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Reporting is not an end in itself – it is a lever that can initiate and enable change

Study Objectives

Making the added value of sustainability reporting more tangible for companies

While the costs associated with sustainability reporting are relatively easy to quantify and feed directly into public debates, the potential medium- to long-term benefits that reporting can unlock are difficult to grasp for most decision-makers within companies.

With this study, we address precisely this gap by making the added value of sustainability reporting for companies more tangible, using concrete examples from corporate practice. We show what kinds of transformation processes can be set in motion through reporting and under which conditions financial value can arise. In doing so, we aim to contribute to the political, economic, and societal debate on the

future of sustainability reporting, offering concrete examples that make the benefits more visible and outline the pathways through which companies can unlock them.

Understanding the conditions under which value is created

We present a holistic model of the transformation processes and outcomes of sustainability reporting that, under certain conditions, can generate financial value for companies (see Figure 1). Decision-makers can use this model to structure internal discussions on the value of sustainability reporting within and beyond their organizations and to derive concrete implications for action.

Key Messages

The value lies in the process – not the product

Sustainability reports derive their benefits not from the final product itself but from the organizational change processes that their preparation initiates – and from the purposeful use of the resulting data for management and communication, both inside and outside the organization.

Key transformation processes triggered by reporting include:

- Strategic elevation and prioritization of sustainability topics
- Professionalization and systematization of processes and data management
- Development of effective corporate governance structures
- Strengthening internal collaboration and breaking down silos
- Institutionalization of stakeholder engagement formats

Quotes from the study which illustrate this:¹

”The reporting pushes us to improve and makes the gaps in our sustainability strategy visible.”

”Reporting is a vehicle for building structures for data availability and quality. A form of data governance.”

”Sustainability reporting encourages us to take a holistic approach. It brings all departments to the table.”

Transformation is not automatic – impact depends on context

Sustainability reporting can trigger transformation processes that generate financial value if it is understood and used not merely as a compliance exercise but as a strategic management tool. The degree to which such value materializes depends strongly on its context. Our study illustrates, through concrete examples, under which internal and external conditions reporting can be effective. This includes factors such as:

- Organizational maturity and available resources
- Data infrastructure and management involvement
- Market and regulatory pressure
- Clarity and interoperability of standards

Reporting can therefore serve as a powerful lever to initiate transformation processes and generate financial value, but it is not a self-perpetuating mechanism.

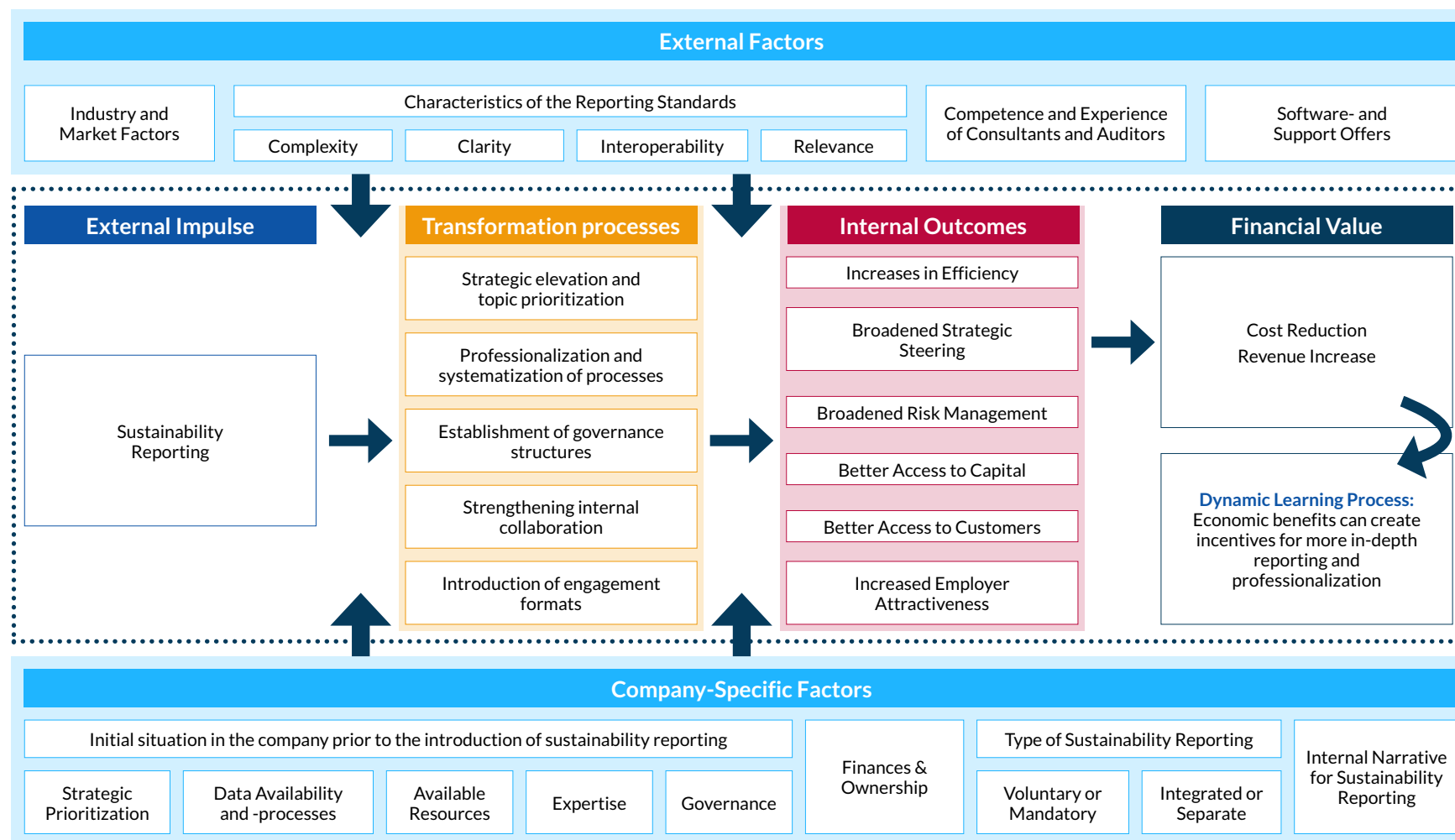
”If you have a report, you can pass it on to customers and don’t have to look up the data individually for each request.”

”Sustainability reporting pays off. We have won multi-million-euro contracts because we were able to present our DNK report.”

”Many of the energy and resource efficiency projects we later implemented noticeably reduced costs. The reporting initiated them.”

¹ Quotes have been shortened for this brief version. The full-length quotes can be found in the [study](#).

FIGURE 1 | Relationship between transformation processes, outcomes, and financial value



Source: Own illustration.

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Recommendations for Action

For Companies:

- Use this paper to systematically analyze the costs and benefits of reporting within your organization. Which outcomes apply to your specific context? What needs to be done to realize such outcomes?
- View sustainability reporting early on not merely as a regulatory duty but as a potential management and learning instrument to strengthen internal learning, governance structures, and data-driven decision-making.
- Make use of available guidance and technical solutions to handle data efficiently (e.g., tools provided by the German Sustainability Code [“Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitskodex”]).
- Actively use the data generated through reporting for strategy development and stakeholder communication.

For Policymakers and Regulators:

- Ensure planning security and continuity so that companies can make long-term investments in reporting and data systems.
- Maintain proportionality by simplifying sustainability reporting where possible, but without undermining the potential transformative impact of reporting.
- Strengthen dialogue and feedback loops between regulators, businesses, and academia to further develop pathways and metrics for assessing the benefits of sustainability reporting.

This summary is based on the study “More than Reporting: How Sustainability Reporting Creates Value for Companies”.

Access the full version here:

<https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/more-than-reporting-how-sustainability-reporting-creates-value-for-companies>

The original study was written in German:

<https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/mehr-als-reporting-wie-nachhaltigkeitsberichterstattung-wert-fuer-unternehmen-schafft>

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