



Middle East
Human Capital Trends 2026

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.

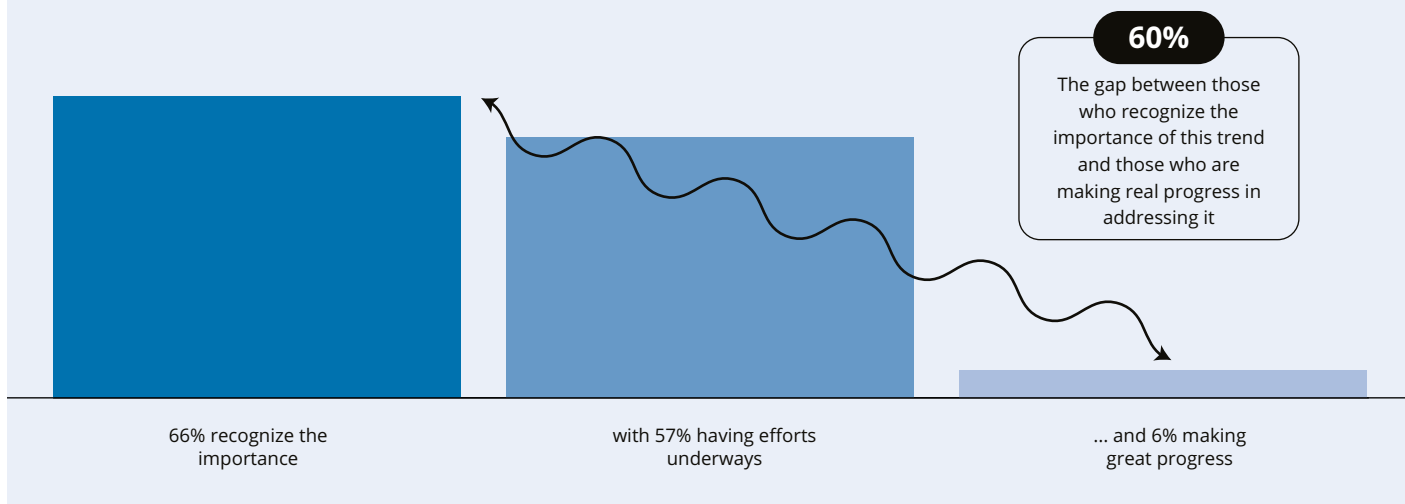
Yet amid this surge in adoption, a more fundamental question often receives far less attention: **How should humans and machines actually work together?**

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.³⁴ 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.

Endnotes

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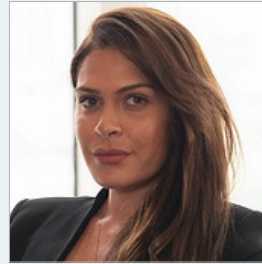
Key Contacts



Samir Khayzaran

skhayzaran@deloitte.com

Samir is a partner at Deloitte Middle East where he leads the Organization and Workforce Transformation Service Offering. Samir has over 18 years of experience in consulting with global management consultancy companies in the areas of strategic planning, organization structure design, performance management, HR strategy and structure development, workforce planning, and driving large-scale transformation programs. Samir has worked extensively in the Public Sector, from education to non-profit organizations, as well as Financial Services, including commercial and development banks, and Telecom and Retail sectors in the Middle East, Europe, and Singapore.



Dania Nourallah

dnourallah@deloitte.com

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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