

CEO compass: Deloitte Global's 2025 Airline CEO Survey

Amid uncertainty, airline CEOs focus on maintaining financial discipline while strategically investing in technology, people, and a more resilient future

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Introducing our CEO survey findings

Dear aviation colleagues,

It is our pleasure to welcome you to Deloitte's 2025 Airline CEO Survey. We embarked on this research journey to tap into the collective wisdom of airline leaders and illuminate the strategic priorities shaping the future of aviation. Drawing on insights from 32 chief executive officers across the globe—spanning a diverse range of airline sizes and models—this report offers a unique vantage point into the forces at play and leadership strategies guiding the industry forward.

Fielded just after tariff announcements in early April, the survey might have been expected to surface apprehension over global trade. But tariffs appeared only on the

margins of CEO concerns. More strikingly, even other familiar industry risks—like pilot shortages and fuel-price volatility—were not top of mind. Instead, CEOs pointed to broader macro-risks: persistent economic uncertainty and geopolitical instability. This focus sets the tone for what follows: a renewed emphasis on cost control and reliability, paired with more pragmatic stances in areas like customer experience and sustainability. These aren't just business strategies—they're risk management practices, helping leaders build resilience in a world that's becoming harder to predict.

And perhaps most notably, less than 5% of CEOs view pandemics as a leading threat. It's a symbolic moment—the crisis that reshaped the industry no longer defines its future.

Throughout this report, you'll find an in-depth look at how airline leaders are balancing competing priorities, adopting advanced technologies, and fortifying their workforces and culture to build resilience. From transformative technology investments to the evolution of customer engagement, the insights shared here reveal how CEOs are positioning their organizations for long-term success.

We extend our gratitude to the leaders who shared their insights and to you, our readers, for your continued engagement. Together, let's navigate these turbulent skies and chart a course toward a more resilient and prosperous future.

Sincerely,

Yvonne Rene de Cotret

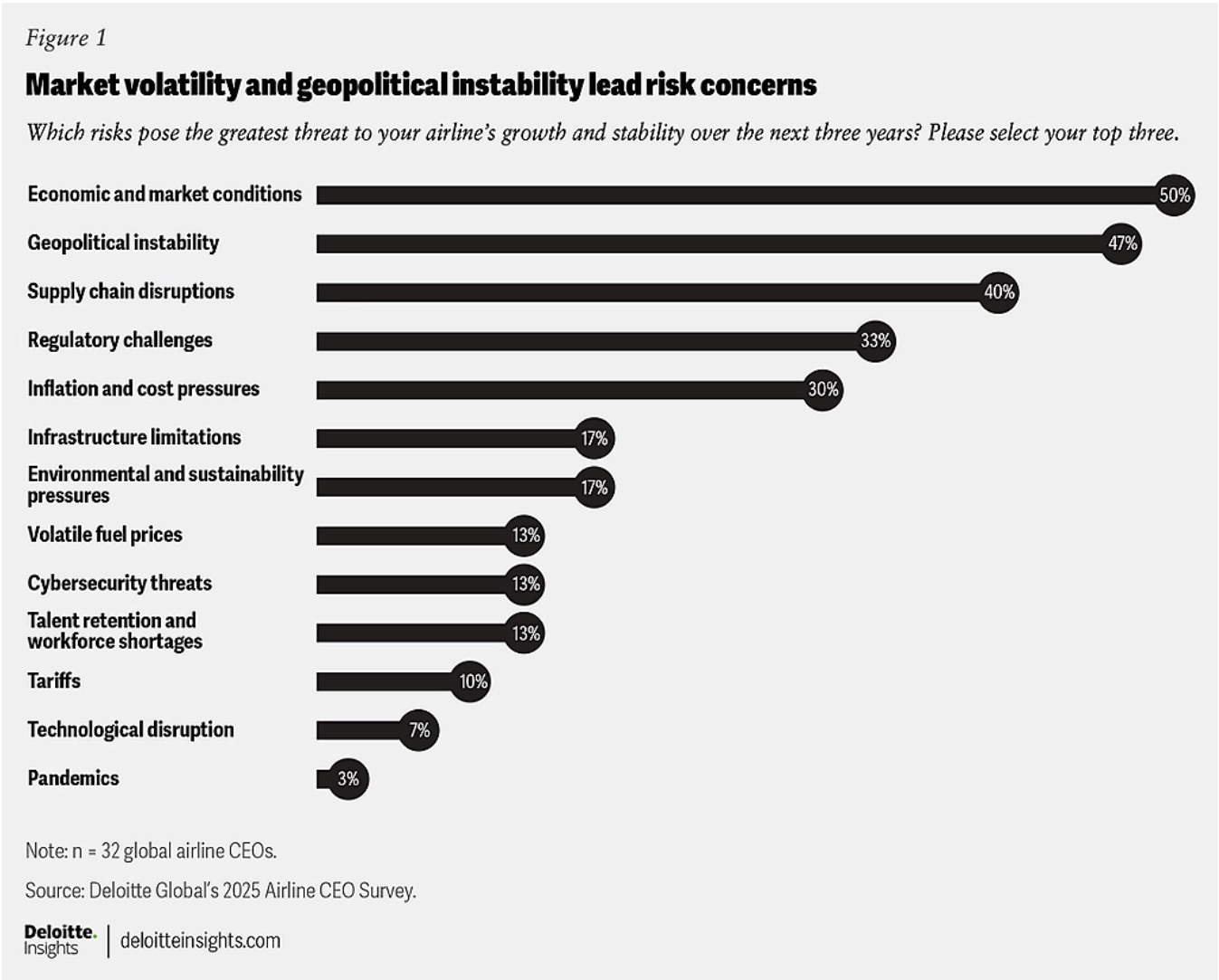
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Airline CEOs are navigating a market that's still volatile and increasingly shaped by forces outside their control. Thinking about the year ahead, CEOs now see their

biggest threats to airline success rooted in macroeconomic uncertainty and geopolitical instability (figure 1). The potential for fragile consumer and business confidence, escalating operating costs, and unpredictable demand patterns have replaced COVID-19–induced disruptions as the top sources of risk.



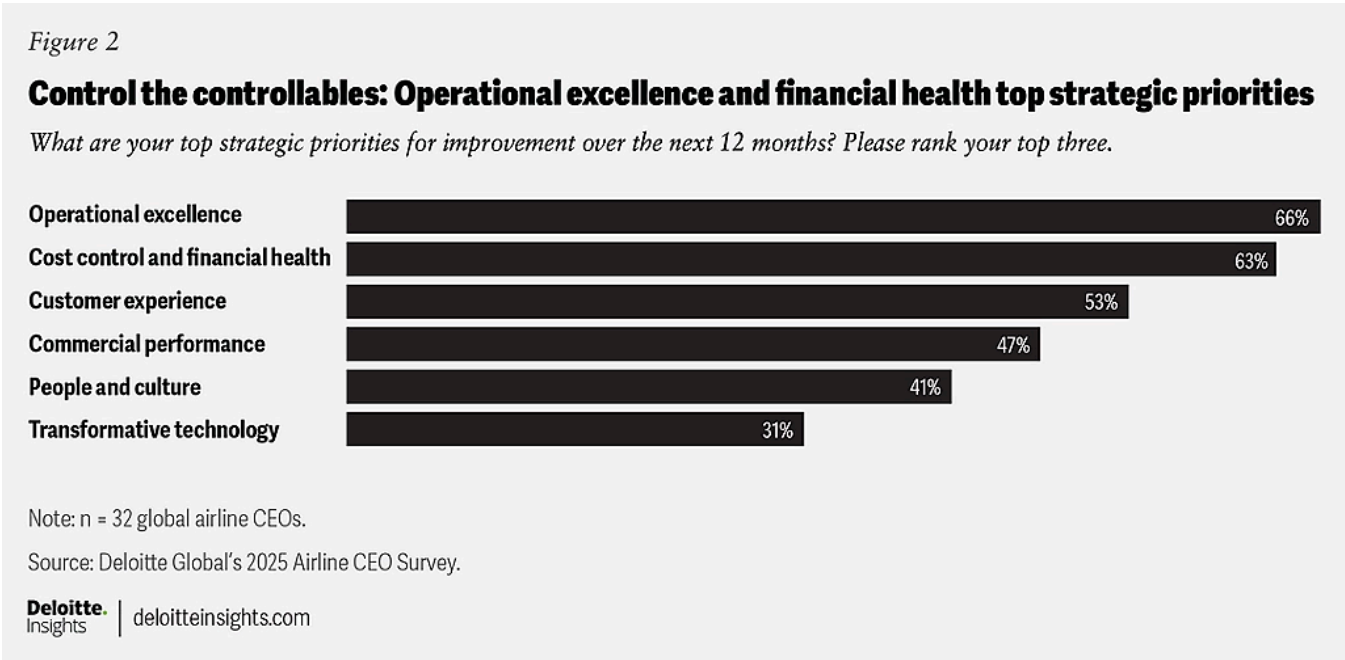
In response, leaders are tightening their grip on what they can influence: cost structures, operational reliability, and network performance. This year's survey shows cost control and financial health high on the strategic agenda, cited by 63% of CEOs (figure 2).

It's not just belt-tightening; it's a structural shift. After years of rapid growth and workforce expansion, many carriers are rebalancing toward leaner, more efficient

operations. Operational reliability, cited by 66% (figure 2), reflects a renewed push to deliver consistent performance where it counts—on-time arrivals driven by strong tech ops execution (figure 5).

Still, more than half of CEOs surveyed continue to prioritize customer experience, reflecting the need to manage costs without sacrificing competitive differentiation (figure 2). That tension—between financial discipline and delivering value to customers—is the throughline running across major decisions that airlines are making today, and underscores the broader narrative of balance running through this year’s findings.

While cost control and operational excellence are key focus areas, no strategic priority stands alone. Many CEOs are also leaning on customer experience, commercial performance, transformative technology, and a strong culture to position their airline for what comes next (figure 2).

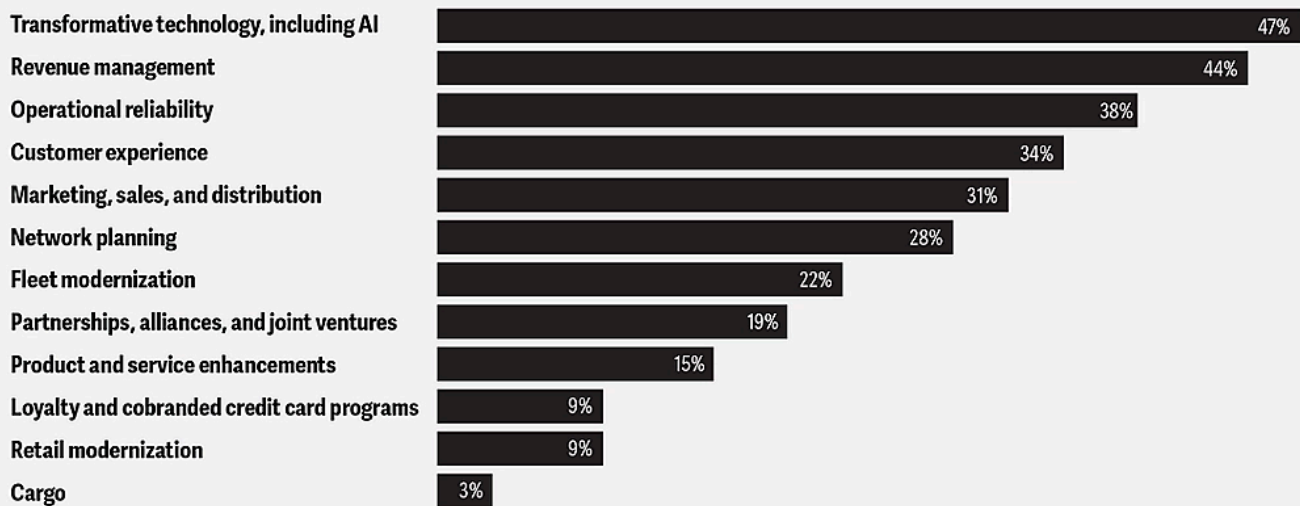


And a varying mix of five different growth initiatives are being prioritized by at least one-third of CEOs (figure 3). This balanced approach to priorities and growth reflects not only the multifaceted role CEOs play, but also a shared belief: Being resilient and adaptable in the face of uncertainty means excelling across many fronts.

Figure 3

Growth at the right cost: Tech and revenue management top a varied mix of growth initiatives

Which initiatives are you prioritizing to drive growth over the next 12 months? Please select your top three.



Note: n = 32 global airline CEOs.

Source: Deloitte Global's 2025 Airline CEO Survey.

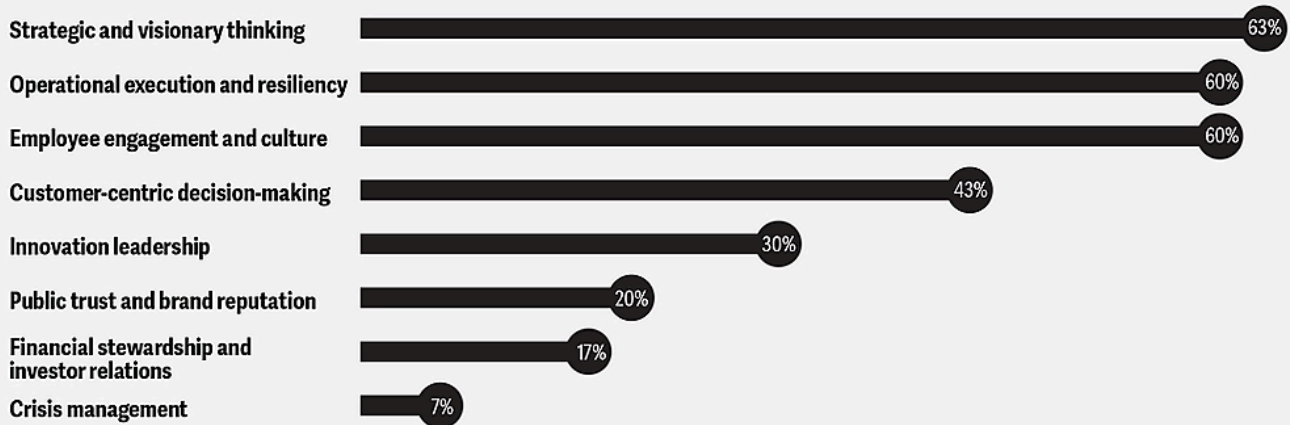
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That same balance mindset carries through to the traits CEOs view as important in today's environment. When asked what kind of leadership traits are most critical for navigating the airline industry today, they gave near-equal weight to strategic, visionary thinking and operational execution (figure 4). It's not one or the other. Success now requires both—the ability to chart a long-term path forward while delivering flawlessly in the day to day. Alongside these, CEOs increasingly recognize that fostering employee engagement and cultivating a strong culture are critical. This emphasis on people reflects the belief that a motivated and aligned workforce is foundational to navigating complexities and driving sustainable success. This blend of vision, resilience, and people-first approach is what many CEOs see as the hallmark of effective leadership in a complex, fast-moving, uncertain market.

Figure 4

CEOs balance strategy, execution, and their team as leadership priorities

What leadership traits do you consider most critical for navigating the airline industry today and your airline's success? Please select your top three.



Note: n = 32 global airline CEOs.

Source: Deloitte Global's 2025 Airline CEO Survey.

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As CEOs double down on cost control and adjust to new operational realities, other priorities are shifting in response. Sustainability, for instance, appears low on the list of concerns as more immediate financial and operational demands take center stage (figure 1). Meanwhile, transformative technologies are gaining traction—not just as tools for innovation, but as critical enablers of efficiency, resilience, and growth (figure 3).

Our research reveals key insights on how leaders are navigating that balance—through investments in workforce, technology, and reliability—amid an economic and geopolitical landscape that remains unsettled.

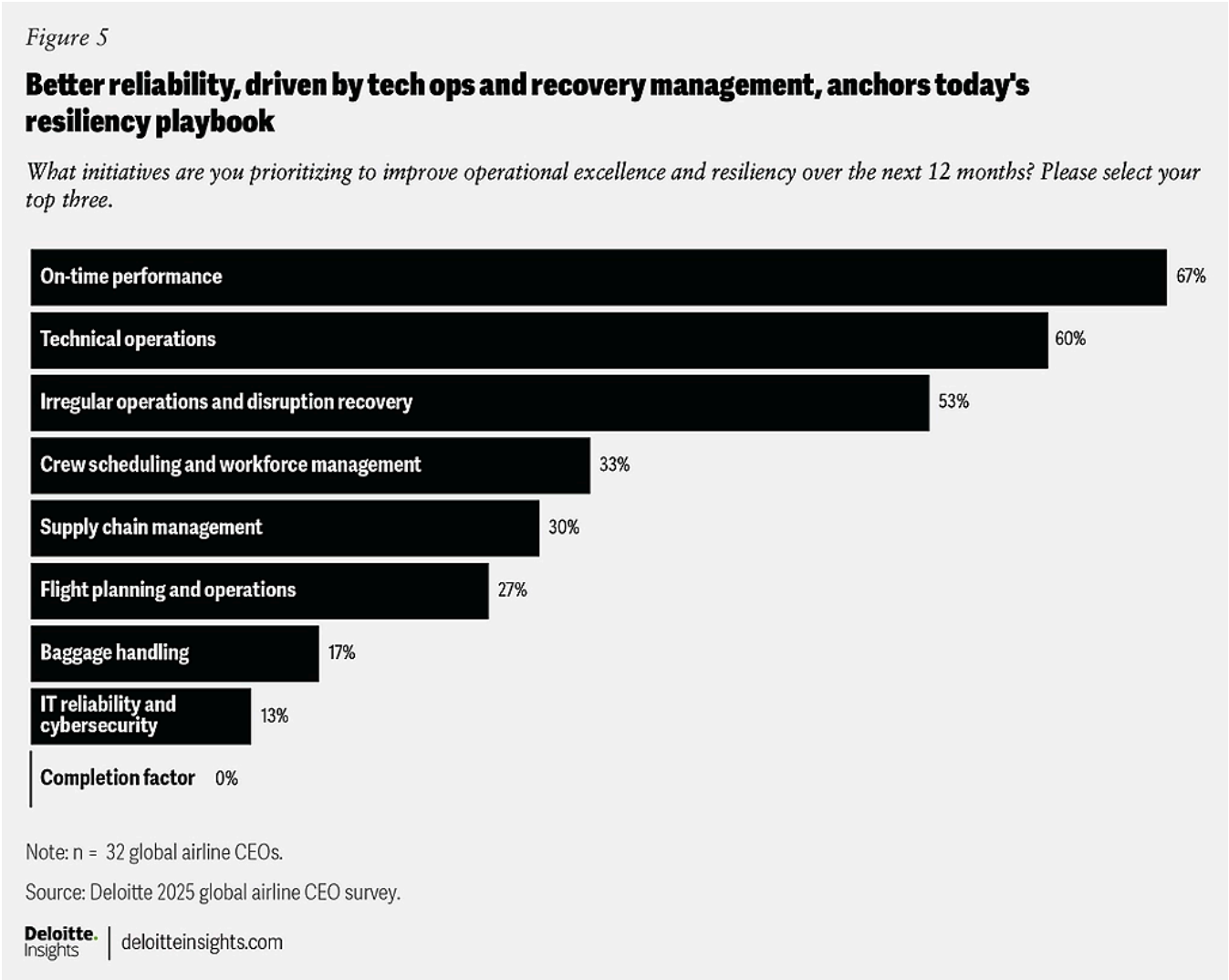
Operational excellence and resiliency

For airline CEOs, reliability has become nonnegotiable. The survey asked which initiatives they are prioritizing to help strengthen operational excellence and resiliency in the year ahead: Two responses topped the list—on-time performance and technical operations (figure 5). That's not a coincidence. It reflects a shared understanding that

a dependable operation is the foundation for everything else: customer satisfaction, cost efficiency, and even revenue growth.

What stands out is how concentrated the focus is around day-to-day execution and recovery. More than half of the CEOs surveyed are investing in better recovery from disruptions and irregular operations—a signal that in today’s environment, how quickly an airline bounces back matters as much as how often it runs on time (figure 5). Priorities like supply chain management, crew scheduling, and flight planning—though cited less frequently—still reflect the behind-the-scenes complexity of keeping a global flight network stable, especially when small challenges can ripple fast.

The message is clear based on the survey’s findings: Most CEOs are not chasing perfection—they’re building resilience. The goal isn’t just to avoid delays, but to run smarter, recover faster, and create a more predictable experience in an unpredictable world.



Customer experience enhancements

For airline CEOs, the customer experience starts long before boarding—and often, it begins and ends with reliability. That’s likely why more than half of the CEOs surveyed ranked operational reliability as one of the top customer experience priorities this year (figure 6). In an industry where a single delay can unravel trust, CEOs are drawing a straight line between operational discipline and customer satisfaction.

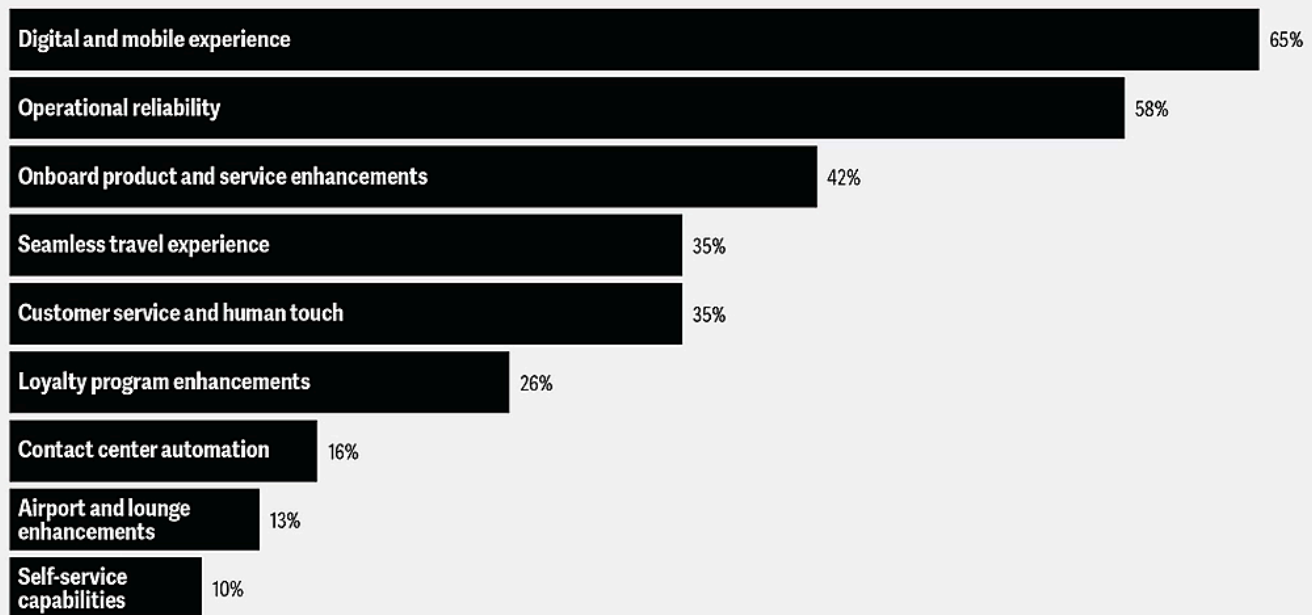
But reliability isn’t enough on its own. The most-selected initiative, by 65% of CEOs, was digital and mobile experience (figure 6). That emphasis signals how central the traveler’s digital relationship with the airline has become—from booking to boarding to rebooking. In a world of rising expectations, seamless and intuitive touchpoints aren’t just conveniences—they’re drivers of loyalty, efficiency, and brand equity.

Beyond tech and reliability, CEOs are spreading their bets. Considering a wide range of enhancements—from onboard product and loyalty programs to human-centered service and the end-to-end travel experience—each drew meaningful support, with at least a third of CEOs selecting them (figure 6). That distribution reflects a broader reality: Today’s customer experience isn’t defined by one moment, but by the cumulative impact of many. It’s not about dazzling passengers in one area—it’s about showing up consistently across many of them.

Figure 6

Airlines embrace travelers' personal devices as the key to customer experience excellence

What initiatives are you prioritizing to enhance customer experience over the next 12 months? Please select your top three.



Note: n = 32 global airline CEOs.

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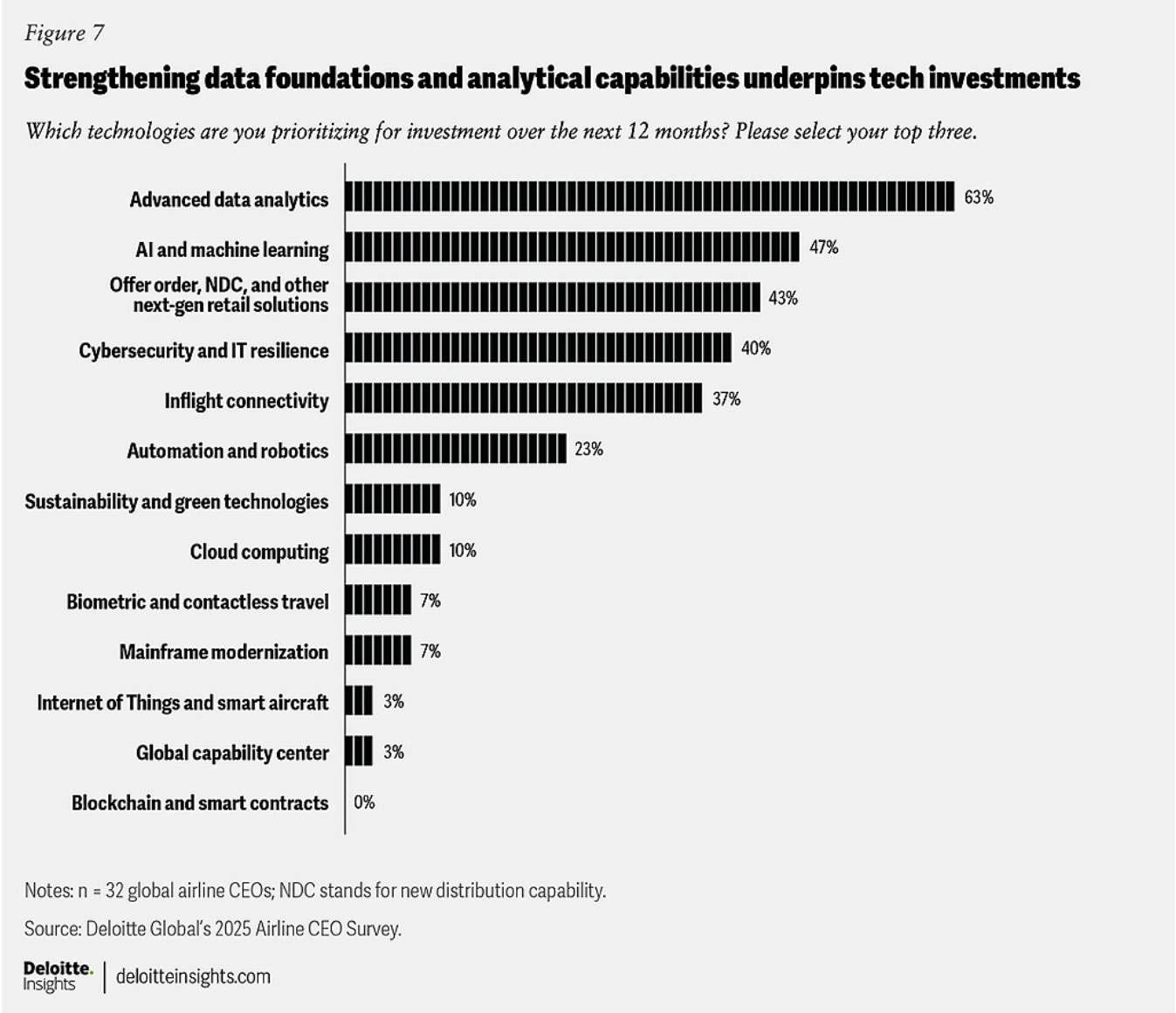
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Technology investments

Technology has moved from the periphery to the center of the airline growth agenda. Roughly half of CEOs now cite transformative technology as one of their top growth priorities (figure 3). That shift isn't about chasing hype. It reflects a growing belief that digital investments are key to unlocking value across the business—from network planning to customer experience.

But CEOs are pragmatic about where they place their bets. In a landscape dominated by headlines about artificial intelligence, it's advanced data analytics that ranks first among tech investment priorities, selected by 63% of CEOs (figure 7). That's not necessarily a criticism of AI—it's a reflection of what's working today. After years of grappling with fragmented systems, many airlines are modernizing their data environments. With that foundation strengthened, more traditional analytics are

already driving meaningful gains in efficiency and profitability. CEOs are pushing for wins now, not just potential later.

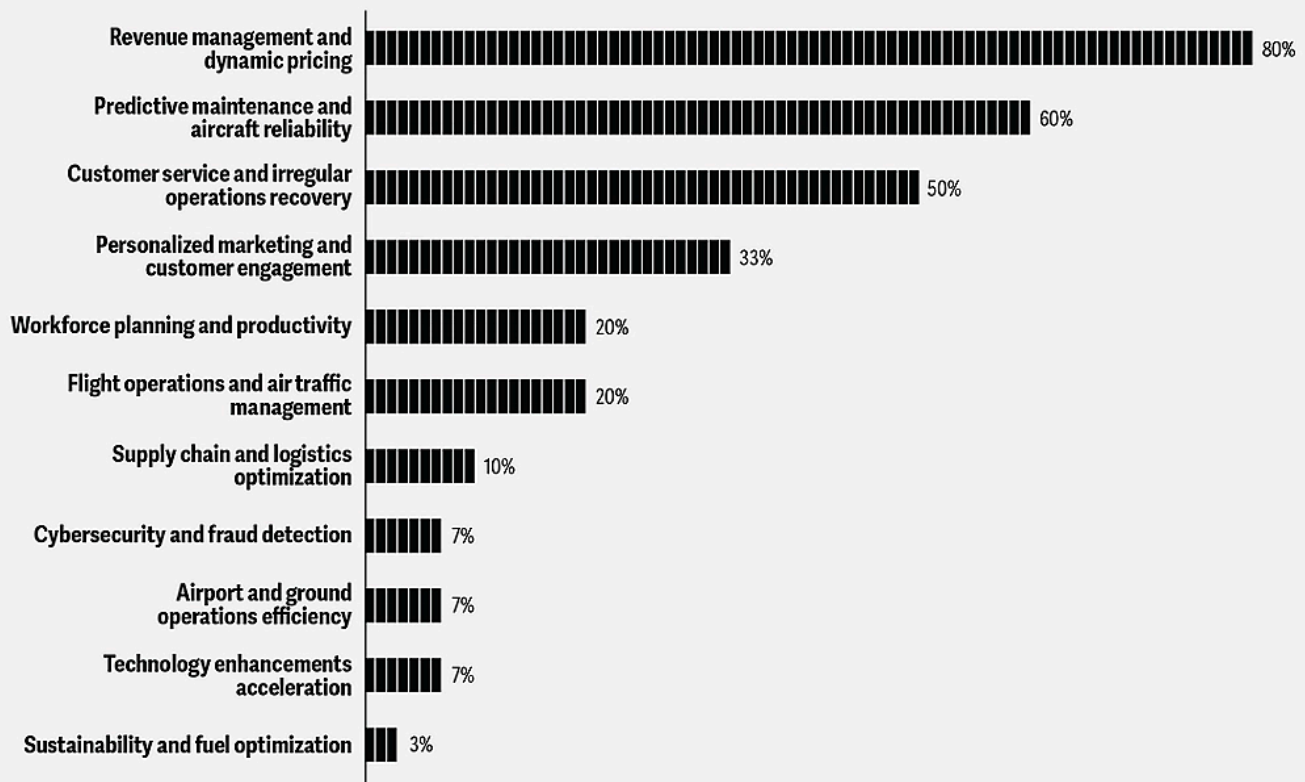


That said, AI is far from sidelined. When asked where they expect it to deliver the most impact in the next three years, CEOs zeroed in on revenue management and dynamic pricing—directly tied to their top growth priority (figure 8). Predictive maintenance and aircraft reliability follow closely, showing a clear link between AI and cost control. AI’s role in customer service and disruption recovery also signals growing trust in its ability to enhance the passenger experience, especially in high-stakes moments. As AI matures, CEOs increasingly recognize its transformational potential across some of the major facets of the business, making it a cornerstone of future-ready airline strategies.

Figure 8

AI's next frontier: CEOs zero in on pricing and fleet reliability

Where do you expect AI to have the most significant impact on your airline over the next three years? Please select your top three.



Note: n = 32 global airline CEOs.

Source: Deloitte Global's 2025 Airline CEO Survey.

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The third-highest technology investment area—offer order, and new distribution capability (NDC) solutions (figure 7)—is also worth calling out. For years, NDC has been more aspiration than reality. But this year's data suggests an inflection point: CEOs are no longer just talking about next-gen retail—they're funding it. That shift could reshape how airlines package, personalize, and sell across digital channels. It's a sign that airlines are transitioning from a traditional passenger number record model to a more stock-keeping unit framework, aligning themselves with modern digital retail practices.

Ultimately, CEOs may not be chasing technology for technology's sake: They're investing where it counts, that is, where it improves reliability, sharpens pricing, and helps strengthen the customer relationship.

Workforce and talent strategy

For many airlines, workforce and culture have long been core to competitive advantage. But in today's environment, that differentiator is being reasserted—and redefined—as CEOs prioritize leadership strength, organizational stability, and employee engagement as key levers for resilience and performance.

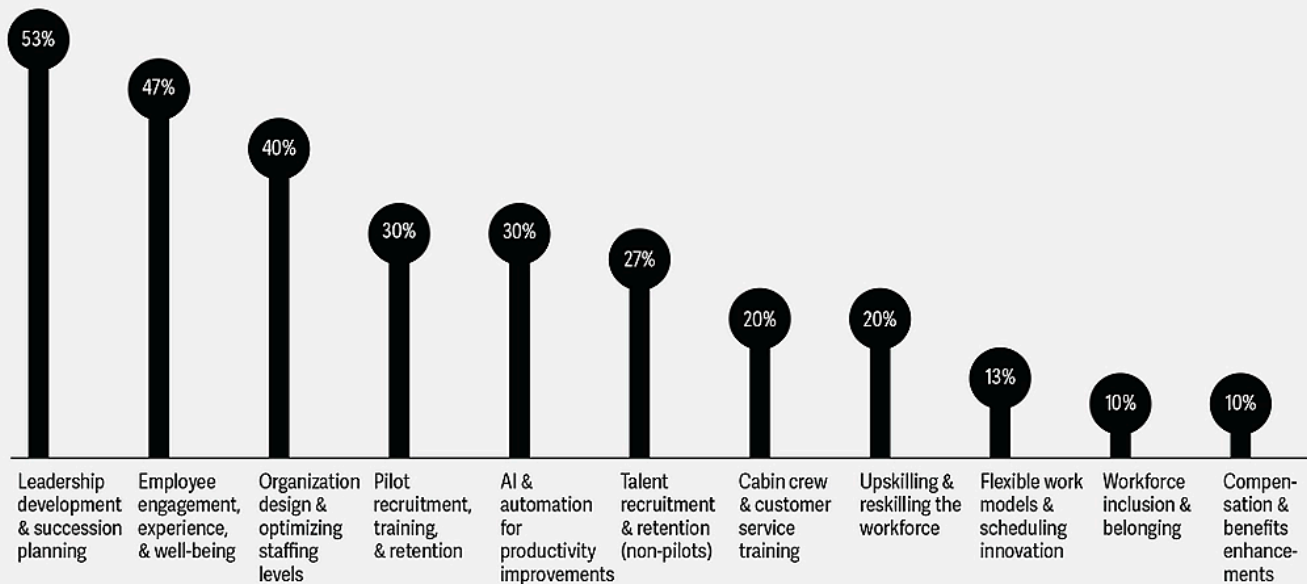
Leadership development and succession planning top the list of workforce initiatives this year, cited by roughly half of CEOs (figure 9). That focus goes hand-in-hand with employee engagement, experience, and well-being—selected by 47%. Together, these priorities reflect a strategic shift: CEOs are investing in people not only at the top, but across the frontlines, recognizing that strong culture and leadership execution are inseparable in today's environment.

Interestingly, some headline-grabbing concerns of recent years, like pilot recruitment and retention, have receded slightly, with only 30% of CEOs listing it as a current priority (figure 9). The same goes for inclusion, reskilling, and flexible work models, which rank low on the list. That suggests a possible pivot toward operational stability—right-sizing staffing levels, streamlining organizational design, and strengthening core leadership capabilities—as airlines brace for a market that still feels uncertain.

Figure 9

Leading across levels: With an eye on leadership development, CEOs also seek a better employee experience across the organization

What workforce initiatives are you prioritizing to meet the evolving needs of your airline? Please select your top three.



Note: n = 32 global airline CEOs.

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In short, CEOs aren't spreading resources across every workforce trend. They're likely prioritizing what drives performance now: resilient leadership, aligned teams, and a culture that can deliver under pressure.

Sustainability commitments

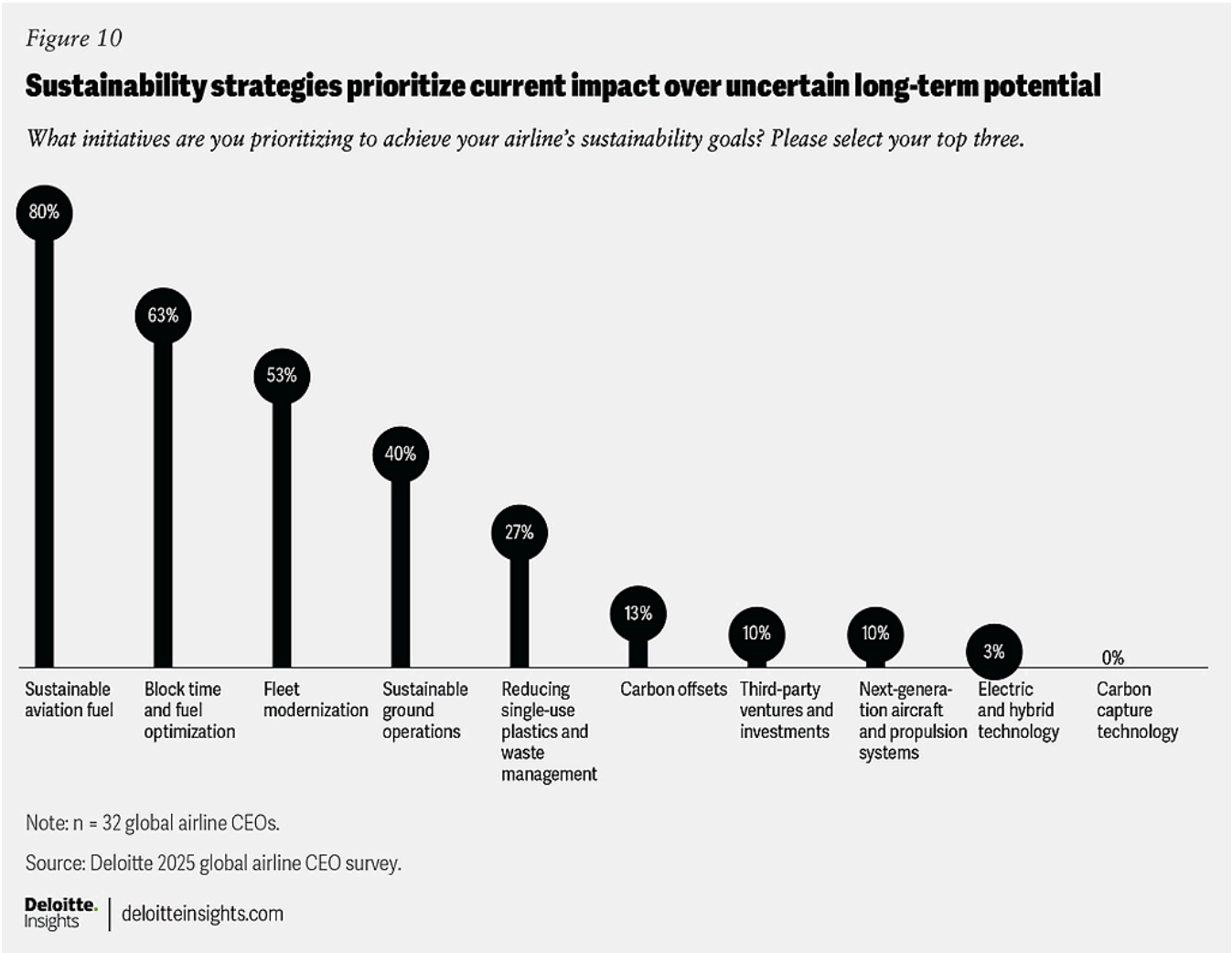
CEOs aren't walking away from sustainability—they're getting more targeted. Amid a backdrop of economic uncertainty and mounting cost pressures, airlines are focusing on sustainability levers that offer measurable impact—starting with sustainable aviation fuel.

Eighty percent of CEOs cite sustainable aviation fuel as a top initiative for meeting sustainability goals (figure 10). That focus reflects both external pressure to reduce emissions and a growing consensus. Right behind it, 63% are prioritizing block time

and fuel optimization—further proof that CEOs are aligning sustainability efforts with operational efficiency.

At the same time, carbon offsets now rank near the bottom at just 13%. Investments in long-horizon technologies like electric propulsion or carbon capture were ranked even lower. Instead, CEOs are doubling down on what they can implement now—optimizing fleets, making ground operations more sustainable, and improving day-to-day efficiency.

Airlines are pursuing sustainability in ways that align with near-term financial and operational imperatives. The focus is on credibility, control, and impact—not optics.



Risk management and the road ahead

The risks weighing on airline CEOs today look very different from those of just a few years ago. Gone are the days when industry-specific challenges—like pilot shortages

or volatile fuel prices—dominated the risk agenda. Today, the focus has broadened. Economic conditions, geopolitical instability, and supply chain matters now top the list. In short, the turbulence CEOs are preparing for isn't just in the air—it's in the global marketplace.

This shift helps explain the strategic decisions that CEOs are making, as noted in the survey results: a renewed focus on cost control; a prioritization of reliability; and a more pragmatic approach to customer experience and sustainability. These aren't just business strategies—they are risk responses. CEOs are steering their airlines with discipline, looking to shore up resilience in a world that's become harder to predict.

Some risks, once front and center, have faded from view. Very few CEOs cite talent shortages or cybersecurity as a top concern (figure 1). Even fuel price volatility—a longtime fixture in airline risk assessments—has fallen to 13%. And perhaps most notably, almost no CEOs selected pandemics as a leading threat. It's a symbolic moment: The pandemic that reshaped the industry no longer defines its future.

Looking ahead, CEOs aren't chasing growth at all costs: They're positioning their airlines to move forward with agility and resilience, aware that the next disruption might not look like the last. As they navigate uncertainty, they're staying grounded in fundamentals—cost, reliability, and leadership—while keeping an eye on the horizon for what's next.

Methodology

This survey was conducted by Deloitte's Global Aviation practice using an online questionnaire fielded through Qualtrics from April 8 to May 8, 2025. Invitations were sent directly to airline CEOs and all responses are confidential. The participant group reflects a global mix of airline leaders representing a range of annual revenue sizes and business models. Responses reflect CEO sentiment at the time of fielding.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the following for their contributions to this article: **Aloke Mukherjee**, Canada Aviation leader; **Andy Gauld**, UK Aviation leader; **Anurag Gupta**, India Aviation leader; **Bird Ji**, China Aviation leader; **Dejan Markovic**, Central Europe Aviation leader; **Dorian Reece**, Middle East Aviation leader; **Kaihei Torigoe**, Japan Aviation leader; **Matt Soderberg**, US Aviation leader; **Thomas Pellegrin**, Asia-Pacific Aviation leader; **Vicente Segura**, EMEA Aviation leader; **Marcello Gasdia**; **Maggie Rauch**; **Steve Rogers**; and **Henry Weston-Davies**, Global Voice of the Customer leader.

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