6 business trends for 2026

Geopolitics and artificial intelligence will shape many of the top global business trends in 2026.



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The global economy will continue to expand in 2026 but on shakier grounds. Artificial intelligence (AI) may gain depth. Talent will reflect geopolitical and technological shifts. Sustainability will advance while becoming increasingly politicized. And sports may become a new cultural battleground.

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IESE professors, along with other international experts, analyze the changing landscape. Here are six trends that no executive can afford to ignore in the year ahead.

1. Economic growth likely to continue

Despite pockets of “degrowth” sentiment, the world economy is likely to continue being the strong growth engine it has been for the past 70 years, noted Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* in a recent IESE session. The IMF forecasts global GDP expansion of 3.1% in 2026.

That being said, the conditions underpinning that forecast are now much more fragile. The IESE Economic Uncertainty Index indicates that global uncertainty has gone back to medium levels, after spiking during the pandemic and the start of the war in Ukraine, a respite that favors the normalization of investment and trade. However, the IESE index also reveals a structural trend: since 2008, episodes of extreme uncertainty that undermine growth have become more frequent and synchronized among major economies.

2. Companies need to expect the unexpected

Business leaders need to stay alert to systemic risks, warns Javier Diaz-Gimenez. Geopolitical tensions rattle energy and commodity prices, which in turn pressure inflation and monetary policy. Major powers’ fiscal or regulatory changes are almost immediately transmitted to the rest of the world. Apparent calm can quickly be undone by unexpected shocks, which spread and amplify rapidly.

The uneasy ties between the U.S., China and Russia are obvious sources of tension, especially given the unpredictability of the Trump administration. “The wars, conflicts and coups we see around us are signs of the collapse of the age of globalization and the emergence of a new world order,” says Mike Rosenberg. “What that will be is still very much evolving and dependent on leadership in government, business and civil society — and therein lies the challenge.”

There’s also concern that the AI bubble will burst. With governments awash in debt and national balance sheets increasingly fragile, the bond market is jittery. Recent bankruptcies in the private credit market may be a warning of more to come. Markets may also begin to better reflect how environmental destruction raises borrowing costs. Depending on who is chosen, Trump’s new Federal Reserve head may trigger a broader crisis in the international monetary system. Confidence is already wavering on the dollar’s reliability and issues of trust

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— though no real alternative to the dollar exists yet.

3. AI's next phase: depth over breadth

2026 may be the year AI is adopted more systematically at work. AI use, in general, is broad but shallow. To use AI for more than answering emails, you may want to start with asking basic questions about your job: What can AI allow you to stop doing? What can AI help you do better? And what new things can you do thanks to AI?

AI's apparent ease of use belies the complexity of deploying it at scale. A useful conceptual tool is Sampsa Samila's Generality-Accuracy-Simplicity (GAS) framework, which can help business leaders understand the trade-offs between how widely useful a model is, how accurate it may be in a given a situation and how easy it is to use. It's not that large language models have done away with complexity — it's that the complexity has moved elsewhere. Understanding this can help companies decide on which AI approach best suits their strategy. For Christoph Zott, the real productivity breakthrough will come when AI is embedded into the processes that generate new business models.

4. Talent adapts to geopolitical and tech shifts

2026 may also be the year in which AI begins to reshape how companies are organized, with consequences for knowledge jobs, especially for entry-level positions. Thus far, AI adoption hasn't made a dent in aggregate job creation, but there are indications that may change in 2026. Research is beginning to reflect that starting wages are declining in new positions in AI-exposed industries; since the launch of ChatGPT, they dropped on average 4.5%, with junior wages falling by 6.3% while salaries for senior positions remained stable or even increased.

According to Sebastian Reiche, companies will need to design roles with a high content of continuous learning, to ensure employees acquire the capabilities that matter most in an increasingly AI-led environment. Coupled with the tech knowledge, higher-level analysis abilities and domain expertise will be prized. And to thrive in such uncertain geopolitical times, companies will be looking for people who show resilience, flexibility, leadership and creative thinking.

The dearth of positive leadership models and the quiet shelving of DEI programs doesn't mean diversity has gone away, or that the problems of inequality and pay disparity are any

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less. Expect to see progress happen through smaller collectives, with a new networking-and-empowerment model called “tribes,” launched by female leaders in Africa and the diaspora, set to consolidate, ripple outward and grow in 2026.

5. Sustainability advances under the radar

With environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria becoming uniquely polarizing in the U.S., that doesn’t mean concern for the planet will die in 2026. Many companies remain steadfast in their sustainability policies, though they may avoid showcasing them. This is a useful strategy in the new PLUTO world: moving forward and protecting the company’s purpose without making a show of it.

Despite its questionable environmental track record, China will continue to dominate green tech. In the U.S., companies will rush to start or complete green projects before Biden-era tax credits expire in 2026, which could potentially result in a surge in renewables, Jennifer Granholm, former U.S. secretary of energy, told a recent IESE session.

Expect to see a loosening of EU environmental regulations in 2026, with the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) delayed or watered down. A major piece of legislation to watch out for in 2026 is the EU Circular Economy Act, which for Anna Saez de Tejada and Fabrizio Ferraro represents “a historic opportunity to transition to more environmentally sound models of production and consumption” and also aligns with Europe’s goal of becoming more autonomous and resilient.

6. Polarization enters the stadium

The Economist’s Tom Standage, speaking at IESE, wonders whether sport will become the next culture-war casualty. With the FIFA World Cup coming to Canada, Mexico and the U.S., its power to unite will be put to the test. Tensions are already apparent among the three hosts, and international fans may not feel as welcome to the U.S. “Sports are meant to serve as a platform for upholding human values,” says Albert Fernandez of IESE’s Sports Management Initiative. But he warns that acrimony and protests pose “significant economic and sporting harm” for fans, organizers, sponsors and host cities alike. For companies navigating culture-war backlash in sponsorships and brand associations, John Almandoz’s advice is simple: stay true to your core purpose.

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