



# RUBICON

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# Foreword

*Alea iacta est.*

Every year, as we conduct our market outlook survey, we look for a name that sums up our sense of the year ahead. This time, we chose the word Rubicon, to signal a time of no turning back.

The Rubicon is a small river that flows east from the Apennine Mountains into the Adriatic Sea.

In 49 BC, Julius Caesar was governor of a region above this river. He was not permitted to cross it, yet he uttered the words “Alea iacta est” (“the die is cast”). It was the point of no turning back.

That is the nature of 2026. Most obviously, it is the year of committing to the greatest technological disruption of our lifetime. Last year, positions and rates of adoption varied, with some organisations taking very cautious stances. As the data in the report shows, sentiment is now qualitatively different.

But it isn't just AI. There are Rubicons of many other kinds. We have never seen leadership more in focus than in 2026. That's not surprising as we've never seen external volatility and internal complexity both be so high at the same time. Most organisations are struggling with change responsiveness, course correction, thinking space and wellbeing.



Alea iacta est (“the die is cast”)

Julius Caesar

It's also the first time we have seen performance and accountability being the top cultural imperative (ahead of cross-organisational collaboration). That's understandable but also a challenge, given what I term ‘transformation dislocation’ – the drop in engagement and organisational commitment arising from working in a vortex of changes.

If there is one word that stands out to me in all the data, it is ‘ambiguity’. This is not temporary, it is situation normal. Organisations have to cross this Rubicon too – operating effectively in ambiguity, not trying to wish it away.

What is your Rubicon? Study the report in depth to find its implications for your organisation and role. Then find that Rubicon, and resolve to cross that river.

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**Anthony Mitchell**

Chief Potential Officer  
Bendelta

# Executive Summary

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## Acceleration is no longer episodic. It is structural.

Across three years of research, one signal has clearly strengthened: Artificial Intelligence has moved from an emerging theme, to an operational experiment, to a defining condition. In 2026, it is described not as a program of work, but as part of the operating environment itself, alongside economic constraint and regulatory complexity. At the same time, leaders report heightened pace, compressed cycles and sustained urgency. The baseline speed of the system appears to have increased.

Importantly, this is not a crisis narrative. The tone across responses is composed and pragmatic. Organisations are tightening discipline, sharpening investment logic and focusing on execution. Leadership development and technology modernisation sit at the top of the agenda. Structural redesign, organisational reinvention and workforce transformation are more measured.

Internally, however, adaptability remains moderate. Complexity is compounding. Reflective space is limited. AI is widely expected to improve productivity and ways of working, yet few anticipate fundamental shifts to business models or workforce composition. Optimisation appears to be advancing faster than reinvention.

This raises an important strategic question. If this acceleration is becoming structural rather than temporary, how well are organisations calibrated for the environment emerging around them?

If previous years were about noticing and experimenting, 2026 reads as a crossing point: a Rubicon moment. The question is no longer simply whether organisations will respond to change, but how deeply they will adapt their systems so they remain aligned with a world where technological, economic and organisational acceleration has become the baseline.

## The Landscape

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### Key Shifts: From Volatility to Acceleration

One signal has strengthened consistently across three years of this research: Artificial Intelligence. AI has evolved from an emerging theme to an operational experiment and now to a defining condition.

In 2026, over half of respondents cite AI as the most significant shift compared to the start of 2025. AI is no longer viewed as a discrete initiative, but as a force reshaping work, leadership expectations and competitive dynamics.

AI is no longer framed in terms of exploration or pilots. It is described as pervasive and inevitable. The question is no longer whether to engage, but how to operate in a permanently AI-enabled environment.



AI will significantly disrupt the world of work. How do you prepare for something you can't fully predict?

At the same time, leaders are not describing isolated shocks. They point instead to heightened pace, shorter horizons and sustained urgency. Complexity has intensified and cycles have shortened. Rather than episodic volatility requiring organisations to absorb sudden shocks, the baseline speed of the system appears to have increased.

This distinction matters. Volatility can be managed. Acceleration changes the operating conditions.

AI is likely contributing to these compressed cycles. By reducing the cost of iteration and lowering the time required to produce outputs, it raises expectations across the system. When competitors move faster, standards rise. When outputs scale more easily, benchmarks tighten. The result is not relief but added pressure; a system that feels more capable and less forgiving at the same time.



Alongside this acceleration sits a noticeable hardening of discipline. Economic headwinds, cost scrutiny and sharper prioritisation are prominent. Leaders speak of proving value, tightening investment logic and making more explicit trade-offs. Focus has narrowed.

Importantly, these shifts are not being interpreted as crises. Despite disruption and constraint, leaders still express a sense of agency. Change is something to act upon, not something purely imposed.

The shifts described do not signal collapse. They signal compression. In compressed systems, choices carry greater weight.

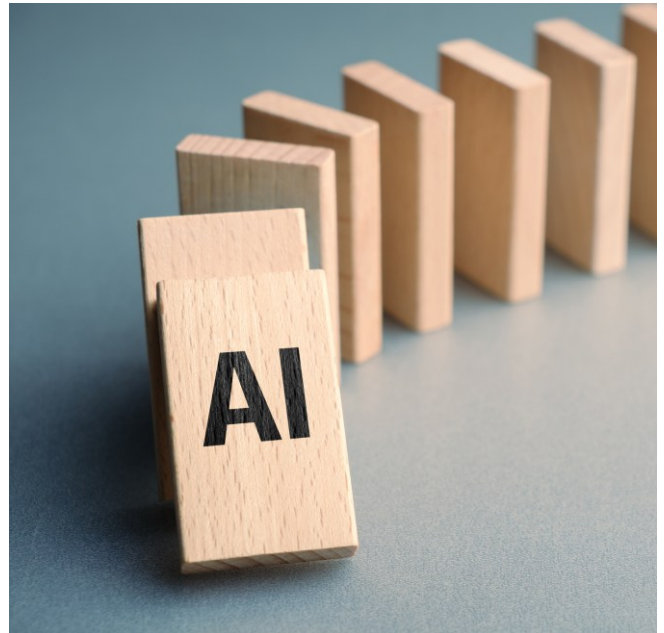
### About the participants

Rubicon 2026 draws on insights from senior leaders across organisations of varied size and sector. Almost half of respondents come from organisations with between 1,000 and 10,000 employees, with a further 17% representing enterprises of more than 10,000 employees. Participants span a broad cross-section of industries, including financial services, infrastructure, professional services, technology and media, education, healthcare and government.

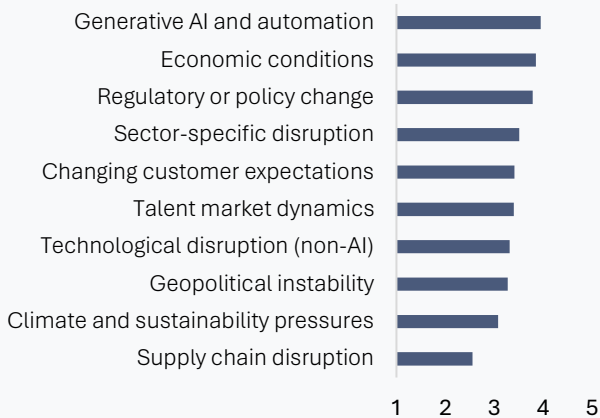
This shift is reflected clearly in how leaders expect the external environment to evolve.

A strong majority anticipate volatility and uncertainty in 2026 to be higher than in 2025, with very few expecting any easing. Stability is no longer the reference point. The baseline assumption is continued intensity.

What is driving that intensity is equally telling. Generative AI and automation now rank alongside economic conditions and regulatory or policy change as the most significant forces expected to shape organisational performance. Over three years, AI has moved from emerging signal to structural condition. It is no longer framed as an innovation program but as part of the operating environment itself, comparable in weight to capital constraints or compliance obligations.



**What level of impact do you expect each of the following external forces to have on your organisation in 2026?**



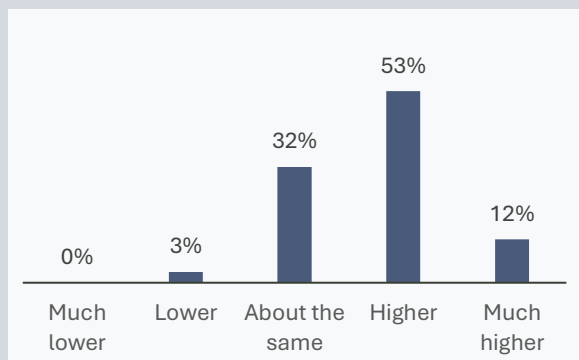
At the same time, economic uncertainty continues to be identified as the most prominent headwind. Cost pressure, investment scrutiny and competitive intensity are front of mind. This sits alongside reports of strong demand and pipeline momentum as leading tailwinds.

Taken together, the environment is not contracting but tightening. Growth opportunities remain, but they appear concentrated in areas where execution is disciplined and value is clear.

Notably, themes that dominated recent years such as supply chain disruption, pandemic aftershocks and hybrid work, have receded. The narrative has shifted from reactive crisis management toward structural adaptation. Technological disruption, tighter economics and regulatory complexity are converging to create a more compressed operating environment: faster cycles, higher expectations and less tolerance for missteps.

If previous years were about noticing change and experimenting at the edges, the signals in 2026 suggest something closer to commitment. The question is no longer whether conditions are volatile, but how organisations will adapt to operate effectively within this more demanding environment.

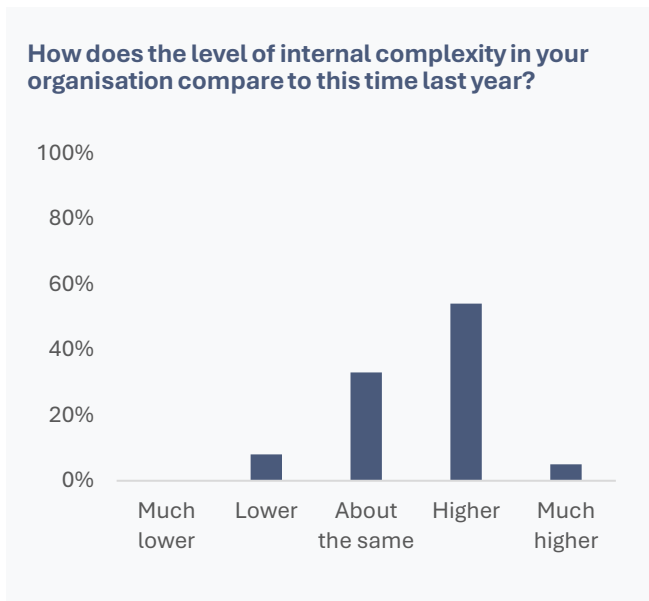
**How do you expect the level of volatility and uncertainty in 2026 to compare with 2025?**



## Coping with Acceleration. But Designed for It?

If the external environment has accelerated, the question becomes: *how well are organisations calibrated for this shift?*

A clear majority of respondents report that internal complexity is higher than this time last year, with almost no one reporting a decline. Complexity appears to be compounding, with the internal system, including decision-making, coordination, communication and delivery, operating under heavier load.

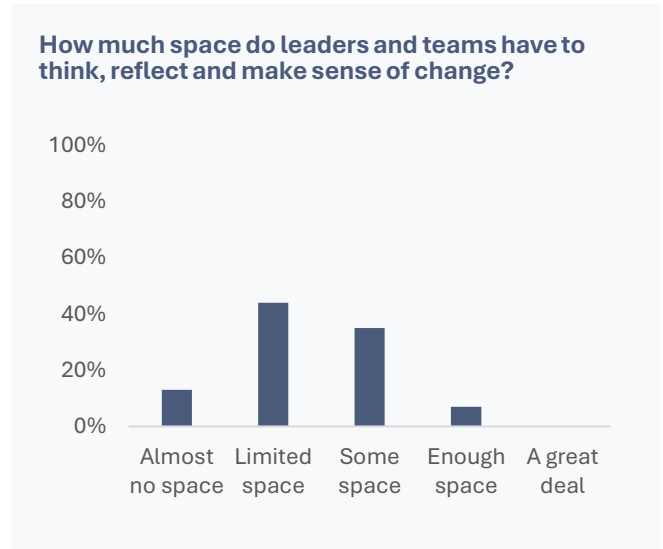


Yet when asked how effectively their organisation responds to change, most cluster around “moderately effective.” The same pattern appears in assessments of coherent decision-making under complexity and rapid change, and in organisations’ ability to learn from experience and adjust in response.

*Organisations are functioning. They are not failing.* But neither are they reporting heightened adaptability.

This distinction matters. Moderate adaptability may have been sufficient in an environment characterised by episodic volatility. In a system defined by sustained acceleration, adequacy may no longer be enough.

The constraint appears less about intent and more about capacity. When asked whether leaders and teams have sufficient space to think, reflect and make sense of change, very few report having enough. A majority describe limited or almost no space for reflection.



At the same time, the biggest drivers of wellbeing pressure are the pace and volume of change, unrealistic workloads, and friction in organisational processes.



Taken together, this suggests a tightly compressed internal system: high pace, sustained demand and limited slack. Organisations appear busy and progressing, but the deeper question is whether their internal settings are evolving with the environment, or simply absorbing the pressure it creates.

AI provides a revealing test case. The speed of AI and technology change is the most frequently cited source of complexity, while AI literacy is among the largest identified capability gaps. Yet the barriers described are rarely framed as purely technical. Respondents point instead to fragmented upskilling, legacy systems, data integrity constraints, scaling challenges and cross-functional coordination issues.

*In other words, AI is not just a technology challenge. It is a systems challenge.*



The opportunity to embrace AI is strong, yet issues like data integrity, legacy systems and clunky processes are impeding progress.

Notably, technical readiness for AI and readiness to support people through AI-driven role changes show near-identical distributions. Organisations do not appear overconfident in the technical domain while neglecting the human one. Instead, there is a general sense of moderate preparedness, accompanied by recognised gaps in leadership capability, AI literacy and adaptability.

This is an important nuance. Confidence in workforce skills overall remains moderate to high. The issue is not a perceived absence of capable individuals. Rather, it is whether organisations possess the meta-capabilities required to operate effectively as pace increases, including leadership equipped for ambiguity, coordination mechanisms that scale innovation, and adaptive routines that convert experience into advantage.

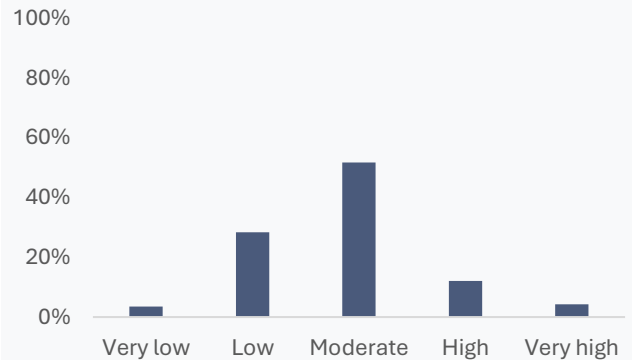
The qualitative data reinforces this. Respondents describe pockets of innovation that struggle to scale. Others note conflicting priorities, unintended consequences and the difficulty of aligning change across functions. The opportunity cost is less about stalled progress and more about unrealised potential.

Across three years of research, the tone has shifted from reactive crisis management toward structural adaptation. Hybrid work and supply chain shocks have receded. In their place sits a more durable pressure: speed.

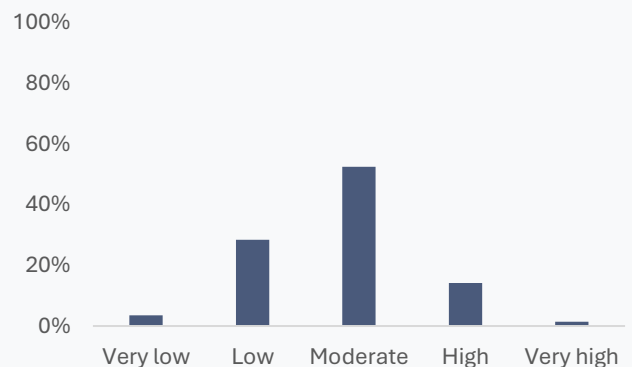
Internally, however, operating settings appear steady rather than elevated. Adaptability is consistent but not intensifying. Reflective space remains constrained. Capability gaps cluster around leadership, AI literacy and change.

The risk, then, is not collapse. It is the gradual accumulation of strain between rising external pace and internal capacity.

**What is your organisation's level of technical readiness for AI adoption?**



**What is your organisation's level of readiness to support people through AI-driven changes to roles and expectations?**



Given acceleration appears structural rather than temporary, organisations may need to consider whether their leadership rhythms, decision forums, prioritisation disciplines and learning mechanisms were designed for a slower system. Adequate responsiveness in the past may not guarantee strategic advantage in the years ahead.

The sections that follow examine how organisations are responding, including through leadership priorities, cultural focus and adjustments to organisational architecture.



## The Approach

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### Leadership Under Sustained Acceleration

As external conditions intensify and internal complexity rises, the leadership agenda for 2026 sharpens.

More than half of respondents identify leading through ambiguity and rapid change as the primary capability requiring uplift. Ambiguity is no longer viewed as a disruption to manage, but increasingly as the baseline operating context.

Notably, this emphasis extends beyond digital or technology change. While AI remains prominent, “leading in an AI-enabled environment” ranks lower than navigating ambiguity itself. AI appears to be viewed less as a specialised leadership domain and more as one contributor to broader, sustained disruption. The capability required is not narrow expertise, but steadiness and judgement when consequences are unclear.



Leadership today requires the ability to sit in the zone of disequilibrium and navigate challenges that cannot be solved through expertise alone.

Two adjacent priorities reinforce this interpretation: strengthening mid-tier leadership capability and translating strategy into clear action. Together, they point to the challenge of execution under pressure. The issue appears less about setting direction and more about ensuring intent cascades coherently through the organisation. The mid-tier, which is often the bridge between strategy and delivery, may be where these pressures are most acutely felt.



Leaders need to build an organisation-wide mindset, rather than remaining anchored in technical expertise.

Leader insights underscore the significance of these gaps. Leadership uplift is framed less as aspirational development and more as a prerequisite for organisational performance. The risk described is not lack of vision, but misalignment, drift and inconsistent execution at pace.



In conditions of sustained ambiguity and heightened execution pressure, leadership capability becomes central to aligning intent and delivery across the organisation. The emerging question is whether organisations have equipped their leaders, particularly through the middle, to translate strategic ambition into disciplined, adaptive action in conditions that are unlikely to stabilise.

**Which areas of leadership capability require the most focus or uplift in your organisation in 2026?**



## Culture: Tightening for Delivery

As external change accelerates and internal complexity intensifies, organisations in 2026 appear focused on fostering cultures that enable execution.

The strongest signal is a renewed emphasis on accountability and performance, closely followed by cross-organisational collaboration and enterprise mindset. Culture is being framed primarily through shared behaviours that support alignment and strategy delivery, with less emphasis on themes centred on employee experience. Leaders describe the need to clarify ownership, minimise duplication and ensure priorities hold under fiscal constraint. Where resources are tighter, ambiguity around ownership and priorities quickly becomes costly.



With AI competitors moving fast and transformation timelines tightening, we can't afford initiatives that drift without clear ownership.



Customer needs are changing rapidly and require cross-functional responses.

This focus marks a subtle shift. Over three years, collaboration and agility have remained consistent themes. In 2026, however, they appear more tightly linked to execution than engagement. The emphasis is not primarily on aspiration or motivation. It is on coordination.

At the same time, risk tolerance and experimentation continue to rank lower among identified priorities. Despite technological disruption and sustained uncertainty, organisations are not signalling a widespread cultural shift toward bold reinvention. Instead, the emphasis appears to be on consolidating the operating culture by strengthening consistency, clarity and execution before expanding risk appetite.

A tension becomes visible here. Earlier sections suggest organisations assess their adaptability as moderate rather than strong, with limited space for reflection and learning agility. Yet the cultural agenda emphasises accountability and performance. The challenge may therefore be balancing execution discipline with the capacity to adapt. Discipline improves efficiency. Adaptability enables evolution. In a system defined by sustained change, both are required.

Notably, wellbeing and belonging rank lower as areas for uplift. This does not imply they are unimportant. Rather, under economic and technological pressure, relational aspects of culture may be assumed stable or temporarily deprioritised. The risk is subtle: in already demanding conditions, tightening performance expectations without reinforcing cohesion may gradually erode resilience.

The cultural story of 2026 is therefore not one of reinvention. It is one of refinement under pressure. Whether refinement alone is sufficient in an environment of sustained acceleration remains an open question.

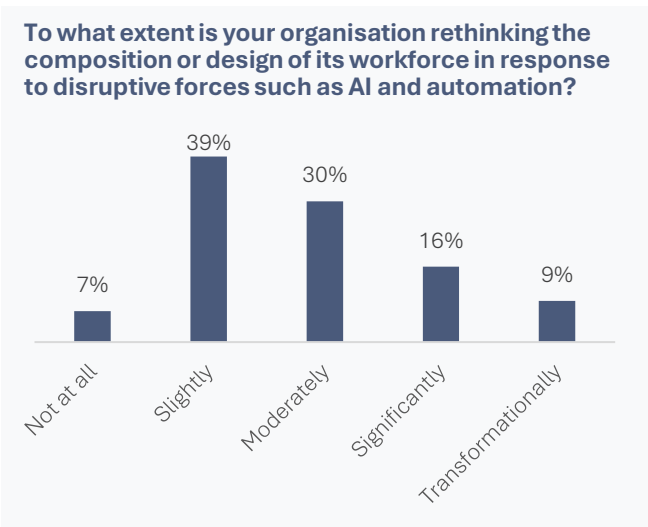
### Which aspects of your culture require the most focus or uplift in your organisation in 2026?



## Organisational Architecture: Refinement, Not Reinvention

If heightened pace and change are becoming baseline conditions, how are organisations adjusting their structure in response?

The dominant pattern in 2026 is deliberate recalibration rather than wholesale redesign. While almost all organisations acknowledge some rethinking of workforce composition or design in response to AI, most report slight or moderate change, with relatively few pursuing significant transformation. Disruption is recognised, but responses remain measured.



When organisations describe their actions, the most common mechanism is a formal operating model or organisational design review. Structures are revisited, accountabilities clarified, layers simplified and functions consolidated. These shifts are not passive. They represent intentional refinement within familiar paradigms.



Among organisations rethinking their workforce design, 40% are undertaking operating model or organisational design reviews to ensure their structure is fit for purpose.

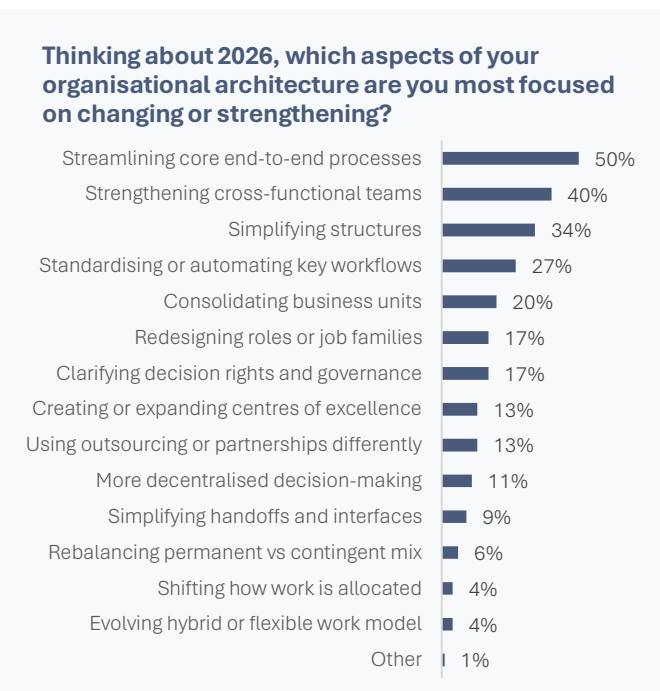
Looking ahead, priorities cluster around strengthening end-to-end processes, improving cross-functional teaming and standardising workflows. The emphasis is less on redrawing reporting lines and more on improving how work flows across the system. Integration appears to be the centre of gravity.

More radical structural levers attract comparatively limited attention. Decentralising decision-making, materially shifting workforce mix, or redesigning roles at scale sit lower on the agenda. Even as technological disruption accelerates and complexity rises, there is little evidence of widespread appetite for structural experimentation.

This raises an important consideration. Incremental operating model refinement may improve efficiency, but does it fundamentally increase an organisation’s capacity to adapt at pace? Strengthening processes and coordination can enhance execution. The deeper question is whether these changes also increase structural agility.

A smaller but noteworthy group are beginning to orient design around skills, capability architecture and scenario-based workforce planning. While not yet dominant, this approach hints at a different organising logic that prioritises redeployable capability over static role design.

Across three years of research, the trajectory is consistent. Organisations are tightening, aligning and integrating. The signal in 2026 is not structural theatre. It is disciplined evolution. Whether refinement alone is sufficient in an environment where speed and complexity continue to intensify remains an open question.



## AI Impact: Contained Transformation

If AI is the defining shift of 2026, how materially do organisations expect it to reshape them?

A clear majority anticipate moderate to high impact, with very few expecting minimal influence. AI is firmly embedded in expectations for the year ahead. Yet the centre of gravity sits at “moderate.” The signal is neither hype nor dismissal. AI is seen as significant, but manageable.

Where impact is expected is equally revealing. Productivity and efficiency lead by a clear margin, followed by changes to ways of working and core processes. Far fewer anticipate major effects on products and services, business models, customer relationships or workforce composition.

This pattern suggests that AI is currently being positioned primarily as an operational multiplier rather than a strategic reinvention lever. Organisations appear focused on compressing cycle times, improving execution and augmenting knowledge work before reimagining value propositions or redesigning their enterprise.

Notably, very few foresee substantial changes to workforce composition. The prevailing expectation is task-level augmentation rather than structural displacement. Skills and workflows may shift; wholesale redesign remains limited.

This creates a quiet tension. Across the report, AI is described as the most significant force shaping 2026. Yet responses here suggest incremental integration rather than transformational overhaul. The gap between technological possibility and organisational appetite becomes visible.

Whether this reflects prudent pacing under economic constraint, regulatory caution or confidence in existing systems, the implication is similar: optimisation appears to be advancing faster than reinvention.

If acceleration proves structural rather than temporary, the sufficiency of incremental change may become a defining strategic question in the years ahead.

*In which areas is AI likely to have the greatest impact (positive or negative) in your organisation in 2026?*



## The Rubicon

In the final section of Rubicon, respondents' stated priorities offer insight not just into what organisations want to do in 2026, but how they intend to build adaptive capacity in an environment of sustained acceleration.

The pattern is strikingly coherent. Technology, automation and AI sit at the top of the investment agenda and are almost never being deprioritised. Leadership development ranks alongside them as a primary focus. By contrast, innovation and new offerings are most frequently deprioritised, which is a counterintuitive signal in a year defined by technological disruption.

### Top investment priorities for 2026



Technology,  
automation and AI



Leadership  
development

Innovation and new offerings are the most frequently deprioritised investment area for 2026 (28%)

Taken together, these signals suggest a market leaning toward disciplined transformation rather than expansive reinvention. Organisations are modernising the core, tightening investment logic and strengthening leadership capability as the primary mechanism for navigating complexity. In a climate of sharper scrutiny, leadership appears to be viewed as a high-return lever, improving decision quality, alignment and execution without the disruption of wholesale redesign.

The open-text responses reinforce this orientation. When respondents describe the outcomes they most want to influence, the language centres less on inspiration or relational uplift and more on navigating the system: adaptive leadership, enterprise mindset, frontline capability, alignment, cohesion and leading through ambiguity.

Culture, too, appears in familiar terms such as safety, engagement and collaboration, but with less emphasis on the employee experience themes that often anchor cultural discussions. The implication is not that culture is unimportant, but that it may be treated as something to stabilise while the system modernises.

Across the report, a consistent pattern becomes visible.

The external environment is accelerating. AI is emerging as a defining feature of the landscape, while economic pressure, regulatory complexity and rising expectations are compressing decision cycles and increasing the cost of delay.

Internally, organisations are responding with focus and discipline. Leadership capability is being strengthened. Cultural expectations around accountability and coordination are tightening. Operating models are being refined to improve flow and execution. These are pragmatic responses, and in many cases they represent organisations already beginning to adapt to a faster system.

Yet the signals also raise a broader strategic question.

Adaptability does not emerge from any single organisational lever. It reflects how the organisation as a whole is calibrated to the environment it operates within. Leadership capability, cultural norms, operating structures and technological capability all shape how quickly organisations can interpret change, make decisions and redirect effort.

Across these dimensions, two questions become increasingly important: focus and depth.

Are organisations concentrating on the capabilities that matter most in an accelerating environment? And how fundamentally are they willing to reshape them?

This is where the Rubicon moment appears.

Not as a single initiative, but as a strategic threshold: the point at which organisations determine how deeply they will adapt their systems to a world where acceleration across technological, economic and organisational domains has become structural rather than temporary.

Ultimately, the question is not simply how organisations respond to change, but whether their systems evolve fast enough to remain aligned with the environment now emerging around them.



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