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CEO Watch 2Q26

Key Mandates From the 2026 CEO Survey



20Q

CEO Watch

The Autonomous Business Imperative

by David Furlonger

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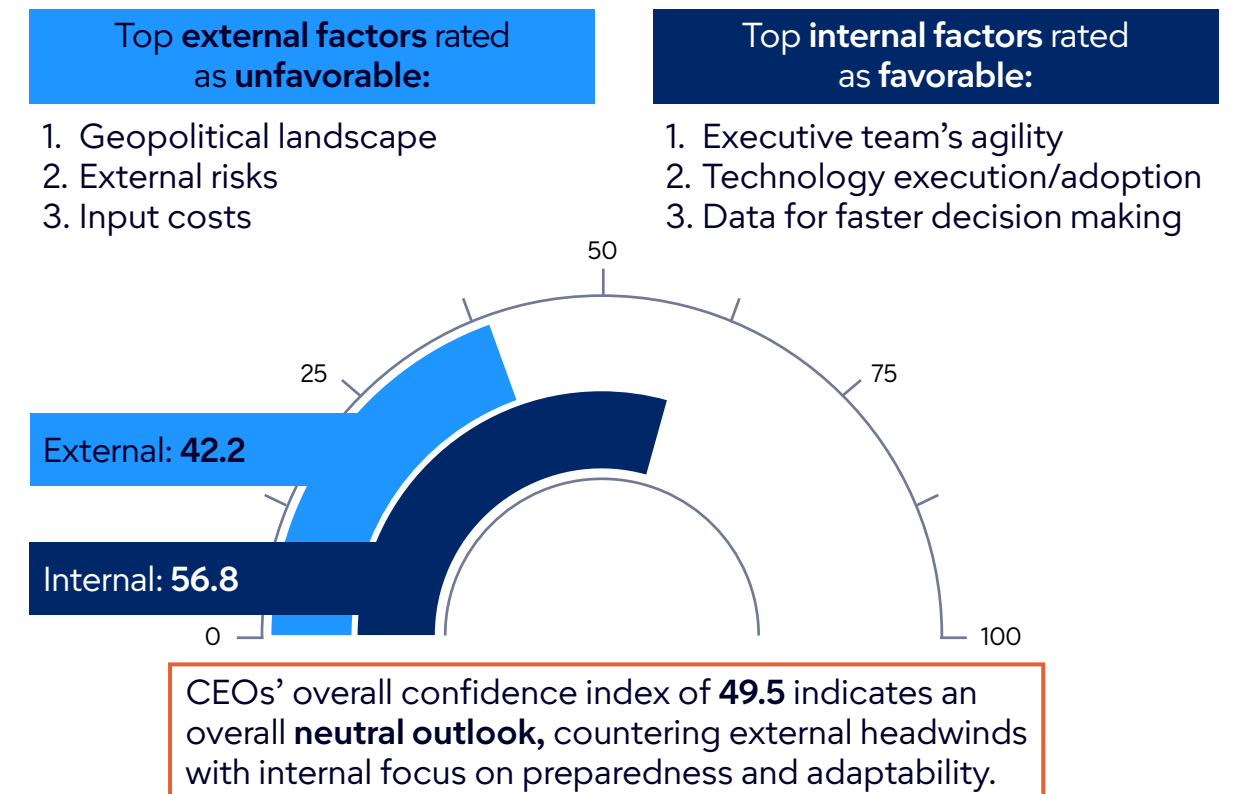
The 2026 Gartner CEO Survey¹ shows that leaders are moving into the autonomous business era. AI is central to their growth plans, but their enterprises must strike a careful balance between autonomous operations and talent.

The CEO Mindset: Macro Anxiety, Micro Confidence

CEOs are navigating a perfect storm of trade barriers and supply chain disruptions, and they rate geopolitics as the most unfavorable external factor. However, they feel equipped to cope because they trust the enterprise's ability to execute on technology (see Figure 1).

» Figure 1: 2026 Gartner CEO Confidence Index

Average on 0 to 100 scale



n = 469, all respondents

Q: How do you expect the following external factors will affect your organization's performance in 2025?
Source: 2026 Gartner CEO & Senior Business Executive Survey, conducted March through November 2025 among 469 global CEOs and senior business executives. Fielded by Gartner using an external panel.

- **The internal stabilizer:** CEOs rate “technology execution/adoption” as the second most favorable internal factor affecting performance.
- **Strategic shift:** Consequently, the focus on **financial/cost control, although still critical, decreased slightly over the course of 2025**, while **technology priorities surged by 10 percentage points**, driven almost entirely by AI.

Strategic Priorities: The AI Investment Wave

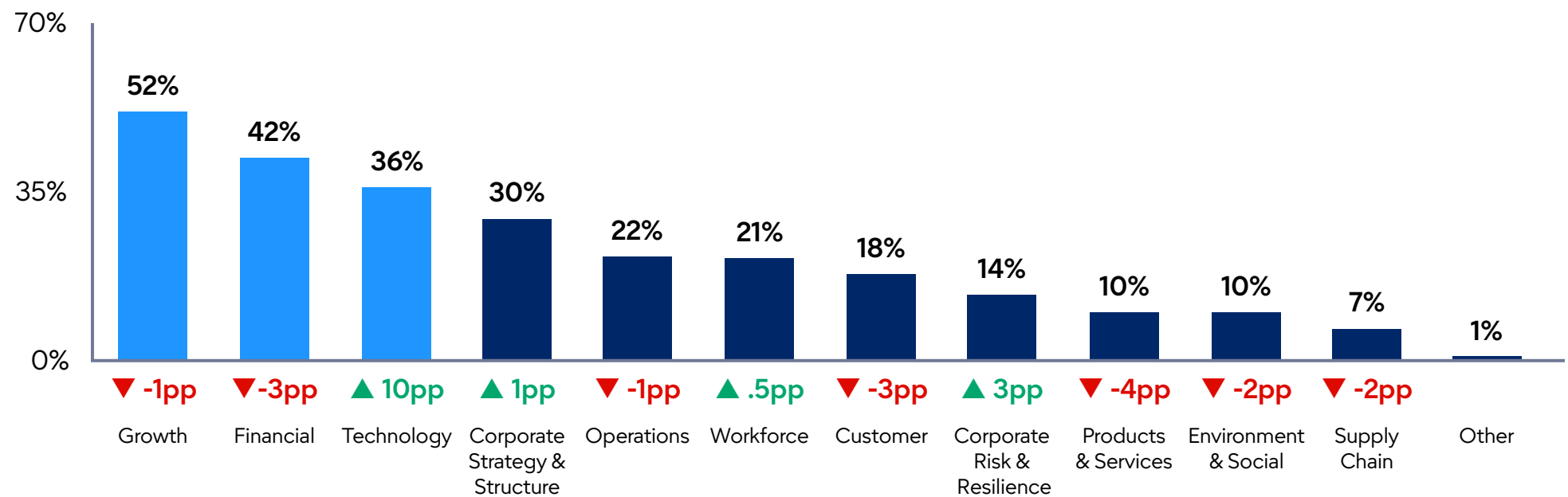
CEOs’ resource allocation for 2026 confirms a decisive move from “tech-enabled” to “AI-centric.”

- **Top priorities: Growth** (which 52% of CEOs regard as a top 3 priority) remains the obsession, but **technology** (36%) has solidified its position, displacing workforce concerns in relative ranking (see Figure 2).

» **Figure 2: CEO Business Priorities Entering 2026**

Summary of top 3 mentions

Change from 2025 Survey ▼ Decrease ▲ Increase



n = 469, all respondents

Q: To start, please tell us about your organization’s top 5 strategic business priorities for the next two years (2025/2026).

Source: 2026 Gartner CEO & Senior Business Executive Survey, conducted March through November 2025 among 469 global CEOs and senior business executives.

Fielded by Gartner using an external panel.

Note: The structure for open question responses has been changed in 2026; not directly comparable to previously published data.

pp = Percentage point

- **Investment polarization:** Investment intentions diverge starkly. Eighty-eight percent of CEOs plan to increase investment in AI, while only **32% intend to spend more on hiring staff**. Investment intentions for people and culture development and staff hiring are declining sharply, continuing a trend that began at the end of 2022. This finding confirms CEOs are reallocating capital from headcount growth to digital capability.

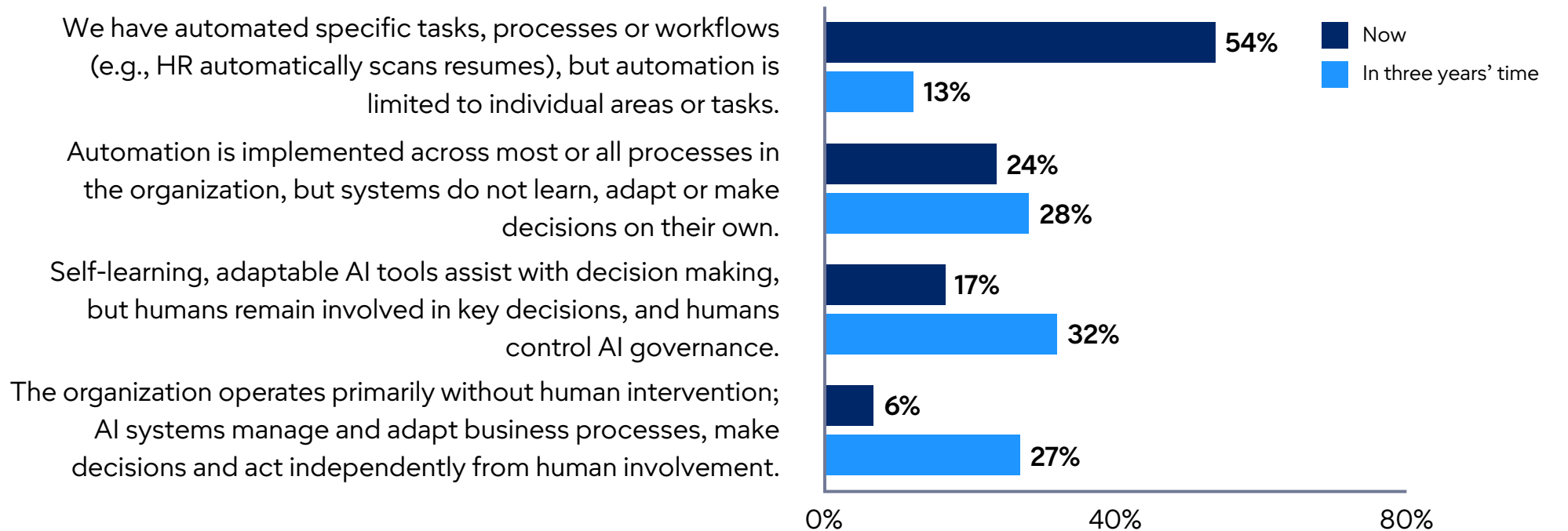
The Autonomous Business Opportunity

CEO views on automation are shifting rapidly from “task assistance” to “autonomous operation.” Leaders are preparing for business models where humans are designed “out of the loop” for core transactions and where AI agents have and use their own agency.

- **Current versus future state:** Today, 54% of enterprises report that automation is limited to specific tasks. By 2028, **27% expect to operate primarily without human intervention**, with AI systems making decisions and acting independently (see Figure 3).

» Figure 3: Autonomous Business

Percentage of Wave 3 respondents rating their organization’s autonomy now and expectations in three years



n = 252, Wave 3 respondents only

Q: Which of the following most closely describes how autonomous your organization is now, and what do you expect it to be in three years' time (i.e., by end of 2028)?

Source: 2026 Gartner CEO & Senior Business Executive Survey, conducted March through November 2025 among 469 global CEOs and senior business executives. Fielded by Gartner using an external panel.

- **New revenue streams:** CEOs estimate that by 2030, **19.9% of total revenue** on average will come from AI agents or machine customers rather than humans.
- **Enhanced treasury capabilities:** As CEOs see it, autonomous operations include finance or treasury activity. By the end of 2026, **25%** of CEOs expect to have deployed AI agent systems that can **trade products or services and make or accept payments** using programmable forms of money. And **28%** expect similar systems to help **raise capital or manage liquidity**, again using programmable money.

Harnessing the AI Agent Shift

The most critical CEO challenge is managing the tension between autonomous operations and talent. While chief executives rank “people” as a top capability for business resilience, the survey results show a reluctance to hire and an expectation that AI agents may be a cheaper workforce solution.

- **The paradox:** Despite hiring freezes — **and reduced investment in people and culture development** — the use of AI agents will likely require significant upskilling of the remaining workforce.

- **AI as employee:** Thirty-nine percent of CEOs already view AI agents as employees, a fundamental change in how they define the workforce (see Figure 4).

» **Figure 4: CEOs’ View on AI Agents as Employees**
Percentage of Wave 3 respondents who see AI agents as employees



n = 252, Wave 3 respondents only
Q: Many organizations are already using AI agents in their workflows, with significant planned growth in the next one to two years. Do you see AI agents as employees?
Source: 2026 Gartner CEO & Senior Business Executive Survey, conducted March through November 2025 among 469 global CEOs and senior business executives. Fielded by Gartner using an external panel.





Implication for the C-Suite

Enterprises cannot simply cut their way to an autonomous business future. The transition requires a new and specific talent pattern, protecting high-value human roles and automating transactional ones.

¹ **2026 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey.** This survey was conducted to examine CEO and senior business executive views on current business issues and areas of technology impact. 469 actively employed CEOs and other senior business executives participated in the survey that was conducted across three quarters in 2025: March through April, May through June, and October through November. CEOs (n = 330), CFOs (n = 100), COOs or other C-level executives (n = 23), and chairs, presidents or board directors (n = 16) from North America (n = 186), Europe (n = 147), Asia/Pacific, excluding China (n = 99), Latin America (n = 22), the Middle East (n = 11) and South Africa (n = 4), and organizations of various sizes (\$50 million to less than \$250 million, n = 43, \$250 million to less than \$1 billion, n = 102, \$1 billion to less than \$10 billion, n = 213 and \$10 billion or more, n = 111) participated in the survey. Survey results reflect open-ended responses categorized using an LLM-based topic modeling that was updated in 2025. As such, results are not directly comparable to previously published research. Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

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