Cutting through competition

C-suite barometer: outlook 2025

Contents

Foreword

At the end of 2024, we collected the views of leaders worldwide for our annual C-suite barometer. Over 1,700 executives from more than 35 countries contributed, revealing a determination to continue growing amid a more competitive and challenging environment.

As in last year's survey, C-suite executives still have a positive outlook when it comes to growth (93%). This is built on the successes achieved in quite a volatile environment over the past two years, and shows the resilience that many leaders and their businesses have established over time – a vital strength for 2025 and beyond as the challenge of increasing competition emerges as a key issue in many markets.

This year, revenues remain robust with 85% of leaders worldwide expecting growth in activity. However, we are seeing a slight reduction in the number of businesses expecting strong growth, which suggests that respondents are anticipating some slowing of markets during the year – especially those in Europe and Asia-Pacific, and from the real estate and automotive sectors globally.

Achieving growth in 2025 will mean navigating a number of key uncertainties. Executives have identified economic uncertainty as still widespread, and note continued scarcity of talent and increasing regulatory complexity as significant in their planning for the year. Business leaders are also focused on a number of geopolitical tensions around the world and looking to strategies that insulate their businesses from the attendant risks.

The most apparent, and potentially underrated, change from C-suite respondents is the mounting impact of increased competition. More leaders have identified this factor in three critical areas of our questions on business planning: it's a top factor most likely to suppress growth, it's the highest rising trend expected to have the biggest impact on business, and it's the area we see one of the biggest drops in confidence among leaders in managing or preparing for, alongside the challenges posed by new or higher regulation.

This rising trend of increasing competition is driven predominantly by activity in CEE and Latin America where it's viewed as the topmost important factor holding back growth. In North America it's the second-most important external trend impacting businesses, driven by the US where it has jumped from the tenth most important trend in 2024 to the second this year.

The connection between the two trends of geopolitics and competition will be clearer and inevitably have greater implications for organisations with interests in these areas of the world. Changes to many governments have resulted in new sanctions and tariffs, and the prospect of trade wars should force leaders to reassess their strategies and plans.

Our data shows this view of increased competition is also growing in importance across specific industries. It is the number one factor Pharmaceutical and Life Sciences organisations expect to hold back growth as well as those in the Energy & Infrastructure sector. C-suite leaders in the TMT sector recognise it having the biggest impact on their business – having risen from ninth place (20% in 2024) to second (38%) in 2025.

As a result, confidence among executives in managing or preparing for this heightened competition sees the second largest fall from 48% to 36%. Leadership will also need support in adjusting to new and more complex regulations – especially where these relate to their expansion into new geographies – which four in five intend to do. This is where we see the biggest drop in confidence that businesses and their executives can manage (from 52% to 33%). The chief beneficiaries of geographical investments will likely be the US, Germany, China and the UK. Leaders expect to be challenged by adjustment to local

Foreword

regulations, sourcing local talent and diversifying their products and services to deliver successfully in these new markets.

The continuing central importance of technology couldn't be clearer. It remains the dominant strategic priority for most C-suite leaders and nearly half now believe that generative AI will have a major impact on their business. In the past few years we have seen a range of organisations being quick to adopt this new technology for fear of missing out on the latest trend. Now, we see that an increasing number of organisations are already using generative AI, mainly for internal processes to date. Leaders are working closely with their teams and specialists to ensure real return on the investment and we see that many are now readying themselves to scale transformation strategies.

Finding, recruiting and retaining the best talent continues to be a key strategic priority for leaders. There has been a concern for a number of years now in respect of talent shortages in most parts of the world. Almost half (43%) of organisations say they struggle to hire, primarily at the early stage and mid-levels. We are starting to see leaders respond and begin to embrace new strategies to tackle this problem, beyond hybrid and remote working. Again, we also see the inevitable impact of technology, but not to replace talent that's already scarce. There's now a clear focus on balancing the need to maximise the value from people with the efficiencies that technology brings in terms of productivity.

Despite articulating some concerns about business conditions, as we have already noted our data shows strong positivity from executives, with continued growth expected and investment planned in 2025. Two-thirds report that they plan to continue to increase investment, with the most important investments dedicated to outward-looking business objectives such as acquiring customers, developing new products, services and markets and sourcing new talent. The overarching challenge of 2025 will be maintaining these strategic priorities and a clear vision amid new market entrants, continuing technological disruption and potential market turbulence. The key message; C-suite leaders should be looking for new ways to adapt, to cut through the competition, ensuring that they lead their business to success in 2025.

Mark Kennedy,
Partner and Chief Clients & Markets Officer, Forvis Mazars Group

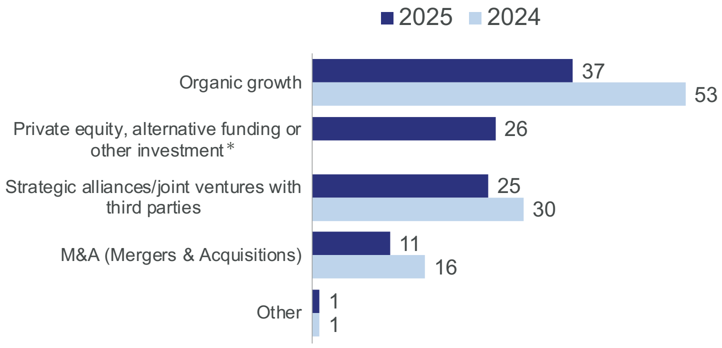
Executive summary
Key findings

93%

C-suite executives have a positive growth outlook for their organisation in 2025.

Most important sources of growth

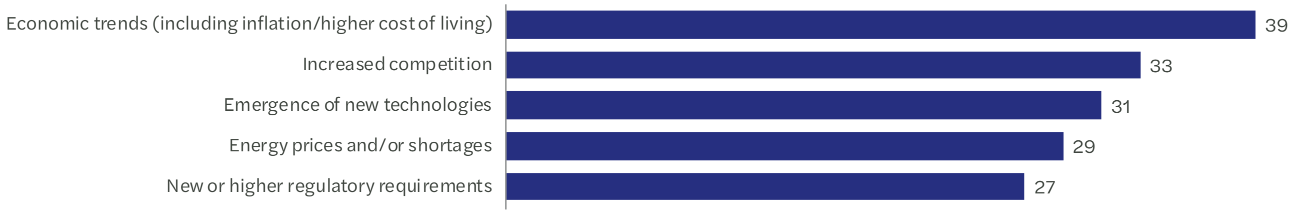
Percent of respondents



*Private equity not asked in 2024

External trends expected to have the biggest impact on organisations in the next 12 months

Percent of respondents



Top five strategic priorities for the C-suite in the next 3-5 years

Percent of respondents

Confidence Index

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
32%	44%	37%	44%	37%

Average percent "very confident" their organisation is prepared across all relevant trends

Investment Index

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
47%	72%	63%	66%	64%

Average percent increasing investment across all fields

Chapter one

A positive, but challenging, growth outlook

The global C-suite barometer shows a business world focused on opportunities for growth and expansion in a more competitive and challenging environment compared to last year. 2025 is the year to scale up transformation plans to get ahead.

A positive, but challenging, growth outlook
Managing the key trends for growth

A majority (85%) of businesses reported growth in 2024, and an overwhelming 93% of C-suite executives are positive their organisations will grow in 2025. Against a backdrop of heightened competition and increased geopolitical influences, the business environment and its leaders are determined to remain strong.

There has been a shift in the challenges that leaders say will hold back growth. Economic uncertainty remains the biggest obstacle (41%) followed by increased competition (35%), which is up 13 points from 2024.

At 31%, energy prices/shortages is less of a factor than it was in 2024 (down 17 points), but still places third just ahead of political tension/instability at 30%, which is up eight points this year. Difficulty recruiting a skilled workforce and new regulations are both mentioned by 28% of businesses.

Factors most likely to hold back growth

A positive, but challenging, growth outlook

The top ten external trends impacting businesses in 2025

1. **39%** unchanged
Economic trends
(including inflation/higher cost of living)

2. **33%** ▲ 2
Increased competition

3. **31%** unchanged
Emergence of new technologies

4. **29%** ▼ 2
Energy prices and/or shortages

5. **27%** ▲ 1
New or higher regulatory requirements

6. **26%** ▼ 1
Climate change and other environmental impacts

7. **26%** new
Supply chain challenges/resilience

8. **25%** ▲ 1
Geopolitical tension/instability

9. **25%** ▲ 1
Scarcity of talent

10. **23%** ▼ 3
New models of work

A positive, but challenging, growth outlook
Confidence in tackling key trends

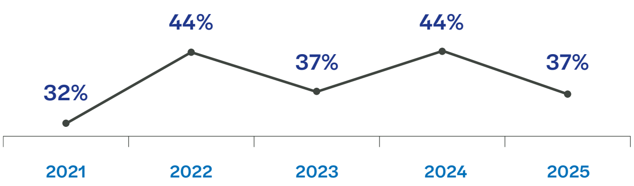
Confidence among C-suite leaders has returned to 2023 levels, suggesting a more cautious and considered approach to tackling the key external trends expected to impact their business in the coming year.

Our data indicates that organisations may need further support in tackling scarcity of talent (confidence down 10 points) and new or higher regulatory issues (confidence down 19 points), especially where they overlap with international expansion. However, some of the other biggest drops in confidence we're seeing relate to increased competition, geopolitical tension/ instability and social unrest.

Planned investment is on par with last year: C-suite leaders may be feeling less confident in tackling trends than they were in 2024, but they're continuing to prioritise investment.

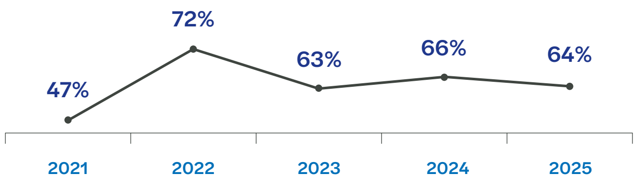
The Forvis Mazars Investment Index shows close to two-thirds of C-suite leaders still plan to increase investment across business areas. In uncertain times, leaders are refusing to turn inwards or scale down. Executives plan to target outwards-looking business objectives, chiefly: acquiring new customers, new products/services/markets and new talent. Maintaining IT systems will also be a key resourcing focus.

Confidence index



Average percent "very confident" across all relevant trends

Investment index



Average percent increasing investment across all fields

Top ten areas of investment

Area of investment	2025	2024	Change in investment from previous year
	Percent of respondents investing		
Acquiring new customers	74%	74%	-
Maintaining and evolving IT systems	71%	70%	Up 1 point
New products/services/markets	70%	69%	Up 1 point
Sourcing new talent	69%	68%	Up 1 point
Sustainability initiatives	67%	70%	Down 3 points
Improving efficiency	67%	69%	Down 3 points
Customer relationships	67%	67%	-
Digitising internal operations	67%	66%	Up 1 point
Evolving sales	66%	67%	Down 1 point
People and team management	66%	65%	Down 1 point

A positive, but challenging, growth outlook
Expert view

With the world projected to grow at a slower pace over the next year, and the real prospect of trade wars, the level of positive outlook for growth from C-suite is surprising. I see reason for cautious optimism, but uber optimism should be avoided, especially considering the shift in geopolitics, supply chains, very high company valuations and very high debt levels fuelling meagre growth.

> “This is a time to build up the fortress, not expand the realm.”

Business leaders must not be blind to the risks, which are significant, and need to continue to build resilience, predominantly through their supply chain and by shoring up debt obligations.

Geopolitical fragmentation will threaten supply chains and, in response, business leaders should consider limiting the breadth as a protective measure. Those operating internationally or looking to expand must scale and duplicate supply chains appropriately across borders. It’s better to slim these to a few key countries and share production across those countries. It doesn’t matter if you produce goods or services, it’s the same thing and even if it costs more, it may very well be worth it.

In terms of macroeconomic indicators, leaders should be focusing on credit spreads and sovereign yields. People need to understand and prepare for the consequences of a potential debt crisis. It’s up to CFOs to make sure that companies are shored up from fluctuations in interest rates and yields.

Deregulation of the finance system will be the key to unlocking growth for businesses and generate more healthy competition in the market. The debate on reducing regulation will continue and will be the game changer that could influence the overall geopolitical challenges and outlook for 2025.

George Lagarias
Chief Economist,
Forvis Mazars Group

A positive, but challenging, growth outlook
Industry insight

Thomas Gomart
Director, Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri)

Thomas Gomart is a French historian of international relations and has been the Director of Ifri, a French think tank on international relations and geopolitics, since 2015. He has published several books on Russia, digital governance, French foreign policy and global challenges. Previously, he was Ifri's Vice President for Strategic Development from 2010 and the Director of its Russia/NIS Centre between 2004 and 2013. His latest book, 'L'acceleration de l'Histoire', was published in January 2024.

Competition enablers: observations with Ifri

The level of optimism for potential growth in the market is a welcome surprise, but generally isolated from other economically-driven activities – namely, the respective geopolitical and geoeconomic inhibitors to growth.

Our observations and analysis at Ifri consider the current, next and future decades to try to capture precise intentions of the respective political leaderships. This approach gives us a different view of the global outlook and competition enablers from those in the business community, but with similar findings.

Main observations

- Overall, we have observed a degradation of the strategic situation for Europe. The turning point was almost 10 years ago and what is striking to us is, the fact that geopolitical risk was not seen as something important. Things are certainly different now since Brexit, pandemics and more recently with the return of conventional warfare on European soil.
- The main risk to any organisation operating, never mind competing, is global warming and its speed – the speed of the loss of biodiversity and pollution. Leaders need to recognise that the risks they will have to deal with are broader than those directly impacting business activities.
- Supply chains and competitive opportunities in European markets have been disrupted. This has created pressure on organisations to shift operations, production and service lines as a result of increased risks and geopolitical conflict.
- It's not surprising that leaders have a new or revised talent/retention strategy at the top of their agenda. What is a surprise, is how low this still is in the overall percentage of leaders prioritising it. While it's still a top three priority, I would have expected it to be much higher as one of the critical enablers for remaining competitive in the coming years.
- There is a real concentration of wealth and power in a few different industries and again we see the technology sector emerge strong with successful expansion into different segments or other industries. If we look at SpaceX owning around 50% of global satellites outside Earth, for instance – over 2,000 satellites compared to the European Space Agency's 45. So, it is a unique concentration and related to what we can call these critical enablers to competition and economic activities that should be carefully observed.
- The growing importance of political capital: how do you accumulate it? Does your company have it? To what extent? In what ways should you be leveraging it? These are the questions leaders should be asking themselves and giving more attention in strategic planning to confidently understand the key trends and understand the challenges. I expect measurement of geopolitical risk will become more common for analysis at board or investor level and we are only at the beginning of this process.

> "When it comes to global warming, our collective power of transformation is clearly higher than our collective power for anticipating this transformation. Businesses and leaders should deal with this challenge."

Chapter two

Topping the C-suite agenda

C-suite leaders still view IT and technology as their key to transformation. Leaders also remain focused on international expansion and new or revised talent and retention strategies, which will play a major role in redefining organisations, creating opportunities to unlock growth and competing for market share.

Topping the C-suite agenda

Transformation through IT and technology remains a priority for leaders over the next three to five years. With 43% saying they will focus on this, it has also risen sharply by 11 points from last year to dominate the top spot.

International expansion and new or revised talent attraction and retention strategies also continue to remain high, cementing their position as joint second in the list of priorities for the second year. Businesses are confident they will continue to grow, most of which will be organic growth, and are looking to new markets to deliver it. Talent is now more salient than ever, with new and different challenges for businesses competing for the skills they need to remain competitive in the market and with a workforce that has evolving expectations.

Entering a new product or service appears in the top five priorities of leaders for the first time since 2023. Perhaps surprisingly, the focus on new or revised sustainability strategies has dropped in position and by two points from 2024.

The business world has re-evaluated initial priorities set in their strategies over the past twelve months, inevitably as a result of heightened geopolitical challenges and the need to get ahead of the competition, which only seems to be increasing. We now have a C-suite driven by the value of scaling up the investments they have made in new technologies, the advantages in upskilling their people and the opportunities to expand internationally.

In this report, we take a deeper dive into these top three strategic priorities of technology, international expansion and talent, with insights from industry experts and specialist advisors across our global community.

Top five strategic priorities

Percent of respondents

Chapter three

Digital agility and data-powered transformation

C-suite leaders have not lost focus on the transformative opportunities technology can bring to their businesses. The big rush to jump on the latest tech trend seems to have shifted, with more evaluation and smarter use cases to maximise ROI and differentiate from the competition with more data-focused, dynamic strategies.

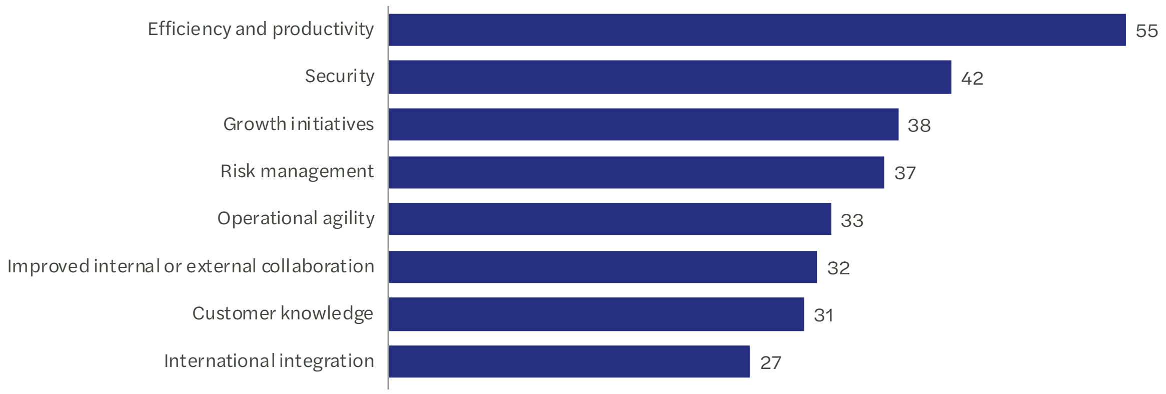
Digital agility and data-powered transformation

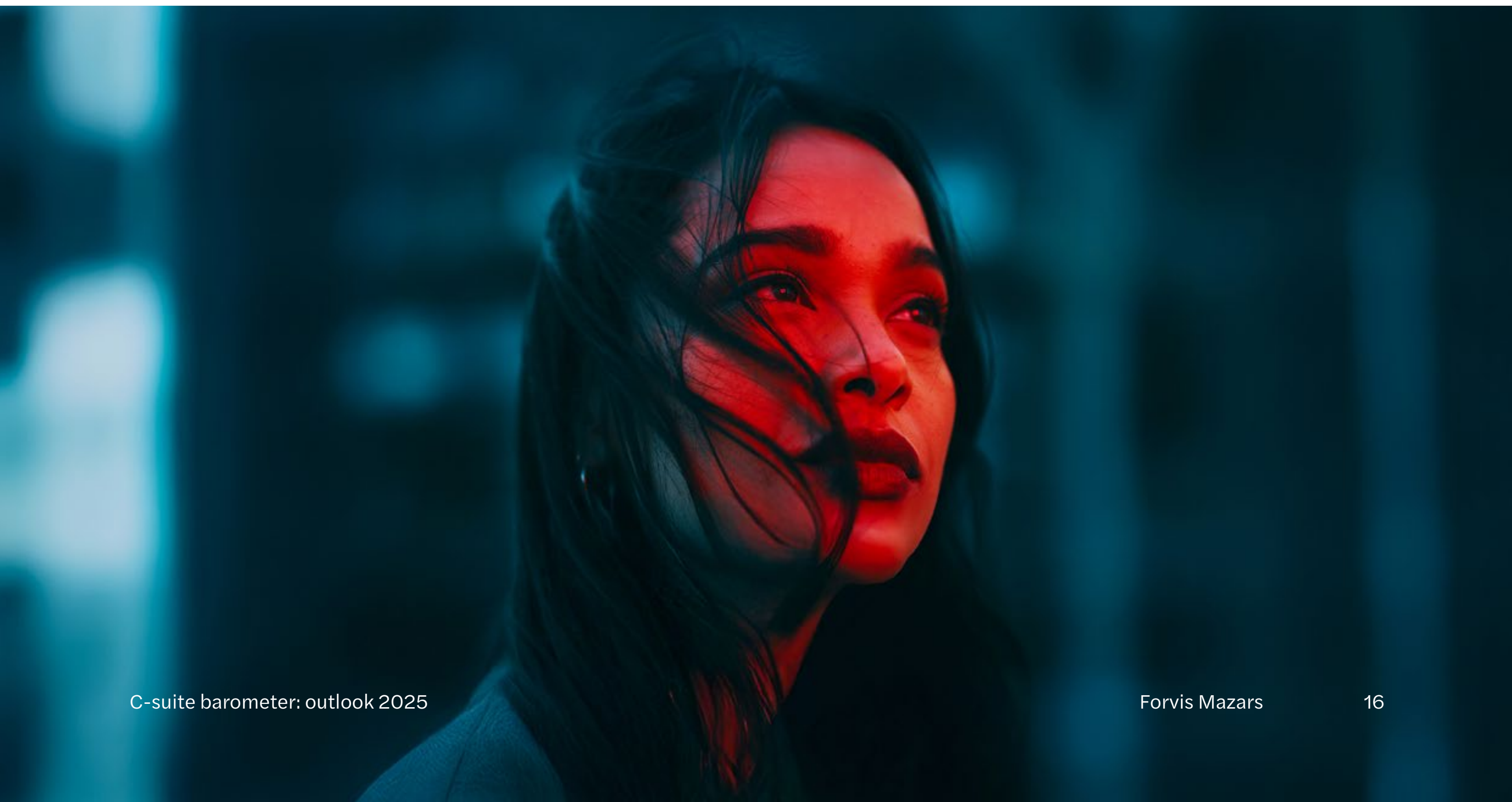
Transformation of company IT and technology has dominated as the top strategic priority of business leaders. Now, nearly half (43%) confirm this at the top of their agenda – up a massive 11 points in just 12 months – and a majority (85%) feel confident in the potential return this investment will deliver.

In addition to this commitment to transforming technology across their businesses, leaders have not lost sight of the emergence of new technologies as one of the top three trends expected to have the biggest impact on their organisations, alongside economic factors and increased competition, which has risen in prominence this year. C-suite executives are already using various forms of artificial intelligence and they now have strategies in place to use these more confidently and productively.

Top digital transformation priorities of businesses

Percent of respondents

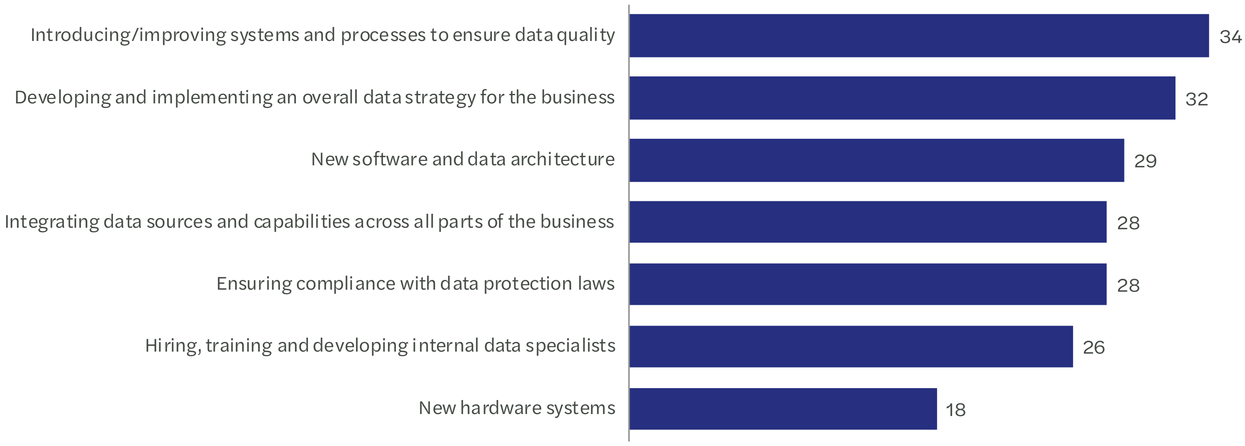




Digital agility and data-powered transformation

Businesses’ biggest priorities for data management and governance investment in 2025

Percent of respondents



“The top strategic priorities we’re seeing emerge are collectively a larger route to transformation – these should not be addressed as three separate things. Organisations need talent and technology in an increasingly global marketplace, and a culture of innovation to evolve.”

Jon Cambras
Head of Emerging Technology Research, Vanguard

Digital agility and data-powered transformation
Expert view

Change management for effective transformation strategies

New technologies are positioning IT at the forefront of growth and transformation strategies like never before. It's encouraging to see that IT transformation and new technologies have become top strategic priorities for organisations.

> "Digital transformation can elevate an organisation into a powerhouse for innovation and strategic growth, leading to competitive advantages."

IT used to be something you had to do to stay operational. It used to be viewed merely as a requirement to keep the lights on, but now IT plays a pivotal role within organisations because of the limitless use cases and intuitive possibilities. It's a catalyst for innovation and transformation, potentially driving strategic growth and helping companies secure market share. However, the scope and speed of change also introduce significant challenges that must be addressed properly.

At the core of a successful transformation strategy is the need to thoughtfully manage its impact on people. This means recognising professional scepticism across your organisation, training employees effectively and understanding that deploying new technologies at scale – especially GenAI – is a major cultural shift.

> "Using tech for tech's sake is the worst strategy you can have. Business teams should always be in the driver's seat when it comes to digital transformation. If not, it can lead to disaster, even if it's great tech."

We've already seen organisations rush to adopt AI tools without a clear plan for implementation, only to struggle with aligning them to their business needs. Regardless of how sophisticated the technology is, it still depends on people using it skilfully and confidently.

Ultimately, technology needs to be palatable for your people and company culture plays a pivotal role here.

C-suite executives should have the right processes in place to act quickly, understand the risks involved and upskill teams. By doing so, they ensure that their investments in IT and emerging technologies achieve maximum value – scaling transformation in a way that benefits both the organisation and its people.

Florence Sardas
Chief Transformation Officer,
Forvis Mazars Group

Digital agility and data-powered transformation
Scaling up big bets on artificial intelligence

C-suite executives are clearly committed to investing in AI. This year, our barometer found 87% of leaders adamant that generative AI will have an impact on their organisation – a slight increase on what was already a majority (85%) in 2024.

We can now see 91% of leaders either already have a dedicated strategy for implementing generative AI or are currently planning one. There is some uncertainty however, in whether they are investing correctly with 20% stating too much and 15% too little, but overall there's confidence that it will deliver the best possible return.

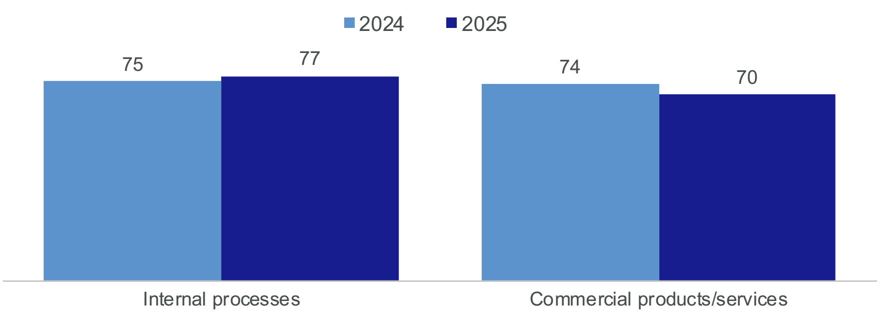
Noticeably, there is a slight disconnect between the number of organisations that have a strategy for implementing generative AI and those that also have one for discriminative AI. This is interesting given the continued concerns around the ethical use of artificial intelligence. It's encouraging to see these concerns drop by nine points this year, again emphasising the increased confidence in leaders using the technology, but leaders should assess the value in approaching these two holistically alongside their digital transformation strategies to classify and assess the accuracy of the data being generated. This will ensure they can optimise and scale up their use in the workplace – taking it beyond the hype and attraction of initial adoption.

Organisations have also started to shift their AI deployment towards optimising internal processes rather than externally facing commercial products/services. There's been a six-point swing in the difference between these two objectives between 2024 and 2025, as organisations gain a more practical understanding of where AI can be most beneficial to their operations.

When it comes to the benefits, organisations are prioritising their use of generative AI to improve their operational or digital agility. Increasing operational excellence and supporting growth initiatives are also key deployment cases. Some C-suite leaders are using AI to improve their customer experience and risk management, but this is rarer.

Use cases for AI

Percent of respondents

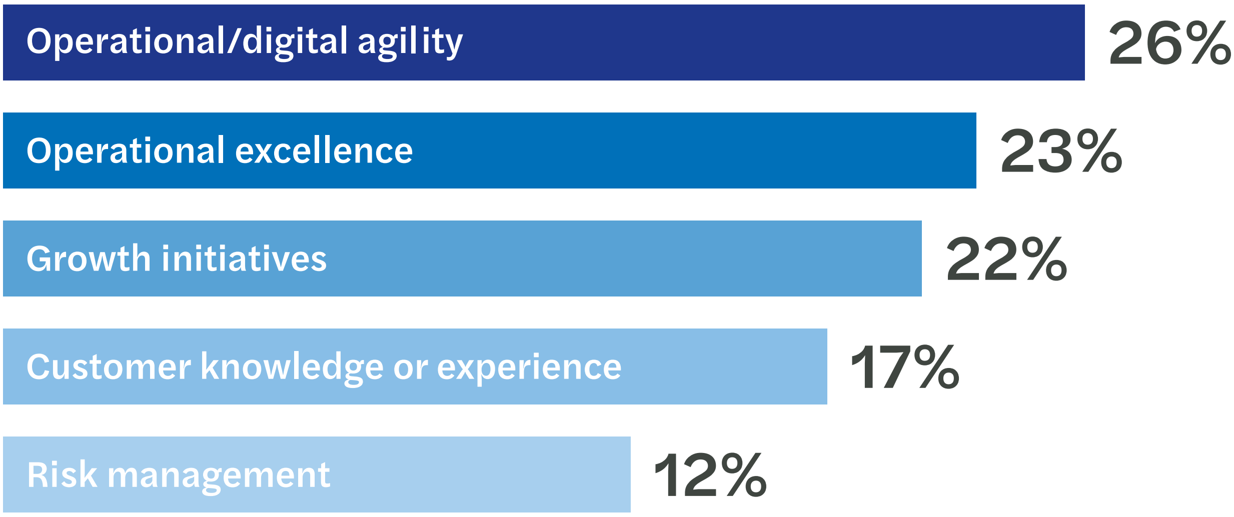


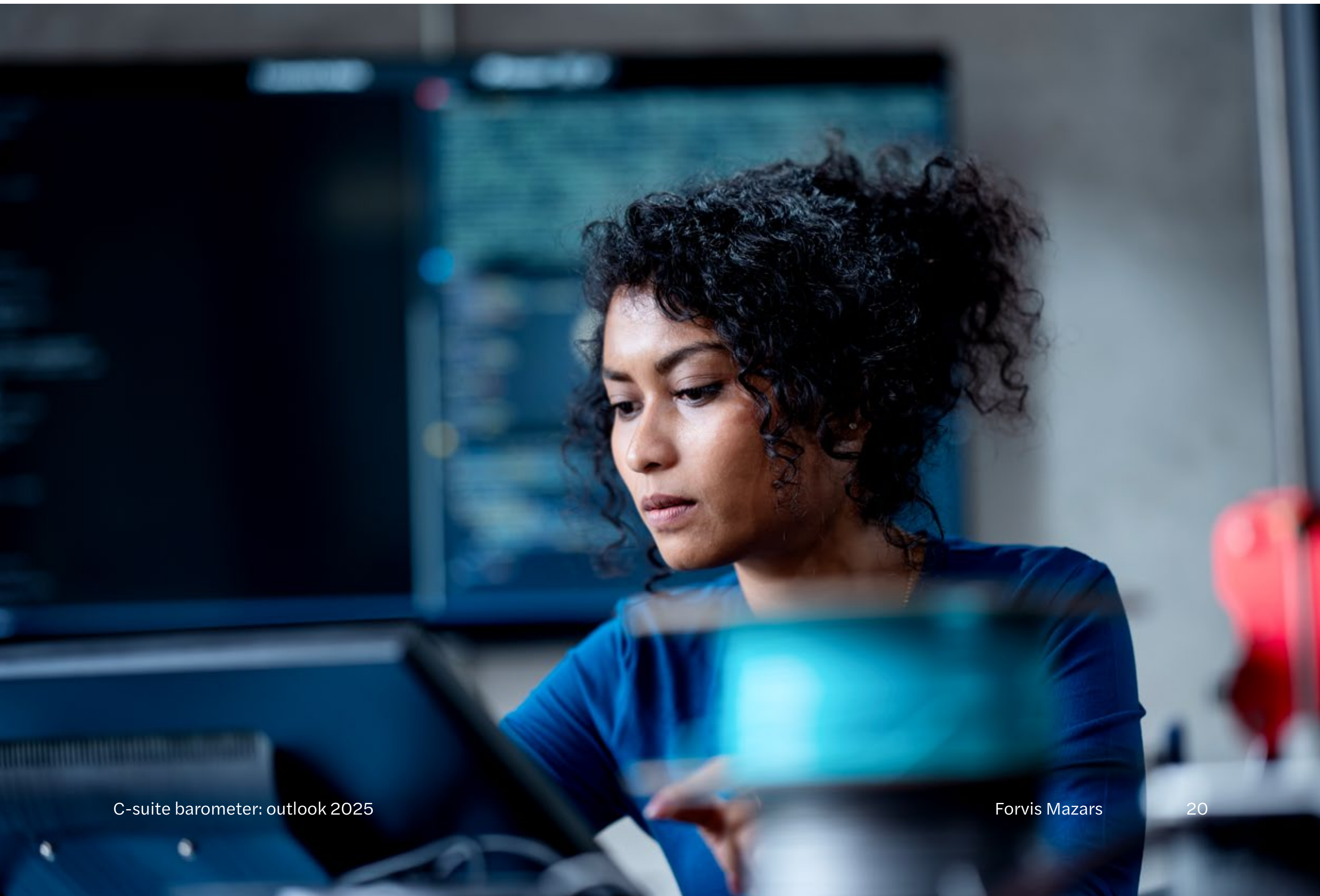
Digital agility and data-powered transformation

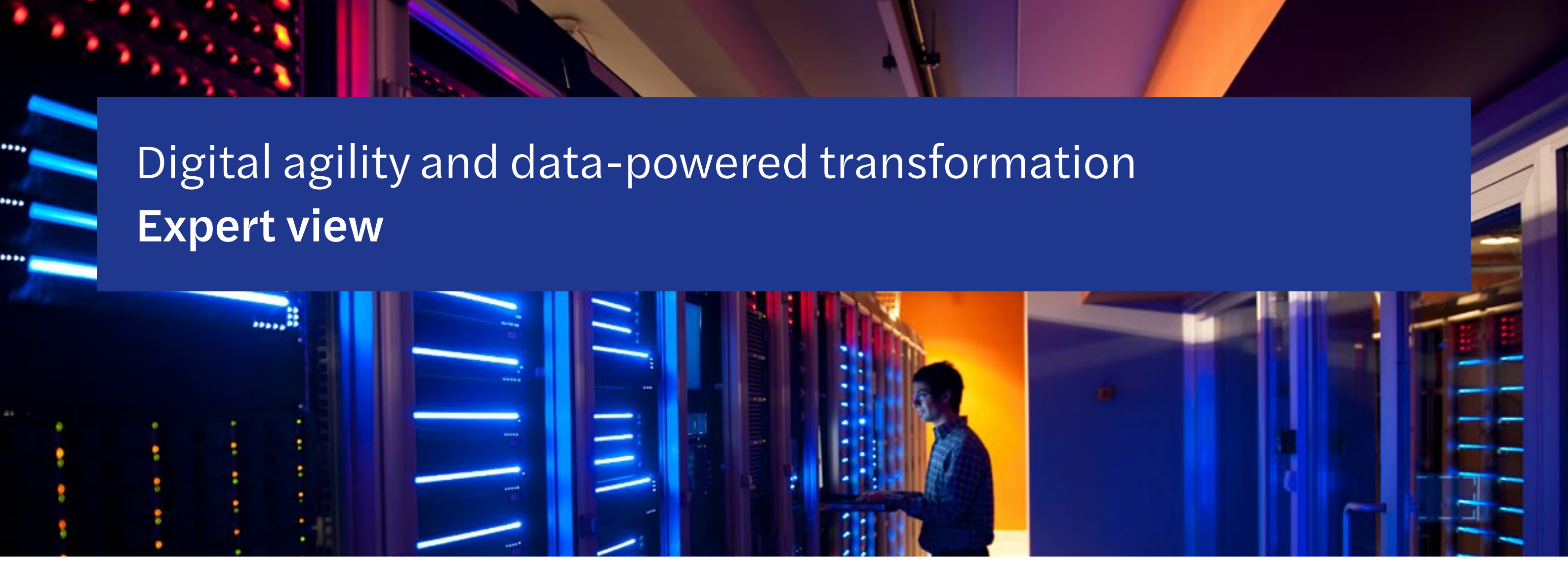
Scaling up big bets on artificial intelligence

Generative AI priorities

Percent of respondents







Digital agility and data-powered transformation
Expert view

Creating data-empowered businesses

This year, organisations and their leaders should rightly question the use of AI more. Many have been excited by the advancements and efficiencies, and have been quick to respond to the hype. Now they need to get the most out of it before jumping on the next trend or potential fad as a way of staying ahead.

I'm pleased to see that fewer executives now expect to see AI replace jobs in their organisations. In 2024, 49% of C-suite leaders felt AI would lead to job losses. Now, this proportion has dropped seven points to 42%. It's possible that more intelligence and experience through regular interaction with AI over the last year has given executives a different perspective on the supporting roles of people and this tech with smart implementation. This is critical and should be pushed further.

"Like any technology, AI is only as good as the people implementing and using it – you need both to maximise the output."

Emerging tech like AI is only successful if the underlying data is correct. If you don't get the data right by being misinformed, you're not getting artificial intelligence, you're getting artificial information.

With the right data, AI really allows for hyper personalisation. It can add everything someone likes at a click and brings in other data sources. On social media, via emails and while surfing the web, consumers get content that is more and more tailored to them and only them. However, we've seen businesses get it wrong – it's an easy way to put consumers off and rebuilding reputation is difficult.

Organisations are still experiencing the age-old glitch of human input influencing the output of the tech. I expect this is why we're seeing 'introducing or improving systems and processes to ensure data quality' is the biggest priority for data management and governance investment from leaders in 2025.

This priority is absolutely critical to get any sort of value from your investment. All AI is trained upon historical data. So, if an individual has any bias (even subconscious), the AI is going to inherit that bias. The risks and consequences of this are high if it's wrong.

One development that could support this is the new EU AI Act, which came into force on 1 August 2024 and is intrinsically linked to GDPR, as well as the safety and respect of AI systems, and now the latest Digital Operation Resilience Act (DORA) that has just come into force in January.

While the AI Act is only enforceable across Europe, it's the first legal framework of its kind proposed by a major regulator and will impact any organisation with interests in the region or looking to expand. This is an opportunity for an organisation and its leaders to assess the level of risks associated with the technology it has invested in, and the way the data is being applied across all international operations, for the benefit of their people and clients or customers.

Asam Malik
Partner, Group Technology, Digital & Consulting, Forvis Mazars Group

Digital agility and data-powered transformation
Industry insight

David Benigson
CEO and Founder, Signal AI

David Benigson is the CEO of Signal AI, pioneering the intersection of artificial intelligence and media intelligence. With a track record in technology and entrepreneurship, he leads Signal AI's mission to transform how businesses make informed decisions through data-driven insights. Under his leadership, Signal AI has flourished from one of the fastest growing start-ups to a global leader in advanced AI solutions, revolutionising how organisations analyse and leverage information for strategic advantage.

Supercharging transformation

AI and tech will continue to play a critical role in transformation and opportunities for growth. What C-suite executives need to focus on now is a strategic approach to get the real payoff from their investment and generate the value artificial intelligence can deliver.

I certainly wasn't surprised to see transformation through IT and technology being the top priority for leaders again this year, but the validation reinforces its importance for businesses and their leaders looking for opportunities to grow. In AI, and generative AI specifically, we've seen a lot of experimentation over the last 12 to 24 months but we need to see the translation of that experimentation into practical applications and real use cases that generate business value. This is entirely possible, but it can't just be consultants and suppliers like us that are pushing that. It's got to be the business leaders experiencing and seeing the translation of that investment into specific transformational change.

What businesses need most now, and something that our organisation is entirely focused on, is better information, insight and decision-making intelligence to figure out how to navigate uncertainty, make the right choice and use data with confidence.

"There's been a lot of experimentation and investment in artificial intelligence over the past few years. 2025 is all about the pay off and a refocus on augmented intelligence with a synchronised approach to the AI deployed."

The approach to deliver valuable transformational change

Starting from the problem and working backwards is key to any transformational change – this is not new, but it hasn't really been the approach the majority of organisations have taken in the rush to adoption. In the last year or two, we've seen a shift towards businesses jumping to invest in AI without necessarily knowing what problems they were trying to solve. It's been viewed as a solution that can look for problems and that isn't always the right way of approaching it to get the best result.

Industry insight

Consultants can be great at helping you figure out the fundamental business issues you're trying to solve and how to map what's out there to unlock the value. Partnership collaborations can deliver even more benefits at an earlier stage with innovative, technology-driven companies.

For businesses, all of this begins with an increased focus on AI literacy and on upskilling your people to know how to use these tools more effectively. We often say to our clients, it's not the technology that's going to take people's jobs, but it may be people who know how to use the technology. So how should we think about augmenting our workforce, upskilling them, giving them an opportunity for development and creating better skills – how do we supercharge them?

I'm a big believer in this phrase 'augmented intelligence,' rather than artificial intelligence. I've been pushing that for a long time, because I believe these things can, and should, work symbiotically. These technologies should become a natural extension of our workforces. This has to start, in my opinion, top down with the CEO, the C-suite and the board, perhaps also educating themselves about this technology and then leading from the front in regard to adoption and implementation.

Transformation beyond generative AI

We've been speaking a lot to our customers about not becoming fixated on any one specific type of technology. In the last two years generative AI has become the latest craze – in Q2 2024, 50% of Fortune 500 companies mentioned generative AI in their earnings calls. Everyone's talking about it, but this is just one option. Broadly speaking, in the world of machine learning, there are 22 main families that exist.

At Signal AI, we've taken a more synchronised approach to combine generative AI with discriminative AI technology to accurately retrieve the right information and deliver the answer (or 'signal') from the noise. We then deploy generative AI to summarise those signals and synthesise the data in a way that a decision maker can interact with it intuitively and with confidence.

Being able to accurately tell what something is or isn't from a pattern recognition perspective, is extremely useful for information retrieval and for finding the right documents or data points in intelligence. Generative AI is really good for drafting new information or producing new content, helping to be a critical thought partner, but neither on their own are an elixir. Given the challenges we've seen with hallucinations, production of misinformation, and ethical concerns around quality and accuracy, leaders must seriously consider which technology to use or be smarter and use them in harmony.

One of the things we're experimenting with is a new field of AI called Causal AI. It's neither discriminative nor generative. Causal AI is all about finding causal links and relationships between different data sets. This is the beginnings of creating more predictive models and I think this is going to be one of the new frontiers of the technology – predictive intelligence.

Leaders and their organisations have all of this knowledge and data, all of this human capital and expertise within the business. The combination of causal AI with discriminative and generative AI would supercharge their transformation strategies to get ahead of competitors in a more pre-emptive way. It's certainly not as hot or well-known as the likes of ChatGPT and other generative AI solutions right now, but it could be applied powerfully into this world of business, information and intelligence for C-suite executives to extract the real value in transformational technology. I think this is going to be a fascinating trend and opportunity to track.

Chapter four

Investing in international expansion

C-suite executives have high ambitions for international expansion. A strong majority plan to invest in this path to achieve their strategic growth plans in the coming years. When also faced with increased competition throughout the world, leaders should look beyond the big powers that have emerged again as the areas most attractive to expand into.

Investing in international expansion

High ambitions in top destinations

The world may have altered dramatically in the last 12 months, but C-suite executives are sticking to their plans and priorities on international expansion. As in 2024, it is a top strategic priority in 2025 for a quarter of leaders. Beyond this, more than four in five (83%) businesses plan to expand to at least one new country in the next five years, with over 40% targeting three or more new countries.

The big powers have emerged strong and consistent, with the US, Germany, UK, China and Canada highlighted as the top countries targeted for expansion.

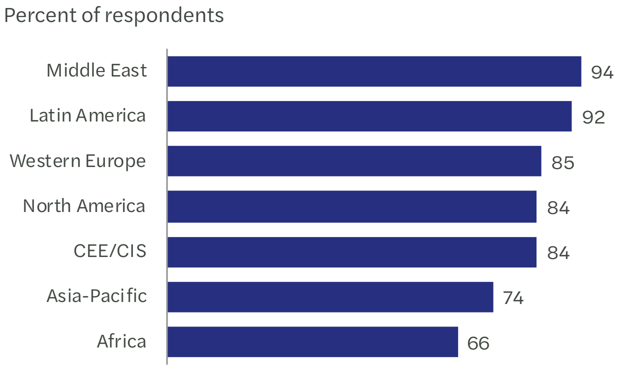
The US tops the table again as the country where most C-suite leaders plan to expand their business and this predominantly comes from Asia-Pacific, Western Europe and the Americas.

Germany can still expect 10% of organisations around the world to choose to expand there and Canada is becoming more attractive (up two points to 6%) having stolen the top 5 spot from France.

Countries with most businesses planning international expansion in the next five years

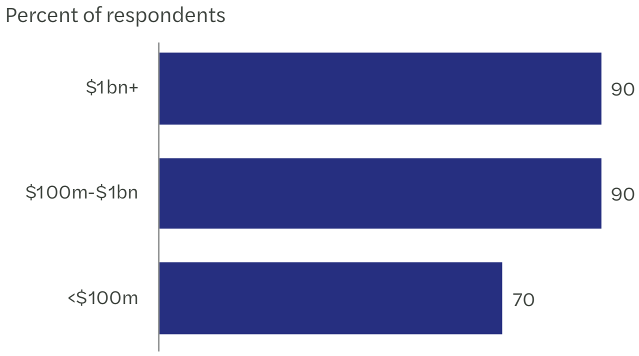
International expansion plans, by global region

Will expand to one or more new countries, by global region



International expansion plans, by revenue band

Will expand to one or more new countries, by revenue band



Investing in international expansion

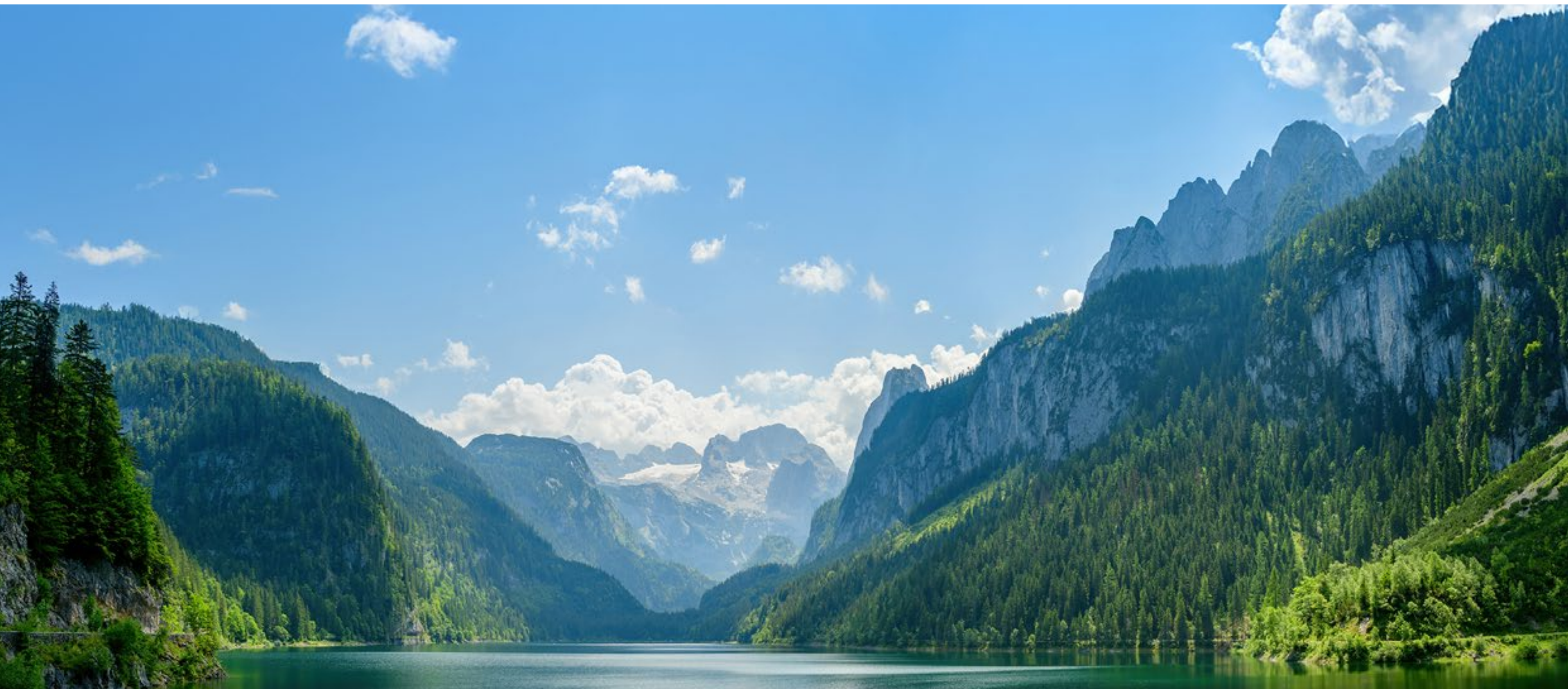
Setting up in new territories

International expansion brings its own set of challenges, and they vary from region, by country and with regulators. For C-suite executives that seek to expand internationally, they need to navigate many different types of compliance.

This is the top (or joint-top) challenge for leaders in every region. The second most important challenge is talent-based – finding and securing a local workforce – followed by diversifying products/services to suit new markets.

Biggest challenges in setting up operations in new countries

Percent of respondents



Investing in international expansion
Industry insight

Jumana Saleheen
Chief Economist and Head of Investment Strategy in Europe, Vanguard

"The era of sound money lives on."

Jumana Saleheen, PhD, is Head of Investment Strategy Group for Europe, and Chief European Economist at Vanguard – one of the world's most respected investment management companies. Her areas of expertise include monetary policy, international macroeconomics and macroeconomic forecasting. Before joining Vanguard in 2022, Jumana held several senior roles at the Bank of England, where most of her career was in the Monetary Stability Directorate and later as head of division in the Financial Stability Directorate.

Demographics, technology and globalisation: the economic tug-of-war

Exploring the long-term nature of massive shifts in technology, demographics and globalisation can help us better understand how such forces may shape future markets, individuals and the investing landscape in the years ahead.

The top three strategic priorities highlighted by C-Suite executives are interconnected. Technology, international expansion (or globalisation) and the need for a talent strategy are a trio of strategic decisions that need to be addressed together to drive long-term success. These decisions cannot be addressed in isolation.

Vanguard's proprietary Megatrends model supports the C-suite barometer's latest findings. The model brings these three priorities together into a single coherent framework and highlights how the economic outlook in the decade ahead will be determined by a tug-of-war between technology and demographics.

Our baseline, and the most likely outcome, is an optimistic scenario – one in which transformation of technology is such a success that it dominates and drives growth higher than what we have seen in the decade just gone. The flipside of this is a pessimistic scenario in which technological advancements are not large enough to offset the drag from an ageing population. Although an unlikely probability, the third scenario is one in which the decade ahead looks exactly like the past decade.

The big decisions and strategies that C-suite executives set now will directly impact the outcome when it comes to technology. However, there is not a direct mapping from an ageing population to a talent strategy. Designing a successful talent strategy – finding the right people at the right level – is probably getting harder, partly because we live in a world where the size of the working population is shrinking.

International expansion (or globalising one's business) can help here, because when you look at emerging economies of, for example, Latin America, Africa and India, they offer huge potential given their young populations.

The UK economy is an interesting one. For a decade, the UK has experienced lower growth than the US – arguably a potential issue, as it reduces the country's appeal to overseas investors looking to expand. Despite these challenges, the UK is still considered one of the top targets for company expansion, thanks to its strong legal and professional services sector, the UK time zone and the widespread use of the English language and relative stability.

As economists, we have a good understanding of the drivers of economic growth and productivity: it is the quality of our people, our capital and how they are combined with technology and innovation. That brings us full circle to needing the right people in the right markets with access to the right technology. These are critical to improve a company's competitiveness. The challenge for corporate leaders is being able to design the mix of strategies that enable them to win the tug of war.

Chapter five

Talent and leadership

People continue to shape priorities and are the clear capital for organisations to compete and grow. Talent scarcity is now a global issue for leaders and their organisations and, as a result, new or revised talent recruitment and retention strategies has risen as a priority this year.

Talent and leadership

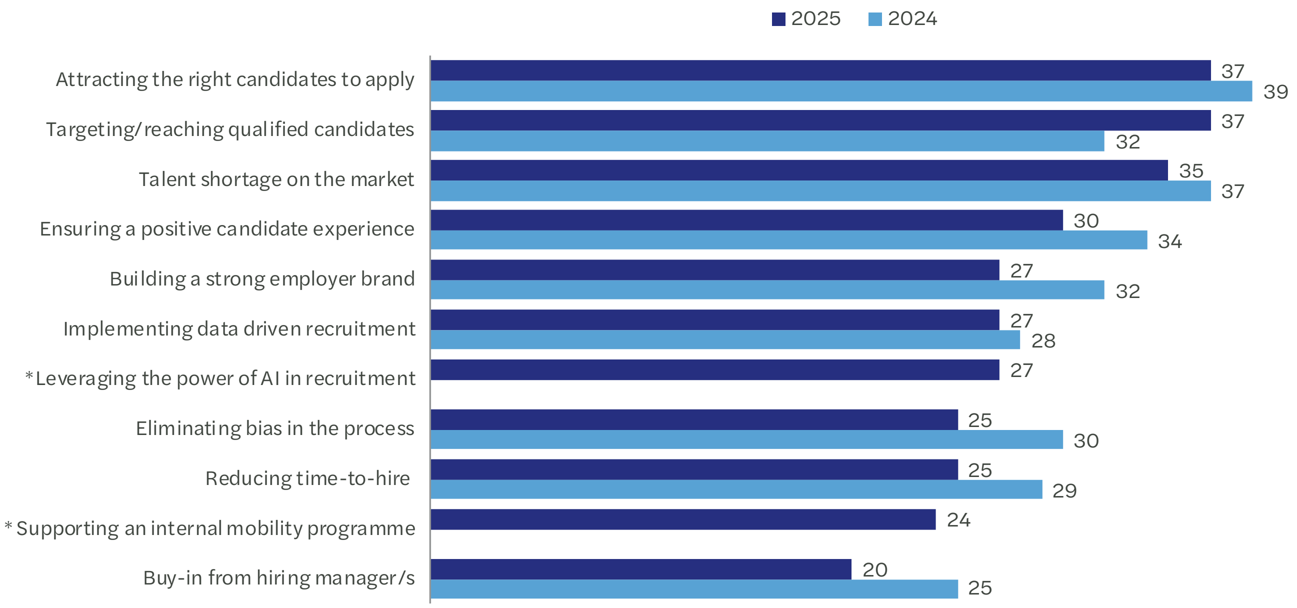
As talent rises as a strategic priority in 2025, just under half (43%) of organisations continue to report a struggle to recruit talented people.

Executives are reporting widespread difficulty in attracting and hiring the right talent and the bigger challenge now is in recruiting entry and mid-level talent, rather than senior talent as we saw in 2024.

To get the best people, organisations recognise the importance of learning and development opportunities for employees and their business, but may need to review with their people what they expect from their employer of choice.

Biggest recruitment challenges

Percent of respondents



* New response selection added in 2025 survey

In some regions, C-suite executives are having an especially tough time finding the right people. Leaders in Africa, CEE and Asia Pacific report the most difficulty, and organisations in Western Europe report more challenges than those in the Americas. Smaller businesses are also bearing the brunt of recruitment challenges, with more than half struggling to hire top talent compared to around a third of $1bn+ organisations.

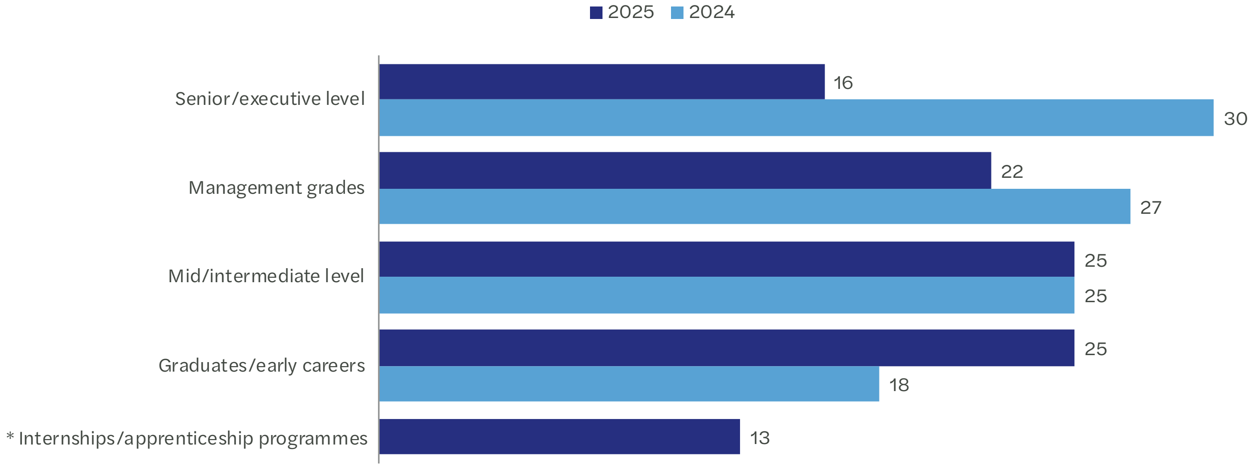
Talent and leadership

An ageing talent population

Leaders report that their main challenges with hiring have moved from the senior level to mid and early career professionals this year. In 2024, three in ten reported the most difficulty in finding talent at the senior/executive level. In 2025, this drops to 16%, with the emphasis shifting to high-quality employees at more junior levels.

Most challenging levels to recruit

Percent of respondents from organisations that have some hiring challenges



** New response selection added in 2025 survey*

New priorities and ways of working to tackle scarcity

To make their organisations more attractive places to work, C-suite executives are focusing on flexibility and hybrid working. Two in five leaders select each as a priority for their overall working models. There is, however, still a split in consensus when it comes to ways of working, as we're seeing compliance with standard working hours is also chosen by 37% of executives. While many are leaning into flexible working, another group is doubling down on standard working hours.

Among those organisations who do use hybrid working, the aim is to be as flexible as possible for employees – and not to ensure that everyone is in the office. Three in five executives say that a key goal of hybrid working for their business is to "be fully flexible for our people."

Talent and leadership
Expert view

Competing for talent in a competitive market: upskilling to upscale

Learning and development opportunities continue to feature highly as those which leaders think are most important to attracting talent (94%). Alongside this, a modern working environment with access to tech has increased by three points (93%) and a generous salary and benefits remains in the top spot (96%). However, this view is potentially at odds with what we know it takes to attract the best talent with more flexibility in the current climate.

Opportunities to work remotely feature at the bottom of the list at 86% – arguably, an oversight but it's also an opportunity for leaders to readdress their business strategies, listen to their people and create a sustainable working model that retains experienced workers and attracts new talent – both of which will welcome collaborative upskilling through learning and development.

Bring back employee engagement

Talent scarcity is no joke, but neither is a shortage in skills or engagement with your people. For that reason, I'm amazed by such high levels of positivity in relation to the growth outlook – we need people to do that, and we need them to optimise new technology solutions if this is a strategic priority that will enable businesses to grow.

For me, there are two things missing that leaders should be focusing on: 1. intergenerational differences and the development and engagement of our talent; 2. the difference in generations and the way they look at their career is completely different to what C-suite executives view as the most important aspects of attracting, or retaining, talent.

We cannot bring back what we had before Covid-19, although some have tried to do that, and personally I don't think we would want to. If leaders expect and push everyone back to the office 100%, they will lose people. I also don't like the words, 'go back' – leaders need to provide clarity and engage their people on the specific reasons to be in the office together at certain times. One of the reasons being the development of our talent. You cannot expect to lead any organisation as you did even 10 years ago.

To create engagement, it's important to give people the trust and responsibility to ensure they know that they matter. At Forvis Mazars, we do this through our own people surveys to capture a consensus of opinions as well as the more personal day-to-day discussions during development. This is a great way to establish engagement and receive more value in return from your people.

Véronique Ryckaert
Partner and Chief Operations Officer, Forvis Mazars Group

Industry insight

Kelvin Stagg
Chief Financial Officer and Board Executive Director, PageGroup

"If you want something pretty rare, you have to do something different."

Kelvin Stagg has extensive international experience in finance and leadership roles, having worked in Asia, Continental Europe and the UK for companies such as PageGroup, Allied Domecq, and Unilever.

Dynamic talent strategies

Depending how you see 2024, 2025 could be a tougher year for some. We're in a strange and somewhat unprecedented environment. For us at Michael Page, normally when times are tough you see fee rates going down. That hasn't been the case – we're working at record fee rates and the demand for talent couldn't be higher.

With the level of uncertainty in the market, candidates are hedging their bets and are hesitant to move, and the salary premium already being paid in certain sectors is making it harder for organisations to put inflated offers on the table that are big enough to persuade candidates to join. That, of course, differs in areas where specific skills are at their most scarce. Anything related to information security, cyber or digital marketing, C-suite leaders need to be prepared to invest heavily to get them through the door and, yes, you can pay more, but it's not always the best, feasible or even sustainable solution to securing the right candidates for your business.

The right model for rare commodities and real competitors

PageGroup can almost be viewed as a data company now. We have a huge international database accessing some of the best talent around the world – talent that doesn't necessarily need or want to work from a specific location or office. The more flexible organisations can be with their people, the more opportunities they will have to attract the best talent. Leaders will end up in a much more dynamic hiring position than if they are simply just paying more.

Location strategies are also important, and this is where we see the interconnectivity of cultural skills, centres of excellence, technology solutions and geopolitical factors come into play. We have, for example, a digital hub and marketing studio in our Shared Service Centre in Barcelona because the skillset, internationalisation and diversity of candidates there enables us to hire excellent people. This global approach to talent location has opened up a much wider network of talent opportunities. Other areas we're seeing opportunities like this include both Kuala Lumpur and Buenos Aires where we also have Shared Service Centres, and which have become great places to hire some really talented individuals.

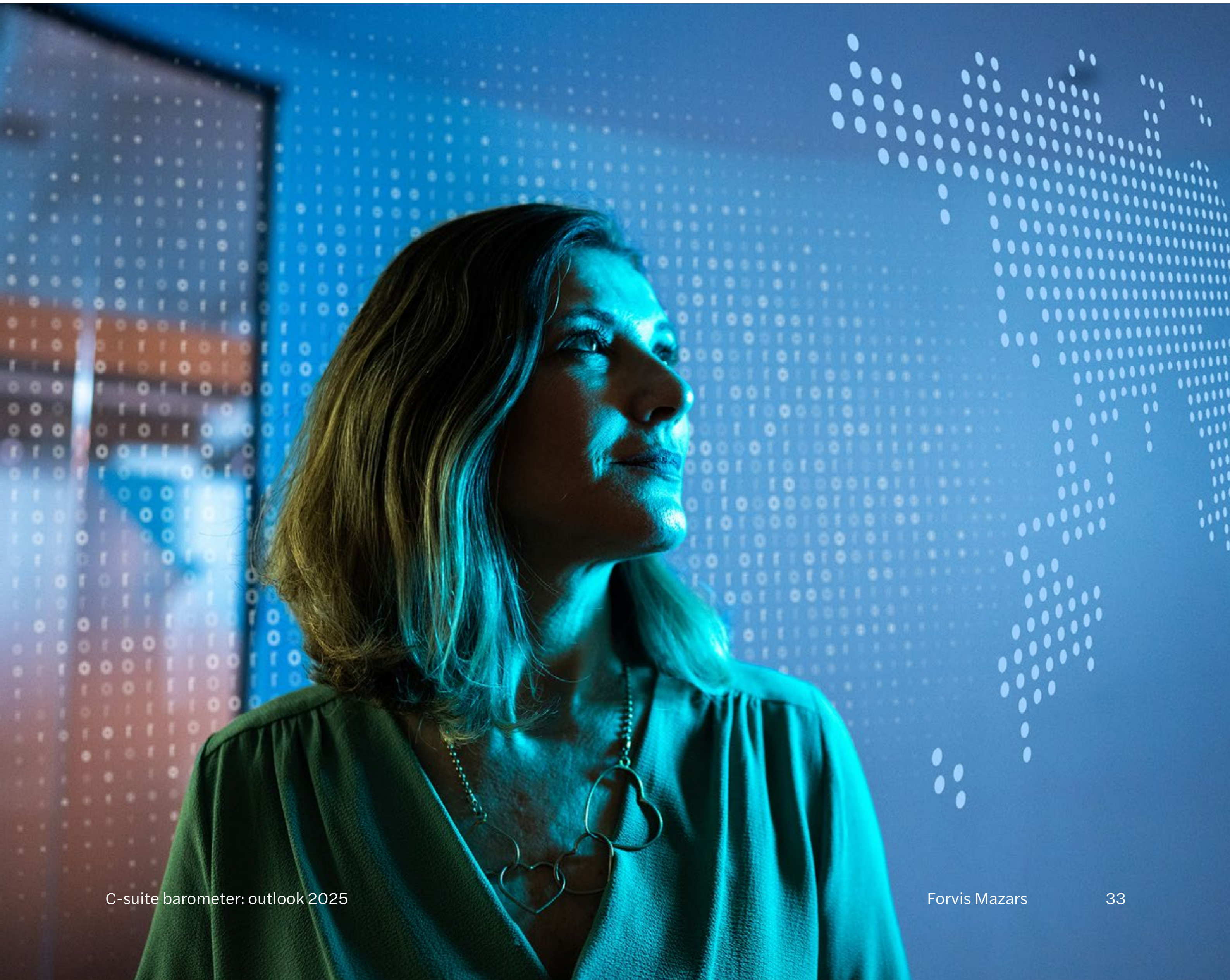
Evolving structures of people and the role of technology

The talent is out there, leaders just need to approach their needs differently. People are becoming more successful and more attractive to employers with broader careers compared to what we saw in the last decade with people specialising. Even if we look at what CFOs are responsible for now, it crosses over significantly with the role of a more traditional COO. We've also seen it clearly with the roles of marketing teams and how they have evolved now into much more data-centric teams. The influence and changing use of technology has been instrumental in this evolution and the need for talent that has a broad set of skills with big picture thinking.

Talent and leadership
Industry insight

At Michael Page, we've really taken the time to assess the most valuable use cases for technology, such as generative AI. We've created efficiencies for our people with tech taking more general tasks like writing job descriptions, but the way we're applying it goes far beyond that. Some of the algorithms are really sophisticated and can simultaneously identify and predict talent that may be ready to move based on their career history, as well as salary expectations, the type of organisation and team they're most attracted to, location and working conditions.

If you can pay the salaries, then be prepared to pay big. But it's not the only priority for candidates. When remuneration strategy and talent is scarce, this combined and flexible approach is a more dynamic way of cutting through the competition to attract and retain the best people.



Spotlight on sustainability priorities
Expert view

When it comes to sustainability reporting today, organisations are not just reacting to regulators' requirements, but on the competitive growth value ESG can bring.

Sustainability appears to have dropped down the list of strategic priorities of leaders but there's a reason for this. For most of our clients, it is rightly becoming a natural part of the business activities and operations. This is why it's still a top strategic priority with 25% of C-suite executives for the next three to five years – for those that understand the competitive advantage this brings.

Setting your own standards alongside compliance

Businesses need to ensure they're reporting on the data that's material to their business. That's the difference between doing reporting for reporting's sake and reporting on topics that have a direct and long-lasting impact on the company.

> "In an environment of increased competition, large companies will not work with you unless you have a net-zero plan or commitment."

While most businesses based in Europe that have a regulatory obligation to report are clear on what should be covered, there is still complexity in other regions where expectations and cultural differences interplay. However, it is essential to have standard sustainability requirements and commitments across all aspects of the business and its supply chain that is relevant to you. I've seen organisations struggle to report on the likes of biodiversity, for example, yet it had no impact to their business, and they feel pressure to say something.

Value chain dependencies

How you look after your values and your work across supply chains will depend on what sector you're in. In retail, for example, the governance element of ESG isn't as prominent now as the focus it's had in recent years has resulted in a much better understanding of what's expected, and what can be implemented to set organisations apart. These days, if you're in that space, you can't continue to operate, let alone, compete without putting some of these ESG measures in place. This is where other sectors can take note.

Where many are just following a process to finalise a report they're obligated to create, C-suite leaders need to address the underlying problem and create controls around how robust their ESG data points are. You need to have a plan for how you're going to collect that data, and how you can improve and better automate each year. This includes controls for appropriate comparatives throughout.

Spotlight on sustainability priorities
Expert view

Establishing confidence in your markets

The whole process of responsible reporting starts with what's material, or relevant, for your business and your target markets. Going through that filtering process, you only keep what's material. This is key to establishing confidence with consumers and investors who will then be pleased to see that, while addressing your ESG risks and opportunities, you're also addressing your impact on society and the environment.

Overall, I'm happy to see that leaders didn't just select 'all the above' for topics they're addressing in their reports and are beginning to be more selective on what impacts their businesses directly.

Sustainability reporting may never be as simple as a one size fits all initiative and priorities remain different across organisations, across sectors and around the world. What is certain is that sustainability is like dust – it settles everywhere and not having the right approach in place that's relevant to your business is the difference between basic (or bare minimum) compliance with the regulation and standing out as true leaders of transformation and best practice for the future sustainability and legacy of your organisation.

Emmanuel Thierry
Partner and CSRD Task Force Leader,
Forvis Mazars Group

Acknowledgments and methodology

Forvis Mazars appreciates the support of our contributors and subject matter experts, including Ifri, PageGroup, Signal AI and Vanguard, for sharing their perspectives and insights. Their knowledge and experience have added significant value to our 2025 C-suite barometer.

We also wish to acknowledge the creative and editorial teams for their expertise and attention in the design, writing and production of this report, ensuring its clarity and visual impact for our clients and readers.

Forvis Mazars, in partnership with Peter McLeod AS, surveyed 1,706 C-suite executives around the world for its 2025 C-suite barometer. The fieldwork was conducted via online panels between 28 September and 23 October 2024. This independent research captures the views of C-suite leaders at for-profit organisations with annual revenues of over US$1 million across more than 35 countries.

Respondents were based in Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Côte d'Ivoire, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, Nigeria, Poland, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, UAE, Uganda, the UK, the US and Zimbabwe.

Contacts

Mark Kennedy
Partner and Chief Clients & Markets Officer
mkennedy@mazars.ie

Lorraine Hackett
Chief Brand & Communications Officer
lorraine.hackett@mazars.co.uk

Forvis Mazars Group SC is an independent member of Forvis Mazars Global, a leading professional services network. Operating as an internationally integrated partnership in over 100 countries and territories, Forvis Mazars Group specialises in audit, tax and advisory services. The partnership draws on the expertise and cultural understanding of over 40,000 professionals across the globe to assist clients of all sizes at every stage in their development. Visit forvismazars.com to learn more.

forvismazars.com

forvis mazars