




# Adapting in uncertainty

C-suite barometer: Global and Korean outlook 2026

**forv/s**  
**mazars**

# Contents

|           |   |           |                                  |
|-----------|---|-----------|----------------------------------|
| <b>3</b>  | Foreword  | <b>11</b> | Technology transformation        |
| <b>5</b>  | Key findings  | <b>15</b> | Resetting strategic priorities   |
| <b>7</b>  | The global paradox  | <b>18</b> | Acknowledgements and methodology |
|           | Growing through uncertainty   |           |                                  |
|           | Breaking through barriers to growth                                 |           |                                  |
|           | Trends set to have the biggest impact on businesses                 |           |                                  |
|           | Confidence trends   |           |                                  |
|           | Investment trends   |           |                                  |
| <b>10</b> | The C-suite's economic survival strategy                            |           |                                  |
|           | Expert view with Forvis Mazars' Chief Economist,<br>George Lagarias |           |                                  |



**At the end of 2025, for the sixth edition of the annual C-suite barometer, we surveyed more than 3,000 C-suites across 40 countries worldwide. Globally, despite continued uncertainty and volatility, confidence in growth prospects for 2026 has begun to rebound. In contrast, the outlook in Korea is more subdued. Korean executives report lower confidence in growth compared with the global average and demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to external risks, reflecting a more cautious stance as they navigate an increasingly complex operating environment.**

Each year, our C-suite barometer gives us a useful snapshot of business leaders' sentiment. Looking at this year's Korean results, we note that Korean executives have a different perspective from their global peers, with an outlook characterized by greater caution and measured realism.

When we speak with CEOs and CFOs across Korea, we do hear this caution along with a strong awareness of risk. That comes through clearly in this survey. Compared with our global sample, fewer Korean leaders describe themselves as very confident about growth. And when they do expect growth, they tend to describe it carefully, not enthusiastically. The figures are quite striking: only 64% of Korean respondents expect growing their top line in 2026 vs. 92% of global executives; this is a decrease of 28 percentage points compared to last year. Moreover, only 9% of Korean C-suite executives say they are very confident in their ability to manage key global trends, versus 43% globally.

That difference is quite remarkable but not so surprising.

As Korea is relying heavily on exports, any global uncertainty, such as the foreign currencies' volatility and tariffs discussions, have a substantial impact on its economy. While export performance has improved, it is largely driven by semiconductors, whereas companies in more traditional industries, such as manufacturing or construction, continues to struggle. Only 44% of Korean C-suite leaders are confident that their firms can manage tariff-driven costs, with just 4% being "very" confident. This compares with 88% of global executives expressing confidence, including 44% who are "very" confident. Intensifying competition from Chinese players is another factor contributing to this restrained optimism.

So, in such an environment, Korean executives are focusing on fundamentals, prioritizing margin protection and operational efficiency. Compared

to their global peers, their investments plan is somewhat subdued. This explains also the more cautious geographical expansion plan. As many as 42% of Korean respondents have no international expansion plans, to be compared with a global average of 16%. The United States, Japan and China remain attractive for Korean businesses, with more than 30% of respondents planning to expand to one of these locations. And although Korean businesses are trying to diversify their markets to be less dependent on the U.S., only two countries from Europe, UK and Germany, are among the top 10 countries they consider expanding.

# Foreword

A similar conservatism applies to technology and AI. Although there is broad recognition that AI matters, the actual scope of implementation seems less ambitious in Korea compared to other countries. Only 36% of Korean respondents mentioned that their company had restructured their teams to implement AI (vs. 80% globally), with fewer cases where AI is replacing jobs in business (17% vs. 29% globally). The investments are also expected to be lower in Korea compared to global peers. We believe many leaders are still working through practical questions: where it pays off, how to integrate it, and how to manage the cost and risk, hence a focus on how AI can optimize business.

This realism contrasts somewhat with Korea's strong individual adoption of generative AI. According to OpenAI, a few months ago, Korea ranked second globally among paid ChatGPT users. However, our everyday basic use differs significantly from complex, enterprise-wide AI use. This cautious stance may also be linked to concerns around data management. Only 14% of Korea C-suite executives say their company's data are "completely" protected - down 26 percentage points from 2025 - compared with 40% globally.

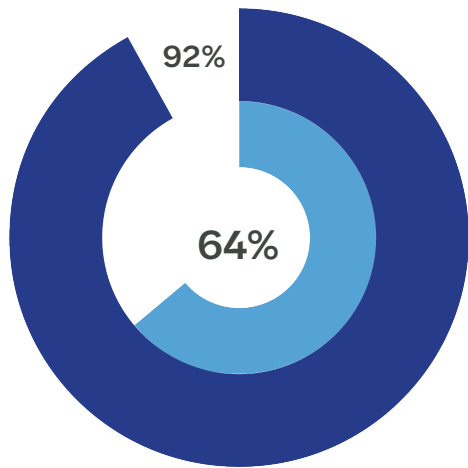
Overall, this year's Korean barometer paints a picture of executives that are well aware of their operating environment and focused on resilience. At a time when global optimism is returning quickly, Korean leaders are choosing a more measured path. They may indeed prepare themselves for future uncertainty and business turbulence. Uncertainties being the norm, what is clear is that success will rest on businesses' capacity to adapt, in order to meet their ambitions.



**Julien Herveau**  
Country Lead Partner  
Forvis Mazars in Korea



# Key findings



■ Global ■ Korea

C-suite executives have a positive growth outlook for their organisation in 2026.

## Confidence index

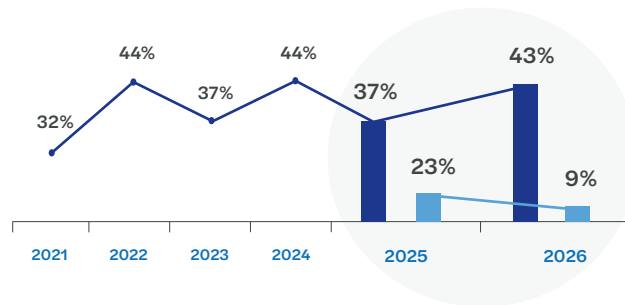
Global

| 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 32%  | 44%  | 37%  | 44%  | 37%  | 43%  |

Korea

| 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| -    | -    | -    | -    | 23%  | 9%   |

Average % "very confident" their organisation is prepared across all relevant trends



## Investment index

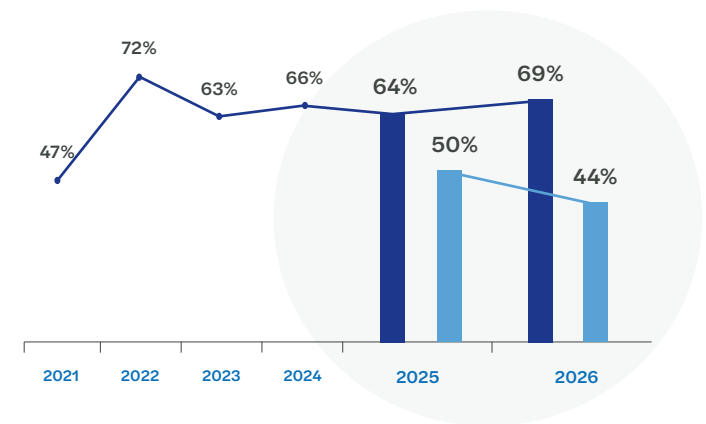
Global

| 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 47%  | 72%  | 63%  | 66%  | 64%  | 69%  |

Korea

| 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| -    | -    | -    | -    | 50%  | 44%  |

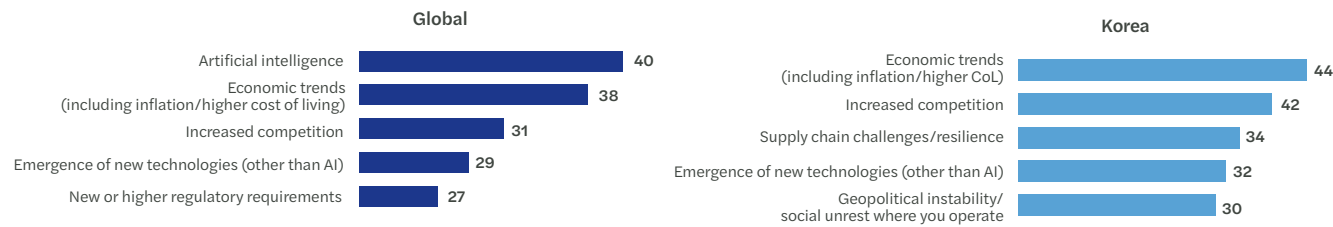
Average % increasing investment across all fields



# Key findings

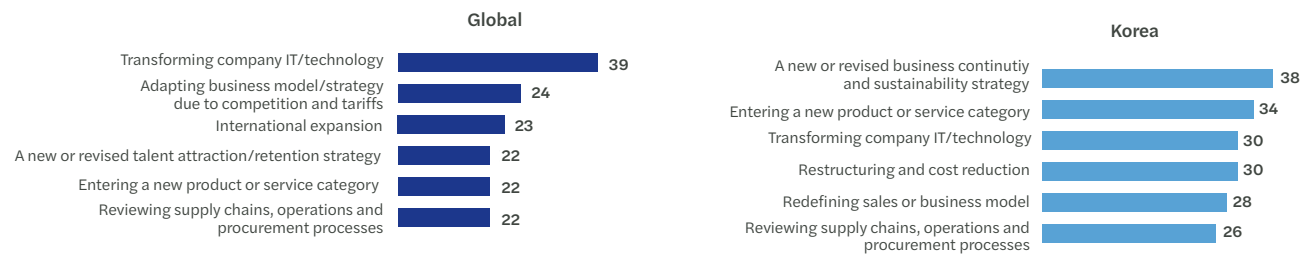
## External trends expected to have the biggest impact on business in the next 12 months

Percent of respondents

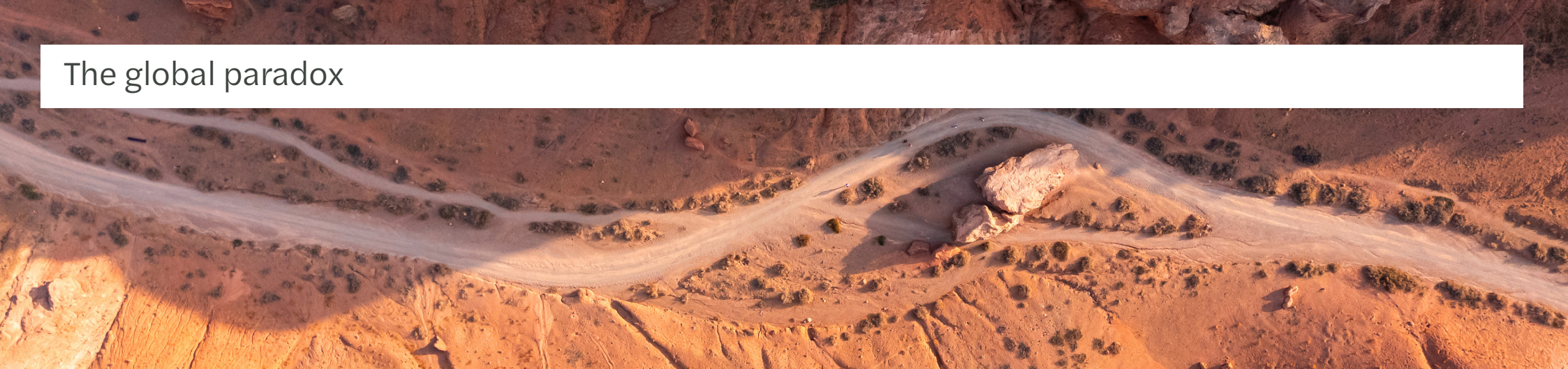


## Strategic priorities on the executive agenda in the next 3-5 years

Percent of respondents



# The global paradox



**New risks and emerging opportunities are reshaping the strategic priorities of executives worldwide. While ongoing global uncertainty and disruption have tempered overall revenue growth expectations, leaders continue to search for opportunity amid complexity. However, the intensity of this optimism varies markedly by country.**

## Growing through uncertainty

Globally, 92% of C-suites remain positive about their organisation's growth prospects, and 82% expect revenue to increase. Although this represents the lowest level since the mid-pandemic period in 2021, it still signals a broadly resilient and measured optimism.

In contrast, sentiment in Korea is notably more cautious. Only 64% of Korean C-suites express confidence in their company's growth outlook, a sharp decline from 86% the previous year. Expectations of revenue growth have also fallen significantly, from 86% in 2025 to 58% in 2026. Compared with the global average, this indicates a clear softening in optimism and reflects a more acute awareness of external risks among Korean leaders.

## Breaking through barriers to growth

Uncertainty remains the principal constraints on growth at the global level. Economic factors (42%) and intensifying competition (32%) are cited as the leading barriers, while political instability (29%) is rising rapidly as a concern. In Korea, these pressures are felt even more strongly. Economic conditions are identified as a primary constraint by 58% of executives, well above the global average. Political instability (44%) and competition (42%) are also viewed as significant obstacles. This suggests that Korean businesses are particularly exposed to global economic slowdown, geopolitical tensions and heightened industry competition.

While global leaders demonstrate calibrated optimism, Korean executives appear to be shifting towards a more defensive and risk-ware strategic stance. Yet such caution may also serve as a catalyst for strengthening resilience and sharpening strategic focus.

## Trends set to have the biggest impact on business

AI is no longer a distant disruptor. 40% of global executives identify AI as the single trend most likely to impact their business over the next 12 months, and its separation from the broader "emerging technologies" category in this year's study underscores its elevation to a core strategic priority.

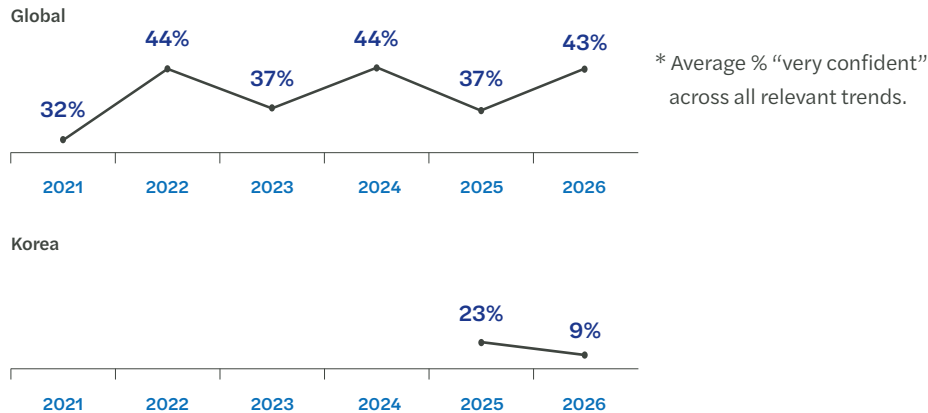
In Korea, executives likewise expect AI, automation and data analytics to deliver ROI. However, only 38% report having a dedicated technology transformation strategy in place, compared with a global average of 74%, and most organisations allocate less than 10% of their budgets to AI initiatives. This more cautious investment posture reflects a strong focus on measurable performance and profitability, while also highlighting the need to reinforce foundational capabilities such as data, security and governance to support sustainable technology transformation.

# The global paradox

## Confidence trends

Global business leaders are seeing confidence rebound, with technology at the centre of this recovery. After a seven-percentage-point decline last year, the confidence index has risen by 6%p, signalling renewed optimism despite ongoing geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty. For the first time, we measured AI readiness separately from other emerging technologies. The results show that 94% of executives believe their organisations are prepared for AI, while 92% feel equipped to manage broader technological innovation. Technology is clearly viewed as an opportunity rather than a risk.

### Confidence index\*

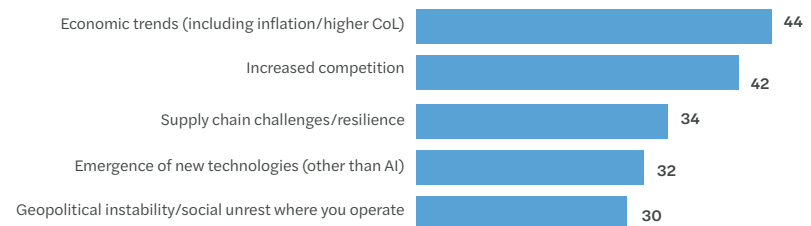


In Korea, however, the trajectory is more cautious. The national Confidence Index stands at 9%, down 14%p from 23% the previous year, in stark contrast to the global rebound. This decline signals a more guarded outlook among Korean executives as they respond to mounting external pressures and economic uncertainty.

Beyond technology, confidence in areas such as supply chains, regulatory compliance and ESG has improved globally, pointing to broader resilience across markets. In South Korea, by comparison, leaders appear to be prioritising risk containment over acceleration. While this stance may appear conservative in the short term, it suggests a deliberate phase of strategic recalibration, focused on strengthening resilience before pursuing renewed expansion.

## Top five external trends expected to have the biggest impact on business in the next 12 months

Percent of Korean respondents



# The global paradox

“Amid persistent uncertainty, Korean companies are taking a more measured and selective approach to investment—prioritising strategic focus, managing risk and strengthening the foundations for sustainable long-term growth.”



**Jung-Min Lee**  
Partner,  
Head of Audit & Quality Control  
Forvis Mazars in Korea

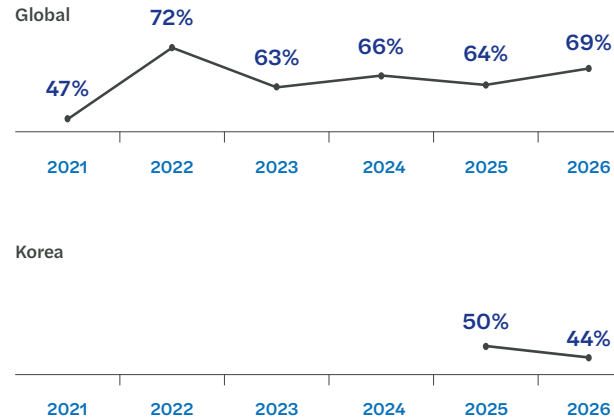
## Investment trends

Globally, C-suites are translating confidence into tangible investment action. The investment index has climbed to 69%, its highest level since 2022, with more than two-thirds planning to increase investment across core business areas. This reflects a clear commitment to strengthening long-term growth foundations rather than focusing solely on short-term survival.

In contrast, the trajectory in Korea is more restrained. The national investment index has declined from 50% in 2025 to 44% in 2026, diverging from the global upward trend. While Korean executives continue to expect strong returns from AI and automation, overall appetite for expanding investment remains cautious. This stance likely reflects a heightened awareness of external economic uncertainty and political risk.

At the global level, AI implementation and customer acquisition (both 76%) rank as the top investment priorities, with IT systems and digitisation (72%) recognised as critical enablers to maximise AI returns. Financial commitments are increasingly matched by investment in human capital, signalling a coordinated push to advance technology and talent together. In Korea, although the strategic direction of technology investment is broadly aligned, the scale and pace of deployment are more measured and selective.

## Investment index\*



\* Average % increasing investment across all fields.

“Amidst market change and crisis, there is always opportunity. Businesses have no choice now but to adapt to an ever-changing environment.”



**Rick Chan,**  
Country Leader in Singapore and  
Group Governing Board Member,  
Forvis Mazars Group

# The C-suite's economic survival strategy

## Expert view



“What matters now is agility. Businesses need to be able to pivot quickly when shocks hit, which is expected to happen in 2026 as the actual economic impact of trade and geopolitical tensions begins to surface.”

**George Lagarias**

Chief Economist, Forvis Mazars Group

Get used to the uncertainty. It's not going away in 2026. The global paradigm shift that business leaders are entering requires real flexibility across all areas of strategic growth plans to tackle the financial and economic aftershocks expected from the last twelve months.

Confidence is rising even as uncertainty deepens. This is not generally a surprise, but I am surprised by the level of optimism reported by leaders as they welcome 2026. Behind the uptick in upbeat outlooks lies a business world emerging from extreme volatility, geopolitical fragmentation and technological disruption, from which we're still waiting to see the full fallout. Trade and tariffs are the most obvious area here, but we also see only 48% of organisations confident in AI delivering the best possible return and only 30% seeing it come to fruition in the next year.

We need to accept the world as permanently disrupted. It's a stark warning contrasting with high confidence levels. Adaptability, not mere resilience, will be the defining trait of successful organisations in the year ahead.

### **Adapting to the three Ds: disruption, debt, deregulation**

The global economic order is shifting from the Washington Consensus to a multipolar reality. Trade wars, tariffs and regulatory fragmentation are no longer temporary irritants, they are structural pillars forming the complexities of the new business landscape. Executives who expect a swift return to pre-2020 globalisation risk significant strategic missteps.

Tariffs of course, exemplify this shift. Initially dismissed as short-term political manoeuvres, they now form part of a broader geopolitical contest, particularly between the U.S. and China when it comes to what is now the next space race – technological supremacy.

### **Supply chains: the strategic battleground for ultimate success**

Supply chain is where adaptability matters most and the key to success. Sustainability mandates, tariff pressures and regionalisation are making global networks harder to manage. It was difficult enough

to build supply chains that were both sustainable and dependable. Now, with new restrictions and trade tensions spilling into third markets, it's even more complex.

### **Economic outlook: moderate growth, high risk**

Forecasts for 2026 suggest modest global growth – around 2% in the U.S. and 1% in Europe – but downside risks dominate. Inflationary pressures could resurface after April as the tailwinds of lower oil prices fade. Employment trends remain weak across major economies and geopolitical shocks could derail fragile recoveries.

C-suite executives are facing a high-energy task for 2026 and beyond, one that will require resolve. Decision makers will need to make bold bets and, sometimes, conserve strength. One thing is clear at any rate, adaptability is no longer optional, it's existential for inclusion in strategic plans to survive and thrive in such a competitive landscape.

# Technology transformation



**The gap between recognition and execution is emerging as the defining challenge in Korea's technology transformation.**

Korean C-suites leaders widely recognise the strategic importance of technology transformation and AI, yet the pace of formal strategy development, investment scale, and organisational restructuring remains more cautious than the global average. Investment decisions continue to prioritise measurable ROI and short-term performance, while foundational capabilities such as data protection, governance, and scalability show relative underinvestment. At the same time, AI is already driving tangible changes in workforce structures and operating models, reinforcing its role as a core lever for efficiency and future competitiveness. Korea's long-term technology advantage will depend less on adoption itself and more on the ability to scale AI sustainably through enterprise-wide execution, organisational agility, and stronger data infrastructure.

“Many Korean companies acknowledge the strategic value of AI but have struggled to move from intention to execution. As Korea becomes the first country to fully implement the AI Framework Act, it sends a clear message: passive adaptation is no longer an option. Moving forward, sustainable AI competitiveness will depend not on adoption alone, but on the ability to operate AI in a trusted and scalable way - supported by strong data foundations, governance, organizational capabilities, and an enterprise-wide strategy that binds them together.”



**Yea-Sul Lee**  
Partner, Outsourcing  
Forvis Mazars in Korea

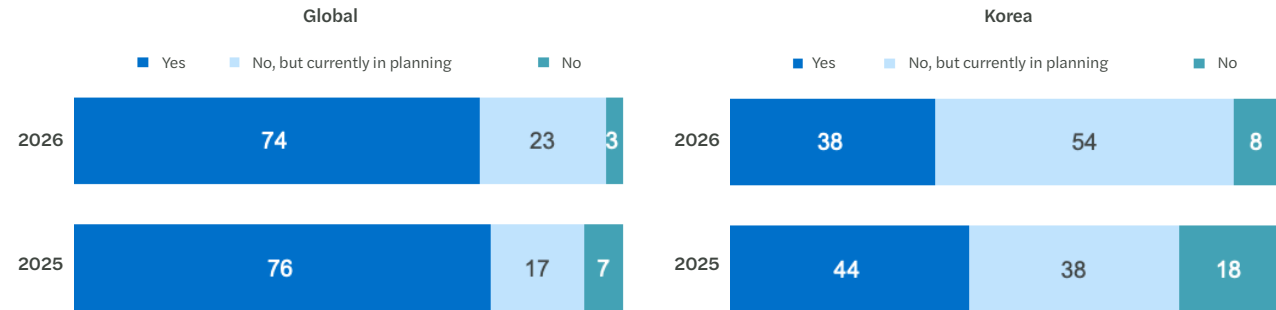
# Technology transformation

## Need to establish and execute a technology transformation strategy

While nearly three-quarters of global C-suite leaders already have a dedicated technology transformation strategy in place, Korean C-suites likewise recognise the importance of technology transformation. However, only 38% report having a dedicated strategy, significantly lower than the global average of 74%, and down from 44% in 2025. In addition, 54% state that a strategy is “currently in planning”, suggesting that although the need for technology transformation is well understood, the formal development of such strategies and their enterprise-wide implementation are progressing more slowly in Korea.

### Dedicated technology transformation strategy

Percent of respondents



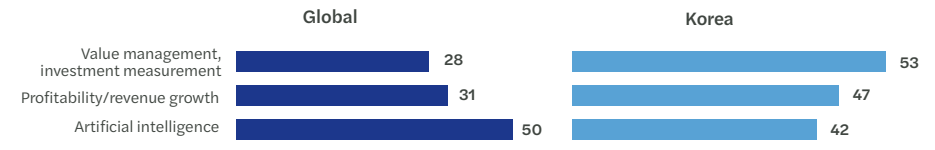
## Performance-driven technology investment

Korean C-suite leaders identify value management, investment measurement (53%), profitability/revenue growth (47%), and AI (42%) as the most critical drivers of successful technology transformation, reflecting a strong emphasis on ROI and measurability in their technology investment decisions. This tendency can be interpreted as an extension of Korea’s broader business culture, which often prioritizes relatively short-term and clearly measurable performance outcomes. However, the perceived importance of foundational capabilities such as data security and infrastructure (16%), scalability and resilience (5%), and governance (11%), is significantly lower in Korea than in the global sample. This limited focus and insufficient investment in these essential areas may create structural constraints when organisations attempt to scale technology transformation efforts across the enterprise.

Even so, Korean C-suites, similar to global, expect AI, automation, and data connectivity, analytics and warehousing to deliver the highest ROI, indicating that a strong preference for performance-driven investment exists alongside high expectations for emerging technologies.

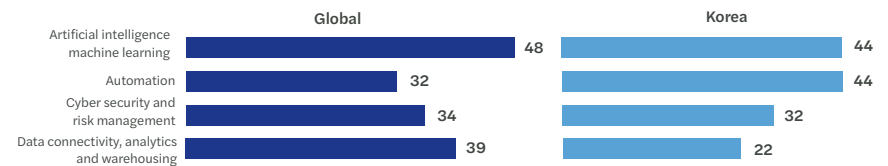
## What affects tech transformation success

Percent of respondents



## Confidence in ROI for technology transformation investments

Percent of respondents



# Technology transformation

## A cautious investment and slow implementation of organizational change

In terms of proportion of budget invested in AI, 65% of Korean C-suites allocate less than 10% of their budget to AI, a figure significantly higher than the global average of 35%. In contrast, only 2% invest more than 20%, compared with 15% globally. This reflects a cautious investment approach in Korea, where organizations acknowledge the benefits of AI but remain hesitant to commit to large-scale investment, potentially creating limitations when attempting to scale technology transformation initiatives.

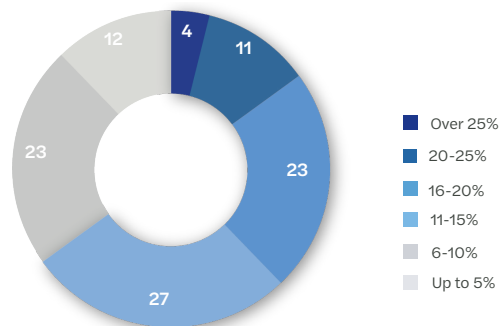
A similar trend is observed in organizational restructuring. In Korea, 36% of C-suites that they have already restructured to implement AI, 26% are in the “planned but not yet implemented” stage, and 38% report “no” restructuring activity. Globally, however 80% have already completed restructuring and only 12% remain in the planning stage, demonstrating a significantly faster pace of organizational transformation.

This slower pace in Korea may reflect the country’s relatively rigid labour management environment, as well as the institutional and regulatory burdens associated with workforce and organizational restructuring, which likely contribute to delays in executing transformation-related organizational changes.

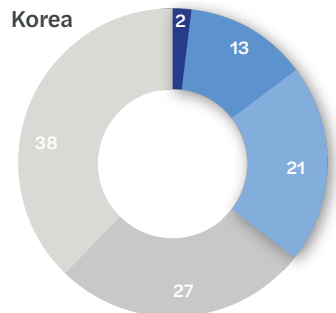
### Proportion of budget invested in AI

Percent among business using AI

#### Global

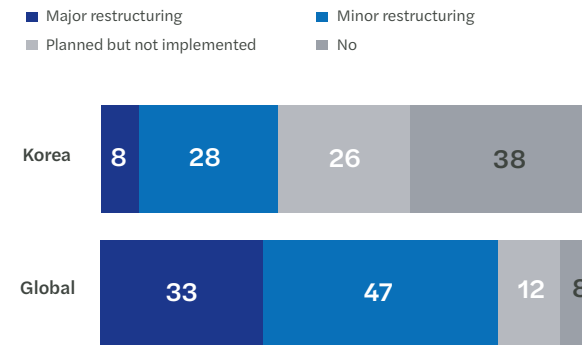


#### Korea



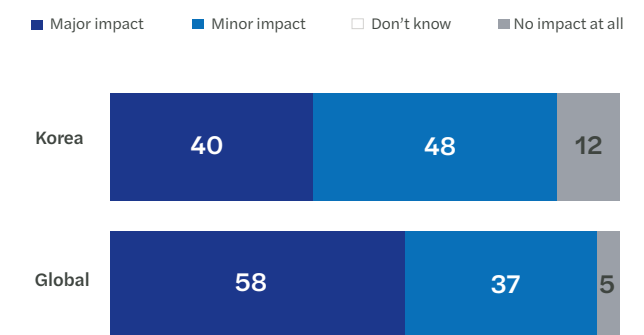
### Restructuring teams to implement AI

Percent of respondents



### Impact of AI on business

Percent of respondents



# Technology transformation

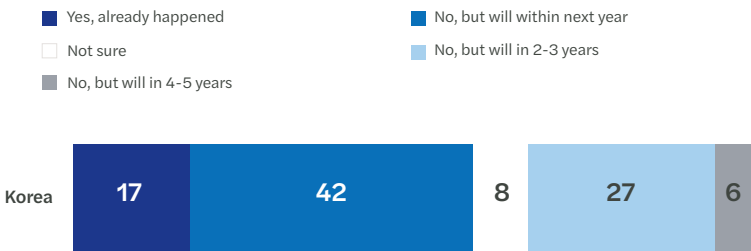
## Visible impact of AI

AI is already driving significant workforce changes in Korea. 59% of leaders report that AI is replacing jobs, and the same proportion (59%) say it is creating new roles, indicating that AI is reshaping workforce structures in substantive and structural ways.

AI adoption is particularly strong in knowledge acquisition, banking and retrieval; forecasting and planning; ad monitoring and benchmarking, with widespread use across knowledge-based and analytical tasks. These applications show that AI is already being implemented at scale to enhance efficiency and strengthen analytical capabilities. However, AI utilization remains relatively lower than global levels in commercial products/services, customer/client experience (CX), and lead generation, suggesting considerable room for further expansion into more growth-oriented areas.

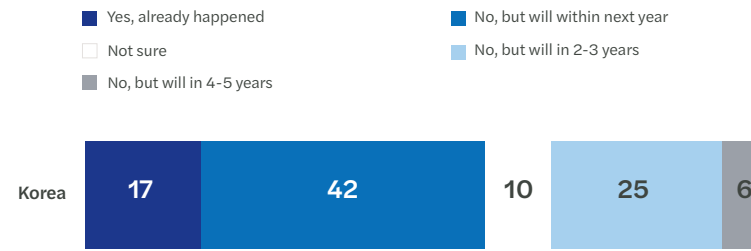
### Has AI replaced jobs in business

Percent of respondents whose business uses some AI



### Has AI created jobs in business

Percent of respondents whose business uses some AI



## AI adoption for operational optimization and competitive advantage

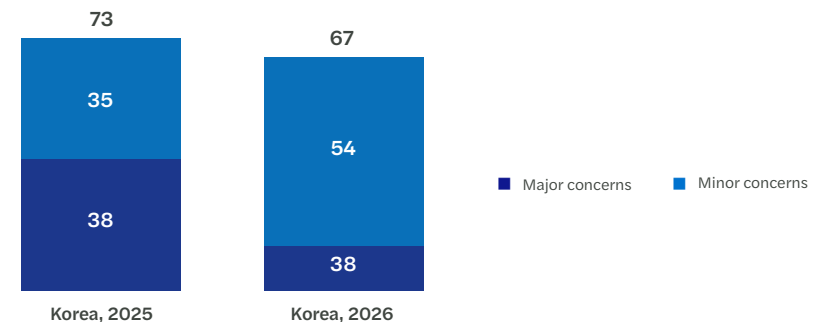
Korean C-suites executives identify operational optimization and strengthening future competitive advantage as the primary motivations for adopting AI, which is broadly consistent with global trends.

Although ethical concerns around AI remain, the proportion of leaders reporting “major concerns” has decreased by 25%p since 2025, indicating that concerns are easing as AI becomes more integrated into day-to-day operations.

However, only 14% of executives state that their company’s data is “completely protected,” a sharp 26%p drop from 2025 and 46%p below the global average. This highlights the urgent need to reinforce data protection and governance frameworks, which are essential to scaling AI adoption in a sustainable way.

### Ethical concerns with AI

Percent of respondents whose business uses some AI



# Resetting strategic priorities



## Adapting to competition and tariffs

Responding to tariffs is a matter of survival. However, the way companies respond can differ depending on national context and industry structure.

The C-suite data shows that Korean firms (44%) are significantly less confident in managing tariff-related costs than global executives (88%). Their response strategy also looks different. While cost management is a common reaction everywhere, Korean firms (14%) report far fewer price increases in response to tariffs (36% globally). Instead, they more frequently adjust their expansion plans (44% vs. 36%).

The pattern is not surprising. Many Korean companies operate within global supply chains where pricing power is limited. In manufacturing and export-driven sectors, raising prices can quickly affect competitiveness. With a high share of revenue coming from overseas markets, firms may be more exposed to price competition from global executives. In such an environment, passing tariff costs directly to customer is often difficult.

## A change in direction for international expansion

As a result, adjusting expansion plans and diversifying market portfolios may be a more practical and realistic strategy. Rather than relying on price increases, firms may seek to rebalance their geographic exposure, reconsider market priorities, or shift operational footprints.

The survey also shows that 58% of Korean firms have international expansion plans, which is significantly lower than the global figure of 84%, highlighting a more cautious stance.

Even among those that do have expansion plans, the scale of expansion appears more restrained. Fewer Korean firms report adding new target countries, and the proportion making major changes to their expansion footprint remains limited compared to the global sample.

For highly trade-exposed Korean companies, geopolitical risks and tariff changes are not just external concerns. They can directly affect costs, profits, and overall business feasibility. In this context, international expansion remains strategically important, but it also becomes one of the most sensitive and carefully evaluated strategic decisions.

Instead of pushing ahead, companies may choose to slow down, rethink markets, or change their geographic focus to reduce risk.

As Korean firms adjust their global strategies in a more volatile trade environment, how they move forward in the coming years will be closely watched.



**Hyun-Ho Shim**

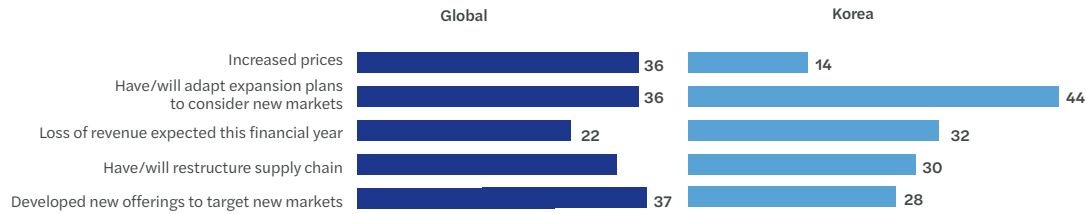
Partner, Head of Korean Desk  
Forvis Mazars in Korea

# Resetting strategic priorities

## Key indicators

### How tariff changes have affected businesses

Percent of respondents



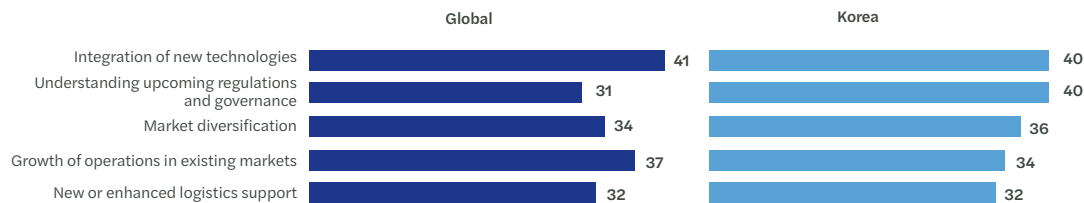
### Consolidating and offshoring operations

Percent of Korean respondents



### Supply chain investment priorities

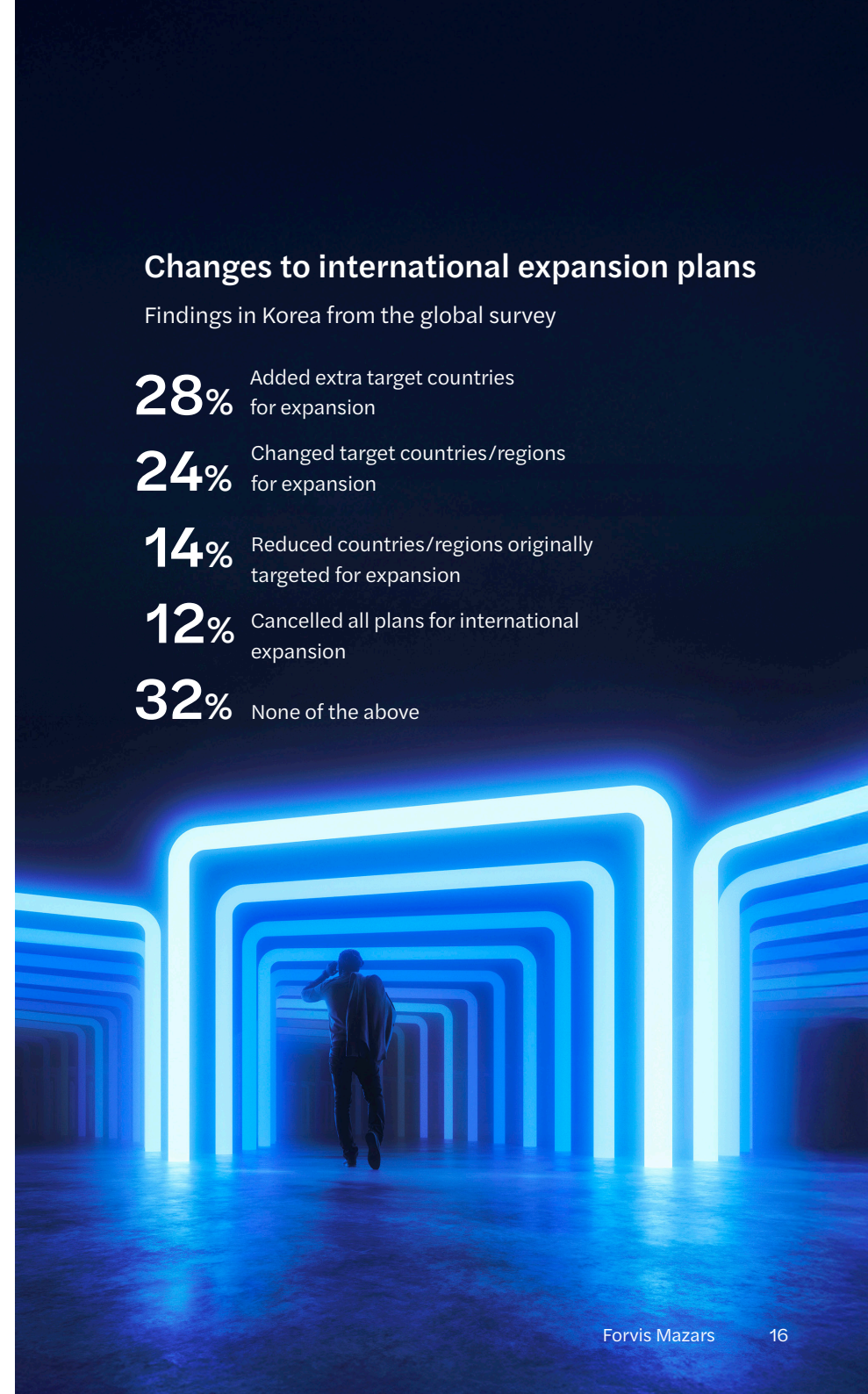
Percent of respondents



### Changes to international expansion plans

Findings in Korea from the global survey

- 28%** Added extra target countries for expansion
- 24%** Changed target countries/regions for expansion
- 14%** Reduced countries/regions originally targeted for expansion
- 12%** Cancelled all plans for international expansion
- 32%** None of the above

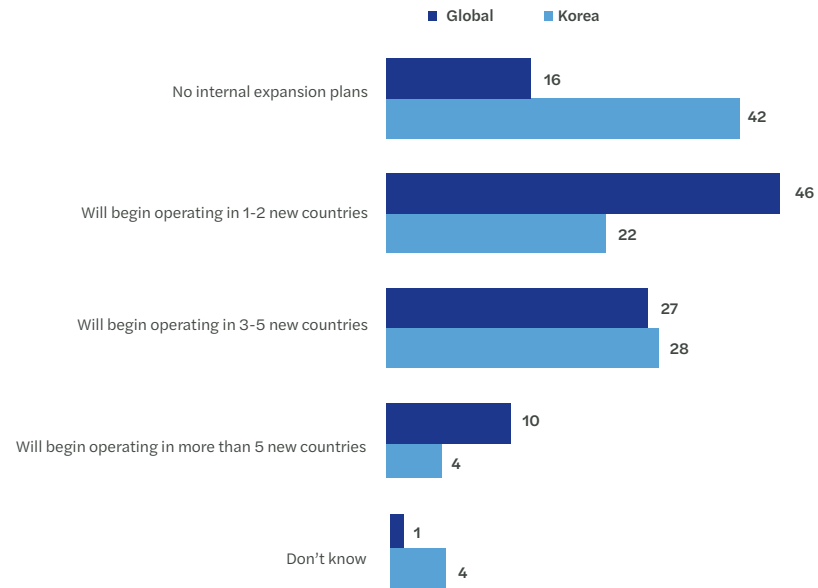


# Resetting strategic priorities

## Key indicators

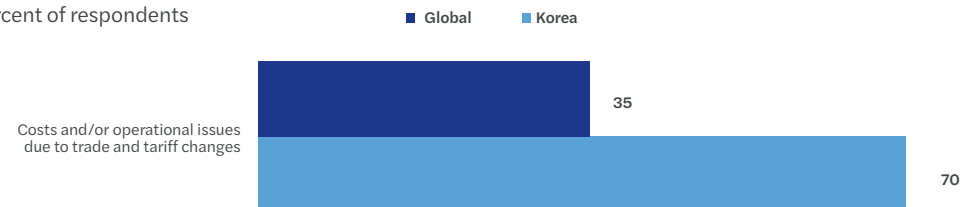
### International expansion plans

Percent of respondents



### Biggest challenges faced in setting up operations in new countries

Percent of respondents



# Acknowledgements and methodology

Forvis Mazars appreciates the support of our contributors and subject matter experts, including Adecco and T.Rowe for sharing their perspectives and insights. Their knowledge and experience have added significant value to our 2026 C-suite barometer.

We also wish to acknowledge the creative and editorial teams for their expertise and attention in the design, writing and production of this report, ensuring its clarity and visual impact for our clients and readers.

Forvis Mazars, in partnership with Peter McLeod AS, surveyed 3,012 C-suite executives around the world for its 2026 C-suite barometer. The fieldwork was conducted via online panels in October and November 2025. This independent research captures the views of leaders at for-profit organisations with annual revenues of over US\$1million.

In Korea, the findings are based on responses from 50 C-suite leaders, forming part of a broader Asia-Pacific sample of 260 executives. The research captures the perspectives of senior decision-makers at for-profit organisations with annual revenues above US\$1 million, spanning a range of industries and leadership roles.



# Contacts

## **Julien Herveau**

Country Lead Partner

[julien.herveau@forvismazars.com](mailto:julien.herveau@forvismazars.com)

## **Jung-Min Lee**

Partner, Head of Audit and Quality Control

[jung-min.lee@forvismazars.com](mailto:jung-min.lee@forvismazars.com)

## **Yea-Sul Lee**

Partner, Outsourcing

[yea-sul.lee1@forvismazars.com](mailto:yea-sul.lee1@forvismazars.com)

## **Seung-Ha Park**

CEO

[seung-ha.park@forvismazars.com](mailto:seung-ha.park@forvismazars.com)

## **Hyun-Ho Shim**

Partner, Head of Korean Desk

[hyun-ho.park@forvismazars.com](mailto:hyun-ho.park@forvismazars.com)

Forvis Mazars Group SC is an independent member of Forvis Mazars Global, a leading professional services network. Operating as an internationally integrated partnership in over 100 countries and territories, Forvis Mazars Group specialises in audit, tax and advisory services. The partnership draws on the expertise and cultural understanding of over 40,000 professionals across the globe to assist clients of all sizes at every stage in their development.

Forvis Mazars Sebit Accounting Corporation is an independent member firm of Forvis Mazars Group SC.

© March 2026

[forvismazars.com/kr](http://forvismazars.com/kr)

