MENA LEADERS COMMUNITY
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AI leadership pulse report

Senior leaders. Community Insights.
A candid picture of where AI transformation really stands.

salt™

The *gap* between AI ambition and AI execution.

7.3/10
Avg AI hiring difficulty

3.5/5
Avg ROI confidence

90–120+ days
Median time to hire senior AI

Survey snapshot

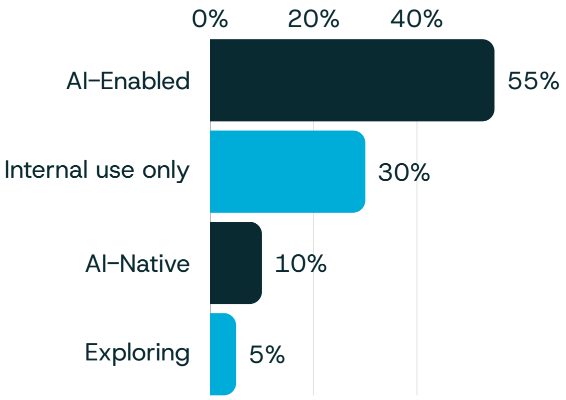
Who answered

C-suite and senior AI/technology leaders across the Middle East, Asia Pacific and Europe. Predominantly large enterprise (55% employ 10,000+).

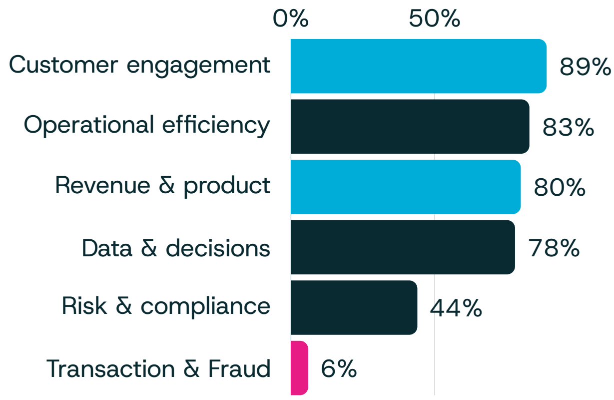
Responding anonymously in May 2026.

Senior	**Industries**	**Locations**	**55%**
Leaders surveyed (CDO, CTO, CAIO, CPO, CGO)	represented. Retail, FinTech, Healthcare, eCommerce, Logistics…	Conducted in the UAE with organisations extending across the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.	**Employ 10,000+ people**

AI maturity of company



Primary AI objectives



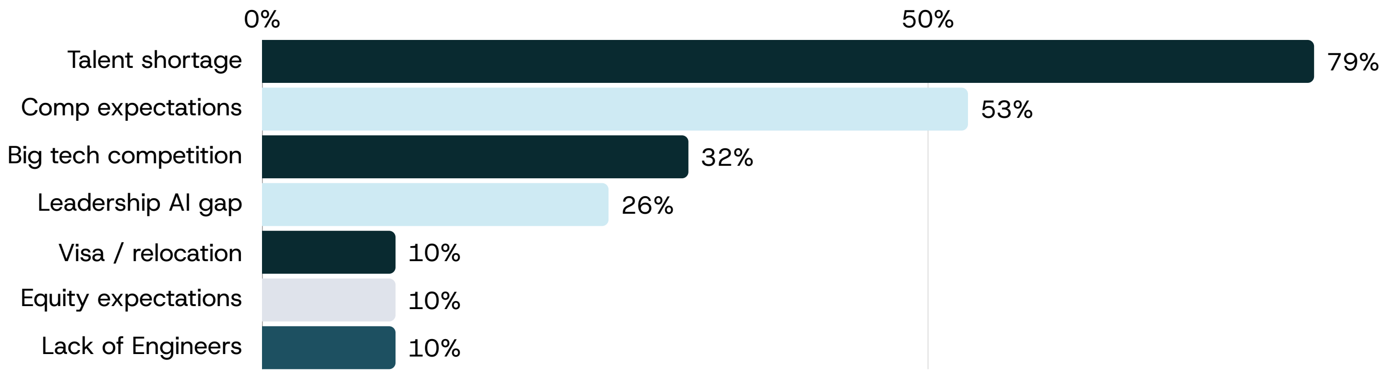
Percentages exceed 100% as respondents selected multiple options.

Hiring AI talent is genuinely hard. And getting harder.

Over 80% of respondents rated hiring difficulty 7 or above. The average senior AI hire takes over 90–120 days to close, and that's before candidates have multiple competing offers.

7.3	70%	90–120	10%
Average hiring difficulty score (out of 10)	Rated difficulty 7+ out of 10	Days to hire a senior AI leader	Report difficulty of 10/10 — the hardest possible

Biggest barrier to hiring AI Talent



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Compensation trend

Moderate | **Stable** | **Rapid**

47% see moderately increasing compensation. 31% report stable increases, and only 21% see rapid increases.

Most critical roles selected

Head of AI / OPS | **MLOps / Platform Engineer** | **AI Product Manager**

Head of AI / CAIO cited by 55% as the single most critical hire.

Team structure

The centralised model dominates. But leaders are moving toward hub-and-spoke.

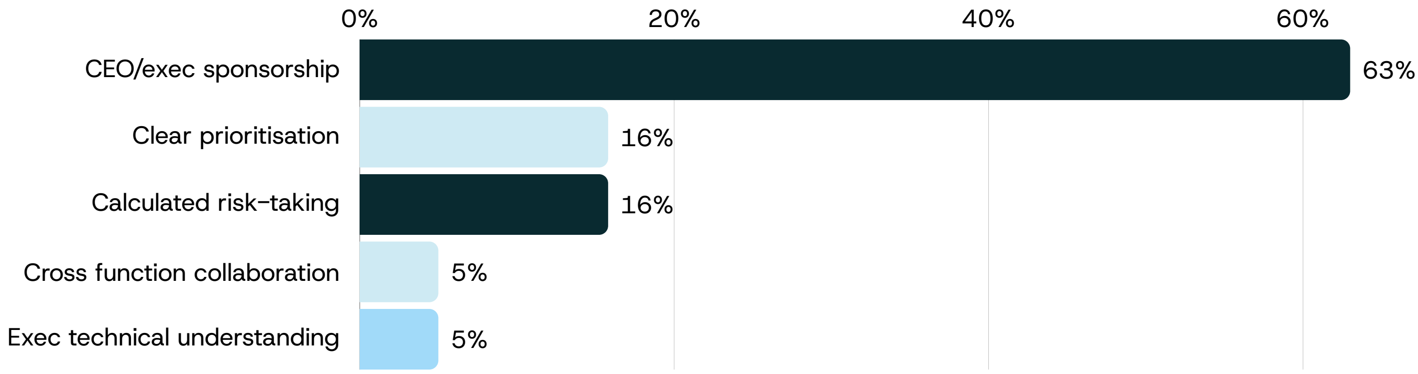
Most organisations currently run centralised AI teams. But when asked about their preferred future model, two thirds chose hub-and-spoke (central platform + embedded teams) as the clear aspiration.

47%
Centralised model. A single AI team delivers solutions to the business.

26%
Hybrid model. Central AI team plus embedded engineers across business units.

20%
Distributed and not clearly stuctured in any central way today.

What leadership behaviour most accelerates AI?



⚠ Leadership comprehension gap

When asked what % of their leadership team truly understands AI at implementation level, 85% answered under 25%. Only 2 respondents believed more than 75% of their leadership team genuinely understood AI.

Confident in the vision. Uncertain about the returns.

Average ROI confidence sits just below 4 out of 10. The gap between what organisations say publicly about AI and what leaders privately believe is one of the most striking findings of this survey.

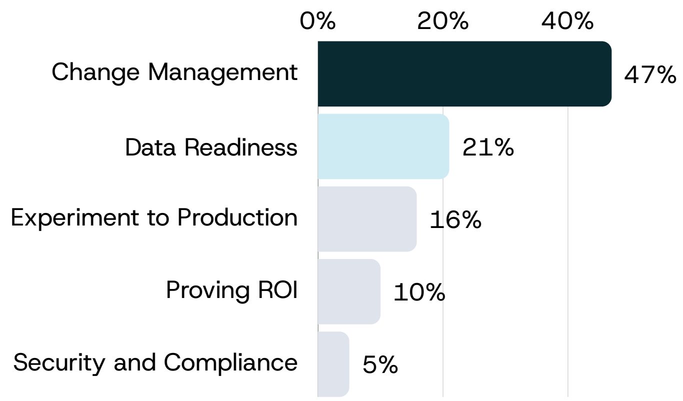
3.42
Average ROI confidence (1–5 scale)

21%
Score their ROI confidence 1 or 2.

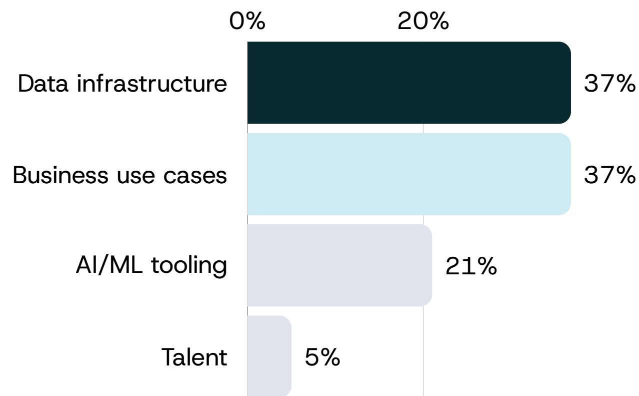
5–10%
Tech budget allocated to AI by most respondents. Only 3 exceed 20%.

6–12months
Expected ROI timeline for most. A significant minority expect under 6 months.

What is harder than expected?



Where AI investment is going



⚠ The investment irony

Only 5% of AI spend goes to talent...yet talent shortage is cited as the #1 barrier by 80% of respondents. Organisations are funding infrastructure but underfunding the people who build and run it.

Build vs. buy: in-house AI capability

Spread across build/buy bands, with <25% in-house slightly most common. Most respondents (74%) report no regrets about in-house builds.

Scaling blockers

Pilots succeed. Scale fails.

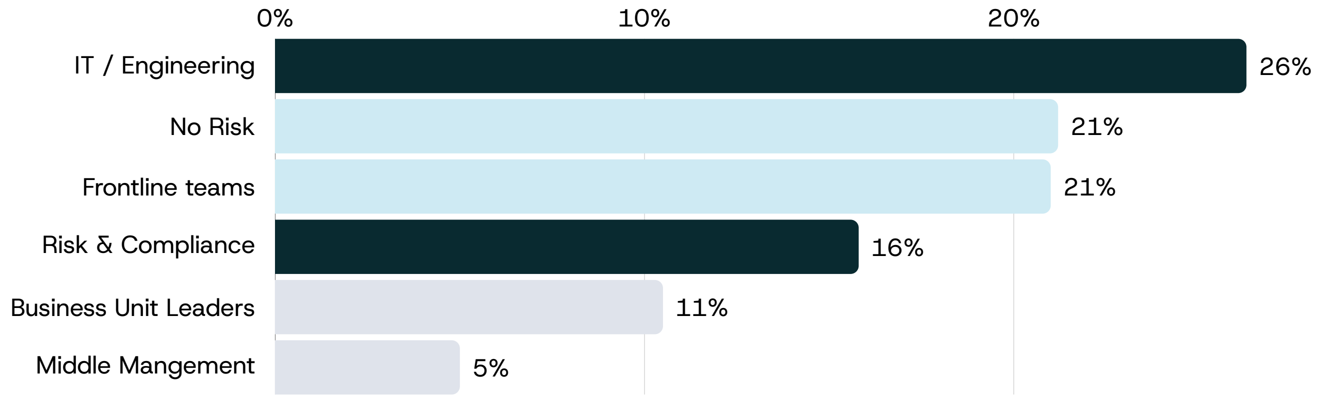
The defining challenge for 2026 isn't starting AI, it's growing it. Almost every organisation has successful pilots. Very few have scaled beyond 3–5 use cases. Here's why.

26%
Weak ROI justification is the top barrier to scaling beyond pilots; cited most frequently as the primary blocker.

21%
Technology legacy architecture constraints. Tied for second most common barrier to scaling.

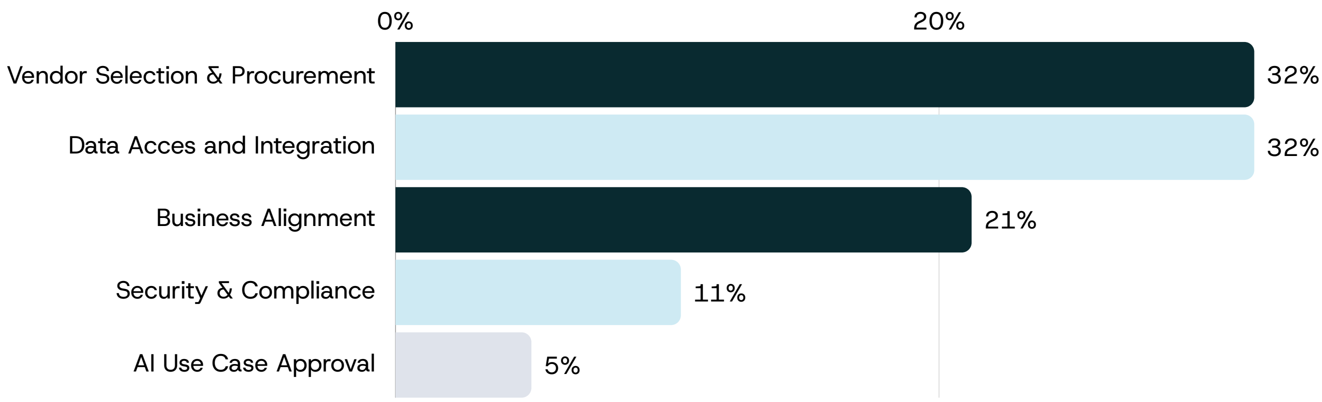
16%
Governance and risk controls. Compliance and risk appetite slowing deployment more than leaders expected

Where internal resistance is strongest



IT and engineering teams, the very teams meant to build AI, are cited as the most resistant group. Technical debt and control concerns drive this tension.

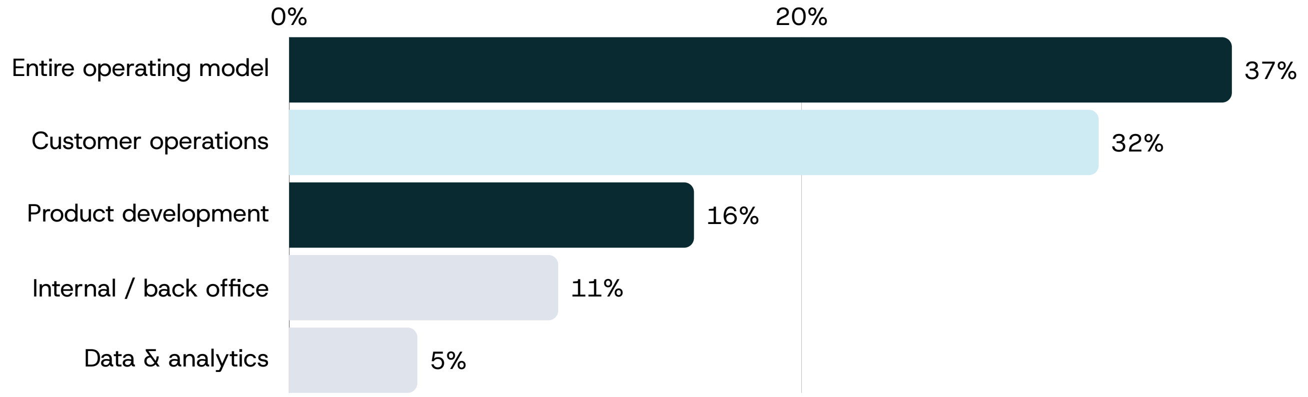
What takes the longest?



What leaders see coming.

Beyond the current frustrations, where do leaders expect AI to deliver its biggest transformation, and what do they believe most companies are getting wrong?

Where AI will most transform organisations by 2028



What trend is most underestimated?

Agentic AI	Pace & advancement	Automation & analytics
Data readiness	Knowledge engineering	"CX," "local models," "intellectual memory"

Agentic AI, its rise, its impact on distribution models, customer interaction, and legacy system integration is the most frequently cited trend respondents feel is being underestimated, mentioned in over a quarter of responses.

The CIO/CTO role in 5 years:

Strategic business transformation leader (37%)
Less technical ownership, more business orchestration. The tech leader becomes the change leader. What leaders expect.

Platform and ecosystem orchestrator (26%)
Managing internal + external technology ecosystems. Building with, not just for, the business.

AI and data product owner (21%)
Owning AI and data as a product across the enterprise, not just infrastructure.

What leaders said in their own words

On the biggest mistakes companies make when building AI

"Centralizing a team for AI and making the rest of the teams work as is."

"Starting from tech instead of from and with business"

"The biggest mistake is not handling the human aspect of change management in ground level teams-educating and training them on how AI is more than chat, how to identify toil and put automations in place."

What AI trend are companies are underestimating?

"Automation works in clean cases - it breaks down when based on data with outliers. Even if these are low percentages, the consequences need to be clearly undersood (black swan modelling)".

"Building a structured and automatically updated company context as a summary and index for LLMs to help with decision making"

What will the AI talent market look like in 2027?

"High demand low supply of experienced staff"

Executives are split between a market that stays structurally tight and one that gradually stabilises. A recurring theme is demand continuing to outpace supply. Driven by AI replacing some roles while simultaneously creating scarcity for experienced, execution-ready talent, particularly at leadership level.

Several respondents expect the market to stabilise by 2027 as more professionals gain hands-on AI experience and the supply of skilled engineers catches up with demand. A distinct quality concern also emerges: multiple leaders distinguish between the current wave of superficial **"AI-adjacent" profiles** and the more established, proven practitioners they expect to see by 2027.

Others point to a broader shift in what **"AI talent"** means altogether, with several predicting **AI fluency** will become a baseline expectation across all roles (not a specialist function), and niche, industry-specific domain skills becoming more valuable than generic technical skills.

Salt Solutions

Need AI talent that can actually deliver?

Salt specialises in placing AI and digital transformation leaders across the Middle East, Asia Pacific, US and Europe. We work with organisations at every stage, from first AI hire to scaling a global team.

Global talent solutions

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