

CIO 2026 outlook:

# AI moves from disruption to delivery

| A Global Leader in  
Technology Services





# Table of contents

- Executive summary
  - **Foreword:** CIOs navigate an era of change
- 
- Business alignment tops CIO priority list in 2026
  - **Case study:** merging technology operations in a newly formed company
  - The evolution of tech roles and skills for the AI era
  - Growing security and digital sovereignty challenges
  - Keeping up with the accelerating pace of change
  - **Case study:** transforming a nation's digital infrastructure
- 
- Core leader actions for business impact
  - Experis global resources for tech leaders

# Introduction



## Executive summary

Today's CIOs are under increasing pressure to turn AI and technology investment from proof of concept into measurable business value. The organizations making progress are aligning AI to business priorities, modernizing the core, and activating it through governed delivery models.

**The key question is not whether technological advances matter, but how to operationalize them responsibly and at scale.**

**The Experis 2026 CIO Outlook Survey offers a comprehensive view of CIOs' fragile tightrope:** keeping pace with emerging technology applications while driving business growth and maintaining security. **We asked 1,930 CIOs, CIOs, CTOs, CISOs, and other senior tech leaders how they are currently navigating this current era of change and what it means for the future of tech work.**



**Taking center stage:** CIOs are intensifying efforts to close the gap between technology potential and organizational readiness as AI implementations move from proof of concept to proof of value. This will be a challenge as most CIOs (61%) say their senior leader peers struggle to fully understand their role and what is required to succeed.



**Keeping pace:** The challenge of keeping pace with rapid technological change now outweighs concerns over digital sovereignty, prompting many organizations to continue increasing investment in offshore delivery. Many tech leaders (44%) say keeping up with the pace of technological innovation is their top business challenge.



**Staying the course on AI:** As historic investment in AI continues, CIOs and senior tech leaders remain bullish on its future potential. Most (54%) say the investments are already starting to generate positive ROI and only 31% believe business leadership is overinvesting in AI.



**Help wanted:** Tech talent acquisition and retention remain a significant challenge as CIOs struggle to find workers with the rapidly changing tech skills they need.



## Foreword: CIOs navigate an era of change

The IT function has never been more consequential or more complicated. **Since our last CIO Outlook study in 2025, the gap between what technology can do and what organizations are ready to execute has only widened.** AI investment is at an all-time high. Returns are not keeping pace. And CIOs are caught in the middle, being asked to prove value to peers who, by their own admission, don't fully understand what the role requires.

That tension runs through everything in this year's data. **Business-IT alignment has overtaken cybersecurity as the top CIO priority for the first time, not because security matters less, but because the stakes of misalignment have never been higher. In many organizations, IT no longer supports the business.** It drives it. That's a fundamental shift, and it demands more than coordination. It demands more alignment than ever before at the leadership level.

The hard part is making AI work inside real businesses, with real workflows, real people, and real accountability. That is where **most AI initiatives stall, not at the technology level, but in the execution stages.** The sovereignty question adds another layer of complexity, particularly in Europe, where organizations are prioritizing digital sovereignty while simultaneously increasing their dependence on offshore delivery. Most organizations haven't resolved that tension, and this year's data makes it impossible to ignore.

**At Experis, we work with CIOs every day who are navigating exactly these pressures, finding the right talent, building internal capability, and closing the gap between AI investment and AI impact.** Technology gets you to the pilot. Humans get you to results. That is what this report is about, and we hope it gives you something useful to bring back to your own organization.

Kye Mitchell  
Experis US Brand Leader

James Hallahan  
Experis Europe Brand Leader

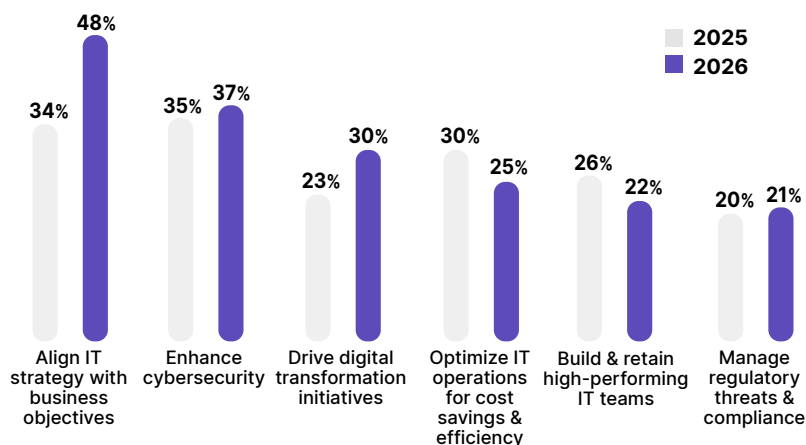
# 2026 CIO outlook



## Business alignment tops CIO priority list in 2026

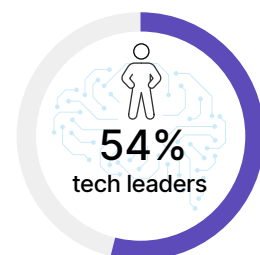
Nearly half (48%) of IT leaders in the CIO survey now say that the most important thing a CIO can do to help the organization is to align IT strategy with business objectives. This figure rose from 34% in 2025, overtaking cybersecurity as the top responsibility. Unfortunately, despite the prioritization, our respondents' companies haven't necessarily improved the alignment between business and IT since last year. Rather, IT leaders feel they must constantly focus on keeping business and IT goals from diverging more sharply. This is an admittedly difficult task when other senior leaders are confused about IT's mandates: 61% of tech leaders share that other leaders don't know enough about the CIO role and responsibilities, up from 49% in 2025.

Global CIO priorities: 2025 vs. 2026



To that end, tech leaders are starting to gain tangible ROI from AI investments. Most (54%) have already seen a positive return, with large, knowledge-based companies the most likely to report these early victories.

But tech leaders remain grounded about AI's potential: just 17% classify delivering AI solutions as a top CIO responsibility and have mixed feelings about AI investment. Just over half of tech leaders (51%) feel investment is at the right level, while 31% think they are investing too much and a further 18% are uncertain.



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Six in 10 tech leaders say they are in the process of implementing AI-based technologies into current systems. One-third (34%) claim that automation and AI-powered solutions such as chatbots and RPA are the technologies in production giving them the best ROI, while 41% still believe cloud computing and scalable digital infrastructure are the ROI winners.



## Merging technology operations in a newly formed company

**When two large pharmaceutical businesses recently merged, a main concern involved how to efficiently roll out SAP across global operations.** The core modules in question—**Financial Accounting and Controlling**—handled purchasing, invoicing, reporting, and cost management. **Without this integration, the success of the merger itself was at risk.**

Unfortunately, the newly formed company faced a fiercely competitive labor market for SAP expertise, so it **sought Experis Cross Border's help to source the right talent at a sustainable cost.**

**Drawing on Experis' global market intelligence** and balancing the pharmaceutical company's requirements against cost, availability, and competency, the staffing team **sourced and managed 25 SAP specialists and functional consultants** from its global network of 400 active SAP workers with seven or more years of experience.

The **SAP roll-out resulted in cost savings of approximately 35%**, achieved by strategically placing high-quality professionals in lower-cost locations. The Experis team's approach also reduced the company's dependence on expensive external consultants.

“Everyone wants to know more about artificial intelligence, but we're taking it one step at a time. At the level of internal IT processes, we are developing agents that make our lives easier. Once we have it under control, we will apply it to business use cases.” – CIO, food & beverage sector, Spain

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## The evolution of tech roles and skills for the AI era

Traditional IT roles are evolving rather than becoming extinct. Compared to 2025, AI-related headcount reductions are becoming less popular. **Fewer IT leaders than last year say AI developments are prompting organizations to eliminate roles so they could either move headcount to other areas or conserve costs generally.**

To us, this movement signifies the essential role of human oversight in the integration of AI-based technologies. More than half of tech leaders are embedding AI skills into existing roles, many are blending technology expertise with strategic thinking, and some are creating new roles.

Unfortunately, just as IT roles are being upleveled in their sophistication, tech leader succession planning is reaching a crisis point. **Fewer IT leaders this year say their companies regularly conduct programs for rising talent (58% vs 63% in 2025), raising the question of who will be adequately prepared to lead our organizations' technology functions in the near future.**

Notably, IT leaders are still looking to external candidates to fill open roles rather than considering alternative routes such as promoting from within. But even as they continue to rely on external sources, companies are widening their talent pools. For instance, the popularity of internal promotions and external IT services also grew.

### How tech leaders are adapting roles for the AI era



1. Embed AI skills into existing roles ↑
2. Blend tech expertise with strategy ↑
3. Increase versatility of existing roles ↑
4. Create new roles -
5. Require more cross-functional collaboration ↓
6. Increase focus on ethics and governance ↓
7. Reallocate headcount ↓
8. Reduce headcount for cost savings ↓

*Arrows indicate YoY change vs. 2025*

### Top sources of experienced tech talent

1. External candidates ↑
2. Internal promotion ↑
3. Outsourced IT services ↑
4. Freelance talent -
5. Interns or apprentices -

*Arrows indicate YoY change vs. 2025*



"AI is expected to integrate into every role within the company, enhancing skills and providing new analytical and decision-making capabilities. This widespread adoption signals a profound shift in how technology supports the organization, with AI serving as a universal tool rather than a domain reserved for specialists."

– Emmanuel Frénéhard, Chief Digital Officer, Sanofi, France

## Growing security and digital sovereignty challenges

Speaking of cybersecurity, it remains among the top concerns for CIOs and IT leaders, and this is reflected in budget prioritization. Cybersecurity and digital sovereignty are the priorities most frequently earmarked for budget increases in 2026. Still, despite the ever-increasing importance of and cost for effective cybersecurity, training and risk management strategies are not necessarily up to standard.

**Not even three-quarters of IT leaders (72%) say their risk strategy is aligned with their cybersecurity readiness, which is fewer than last year (77%).** Just 72% of our respondents regularly conduct cybersecurity training for employees, representing a small decline (74%) from 2025. This is surprising given that, as we already mentioned, cybersecurity skills are hotly in demand in the IT talent marketplace.

“Digital sovereignty, particularly for cloud and data, is becoming increasingly important as we consider new IT investments and partnerships.”

– Vincent Broussin, CIO, Tereos, France

Digital sovereignty is the ability of states, organizations, or individuals to maintain control over their own digital infrastructure — specifically pertaining to data, hardware, and software. **And while it plays a critical role in cybersecurity and is named as a high priority by 81% of IT leaders, the investment in offshore and nearshore IT delivery continues to rise.** Sixty-seven percent of IT leaders expect to increase their dependence on external services this year.

Cybersecurity tops list of most important tech skills



Cybersecurity

46%

AI & machine learning

37%

Cloud computing

31%

Collaboration and teamwork

22%

Software development

22%

DevOps

20%

Adaptability & continuous learning

17%

Problem solving

16%

Soft skills (e.g., communication)

14%

Innovation & creativity

12%



**67% of tech leaders plan to increase investments in offshore or nearshore IT delivery despite digital sovereignty concerns**

67%

## Keeping up with the accelerating pace of change

The accelerating pace of technological change presents a formidable challenge for CIOs globally. The **pressure to make timely decisions, manage evolving cybersecurity risks, and ensure their organizations remain competitive means that tech leaders are often juggling multiple priorities**, all while striving to align technology initiatives with broader business objectives. It was clear this was still a challenge for tech leaders across countries and industries in 2026. Nearly half (44%) of tech leaders say the top barrier for CIOs is keeping up, which is considerably higher than 2025 (34%).

“You're not going to be able to get the human out of the loop. I'm not going to replace you with a robot. I may, however, replace you with a person who is leveraging a bunch of bots and robots.”

– Travis Barrs, Chief Strategy & Transformation Officer, Discovery Education, USA

Pace of change tops global CIO business barriers



### Keeping up with rapid change

44%

Justifying value

26%

Managing internal resistance

25%

Legacy systems

22%

Cybersecurity incidents

22%

Privacy & regulatory compliance

21%

Finding & keeping top talent

19%

Insufficient budget

19%

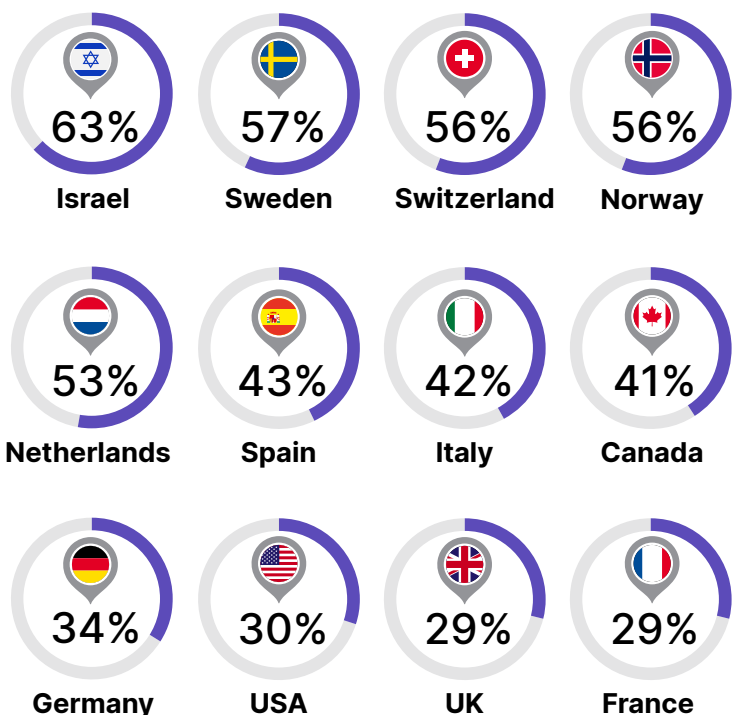
Unrealistic C-suite expectations

13%

Shadow IT operations

11%

### CIOs struggling with the pace of change across countries



“We need HR support that better understands our business needs beyond administrative and organizational support. This is particularly important in talent acquisition of specialized tech roles.”

– Kenneth Vik, CIO, Tide AS, Norway

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“I really see my role as that of a business partner. It’s not just about managing IT, but also aligning strategy with the company’s ambitions and helping business units prioritize their projects.

The success of IT projects depends not only on technology, but also on the ability to build buy-in and get business teams on board with a shared vision.” – Vincent Broussin, CIO, Tereos, France

Looking ahead, CIOs will need to embrace innovative strategies and cultivate adaptability to navigate the complexities of rapid technological transformation. As the pace shows no sign of slowing, those who invest in continuous learning, foster a culture of agility, and proactively address emerging challenges — such as legacy systems, cybersecurity, and talent shortages — will be best positioned to drive meaningful progress. **The ability to align IT with evolving business needs, while maintaining resilience and digital sovereignty, will distinguish the leaders capable of turning disruption into opportunity.**



## Transforming a nation's digital infrastructure

**A prominent UK government office recognized that its outdated technology systems were struggling to keep pace with public demand.** This was an issue given that the organization delivers critical services to millions, supported by more than 60 applications communicating through hundreds of interconnected applications. The whole technological infrastructure needed an overhaul.

To undertake the transformation, **Experis assembled a team of approximately 130 technology specialists, bringing together program managers, architects, business analysts, engineers, and testers.** The collaborative team followed a phased approach to development, including a detailed initial discovery phase and a thoughtful retirement of legacy systems. The program focused on one key component: migration to a modern cloud infrastructure on Amazon Web Services.

Leveraging the highly specialized, short-term team assembled by Experis, the UK government office experienced significant operational improvement. **Containerization drove a 79% reduction in cloud infrastructure usage,** meaning the same workloads ran on a fraction of the previous resources. Performance across key APIs doubled, delivering faster, more responsive services to the public. **And finally, all 60+ applications were modernized, leaving the organization with a stable foundation that was adaptable enough to serve its needs in the coming years.**

# Best practices for future success



## Core leader actions for business impact

As the pace of change accelerates, technology leaders have a greater opportunity than ever to shape business outcomes. Success will depend not just on adopting new technologies, but also on aligning them to business priorities, building the right skills, and creating the governance and operating discipline needed to scale change effectively. As AI adoption expands across functions, organizations that combine readiness, agility, and execution will be best positioned to lead.

### Align technology to business priorities



Solid aligning with business is not just maintaining a strong relationship with your CEO. Ongoing education and collaboration with leaders in other functions is critical, as is forming a bridge to the leadership of individual teams so that you're in the loop regarding practical applications they're implementing and tools they're using. When it comes to your metrics, measure what matters to the business: revenue growth, operational efficiency, and customer retention.

"If we save time thanks to AI, the real question is: what are we going to do with that time? The value of a project must be measured in terms of revenue or profitability."

– CIO, luxury goods sector, France

### Create a structured approach to emerging technology



Keeping pace with innovation requires more than informal experimentation. Leading organizations are building repeatable processes to evaluate, test, prioritize, and scale new technologies based on business value, governance requirements, data readiness, and workflow fit.

Given that all of this requires budget spend, work with your CFO to understand where you can and should expect ROI, and where it makes sense to cut underperforming programs. By reassessing the performance of all investments through quarterly audits and then communicating positive results across the company, you'll build trust, goodwill, and buy-in for the next time you want to try something new.

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## Strengthen leadership and human skills

Understand that any IT leader working today must have equally strong technical and soft skills. Being later in your career doesn't excuse the need to continuously evolve such as interpersonal communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills. Active listening is an especially valuable skill for uncovering how technology rollouts impact teams' daily workflows and operations.

## Expand how you build capability

Leaders should look beyond traditional hiring models to build the skills required for AI, cybersecurity, cloud, and modernization. That means combining internal upskilling, external expertise, and flexible delivery models to strengthen execution capacity. The goal is not simply to fill roles, but to build teams that can deliver transformation with speed, accountability, and the right balance of oversight and specialized skill.

## Promote continuous learning and AI readiness

Learning must become an ongoing discipline, especially as cybersecurity risks evolve and AI adoption accelerates. Leaders should invest in continuous development that helps teams strengthen technical skills, improve security awareness, and learn how to work effectively with AI in daily operations. Access to courses, certifications, and hands-on learning can help employees stay relevant and prepared.

## Be practical about digital sovereignty

Decide how important digital sovereignty actually is to your organization and based on your answer, consider taking steps to reduce your dependence on outside resources. Set reasonable benchmarks to this effect so your credibility is not damaged by unfilled promises. As the world grows more connected, true sovereignty will be a challenge but building internal competency and simplifying integrations in a sensible way to go about it.

“The most important capability for a CIO going forward is the ability to continuously learn and stay updated. This means actively feeding your thinking with new input, whether from industry insights, experimentation, or new tools. The pace of change is extremely fast, and what was relevant a few months ago may no longer be sufficient. If you do not evolve continuously, you become outdated very quickly. Developing your mindset and understanding is therefore critical to being able to lead your organization forward.”

– Frode Vatne, CTO, Pelagia AS, Norway



## Experis global resources for tech leaders

Experis®, a global leader in technology services, provides the experience and expertise to shorten the distance between innovation and business impact in a digital world. Experis is guided by the principle that only human ingenuity can unlock the true potential of advanced technologies like AI.

For clients, Experis offers the right mix of talent and technology to accelerate progress and deliver real-world results. For individuals, Experis has the insight, size, and scale to help tech professionals expand their skills, increase their value, and find the right opportunities. By matching talent to technology in transformative ways, Experis creates brighter futures for everyone. Experis is part of the ManpowerGroup® (NYSE: MAN) family of brands, which also includes Manpower and Talent Solutions.

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### Research Methodology

Experis commissioned a survey of 1,930 senior tech leaders across 12 countries from January 28 – March 4, 2026. Respondents included CIOs, CTOs, CISOs, and other senior tech leaders with decision-making authority over IT budgets and hiring. In addition, in-depth qualitative interviews were completed in each market. Some of the quotes from these interviews were kept anonymous at the request of the respondent.

