

KPMG Global private company CEO Outlook



KPMG. Make the Difference.

Foreword

Private companies encompass every sector across the globe and include family businesses, family offices, and 'Emerging Giants' (portfolio companies of private equity and venture capital funds). Many of these businesses are poised for significant growth, with confident, entrepreneurial leaders. This optimism prevails despite an uncertain, volatile geopolitical and economic environment, notably tariffs and trade disputes, international conflicts, inflation and high interest rates, regulatory change, climate events and supply chain disruption.

For those players with an eye on mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and divestment, interest rate uncertainty casts doubt on credit availability. Their portfolio companies are also coping with inflationary costs that could impact their profitability. For family businesses/family offices, there's the added pressure of succession planning and leadership transition, and whether CEOs want to pass the business onto the next generation or pursue a sale.

The 2025 CEO Outlook survey highlights how the CEOs of private companies are addressing the major economic, technological, geopolitical, regulatory, and

talent challenges. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a central issue, as a means to improve operational performance, boost innovation, and manage risks. Al is also a booming sector for investment, boosted by government incentives to attract AI start-ups across numerous sectors. However, Al also brings certain challenges, such as concerns over trust, and return on investment (ROI).

Private companies have long recognized the importance of sustainable growth, driven by strong governance, ethical practices and social responsibility — with the reporting of non-financial metrics increasingly critical to investor confidence. Talent remains a big priority, to compete for the best people — especially for highdemand technology skills — and to continually upskill their own employees in Al and other emerging areas.

In an unpredictable world, CEOs need to be highly informed, and very agile in order to overcome challenges and take advantage of new opportunities to accelerate growth.



Conor Moore Global Head of KPMG Private Enterprise, KPMG International and Partner. KPMG in the US

Executive Summary

Despite continuing economic and geopolitical headwinds, CEOs of private companies are highly optimistic over the growth prospects of their companies, their countries, and to a slightly lesser extent, the global economy. While M&A appetite remains strong, in comparison to publicly listed companies, there is a trend towards moderate and lowerimpact deals, signaling a trust in organic expansion.

Our survey underscores how private companies are prioritizing their approach to technology — especially AI — with leaders investing significantly and now expressing greater confidence in its ROI potential, compared to their peers in public companies. However, they are less certain of their employees' ability to fully embrace AI, with concerns about generational skill gaps.

Private leaders are also embedding environmental, social and governance (ESG) into their strategy and operations. But, there are concerns over capabilities in this area, which may explain why private CEOs are less positive than their peers in public companies about their organizations' ability to hit net zero targets.

Ultimately, their entrepreneurial spirit and ability to move fast may be the superpower that gives Emerging Giants and established private companies a competitive edge.

Key findings

Economic outlook and business confidence

80%

of private company CEOs are confident about their company's growth prospects.

30%

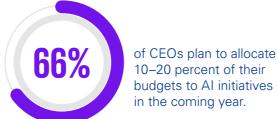
say they expect their organization to pursue 'high-impact' M&A opportunities.

plan to explore new market or regional opportunities.

Al powered technological innovation



of private company CEOs expect returns from Al investments in 1–3 years, compared to 65% of peers in publiclylisted companies.





Tuning the workforce into an Al world

say the single biggest labor market impact on their businesses is the generational skill gap, especially in Al uptake.

of CEOs feel the gap between existing and desired skills is the biggest challenge in attracting and retaining AI talent.

of CEOs agree their leadership understands Al's disruptive potential.

Achieving strategic advantage through ESG



are prioritizing compliance and reporting standards to align with investor and regulatory demands.



believe workforce skills gaps pose the biggest barrier to achieving net zero.



have fully embedded sustainability into their business.

Economic outlook and business confidence

Faced with an uncertain economic environment, including inflation, high interest rates, trade barriers and regional conflicts, CEOs of private companies remain optimistic. The vast majority (80 percent) express confidence in their company's growth prospects, and 65 percent are confident about the global economy — slightly less than their peers in public-listed companies (69 percent).

Private company leaders often tend to be entrepreneurial, 'glass half full' types, further evidenced by a desire to explore new market and regional opportunities, with 73 percent either actively pursuing strategic expansion, or expecting to do so in the near term. Inorganic growth is another priority, with an overwhelming 85 percent showing an appetite for M&A. However, in comparison with public company CEOs, private company chief executives are considerably less likely to seek 'high-impact' transactions. Only 30 percent report enthusiasm for big transformative deals, a marked contrast to 2024, when almost half (45 percent) did so.

These feelings about M&A may reflect prevailing uncertainty, where economic forecasts can quickly change in reaction to tariffs and other geopolitical phenomena. There may also be a sense amongst private company leaders that they trust their

in-house capabilities and possess the drive to achieve their ambitions. Without the need to constantly report to shareholders, private organizations can be nimbler and bolder and divert resources to new initiatives at pace. One example is the emergence of companies considering a presence in the US to mitigate tariff risk. In some cases, private companies that decide to go public are considering dual class stock structures to ensure the founders retain greater control.

In an age of fast-evolving technology, it's little surprise that some of the trends most impacting future prosperity are cybersecurity (81 percent), cost of technology infrastructure (79 percent), and Al workforce readiness (77 percent). Rising costs and inflationary pressures are additional concerns, reflecting underlying economic conditions.

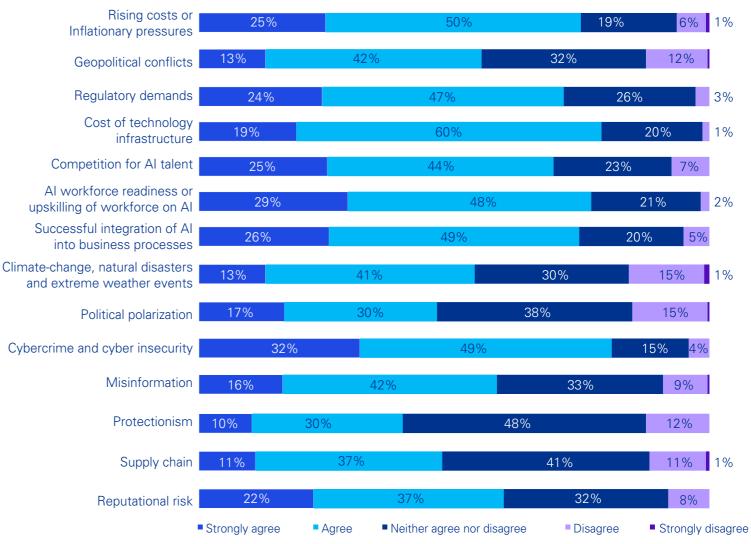


It's a very dynamic environment, with geopolitics impacting on business decisions to a greater extent than most of us can remember. CEOs are considering how they can future-proof their organizations against future tariffs, trade wars and other events. One option is to swiftly pivot to new markets to take advantage of favorable regulatory and trading conditions."

Greg Limb

Global Head of Family Office and Private Client, KPMG International and Partner. KPMG in the UK

Trends impacting the prosperity of organisation over next 3 years

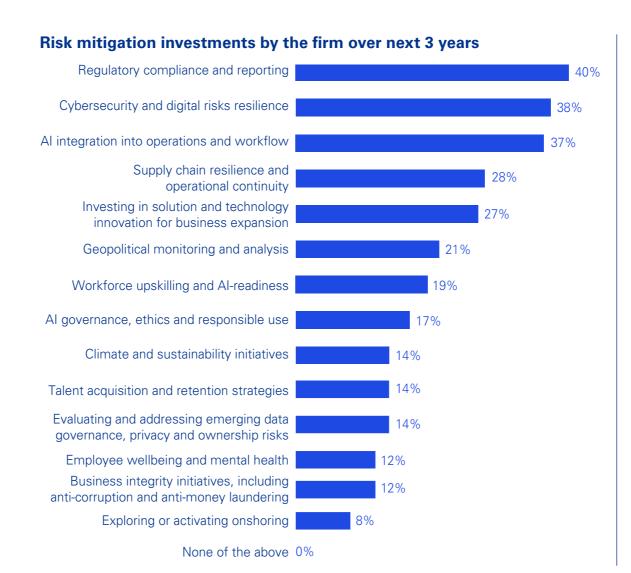


Regulatory compliance: risk management or foundation for growth?

It's tempting to view regulation and compliance as 'defensive' items, when they actually have the potential to be the building blocks for growth. With the pace of regulation increasing in many parts of the world, private companies must meet rising expectations of strong governance, transparency, and commitment to responsible and sustainable business. The growing use of technology places a greater spotlight on data privacy, protection, and ethical and fair use of Al.

The CEOs taking part in this year's survey acknowledge these challenges, and say their companies are increasing investment in regulatory compliance and reporting (40 percent), cybersecurity and digital risks (38 percent), and integrating AI into operations and workflow (37 percent).

What kind of leadership is required to tackle these pressing business issues? Private company CEOs prioritize greater agility and faster decision-making under pressure (26 percent) alongside greater regulatory understanding (26 percent). Adaptability is highly relevant, given the speed of change and unpredictability of factors like tariffs, supply chain disruptions, and new competitive threats. Other key capabilities include transparent communication (vital to satisfy stakeholder scrutiny) and digital and technological literacy.





26%

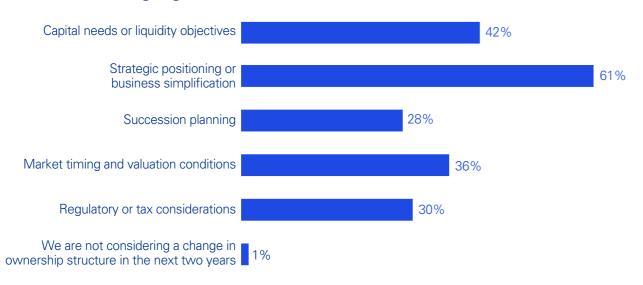
Private company CEOs prioritize greater agility and faster decisionmaking under pressure alongside greater regulatory understanding (26 percent).

Is it time to consider a change of ownership structure?

For family businesses in particular, ownership and succession are never far from the surface, along with the need to continually align family and business values. All private companies — especially fast-growing start-ups — are seeking ways to manage and accelerate their growth. Injections of capital, such as independent public offerings, are a possible source of capital.

According to the CEOs surveyed, the number one factor influencing ownership structure changes is to adapt strategic positioning or simplify the business (61 percent). In second place is capital needs or liquidity objectives (42 percent), to provide much-needed financing or to manage working capital.

Factors influencing organizational structure





When it comes to adopting more complex ownership structures including private equity and venture capital funding — it's vital to find the right partners, understanding the value they are looking to gain from engagement, and undertaking due diligence on issues like cultural fit. Dualclass stock structures can help founders retain greater control."

Mike Linter

Global Head of Private Enterprise Tax, KPMG International and Partner, KPMG in the UK

Alpowered technological innovation

Private companies — from Emerging Giants to established players — are starting to harness Al not just for efficiency, but also to create value from innovation, analytics and risk management. In a recent KPMG survey of senior executives from US private companies, 53 percent feel Al is an especial game changer for innovators and disruptors, giving them a significant competitive advantage as early adopters.

Family businesses, with their long-term horizons, may be a little more cautious about introducing Al, and may therefore need to consider how to avoid becoming technological laggards, underestimating the amount of change that's coming their way. On the other hand, family organizations are often agile, and able to move fast to harness Al without some of the obstacles presented by bureaucracies and large, legacy systems. Increasing digitization is a further enabler, presenting options to expand in different geographies at pace.

More than two-thirds (71 percent) of private enterprise CEOs surveyed for this year's CEO Outlook say that. despite continuing economic uncertainty, AI is a top investment priority. The top perceived advantage is enhanced decision-making and data analysis capabilities, followed by increased efficiency and productivity through automation.

Al has initially been used to complete routine tasks and take time out of processes, often in the finance function. However, it's now spreading to back-office functions such as legal and HR, as well as forwardfacing areas like sales and marketing.



two-thirds

of private enterprise **CEOs** surveved for this year's CEO Outlook say that, despite continuing economic uncertainty, Al is a top investment priority.



Al is simultaneously an opportunity and a threat to private company leaders. On the one hand it could enable their business to make huge strides in a short time; on the other, there's a fear that competitors could use Al to do what they're doing — but better. Unlike major corporates, private companies don't have the luxury of a Chief Al Officer, so should consider external help to get the most out of their investments in Al."

Conor Moore

Global Head of KPMG Private Enterprise, KPMG International and Partner, KPMG in the US

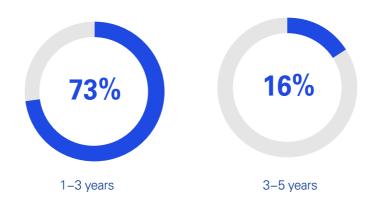
Is AI a quick fix or a transformative technology?

Only 10 percent of private company leaders expect to realize ROI in AI within 6 months to a year — compared to 22 percent of their public company counterparts. However, a higher proportion of private company leaders (73 percent) than public company leaders (65 percent) expect a return in 1 to 3 years — suggesting that, even though larger corporates inevitably have more funds and people to devote to AI, private companies are overall

confident about the prospects for their Al investments. And CEOs are backing up their words with money: 66 percent plan to allocate between 10 percent and 20 percent of their budget to AI in the next 12 months.

Agentic AI systems can autonomously take decisions and action them with minimal human intervention, introducing a possible step change in AI effectiveness. As a sign of its promise, half (50 percent) of private company CEOs expect agentic AI to have a significant or transformational impact on their organization, driving growth.

Anticipated timeline for AI ROI





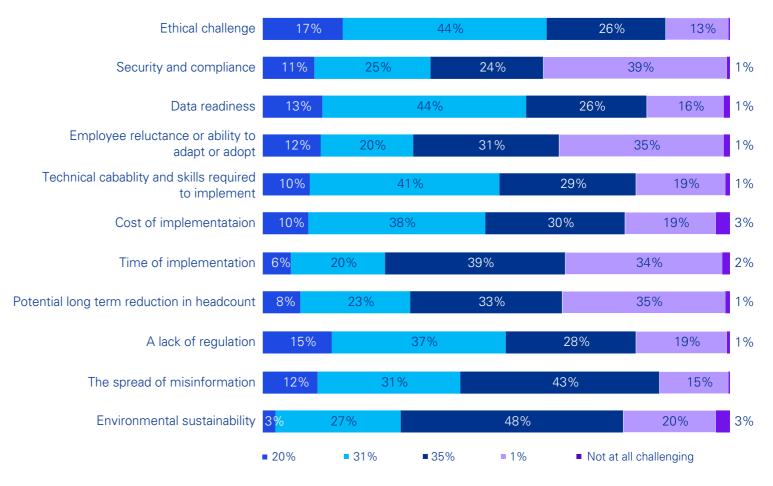
The ethics and data dilemma

The exciting promise of AI is likely to be constrained if companies cannot overcome some major roadblocks. Top of the list are ethical concerns, cited by 61 percent of CEOs as a barrier to effective AI implementation. Amongst these worries are bias and discrimination, privacy and data protection, lack of transparency and accountability, and risks associated with autonomous decision-making.

Large language models require reliable data to produce reliable analyses and decisions, yet data readiness is considered the second biggest challenge. According to the recent paper Prepare your data for an Al-driven future, from KPMG and Microsoft, companies should focus on gaining a holistic view of data, via scalable platforms that support data science and reporting, with strong governance that allows flexibility for innovation.

Regulatory inertia is viewed as a further hurdle, with 73 percent of CEOs indicating that slow-moving regulations are obstructing their ability to deploy Al. In response, private companies of all sizes should ensure their governance, risk and control frameworks properly account for AI use, and keep abreast of evolving regulations such as the EU AI Act. Private companies, especially if they are family run, are very concerned about their reputation and legacy, and are keen to bring in the right AI ethical and governance frameworks, to maintain the trust of their communities, customers and suppliers.

Challenges in implementing Al



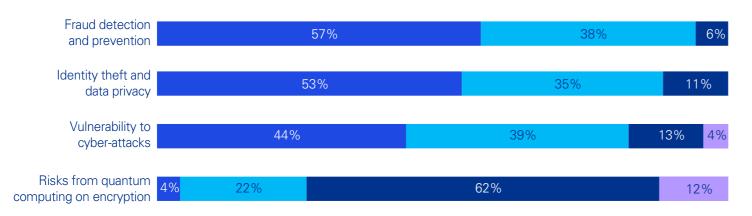


Don't let cyber risk threaten growth

With their rapid digitalization and innovation, fastgrowth private companies are particularly vulnerable to cyberattacks, with some having the added complication of complex technology stacks as a result of multiple mergers and acquisitions. When you factor in fast adoption of new technologies like 5G, IoT, and cloud, and expanding customer and supplier networks, the attack surfaces are abundant.

The CEOs participating in this year's CEO Outlook are very alert to these dangers. Fifty-seven percent are "extremely concerned" about fraud detection and prevention, 53 percent about identity theft and data privacy, and 44 percent about cyberattack vulnerability. Interestingly, they feel one of the top benefits of Al is an enhanced capability to detect fraud and respond to cyberattacks. With its vast data processing capacity, AI can be used to detect, predict, and respond to security threats, analyzing anomalies from network traffic or user behavior patterns.

Technological risks affecting cybersecurity



- Extremely Concerned it's a top leadership priority, and have a plan in place to mitigate against this
- Concerned actively investigating and looking to manage this risk
- Aware conscious of it but it's not yet a priority to tackle
- Not Concerned don't perceive AI to introduce additional risk



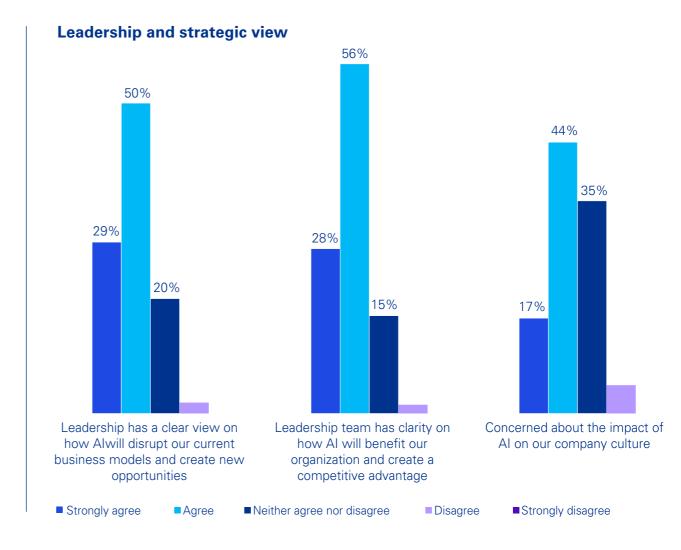
For Emerging Giant CEOs in particular, the pressure from investors to grow quickly creates a temptation to go full-speed on Al. These leaders need to balance bold innovation with practical execution and strong governance. A strong focus on ethical use of technology is needed to retain stakeholder trust in Al."

Euan West

Head of UK Regions and UK & EMA Head of KPMG Private Enterprise, Head of Markets & Growth, KPMG in the UK

Tuning the workforce into an Al world

The CEOs surveyed appear to have a clear view of what AI can do for their business. Seventy-nine percent are confident in their leadership's vision of Al's role in disrupting existing business models and creating new opportunities. And an even greater proportion (84 percent) believe that leadership understands how Al can be leveraged to sharpen competitive edge. Consequently, most of the CEOs are confident their organization has what it takes to keep pace with rapid Al development and its accompanying complexity.



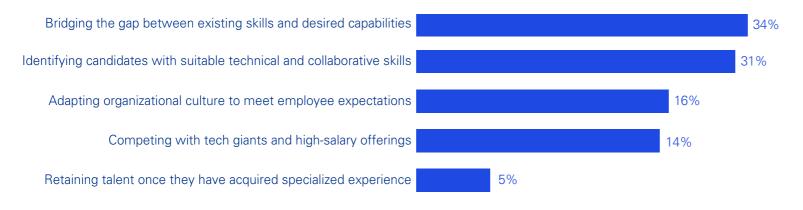
Can private companies prepare their people for the demands of AI?

As Al adoption gathers pace, leaders of private companies of all sizes, across all industries, are considering how this technology affects their workforce, culture and organizational structure. Our survey indicates that the single biggest challenge in attracting and retaining Al and digital talent is bridging the gap between existing skills and desired capabilities (34 percent). And 61 percent of respondents express concern about Al's impact on company culture.

In contrast to public-listed companies, private companies are less likely to have roles such as Chief Al Officer, or an Al ethics committee, which may hinder their ability to use Al and other technologies.

How can businesses adapt their recruitment, learning and development to embrace new technologies that can drive them forward? The top response is to communicate openly with employees about the potential impact of AI on their roles (48 percent), with AI education and training in second place (45 percent), followed by reskilling and upskilling (41 percent).

Challenges in attracting and retaining Al talent





Inevitably, there may be some cultural resistance and barriers to the use of AI, so it's vital to prepare teams for this technology and excite them about its possibilities. The real trick is to figure out how to make the most of employees' talents and orient them to higher-level work. This calls for a focused change and innovation strategy that resonates with people, with regular and consistent communications to allay fears."

Carolina Oliveira

South America Private Enterprise Leader, Head of Digital Growth, **KPMG** in Brazil

Coping with inter-generational differences and mass retirement

Younger generations of workers are increasingly digitally fluent, comfortable with technology and able to embrace new innovations as they emerge. When asked about the biggest labor market factors affecting their organization, the most popular response is the growing generational gaps on key future skills, including AI uptake (38 percent). Interestingly, the response from publiclylisted companies was considerably lower at 28 percent, suggesting that these businesses have expended more effort on this challenge.

An overwhelming majority of CEOs (86 percent) acknowledge that an aging workforce is also affecting recruitment, retention and overall culture — with 22 percent admitting that the impact is "high".

An aging workforce puts further pressure on capabilities. The second most important labor market influence is the trend for large-scale retirement combined with a lack of skilled workers to replace them (20 percent). A further 18 percent point to the widening expectation gap between older and younger employees, which has an influence on issues like remote working, career planning, work-life balance and personal development.

To succeed in an increasingly competitive world, private companies need to not just upskill their workforce but encourage them to embrace Al and view technology as an enabler, not something to fear. One approach, endorsed by most of the CEOs (86 percent), is to encourage experimentation to unlock Al's potential, to help ensure that all employees participate, irrespective of background or seniority.

Influence of labour market factors on the firm



Differences and tension resulting from corporate responses to social and global issues



Widening expectation gap between older and aging employees compared to the next generation



Growing generational gaps on key future skills including Al uptake



Increasing employee reliance on Al-driven automation at the expense of upskilling

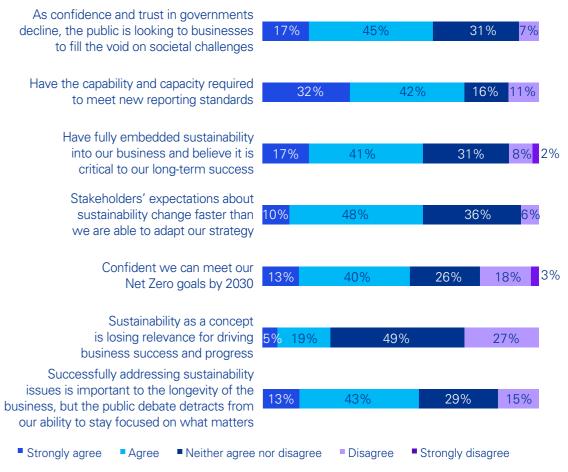


The number of employees retiring coupled with a lack of skilled workers to replace them

Achieving strategic advantage through ESG

Family businesses have traditionally identified closely with their local communities and have prioritized an ethical and responsible reputation as part of their legacy to subsequent generations of owners. Emerging giants are eager to attract investment capital and win customers, by demonstrating sustainable business models. Six out of ten private company CEOs (62 percent) agree that the public is increasingly looking towards businesses to address societal challenges.

Opinions of ESG in operations



However, despite this ESG focus, there are signs that private companies may be falling slightly behind their publicly traded counterparts. Two-thirds (67 percent) of publicly traded company leaders say that sustainability has been embedded into their business, but private companies track lower at only 58 percent. It's a similar story with net zero targets, with 63 percent of public company CEOs confident in hitting their goals; the figure for private companies is markedly lower at 53 percent. Listed companies have greater regulatory burdens,

come under more scrutiny, and allocate more resources to ESG and reporting, which may explain the disparity.

For the CEOs taking part in our global survey, the top geopolitical and internal ESG priority is compliance and reporting standards to align with investor and regulatory demands (49 percent). Demonstrating a commitment to transparency, good governance and ethical practices can help to maintain stakeholder trust. However, just 17 percent feel "very confident" that they have strong

systems and the right leadership to navigate regulatory and political differences in ESG. For their public company counterparts, this figure rises to 24 percent. Although private companies have fewer regulatory obligations, they may also lack the expertise associated with a large. corporate sustainability function. Given the twists and turns in different national attitudes and policies towards sustainability and the energy transition, adapting to changing trends is a vital business capability.

Geo-political landscape and internal challenges in ESG





ESG is part of the DNA of family businesses, who seek to give back to stakeholders, and are highly committed to the communities in which they operate. There's a big emphasis on legacy, to make the firm sustainable for the next generation, by taking a long-term view. But there needs to be a firm focus on the financial benefits of impact investing, to maintain financial discipline."

Robyn Langsford

Lead of Global KPMG Private Enterprise Family Business, KPMG International, and Partner in Charge of Family Business & Private Clients, **KPMG** Australia

Beyond compliance — ESG as a value driver

Our survey indicates that private companies are striving to align sustainability goals with core business strategies (45 percent). No longer viewed as a mere compliance exercise, ESG has become a critical driver of long-term value creation. This may mean building operations and supply chains resilient to climate change and extreme weather events, accessing reliable energy sources that can withstand geopolitical disruption, or forging circular business models that reduce dependence on scarce resources.

Consequently, 41 percent of CEOs say their organizations are developing and launching new products or services that address the energy transition. And there's growing belief in the potential of AI to augment these efforts, with 69 percent agreeing that this technology can help them achieve rapid innovation whilst meeting climate ambitions.

Will private companies be able to keep up with ESG demands?

When questioned on the barriers to net zero/climate ambitions, skill gaps (27 percent) is the number one challenge. Just 19 percent of CEOs from public companies voiced similar concerns — which reflects their scale. The second largest obstacle is supply chain decarbonization complexity (26 percent). Even the largest multinationals struggle to identify and reduce emissions across a sometimes opaque and large network of suppliers and logistics providers; it's even more of a challenge for a smaller business. There is hope that Al can drive advanced analytics to help identify emissions hotspots and track progress. Indeed, three-quarters (76 percent) feel AI can help reduce emissions and improve energy efficiency, and 73 percent believe it can enhance climate risk modeling and scenario planning.

Interestingly, private company chief executives place a bigger emphasis on collaboration and partnerships to drive innovation that adheres to environmental and regulatory requirements (53 percent — versus 46 percent for CEOs of publicly-listed companies).

Emerging Giants and modest-sized family businesses are unlikely to have the resources of a major corporate, and may need to seek external expertise in areas like AI, digital and cloud, energy-efficiency, engineering, and regulatory to grow at pace.

Innovation approaches for ESG and sustainability products and services





As the great generation wealth transfer evolves, we may see an acceleration both in the adoption of Al and the embracing of ESG, as the younger owners attempt to realize their vision of 'responsible capitalism."

Josh Geelan

Partner, KPMG Enterprise, Global Private Enterprise ESG Lead, **KPMG** Australia



The journey ahead

Al-powered technological innovation

Harness private companies' superpower: entrepreneurial agility

Emerging Giants, as well as long-established family businesses, are renowned for their ability to move quickly to seize opportunities, without some of the restraints inherent in larger organizations. Al provides a means to experiment, innovate and leap ahead, which may entail changing organizational structures and reinventing roles. Companies that can decisively make such strategic shifts could gain significant competitive advantage.

Keep ahead of cyber security and Al risks

Cyber threats, which are increasingly Al-powered, pose a constant danger, and private companies need to find the resources to manage these challenges — as well as Al-related ethics and data risks. Strong governance is a 'must-have', but, without the resources, companies may need to co-source solutions to access appropriate cyber and data management capabilities.

Achieving strategic advantage through ESG

Professionalize inherent sustainability

By giving a more structured framework to their community and environmental commitments, private companies can help preserve their legacy and build even more sustainable business models. Strong governance can aid succession planning and embed net zero and other key indicators even more strongly.

Focus on the ESG business case

Impact investing is dependent upon reliable metrics and an ability to integrate financial non-financial reporting. By demonstrating a measurable ROI in ESG, private companies can tap into investment capital and assure investors.

Tuning the workforce into an Al world

Communicate an already exciting employee brand proposition

Current and future generations of talent are seeking dynamic careers characterized by frequent change and opportunities to take risks. Many private companies offer a fast-moving entrepreneurial environment, where younger workers can take on responsibilities earlier than their peers in larger corporations. These possibilities should be broadcast to potential recruits as part of the brand proposition.

Manage the inter-generational succession skillfully

As a new generation starts to take over the reins of many private companies, it's critical that established leaders manage the inevitable cultural shift, retaining core brand values while adapting to new challenges and ways of working. Good governance frameworks can help to facilitate this progression.

Methodology

The 11th edition of the KPMG CEO Outlook, conducted with 1,350 CEOs between 5 August and 10 September 2025, provides unique insight into the mindset, strategies and planning tactics of CEOs.

This report focuses exclusively on the 298 private company CEOs surveyed, with comparisons to 1,052 public company peers noted where relevant.

Where year-over-year comparisons are made (e.g., 2024 vs 2025), the data is drawn from equivalent questions in previous editions of the KPMG CEO Outlook survey. While the private company sample size and composition are broadly consistent, minor variations may affect comparability.

All respondents oversee companies with annual revenues over US\$500M and a third of the companies surveyed have more than US\$10B in annual revenue. The survey included CEOs from 11 key markets (Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Spain, UK and US) and 12 key industry sectors (asset management, automotive, banking, consumer and retail, energy, infrastructure, healthcare, insurance, life sciences, manufacturing, technology, and telecommunications).

NOTE: Some figures may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

How KPMG can help private companies

KPMG professionals have guided entrepreneurs, family businesses and privately owned companies toward sustainable success. KPMG Private Enterprise can help unlock opportunities, navigate challenges and achieve your strategic goals — regardless of the size of your private company, or whether it's an Emerging Giant, or an established family office or family business.

KPMG Private Enterprise advisers in member firms around the world are dedicated to working with you and your business, no matter where you are in your growth journey whether you're looking to reach new heights, embrace technology, plan for an exit, or manage the transition of wealth or your business to the next generation.

Working with KPMG Private Enterprise, you'll gain access to a trusted adviser — a single point of contact who shares your entrepreneurial mindset. Crucially you'll have access to KPMG's global resources and alliance network, to help you grow in new regions and markets, and manage global supply chains, regulatory, geopolitical, and talent challenges.

Accolades

KPMG is honored to be positioned as a Leader in the 2025 IDC MarketScape for Worldwide Al Services AND receive the IDC 2024 Customer Satisfaction Award for Enterprise Intelligence Services.

This study assesses the strategies and capabilities of 20 vendors who have established themselves as trusted providers across the full life cycle of AI services, with the ability to assist clients both to establish Al-fueled business plans and to transition to Al-ready technology operating models.

KPMG firms have been recognized as a Horizon 3 Market Leader by HFS Research in their latest Horizons research entitled Sustainability Services, 2024. KPMG has been named a global market leader by ALM Intelligence in their latest Pacesetter research entitled ESG: Environmental, 2023-2024. KPMG has been named a global leader in the Verdantix Green Quadrant: ESG and Sustainability Consulting 2024.



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