Global economic conditions survey report: **Q3, 2026.**



ACCA

ima®

The Association of Accountants and Financial Professionals in Business

Accountants remained cautious in Q3, but GECS survey points to resilient global economy.

The ACCA and IMA Global Economic Conditions Survey (GECS) recorded a very minor fall in confidence among global accountants in Q3 2026 (see Chart 1).

- **Confidence among accountants globally fell slightly in Q3 and remains at quite a low level by historical standards.** Despite some fluctuations, this has consistently been the case since late 2024, likely in part reflecting the uncertain and unpredictable global economic backdrop, which has increasingly become the 'new normal' operating environment for firms. Confidence improved somewhat among chief financial officers (CFOs), but caution appears to remain the order of the day.

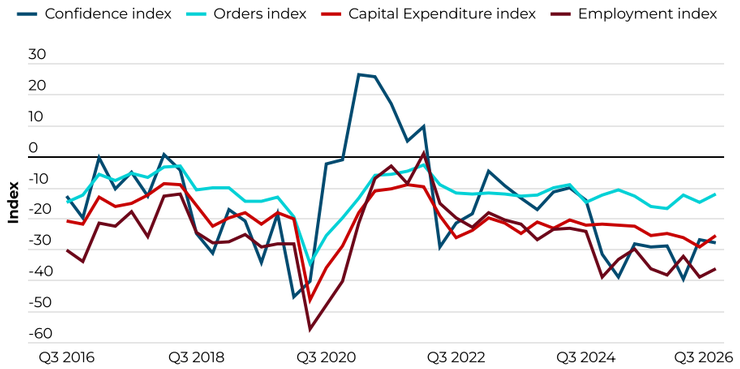
- **Cost pressures remain a major challenge for firms.** Almost 70% of surveyed accountants globally reported increased operating costs in Q3. This is down from Q2, but still significantly above the series average.[1] Among CFOs, 82% experienced higher costs, barely lower than in Q2.

- **The other key indicators remain consistent with a resilient global economy.** The Global New Orders Index improved and is just above its historical average and broadly similar to other readings since the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There were also small gains in the Global Capital Expenditure and Employment indices, although both remain below series averages. The artificial intelligence (AI) boom continues to provide major support to global growth and equity markets. Nevertheless, the renewed rise in energy prices and inflation, large increases in government bond yields in the advanced economies, and tighter monetary policy, continue to suggest that the risks to global growth remain firmly stacked to the downside.

- **Among the major economic regions, confidence rose in North America,** driven by a marked rise in the U.S., where our key indicators point to a strengthening economy. There was also some improvement in Western Europe, amid gains in both the UK and the wider region. By contrast, there was quite a large decline in confidence in Asia Pacific following a huge increase in Q2, although there was another solid gain in the forward-looking New Orders Index, which is close to the series high.

- **Economic pressures remained accountants' top risk priority in Q3 (24%), followed by geopolitical instability (18%),** and then regulatory/compliance risks and cybersecurity (c.13%). The open-ended responses suggest that the initial shocks to businesses are only part of the story. Some accountants are tracing how disruption works its way through customers, suppliers, technology and finance before it affects a service, margin or a decision.

Chart 1 **GECS global indicators**



Source: ACCA/IMA (2016–26)

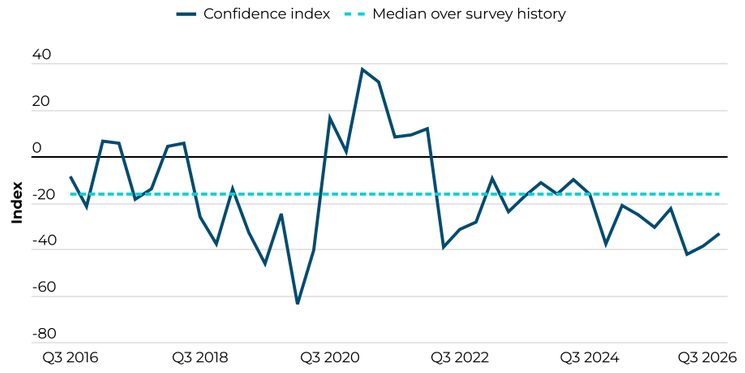
'Accountants globally remain cautious, but the other key indicators remain consistent with a resilient global economy.'

1 The median is used to calculate the averages.

While confidence globally remains meaningfully higher than the near-record low in Q1 amid the outbreak of the conflict in the Middle East, it remains in the low range it has moved in since late 2024, despite a global economy that has proved surprisingly resilient. This continued caution among accountants likely reflects the impacts from geopolitical risks and tensions, major changes in trade policy, country specific challenges, and rising political polarisation, which have created a highly uncertain and unpredictable operating environment for firms. Unsurprisingly, economic pressures and geopolitics remained the top risk priorities for accountants globally in Q3 (see Chart 11). Confidence improved somewhat among CFOs but remains at quite a low level by historical standards (see **Chart 2**): 28% of them ranked economic pressures as their top risk priority, followed by 25% who chose geopolitics.

Our key global activity indicators all improved slightly in Q3 (**see** Chart 1), consistent with a global economy that continues to show resilience. The forward-looking Global New Orders Index is now modestly above its historical average, and similar to most readings since the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Global Capital Expenditure Index remains somewhat below its historical average, but broadly similar to other readings over the last several years. Meanwhile, the Global Employment Index remains at quite a low level by historical standards. This may reflect the fact that while the unemployment rate is quite low in many major economies, job markets are rather sluggish and very far from firing on all cylinders. For CFOs, the New Orders Index improved quite markedly in Q3, although it can be volatile.

Chart 2 **GECS Confidence index for CFOs**



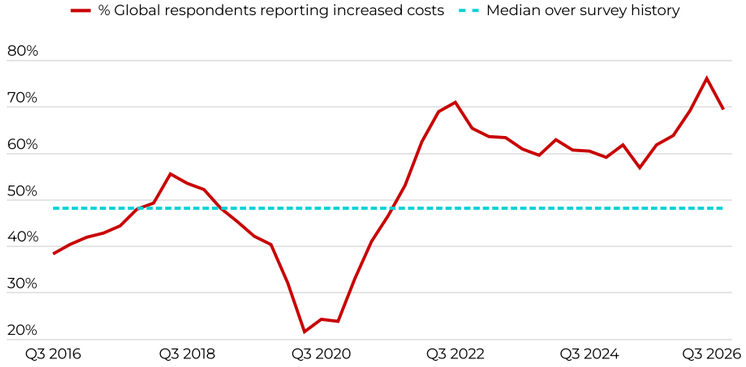
Source: ACCA/IMA (2016–26)

'Confidence among CFOs rose again in Q3 but remains well below its historical average.'

Cost pressures remain intense in the global economy, amid higher energy-related and other costs due to the war in the Middle East. The rapid AI build out is also pushing up prices, while higher import tariffs are a contributing factor in countries such as the U.S. Cost pressures appeared somewhat less severe in Q3 according to surveyed accountants globally, although 69% of respondents still reported increased operating costs – significantly above the series average (see **Chart 3**). Moreover, 82% of CFOs reported increased costs – barely down from the previous quarter (see Chart 4).

Developments in the Middle East and changing energy prices will clearly have a very important impact on costs over coming quarters. Energy prices have risen sharply since the beginning of July amid increased tensions in the region, with prices of important refined products such as diesel hitting records in many countries.

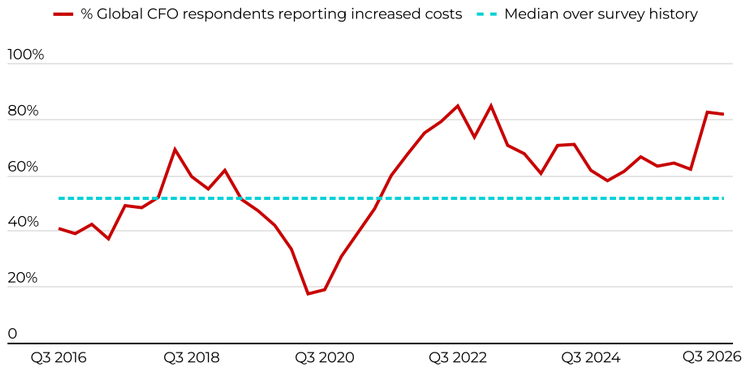
Chart 3 **Concerns about increased operating costs**



Source: ACCA/IMA (2016–26)

'The share of surveyed accountants globally reporting rising operating costs declined in Q3 but remains very elevated by historical standards.'

Chart 4 **CFO concerns about increased operating costs**



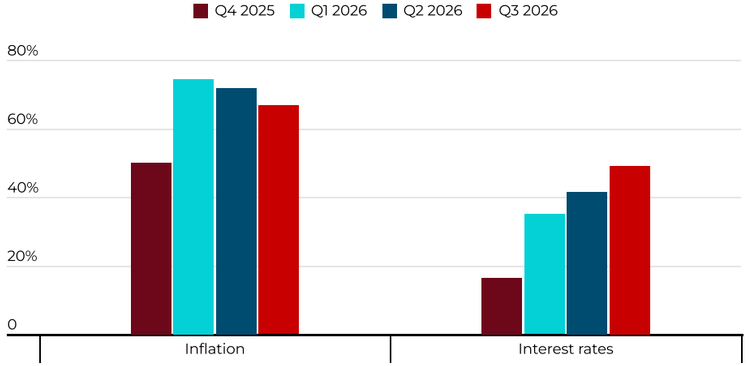
Source: ACCA/IMA (2016–26)

‘Over 80% of CFOs reported increased operating costs in Q3: significantly above the series average.’

Headline inflation has begun to rise again in many economies, and higher food prices appear to be another risk over coming months and quarters, including through the impacts of what looks likely to be an extremely powerful El Niño weather effect. Against such a backdrop, the U.S. Federal Reserve (Fed), European Central Bank (ECB) and Bank of Japan all raised interest rates in September, and further monetary tightening appears likely over coming months. Around two-thirds of surveyed accountants globally expect inflation to rise in their country over the next three months, down somewhat from Q1 and Q2, but well up from the 50% expecting a rise in Q4 2025. Furthermore, almost 50% expect interest rates to increase in their country over the next three months, up meaningfully from the previous two quarters, and compared with just 16% in Q4 2025 (see **Chart 5**).

Concerns among surveyed accountants globally that their customers could go out of business, an early indicator of potential corporate stress, rose in Q3. Excluding the pandemic era, this indicator is looking somewhat high by historical standards (see Chart 6), although it is at levels broadly similar to some readings in 2011 and 2012. Problems securing prompt payment also increased globally, according to accountants (see Chart 7). The series is only slightly higher than its historical average but is looking somewhat elevated compared with other readings in the post-pandemic period. While neither indicator is setting off alarm bells, a more meaningful and consistent move higher in these series over coming quarters could be a warning sign. Potential catalysts include a more pronounced slowing in global growth or aggressive monetary tightening by the major global central banks.

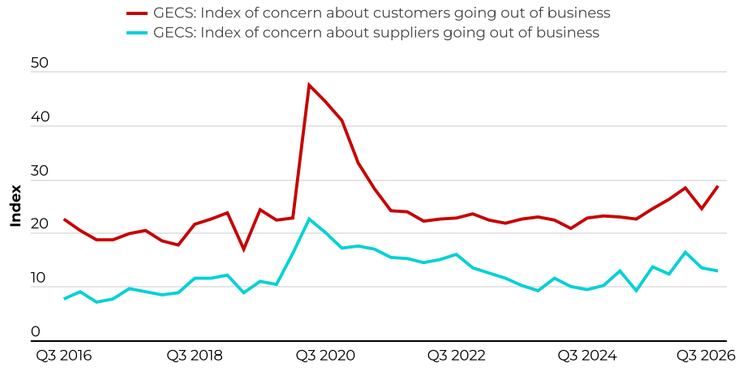
Chart 5 **Percentage expecting inflation and interest rates in their country to rise over the next three months**



Source: ACCA/IMA (2025-26)

‘Around two-thirds of survey respondents expect inflation to rise in their country over the next three months, while almost half expect interest rates to rise.’

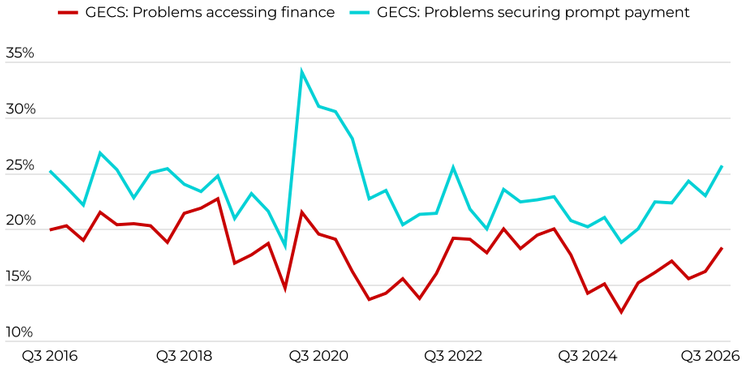
Chart 6 **GECS global ‘fear’ indices**



Source: ACCA/IMA (2016–26)

‘Concerns about customers going out of business among surveyed accountants globally are on the high side of readings outside the pandemic.’

Chart 7 **Problems securing prompt payment and accessing finance**



Source: ACCA/IMA (2016–26)

‘Global problems securing prompt payment have risen somewhat, but problems accessing finance don’t appear to be a particular issue.’

By contrast, concerns that suppliers might go out of business declined for the second successive quarter, following the recent peak in Q1 2026 amid the outbreak of the conflict in the Middle East. Such concerns are just above their historical average, but below levels seen from the onset of the pandemic until just after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (see **Chart 6**). Meanwhile, problems accessing finance globally rose for the second successive quarter but remain just below the series average (see **Chart 7**). Global financial conditions remain quite supportive amid stock markets near record highs. But tightening monetary policy and higher government bond yields are key risks, while further U.S. dollar strength could also become a problem, particularly for emerging economies.

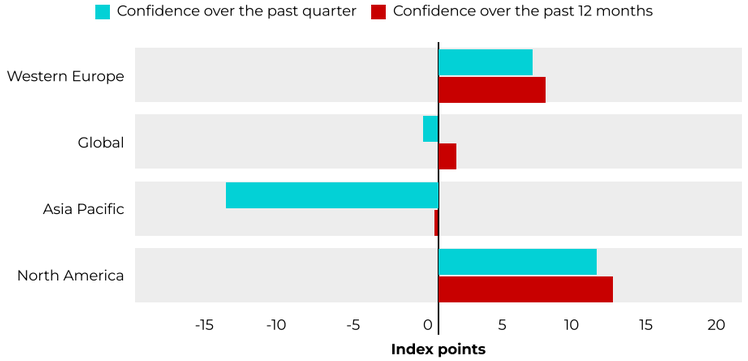
Overall, our key activity indicators for Q3 suggest that the global economy continues to prove resilient, despite very elevated cost pressures amid the fallout from the conflict in the Middle East. The global AI boom remains a major support – robust investment in countries such as the U.S. is fuelling surging exports from Asia Pacific, while stock markets remain close to record levels. But downside risks are increasing as rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran fuel a renewed rise in energy prices, which has sent major central banks back into tightening mode, while government bond yields in the U.S. and other advanced economies have risen to levels seen before the Global Financial Crisis. Developments in the Middle East will be key over coming months. A further sharp rise in energy prices would weigh on economies and increase pressure on central banks to act, and may lead government bond yields to hit levels that could be increasingly damaging for economic activity and financial markets. Indeed, expensive valuations could make equity markets vulnerable to a significant price correction.

North America

Among the major regions, there was quite a large rise in confidence in North America and a decent gain in the New Orders Index (see **Charts 8** and **9**). Confidence is at its highest since Q3 2024, while the New Orders Index is only slightly below its historical average. There were solid gains in the Capital Expenditure and Employment indices, although the latter remains at quite a low level by historical standards. The rise in the Confidence and Capital Expenditure indices for the U.S. alone were particularly marked, and there was an encouraging increase in the Employment Index. The New Orders Index was down very slightly though. Overall, our key indicators look consistent with some strengthening in the U.S. economy in Q3.

U.S. economic growth is benefiting significantly from the AI boom, amid surging investment and stock prices that are close to record highs. The latter, and a stable jobs market, is helping to drive solid consumer spending gains, despite high gasoline prices. Nevertheless, commentary from survey participants reveals the many headwinds still facing firms, including import tariffs, high energy prices and inflation, geopolitical and policy uncertainty, and elevated interest rates. Among U.S.-based respondents, 77% reported increased operating costs in Q3, down slightly from Q2, but very high by historical standards (see Chart 10). At its September meeting, the Fed resumed monetary tightening for the first time since July 2023. Given the combination of resilient growth, favourable financial conditions, and elevated inflation, it seems more likely than not that Fed Chair Kevin Warsh will be presiding over a second-rate hike by year-end.

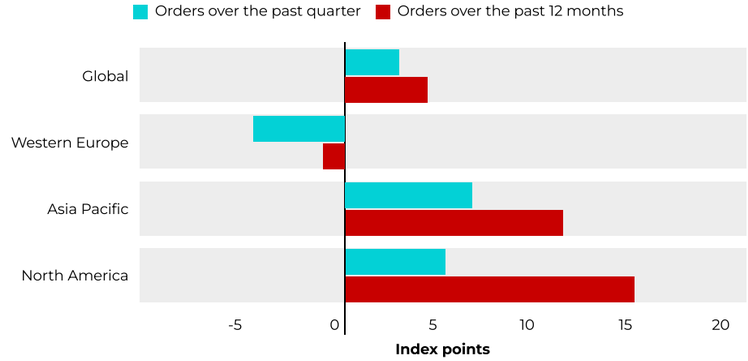
Chart 8 **Change in the GECS Confidence index, by region***



*Global also includes Africa, Middle East and South Asia.
Source: ACCA/IMA (2025-26)

'Confidence rose in North America and Western Europe in the latest quarter.'

Chart 9 **Change in the GECS New Orders index, by region***



*Global also includes Africa, Middle East and South Asia.
Source: ACCA/IMA (2025-26)

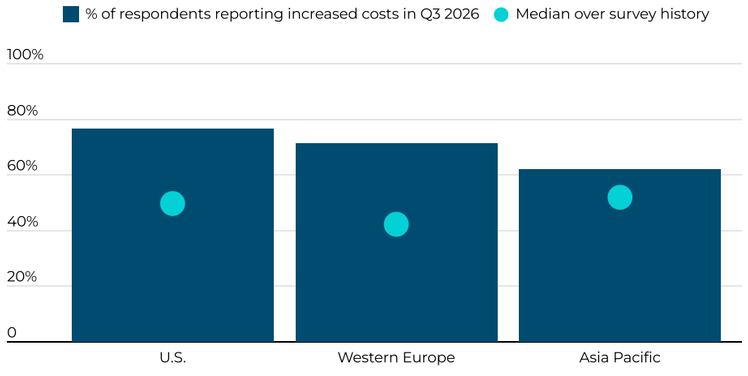
'The New Orders Indices registered encouraging gains in North America and Asia Pacific in Q3.'

Asia Pacific

Confidence in Asia Pacific declined materially in Q3 (see **Chart 8**), shedding almost three-fifths of the huge Q2 increase, although it remains just above its long-term average. By contrast, developments in the other key indicators were encouraging. There was a second consecutive solid improvement in the New Orders Index, which currently stands close to the series peak. There were also decent gains in the Capital Expenditure and Employment indices, which are now around their historical averages. All in all, the Confidence Index can be quite volatile and the decline in Q3 may be in response to renewed Middle East tensions and the rebound in energy prices. Nonetheless, the indicators generally point to a constructive picture for the region.

The resilient U.S. and global economies are clearly supportive, and a number of countries are important beneficiaries of the global AI boom. Cost pressures are a concern for businesses, however, with 62% of respondents reporting increased operating costs (see Chart 10). That's down from Q2, but still meaningfully above the series average of 52%. Resilient economic activity and elevated cost pressures may increase pressure on central banks in the region to tighten policy. Among survey respondents, 41% expect interest rates to rise in their country over the next three months, compared with 24% and 30% in Q1 and Q2 respectively. Further large rises in energy prices would present downside risks to the region, as will the upcoming El Niño weather effect, which is expected to be extremely powerful.

Chart 10 **Concerns about increased operating costs**



Source: ACCA/IMA (2026)

'Cost pressures are elevated in all the major economic regions, but are most intense in Western Europe and the U.S.'

Western Europe

In Western Europe, confidence improved somewhat (see Chart 8) for the second successive quarter in Q3, although it remains well below its historical average. There was quite a meaningful decline in the New Orders Index, however, which is at its weakest since Q4 2023, albeit similar to levels in the second half of 2025. The Capital Expenditure and Employment indices showed conflicting indications: the former declined quite meaningfully, but there was an improvement of a similar magnitude in the latter. Both remain well below their historical averages. Meanwhile, the proportion of survey respondents reporting increased operating costs fell by over 10 percentage points, but at 71% remains significantly above the historical average. An improvement in confidence was evident in both the UK and the region excluding the UK, although the improvement was much larger in the region excluding the UK, where the Confidence Index is much higher. The key UK-related indicators remain at very low levels by historical standards. Cost pressures appear very elevated in both, but are slightly higher in the region outside the UK.

Overall, both the euro area and UK economies have shown greater than expected economic resilience this year, but inflationary pressures remain elevated amid rising energy prices owing to events in the Middle East. The ECB has already raised interest rates twice in 2026, and another rate hike seems likely before year end. With much higher interest rates already, the Bank of England has so far eschewed monetary tightening, but, if energy prices remain elevated, the risk is clearly for a rate hike over coming months. Higher inflation, government bond yields, and central bank interest rates are likely to weigh on economic growth in both economies over coming quarters.

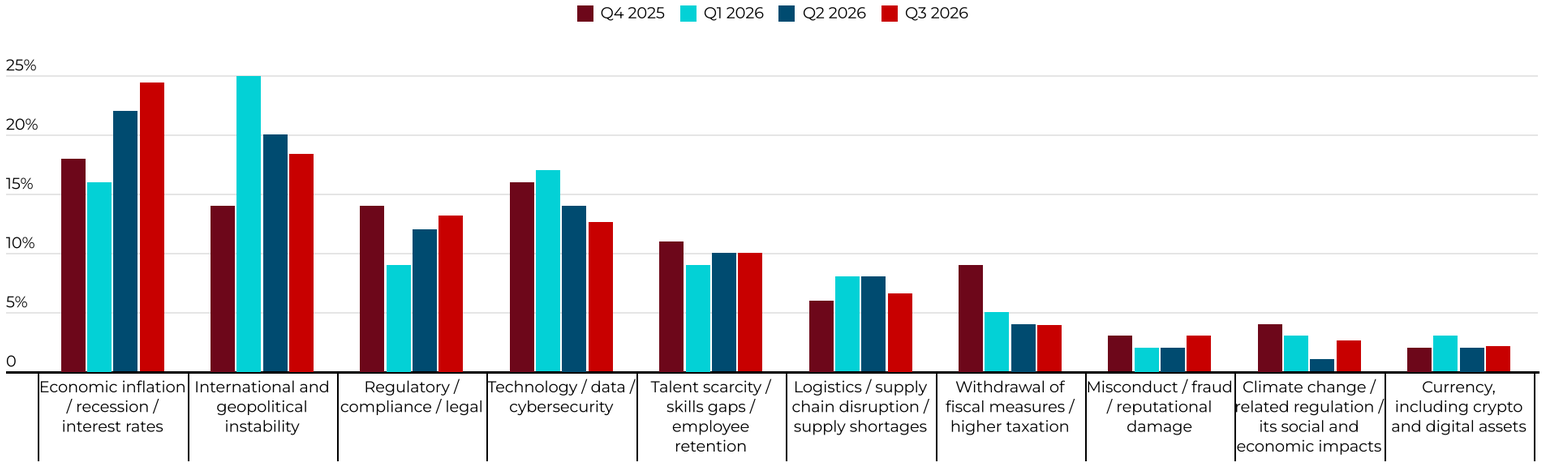


Where the shock lands.

In Q3 2026, accountants were asking how shocks travel through customers, suppliers and systems. Where will they land, and who needs to act?

Economic pressures remained accountants' leading risk priority in Q3 2026, ranked first by 24.4% of respondents to the ACCA/IMA Global Risks Survey. Geopolitical instability follows at 18.4%, with regulatory, compliance and legal risk at 13.2% and technology, data and cybersecurity at 12.6%. The rankings are broadly similar to Q2 findings. What differs is how these pressures reach organisations, and what they put at risk when they do.

Chart 11 **Accountants' top risk priorities over past year**



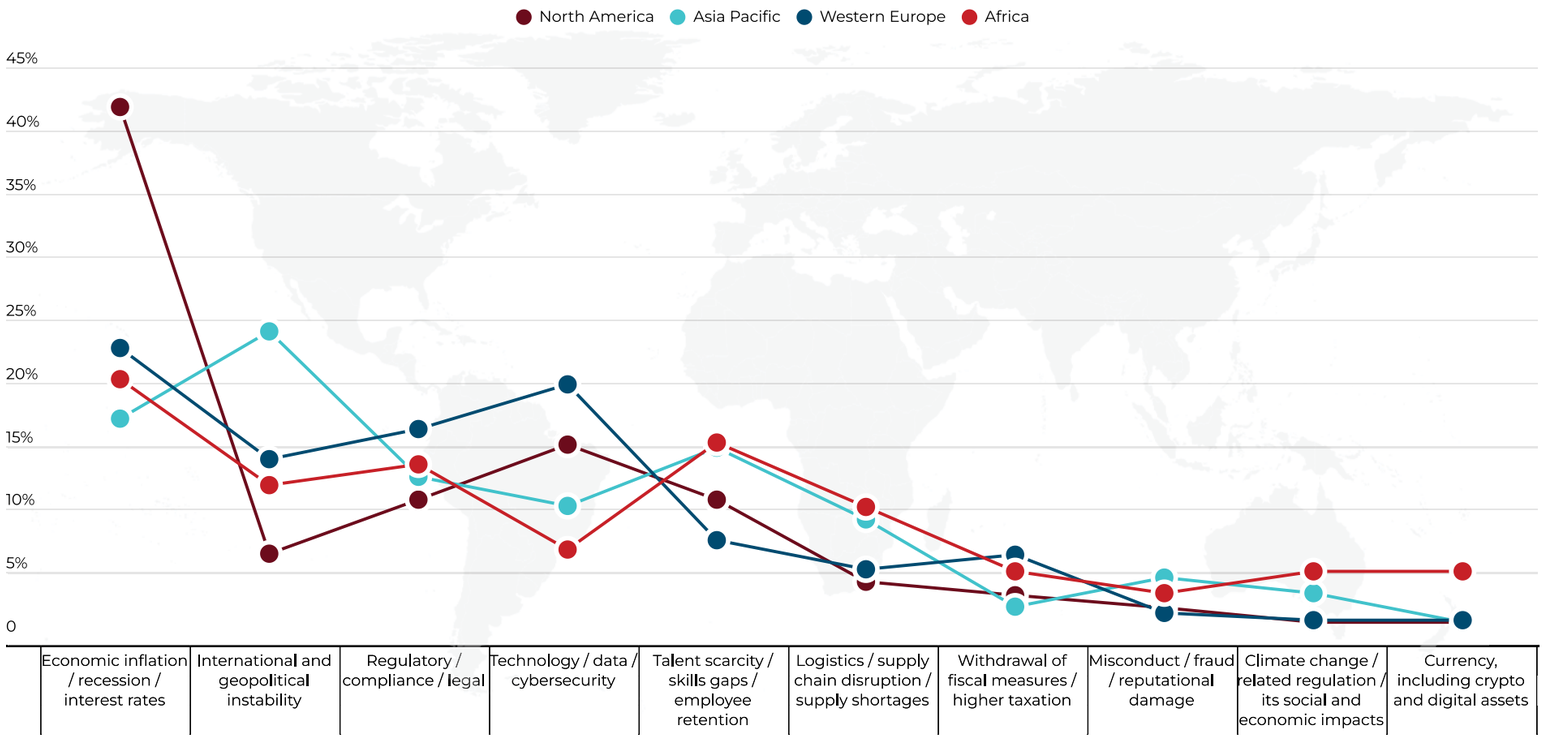
Source: ACCA /IMA Global Risks surveys (2025-26)

The breakdowns by region and organisation type reveal some of those differences. The open-ended answers go further, showing how decisions made elsewhere can affect an organisation's own prospects. Customers cut spending; suppliers raise prices; governments change policy; technology providers suffer disruption. By the time the consequences reach an organisation, they may appear as a loss of income, a service failure or a decision made with unreliable information.

Same world, different priorities

Economic risk is the first-ranked priority for 41.9% of North American respondents, well above the global figure, even as the region recorded the largest rise in confidence among the major economic regions in the wider GECS. In Asia Pacific, geopolitical instability leads at 24.1%, while talent and skills concerns reach 14.9% versus 10% globally. Supply chain disruption also remains more prominent here than globally, cited first by 9.2% of respondents against 6.6% worldwide. Western Europe presents a different mix: economic risk leads at 22.8%, but technology, data and cybersecurity risk is close behind at 19.9%. Cybersecurity has remained a prominent priority for the region's respondents, warranting attention even when another risk ranks higher.

Chart 12 **Q3 2026 risk priorities by region**



Source: ACCA /IMA Global Risks surveys (2026)

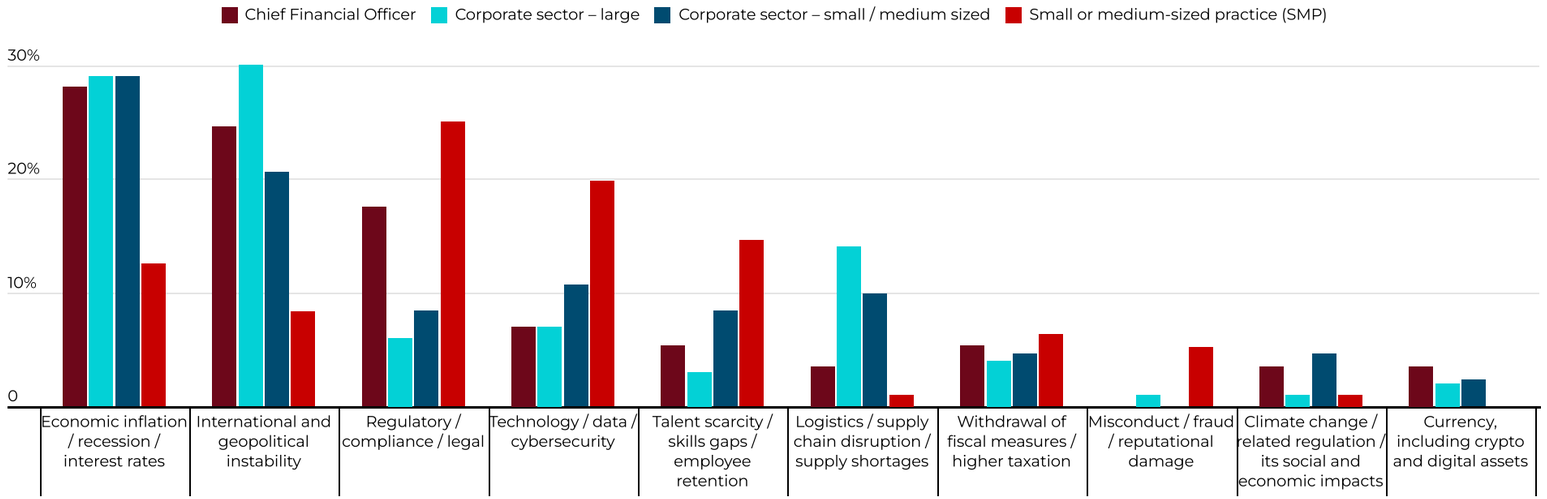
Organisation type is just as revealing. Among respondents in large corporates globally, geopolitical instability ranks first at 30%, narrowly ahead of economic pressures at 29%. For small and medium-sized (accountancy) practices (SMPs), regulation leads at 25%, followed by technology and cybersecurity at 19.8%. A large business may be assessing how conflict affects its markets, suppliers and investment plans. A practice may face the same economic uncertainty while trying to meet growing compliance demands, protect client information and adapt its services to AI. Those differences are telling when interpreting risk priorities and rightsizing effective approaches for managing them.

For SMPs and small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the regulatory burdens have an immediate commercial effect:

'Our whole week is now spent looking at all the compliance deadlines. We do not get time to do positive work for clients and that gives other less regulated businesses an advantage.'

Respondent from an SMP

Chart 13 **Q3 2026 risk priorities by organisational type**



Source: ACCA /IMA Global Risks surveys (2026)

When another organisation's decision becomes your risk

The answers to ***'What are the most underestimated risks facing your organisation?'*** show how pressures beyond an organisation's control can affect its finances and its ability to deliver services. A UK respondent identified clients capping staff health benefits and making redundancies as an underestimated risk to the organisation's income. Another respondent working in healthcare pointed to costs rising faster than reimbursement and funding, putting pressure on cash flow and making it harder to maintain the same level of services.

Respondents in Europe and the Middle East connected conflict to energy prices, shipping and demand. U.S. respondents pointed to tariffs and policy changes affecting costs, investment and contracts. One U.S.-based CFO working for a federal contractor explained that staff losses in government have also meant more time spent following up with and supporting federal employees, commenting:

'The instability since the new administration began has decreased our revenue by 20% and our staffing costs have increased.'

U.S.-based CFO

For a healthcare business in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the regional conflicts raise a different concern:

'Prolonged instability could have a greater impact on our business than is currently anticipated, particularly through reduced demand, customer relocation and increased payment and collection risks.'

Dubai-based respondent

Several respondents in Asia Pacific and Africa described how climate change could disrupt supplies and services. Citing cash flow constraints and an underestimation of the probable impact, a respondent in Botswana's energy and utilities sector warned that:

'Very little is being done to prepare for drastic weather changes such as extreme heat or extreme rainfall.'

Botswana-based respondent

Dependence on other organisations also features in the technology responses. An insurance executive pointed to the need for timely, reliable data from external administrators and intermediaries. Delays or errors could affect reserving, IFRS 17 calculations, regulatory reporting and management decisions. As those processes become more automated, a data problem or cyber incident at a provider could have financial and operational effects inside the insurer. The comment is a reminder that an organisation can be accountable for decisions made using information it does not generate or fully control.

'As reporting becomes more automated, weak data governance or a cyber incident at a third-party provider could create significant financial, operational and reputational consequences.'

Malta-based respondent

Following the consequences

This concern closely echoes what ACCA is hearing in discussions with its global chief risk officers (CROs) community. In a September 2026 session on geopolitical risk, participants examined whether their scenarios went far enough beyond the initial shock. They considered how disruption to infrastructure or a critical service provider could affect access to systems, the ability to make payments and, ultimately, an organisation's strategic objectives. The discussion was less about adding another risk to a register than about understanding the chain of consequences and being prepared to act.

The Q3 2026 survey findings offer a complementary view from finance leaders. Their comments often identify where the consequences appear in the numbers: costs, margins, cash flow, revenue and financing. The CRO discussions considered how a shock travels through operations and dependencies before it reaches those numbers.

Bringing these perspectives together can help an organisation test a scenario more convincingly: Which services must continue? What does the organisation assume a supplier can withstand? How quickly would disruption affect customers or liquidity? Who would recognise that the assumptions had failed, and who could decide what happens next?

AI makes those questions more urgent. Q3 respondents expressed concern about cyber-risk exposure, data quality and the loss of human judgement when tools are introduced faster than people and controls can adapt. One warned that trainees may lose the experience needed to spot errors if routine work is automated too quickly. Another described the gradual transfer of operational knowledge and decisions to interconnected systems and third parties. These concerns extend beyond whether a tool works: they ask whether an organisation can still understand, challenge and support the decisions on which it depends.

'The lack of human interpretation and oversight is already allowing more issues and errors to creep through the system. Trainees will not get the insight and experience needed to spot issues and advise.'

UK-based director in professionals services

The Q3 results do not point to one exposure shared equally by every sector. They show how economic and geopolitical pressures affect different business models, while the comments reveal dependencies that a headline ranking cannot capture. Boards, CFOs and risk leaders can use these findings to start by looking at a consequence that matters to their organisation – a service they cannot deliver, a margin they cannot sustain, or a decision they cannot make with confidence – and trace what could cause it. That means looking beyond their immediate suppliers and internal teams, testing the assumptions on which they rely, and agreeing who will act when the evidence shows those assumptions are failing.

About this report.

The Global Economic Conditions Survey (GECS), carried out jointly by ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) and IMA (Institute of Management Accountants), is the largest regular economic survey of accountants around the world, in both the number of respondents and the range of economic variables it monitors.

The GECS has been conducted for over 10 years. Its main indices are good lead indicators of economic activity and provide a valuable insight into the views of finance professionals on key variables, such as investment, employment, and costs.

Fieldwork for the Q3 2026 survey took place between 1-17 September 2026, gathering 699 responses: 478 ACCA members and 221 IMA members.

ACCA and IMA would like to thank all members who took the time to respond to the survey. It is their first-hand insights into the fortunes of companies around the world that make GECS a trusted barometer for the global economy.

Read the previous GECS reports here

Contacts.

For further information about the Global Economic Conditions Survey and the series of quarterly reports, please contact:



Jonathan Ashworth
Chief Economist
ACCA
jonathan.ashworth@accaglobal.com



Alain Mulder
Region Head Europe & Central Asia,
Sr. Director Global B2B, IMA®
amulder@imanet.org

The section 'Where the shock lands' was produced by:

Rachael Johnson



Global Head of Risk Management
and Corporate Governance
for Policy & Insights, ACCA
rachael.johnson@accaglobal.com

All rights reserved. Used with permission of ACCA.
Contact insights@accaglobal.com for permission to reproduce, store or transmit, or to make other similar uses of this document

© ACCA, Institute of Management Accountants, OCTOBER 2026.

This publication has been produced in line with WCAG 2.2 AA accessibility standards. It is designed to be accessible to a wide range of readers, including those using assistive technologies. If you experience any accessibility barriers, please contact ACCA to request an alternative format.

About ACCA.

We are ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants), the only truly global professional accountancy body.

Since we were founded in 1904, we've been breaking down barriers to the accountancy profession. Today we proudly support a diverse community of over **266,100** members and **546,500** future members in **179** countries.

We're redefining accountancy. Our cutting-edge qualifications, continuous learning and insights are respected and valued by employers in every sector. They equip individuals with the business and finance expertise and ethical judgment to lead and drive sustainable value in organisations and economies worldwide.

Guided by our purpose and values, we're leading the accountancy profession for a changed world. Partnering with policymakers, standard setters, the donor community, educators and other accountancy bodies, we're strengthening and building a profession that focuses on people, planet and prosperity to create value for all.

Find out more at **accaglobal.com**

About IMA®

(Institute of Management Accountants)

IMA® is one of the largest and most respected associations focused exclusively on advancing the management accounting profession.

Globally, IMA supports the profession through research, the CMA® (Certified Management Accountant), CSCA® (Certified in Strategy and Competitive Analysis), and FMAA℠ (Financial and Managerial Accounting Associate) certification programs, continuing education, networking, and advocacy of the highest ethical business practices. Twice named Professional Body of the Year by *The Accountant/International Accounting Bulletin*, IMA has a global network of about 140,000 members in 150 countries and 200+ professional and student chapters. Headquartered in Montvale, N.J., USA, IMA provides localized services through its six global regions: The Americas, China, Europe, Middle East / North Africa, India, and Asia Pacific.

For more information about IMA, please visit: **www.imanet.org**

ACCA
The Adelphi, 1/11 John Adam Street,
London WC2N 6AU, United Kingdom

020 7059 5000

accaglobal.com

IMA
10 Paragon Drive, Suite 1
Montvale NJ 07645-1760, USA

+1 (201) 573-9000

www.imanet.org

Accessible Document