

AlixPartners

Women leaders in an AI era: Navigating opportunity and change

Insights from the
2026 AlixPartners Disruption Index



Vivienne
Artz OBE

CEO, FTSE Women Leaders
Review, and Senior Advisor,
AlixPartners

Foreword

“AI has swiftly become a defining force in business life, reshaping how organizations operate, compete, and grow. The question is no longer whether to engage with it, but how. As the findings in this report make clear, the “how” matters enormously.

What strikes me most in this report is the quality of the approach that women leaders are bringing to AI transformation. Not dazzled by the technology, not paralyzed by its implications, but focused—on what AI can actually deliver for the business, on how to bring people with them, on identifying the quick wins that build confidence and momentum. The women leaders I encounter are asking the right questions: Where do we start? Who do we need to protect? What do we risk losing? That kind of grounded pragmatism is exactly what this moment demands.

There is, however, a contradiction at the heart of these findings that we cannot overlook. Women leaders are among AI’s most optimistic advocates—yet AI continues to be built largely without them. Too few women are involved in the design, development, and governance of the systems that will shape all of our futures. The consequences of that absence are already visible: products and tools that reflect the assumptions of a narrow design team, missing the needs and experiences of half the world’s population. Closing that gap is not just a matter of fairness. It is a matter of equality.

This report also highlights a risk that organizations are not yet taking seriously enough. Pursuing AI transformation through the narrow lens of cost reduction and headcount efficiency is a false economy. The institutional knowledge, judgment, and experience of long-tenured employees cannot be easily recovered once lost. Sustainable AI transformation requires leaders who understand what must be preserved, not only what can be automated.

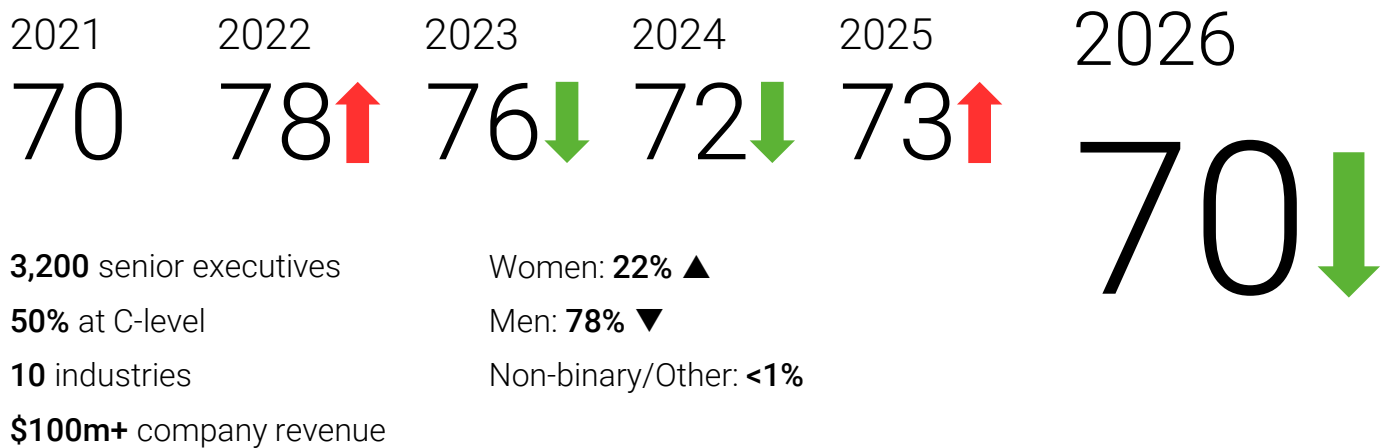
Representation remains a critical concern. At the board level, progress [across the FTSE 350](#) has been real and substantial. But the leadership pipeline—and the CEO role in particular, where women hold just 8% of positions—tells a different story. Until that changes, the full value of women’s leadership perspective will continue to be underrepresented precisely where strategic decisions are made.

The data in this report reinforces what many of us have long believed: that diverse leadership is not a social good in isolation from business performance—it is a driver of it. Organizations that fail to bring women to the center of their AI transformation are not just missing a dimension of fairness. They are missing a competitive advantage.

I hope this report prompts you to reflect—not only on what the numbers reveal, but on what they ask of you.”

AlixPartners Disruption Index

Disruption levels in recent years (/100)



About this report

At AlixPartners, we conduct an annual survey of more than 3,000 C-level and senior executives around the world, to understand the challenges they face and the behaviors of companies that are thriving amid disruption. We publish the findings in our annual Disruption Index, released earlier this year.

Our [2026 Disruption Index](#)—the seventh annual edition—is based on responses from 11 countries and 10 industries. It reveals a complex picture of moderating disruption across most industries and geographies, alongside emerging pockets of confidence and capability.

The Disruption Index score is derived by analyzing the number and severity of disruptive forces affecting organizations. It reflects how many forces executives say are disrupting their business, combined with how powerful they say those forces are.

This year, the overall score fell 3 points, from 73 in 2025 to 70 in 2026, while the share of executives reporting high levels of disruption dropped 9 percentage points to 48%. These findings suggest that while disruption remains intense—driven by factors such as new technologies, tariffs, inflation, regulation, supply chain pressures, and geopolitical tension—organizations are becoming better equipped to respond.

In other words, disruption is increasingly being treated as a structural condition rather than a cyclical one: a new business-as-usual. What once felt exceptional now feels routine, especially among the best-performing companies, which are building the capabilities needed to adapt continuously.

For the third consecutive year, we have examined the global findings through the lens of gender, enabling us to explore how women and men in leadership roles are responding to disruptive challenges. In 2024 and 2025, women leaders made up 19% and 21% of our sample, respectively. This year, that figure has risen slightly, to 22%.

Key findings

Women leaders:

01 **Are more confident in navigating the pace of change, and perceive greater agility and growth in their organizations**

Women leaders are less likely than men leaders to say their business “cannot keep up” with the pace of change (33% of women vs. 38% of men). They are also less likely to say employees are “set in their ways” (37% vs. 42% of men) or to believe their executive team “lacks the agility needed to combat disruption” (30% vs. 35%). 37% of women leaders expect significant positive growth this year, compared with 24% of men.

02 **Are more confident in their skills and roles**

More women leaders report reduced anxiety in their roles this year (41% of women vs 36% of men). They are also less likely to feel they are personally falling behind on skills (24% vs. 30% of men), or to worry about job loss due to disruption (24% vs. 29%).

03 **Lean further towards AI as a tool for growth**

Women leaders are more likely to frame AI as a growth engine (71% of women vs. 63% of men), rather than a cost-reduction tool (29% of women vs. 37% of men).

04 **Report greater AI maturity**

Women leaders are more likely than men leaders to say their organization is “cutting edge” in understanding AI, AI adoption, and AI P&L impact. Women leaders are also more likely to report that agentic AI is deployed enterprise-wide (26% of women vs. 19% of men).

05 **Are more confident in their companies’ tech foundations**

Women leaders are more likely to report “no problem” with legacy technology (39% of women vs. 32% of men), and to agree that their companies’ technology solutions “create competitive advantage” (88% vs. 83%).

06 **Are more positive about remote work models**

Women leaders are less likely to say that remote work models negatively impact productivity (35% of women vs. 45% of men).

07 **Are less likely to expect short-term AI-driven redundancies**

Women leaders are less likely to expect AI-driven layoffs this year (61% of women vs. 71% of men), although both groups converge in their expectations over a five-year timeframe (89% vs. 92%).

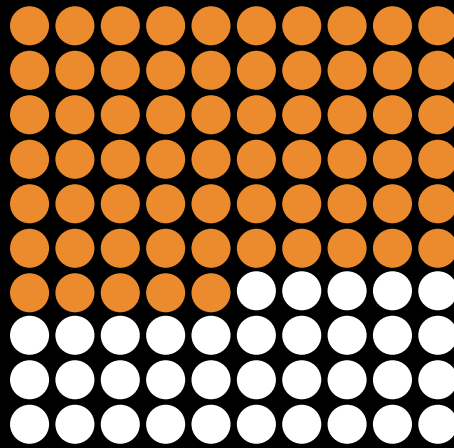
08 **Remain underrepresented**

Women leaders accounted for 22% of our sample of more than 3,000 senior executives, up slightly from 21% last year. Women now hold 36% of leadership roles across FTSE 350 companies, according to the [2026 FTSE Women Leaders Review](#), yet constitute only 8% of CEOs in this group.

How leaders are navigating disruption

Executives see AI, automation, and robotics as the greatest opportunity in 2026

80% of executives are optimistic about the impact of AI on their business. 65% are focused on using AI to drive revenue growth, while 35% prioritize cost reduction.



65%
focus on using AI to drive revenue growth

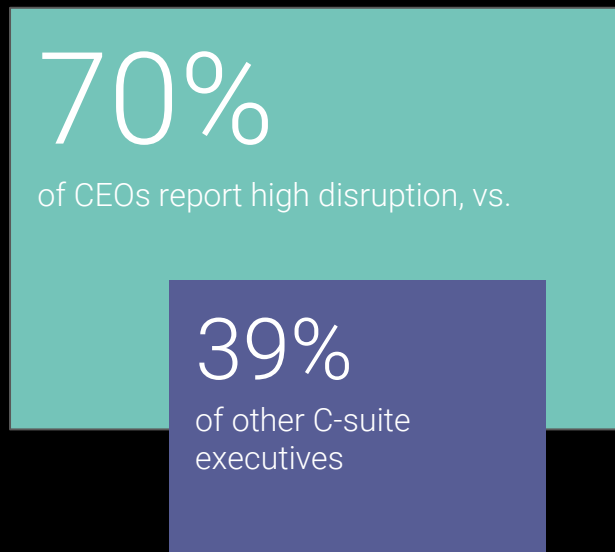
35%
prioritize cost reduction

CEOs in focus

CEOs experience disruption far more acutely than their direct reports. 70% of CEOs report high levels of disruption, compared with 39% of other C-suite executives.

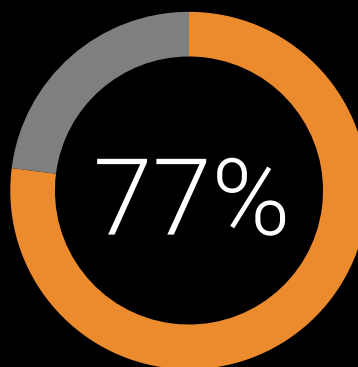
Notably, among CEO respondents, 77% envision the deployment of humanoid robots at scale within five years—up from 72% in 2025—reflecting the rapid expected integration of advanced technologies.

95% of CEOs expect AI to lead to layoffs within their organizations over the next five years, with nearly half (44%) anticipating workforce reductions of 10% or more.



95% expect AI-driven layoffs within 5 years

44% anticipate workforce reductions of 10%+



envision humanoid robots at scale within 5 years

How are women leaders navigating the AI era?

Across the findings, women and men leaders share many similarities, but a consistent pattern stands out: women lean further toward a growth-focused view of AI, while men lean further toward cost reduction and layoff narratives. The margins vary—from 5 to 13 percentage points—but the direction holds. This may reflect greater anxiety among men about AI’s impact on their own roles, given their stronger tendency to associate the technology with cost-cutting rather than creating value.

Women leaders made up

22%

of our sample this year, a slight increase from 21% in 2025 and 19% in 2024

Optimism around growth

The optimism gap is most visible in expectations for growth. This year, 37% of women leaders expect significant positive growth in their organizations, compared with just 24% of men. Importantly, this gender gap holds across industries, suggesting the pattern is not simply a reflection of sector mix, but something more consistent and durable.

“We expect significant positive growth this year”

37%

Women

24%

Men

Seniority barely moves the needle for women leaders

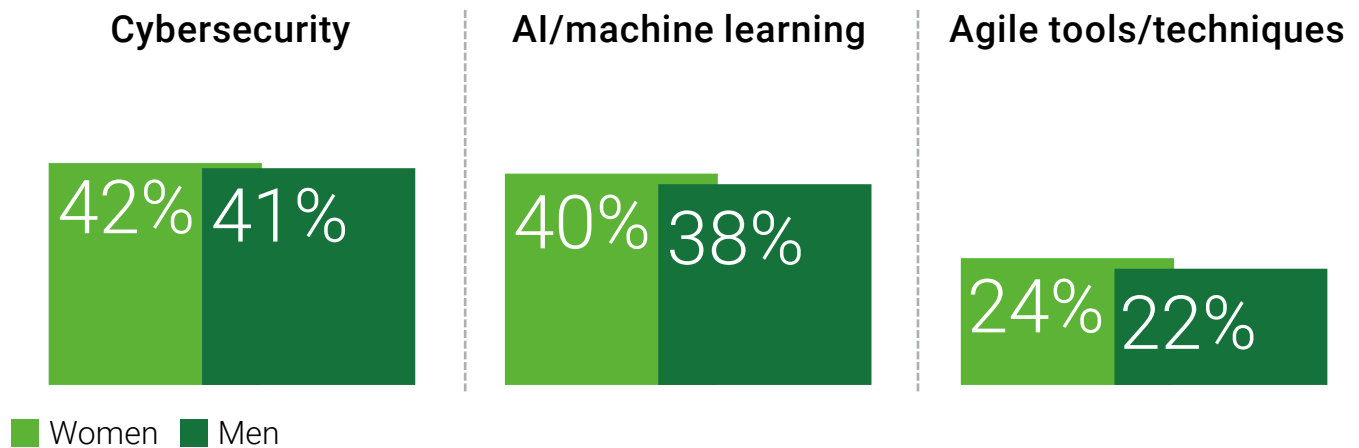
One of the most striking findings is how little women's views shift by seniority. On nearly every key metric, women C-suite, SVP, and mid-level leadership positions track within two to three percentage points of one another. This degree of consistency—across a dimension that would normally be expected to produce variation—suggests that confidence and growth orientation are evenly distributed across the women leadership population.

One credible explanation is the selection effect: women who reach any senior roles in large organizations may already have had to clear a higher bar, resulting in a leadership cohort that is more consistently confident, capable, and resilient.

Women and men leaders agree that digital transformation is the most disrupted area

Both groups identify digital transformation as the top business area impacted by disruption over the next year. They also prioritize similar digital skills: cybersecurity, AI and machine learning, and agile tools and techniques rank at the top of the list for both groups.

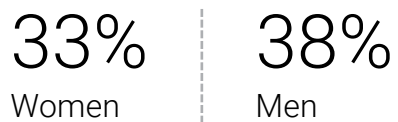
Digital skills: Top priority areas



Women leaders are more confident in navigating the pace of change

The mindset around pace, however, differs. Women leaders are less likely to say their business “cannot keep up” with the pace of change (33% vs. 38% of men). That gap has widened since last year (36% vs. 37% of men in 2025).

“Our company cannot keep up with the pace of change”



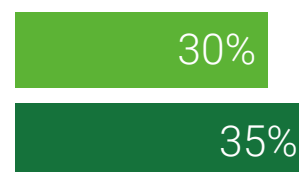
Women leaders perceive greater agility and adaptability

Women leaders are less likely to say employees are “set in their ways” (37% vs. 42% of men), and less likely to believe their executive team “lacks the agility needed to combat disruption” (30% vs. 35% of men).

“Our employees are set in their ways”



“Our executive team lacks agility”

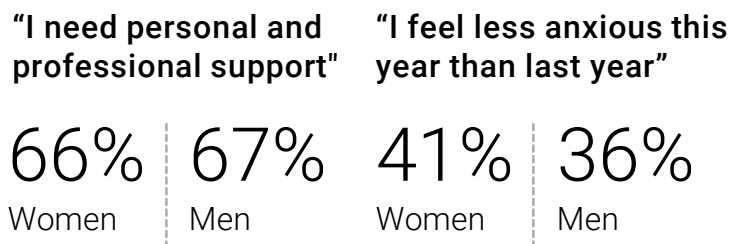


Legend: Women (light green), Men (dark green)

Women leaders feel less anxious in their roles

Both groups express a comparable need for more personal and professional support (66% of women vs. 67% of men), indicating that women are not signaling a greater support gap than men. Self-rated “confidence” as a top leadership strength is also identical across genders—10% for both groups—suggesting no comparable confidence deficit among women leaders.

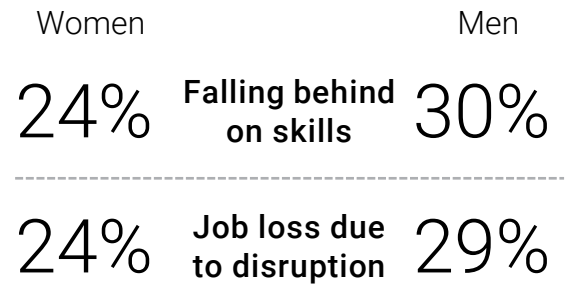
Women leaders are more likely to report feeling less anxious in their roles this year than last year (41% vs. 36% of men).



Women leaders are more confident in their skills

Women leaders are less likely to feel they are personally falling behind on skills (24% vs. 30% of men), or to worry about job loss due to disruption (24% vs. 29% of men).

Women are less likely to worry about:



Women leaders are more likely to say they are “extremely optimistic” about AI

Both groups report net optimism about AI (80% for both). However, women leaders are more frequently “extremely optimistic” about AI’s impact on their business (36% of women vs. 30% of men).



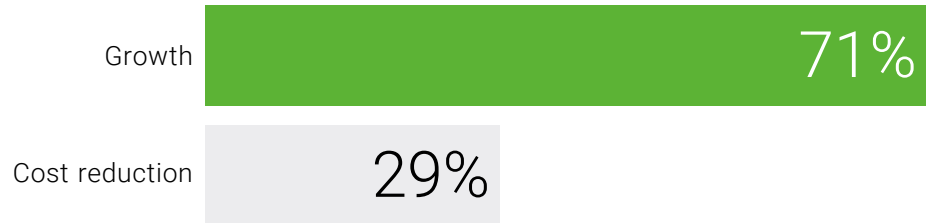
■ Women ■ Men



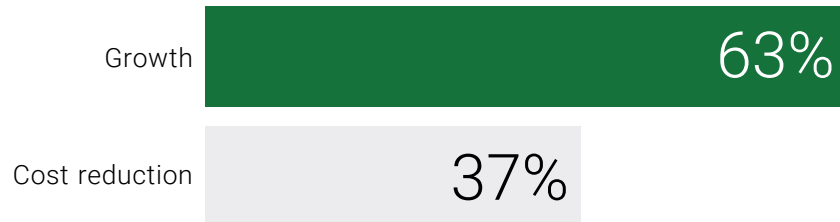
Women leaders lean further toward AI for growth

Women leaders are more likely to frame AI as a growth engine (71% vs. 63% of men), and less likely to focus on cost reduction (29% vs. 37% of men).

Women



Men

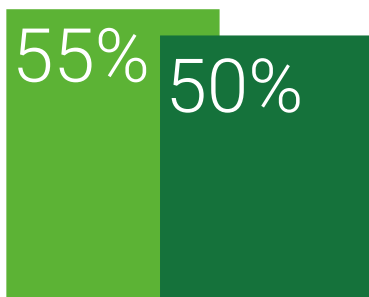


■ Women ■ Men

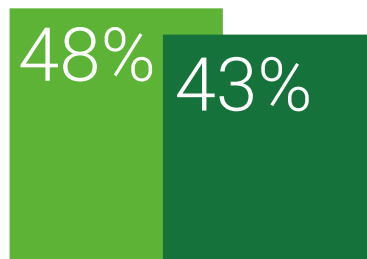
Women leaders report greater AI maturity

Women leaders are more likely to say their organization is "cutting edge" in:

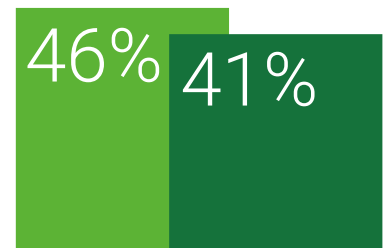
Understanding AI



AI adoption



AI P&L impact

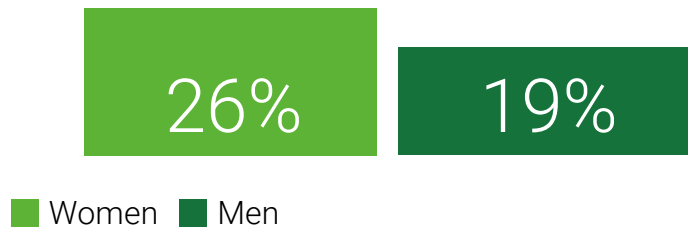


■ Women ■ Men

Women leaders report greater AI agent adoption

Women leaders are more likely to report that agentic AI is deployed enterprise-wide (26% vs. 19% of men).

“Agentic AI is deployed enterprise-wide”



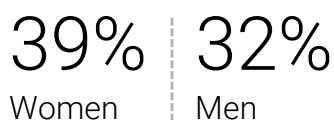
Both groups report similar levels of trust in AI agents—both currently (47% of women vs. 50% of men) and projected over five years (63% of women vs. 66% of men). AI concerns also align closely: women leaders are slightly more concerned about overreliance (36% vs. 32% of men), while men express slightly greater concern about ethics (33% of men vs. 29% of women).

Women leaders are more confident in their company’s technology foundations

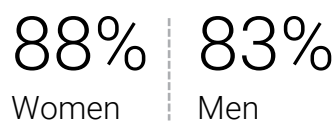
Similar proportions of women (59%) and men (57%) report increased investment in digital tools year over year. However, women leaders are more likely to report “no problem” with legacy technology (39% vs. 32% of men) and to indicate that their systems are under control.

Women leaders are also more likely to agree that their companies’ technology solutions “create competitive advantage and business value” (88% vs. 83% of men).

“We have no problem with legacy tech”



“Our tech solutions create competitive advantage”

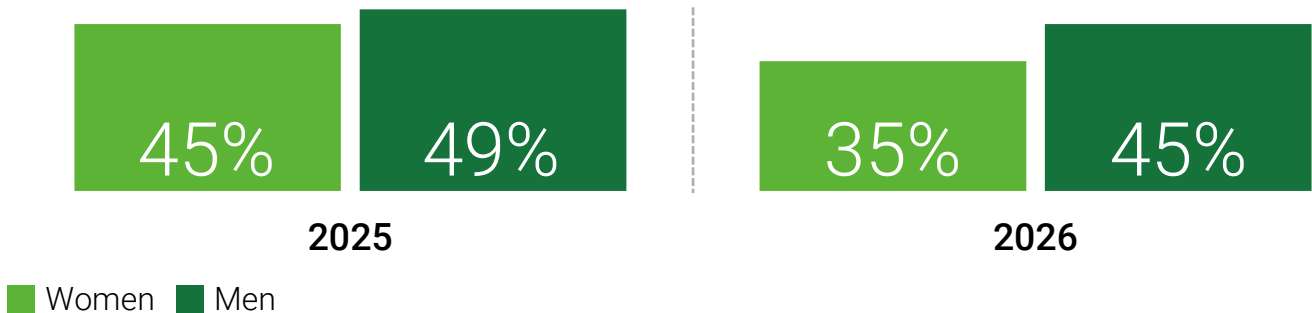


Women leaders remain more positive about remote work models

Women leaders continue to show greater support for remote work models: 35% of women believe these models negatively impact productivity, compared with 45% of men. This gap has widened since 2025, when the figures were 45% of women vs. 49% of men.

Against a backdrop of return-to-office pressure, women leaders growing less concerned suggests they have structured their organizations to perform regardless of location—an operational and talent-management capability, not just a lifestyle preference.

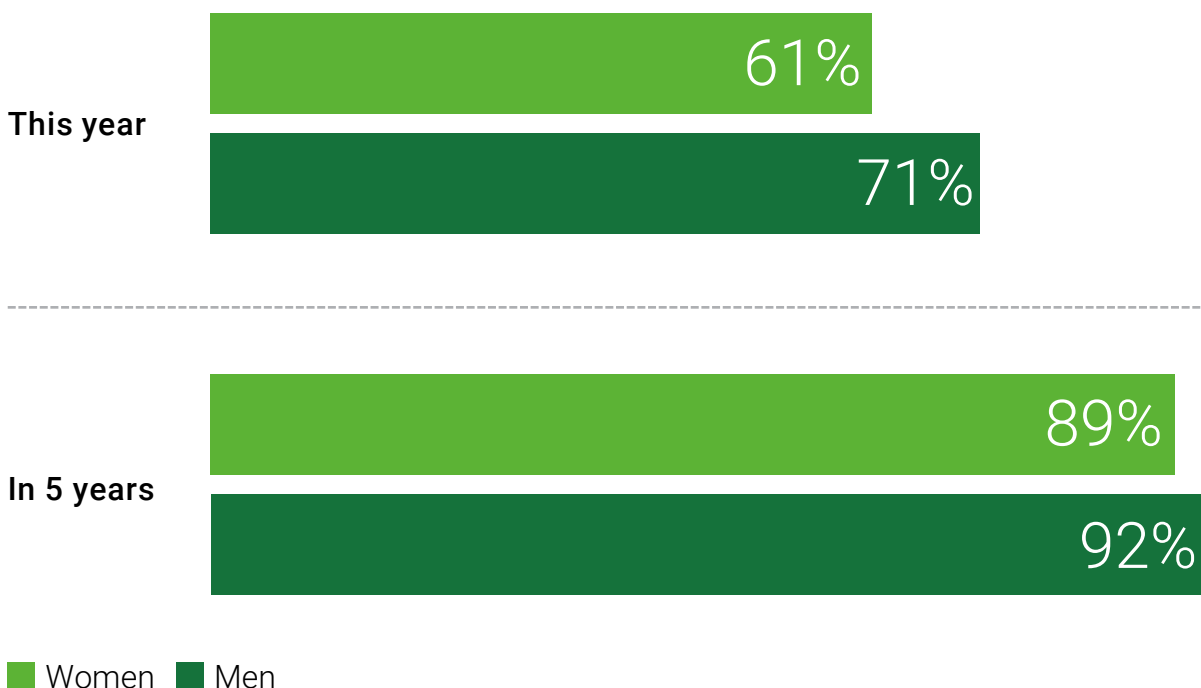
“Remote work hurts productivity”



Women leaders are less likely to expect near-term AI-driven redundancies

Women leaders are markedly less likely to expect AI-driven layoffs this year (61% vs. 71% of men). Over a five-year horizon, however, both groups converge in their expectations (89% of women vs. 92% of men).

This suggests women leaders are not dismissing the disruption AI may bring, but assessing its likely impact with greater precision over time.





Catherine
Brien

Partner & Managing Director,
Global Co-Leader, AI & Data,
AlixPartners

Women in AI: A leadership imperative

“The findings in this year’s report tell a story that goes beyond representation. Across industries, women in senior leadership show a more growth-oriented relationship with AI—and that pattern holds whether you look at C-suite leaders or Directors. It isn’t a composition effect, and it isn’t limited to the top of the house. Women leaders are more likely to frame AI as a driver of growth, more confident in their organization’s technology foundations, and report higher rates of enterprise-wide agentic AI deployment. That consistency across levels is one of the most striking findings in the dataset.

But confidence alone does not deliver transformation. The leaders who succeed are those who bring their people with them—who invest in reskilling and redeployment, and who build the trust that makes workforces willing to change. Employee buy-in is not a soft consideration. It is an implementation requirement, and the difference between AI adoption that sticks and AI investment that stalls. The story an organization tells about AI—whether it is a threat to be managed or an opportunity to be shaped—determines how its technology is received, and whether the investment ever pays off.

When women are absent from how AI is built, deployed, and governed, the cost is not abstract. It shows up in technology that misses the mark, in transformation programs that generate resistance, and in short-term decisions that look like progress but prove to be false economies. These decisions are being made in rooms where women remain significantly underrepresented. The organizations that close that gap will not just be doing the right thing. They will be building technology—and transformation—that is more durable.”

Yet women remain underrepresented in leadership and STEM roles

Despite these strengths, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, highlighting little progress against persistent systemic challenges.

Women leaders made up

22%

of our sample this year—a slight increase from 21% in 2025 and 19% in 2024

Women now hold

36%

of leadership roles across FTSE 350 companies, yet account for only 8% of CEOs in this group

Women make up just

28%

of the global STEM workforce

At the current rate of progress, it would take

123

years to reach full gender parity according to WEF's four dimensions

These statistics demand sustained efforts from organizations to attract, retain, and promote women in leadership and STEM roles. What will be the cost to businesses that do not have women at the heart of their AI transformation?



Kathryn
Britten

Partner and Managing Director,
AlixPartners

The future for women leaders—and AI transformation

“AI transformation is already well underway. The question this report asks—and answers—is not whether it is happening, but who is shaping it, and to what end.

What this year's findings reveal is both encouraging and urgent. Women leaders are approaching AI with a mindset that is patient, systems-based, and genuinely human. They are thinking about growth, not just cost, and treating their people as the foundation of transformation rather than a line item to be reduced.

What also stands out is women leaders' grounded confidence. They report lower anxiety in their roles—not because the challenges are smaller, but, in my view, because their approach is steadier. They are also willing to ask for help, to acknowledge what they do not know, and to adapt incrementally. That is not uncertainty. That is wisdom.

Collectively, the differences we identified between women and men leaders point to a proposition that I find genuinely compelling. The skills that matter most in an AI world—reading risk accurately, building influence, staying grounded but optimistic, creating teams that can adapt—turn out to be precisely the skills you develop when you've spent a career navigating working environments that weren't shaped for you.

The disruption many senior women have faced on the way up hasn't just been an obstacle; it's been a training ground.

That changes the business case for gender diversity. It's not only about equity—though, of course, it is about that too. It's that the experience of overcoming disadvantage may have produced, almost as a side effect, exactly the leaders the AI era needs.

And yet, the representation gap persists. Women remain deeply underrepresented in senior leadership, and at the CEO level in particular. Every year that passes without closing that gap is a year in which a more human, more adaptive, more sustainable approach to leadership is missing from the rooms where strategy is decided.

I hope this report challenges every reader to consider what their organization is leaving on the table. Not as a question of fairness alone, but as a question of performance, durability, and what it truly means to get AI transformation right.

Thank you for reading, for engaging with these findings, and for the role each of you plays in building a future that works for everyone.”

Methodology

The 2026 AlixPartners
Disruption Index:
Gender insights

3,200

business executives in 11 countries: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Most fieldwork was conducted using online and telephone interviews from August 11–October 1, 2025.

Across 10 industries: Aerospace & Defence, Automotive, Consumer Products, Energy & Power Generation, Financial Services, Healthcare & Life Sciences, Media & Entertainment, Retail, Technology, Telecom & Cable

320

per industry

200-600+

per country

Business executives are defined as:

- Ages 25+
- Employed in one of the 11 countries listed
- Director level or above (50% at C-level)
- Company revenue of \$100 million+ (50% from companies with \$1bn+ in revenue)
- Possess insight into disruption trends facing their industry

About AlixPartners

For more than 40 years, AlixPartners has helped businesses around the world respond quickly and decisively to their most critical challenges—circumstances as diverse as urgent performance improvement, accelerated transformation, complex restructuring and risk mitigation.

These are the moments when everything is on the line—a sudden shift in the market, an unexpected performance decline, a time-sensitive deal, a fork-in-the-road decision. But it's not what we do that makes a difference, it's how we do it.

Tackling situations when time is of the essence is part of our DNA—so we adopt an action-oriented approach at all times. We work in small, highly qualified teams with specific industry and functional expertise, and we operate at pace, moving quickly from analysis to implementation. We stand shoulder to shoulder with our clients until the job is done, and only measure our success in terms of the results we deliver.

Our approach enables us to help our clients confront and overcome truly future-defining challenges. We partner with you to make the right decisions and take the right actions. And we are right by your side. When it really matters.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of AlixPartners, LLP, its affiliates, or any of its or their respective professionals or clients. This report: Women leaders in an AI era: Navigating opportunity and change – Insights from the 2026 AlixPartners Disruption Index ("Report") was prepared by AlixPartners, LLP ("AlixPartners") for general information and distribution on a strictly confidential and non-reliance basis. No one in possession of this Report may rely on any portion of this Report. This Report may be based, in whole or in part, on projections or forecasts of future events. A forecast, by its nature, is speculative and includes estimates and assumptions which may prove to be wrong. Actual results may, and frequently do, differ from those projected or forecast. The information in this Report reflects conditions and our views as of this date, all of which are subject to change. We undertake no obligation to update or provide any revisions to the Report. This Report is the property of AlixPartners, and neither the Report nor any of its contents may be copied, used, or distributed to any third party without the prior written consent of AlixPartners.

© AlixPartners LLP, 2026

disruption.alixpartners.com

