making the Circular Economy applicable in a sector- and context-specific way.
- **Multipliers within the organization:** They build strong internal networks of supporters and actively drive the transformation forward.
- **Networkers beyond organizational boundaries:** They foster cross-company exchange, form strategic partnerships, and maintain them over time.

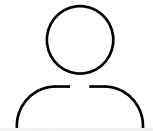
Circular Economy Promoters directly address the core challenges of embedding circular practices sustainably. They generate both reach and impact within the organization, overcome structural barriers, share best practices across company lines, and position the Circular Economy as a key part of their professional success.

Their role is clearly distinct from that of C-level sponsors: while C-level sponsors ideally support and legitimize the circular economy agenda from above, Circular Economy Promoters lead the hands-on implementation and shape the transformation process from within. Even in the absence of top-level support, they play a crucial role in gaining buy-in from leadership and ensuring that circular economy is seen as a strategic priority.

## Internal Champions Are Effective - but There Is No Systematic Approach to Their Development, Networking, and Support

The emergence of champions or promoters within organizational structures is currently more a matter of fortunate coincidence than strategic planning. Few systematic efforts exist to identify and develop the potential of suitable employees. There is a lack of structured support within organizations, forcing promoters to carve out their roles on their own and repeatedly reinvent processes.

Hochschule Pforzheim -  
Harald Koch



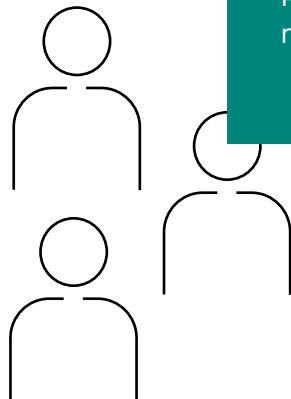
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The problem is: there's no playbook for Promoters - no recipe that shows how to engage people or build an internal community. These were all things we had to figure out on our own.

A guide would have been incredibly helpful - whether it's sample phrases for meetings and presentations or pitch training for boardroom sessions. Promoters need to be able to inspire and mobilize others - and that, too, is a skill

that needs to be learned. Unfortunately, there are hardly any offerings that support this, even though such resources could make all the difference.

**Prof. Simone Sommer**  
Hochschule Pforzheim



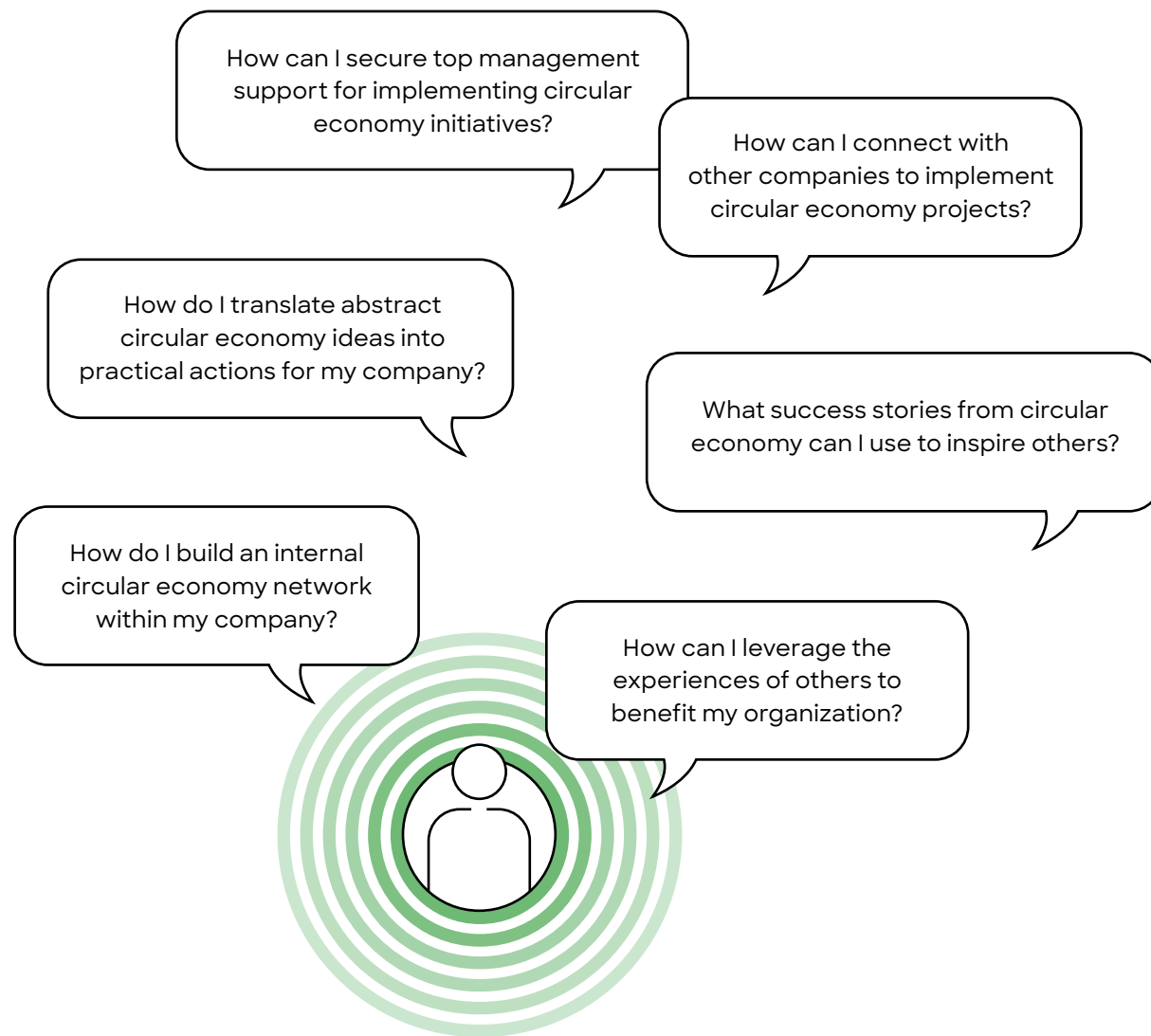


Figure 13: Key Questions for Individuals in Promotor Roles.  
Source: CIRCULAR REPUBLIC Interview Data





# Empowering Internal Champions - Five Key Actions

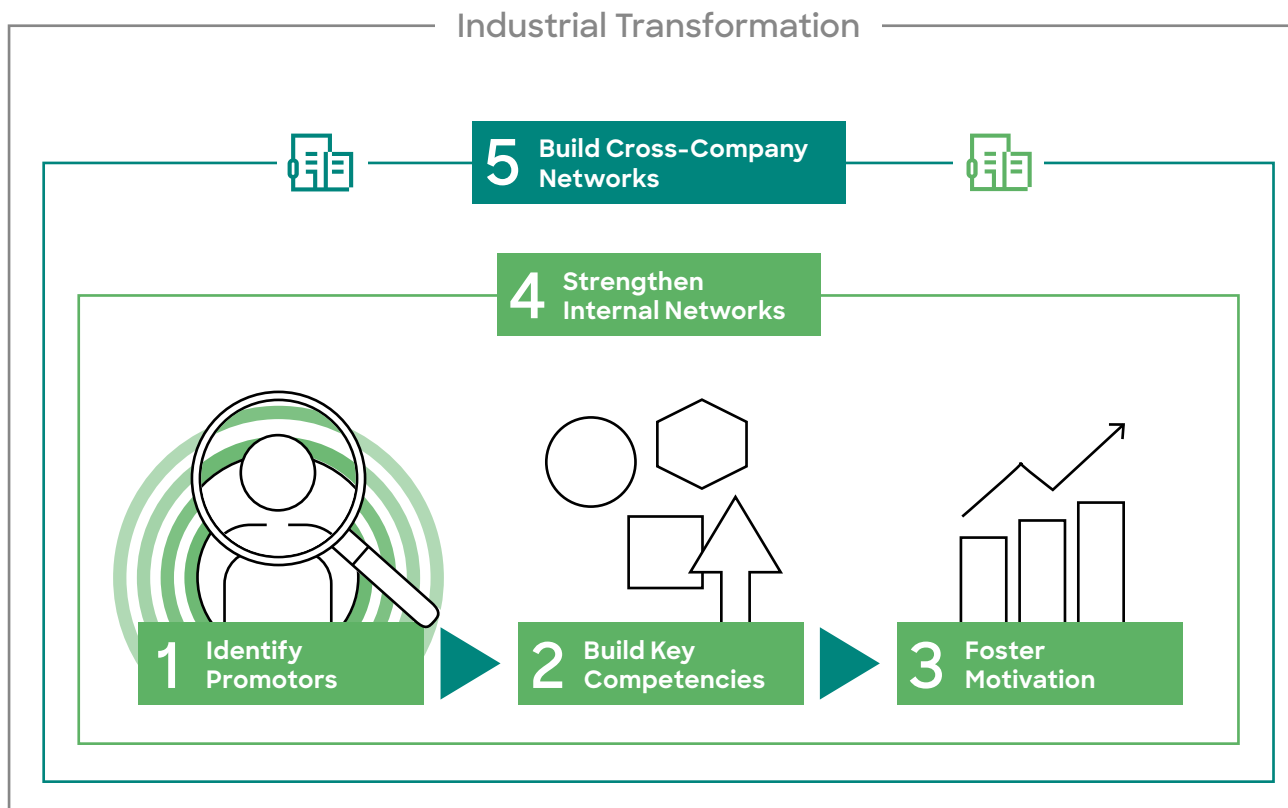


Figure 14: Five Factors That Support the Development of Promoters Within Companies

## Identifying Internal Champions

Potential Circular Economy Champions or Promoters should possess a range of core competencies to successfully drive change within an organization. These include strategic thinking, solid subject-matter expertise, and the ability to apply that knowledge effectively. It is also essential that the person is in a position to actually influence change within the company. Strong internal networks and a deep understanding of organizational structures and processes are also critical for promoters to act effectively. There are already targeted approaches for systematically identifying the organizational environment and suitable individuals. These approaches consider several key factors within the company [13]. The following guiding questions should be asked:

- **Project Team:** Who holds which formal responsibilities in the transformation process?
- **Perception:** How are transformative changes perceived within the organization?
- **Barriers:** What existing obstacles hinder change, and who is best positioned to overcome them?



- **Innovators:** Which employees play which roles? Who acts as a sponsor, expert, intermediary, networker, or skeptic?
- **Collaboration:** What internal and external collaborations exist, and how can they be leveraged for change?
- **Action Plan:** What concrete next steps can be initiated to drive sustainable transformation?

## Develop Persuasive Power and Leadership Skills

Above all, successful promoters must be able to persuade and inspire people to embrace change. Transformation processes often encounter resistance – be it due to uncertainty, entrenched structures, or fear of additional challenges. That’s why it’s not enough to simply present well-founded arguments. Promoters must be emotionally compelling, build trust, and inspire action. Key skills include:

- **Circular Economy Expertise:**  
Promoters need a solid understanding of the principles, strategies, and success factors of circular value creation. They must be able to connect technical, ecological, and economic aspects.
- **Change Management:**  
Promoters must not only initiate change but also make it tangible and relatable. Employees need to feel actively involved, rather than feel that change is being imposed on them from above.
- **Business Case Development:**  
Technical expertise alone is not enough – promoters must present strong, convincing economic arguments for their initiatives. Gaining leadership support often depends on a clear articulation of business benefits.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:**  
Change is only successful when all relevant actors are on board. Promoters must be able to bring people together, overcome resistance, and create a shared vision.

Without the ability to inspire, no transformation will gain traction. Strategies are worthless if they are not understood and embraced. Leadership skills and persuasive power are not optional – they are the foundation of successful change. Those who can win others over can drive transformation. And those who mobilize people will ensure a lasting impact.

**Internal champions who strategically advance circular economy initiatives and build their organizations around them are tomorrow’s top leaders.**

## Create Personal Motivation and “Aha” Moments

### Clear Benefits Over Goodwill:

#### The Promotor Role as a Career Accelerator

Motivated promotorers are the key to a lasting circular economy transformation. To foster real engagement, personal incentives must go beyond pure conviction. Tangible career advantages – such as the opportunity to position oneself as a future leader – and the meaningfulness of contributing to sustainability are essential. Motivation is strengthened when personal benefits align with organizational relevance.

### Inspiring Best Practices

Tangible success stories demonstrate the practical value of the Circular Economy and create emotional connections. They show how circular economy works in practice and inspire employees to apply what they’ve learned in their own contexts.


### “Aha” Moments for Deeper Insights

“Aha” moments occur when abstract circular economy concepts suddenly become concrete and relevant. These critical realizations boost engagement across all levels of the organization and help promotorers step confidently into their role – while also making a compelling case to top management.

### Purposeful Use of E-Learnings

Digital learning formats like e-learnings can play a valuable role – especially when targeted at the right individuals within the company. They enable employees with a genuine interest in the circular

economy to build foundational knowledge at their own pace, which can later be deepened through interactive formats like workshops or peer-to-peer learning.



”

The most expensive part of an e-learning program for companies isn’t the course itself – it’s the time employees spend completing it. Taking a scattergun approach to circular economy training doesn’t just lack impact, it’s also more costly than first identifying the people for whom the topic truly matters and who are eager to drive it forward.

At endlich.academy, we see that outcomes improve significantly when participants are highly motivated. The ones who gain the most are those who choose the course themselves and are intrinsically motivated to learn.

**Anna Köhl**  
Co-Founder, *endlich.academy*



## Build Internal Networks and Secure Top Management Support

### Strong Networks Drive Transformation

Promotors foster cross-functional collaboration by breaking down silos and connecting departments such as R&D, Procurement, and Marketing. Coordinated collaboration between these functions is essential for implementing circular economy initiatives effectively.

Promotors also help spread transformation readiness and capacity across the organization: they build internal networks and deliberately develop additional key players within the company.



Connecting and inspiring people is a key success factor for circular business models. Of course, advancing the content and developing specific expertise in circular economy is essential. But the ability to persuade, engage, and excite others is absolutely critical – especially because circularity can only be achieved through collaboration across departments and industries.

This makes human engagement even more important in the circular economy than in other strategic areas. True change only happens when collaboration toward a circular economy is secured at all levels.

**Dr. Anja Eisenreich**  
Circular Economy Strategy Lead



## Securing Support from Top Management

Support from top management is another critical success factor. Promotors must present clear, data-driven arguments and showcase tangible results to convince C-level leaders of the strategic relevance of the circular economy. Without this backing, the necessary resources and prioritization are lacking. Competencies in business model development are therefore essential to win decision-makers over to the circular economy agenda.

## Establish Cross-Company Networks

Transforming value creation toward closed material loops requires close collaboration along the entire value chain and within a broader ecosystem. Cross-company networks are therefore essential for advancing the circular economy. These networks lay the foundation for knowledge sharing, innovation, and the development of common standards – critical elements for scaling circular economy initiatives. Companies can learn a great deal from one another, especially through direct exchange across industries and organizational boundaries.



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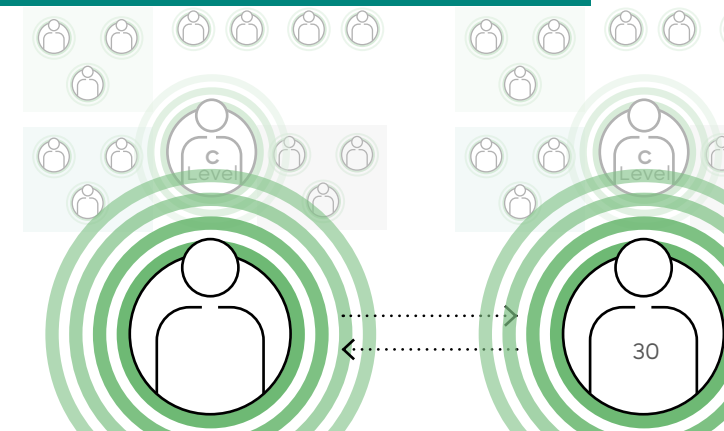
Exchanging with other companies is incredibly valuable. Learning from best practices – but also from the challenges and even the mistakes others have made – can be a huge advantage. Circular economy depends on collaboration across the entire value chain, and this kind of exchange needs to be encouraged even more.

We need to develop a different mindset than in the linear economy. It's about finding solutions together, sharing knowledge, and learning from one another in order to make real progress toward a circular economy.

**Daniel Stölzle**

Business Development  
Manager Sustainability, JAEGGI

Platforms that foster this exchange are crucial for building trust and sparking new projects. Best-practice sharing, peer-to-peer learning, and access to concrete case studies must be systematically encouraged.



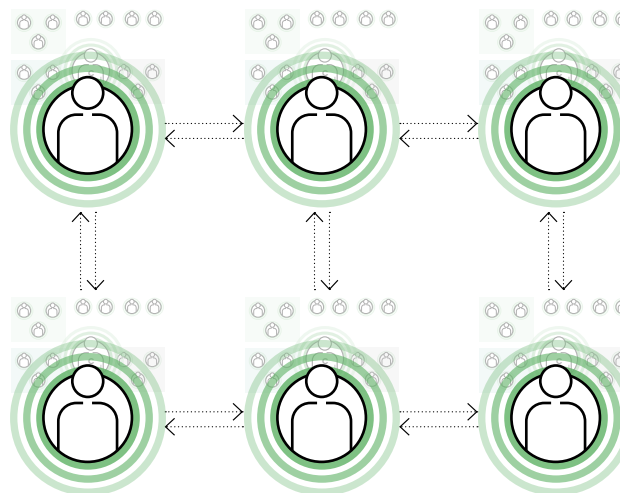


# Call to Action: Building a Critical Mass

Circular economy offers Germany a unique opportunity to reduce its dependence on geopolitical forces and reinvent its engine for sustainable growth. But such a transformation requires a realistic look at the current state of affairs: the linear production model has reached its limits. While it served as the foundation for decades of growth and prosperity, we are now facing the consequences of that success – burdens passed on to future generations and risky dependencies we can no longer ignore.

The success of the circular economy hinges on the emergence of a critical mass of pioneering companies. Only through this collective momentum can we unlock economies of scale and trigger systemic transformation. Networks provide the platform where these companies can collaborate, learn from one another, and jointly lay the groundwork for a sustainable economy. To support this shift at a national and economic scale, a systematic approach is needed to identify and develop internal promoters within organizations. This is how networks can grow, knowledge can spread, and commitment can scale – creating the conditions for long-term, successful circular economy initiatives.

The investment in a functioning circular economy will pay off. To drive this transformation forward, companies must identify the right promoters, empower them through training, and give them the mandate to lead circular economy efforts. These are the people who will play a central role in shaping the future of our economy.





# Methodology

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the current state of circular economy implementation, more than 50 interviews were conducted with decision-makers from industry, business associations, and academic, public, or nonprofit institutions involved in circular economy efforts. In addition, practitioners working on the ground were interviewed to share first-hand experiences.

Insights from these conversations formed the basis for a design thinking process, aimed at developing concrete format ideas through which nonprofit institutions – such as CIRCULAR REPUBLIC and the Bertelsmann Stiftung – can support companies in their transformation toward a circular economy.

In total, 116 existing learning offerings related to circular economy were systematically collected. After an initial review, 92 formats were manually evaluated based on a set of criteria, including:

1. **Focus:** Does the offering concentrate on a specific topic, or does it cover a broad range of content?
2. **Content:** Which industries are addressed?
3. **Target Group:** Who is the intended audience?
4. **Learning Format:** What is the didactic approach?
5. **Delivery Mode:** Is the offering online, offline, or hybrid?
6. **Duration:** Over what time period is the offering delivered?
7. **Cost:** What are the participation fees?
8. **Methods:** Which teaching and learning methods are used?
9. **Additional Questions:** e.g., Are best practices addressed?



## Acknowledgments and Outlook

**“Either** our future will  
be circular **or there**  
**will be** no future.”

**- Janez Potočnik**

Co-Chair UN International Resource Panel

In closing, the authors would like to sincerely thank all individuals and organizations who contributed their time, expertise, and data to this report. We hope it will serve as a catalyst for action – whether in the development of promotor networks, their training, new business collaborations, or even new organizational models.

We look forward to building on this foundation and developing targeted formats to empower Circular Economy promotor.

On behalf of the entire team.

**Dr. Susanne Kadner**

Co-Founder, CIRCULAR REPUBLIC

**Leonhard Teichert**

Program Lead, CIRCULAR REPUBLIC

**Armando García Schmidt**

Senior Expert, Bertelsmann Stiftung





# Authors and Contributors

This report was jointly developed by **CIRCULAR REPUBLIC** and the **Bertelsmann Stiftung**. The team involved in data collection and report preparation includes:

## **CIRCULAR REPUBLIC**

Leonhard Teichert  
Polina Ivanova  
Merle Remy  
Leon Henrik Thiel  
Susanne Kadner

## **Bertelsmann Stiftung**

Armando García Schmidt

## **External Experts**

Susanne Mira Heinz  
Bertram Kloss  
Sören Buttkereit



## More information

CIRCULAR REPUBLIC is a pacesetter for the transformation towards a circular economy. Find out how we support you.



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## About UnternehmerTUM

CIRCULAR REPUBLIC is part of **UnternehmerTUM**, Europe's largest center for start-ups and innovation.



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and

Bertelsmann Stiftung  
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256; 33311 Gütersloh  
[www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

**Authors:**

Leonhard Teichert	Leon Henrik Thiel
Polina Ivanova	Armando García Schmidt
Merle Remy	Susanne Kadner

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