

# Gartner Business Quarterly

Fourth Quarter 2025

- » Use Adaptive Strategic Planning to Succeed Amid Complex Volatility
- » How to Choose AI Initiatives When Near-Term Financial Value Comes First

## SMART PLANNING FOR

# 2026

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# Smart Planning for 2026



**Chris Howard**  
Chief of Research

No plan survives contact with ... next week? A sudden policy shift? A savvy board? Something like that. Planning is essential and promissory. We all do it, iterating PowerPoints, building business cases and forecasting ROI. Then throwing away our first drafts and trying again. Planning can be hard, and is especially tough right now given the amount of chaos in the macroenvironment and the level of economic unease.

When I look at business or technical trends, I often like to think of the cycle of entropy and work. Entropy is the natural state of the world, characterized by randomness and disorder. We apply effort to entropy to convert it into work, into a manageable, less chaotic state. But order always wants to revert to entropy, and we have to employ more sense making. Adaptive strategy works this way: We apply enough effort to create manageability

within a certain time frame, but our task is never “done.” We do scenario planning to create optionality and resilience. We run simulations, perhaps aided by AI to introduce stochastic influences.

Gone are the days when organizations planned annually, locked in workstreams, and then everyone went off to work for another year. Smart planners use adaptive techniques that constantly scan for signals, prioritize them, and influence execution in near real time.

This issue of *Gartner Business Quarterly* guides you through several practices you can use to establish the right AI and cybersecurity priorities, enrich your financial forecasting and workforce planning, and set annual growth targets that reflect your supply chain’s true capacity. That way, your plan will be fit for the year ahead.

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# Use Adaptive Strategic Planning to Succeed Amid Complex Volatility

by Ian Cox

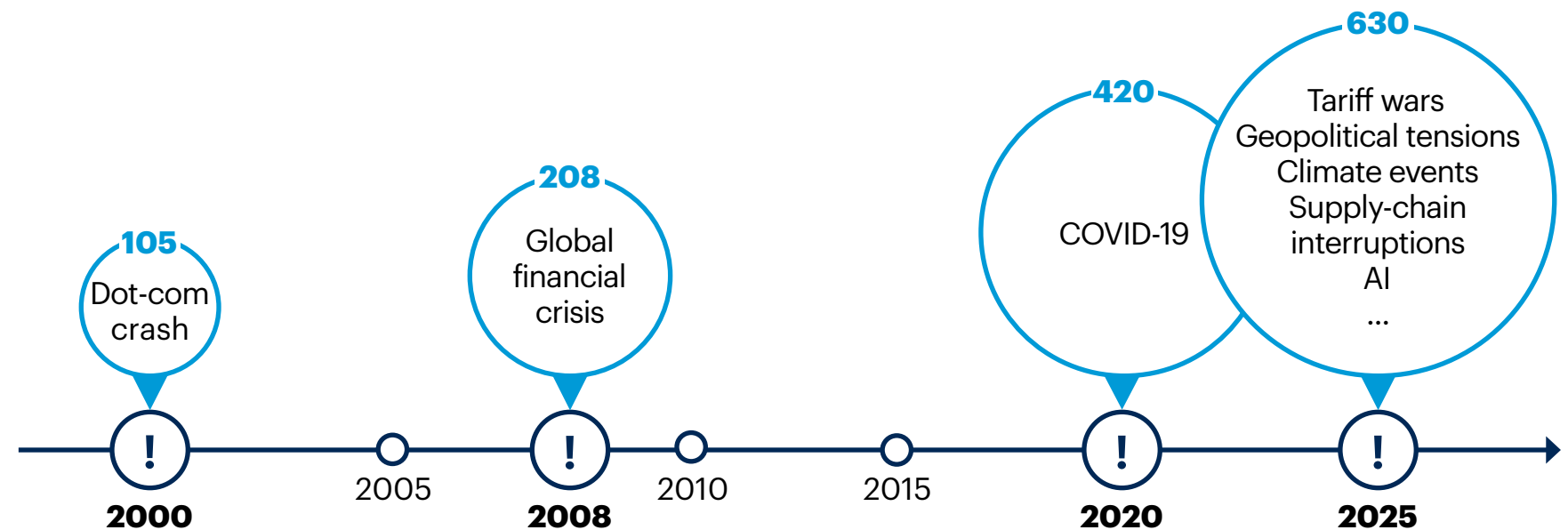
The current volume, frequency, speed and nature of disruptive events are exceptional even by recent standards. As executive leaders engage in strategic planning for 2026, they must adopt new techniques so their planning processes can quickly adapt to change.

When seasoned executive leaders hear about yet more volatility and uncertainty, it is easy for them to believe they have seen it all before. They have successfully navigated the disruption resulting from COVID-19 and the global financial crisis of 2008 to 2009. Some will also have managed through the dot-com bust in the early 2000s. To these leaders, disruption, shocks and unpredictability are not new. So, they have everything they need to succeed in the current environment. Right?

Wrong. Today's uncertainty is new, more complex and multidimensional. The major shocks of the past couple of decades were largely caused by one primary variable or a single isolated event. So, while their impact may have been significant, the potential responses were narrow and relatively easy to identify. In 2025, by contrast, there are multiple variables creating their own disruptive impact and also combining to create compound effects. Tariff wars, geopolitical tensions, climate events, supply-chain interruptions and technology advancements — in particular, AI — are just some of the factors intersecting to create a type of uncertainty today's executive leaders have not seen before.

Reflecting this new reality, the Global Economic Policy Uncertainty (GEPU) Index — a widely used indicator — is at a record high. During the year 2000, which included the dot-com collapse, the current-price version of the index had a peak of 105. At the height of the global financial crisis in 2008, the index peaked at 208, while in 2020 COVID-19 caused it to reach 420. So far in 2025, the index has risen as high as 630. These are uncharted waters (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

» Figure 1. Disruptions and the Global Economic Policy Uncertainty (GEPU) Index Since 2000



Source: Gartner  
Note: The current-price version of the index has been used.

The intersection of factors is increasing the frequency and speed of disruptive events. It is also leading to a wider range of impacts. This more complex environment needs a more complex response. The playbooks that executive leaders used to manage through previous shocks were not designed for this level and type of uncertainty. They will need new tools and techniques to plot and navigate a successful path for their enterprise. This shift starts with adaptive strategic planning.

## Strategic Planning Must Evolve to Address Today's Uncertainty

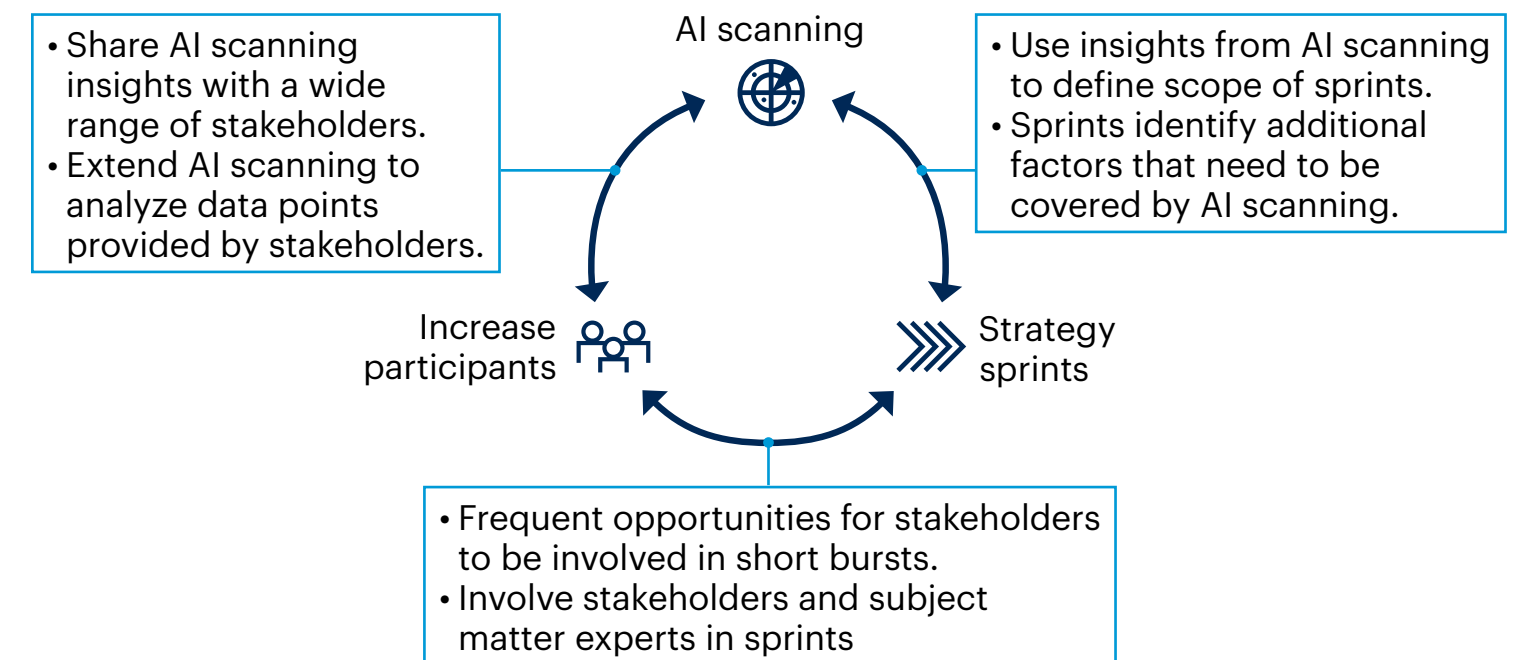
Traditional calendar-based strategic planning processes depend on a level of certainty that no longer exists. The plans they generate quickly become obsolete because they are slow to react to frequent changes. Today's more turbulent world requires more flexible approaches.

*Adaptive* strategic planning enables enterprises to respond quickly to disruptive events at the enterprise, business unit and functional levels. There are many components to a fully adaptive approach, and, over time, all enterprises will need to establish a comprehensive set of adaptive tools and techniques. However, as executive leaders begin their strategic planning for 2026, they should start moving toward more adaptive planning with three immediate actions:

- 1. Use AI to continually scan for disruptive events.**
- 2. Increase participants to make the enterprise more responsive to change.**
- 3. Use sprints to update strategic planning faster.**

While these actions will have maximum benefit when applied across strategic planning activities throughout the enterprise, executive leaders can apply them individually at the enterprise, business unit and functional levels. In addition, while it is possible to implement a subset of the actions, they are complementary. For example, widely sharing the insights generated by AI scanning across the enterprise can increase participation in strategic planning (see Figure 2).

» Figure 2. Three Actions to Start the Journey to Adaptive Strategic Planning



Source: Gartner

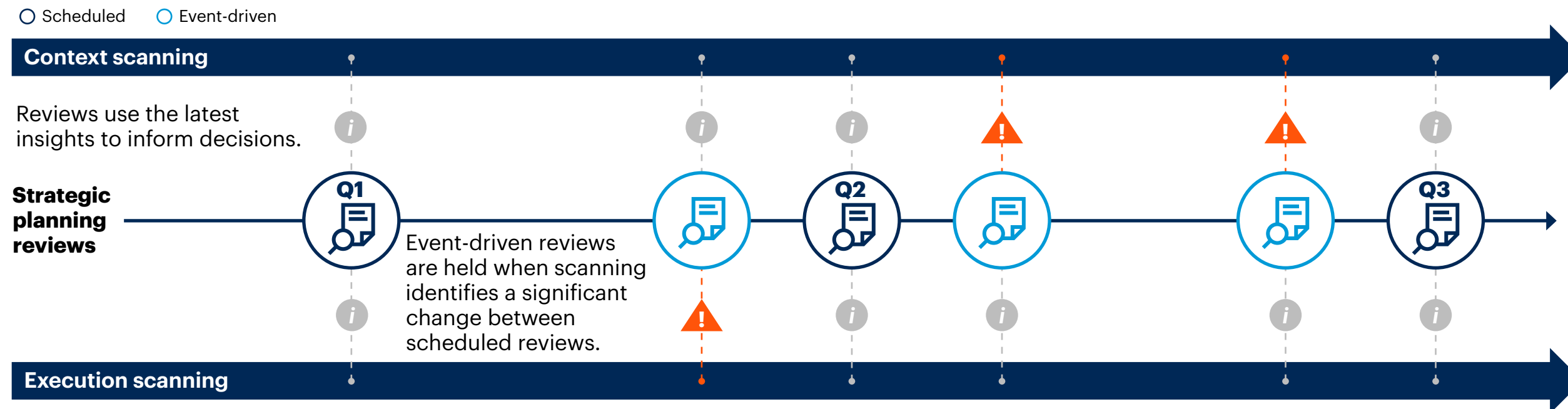
## Use AI to Continually Scan for Disruptive Events

Continual scanning is a fundamental component of adaptive strategic planning. It comprises two parallel streams:

- **Context scanning**, which is the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of internal and external factors that may lead to new opportunities or threats
- **Execution scanning**, which focuses on whether the strategy is being executed correctly and is having the expected impact

Leaders use the insights generated by continual scanning to perform strategic planning reviews, which may be scheduled (such as every quarter) or event driven. These reviews equip the enterprise to proactively spot potential new issues, opportunities and threats and, where appropriate, determine its possible responses (see Figure 3).

» Figure 3. Continual Scanning Provides Insights for Strategic Planning Reviews



Source: Gartner

However, the increasing speed and volume of information mean that manual scanning methods are impractical, and enterprises risk overlooking potentially valuable insights. Technology, and specifically AI tools, allow enterprises to scale their context scanning to a far greater breadth and depth. AI offers automated, real-time analysis that enables comprehensive and timely insights, enhancing decision making and strategic agility.

To establish an AI-enabled continual scanning competency, executive leaders should:

1. Identify and collate a core set of internal and external factors that are relevant to the enterprise's strategic objectives, then gradually expand the scope as the competency matures. Continual scanning will typically cover three types of factors: strategic assumptions, strategic issues and strategic triggers. Scanning should focus on factors in areas of high uncertainty that have the potential for significant impact.

2. Use an autonomous AI solution to continually monitor the internal and external factors, plan and perform related research tasks and generate reports and dashboards that can be used to facilitate strategic planning reviews.
3. Include a step for human review and validation of any high-impact content generated by the AI tool before circulating it to stakeholders. While AI can automate and accelerate scanning, the enterprise needs to safeguard against becoming overly reactive to changes in the business context.

## Increase Participants to Make the Enterprise More Responsive to Change

Traditional strategic planning processes tend to involve a relatively small number of senior stakeholders. Including more people from different levels and areas of the enterprise makes strategy more inclusive, informed and responsive.

Specifically, increasing participation in strategic planning activities will:

- **Increase resources for scanning and review** — Including business units and functions in continual scanning and review activities boosts the resources available to collate and assess data points.
- **Facilitate faster identification of opportunities and threats** — Stakeholders in business units and functions are closer to day-to-day operations, customers, suppliers and even competitors, enabling them to detect indicators of emerging opportunities or threats earlier.
- **Widen decision makers' perspectives** — Bringing more functional and frontline voices into strategic planning forums gives decision makers a broader view of emerging opportunities and threats as well as potential impacts of plan changes.
- **Accelerate implementation of changes** — Engaging a wider group of stakeholders from the outset significantly improves understanding of the need for,

and the nature of, planning changes. People who have participated throughout the process will also feel an increased level of ownership of the changes.

Typically, when enterprises want to speed up a process, they look for opportunities to reduce the number of participants. However, when applied to strategic planning, this tactic may lead to suboptimal decisions that executive leaders then have to explain and justify to the people they expect to implement the resulting changes.

Some might argue that involving more people will result in a lengthier and more complex decision-making process. In reality, however, broader participation leads to more informed decisions that are implemented more quickly. Ultimately, it's still the executive leaders who need to make the choices. But they must have the best available information provided by relevant stakeholders, and those stakeholders must also feel they have contributed to, and understand, the resulting decisions.

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The belief that to move fast, you need to go alone does not apply to strategic planning. To respond quickly to changes, you need a strategic planning process that engages a wide range of stakeholders.

To increase the number of participants in strategic planning, executive leaders should:

1. Share insights generated by continual scanning widely with stakeholders from business units and functions as well as relevant subject matter experts.
2. Establish a mechanism to capture unstructured insights and data points from employees across the enterprise, which can be aggregated to facilitate trend monitoring and identify opportunities and risks. Possible options include a specialized enterprise prediction market solution or, less formally, forums and wikis that are monitored by AI tools.
3. Solicit ideas and suggestions from stakeholders throughout the strategy process. For example, ask for ideas when planning starts, solicit feedback on proposed initiatives or changes or gather suggestions for specific opportunities and threats.

## Use Sprints to Update Strategic Planning Faster

For strategic planning to be effective, the cycle time for updates needs to be as short as possible. If it takes too long to refresh a plan, the enterprise risks responding too late to an emerging opportunity or threat. A shorter cycle time can help executive leaders move away from doing only calendar-based planning updates to also performing event-driven adjustments prompted by continual scanning.

Strategy sprints apply agile development principles to strategic planning, with enterprises treating planning outputs as products that they refine and improve on an iterative basis. A sprint must have a limited time frame and a clearly defined scope to maintain focus and urgency. The time frame might range from a few days to a few weeks depending on the nature of the event that has prompted the need for the update. The scope must address the impact of a specific opportunity or threat that has triggered an update.

To use sprints to update strategic planning, executive leaders should:

1. Consider initially introducing sprints within a business unit or function to provide a working example for the wider enterprise and to demonstrate the value of the approach.
2. Use insights, reports and dashboards generated by AI scanning to define the scope, time frame and objectives of each sprint.
3. Involve relevant stakeholders and subject matter experts from across the enterprise to increase transparency, benefit from different viewpoints and new ideas, and build understanding and commitment to the resulting strategic planning updates.

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<sup>1</sup> [Economic Policy Uncertainty Index](#), Economic Policy Uncertainty.

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