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RESEARCH REPORT

Technology Leader's Strategic Agenda for 2026

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Executive Summary

Technology leaders in the SAP space must balance the need to continuously innovate and remain current on SAP solutions and technology while supporting the needs of business teams and achieving organizational goals. Coming into 2026, these leaders face significant challenges. Geopolitical instability and global macroeconomic uncertainty must be weighed against a need to complete and optimize ERP transformations, deploy AI in SAP applications, and effectively manage costs. This can make supporting business priorities while driving innovation a challenge that should be explored and understood.

To understand the strategic agenda for technology leaders in 2026, SAPinsider surveyed its community between December 2025 and March 2026 to identify their key priorities for 2026, what they are doing to support business goals, the biggest challenges they are facing as a technology leader, their SAP priorities and planned investments, the status of their ERP journey, and their planned use of AI in SAP-related initiatives. Additionally, respondents were also asked about the global factors they expect will impact their strategies in 2026.

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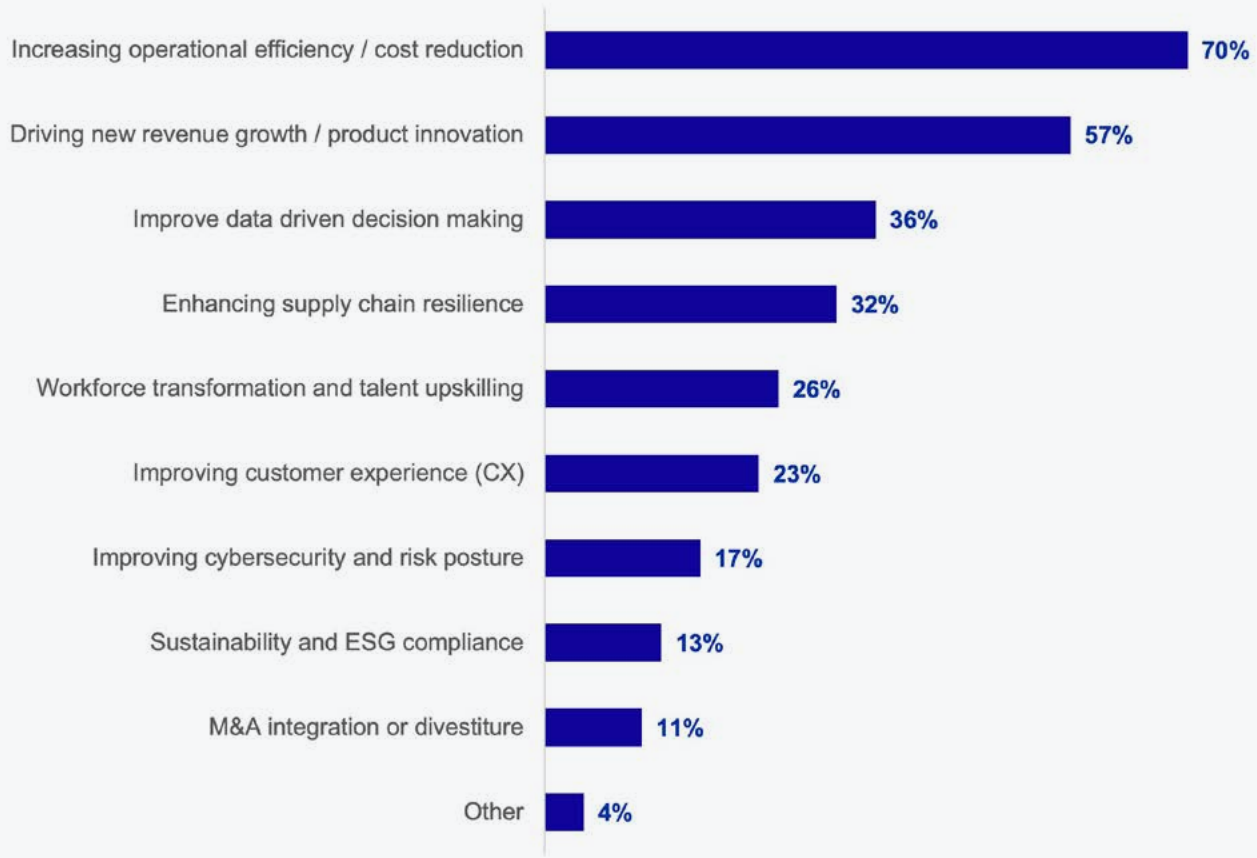
Since the decisions made by technology leaders are based on supporting the business priorities of the organization, the first question asked in this study was about the top business priorities for the year ahead **(Figure 1)**. Not surprisingly, increasing operational efficiency and reducing costs was identified by 70% of respondents as their top priority. Managing costs has long been important for technology leaders even as they strive to implement technologies that support new or changed business requirements. While it is not always possible to manage costs, it may be more possible to increase the efficiency of existing processes, which can, in turn, bring cost savings. Technologies that help achieve these goals are crucial from a business priorities standpoint.

70%

of respondents identify increasing operational efficiency and reducing costs as their top priority.

FIGURE 1

Top Business Priorities for 2026



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"There are 7 ways in which we are responding to our 2026 priorities:

1. Aligning our technology strategy to business priorities that focus on profitable growth, operational excellence and workforce transformation.
2. Using a platform operating model where business product team and engineering teams work as "2-in-box" sharing joint accountability for the outcomes.
3. A sharp focus on platform modernization across our core commercial, supply chain and finance processes. We are taking an end-to-end view with technology implementations while leveraging lean and agile methodologies. Also prioritizing on AI literacy across our business.
4. Focusing on cost discipline across segments, regions, and functions to continuously ensure our cost base matches our book of business.
5. Optimizing asset use to generate revenue or throughput by maximizing utilization and creating capacity with minimal investment.
6. Ensuring the full value realization from technology investments into modernizing platforms and standardizing processes.
7. Focus on simplification by prioritizing core deliverables, streamlining processes, and eliminating non-essential work."

TAPAN DASH, SENIOR DIRECTOR, ENTERPRISE APPLICATIONS, MAERSK

Just as it is important to increase operational efficiency and reduce costs, technology leaders must also support business teams in driving new revenue growth and product innovation. The combination of rapid technology shifts and changing customer expectations is compressing the lifecycle of existing offerings. As AI, cloud, and automation mature, they no longer deliver differentiation on cost and efficiency alone. Instead, they become capabilities that competitors can quickly replicate. Boards and investors are therefore looking to technology leaders to not just keep the lights on or optimize run costs, but to co-own the growth story by enabling new digital products, data-driven services, and outcome-based business models.

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Supporting these first two priorities is the need to improve data-driven decision making. As more organizations deploy AI capabilities, the importance of data increases exponentially. Having access to the right data at the right time not only drives faster decision-making, it also is essential for supporting AI capabilities. The mantra of garbage in, garbage out applies doubly to data that is used for AI as any discrepancy can result in everything from inaccurate results to AI hallucinations. The Technology leaders are faced with an additional challenge: while organizations are collecting ever increasing volumes of data, much of this information may not contribute directly the type of decision-making capabilities that are required. Determining what matters and how to use it is a vital step in supporting improved decision-making capabilities.

With business priorities identified, technology leaders must implement the systems and solutions that allow them to achieve these goals. For SAP customers that starts with planned SAP-related initiatives for the year **(Figure 2)**. Given the importance of ERP and the move to SAP S/4HANA, it is no surprise that the solution features twice in this list. The first is among leaders looking to optimize an existing SAP S/4HANA environment (43%) and the second is those that are still in the process of transitioning to SAP S/4HANA (31%). There is also a group that is focused on the expansion of optimization of SAP Cloud ERP, representing another 21% of respondents.

43%

Leaders are looking to optimize an existing SAP S/4HANA environment.

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"We are responding to this year's priorities by aligning strategy, processes, and technology to support growth and efficiency. The first step we are taking is that of improving the use of data and analytics in decision-making, contributing to operational efficiency efforts, and supporting innovation initiatives that drive new revenue. This includes streamlining workflows, identifying opportunities for automation, and ensuring insights are translated into actionable business outcomes."

— SAP PROGRAM MANAGER, FINANCIAL SERVICES AND INSURANCE COMPANY

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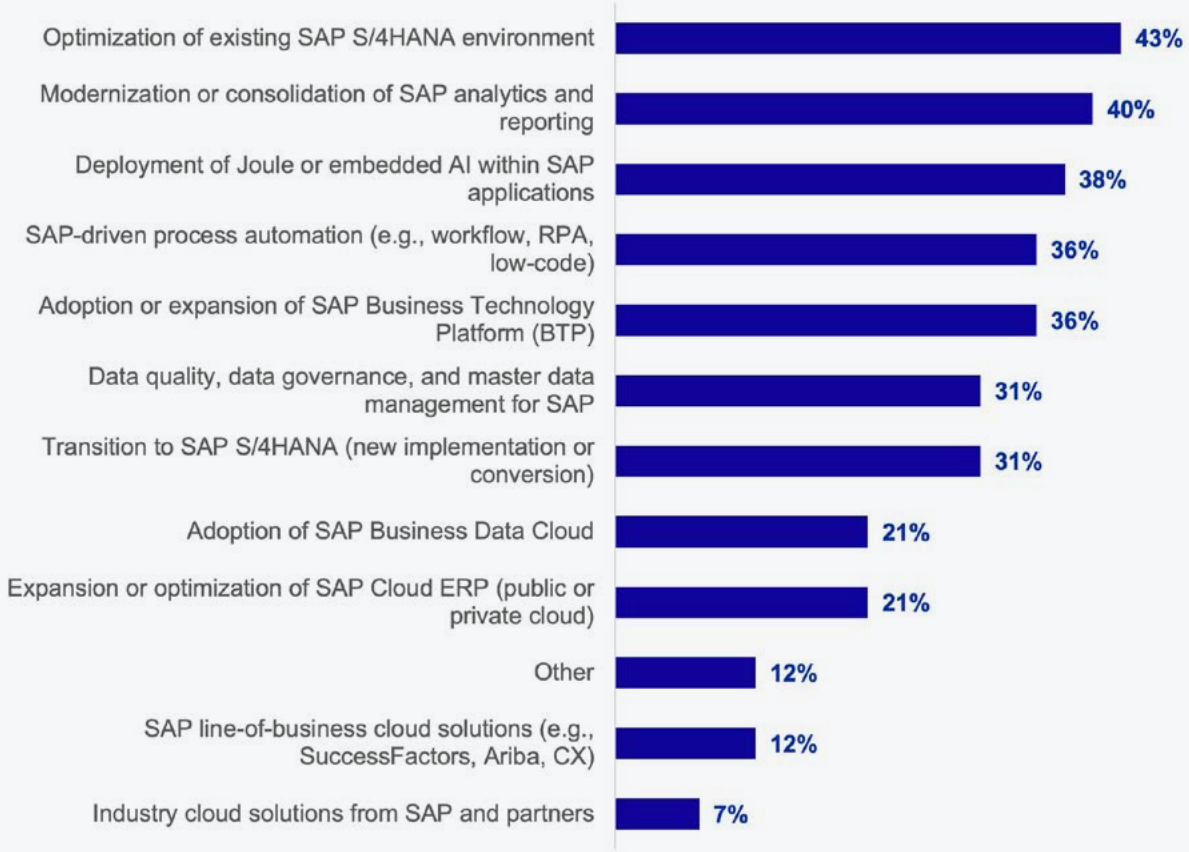
FIGURE 2

Planned SAP-Related Initiatives in 2026



It may seem as though these are separate groups. However, there are significant overlaps between these groups. For example, 28% of those planning on optimizing their SAP S/4HANA environment are also planning an expansion or optimization of SAP Cloud ERP and 17% are still transitioning to SAP S/4HANA, although that could be a separate instance. Similarly, 23% of those transitioning to SAP S/4HANA are optimizing another SAP S/4HANA environment or planning an expansion to SAP Cloud ERP.

Organizations modernizing or consolidating their SAP analytics and reporting capabilities are supporting the business priority of improved data-driven decision-making . With 40% of leaders reporting that this is in their plans, there is an obvious need that may be coming from SAP's changes and announcements in the analytics space over the last year. This is also reflected in the fact that 21% of respondents report that they are planning to adopt SAP Business Data Cloud (BDC) in the next year. SAP's new software-as-a-service offering that is built on SAP BTP and now includes SAP Datasphere and SAP Analytics Cloud, has been positioned as a strong candidate for helping organizations revolutionize their data and analytics capabilities.

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Rounding out the top three planned SAP-related initiatives for 2026 is that of deploying Joule or embedded AI within SAP applications. Given the increased use of AI within the enterprise space, adding these capabilities to SAP applications in 2026 has become increasingly important and the plans of technology leaders will be further discussed later in this research.

Although all leaders identify the plans they want to prioritize for the year, where they plan on spending their budgets is more telling. With core ERP often consuming the lion's share of technology budgets, exploring where leaders plan to invest beyond their ERP systems is crucial. Interestingly, planned investments do not necessarily align with the planned initiatives reported previously. For example, adoption or expansion of SAP Business Technology Platform (BTP) was fifth on the list of planned initiatives but first behind core ERP for planned investments. Similarly, embedding AI in SAP systems was third in the list of planned initiatives but fifth in the list of investments. **(Figure 3)**

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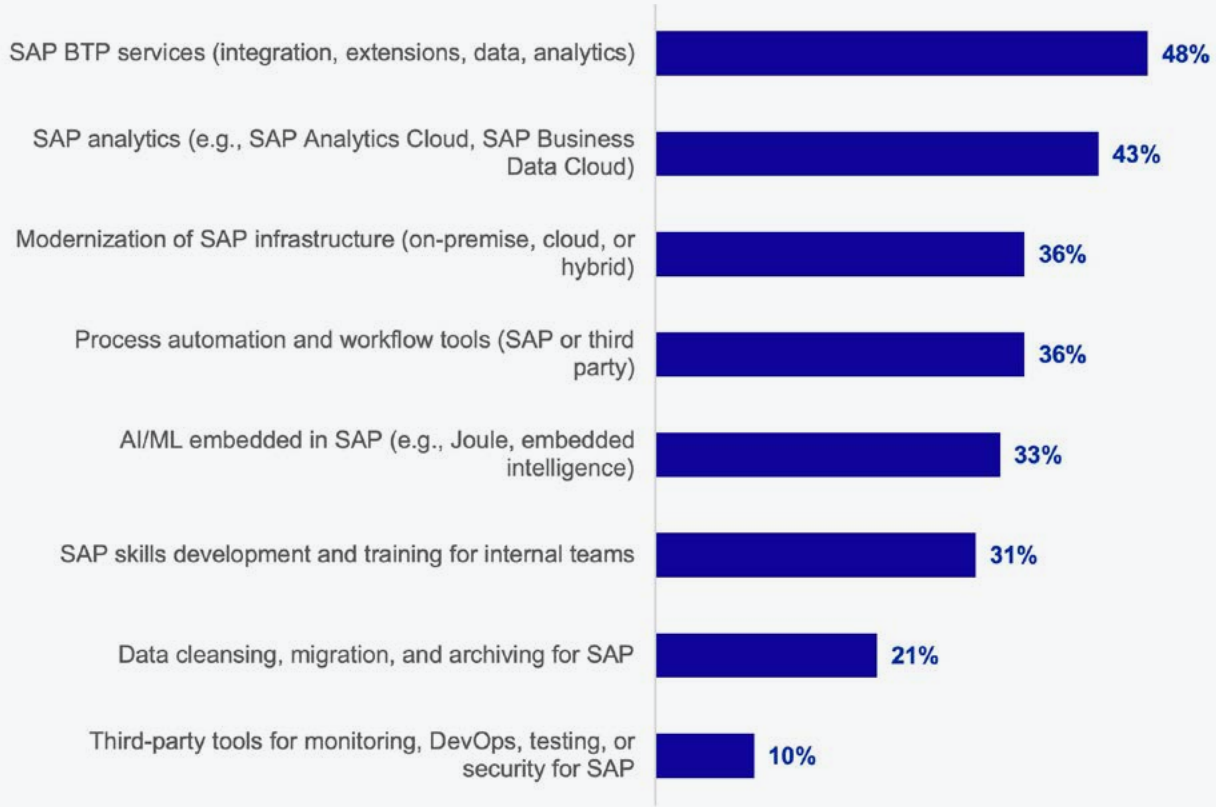
"This year we plan on optimizing our SAP S/4HANA landscape with additional focus on the digital supply chain. We also plan to focus on AI & automations with SAP Business Data Cloud, Joule, and other ancillary solutions."

STEVE BIRGFELD
CIO, BLUE DIAMOND GROWERS

FIGURE 3

Planned SAP Investments for 2026 (Beyond Core ERP)



These differences reflect the reality of the balance technology leaders must achieve with scoping and funding projects. With the foundational role SAP BTP plays in SAP landscapes, it makes sense that leaders must find these initiatives first and that AI, while important, may end up being secondary from a funding perspective. Or, because capabilities like SAP's generative AI assistant Joule are only available in ERP systems to customers with SAP Cloud ERP contracts (previously RISE with SAP or GROW with SAP), may have limited the ability of technology leaders to invest in using AI in SAP until they have completed other projects such as a move to cloud ERP.

By contrast, there is a continuation when it comes to investments on analytics required to support the business priority of improved data-driven decision making. While this is important, and more leaders are exploring the use of offerings like SAP BDC, investments like infrastructure modernization and process automation tools also require significant investments. Although critical, initiatives like infrastructure modernization often provide minimal differences to end users who may question the need for these projects, making the balancing act conducted by technology leaders even more important.

Artificial intelligence is a crucial part of future strategy for technology leaders though it is lower on the list of investment priorities for respondents,. This is reflected not only in the fact that it is the third most important initiative identified by respondents, but that it is also on the list of investments being prioritized.

Still, most organizations are relatively early in their adoption of AI in SAP-related systems with only 16% of respondents indicating that they are using AI in more than a limited manner. Despite this relatively conservative adoption, technology leaders have plans in place to implement AI and ML in multiple SAP-connected use cases this year **(Figure 4)**. The two most likely use case scenarios are intelligent automation and decision support in core ERP processes and predictive analytics and forecasting. Both these scenarios were selected by four in ten respondents.

16%

respondents have indicated that they use AI in more than a limited manner.

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"To address the challenges we face today we need a framework, methods, templates, and use cases that clearly show the business value, ROI, and return to justify the investments and cost related to each initiative we undertake."

— HEAD OF ERP INNOVATIONS & PRODUCT RELEASE, MANUFACTURING COMPANY

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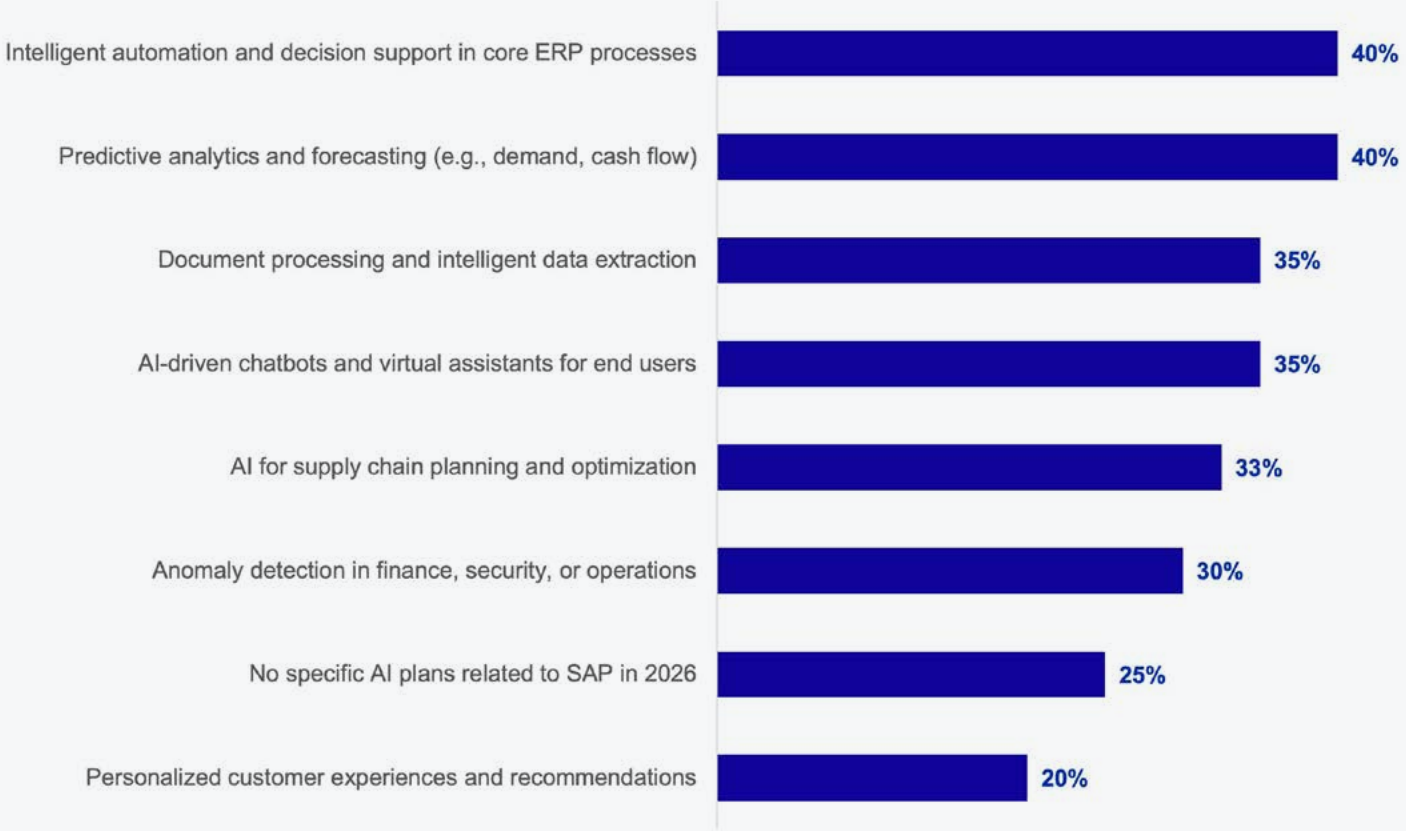
FIGURE 4

Planned SAP-Connected AI and ML Use Cases in 2026



Implementing AI and ML in core ERP processes is a key starting point for organizations because ERP systems are some of the most used solutions in the enterprise. Having access to AI and ML capabilities in these systems can make a big difference in their value, and this is something that SAP has offered for some years. However, the AI capabilities currently available to every SAP S/4HANA user are iterative AI and not generative AI. Accessing generative AI capabilities in SAP S/4HANA requires an SAP Cloud ERP (previously RISE with SAP or GROW with SAP) contract which many organizations do not currently have. This is where there is a focus on adding intelligent automation and decision support capabilities.

80%

leaders plan on using AI for intelligent automation and predictive analytics and forecasting.

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The second most important AI and ML use case is that of predictive analytics and forecasting. With a focus on improving data-driven decision making, enhancing predictive analytics and forecasting will go a long way to helping achieve this goal when combined with other analytics related initiatives.

Other AI and ML use cases include document processing, intelligent data extraction, AI-driven chatbots, and virtual assistants for end users. AI-driven chatbots and virtual assistants is what SAP's generative AI assistant Joule is designed to do, and technology leaders already have this on their agenda for the year. Document processing and intelligent data extraction are areas in which the addition of AI can offer significant improvements in reducing manually intensive processes. While it may be necessary to initial include a human in the loop to verify that everything is working correctly, using AI and ML for these capabilities can save organizations huge amounts of time and money.

While technology leaders have already planned their goals for 2026, external or even global factors could have a significant impact. To understand their thinking, respondents were asked to identify which of these factors were most likely to impact their company's strategy or SAP roadmap for the year (Figure 5). Given the volatility that occurred in 2025, it is no surprise that macroeconomic conditions was identified by 45% of respondents as the most likely factor to impact their plans for the year.

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"We've fully integrated AI into our SAP CRM landscape to empower our field force. Previously, our reps spent 15 to 20 minutes preparing for a single customer call. Today, through one question to our AI application, they instantly access complete customer context—like the exact number of invoices raised in the last 45 days, accurate down to the cent."

—HEAD OF ERP INNOVATIONS & PRODUCT RELEASE, MANUFACTURING COMPANY

45%

Leaders feel that macroeconomic conditions such as geopolitical tensions could change their SAP roadmap strategy in 2026.

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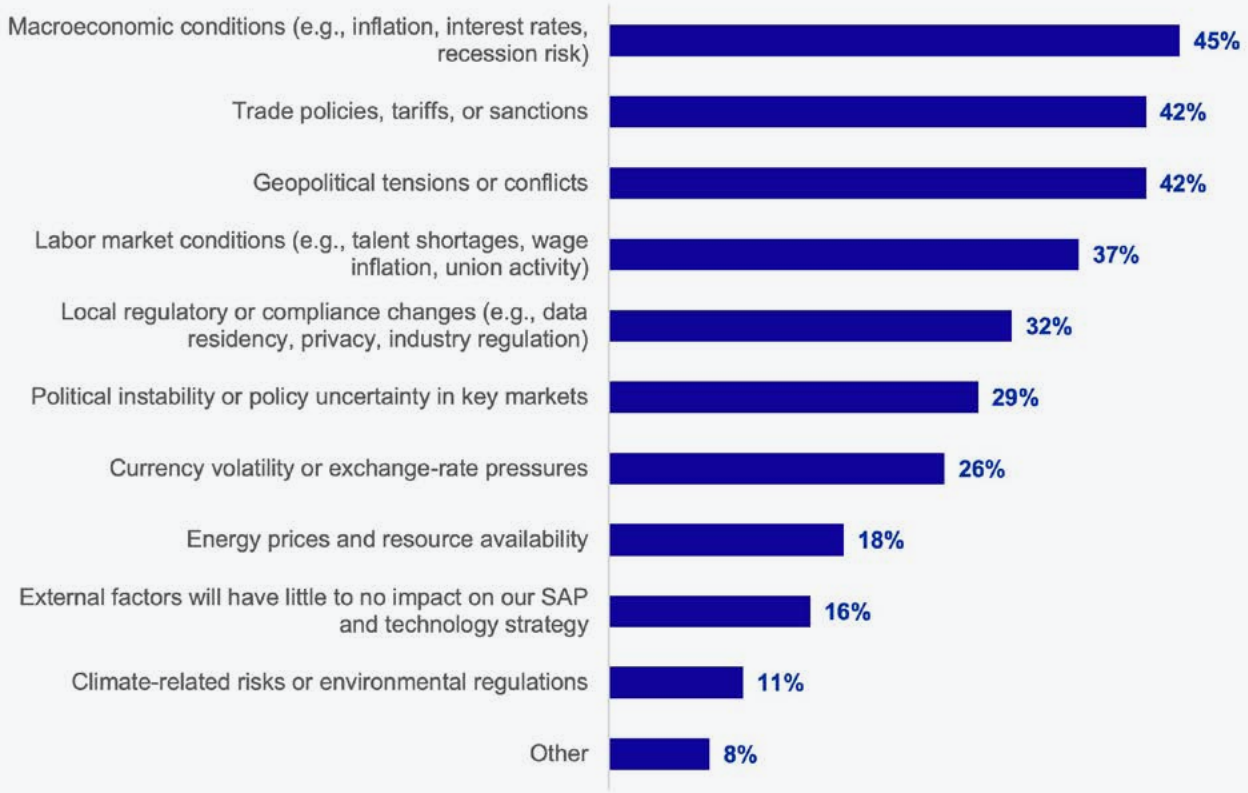
FIGURE 5

Global Factors Likely to Impact Organizational Strategy and SAP Roadmap for 2026



Almost as likely to change plans were trade policies, tariffs, or sanctions, and geopolitical tensions or conflicts, both of which were highlighted by 42% of respondents. While this survey was no longer active for much of the current geopolitical tensions, respondents were expecting some form of tension to develop over the course of the year.

The expected impact of these factors was most likely to be a need to reduce IT and SAP-related costs. Highlighted by 63% of respondents, this was nearly twice as likely as the next most likely impact, which is the acceleration of automation and efficiency-focused initiatives (34%). The default response of many organizations to external or global factors is a move to cut costs. This is done to provide the organization with more flexibility while it considers how to move forward. Technology leaders understand this but need to ensure that they have effective plans for reacting to a need to reduce costs and the knock-on effect that it is likely to have on their plans for the year.

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This year's survey also revealed other trends, including the following:

- Integration of AI into existing SAP processes (53%), a shortage of AI/ML skills and expertise (48%), and a lack of clear business cases or ROI (48%) were the biggest challenges faced in adopting AI in SAP environments. Given that SAP has focused on developing its own AI capabilities through functionality like Joule and has only made public AI models accessible though the AI Foundation in SAP BTP, organizations have lacked a way to integrate AI into SAP processes. This may change as more organizations seek to adopt offerings like Joule, but there is still much to be learned by technology leaders if they are to be successful.

- The most critical SAP-related skill sets to acquire in 2026 were SAP BTP development and integration skills (53%) and AI/ML and data science in SAP and non-SAP contexts (50%). With SAP BTP being the most likely investment to be made by technology leaders this year, it is no surprise that they are focusing on boosting skills for that product. Similarly, with AI and ML adoption accelerating across the enterprise and showing increasing importance within SAP solutions, and organizations lacking skills in this area, recruiting and developing skills with these technologies is critical.

- Nearly two thirds of respondents (59%) report that they are either live on SAP S/4HANA (45%) or live on SAP S/4HANA Cloud Private Edition (14%). This shows that the move to SAP S/4HANA is accelerating even if not every organization will complete that move prior to the end of 2027.

- The two biggest challenges identified by technology leaders in 2026 were aligning IT and business stakeholders on priorities (51%) and managing cost pressures while funding transformation (49%). Aligning IT and business teams is a problem as old as the existence of IT, and managing cost is a perennial issue for technology leaders. While not new, that does not make these challenges any less important to address.

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Required Actions

Based on the survey responses, technology leaders should consider the following when planning for the year ahead:

Plan for AI projects and adoption in SAP systems and data even if they are not being used today.

With most organizations still in the evaluation phase when it comes to leveraging AI directly in their SAP environments, it is important to plan for a time when AI is embedded and native to SAP applications. SAP is already starting to rewrite line of business applications on SAP BTP to make them AI-native. This is different from having access to Joule although SAP does plan on making Joule the primary interface for SAP systems. This will allow users to leverage AI without necessarily knowing that they are doing so. Over time this is likely to be extended to the entire SAP Business Suite and is something that technology leaders must include in their future plans.

Align closely with business teams to ensure that projects are successful and widely adopted.

Technology leaders already know the importance of closely aligning IT and business teams and successful projects leverage this by ensuring that business leaders are part of the project from the beginning. Leaders should continue to execute their strategies by finding a way to more closely partner IT and business teams and make those teams jointly responsible for success. This type of alignment will help ensure that participants from both sides remain engaged throughout the project and develop an accountability that extends beyond individual products or programs. Technology leaders should also set examples in taking this approach.

Do not neglect the importance of security and cybersecurity when it comes to plans for the year ahead.

Security and cybersecurity were towards the bottom of the list of business priorities identified by technology leaders for 2026 despite 2025 being a year of major cybersecurity breaches and SAP issuing more high priority patches than it had ever done before. Last year also offered some stunning examples of the knock-on impact of a cybersecurity breach that went way beyond the operations of a single organization. This makes it vital for technology leaders to ensure that security and cybersecurity are built into every project that they initiate in 2026. Just like any AI project requires guardrails to ensure that models do not access sensitive data or return inaccurate results, security should never be taken as an afterthought. Technology leaders risk much if they fail to follow this approach.

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