



AI Engine Room:

From Ambition to Impact

2026 INDUSTRY REPORT
THE BOARDROOM CLUB
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



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Synopsis

This report examines the steps senior executives are taking within their organisations to integrate and scale AI to reduce cost and generate revenue.

With insights from leaders in Dubai across financial services, pharma, energy, healthcare, and other industries, this report provides a comprehensive overview of where organisations sit on their AI journey, their intended direction, and the challenges shaping progress.

A rounded mix of perspectives is presented from senior executives across risk, strategy, finance, technology, operations, and data functions, reflecting how AI adoption intersects across organisations. Where appropriate, contributors and quotes have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

“Only 12% of CEOs report both cost reduction and revenue growth from AI. [PwC, 2026]”

“70% of AI initiatives fail due to people and process related issues. [BCG, 2025]”

“Reaping value from AI investments requires mastering the tensions between talent and tech or risking an AI productivity drop of 40%. [EY, 2025]”

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Cisco, a global leader in technology, is not just building the infrastructure for the AI future; it's actively living it. Through its "Cisco on Cisco" initiative, the company is demonstrating how to integrate AI across every facet of its business – from empowering its workforce and redesigning workflows to optimising IT operations and enhancing customer experiences.

Cisco's intelligent solutions enable organisations to connect, secure, and automate their operations, making processes and working life for their employees smarter and more accessible. With a focus on AI-ready infrastructure, responsible AI practices, and a culture of continuous learning, Cisco is committed to supporting its customers and businesses to leverage AI to drive innovation, efficiency, and growth.

Topic Overview

AI ENGINE ROOM: FROM AMBITION TO IMPACT

“33% of UAE organisations have a Chief AI Officer, more than 20% higher than other countries.”

[IBM, 2025]

The UAE is emerging as a global AI pace-setter. Backed by strong national leadership, the Emirate has appointed more Chief AI Officers per capita than anywhere else in the world [IBM 2025]. For business leaders, this is an opportunity to move faster than your competition, drive growth, and make a global impact.

But leading the pack comes with a catch: there's no proven roadmap. Who will you partner with? What skills, operating models and governance do you need? And given that 95% of AI pilots fail to deliver value at scale [Forbes 2025], which change initiatives will actually drive meaningful business transformation?

With the UAE striving to become the world leader in AI by 2031, how will you capitalise on the growth opportunity at your fingertips?

“ The highest performing organisations stand out for thinking beyond incremental efficiency gains: they treat AI as a catalyst to transform their organisations, redesigning workflows and accelerating innovation. ”

[McKinsey, 2025]

#1 Ambition Is Easy. Execution Is Hard

BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR AI AT SCALE

“Many companies today are ‘AI-interested’. They’re running pilots, dabbling with chatbots, issuing executive memos on experimentation. But these efforts are often bolted onto old ways of working.” [Forbes, 2025]

In a 2025 analysis, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) named the United Arab Emirates as the world’s foremost sovereign investor in AI, highlighting a bold ambition to be at the forefront of the fourth industrial revolution. Backed by national leadership, organisations within the UAE have appointed more Chief AI officers per capita than anywhere else in the world. As such, there is a real opportunity to establish a position as a global pace-setter, but there are also challenges to overcome. As our panel discussed, to deliver on their AI ambitions, businesses must build infrastructure, address issues around governance and adopt the new operating models that will enable them to scale their initiatives.

#1 Ambition Is Easy. Execution Is Hard

MATURITY LEVELS

To build AI readiness, the UAE has struck deals with overseas technology partners while remaining focused on developing the right talent. Meanwhile, businesses have been quick to experiment with AI tools and there has already been some success in deploying the new technologies into customer-facing initiatives.

“Organisations might operate in the AI space for years, yet still remain behind in adoption.”

**[Umar Ansari, Global Head
of Clinical AI, Abbott
Laboratories]**

Whilst positive steps are being made, our panel characterised the current state of AI maturity as nascent, particularly in terms of internal adoption. As things stand, there is a gap between the strategic ambition to use AI as a transformative technology and the current state of organisational readiness. They highlighted that organisations are at different stages of maturity.

#1 Ambition Is Easy. Execution Is Hard

READINESS AS THE BENCHMARK OF SUCCESS



"The governance is very important... otherwise you multiply tools and scaling becomes much harder."

**[Sonia Kusters, Chief of Staff to Group CHRO,
Schneider Electric]**

Our discussions highlighted an inflection point, with leaders stressing their ambitions to move AI deployment from experimentation, pilots and innovation initiatives to enterprise-wide transformation. This will require a considerable amount of foundational work. Organisations must ensure they have the appropriate infrastructure and data architecture in place. Equally important, governance structures and policies are required to ensure that risks are managed appropriately. There are cultural issues to address, too. For instance, enterprise-wide AI transformation may require considerably more cross-function collaboration than is the case at the moment.

#1 Ambition Is Easy. Execution Is Hard

THE AI BUSINESS CASE

“The real question isn’t whether there’s a business case, it’s the cost if your organisation gets left behind.”

[Wayne Beifus, Group CFO, AW Rostamani]



The business case for AI is evolving. As companies experimented with the capabilities of the technology, business-case discussions tended to revolve around the short or medium-term return on investment. Would a pilot project result in lower costs or higher revenues?

This is changing. Today, rather than asking if AI investments are justified, leaders have acknowledged that the technology represents a strategic capability. Without a commitment to AI, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to remain competitive when rivals are accelerating adoption. This is driving adoption.



“ Our new world of work is brimming with possibilities in automation, data analysis, artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. But technology is only as good as the people using it every day. ”

[PwC 2025]

#2 AI Adoption Starts With People, Not Platforms

Picking up on the theme of cultural change, our panel noted that AI adoption, at heart, represents a human challenge. The tools are available - and more are coming onstream as the technology advances - but it is how organisations use those tools that will determine whether an implementation is successful. There are a number of factors to be considered here, including leadership behaviour, the readiness of the workforce and an openness to cultural change. For many organisations, progress will see them building on what has already been achieved through experiments and pilots. The next phase will require AI to be embedded in day-to-day workflows across organisations. Our panel discussed how that can be achieved.

“CEOs are recognising that AI is more than a technology. It opens the door to a fundamentally different way of running organisations. [BCG, 2026]”

#2 AI Adoption Starts With People, Not Platforms

LEADERSHIP MODELLING DRIVES ADOPTION

In a 2026 article drawing on global research, BCG noted that CEOs tend to fall into three camps. There are “followers” who adopt a wait-and-see approach. Then there are pragmatists who are active in learning about the technology. Finally, there are the trailblazers who act decisively to upskill the workforce and drive forward with transformational change. BCG found that trailblazers are already seeing gains in speed, decision-making and efficiency.

This finding was reflected in our panel discussions. Participants stressed the importance of leadership.

AI adoption accelerates when leaders actively demonstrate its value and enable experimentation. This does not mean a wholly top-down approach. In fact, the most successful organisations combine executive sponsorship with initiatives to encourage bottom-up innovation. This could include hackathons, AI champions and decentralised projects.

“Our role as leaders is not just to deliver AI, it’s to enable and facilitate innovation.”

[Niraj Balwani, Regional CFO & AI Capability Leader, Procter & Gamble]

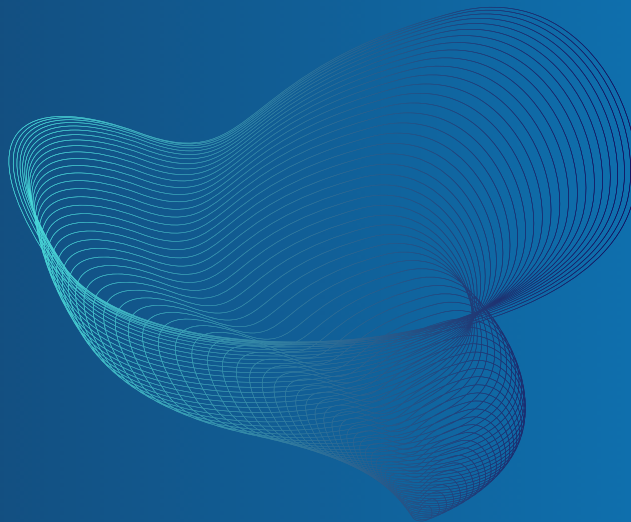
#2 Adoption Starts With People, Not Platforms

AWARENESS TO APPLICATION

“People are increasingly aware of AI; the challenge now is helping everyone apply it confidently in their daily work.”

[Sonia Kusters, Chief of Staff to Group CHRO, Schneider Electric]

Awareness of AI is growing. Organisations have invested heavily in upskilling their teams by providing training and access to learning platforms. The next stage is the all-important transition from awareness to application. In practice, this means integrating AI into everyday business processes and decision-making. This will involve a change in behaviour and mindset. Rather than simply understanding AI on a conceptual level, leaders and employees must address how the technology can be applied as a catalyst for transformation.



#2 Adoption Starts With People, Not Platforms

HR AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER

“HR still struggles to define what the future competency model looks like.”

[Unmesh Shukla, Head of HR, JK Cement]

HR will play a critical role in driving AI initiatives forward. This is a work in progress. According to the World Economic Forum’s 2025 Future of Jobs Report, 77% of employers planned to reskill their talent for the AI age. However, less than half had involved their HR teams. Commenting on the report, Forbes (2025) saw this as a critical miss, arguing that projects move faster when HR is involved.

At our roundtable, participants stressed the need to rethink workforce structures, competency frameworks and operational roles, with HR at the heart of the process. This was seen as evolving from operational support to strategic partnership, with HR acting as an enabler for future skills development.

“AI technology continues to evolve rapidly, introducing new opportunities almost daily. For leaders, the challenge lies not in waiting for perfect conditions, but in acting strategically and learning continuously.”

[Harvard Business School, 2025]

#3 The Leadership Dilemma

Our roundtable explored the possible tensions and trade-offs. Do they press ahead with aggressive adoption strategies? Or do they take a more cautious approach?

NAVIGATING URGENCY WITHOUT BREAKING TRUST

While enthusiasm for AI is running high, organisations face a dilemma. Leaders understand the importance of moving quickly to maintain or capture competitive advantage, but equally, they want to ensure that the transition to an AI enabled organisation is sustainable.

What emerged from our discussions was a broad agreement that if AI is to be scaled successfully, it must be seen not as an isolated project but as an enterprise-wide initiative.

SOLVE PROBLEMS, NOT TRENDS

"If you don't need AI to solve a problem, don't use it."

**[Umar Ansari,
Global Head of
Clinical AI,
Abbott
Laboratories]**

Businesses are often encouraged to adopt AI as a core capability that will enable change across the entire organisation. However, this does not mean that organisations should simply embrace the technology for its sake. Nor should they simply cut and paste generic use cases.

Instead, leaders should move forward by identifying problems and use cases that are specific to the business. Once that has been done, the next step is to redesign existing processes using AI as the enabler. Once tested, these innovations can be scaled across the organisation.

#3 The Leadership Dilemma

SPEED VS RESPONSIBILITY

There remain tensions around the speed of execution. Often, this will reflect different departmental priorities and perspectives. For instance, during our discussions, finance leaders focused on the danger of falling behind competitors. From this perspective, the risk lies in not moving quickly enough. In contrast, some HR leaders put the emphasis on social responsibility and workforce sustainability.

Varying priorities often lead to tensions, so it's important for leaders to ensure there is alignment across functions. This will be essential if businesses are to move from pilots and experiments to initiatives that can be scaled.

GOING BEYOND LAYERING

"Disparate AI use cases are not a strategy. We need to reimagine processes." [Lena De Geer, Regional Head IT & Digital Transformation Middle East & India, Fugro]

Rather than simply layering new AI tools onto existing workflows, there is an opportunity to completely redesign business models around AI capabilities. In other words, the big prize lies not in making legacy processes more efficient but in radically reimagining how business is done.

This is no small task. Moving forward successfully will not only require strategic clarity but also robust governance frameworks and a high degree of collaboration between teams.

Conclusion



The UAE has invested heavily in AI, creating strong national momentum and putting itself in a position to be a global pacemaker. This is reflected by the approach of the business community. There are more AI chiefs per capita than in any other part of the world. However, ambition and intention do not necessarily create value. Having experimented with AI, organisations are now looking at how to scale their initiatives. This will require integrated infrastructure, robust governance and clearly defined operating models. Those who invest in AI readiness rather than focusing on isolated projects are most likely to translate their ambitions into outcomes.

AI transformation is fundamentally a leadership and organisational challenge. While the technology is available, there are hurdles around culture, behaviour and organisational design. Leaders must prepare the groundwork by encouraging teams to embed AI into their daily workflow. In addition to top-down leadership, organisations should encourage innovation and experimentation at all levels.

Organisations face the dilemma of balancing speed with sustainability, and there may well be tensions. For instance, while a CEO and finance director may want to press ahead with an initiative in order to capture competitive advantage, HR may be more focused on how to effectively prepare and train employees for new ways of working. There will be a need to encourage collaboration across functions and align stakeholders behind a strategy of enterprise-wide transformation. Going forward, rather than layering tools onto existing processes, organisations should identify problems and opportunities to redesign their operations to take advantage of AI capabilities. Governance, talent strategy and investment should be directed towards scalable outcomes.

AI Engine Room

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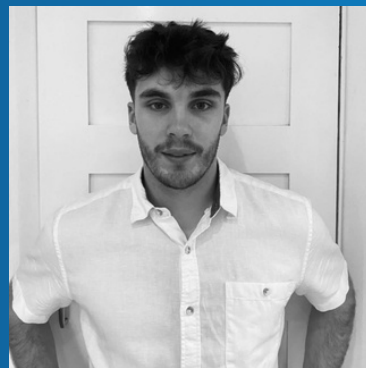
BOARDROOM

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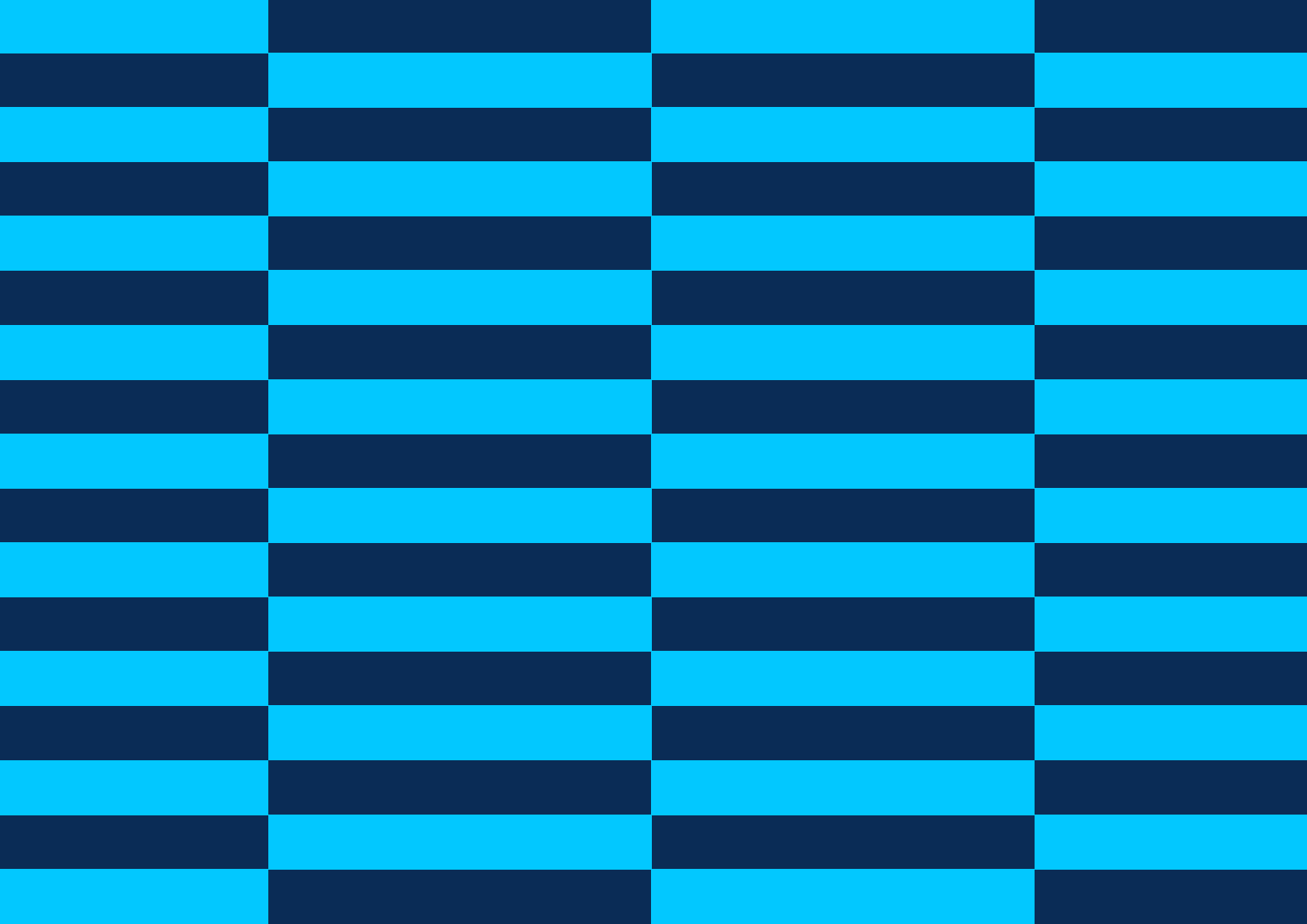


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