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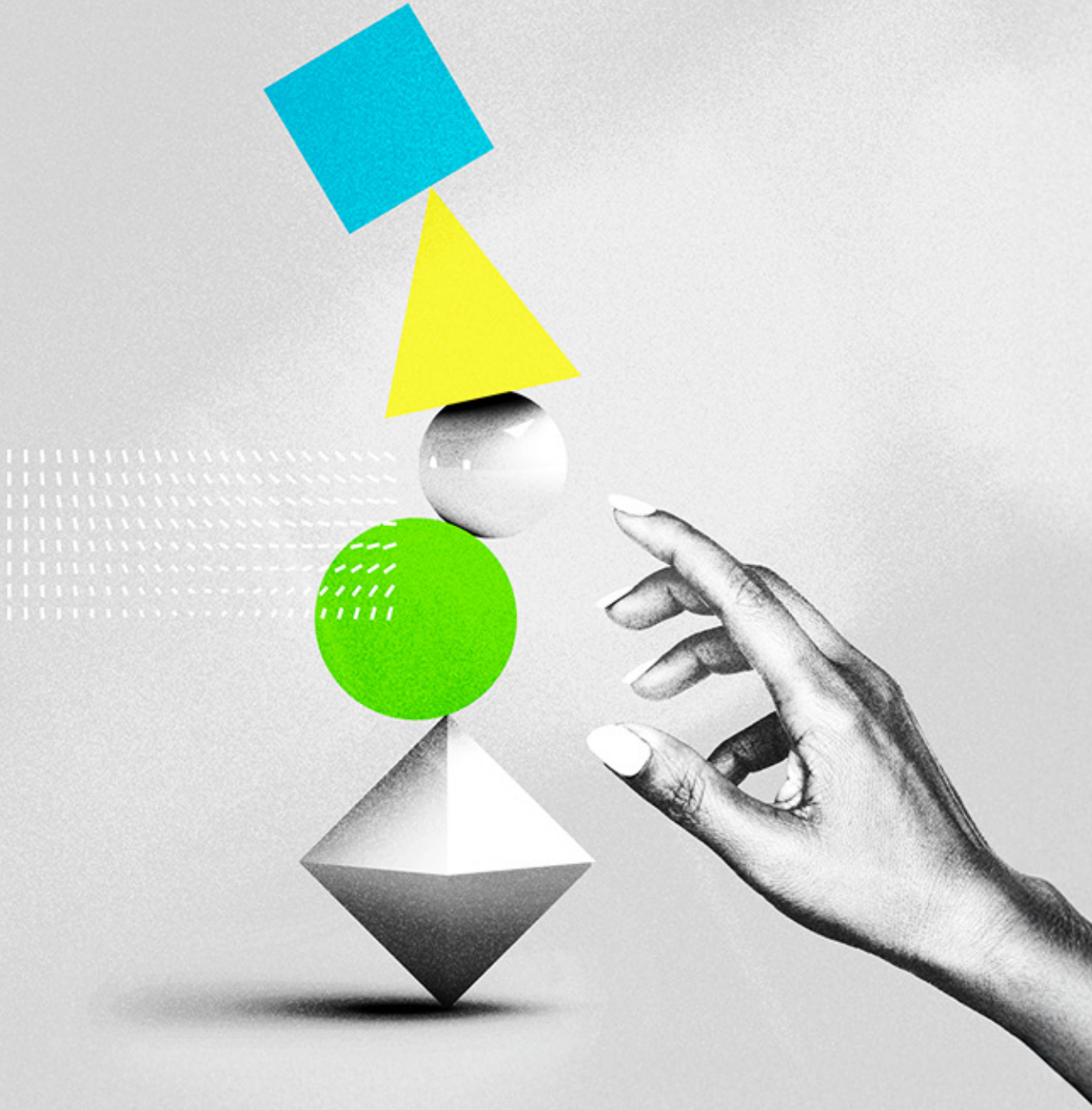


Middle East Human Capital Trends 2026

Contents

Introduction: Designing for a future that refuses to stand still

—By Dara Latinwo, Editor of 2026 Report

Across the Middle East, the future of work is no longer something organizations are preparing for. It is something they are actively shaping.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly moving from experimentation to implementation. New industries are emerging. Existing business models are being reinvented. Governments are accelerating ambitious national transformation agendas, while organizations across every sector are rethinking how work gets done, how decisions are made, and how value is created.

Yet amid this extraordinary pace of change, one question sits at the heart of the region's transformation: **How do we ensure that human potential remains the defining advantage in an increasingly intelligent world?**

The Middle East Human Capital Trends Report 2026 explores this question through eight interconnected perspectives on the future of work, leadership, and organizational performance. While the themes range from human-machine collaboration and AI-enabled decision-making to organizational agility, workforce readiness, trust, and culture, they are united by a common challenge: how leaders can design organizations that remain effective, adaptable, and distinctly human in an era of constant disruption.

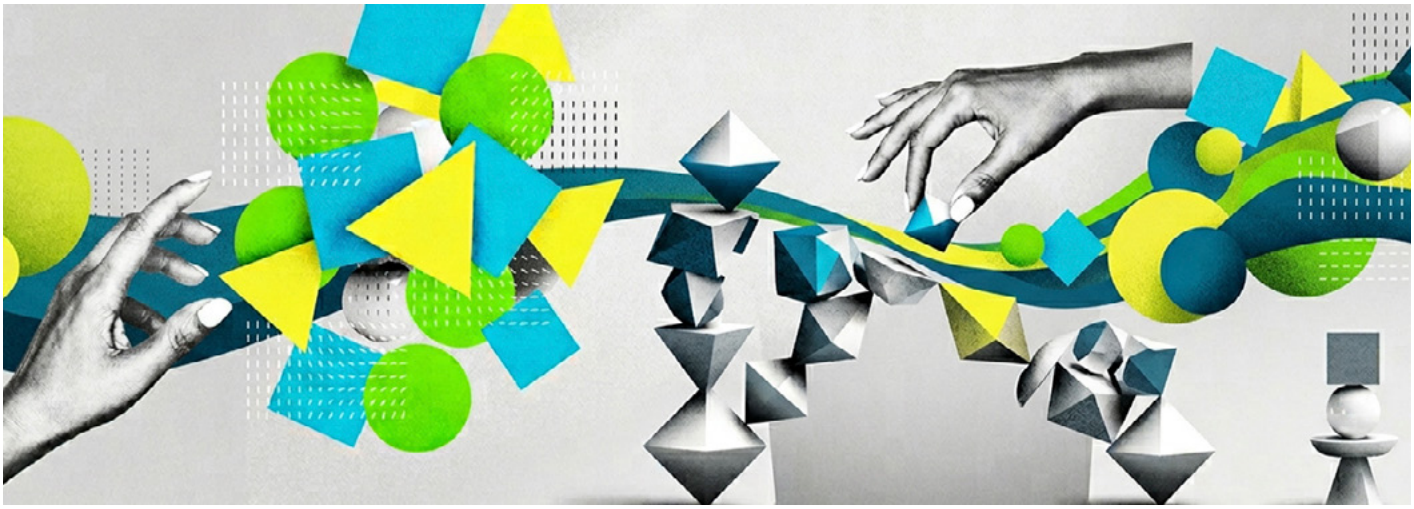
What makes the Middle East particularly compelling is that these conversations are not taking place in isolation. Across the region, national ambitions such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's digital transformation agenda, and Qatar's long-term development strategies are reshaping economies through investment in technology, talent, and innovation. As a result, organizations are increasingly being asked to do more than respond to change—they are being asked to help create the conditions for it.

Throughout this report, we see a consistent shift in leadership thinking. The focus is moving beyond technology adoption and towards organizational design. Leaders are questioning how capability should be orchestrated across humans and machines. They are reconsidering whether traditional structures still serve modern organizations. They are exploring how trust can be maintained when intelligence is increasingly artificial, how culture can evolve alongside technology, and how organizations can build workforces that remain relevant in a world that refuses to stand still.

What emerges is a powerful insight: the future of work will not be determined by technology alone. It will be determined by the choices leaders make about how technology, people, culture, and organizations come together to create value.

Above all, this report offers an optimistic perspective on the region's future. Across the Middle East, organizations are not simply adapting to global trends: they are helping define them. By designing workplaces that strengthen human capability, expand opportunity, build trust, and enable responsible innovation, they have an opportunity to create organizations that are not only more productive, but also more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable.

The future is arriving quickly and the organizations that thrive will be those that design most thoughtfully for the humans at the centre of it.



The orchestration advantage

Why competitive advantage in the AI era will depend less on workforce size and more on the ability to combine human and machine capability

—By Alia Al Masaeid

For decades, organizational success was built on a relatively simple formula: hire more people, build more capability, and scale operations. Growth was often measured by headcount, hierarchy, and the size of the enterprise itself. Today, that formula is beginning to break down.

As artificial intelligence becomes embedded into everyday work, organizations are discovering that capability is no longer exclusively human. Work that once depended on large teams can now be accelerated, augmented, or in some cases completed by AI systems. Knowledge is becoming more accessible. Expertise can be amplified. Decision-making can be supported at unprecedented speed and scale.[1]

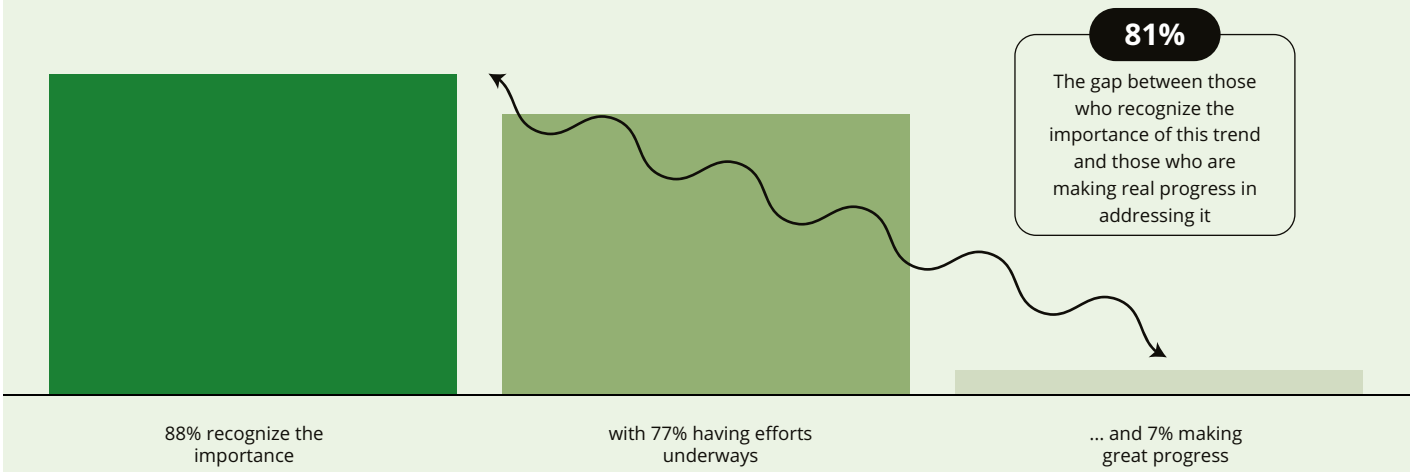
It is this shift that raises a fundamental question for leaders:

What happens when competitive advantage is no longer determined by the number of people you employ, but by how effectively you combine human and machine capability?

While organizations continue to invest heavily in AI, many are realizing that technology alone does not create value. The real challenge lies in redesigning work, teams, and operating models so that people and technology can create value together.[1]

Organizations say it's important to orchestrate resources, but only 7% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of reponsible answering the question, "how important is accelerating how people, skills, and resources are organized to get work done?"and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Indeed, across the Middle East, this challenge is becoming increasingly urgent. Governments and businesses across the GCC are simultaneously pursuing economic diversification, digital transformation, and AI adoption at extraordinary pace. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's national AI ambitions, and Qatar's digital transformation agenda are reshaping industries and institutions alike. Yet achieving these ambitions will require more than technology investment. It will require organizations to rethink how capability itself is organized due to work becoming more dynamic, skills evolving faster and decisions increasingly relying on a combination of human judgment and machine intelligence. In this environment, organizations need a new source of advantage: the orchestration advantage.

Rethinking competitive advantage

The term "orchestration" is increasingly appearing in discussions about the future of work, but its meaning is often misunderstood. Orchestration is not simply another word for automation. Nor is it about replacing people with technology.

Rather, orchestration is the ability to continuously align and combine different sources of capability—human expertise, artificial intelligence, data, ecosystem partners, and organizational resources—to deliver outstanding outcomes.[1,2]

In the past, organizations were largely built around fixed capabilities: people sat within functions; expertise was concentrated within departments and resources were allocated through relatively stable structures and processes. Today, those assumptions are being challenged.

Organizations increasingly have access to multiple forms of capability that exist within the workforce, AI systems and through partners, platforms or broad ecosystems. The challenge is no longer simply acquiring capability but rather deploying it effectively.[3]

As such, leadership is now shifting away from asking "How many people do we need?" to considering: "What combination of people, technology, and ecosystem capabilities will help us achieve this outcome?"

While this distinction may seem subtle, its implications are profound. Organizations that continue to focus solely on workforce scale may find themselves constrained by traditional structures. Organizations that learn to orchestrate capability dynamically will be better positioned to adapt, innovate, and respond to change.[2]

The question, therefore, is not whether organizations need more capability. It is whether they can access and mobilize the capability they already have.

Building the orchestration advantage

Leading organizations are beginning to recognize that the future of competitive advantage will depend less on ownership of capability and more on the ability to orchestrate it.[1] Across the region, three strategic shifts are beginning to emerge.

Orchestrate capability, not headcount

For decades, workforce planning was largely a question of numbers. Organizations forecasted demand, identified resource gaps, and hired accordingly. Capability was often assumed to reside within people and positions. That assumption is becoming increasingly outdated.

In an AI-enabled world, capability can come from multiple sources and so the leadership challenge is no longer simply ensuring the organization has enough people. It is ensuring the organization can access the right capabilities at the right moment. [8,9]

This requires a shift from workforce planning to capability planning. Rather than organizing around fixed jobs and rigid career paths, organizations are increasingly moving towards more fluid, skills-based models. These models allow capabilities to be identified, developed, and deployed in response to changing priorities rather than static organizational charts. [6,7]

One example of this is e&, which has evolved from a traditional telecommunications provider into a diversified technology group operating across multiple sectors and markets.

To respond to changing capability requirements, e& has increasingly embraced skills-based approaches to workforce development, supported by AI-enabled systems that help identify capability gaps, personalize learning pathways, and align talent with emerging business needs.

The lesson is not simply about technology adoption. It is about recognizing that in a rapidly changing environment, organizations need the ability to mobilize capability faster than traditional workforce structures often allow.

Design better decision environments

If the first orchestration challenge is about capability, the second is about decision-making.

AI is already transforming how organizations gather information, analyze data, and generate insights. Yet many discussions about AI continue to focus on whether machines will replace human decision-makers. In reality, the more important question may be how organizations redesign the environments in which decisions are made.[4]

Historically, leaders relied on experience, expertise, and available data to make decisions. Today, AI can process vast quantities of information in real time, identify patterns that humans may miss, and generate recommendations at unprecedented speed. This does not eliminate the need for human judgment; in fact, it makes it more important.[5]

As AI becomes increasingly capable, human value shifts towards interpretation, contextual understanding, ethical reasoning, and accountability. The role of leaders is evolving from being the sole decision-maker to becoming the architect of systems that enable better decisions. 4,5

Emirates NBD provides a compelling example of this evolution. The bank has invested heavily in AI-powered analytics and decision-support capabilities across customer engagement, operations, and business planning. These systems help identify patterns, predict customer needs, and provide actionable insights at scale.

Yet the objective is not to automate leadership. Rather, it is to augment it. Managers and employees remain responsible for determining how insights are applied, balancing commercial priorities, customer needs, and broader strategic objectives. AI improves the quality and speed of information available, while human judgment remains central to how decisions are ultimately made.

Build adaptive operating models

The final orchestration challenge extends beyond individuals and decisions. It requires organizations to rethink the operating models that govern how work happens.

Many existing structures were designed for stability. Functions were clearly defined, reporting lines were fixed, and change often occurred through periodic transformation programs. Today, however, change is increasingly continuous.

Organizations must respond to evolving customer expectations, technological disruption, shifting market conditions, and new competitive threats simultaneously. In this environment, adaptability itself becomes a strategic capability.[10]

Building adaptive operating models means creating organizations that can reconfigure resources, redeploy capabilities, and adjust priorities without requiring large-scale restructuring each time conditions change. Saudi Arabia's Alat offers an example of what this can look like in practice.

Established as part of the Kingdom's broader Vision 2030 ambitions, Alat is building advanced manufacturing and technology capabilities with digital integration embedded from the outset. Rather than retrofitting AI into legacy processes, the organization is designing systems, workflows, and decision-making structures around a future where technology and human capability operate in tandem.[12]

This approach allows resources, information, and capabilities to move more fluidly across the organization. The result is not simply greater efficiency, but greater adaptability.

While few organizations have the opportunity to build from a blank sheet of paper, the underlying principle remains relevant across sectors: operating models should be designed to evolve continuously rather than periodically.[10]

Conclusion: From scale to orchestration

Ultimately, the orchestration challenge is not a technology challenge: it is an organizational design challenge. As AI becomes more capable and embedded into everyday work, competitive advantage will depend less on workforce size and more on an organization's ability to combine human expertise, machine intelligence, and organizational resources around changing priorities.[1]

Across the Middle East, leading organizations are already beginning to make this shift. Whether through skills-based workforce models, AI-enabled decision environments, or adaptive operating models, they are demonstrating that the future of work is not about replacing people with technology—it is about redesigning work so that people and technology create value together.

Building the orchestration advantage requires organizations to:

- **Orchestrate capability, not headcount:** Focus on dynamically combining human, technological, and ecosystem capabilities around business outcomes.
- **Design better decision environments:** Use AI to enhance decision-making while preserving human judgment, accountability, and oversight.
- **Build adaptive organizations:** Create structures that can continuously redeploy skills, teams, and technologies as priorities evolve.

The organizations that thrive in the years ahead will not simply be those that scale fastest, but rather those that orchestrate best.

Research Methodology

Deloitte' s 2026 Global Human Capital Trends worked in collaboration with Oxford Economics to survey more 3,000 business and human resources leaders across multiple industries and sectors in 15 countries. In addition to the broad, global survey that provides the foundational data for the 2026 Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte supplemented its research with surveys of 6,000 workers, managers and executives to uncover where there may be gaps between leader and manager perception and worker realities. The survey data is complemented by more than 50 interviews with executives and subject matter experts from some of today's leading organizations. These insights helped shape the trends in this report.

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Have organizational functions outlived their functions?

Why the future belongs to organizations that organize around outcomes, not silos

—By Saly Wehbe

For more than a century, organizations have been built around functions. Human Resources manages people. Finance manages money. Technology manages systems. Operations manages delivery. The model is familiar, efficient, and deeply embedded in how most organizations operate. It is also increasingly under pressure.

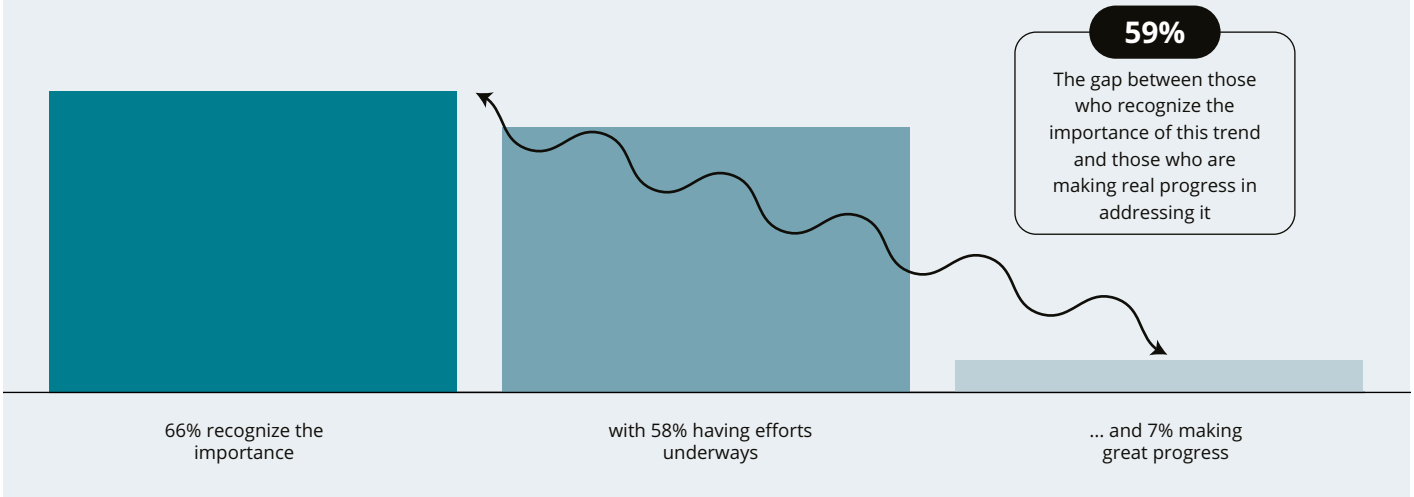
Today's most important challenges rarely fit neatly within a single function. Artificial intelligence affects technology, workforce capability, governance, and risk simultaneously. Customer experience depends on coordination across marketing, operations, digital, and frontline teams. Sustainability, innovation, and transformation initiatives require expertise from across the organization.

Yet many organizations continue to rely on structures designed for a different era: one where work was more predictable, decision-making was slower, and departments could operate largely independently.

However, paradoxically, as organizations become more interconnected, functions are becoming more fragmented. And as leaders demand greater agility, many organizational structures are inadvertently slowing it down. Globally, 66% of C-suite leaders say it is very or extremely important to move beyond traditional functional silos, yet only 7% report making significant progress in doing so.[1] The question is no longer whether organizational functions will evolve but instead what they will evolve into.

Organizations say it's important to push the boundaries of traditional functions, but only 7% are making great progress toward doing

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional organizational functions (e.g., HR, finance, IT) to address cross-disciplinary challenges and drive higher overall outcomes?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

From functional excellence to enterprise outcomes

The debate about organizational functions is often misunderstood. The challenge is not that functions no longer matter—deep expertise continues to be critical. Indeed, organizations still need finance professionals, HR specialists, technology experts, legal advisors, and operational leaders. The complexity of modern business arguably makes specialist knowledge more valuable than ever.

The challenge is that expertise alone is no longer enough. Many of today's opportunities and risks sit between functions rather than within them. Innovation happens at the intersection of disciplines; customer journeys cut across departments and AI initiatives require collaboration between technology, risk, legal, operations, and workforce leaders. Strategic outcomes increasingly depend on how effectively functions work together rather than how efficiently they operate independently.

As a result, leading organizations are beginning to rethink not just what functions do, but how they contribute to value creation. Across the GCC, three shifts are beginning to emerge:

1. Organizing around outcomes rather than activities
2. Integrating capabilities around shared priorities
3. Preserving expertise while increasing organizational flow

Together, these shifts offer a blueprint for moving beyond traditional silos while retaining the strengths that functions provide.

Rethinking how functions create value

Organize around outcomes, not activities

Traditional functions are often optimized around activities. HR manages recruitment and development. Finance manages budgeting and reporting. Technology manages systems and infrastructure.

While these responsibilities remain important, they can unintentionally create barriers when success depends on multiple functions working together. Leading organizations are increasingly shifting their focus from activities to outcomes. Instead of asking which function owns a particular process, they are asking what outcome the organization is trying to achieve and which capabilities are required to deliver it.

Saudi Aramco provides a strong example of this shift in practice. As one of the world's largest integrated energy companies and a key contributor to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 ambitions, Aramco operates in an environment where major strategic initiatives require close coordination across multiple disciplines.

Rather than relying solely on traditional functional silos, the organization has adopted an integrated service line model that brings together capabilities across strategy, technology, human resources, finance, legal, and corporate services. Executive Vice Presidents lead these service lines and work collectively to support enterprise-wide priorities.[2]

The significance of this model is not simply structural, rather it reflects a broader recognition that delivering strategic outcomes increasingly requires functions to collaborate as part of an integrated system rather than operate as independent centres of expertise.

Integrate capabilities around shared priorities

As organizations become more digital, the pace of decision-making continues to accelerate. Customers expect seamless experiences and new products delivered into their hands faster. Emerging risks and opportunities require quicker responses.

In such an environment, the traditional, sequential handoffs between functions can become a competitive disadvantage. The most dynamic organizations are responding by integrating capabilities around shared priorities from the outset, something that Emirates NBD illustrates well.

Operating in one of the region's most competitive banking markets, the UAE bank has embraced agile ways of working through cross-functional squads that combine expertise from product, technology, marketing, operations, and customer experience teams.[3,4]

These squads are organized around customer outcomes rather than functional boundaries. The result is faster decision-making, shorter development cycles, and greater responsiveness to changing customer needs. Importantly, this approach does not eliminate functional expertise. Instead, it creates new mechanisms through which expertise can be applied collaboratively and effectively to deliver the desired results.

Preserve expertise while increasing flow

One of the biggest misconceptions about organizational redesign is that breaking down silos requires abandoning structure altogether. In reality, the most successful organizations strike a balance.

They preserve deep expertise while creating greater flow of information, talent, and decision-making across organizational boundaries. This distinction matters.

Organizations still need clear accountability, governance, and professional standards. Particularly across the GCC's regulated industries and public sector institutions, these foundations remain essential. The challenge is ensuring that expertise does not become isolated from the broader organization.

Qatar Airways demonstrates how to achieve and maintain this delicate balance while operating in a highly competitive global industry. To succeed consistently, the airline depends on operational excellence, customer experience, technology, and commercial performance working in concert. Rather than treating these capabilities as separate domains, Qatar Airways has increasingly integrated them around shared operational and customer outcomes.[5]

Technology is embedded within operational decision-making. Customer experience considerations are incorporated from the outset rather than introduced later in the process. Different functions remain accountable for their areas of expertise, but they contribute toward common objectives. The lesson from Qatar Airways is simple but powerful: organizations do not need fewer functions. They need functions that flow more effectively together.

Conclusion: From functions to flow

Ultimately, the debate about organizational functions is not a debate about structure. It is a debate about value creation.

The functional model helped organizations achieve scale, consistency, and specialization for more than a century.

Those strengths remain important. But today's most significant opportunities and challenges increasingly sit between functions rather than within them.

Across the GCC, leading organizations are already beginning to respond. Whether through integrated service lines, agile cross-functional teams, or operating models built around shared outcomes, they are demonstrating that organizational effectiveness depends not only on the quality of expertise, but on how effectively that expertise is connected.

Building more adaptive organizations requires leaders to:

- **Organize around outcomes:** Focus structures, teams, and resources on the results the organization is trying to achieve rather than the activities individual functions perform.
- **Integrate capabilities:** Bring different disciplines together around shared priorities to accelerate decision-making and improve responsiveness.
- **Increase organizational flow:** Preserve deep expertise while enabling information, talent, and ideas to move more freely across traditional boundaries.

The future belongs neither to rigid silos nor to completely boundaryless organizations.

It belongs to organizations that can combine the depth of functional expertise with the speed and adaptability of cross-functional collaboration.

Research Methodology

Deloitte' s 2026 Global Human Capital Trends worked in collaboration with Oxford Economics to survey more than 3,000 business and human resources leaders across multiple industries and sectors in 15 countries. In addition to the broad, global survey that provides the foundational data for the 2026 Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte supplemented its research with surveys of 6,000 workers, managers and executives to uncover where there may be gaps between leader and manager perception and worker realities. The survey data is complemented by more than 50 interviews with executives and subject matter experts from some of today's leading organizations. These insights helped shape the trends in this report.

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Getting human and machine relationships right

Why the future of AI depends less on technology and more on how we design collaboration

—By Faris Al Baqami

Across the Middle East, organizations are investing heavily in artificial intelligence. Governments have launched ambitious national AI strategies. Businesses are embedding AI into operations, customer service, workforce management, and decision-making. From healthcare and aviation to energy and financial services, AI is rapidly becoming part of how work gets done.

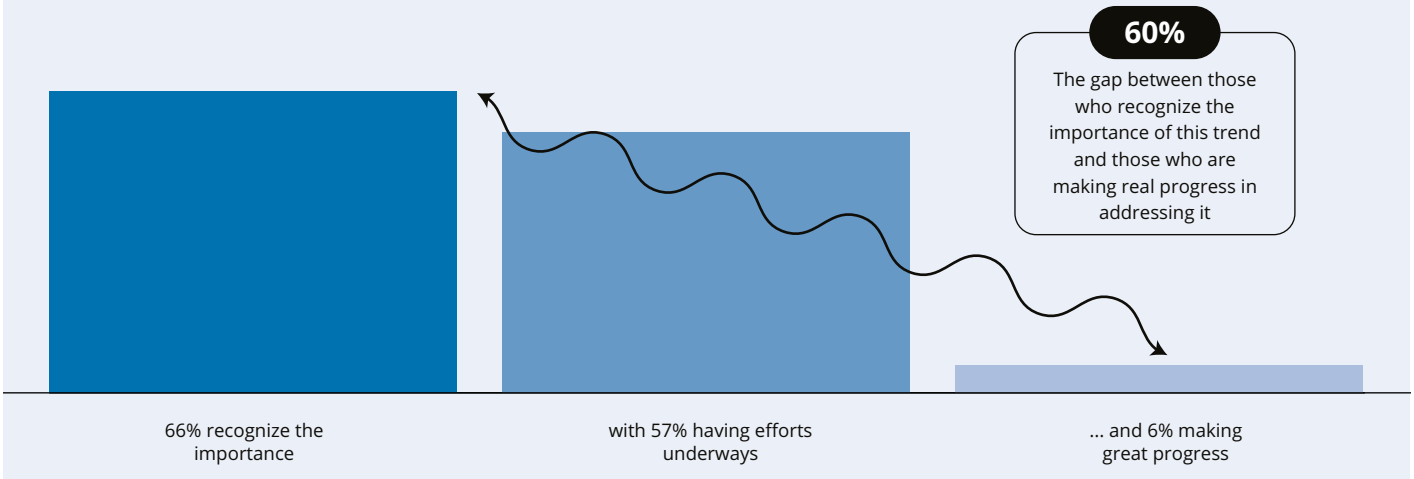
Yet amid this surge in adoption, a more fundamental question often receives far less attention: **How should humans and machines actually work together?**

For many organizations, the focus remains on the technology itself: new tools are deployed; processes are automated and pilot programs are launched. Success is often measured by implementation milestones rather than how effectively people and AI collaborate once those tools are embedded into everyday work. The result is a growing gap between AI adoption and AI integration.

Globally, 66% of leaders say intentionally designing human-machine relationships is very or extremely important to organizational success. Yet only 6% report making significant progress in doing so.[1] The implication behind these statistics is striking.

Organizations say it's important to design human-machine interactions, yet only 6% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is designing effective interaction between machines (e.g., AI, robots) and your human workforce to enhance both organization performance and workforce trust and well-being?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Organizations are investing heavily in AI capabilities, yet relatively few are investing the same level of thought into how people will interact with those capabilities. As AI becomes more embedded into everyday work, this gap may become one of the most significant barriers to realizing its promised value.

For the Middle East, the stakes are particularly high. Across the GCC, national transformation agendas are placing enormous emphasis on both technological advancement and human capability development. Saudi Arabia's National Strategy for Data and AI (NSDAI), the UAE's digital transformation ambitions, and Qatar's National Vision 2030 all depend on organizations becoming more productive, innovative, and adaptable.[2] Achieving those ambitions will require more than deploying AI. It will require designing workplaces where humans and machines can create value together.

From ai adoption to AI integration

The conversation around AI often focuses on what organizations should implement. Which tools should they adopt? Which processes should they automate? Which use cases will deliver the greatest return on investment?

These are all, of course, important questions. However, they are no longer the most important ones.

As AI becomes more capable and more accessible, competitive advantage will increasingly depend not on whether organizations use AI, but on how effectively they integrate it into work. This distinction matters.

AI adoption is primarily a technology challenge. AI integration is a people challenge. One focuses on deploying tools. The other focuses on designing relationships.

When organizations treat AI solely as a technology initiative, implementation often outpaces integration. New systems are introduced, but employees are unclear about how they should use them. Roles begin to change, but responsibilities are not redefined. Decisions become increasingly influenced by AI, yet accountability remains ambiguous. Over time, this creates confusion, resistance, and missed opportunities.

By contrast, organizations that deliberately design human-machine relationships create greater clarity. Employees understand where AI adds value, where human judgment remains essential, and how both contribute to better outcomes.

Across the Middle East, leading organizations are beginning to recognize this distinction and adjust accordingly. While their approaches vary, three common principles are emerging. The first is designing governance before deployment. The second is clearly defining the relationship between humans and AI. The third is ensuring that humans remain accountable for the decisions that matter most.

Together, these principles provide a blueprint for moving from AI adoption to AI integration.

Designing human-machine partnerships

If the challenge is no longer simply adopting AI, but integrating it into work, where should leaders begin?

Within the Middle Eastern region, organizations are beginning to discover that successful human-machine collaboration rarely happens by accident. It requires deliberate choices about governance, accountability, and the role that technology should play in supporting human performance.

Design governance before deployment

With many organizations approaching AI as a technology initiative, questions around governance, accountability, and workforce impact are often addressed later after implementation. Increasingly, this sequence is proving problematic.

AI does not simply change how work is performed. It can influence decisions, reshape roles, alter workflows, and affect how accountability is distributed across the organization. These are not purely technical considerations. They are leadership and organizational design questions. As a result, leading organizations are beginning to design governance before deployment.

Rather than asking what AI can do, they are first asking what it should do—and under what conditions.

Saudi Aramco offers an example of this approach. As AI becomes increasingly embedded across exploration, operations, maintenance, and business functions, the organization has invested not only in technology capabilities, but also in workforce development and governance mechanisms designed to ensure responsible deployment and alignment with strategic priorities.[3,4] The significance of this approach extends beyond risk management.

Organizations that establish clear governance frameworks early are often better positioned to scale AI adoption because employees have greater confidence in how decisions are made, how systems are monitored, and where accountability ultimately resides. The takeaway is simple: governance should not follow implementation, it should guide it.

Define the relationship clearly

Even when organizations establish robust governance structures, another challenge often emerges. Employees are unclear about the role AI is expected to play in their work.

Is AI acting as an assistant that supports productivity? A coach that provides recommendations? A collaborator that contributes ideas? Or a system that evaluates performance and influences decisions? Defining this clearly is vital.

Different relationships create different expectations, behaviors, and levels of trust. When organizations fail to define those relationships clearly, uncertainty often fills the gap. Employees may underutilize AI because they do not trust it. Others may over-rely on it because they assume it is more capable than it actually is. Neither outcome is desirable.

Organizations at the forefront of this transformation are increasingly recognizing that successful human-machine collaboration depends on establishing clarity around roles and responsibilities from the outset.

The Dubai Health Authority actively puts this principle into practice. As digital technologies and AI-enabled capabilities become increasingly integrated into healthcare delivery, careful consideration is being given to where technology can enhance efficiency, where human expertise remains essential, and how decisions are ultimately validated.[5]

The objective is not simply to introduce AI into existing processes. It is to create a clear understanding of how humans and technology contribute together. As AI capabilities continue to evolve, defining the relationship may become just as important as deploying the technology itself.

Keep humans in the loop

Perhaps the most important principle of all is recognizing that human-machine collaboration does not eliminate the need for human judgment. In many cases, it makes it even more valuable.

AI can process information at extraordinary speed. It can identify patterns, generate recommendations, and support decision-making in ways that would have been impossible only a few years ago. What it cannot do is assume accountability.

It cannot understand context in the same way humans do. It cannot balance competing stakeholder interests. It cannot exercise ethical judgment or take responsibility for the consequences of a decision. Those responsibilities remain fundamentally human.

This is why many organizations are focusing not on replacing human judgment, but on augmenting it. Qatar Airways provides a useful illustration. Through initiatives such as AI Skyways, the airline is leveraging artificial intelligence to enhance operational efficiency, customer experience, and service delivery. Yet critical decisions remain subject to human oversight, ensuring that technological capabilities complement rather than replace human judgment.[6] This reflects an important principle that extends far beyond aviation.

The organizations that derive the greatest value from AI are often those that understand where automation creates efficiency and where human judgment creates value. The goal is not to remove people from decision-making, but rather to enable them to make better decisions.

Conclusion: From deployment to design

Ultimately, the challenge of AI adoption is not a technology challenge, it is a relationship challenge.

Middle Eastern organizations are investing heavily in artificial intelligence, yet technology alone cannot determine how work is performed, how decisions are made, or how people experience the workplace. Those outcomes are shaped by design.

Across the region, leading organizations are already demonstrating that successful AI adoption depends on more than implementing tools. Whether through robust governance frameworks, clearly defined human-machine roles, or thoughtful approaches to decision-making, they are showing that the future of work will be shaped not by AI itself, but by how effectively people and technology work together.

Building successful human-machine partnerships requires organizations to:

- **Design governance before deployment:** Treat AI as an organizational transformation, not simply a technology implementation.
- **Define the relationship clearly:** Ensure employees understand where AI supports, informs, or influences their work—and where human expertise remains essential.
- **Keep humans accountable:** Use AI to enhance judgment and decision-making while preserving human responsibility for outcomes.

The organizations that unlock the greatest value from AI will not necessarily be those that adopt it fastest. They will be those that design the most effective relationships between humans and machines.

Because in the end, the future of work is not about artificial intelligence alone. It is about how intelligently we choose to work alongside it.

Research Methodology

Deloitte' s 2026 Global Human Capital Trends worked in collaboration with Oxford Economics to survey more than 3,000 business and human resources leaders across multiple industries and sectors in 15 countries. In addition to the broad, global survey that provides the foundational data for the 2026 Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte supplemented its research with surveys of 6,000 workers, managers and executives to uncover where there may be gaps between leader and manager perception and worker realities. The survey data is complemented by more than 50 interviews with executives and subject matter experts from some of today's leading organizations. These insights helped shape the trends in this report.

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AI and the future of human decision-making

How can organizations across the Middle East utilize AI to enhance decision-making while preserving human judgment, accountability, and trust?

—By Mohammed Zamil

Throughout history, decision-making has been one of the defining responsibilities of leadership. Leaders gather information, weigh competing priorities, assess risks, and ultimately make choices that shape the future of their organizations and nations. While the tools supporting those decisions have evolved dramatically over time, one principle has remained remarkably consistent: humans have been responsible for the final judgment.

However, today, that principle is being tested by artificial intelligence increasingly influencing how decisions are made around the world. AI is now helping organizations forecast demand, allocate resources, detect fraud, identify talent, optimize operations, and evaluate strategic opportunities. In many cases, decisions that once required days or weeks of analysis can now be supported in minutes.

Yet a fundamental question remains: As AI becomes more involved in decision-making, what should remain uniquely human?

Globally, 60% of executives report already using AI to support decision-making, while Gartner predicts that by 2027, half of business decisions will be augmented or automated by AI agents. At the same time, Deloitte's research found that 64% of organizations recognize the importance of addressing AI's implications for decision-making, 62% have efforts underway, yet only 5% report making significant progress.[5][6]

Organization say it's important to orchestrate resources, but only 5% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is addressing AI's implications for decision-making and leadership, including related skills and human capabilities, decision rights, systems of accountability, and balancing human and machine agency?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"

Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Organizations are rapidly increasing AI's role in decision-making, yet relatively few have fully considered how authority, accountability, and judgment should evolve alongside it. For the Middle East, the stakes are particularly high due to ambitious national agendas such as the UAE Strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2031, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and Qatar's Artificial Intelligence Committee are accelerating the adoption of AI across both the public and private sectors. These initiatives are designed to improve productivity, strengthen competitiveness, and support economic diversification.[1][2][3]

In this environment, the challenge is no longer whether AI will influence decisions but rather determining how humans and AI should share judgment.

From faster decisions to better decisions

One of the most common misconceptions about AI is that better decisions naturally follow from faster decisions. In practice, the relationship is far more complicated.

AI excels at processing information, identifying patterns, generating forecasts, and surfacing recommendations. It can help leaders navigate complexity by reducing information overload and highlighting insights that might otherwise go unnoticed. But decision quality depends on more than analytical capability alone: it depends on judgment.

Judgment requires appreciating context, understanding competing priorities, balancing short-term and long-term consequences, weighing ethical considerations, and making choices in situations where no 'right answer' exists. This distinction is increasingly important as AI is woven more deeply within organizational decision-making.

As Harvard Business Review has argued, prediction and judgment are not the same thing. AI can significantly improve prediction, but judgment still depends on human values, preferences, experience, and contextual understanding.[7] The most successful organizations will therefore be those that treat AI as a decision-support capability rather than a decision substitute.

This is particularly relevant across the Middle East, where organizations are increasingly applying AI to strategic questions involving economic development, workforce planning, infrastructure investment, customer experience, and public service delivery. These decisions often carry implications that extend far beyond efficiency or financial performance.

The UAE government offers an instructive example of this application in action. Through its national AI strategy and broader digital transformation agenda, the country has sought to strengthen decision-making capabilities across government and industry. Organizations such as Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) have established dedicated data science and artificial intelligence capabilities to support more informed, data-driven decisions across critical infrastructure and public services.[9]

What makes this example notable is not simply the use of AI itself, but the recognition that technology should strengthen institutional decision-making rather than replace it. AI helps leaders see further and respond faster, but accountability for interpretation, trade-offs, and outcomes remains fundamentally human. This distinction may ultimately determine whether organizations use AI merely to make decisions faster or to make them better.

Designing decision systems, not decision tools

If AI is increasingly influencing decisions, then the question for leaders is no longer whether to use AI.

It is how to design decision-making systems that combine the strengths of both humans and machines.

Too often, organizations focus their attention on the tools themselves—evaluating algorithms, testing models, and deploying new technologies. While these activities are important, they represent only part of the challenge.

The greater challenge is ensuring that decisions remain accountable, challengeable, and contextually informed.

Across the Middle East, leading organizations are beginning to recognize that successful AI-enabled decision-making depends on three principles.

Accountability: Who owns the outcome?

As AI becomes more capable, one of the biggest risks facing organizations is ambiguity, as opposed to technological failure.

When a recommendation is generated by an algorithm, who is ultimately responsible for the outcome? The answer should, in an ideal world, always be clear.

While AI can inform decisions, accountability cannot be delegated to technology. Organizations must ensure that ownership remains visible and that leaders understand where responsibility sits when decisions affect customers, employees, citizens, or broader stakeholders.

This clarity becomes increasingly critical as AI moves beyond routine operational tasks and begins influencing strategic, financial, workforce, and policy decisions.

The organizations that build trust in AI are often those that establish clear accountability before they scale adoption. The OECD has highlighted accountability as one of the foundational principles for responsible AI adoption, particularly as AI becomes increasingly embedded in high-impact decisions.[8] While AI can contribute to a decision, it should not own one.

Challenge: Who questions the recommendation?

One of AI's greatest strengths is its ability to identify patterns that humans may overlook. Yet that same strength can create a new risk. As AI systems become more sophisticated, people may become less willing to challenge their recommendations.

This phenomenon—sometimes referred to as 'automation bias'—can lead individuals to place excessive confidence in algorithmic outputs, even when those outputs are incomplete, flawed, or misaligned with organizational priorities. Leading organizations are therefore creating mechanisms that encourage challenge rather than compliance and complacency.

These organizations are asking their employees not simply to use AI outputs, but to interrogate them with questions such as:

- What assumptions underpin the recommendation?
- What information may be missing?
- What alternative scenarios should be considered?

Healthy skepticism remains one of the most valuable capabilities in an AI-enabled workplace. The aim is to ensure that critical thinking evolves alongside the advancement of technology.

Context: Who understands what the data cannot?

Perhaps the most important limitation of AI is that it can only learn from the information available to it. Data can reveal patterns, identify correlations and predict likely outcomes. What it often struggles to understand is context.

Context includes organizational culture, stakeholder expectations, political realities, ethical considerations, historical relationships, and emerging circumstances that may not yet be reflected in available data. These factors often determine whether a decision succeeds or fails and reinforce why human judgment remains essential.

Humans provide the contextual understanding that allows information to be interpreted rather than simply processed. They can identify when an apparently optimal recommendation may create unintended consequences or conflict with broader organizational objectives.

Saudi Arabia's HUMAIN initiative offers an example of how this challenge is being approached. As the Kingdom invests heavily in building AI capabilities, significant emphasis is also being placed on governance, capability development, and human oversight to ensure that technology is applied responsibly and in alignment with national priorities.[10] As AI becomes increasingly capable of answering questions, human value will increasingly lie in understanding which questions matter most—and why.

In this way, the future of decision-making becomes about designing systems where both human judgment and AI contribute their respective strengths.

Conclusion: Judgment becomes the differentiator

Ultimately, the future of decision-making will remain a leadership question.

Artificial intelligence is transforming how organizations gather information, identify patterns, and evaluate options, with governments and businesses investing heavily in AI to improve speed, scale, and analytical capability. Yet as AI becomes more sophisticated, the true differentiator will continue to be human judgment.

Leading organizations are already beginning to recognize this shift. Whether through strengthening governance, creating mechanisms for challenge and oversight, or ensuring that human expertise remains central to high-stakes decisions, they are demonstrating that effective decision-making depends on more than algorithms alone.

Building better decision systems requires organizations to:

- **Preserve accountability:** Ensure ownership for decisions remains clear, visible, and actionable, regardless of how much AI contributes to the process.
- **Encourage constructive challenge:** Create cultures where recommendations are tested, questioned, and strengthened rather than accepted uncritically.
- **Combine data with context:** Use AI to generate insight while relying on human judgment to interpret complexity, navigate ambiguity, and assess broader consequences.

The future of decision-making is inextricably both human and machine. Although, as AI becomes increasingly capable of telling us what could happen, the responsibility for deciding what should happen will remain fundamentally human. And in a world of intelligent systems, that responsibility may become the most valuable leadership capability of all.

Research Methodology

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Fact or fabrication? AI is blurring the line when it comes to people and work

As artificial intelligence reshapes how work is created, assessed, and delivered, how can organizations preserve trust in what they see, what they know, and the decisions they make?

—By Charlie Casella

For generations, organizations have relied on a relatively simple assumption: We can usually tell what is real.

A qualification reflects genuine expertise. A report reflects genuine analysis. An assessment reflects genuine capability. A piece of work reflects genuine effort. These assumptions have long formed the foundation of organizational trust. But today, that foundation is becoming less certain.

All over the world, artificial intelligence is transforming how work is produced, evaluated, and consumed. AI can generate reports, create presentations, write code, summarize meetings, assess candidates, and provide recommendations in seconds. What once required significant time, expertise, and human effort can now be produced at unprecedented speed and scale. The opportunities are enormous...and so are the questions.

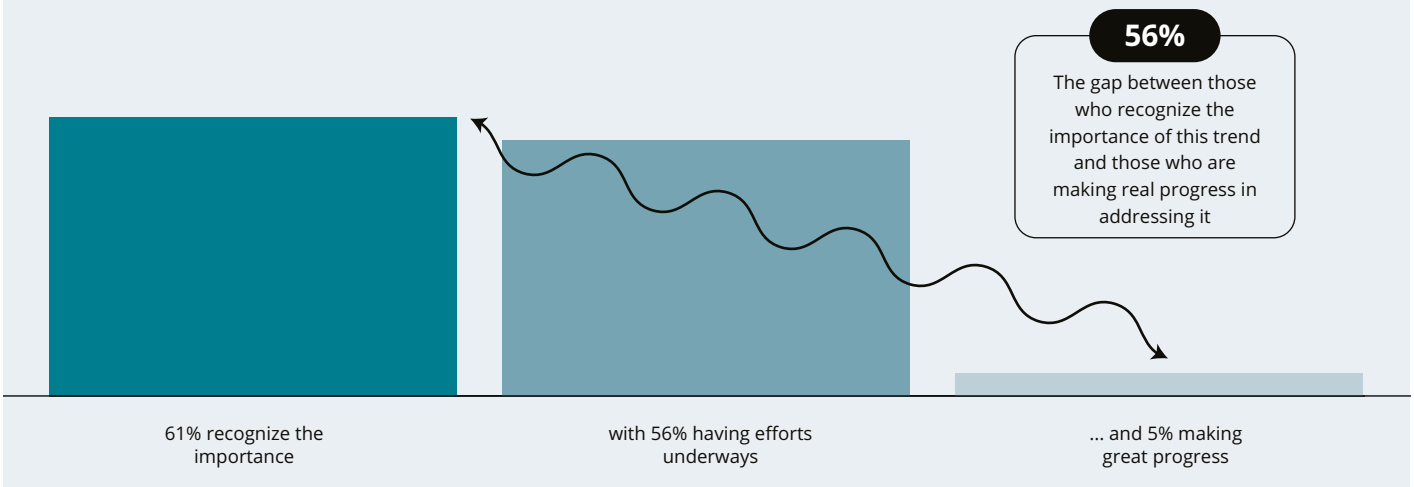
When content can be generated instantly, how do we know it is accurate? When assessments can be influenced by AI, how do we know they reflect genuine capability? When decisions are increasingly informed by algorithms, how do we know they can be trusted?

The question is no longer whether AI can generate the work, but whether organizations (and their people) can trust what it produces.

Globally, 77% of executives believe AI-generated outputs will increasingly require verification and oversight, while 73% expect trust and authenticity to become critical factors in determining organizational success in an AI-enabled future.[1] For organizations across the Middle East, these questions are particularly relevant.

Organizations say it's important to address the decline in the trustworthiness of workforcer data, but only 5% are making great progress toward doing so

How important is addressing "the decline in quality and trustworthiness of work and workforce data (e.g., disinformation)" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

National strategies such as the UAE National AI Strategy, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and Qatar's National AI Strategy are accelerating AI adoption across both the public and private sectors. As AI becomes embedded into everyday work, organizations must ensure that trust keeps pace with technology.[9][10][11]Alongside AI adoption, it will be crucial to preserve confidence in the people, processes, and decisions that increasingly depend on this vital technology.

The trust paradox: More intelligence, less confidence

For decades, organizations assumed that better information would lead to better decisions. AI, at first glance, appears to deliver exactly that: More data, more analysis, more recommendations and more content.

Yet many organizations are experiencing an unexpected outcome. As intelligence scales, confidence does not—the exact opposite of the desired end state.

Employees increasingly question whether content is authentic. Leaders spend more time validating information before acting on it. Organizations introduce additional controls to verify outputs that would once have been assumed to be reliable.

The result is a paradox: AI accelerates output and then organizations slow down to verify it.

This challenge is becoming more visible as generative AI makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between authentic and synthetic content. Europol has highlighted the growing sophistication of AI-generated media and the implications this creates for trust, verification, and decision-making across institutions and society.[2]

This is not because AI lacks value. On the contrary, AI is creating extraordinary opportunities for productivity, innovation, and insight. The World Economic Forum and Gartner both identify AI as one of the most transformative forces shaping the future of work and organizational competitiveness.[3][4] The challenge is that trust has become a new constraint. Without trust, AI-generated insights go unused, recommendations are ignored and adoption stalls.

In this sense, trust is becoming one of the most important determinants of whether organizations realize value from their AI investments. The organizations that thrive in the years ahead will not simply be those that deploy AI effectively. They will be those that create confidence in how AI is used, how its outputs are validated, and how accountability is maintained. In short, trust can no longer be assumed—it must be deliberately designed.

Designing trust: Five levers for ai-enabled organizations

If trust is becoming a prerequisite for AI adoption, the next question for leaders is relatively straightforward: How do organizations build it?

Trust cannot be mandated through policy, nor can it be assumed simply because a technology has been deployed. In an AI-enabled workplace, trust must be deliberately engineered into the systems, processes, and experiences that shape how people interact with technology.

Across the Middle East, leading organizations are increasingly focusing on five levers to strengthen confidence in AI-generated work and decisions.

Make AI transparent

Trust begins with understanding. People are more likely to trust recommendations when they understand how they were generated, what information informed them, and where limitations may exist.

The challenge is that many AI systems operate as black boxes. They produce outputs without clearly revealing the reasoning behind them. While this may be acceptable for low-risk tasks, it becomes problematic when AI begins influencing hiring decisions, financial approvals, workforce planning, customer interactions, or strategic choices. Leading organizations are therefore investing in explainability.

This principle is increasingly reflected in emerging governance frameworks such as the UAE AI Ethics Guidelines, which emphasize transparency, fairness, and accountability in AI-enabled decision-making.[5] Transparency does not eliminate uncertainty, rather it gives people greater confidence in navigating it.

Verify authenticity

As AI-generated content becomes increasingly sophisticated, distinguishing authentic work from synthetic outputs is becoming more difficult and this challenge extends beyond misinformation or deepfakes.

Organizations are increasingly asking broader questions:

- Did a candidate write this application?
- Was this report generated by AI?
- Can this recommendation be traced back to reliable information?
- How can we verify the origin of what we are seeing?

The ability to authenticate content is rapidly becoming a strategic capability. Across the region, organizations are exploring new approaches to content verification, digital credentials, watermarking technologies, and provenance tracking to strengthen confidence in AI-generated outputs. In an environment where fabrication is becoming easier, authenticity becomes more valuable.

Preserve human oversight

Trust is strengthened when accountability remains clear. Regardless of how advanced AI becomes, responsibility for important decisions cannot be delegated to algorithms.

People need confidence that there is still a human accountable for outcomes, particularly when decisions affect employees, customers, citizens, or broader stakeholders. This is especially relevant in highly regulated sectors such as healthcare, financial services, aviation, and the public sector, where trust depends not only on accuracy but also on accountability.

The most successful organizations are therefore treating AI as a decision-support capability rather than a decision-making substitute.

Build workforce confidence

Trust is not solely a technology issue but also a workforce issue.

Even the most sophisticated AI systems will struggle to create value if employees do not understand how to use them effectively or lack confidence in their outputs. This makes capability-building among the workforce critical.

Across the GCC, governments and organizations are investing heavily in AI literacy and workforce readiness initiatives so as to develop employees who can interpret AI-generated recommendations, identify potential limitations, exercise critical thinking, and understand when human intervention is required.

Organizations such as Saudi Aramco, stc, and national institutions led by SDAIA are investing significantly in workforce capability-building to prepare employees for AI-enabled work environments.[6,7,8]

The objective is not to turn every employee into an AI specialist; it is to ensure that every employee can engage with AI responsibly and effectively.

Strengthen data integrity

Trust in AI depends on trust in the information that powers it. Even the most sophisticated models cannot overcome poor-quality, incomplete, biased, or unreliable data.

Organizations therefore need to pay as much attention to their data foundations as they do to their AI ambitions. This requires robust governance, clear ownership, effective controls, and ongoing monitoring of data quality.

Leading organizations increasingly recognize that trustworthy AI begins long before an algorithm is deployed. It begins with the integrity of the data ecosystem that supports it.

Together, these five levers highlight an important shift: Trust is no longer a by-product of successful AI adoption, it is, in fact, becoming a condition for it.

The organizations that move fastest will not necessarily be those that create the greatest value. Instead it is the organizations that build trust the fastest that are likely to be the ones that unlock AI's full potential.

Conclusion: Trust becomes the advantage

Ultimately, the challenge facing organizations is not whether AI can generate content, insights, recommendations, or decisions, it is whether people can trust them. As AI becomes more capable, trust is emerging as a new differentiator. Fundamentally, trust is not a by-product of AI adoption, it is a prerequisite for it.

Building trustworthy AI-enabled organizations requires leaders to:

- **Make AI transparent:** Help people understand how outputs are generated and where limitations exist.
- **Verify authenticity:** Strengthen confidence in the origin, accuracy, and integrity of AI-generated content.
- **Preserve human oversight:** Ensure accountability remains visible, particularly for high-impact decisions.
- **Build workforce confidence:** Equip employees with the skills and judgment required to work effectively alongside AI.
- **Strengthen data integrity:** Create robust foundations that support reliable, trustworthy outputs.

The organizations that succeed in the coming decade will not necessarily be those with access to the most powerful AI. They will be those that create the greatest confidence in how that AI is used.

Because in an era where intelligence is increasingly artificial, trust becomes the defining human advantage.

Research Methodology

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Dealing with AI's cultural debt

Why the greatest barrier to AI success may not be technological—it may be cultural

—By Mahdi Hussein

For much of the past, organizations have primarily worried about technical debt. As systems age and technology evolves, shortcuts accumulate. Processes become inefficient, platforms become outdated, and complexity grows faster than organizations can manage it. Over time, this debt slows innovation, increases costs, and constrains performance.

However, today organizations face a different kind of debt. Governments and businesses are embedding AI into everything from customer service and workforce management to strategic planning and operational decision-making. Yet while technology is evolving rapidly, organizational culture is struggling to keep pace.

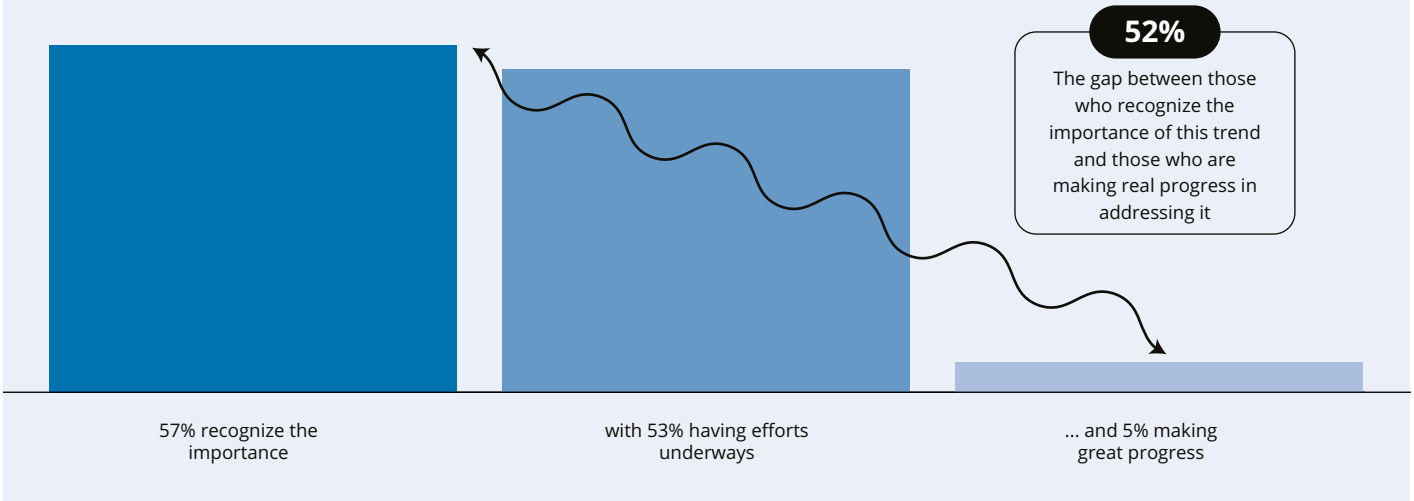
Leadership behaviors, workforce norms, governance practices, and ways of working are adapting far more slowly than the technologies reshaping them. The result is a growing form of organizational liability: **AI cultural debt**.

'Cultural debt' can be defined as the unintended consequences that emerge when AI adoption outpaces the evolution of culture, leadership, governance, and workforce practices.[1] Left unmanaged, this debt accumulates over time, creating friction, eroding trust, and limiting the value organizations can realize from AI.

This challenge is already becoming more and more visible. Globally, 57% of organizations recognize the importance of managing AI's impact on organizational culture, yet only 5% report making substantial progress toward doing so.[1] The gap is striking. Organizations understand the issue but very few are actively addressing it.

Organizations say it's important to understand and manage AI's impact on organizational culture, but only 5% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is understanding and managing how AI affects human relationships in your organization, including effects on culture, trust, and collaboration?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

For the Middle East, the implications are significant. Across the region, AI sits at the heart of ambitious transformation agendas, from Saudi Arabia's National Strategy for Data and Artificial Intelligence and Vision 2030, to the UAE National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2031 and Qatar's digital transformation ambitions.[4,5,6]

The challenge goes beyond simply adopting AI and revolves around ensuring that people, behaviors, and organizational norms evolve quickly enough to unlock its value.

From technical debt to cultural debt

Technical debt is a familiar concept to most leaders: It occurs when technology evolves faster than the systems supporting it. Cultural debt follows a similar pattern: It emerges when organizations invest in new technologies without investing equally in the cultural changes required to support them.

Every AI implementation changes more than processes: it changes expectations, behaviors, relationships and increasingly, it changes how people experience work itself.

Consider how AI is already influencing daily work across many organizations. Employees use generative AI to draft reports, summarize meetings, analyze data, and generate recommendations. Leaders increasingly rely on AI-driven insights to inform decisions on workforce planning, performance management, and resource allocation. While these tools create significant opportunities for productivity and efficiency, they also introduce new questions around accountability, transparency, trust, and decision-making.[2]

In many organizations, employees are still determining how AI fits into their daily work. Some embrace it enthusiastically, while others remain cautious. Some use AI extensively to enhance productivity and creativity, conversely others avoid it altogether because they lack confidence in the technology or fear its implications.

When organizations fail to establish clear expectations, shared norms begin to fragment. Different teams develop different approaches to AI use. Informal rules emerge and employees are left to interpret the role of AI for themselves. Over time, inconsistency becomes embedded into the culture and trust becomes particularly vulnerable in this environment.

When employees do not understand how AI influences decisions, whether in hiring, performance evaluations, promotions, or resource allocation, uncertainty grows. And when uncertainty grows, trust often declines. Research consistently shows that trust, transparency, and organizational alignment remain among the most significant barriers to successful AI adoption.[3]

The good news is that cultural debt is not inevitable. Unlike technical debt, which often remains hidden until systems begin to fail, cultural debt can be identified and addressed early. Organizations that proactively invest in trust, governance, workforce capability, and leadership behaviors can transform AI from a source of cultural friction into a catalyst for cultural renewal. The first step is recognizing the warning signs before the debt becomes too costly to ignore.

Three signs cultural debt is accumulating

Cultural debt rarely appears overnight. Unlike a failed technology implementation or a cybersecurity breach, it often accumulates gradually and quietly. The signs are subtle at first. Teams continue to perform. Productivity may even improve. AI adoption metrics appear positive. Yet beneath the surface, the culture begins to shift in ways that organizations may not have intended. Across industries and geographies, three warning signs are beginning to emerge.

Trust begins to erode

Trust is often one of the first casualties when AI adoption outpaces organizational understanding. Employees increasingly want to know how AI influences decisions that affect them. How is performance being assessed? How are candidates being screened? How are recommendations generated? Who ultimately remains accountable when AI informs a decision?

When organizations cannot answer these questions clearly, uncertainty fills the gap. And where uncertainty exists, trust often weakens.

This challenge becomes particularly acute when employees perceive AI as something that is happening to them rather than with them. Decisions may become faster and more data-driven, but if the process behind those decisions feels opaque, confidence in both the technology and the organization can begin to decline.

Ways of working become fragmented

A second sign of cultural debt emerges when different parts of the organization begin operating according to different assumptions about AI. In many workplaces, AI adoption is happening organically rather than strategically and the result is inconsistency.

Different teams develop different norms. Employees receive mixed signals about what is acceptable. Expectations become unclear. Informal workarounds emerge to fill the gaps left by formal guidance. Over time, organizations risk creating multiple cultures within the same workforce—some highly AI-enabled, others largely untouched by technological change.

Human connection weakens

Perhaps the most overlooked form of cultural debt relates to human connection. Many organizations adopt AI to increase efficiency, automate routine tasks, and streamline workflows. These are important benefits. Yet work serves purposes beyond productivity alone.

Workplaces are also environments where people learn, collaborate, build relationships, and develop professional judgment. As AI becomes more embedded into everyday activities, some of these interactions risk becoming increasingly transactional.

Informal conversations that once helped employees learn from one another may occur less frequently. Opportunities for mentoring, coaching, and knowledge-sharing may diminish. New employees may find fewer opportunities to observe experienced colleagues at work. Teams may become more efficient while becoming less connected.

Together, these warning signs point to a broader reality: Cultural debt is not primarily about technology. It is about what happens when organizations transform their systems faster than they transform the human experience of work.

The good news is that leading organizations across the Middle East are already beginning to address this challenge—and in doing so, are turning cultural debt into a source of competitive advantage.

Turning debt into a differentiator

The encouraging news is that cultural debt is not inevitable. Around the region, many organizations are beginning to recognize that successful AI transformation requires more than technology deployment. It requires deliberate investment in the cultural foundations that enable people to adopt, trust, and benefit from new technologies.

While their approaches differ, the most forward-thinking organizations are increasingly focusing on three priorities: building capability, strengthening governance, and creating responsible pathways for adoption.

Build capability alongside technology

One of the most effective ways to prevent cultural debt is to ensure that workforce readiness evolves alongside technological capability. When organizations invest heavily in AI tools without helping employees understand how to use them, uncertainty and resistance often follow. Employees may fear being replaced, struggle to adapt their ways of working, or simply lack confidence in engaging with new technologies.

By contrast, organizations that prioritize capability-building create a sense of participation rather than disruption.

Saudi Arabia provides a compelling example of this approach. Through initiatives linked to Vision 2030 and the National Strategy for Data and Artificial Intelligence, significant emphasis has been placed not only on AI deployment, but also on developing the skills, mindsets, and capabilities required to support an AI-enabled future. Organizations such as Aramco are investing heavily in workforce capability and digital upskilling to prepare employees for increasingly AI-enabled ways of working.[4][7] People are far more likely to embrace transformation when they feel equipped to participate in it.

Strengthen governance before trust is tested

Capability alone is not enough. Organizations must also establish clear guardrails that help employees understand how AI should be used, where accountability sits, and how decisions are made.

Without governance, employees are often left to navigate uncertainty on their own. Different teams develop different interpretations of acceptable AI use. Informal practices emerge. Trust becomes increasingly dependent on individual judgment rather than organizational consistency.

The UAE has taken a proactive approach to addressing this challenge. Through initiatives such as the UAE National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2031 and associated governance frameworks, significant attention has been given to ensuring that AI adoption is accompanied by principles that promote transparency, accountability, and responsible use.[5] The lesson for organizations is clear: Trust is easier to build before uncertainty emerges rather than after confidence has already been damaged.

Create responsible pathways for adoption

The most successful organizations recognize that AI adoption is not a single event but instead an ongoing process of experimentation, learning, and adaptation.

This requires creating environments where employees can explore new technologies confidently while understanding the boundaries within which they operate. Organizations that move too quickly often create anxiety. Organizations that move too slowly risk stagnation. The challenge is finding a path that balances innovation with confidence.

Qatar's growing focus on responsible AI adoption provides an example of this balanced approach. Through national AI initiatives and digital transformation programs, efforts have focused not only on accelerating technological capability, but also on establishing governance structures, ethical frameworks, and workforce engagement mechanisms that support sustainable adoption. Organizations such as Qatar Airways are also demonstrating how AI can be integrated into customer and employee experiences while maintaining trust and human connection.[6][9] This ensures that adoption strengthens organizational culture rather than undermines it.

Taken together, these examples highlight an important shift in leadership thinking. The most successful organizations are no longer treating culture as something that must adapt to technology after the fact. Encouragingly, they are designing culture and technology together. And in doing so, they are preventing cultural debt from accumulating in the first place.

Rather than becoming a hidden liability, culture becomes an enabler of successful transformation.

Conclusion: Culture is the infrastructure

Ultimately, 'organizations' in abstract do not experience AI transformation, real people do.

While technology can be deployed quickly, culture evolves more slowly. New systems can be implemented in months. New behaviors, norms, and ways of working often take years to develop. This is why so many AI initiatives struggle to deliver their full potential.

The challenge is rarely the technology itself. It is whether employees trust it, understand its role, feel confident using it, and see how it fits within the broader purpose and culture of the organization.

Managing cultural debt successfully requires leaders to:

- **Build trust before scale:** Create transparency around how AI is used, how decisions are made, and where accountability resides.
- **Establish shared norms:** Develop clear expectations for how employees and teams engage with AI across the organization.
- **Preserve human connection:** Ensure that efficiency gains do not come at the expense of collaboration, learning, mentorship, and belonging.

The organizations that succeed in the age of AI will be those that evolve their cultures just as deliberately as they implement this frontier technology. Culture is not a by-product of transformation, it is the infrastructure that makes transformation possible. And the leaders who invest in that infrastructure today will be the ones who unlock the greatest value from AI tomorrow.

Research Methodology

Deloitte' s 2026 Global Human Capital Trends worked in collaboration with Oxford Economics to survey more than 3,000 business and human resources leaders across multiple industries and sectors in 15 countries. In addition to the broad, global survey that provides the foundational data for the 2026 Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte supplemented its research with surveys of 6,000 workers, managers and executives to uncover where there may be gaps between leader and manager perception and worker realities. The survey data is complemented by more than 50 interviews with executives and subject matter experts from some of today's leading organizations. These insights helped shape the trends in this report.

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Staying relevant in a world that won't sit still

Why adaptability is becoming the defining capability of successful organizations

—By Osama Khayat

For much of modern business history, relevance had a relatively long shelf-life. Organizations could build successful operating models, develop workforce capabilities, establish market positions, and expect those advantages to endure for years—sometimes decades. Change certainly happened, but it often arrived in waves. Businesses had time to react, adapt, and reposition themselves. Today, that assumption is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

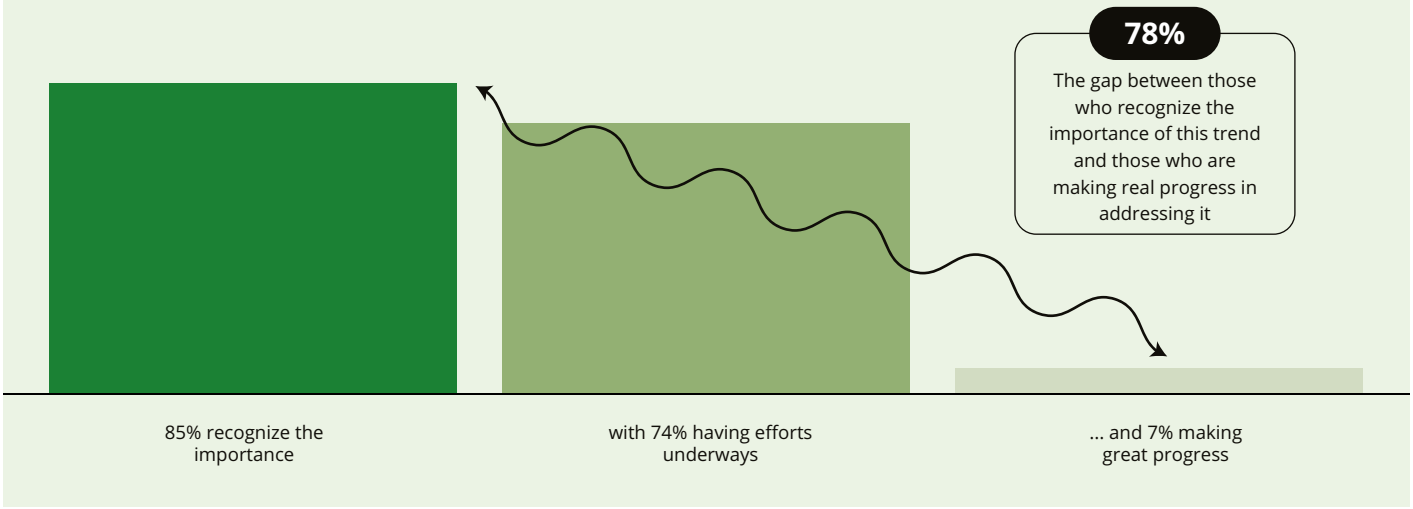
Technologies evolve faster. Customer expectations shift more rapidly. Entire industries are being reshaped by artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and new business models. Across the Middle East, ambitious national transformation agendas are accelerating the pace of change even further.

In this environment, relevance is no longer something organizations achieve.

It is something they must continuously earn.This challenge sits at the heart of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends research. Across industries, leaders are grappling with a common reality: the pace of change is beginning to outstrip the ability of organizations to adapt. Skills are becoming outdated more quickly. Business models are evolving more frequently. Workforce expectations continue to shift. The very capabilities that made organizations successful yesterday may not be the ones that sustain success tomorrow.[1]

Organization say it's important to orchestrate resources, but only 7% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is increasing the ability of the organization and workforce to adapt at the speed required by today's world?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

For organizations across the GCC, the challenge is particularly acute. Governments and businesses are simultaneously navigating digital transformation, economic diversification, workforce nationalization agendas, and the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence. Vision 2030 initiatives in Saudi Arabia, the UAE's continued focus on innovation and competitiveness, and Qatar's national development ambitions are creating unprecedented opportunities for growth. Yet they are also raising the bar for organizational adaptability.[2][3]

The question facing leaders is no longer whether change is coming. The question is whether their organizations can keep pace with it.

Rethinking relevance

Traditionally, relevance was often associated with size, market position, or accumulated expertise. Organizations became successful by building deep institutional knowledge, refining established ways of working, and creating structures designed to deliver consistency and efficiency at scale.

Those strengths still matter. However, in an environment where change is constant, they are no longer enough. Increasingly, relevance depends on an organization's ability to learn, adapt, and evolve as conditions change. It is not simply about responding to disruption when it occurs. It is about building the capacity to adjust continuously—before disruption becomes a threat. This requires a different mindset.

Rather than viewing change as a series of discrete events that can be managed through periodic transformation programs, organizations need to recognize that adaptation itself has become a core organizational capability. In other words, the challenge is shifting from managing change to building readiness.

Organizations that remain relevant are not necessarily those that predict the future most accurately. They are the ones that can respond most effectively when the future unfolds differently than expected. Across the Middle East, leading organizations are beginning to recognize this shift.

While their approaches vary, three common themes are emerging. The first is embedding learning directly into the flow of work. The second is creating more fluid approaches to talent and capability deployment. The third is designing organizations that can adapt continuously rather than episodically. Together, these shifts provide a blueprint for building relevance in a world that will not sit still.

Building organizational relevance

If relevance is no longer something organizations achieve once, but something they must continuously earn, how do they do it?

Across the Middle East, leading organizations are beginning to converge around three strategic shifts. The first is embedding learning directly into the flow of work. The second is creating more fluid approaches to deploying talent and capability.

The third is designing organizations that can adapt continuously rather than relying on periodic transformation efforts. Together, these shifts help organizations move beyond reacting to change and towards building readiness for whatever comes next.

Make learning part of the job

For many organizations, learning has traditionally existed alongside work rather than within it.

Employees attend training programs, complete certifications, or participate in development initiatives that sit outside their day-to-day responsibilities. While these approaches remain valuable, they were designed for a world where skills evolved relatively slowly and career paths were more predictable. That world is disappearing.

Today, the pace of technological advancement means that skills can become outdated within a matter of years—and in some cases, months. Organizations can no longer rely on periodic learning interventions to keep pace with changing business needs.[2] Learning must become part of how work happens.

This means creating environments where employees build new capabilities through projects, assignments, collaboration, and real-world problem solving. It means treating development not as an event, but as an ongoing process that is integrated into everyday work.

Across Saudi Arabia, initiatives such as the National Strategy for Data & AI (NSDAI) and Microsoft's commitment to help three million people acquire AI skills by 2030 reflect the growing recognition that workforce readiness depends on continuous capability-building rather than one-off training interventions.[5][6]

The lesson for organizations is clear: in a world of constant change, learning can no longer be something employees do between periods of work. It must become part of the work itself.

Move talent to opportunity faster

Historically, organizations have often responded to new priorities by hiring additional talent. When new capabilities were required, recruitment became the primary mechanism for acquiring them. Yet in today's environment, this approach is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

Skills shortages are growing. Competition for talent remains intense. And the capabilities organizations need are changing faster than external labor markets can often supply them.

As a result, many organizations are beginning to look inward before looking outward. Rather than asking where they can find new talent, they are asking how quickly they can redeploy the talent they already have. This requires a shift from workforce management to talent mobility.

Capabilities need to move more freely across teams, functions, and business units. Employees need greater visibility into emerging opportunities. Leaders need better mechanisms for identifying transferable skills and matching talent to evolving priorities.

This is especially important in the GCC, where AI adoption is accelerating and organizations are increasingly looking for ways to maximize the value of existing workforce capabilities. Research suggests that organizations across the region are becoming more focused on workforce agility and internal capability deployment as key enablers of future competitiveness.[2][3]

The organizations that remain relevant will increasingly be those that can move talent to opportunity faster than competitors can recruit it.

Design for continuous adaptation

The final shift is perhaps the most difficult—and the most important. Many organizations still treat transformation as a project. A major initiative is launched. Resources are mobilized. New processes are introduced. The organization changes. Then attention moves elsewhere until the next transformation program begins.

Increasingly, this model is proving insufficient. In a world where technology, customer expectations, regulation, and competition are evolving simultaneously, adaptation can no longer be episodic. It must become continuous. This requires organizations to rethink not just individual initiatives, but the operating models that sit beneath them.

Structures need to become more flexible. Decision-making needs to become faster. Resources need to move more easily across organizational boundaries. Leaders need to become comfortable adjusting direction as circumstances evolve.

The public sector offers an interesting example of this shift. Research from the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government found growing adoption of generative AI across Dubai Government entities, highlighting both the opportunities and organizational adjustments required as AI becomes embedded into day-to-day work.[4]

While technology may act as a catalyst, the broader lesson is organizational. The goal is no longer to create organizations that resist change. It is to create organizations that are designed to adapt to it.

Conclusion: From managing change to building readiness

Ultimately, the challenge of staying relevant is not a change management challenge—it is a readiness challenge. In a world where technologies evolve rapidly, skills have shorter shelf lives, and business models are constantly being reshaped, organizations can no longer rely on periodic transformation programs to remain competitive.

Across the Middle East, leading organizations are already beginning to make this shift. Whether through embedding learning into everyday work, creating more fluid talent models, or designing organizations that can adapt continuously, they are demonstrating that relevance is no longer something that can be achieved and maintained. It must be continually renewed.

Building lasting relevance requires organizations to:

- **Make learning part of the job:** Ensure capabilities are continuously developed through real work, not just formal training programs.
- **Move talent to opportunity faster:** Create systems that allow skills and expertise to flow quickly to emerging priorities and business needs.
- **Design for continuous adaptation:** Build structures, leadership approaches, and operating models that evolve alongside changing conditions rather than resisting them.

The organizations that thrive in the years ahead will not necessarily be those that predict change most accurately. They will be those that are most prepared to adapt when it arrives. And in a world that won't sit still, that may become the most important capability of all.

Research Methodology

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Decisions that echo

As organizations reshape work, skills, and opportunity, how can leaders ensure their decisions strengthen not only enterprise performance, but society itself?

—By Hassan Rimmani

For much of the last century, leadership was judged primarily by organizational outcomes:

- Did the company grow?
- Did productivity improve?
- Did profits increase?

These questions remain important. But they are no longer sufficient.

Today, leadership decisions increasingly create consequences that extend far beyond the boundaries of the organization itself:

- A decision about artificial intelligence affects how employees develop skills.
- A decision about workforce design influences career pathways and employability.
- A decision about flexibility shapes participation in the workforce.
- A decision about learning and development affects the future capability of entire talent pools.

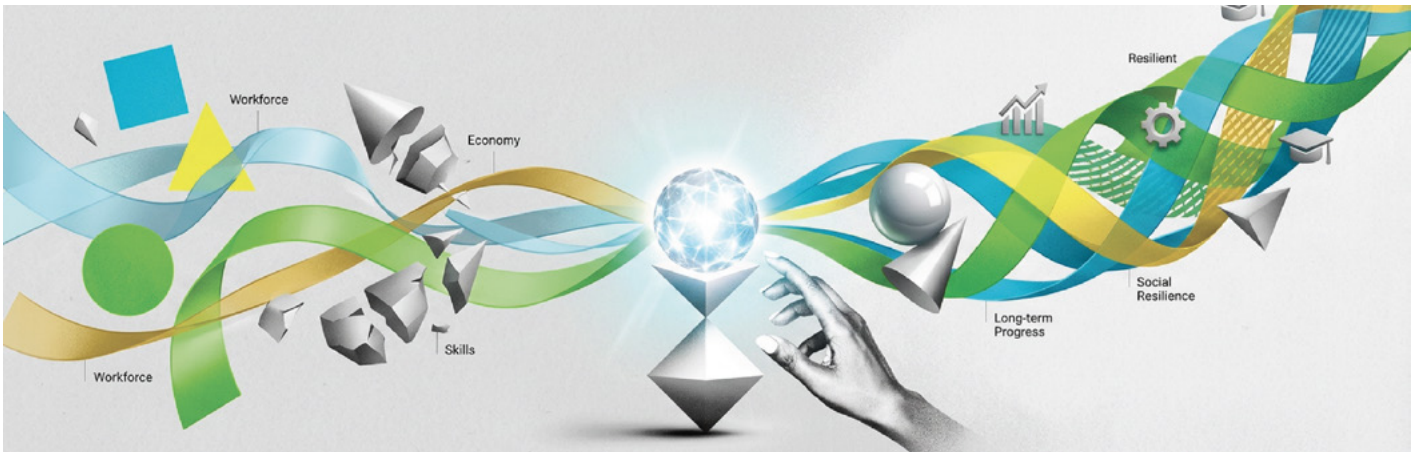
In an increasingly interconnected world, organizational decisions no longer stop at the edge of the enterprise: they echo far beyond it.

This challenge is particularly relevant across the Middle East where workforce transformation sits at the heart of national development agendas. Across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, governments are investing heavily in digital transformation, economic diversification, capability building, and future workforce development. As a result, organizations in this region are not merely responding to change—they are helping shape the future of their societies.[2'4'6]

This represents a profound shift in the role of leadership. Historically, organizations were often viewed primarily as economic institutions. Their responsibility was to create value for shareholders, customers, and employees. Today, expectations are broader.

Organizations are increasingly expected to contribute to national capability, workforce resilience, economic participation, and long-term social progress. Their decisions influence not only business performance, but also how people experience work, develop skills, and navigate an increasingly uncertain future.

The upshot is that the most consequential leadership decisions are increasingly judged by the impact they create beyond their organizations.



Why organizational decisions matter more than ever

The Middle East region provides a powerful illustration of this shift. Across the region, workforce strategy and economic strategy have become deeply interconnected.

In the UAE, the Digital Economy Strategy seeks to accelerate economic diversification and position technology and talent as central drivers of future competitiveness.[2] Saudi Arabia's Human Capability Development Program places workforce readiness, lifelong learning, and talent development at the centre of Vision 2030's ambitions.[4] Meanwhile, Qatar's Digital Agenda frames digital transformation as a catalyst not only for economic growth, but for broader societal development and future readiness.[6]

However, these ambitions cannot be achieved by governments alone, they depend on organizations.

Increasingly, major employers across the region are becoming active participants in national transformation efforts. They are investing in skills, redesigning work, developing future leaders, and creating pathways for workforce participation at scale. Organizations such as ADNOC, Aramco, and QatarEnergy have all positioned workforce capability, talent development, and future readiness as strategic priorities alongside operational performance.[3][5][7]

This matters because organizational decisions now have multiplier effects. When leaders invest in workforce development, they strengthen national capability. When they create opportunities for learning and growth, they improve labor market resilience. When they adopt technology responsibly, they influence how society experiences innovation. And when they fail to do these things, the consequences can extend well beyond their own workforce.

Three ways leadership decisions echo beyond the enterprise

If organizational decisions increasingly shape outcomes beyond the enterprise, where are those effects most visible? Across the Middle East, three areas of leadership decision-making stand out as creating ripple effects that extend far beyond immediate business outcomes.

Building capability

Perhaps the most enduring impact an organization can have is on the capabilities of its people. Every decision about hiring, development, learning, mobility, mentoring, and workforce planning shapes not only current performance, but future readiness. This has become particularly important as technological change accelerates.

Across the region, organizations are investing heavily in artificial intelligence, automation, and digital transformation. Yet technology alone does not create competitive advantage. Competitive advantage comes from the ability of people to adapt, learn, and apply new capabilities in changing environments. This means that workforce development is no longer simply an HR priority, rather it is a strategic investment in future capability.

Organizations that create opportunities for continuous learning help employees remain relevant in a rapidly changing labor market. In doing so, they strengthen not only their own workforce, but the broader talent ecosystem upon which future economic growth depends.

Skills developed within one organization often flow into others. Employees carry knowledge, experience, and capabilities with them throughout their careers. Investments in learning therefore create value that compounds over time and across industries. The most forward-looking organizations understand this dynamic. They do not view capability-building as a cost of doing business but instead see it as a contribution to future prosperity.

Strengthening trust

Leadership decisions also shape trust. Trust influences how employees experience work, how customers engage with organizations, and how societies respond to change.

In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement, uncertainty, and transformation, trust has become an increasingly valuable organizational asset. Employees want confidence that decisions are fair. Customers want confidence that technology is being used responsibly. Communities want confidence that organizations are contributing positively to society.

These expectations place greater responsibility on leaders. Decisions relating to artificial intelligence, workforce transformation, flexibility, performance management, and organizational change are no longer judged solely by their outcomes. They are increasingly judged by how they are made. Transparency, accountability, and responsible leadership therefore become critical.

Organizations that build trust create resilience. They are better positioned to navigate disruption, sustain engagement, and maintain legitimacy during periods of significant change. While trust as a concept may sometimes feel intangible, its effects are profoundly tangible. If weakened, it becomes difficult to rebuild. But if strengthened, it enables rapid adaptation.

Expanding opportunity

A third way leadership decisions echo beyond the enterprise is through opportunity. Organizations play a significant role in determining who participates in the workforce, how careers develop, and who has access to pathways for growth.

Every hiring decision creates access... or limits it. Every development program broadens opportunity... or concentrates it. Every workplace policy influences who can contribute and under what conditions.

This is particularly relevant across the Middle East, where economic diversification and workforce participation remain central priorities. Organizations increasingly have opportunities to expand access for young people entering the workforce, women seeking greater participation, and individuals navigating new career transitions in an evolving economy.

When leaders design systems that broaden access to opportunity, the impact extends beyond individual employees: Families, communities and entire economies benefit. This is why organizational decisions carry significance far beyond immediate business outcomes. They help determine who is prepared for the future and who is left behind.

Taken together, these three areas reveal a broader truth: leadership decisions are no longer confined to organizational performance. Indeed, they increasingly shape capability, trust, and opportunity across society itself, which means leadership carries a broader responsibility than ever before.

Leading beyond organizational boundaries

If leadership decisions increasingly influence capability, trust, and opportunity beyond the enterprise, then leaders themselves may need to adopt a broader perspective. The revised focus should revolve around understanding how performance is created and the wider impact that leadership decisions have on employees, communities, and future generations of workers. This requires three important shifts.

Think systemically

Many leadership decisions are still evaluated primarily through an organizational lens.

- Will this improve productivity?
- Will it reduce costs?
- Will it increase efficiency?

While these questions remain important, leaders must also consider the broader systems within which their organizations operate.

- How will this decision affect workforce readiness?
- How will it influence talent availability in the future?
- How might it shape trust, participation, or social mobility?

The most effective leaders recognize that organizations do not operate in isolation. They are part of interconnected ecosystems that include employees, educational institutions, communities, industries, and governments.

Thinking systemically means understanding that organizational success and societal success are becoming increasingly intertwined.

Invest in capability as infrastructure

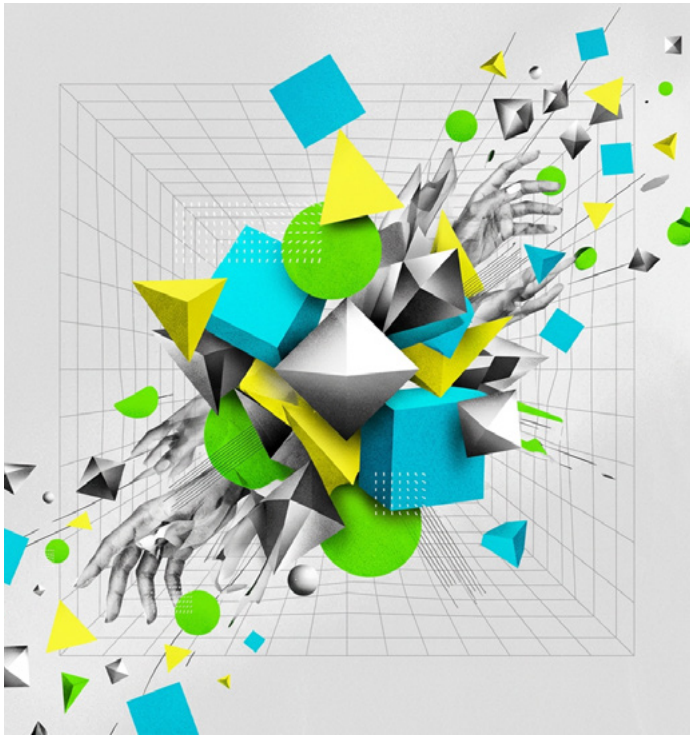
Traditionally, organizations have viewed capability-building as a workforce initiative, but increasingly, it should be viewed as infrastructure.

Just as physical infrastructure supports economic growth, human capability supports organizational resilience, innovation, and future competitiveness. This is particularly important in a world where skills are evolving faster than ever before.

Organizations cannot assume that capabilities developed today will remain sufficient tomorrow. Continuous learning, reskilling, and workforce adaptability are becoming essential components of long-term success.

Forward-looking organizations are therefore moving beyond episodic training programs and investing in cultures of continuous development.

They recognize that capability is not simply an asset to be consumed but a resource that must be continually renewed. And in doing so, they create value that extends well beyond the boundaries of the enterprise itself.



Design for long-term impact

The pressures facing leaders today are often immediate: Market expectations, operational demands, financial performance and technological disruption.

Yet many of the most consequential leadership decisions produce effects that only become visible over time. For example:

- A decision about workforce development may shape careers for years.
- A decision about technology adoption may influence organizational culture long after implementation.
- A decision about inclusion or flexibility may alter who participates in the workforce and how opportunities are distributed.

The challenge for leaders is therefore balancing short-term performance with long-term impact. Organizations that focus exclusively on immediate outcomes may achieve efficiency gains while inadvertently weakening capability, trust, or resilience.

Organizations that consider longer-term consequences are often better positioned to create sustainable value. Instead of the false choice between performance and purpose, leaders should recognize that, increasingly, the two are inseparable.

Together, these shifts point toward a broader evolution in leadership itself. The leaders who thrive in the coming decade are unlikely to be those who focus solely on organizational outcomes. They will be those who understand how their decisions shape the wider systems in which their organizations operate and who act accordingly.

Conclusion: Leadership leaves a legacy

Ultimately, the most important leadership decisions are rarely confined to the organization that makes them. Increasingly, they help determine how societies adapt to a future defined by technological change, demographic shifts, and evolving workforce expectations.

Across the region, organizations are playing an increasingly important role in national transformation. Their decisions influence not only business performance, but also the future capability, resilience, and prosperity of the communities they serve.

Success can no longer be measured solely by what an organization achieves for itself. It must also be considered in terms of the value it creates for others.

Leading in this environment requires organizations to:

- **Think beyond the enterprise:** Recognize that organizational decisions increasingly shape outcomes across broader workforce and societal ecosystems.
- **Build capability for the future:** Invest in skills, learning, and adaptability as foundations of long-term resilience and prosperity.
- **Create impact that endures:** Balance immediate performance objectives with the longer-term consequences leadership decisions create for people, communities, and future generations.

The organizations that matter most in the coming decades will be those whose decisions create value that endures beyond the enterprise itself. Leadership will ultimately be measured not only by the results it delivers today, but by the legacy it leaves behind tomorrow.

And the most consequential decisions are often the ones whose impact continues to echo long after the decision itself has been made.

Research Methodology

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Concluding remarks: Designing for human advantage

—By Dara Latinwo, Editor of 2026 Report

As we conclude the Middle East Human Capital Trends Report 2026, one insight stands above the rest: technology may be accelerating change, but human advantage remains the defining differentiator.

The articles in this report have explored a wide spectrum of challenges: from orchestrating human and machine capability, redesigning organizational structures, and strengthening trust in AI, to building adaptability, preserving culture, and expanding opportunity. Yet, in every case, the answer has not been technology alone. It has been the deliberate design of systems that enable people and technology to create value together.

What does this mean for leaders across the region?

First, it means recognizing that adaptation is no longer a periodic exercise, it is a permanent organizational requirement. The pace of technological, economic, and societal change shows little sign of slowing. Organizations can no longer rely on structures, capabilities, or ways of working that were designed for a more stable era. Relevance increasingly depends on the ability to learn continuously, evolve deliberately, and adapt confidently. Building organizations that can thrive amid uncertainty is becoming a defining leadership responsibility.

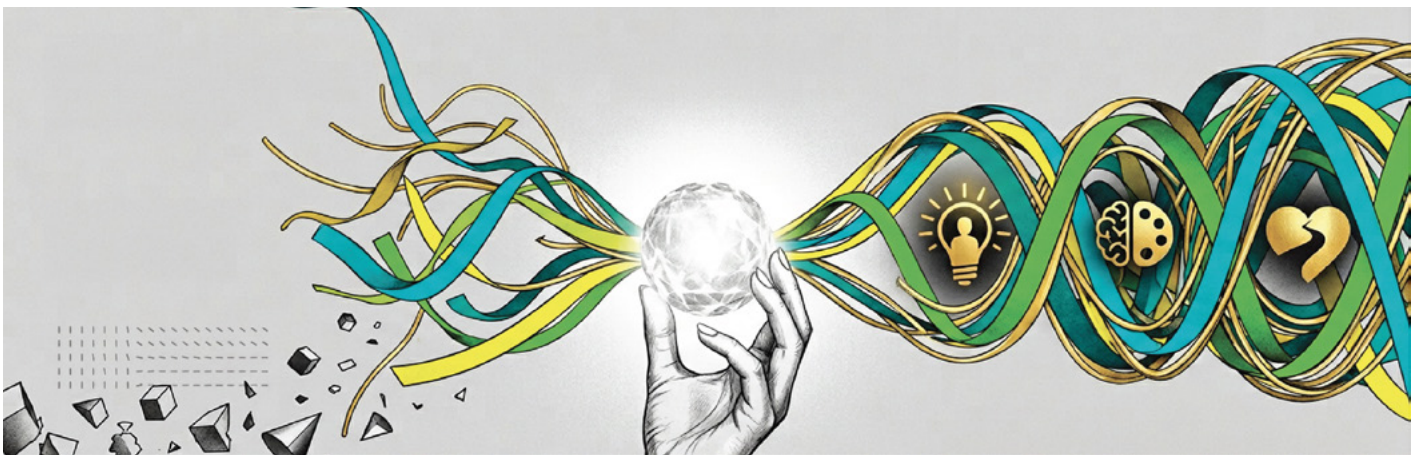
Second, it means rethinking the relationship between humans and technology. Across this report, a consistent message emerges: the greatest value is created not when technology replaces people, but when it amplifies human capability. Whether through AI-enabled decision-making, human-machine collaboration, or intelligent operating models, successful organizations are designing environments where technology enhances judgment, creativity, learning, and performance rather than diminishing them.

Third, it means recognizing that leadership decisions increasingly carry consequences beyond the enterprise itself. Decisions about skills, culture, trust, opportunity, and workforce development shape not only organizational outcomes, but also the resilience and prosperity of the broader communities in which organizations operate. As national transformation agendas continue to accelerate across this dynamic region, organizations are becoming active participants in shaping the future of society, not simply responding to it.

Ultimately, what emerges from these pages is a vision of organizations that are both more intelligent and more human. Organizations that combine agility with purpose. Innovation with trust. Technology with judgment. Performance with opportunity.

The path ahead will undoubtedly bring new challenges, new technologies, and new uncertainties. Yet the organizations best positioned to succeed will be those that remember a simple truth: while technology may transform how work is done, it is people who determine why it matters.

And in a world increasingly shaped by intelligent machines, designing for human advantage may prove to be the most important leadership challenge—and opportunity—of all.



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Dania is a partner at Deloitte Middle East leading the Talent Management offering. With over 15 years of consulting experience, she specializes in organizational and workforce transformation, talent management solutions, HR strategy, and strategic change management. Dania has successfully led numerous large-scale transformation programs across both the public sector and prominent privately owned organizations in the region. Her expertise includes driving impactful change initiatives and optimizing talent strategies to achieve organizational excellence.

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