2026 Global Trade Report

Trade departments are experiencing unprecedented strategic elevation amid tariff challenges

Thomson Reuters Institute

Executive summary

Many corporate trade departments are experiencing unprecedented elevation within organizations, shifting their roles to strategic business partners rather than being viewed as a cost center. Indeed, a significant portion of trade professionals are seeing greater engagement, influence, and recognition in guiding strategic business decisions for their organizations. And this momentum is expected to continue across the industry.

In fact, this may be the forefront of a fundamental revaluation of trade's role in enterprise success, necessitated by tariff volatility and enabled by a dramatic rise in technology adoption.

This past year presents a far different global trade landscape than it did in 2024. The tariffs instituted by the United States in 2025 and other changes have left global trade professionals and their organizations scrambling to understand the new landscape and adjust their strategies in response.

The implications are widespread, impacting not only costs of goods, but trade relationships, supply chains, and location of markets and suppliers, adding significant new elements of risk. The US-imposed tariffs created cascading effects that extend far beyond cost increases and are fundamentally reshaping supply chains, procurement strategies, and competitive positioning.

In this fourth annual iteration of the Thomson Reuters Institute's *Global Trade Report*, we examine strategic priorities and responses in the current global trading environment. This report was derived from a survey of 225 trade professionals around the world.

The previous year's report described the landscape as one of "almost constant disruption" that was hindering global trade. Events since then have ratcheted up that assessment to a completely new level, making the 2025 trade environment structurally different from the cycles that preceded it. Looking toward 2026 and beyond, today's trade professionals say they believe the global trade volatility initiated by US tariffs will continue for the foreseeable future and do not simply represent transient challenges.

Respondents to our survey say they see the effects of tariffs cascading across operations, finance, and all other aspects of any business that conducts international trade. These tariffs are significantly impacting everything from inventory management to market commitments and much more. In addition to the magnitude of the specific changes, organizations must also deal with unprecedented macro-level volatility and uncertainty that is no longer periodic but seemingly continuous.

The trade landscape is increasingly anchored on unstable ground that can shift dramatically overnight. Tariffs have triggered both supply chain volatility and mounting regulatory pressures that are converging to create what may be the most challenging environment trade professionals have faced in decades.

In addition to the tariff situation, corporate trade departments must also contend with on-going challenges involving international conflicts, other trade disputes, cost management, ESG and other sustainability and environmental considerations, technology adoption challenges, and growth in non-tariff regulatory complexity.

Yet within this turbulence also lies a remarkable opportunity, respondents say. Many trade departments are seizing the opportunity to become innovators and early movers, leveraging the current environment to claim stronger, more visible roles and responsibilities as strategic business partners within their organizations.

Trade departments are emerging from the sometimes-unseen shadows of back-office operations into key strategic roles at the executive table.

Key findings:

As we track developments across the numerous changes in the global trade profession, this year's report identified some key findings, including:

- A growing number of trade departments are being elevated within organizational structures, moving from being seen as a cost center to a role as a strategic business partner.
- Technology adoption has surged dramatically. Trade departments are moving quickly to explore emerging technologies such as AI and blockchain and are rapidly adopting data analytics and other automated tools.
- Challenges such as supply chain resilience and regulatory compliance are no longer discrete functions. They now represent interlocking risk domains, mostly because of the widespread impacts of tariffs.
- As a result, supply chain reliability and regulations remain the top priorities for many trade professionals — but with a greatly heightened sense of urgency.
- Tariffs and their associated costs are not only causing operational difficulties, but they are threatening business profitability. Almost four-out-of-ten (39%) survey respondents say their companies may absorb the increased costs of tariffs rather than passing them on to customers.

4 in 10
are seeing increased influence at the executive level

40%
are exploring AI or blockchain technology

72%
said tariff volatility is the most impactful change

Becoming a strategic business partner: A growing sea change in the trade function

The most remarkable change in global trade management over the past year is that vanguard trade departments are experiencing unprecedented elevation within their organizations. Companies are fundamentally re-evaluating — and increasingly recognizing — the strategic importance of trade management to their business growth and success. The current global trade challenges are resulting in a significant portion of trade departments gaining influence, resources, and strategic positioning to a degree that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

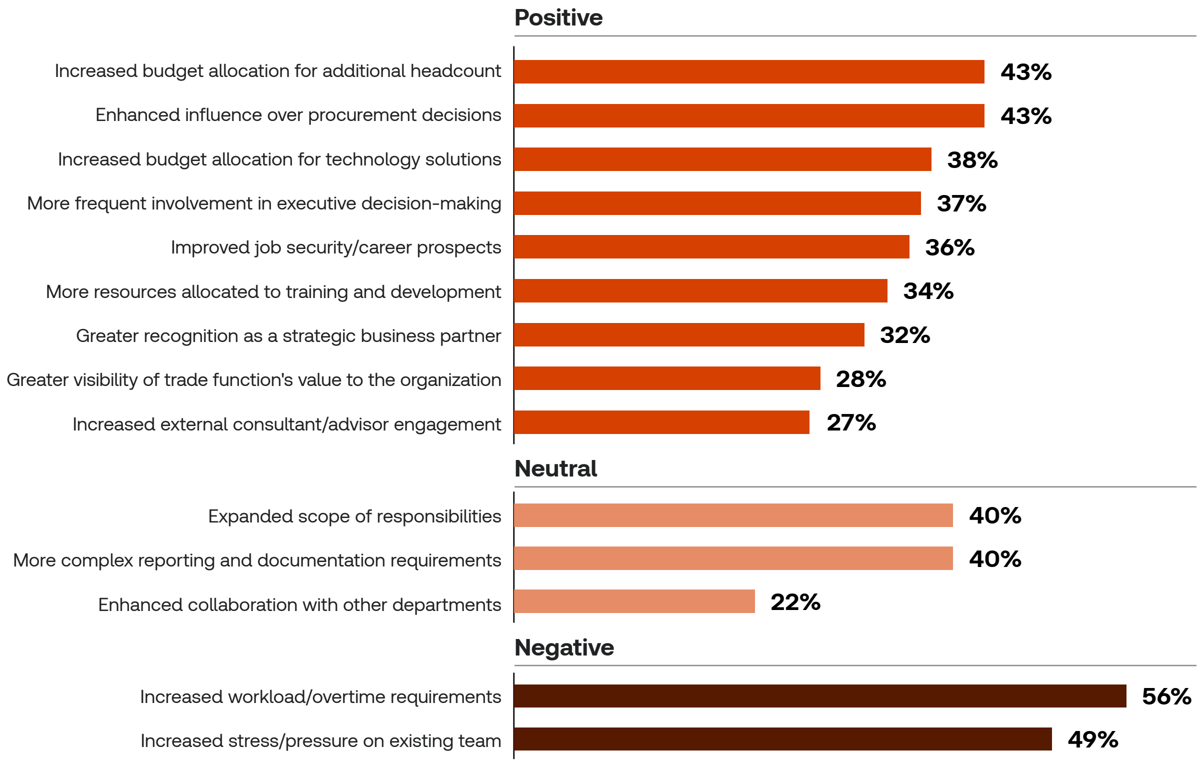
The survey findings indicate trade professionals are increasingly taking a bigger seat at table for strategic planning within their organizations. Fully 43% of trade professionals surveyed say they are experiencing enhanced influence over procurement decisions, while 37% report more frequent involvement in executive decision-making, and 28% also note an increased visibility of the trade function's value to the organization.

Further, those trade departments that are early movers in this trend are no longer seen as a cost center that simply manages compliance. Instead, they are being called upon to formulate and deliver strategic responses to business-critical challenges arising from the new trade environment. One survey respondent captured this dynamic, stating: "The financial burden caused by tariffs led us to reorganize our supply chain and production footprint in order to reduce tariff exposure and preserve profitability."

Indeed, greater strategic input from the trade function can help navigate the organization through these volatile, often seemingly chaotic, changes.

FIGURE 1:

Trade department changes from increased tariff activity & trade complexity



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Trade functions within organizations are increasingly being positioned as more than simply administrators of transactional filings. Trade departments are now interpreting crucial regulatory structures and policies, as well as strategically anticipating new shifts and challenges. Today, trade is no longer a back-office function but rather a frontline risk governance function that's become essential for nearly all aspects of an organization's operations, management, and strategic planning.

The TR Institute's View:

Strategic elevation of trade functions within organizations is rapidly taking hold. Trade departments that are early adopters are already seeing major structural changes, not merely reactive accommodations to the current trade environment.

Trade departments that are not yet experiencing this have an unprecedented opportunity to expand their strategic roles and responsibilities.

The challenge for organizations as they undergo these shifts will be to operationalize the changes by embedding greater strategic collaboration, communication, and planning through formalized processes, procedures, and policies. This will lead to an enduring change that will help the organization achieve lasting competitive advantages.

Increased budgets and resources

Perhaps even more importantly, forward-thinking organizations are coupling the heightened recognition of their trade function with additional resources. Many survey respondents say they are seeing increased budget allocation for hiring (with 43% of respondents saying this), technology solutions (38%), and training and development (34%). Businesses are stepping up to provide the staffing and technology tools that trade departments need to conduct their work with greater efficiency and effectiveness, which in turn benefits the entire organization.

Additionally, these trends towards greater influence and support are growing. Looking ahead to the next 12 months, even higher percentages of trade professionals foresee greater influence over procurement decisions (61%), higher recognition as strategic business partners (56%), more visibility of their function's value within their organization (55%), and greater frequency of involvement in executive decision-making (53%). Nearly half (46%) say they expect to see even greater expansion of their trade department's scope of responsibilities.

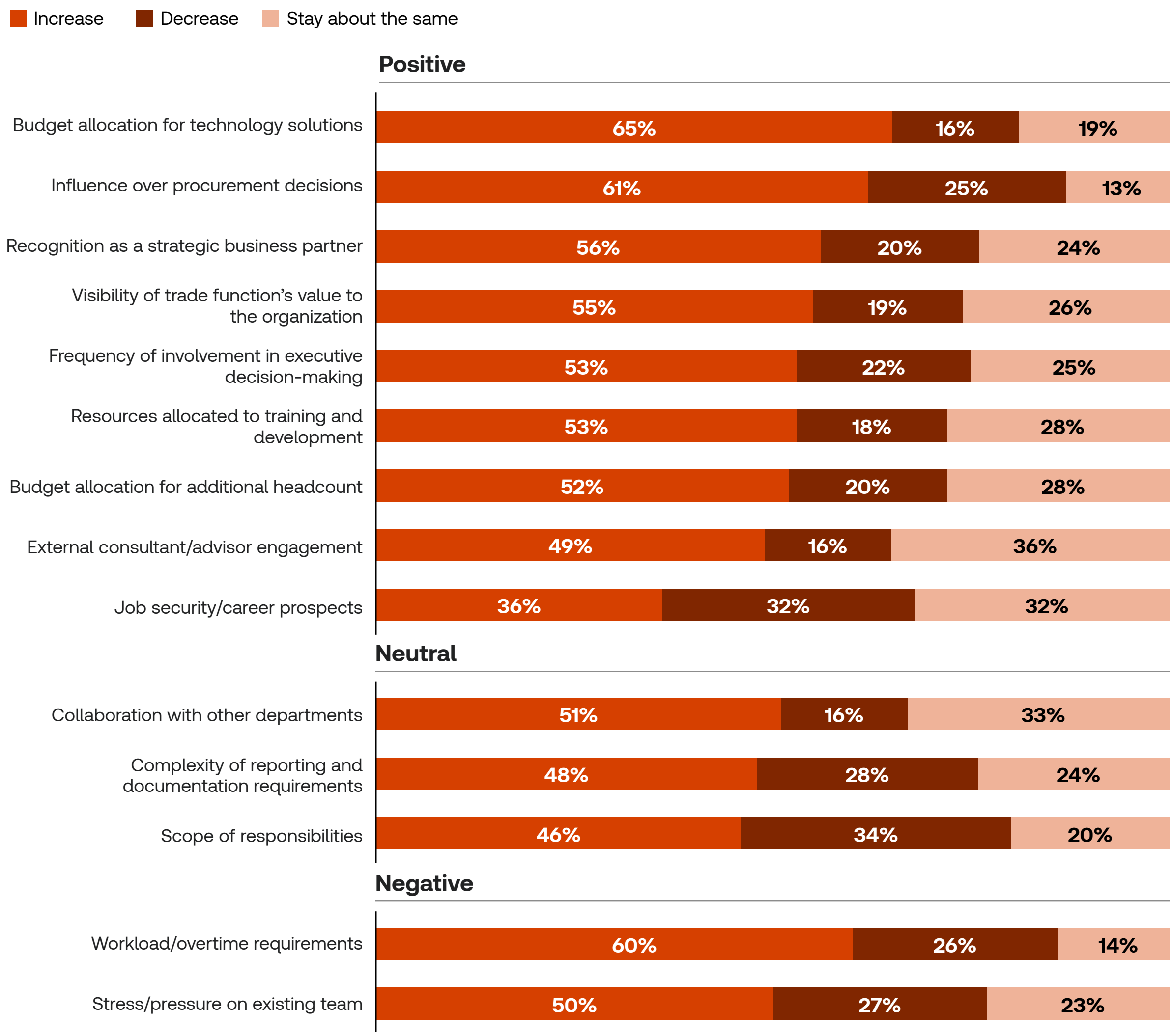
Strategic elevation rapidly moving from early adoption to mainstream

As more resources continue to flow to trade departments, respondents are anticipating a more robust and supported trade function. Most respondents say they expect increased budget allocation for technology solutions (65%), training and development (53%), and increased headcount (52%) over the next 12 months.

Clearly, the strategic elevation of the trade function is being accompanied by an on-going commitment to support this fundamental revaluation of trade's strategic importance, and not merely a transient response to current pressures.

FIGURE 2:

Expected increases in next 12 months



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Greater collaboration across the business

The strategic elevation of the trade function at leading organizations is also visible in its increased role in cross-functional collaboration. Nearly one-quarter of respondents (22%) report enhanced collaboration with other departments as a result of the current tariff environment. The most common collaborations are with Finance, (cited by 50% of those experiencing increased collaboration), followed by Operations (46%), IT (30%), and Procurement/Supply Chain (30%).

These collaborations carry significant competitive implications. When trade teams work more closely with Finance, for example, they can better model the P&L impact of different tariff scenarios, enabling more sophisticated strategic planning. Collaboration with Operations and Procurement, on the other hand, enables coordination between supply chain and production, and can result in more agile adjustments when disruptions occur. Partnership with IT facilitates the technological transformation necessary for more data-driven decision-making and efficient process automation.

Organizations that embrace and institutionalize these collaborative relationships — by using such initiatives as formal trade risk councils or cross-functional working groups — will likely develop significant competitive advantages over organizations that maintain siloed operations.

Most interestingly, the survey data suggests all of this is happening *organically* in response to tariff pressures. More than half of trade professionals surveyed say they expect collaboration with other departments to continue growing over the next 12 months.

The strategic elevation and increased resources for the trade function, and greater collaboration are increasingly seen as organizational necessities. That means, the imperative going forward will be to formalize and systematize these emerging collaborations on a lasting basis.

The TR Institute's View:

As cross-functional collaboration increases organically, it is vital that it be formalized. Ad hoc collaboration can be turned into deepened, permanent relationships across the business with regular touchpoints and dedicated communications channels ensuring collaboration remains on-going. Organization-wide collaboration on trade will benefit all facets of the business and should be an integral part of the formal governance structure for the entire organization.

At the same time, it also means that trade departments find themselves dealing with mounting operational pressures. Half or more of trade professionals say they are facing increased workload and overtime requirements (56%) and experiencing elevated stress and pressure on existing teams (49%).

While increased budgets and resources for additional hiring, training, and talent development are welcomed, trade departments are also increasing their use of advanced technology to automate routine tasks, improve analytical capabilities, and achieve other improvements in efficiency.

Global trade: Challenges & trends

Tariff-related issues are the primary challenge

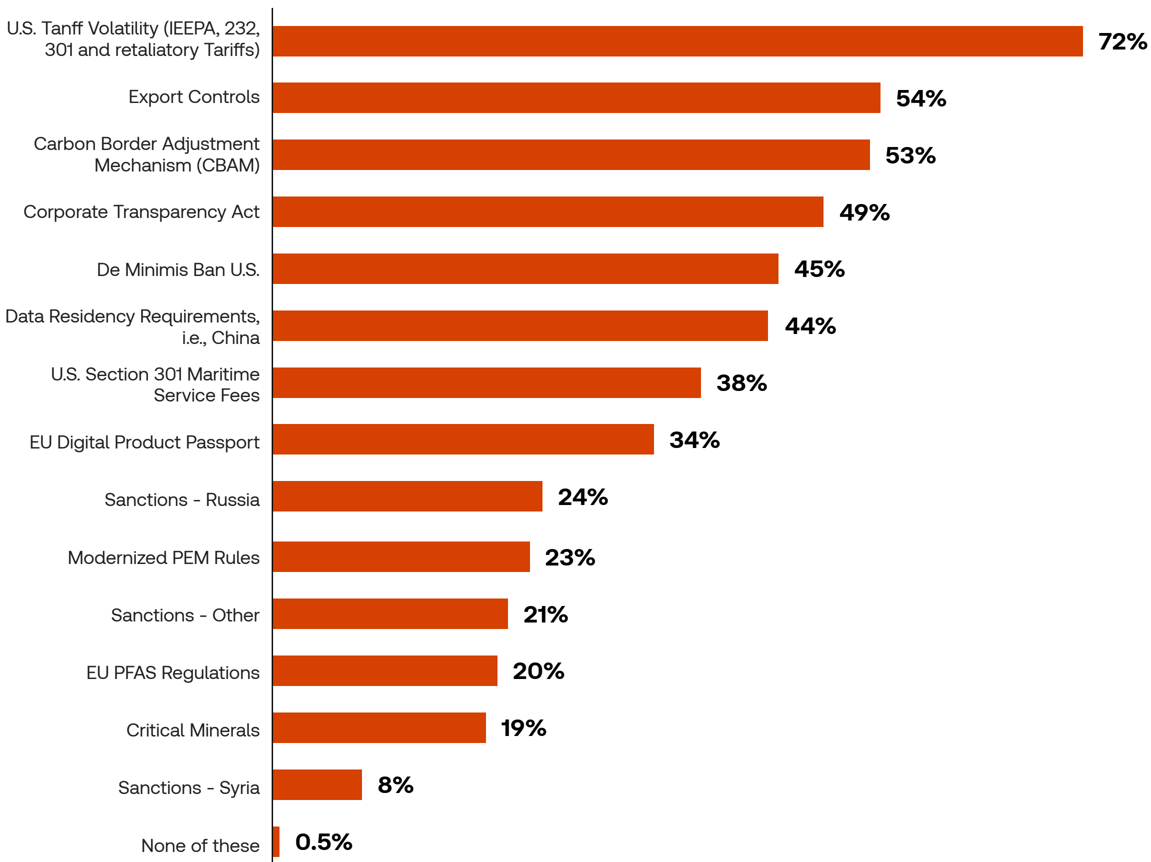
Any comprehensive analysis of the current trade environment necessarily must start with tariffs. Not surprisingly, dealing with the rise in tariffs dominates the current global trade landscape as they have fundamentally recast the entire trade environment. The new, and still-evolving, tariff regimes, in turn, produce cascading effects that extend far beyond financial impacts, altering supply chains, procurement strategies, and competitive positioning.

US tariff volatility is ranked by the global trade professionals we surveyed as by far the most impactful regulatory/customs change, cited by nearly three-quarters (72%) of them. Last year, only 41% rated tariffs as impactful. This year, tariffs were cited by an overwhelming margin, above all other potential impacts, such as export controls, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, and the Corporate Transparency Act.

Indeed, tariffs and their related effects are clearly commanding the lion's share of the focus of corporate trade functions.

FIGURE 3:

Most impactful regulatory and customs systems changes



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

The cascading effects from the tariffs are many-fold, according to respondents, and include regulatory, cost, and quality considerations.

Regulatory

Increasing regulatory and compliance burdens are being driven by the impacts of tariffs to a large degree as governments are intervening more deeply in supply chain transparency, classification discipline, and country-of-origin scrutiny.

The result is significant increases in requirements around documentation— which has grown in volume and complexity — and deeper, more frequent scrutiny of tariff classification, valuation methodology, and country-of-origin claims. Companies are also reporting increased frequency of inspections, reviews, and secondary verification requirements.

This tightens execution windows and places a greater premium on trade accuracy and defensibility, substantially increasing compliance burdens. Respondents report delays in planning and execution, which, in turn, is creating business operational difficulties. As one trade professional describes: “Project schedules are [being] impacted by the complexity and delays in regulatory compliance and customs clearance.”

Costs

Respondents overwhelmingly report cost increases as a major consequence of tariff exposure. These increases are predominantly concentrated in imported raw materials and components, creating compression effects on manufacturing margins and export competitiveness.

These increased costs are being seen not as minor adjustments but significant strategic challenges that in some cases are forcing fundamental re-evaluation and reorganization of supply chains and markets. Indeed, many organizations are realigning sourcing and production while simultaneously exploring new markets in order to maintain growth. “Product costs are increasing,” one respondent notes, “and we are faced with either raising prices at the risk of lower sales or absorbing reduced profits.”

> *“Product costs are increasing, and we are faced with either raising prices at the risk of lower sales or absorbing reduced profits”*

Product quality

In addition to costs, survey respondents say they are concerned about how tariff-induced shifts in supplier relations may impact product quality.

“Tariffs make it difficult to maintain product quality when using alternate suppliers,” one trade professional explains. This is because when companies have to switch suppliers based on tariff considerations rather than quality criteria, they risk degrading the products that define their competitive position and potentially alienating customers.

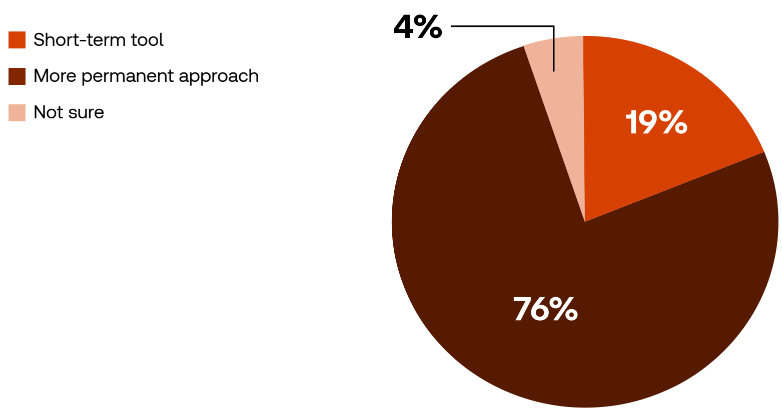
Not surprisingly, the combination of cost and quality concerns raises risks for how markets will respond to these shifts, potentially jeopardizing sales or even entire markets. These challenges speak volumes about the long-term strategic risks of tariff-driven supply chain restructuring.

US tariffs seen as a permanent approach

Looking ahead, the volatility is expected to continue, according to respondents. More than three-quarters of legal trade professionals surveyed (76%) say they believe the new tariffs imposed by the US represent a more permanent approach to trade that will be present for at least the next four years, rather than being a short-term trade tool being used by the current administration.

FIGURE 4:

U.S. tariffs as short-term or permanent approach



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Other regulatory and customs system changes

While tariffs are by far the dominant impactful change that trade professionals cited this year, several other regulatory and customs system changes are also demanding the attention of trade departments, including:

- **Export control laws** — These include US expansion of Entity List and Military End-User (MEU) List restrictions, and export-restricted lists for the sale of advanced semiconductors to China.
- **Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)** — CBAM is likely the first in a series of carbon borders likely to emerge in the United Kingdom, Japan, and other jurisdictions.
- **Corporate Transparency Act (CTA)** — Mostly impactful for US trade professionals (with 69% citing this an impactful change) but also for those in Latin America (42%), the Asia-Pacific region (38%) and the European Union-UK (38%).
- ***De minimis* exemption** — Fully 87% of all respondents said their organizations will be highly or moderately impacted by the US elimination of the *de minimis* exemption.
- **Data residency requirements** — Additional requirements in China for data residency and cross-border transfer of data take effect in January 2026, ensuring further impactful changes in the coming year.
- **Russia sanctions** — Trade sanctions against Russia were ranked impactful by 24% of respondents. Meanwhile, 21% say they were impacted by other international trade sanctions not involving Russia.

Top strategic priorities

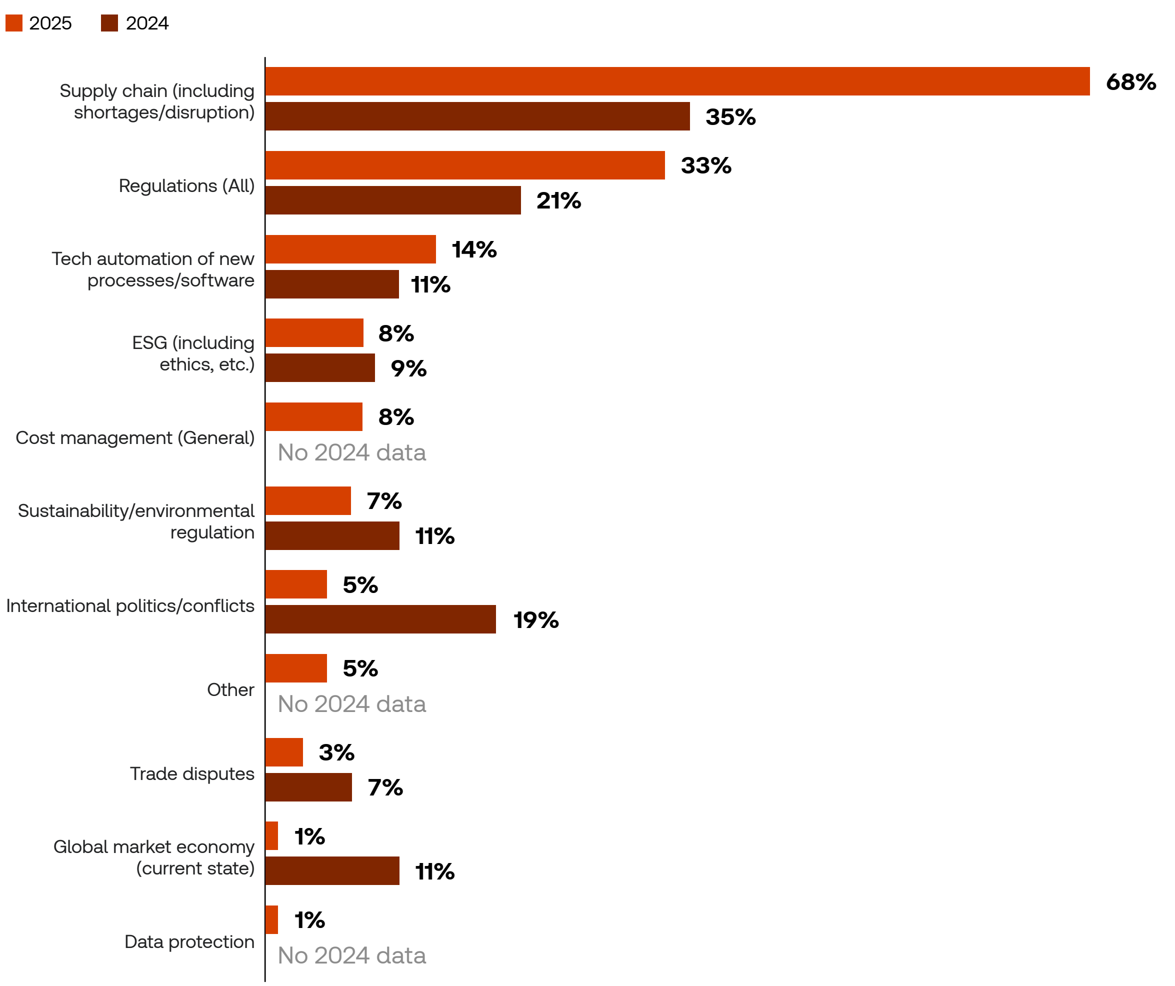
In addition to the direct impact that tariffs are having, the ripple effects from tariffs have significantly reshaped strategic priorities for trade professionals globally.

In last year's report, trade professionals were navigating numerous challenges, led by supply chain concerns and regulations. While those remain the top two priorities, they now dominate the strategic priorities, far surpassing all other challenges. More than two-thirds (68%) of trade professionals say that supply chain management is their top strategic priority — nearly double the percentage (35%) that said that last year.

Indeed, concerns about potential supply chain shortages and disruptions are clearly top of mind as many organizations weigh the impact of tariffs on manufacturing and other operations. In addition, supply chain concerns have shifted away from more day-to-day worries around inventory and logistical optimization and toward prioritizing systemic resilience. As one respondent explains, supply chain reliability is "back on the radar in a big way."

FIGURE 5:

Strategic priorities for next 12 months



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Regulations, including compliance, also now are even more of a strategic priority than they were last year, cited by one-third (33%) of respondents, up from just 21% a year earlier. “Customs paperwork and adjustments to tariff categorization are making trade compliance and operational planning more difficult,” states one global trade professional.

Meanwhile, several other challenges, such as international conflicts, labor/staffing issues, and competition have receded as top priorities, as organizations focus on dealing with the most immediate and critical tariff impacts, including supply chain and regulatory compliance.

Interestingly, economic uncertainty was a major concern for trade professionals last year. While worries about a potential global recession and other economic issues remain, they are largely overshadowed by the urgency of managing a new trade environment that is dominated by tariff-related issues.

Technology: Adoption & exploration are surging

Exploration of AI or blockchain technologies is rising rapidly

One of the most striking findings from this year's survey concerns the dramatic acceleration of technology exploration and adoption by leading organizations. Fully four-in-ten respondents (40%) say their companies are exploring emerging technologies such as AI or blockchain to better manage trade functions, compared to just 6% who said that in 2024. This nearly sevenfold increase signals the industry's growing readiness to explore AI and other new technologies in earnest, as well as the belief that these technologies have matured to the point that they are now ready for consideration.

In addition, the portion of respondents who feel their organization is only at the early stages of adopting technology has significantly fallen to only 2% this year, from 40% last year. Indeed, only 1% say their organization is behind the curve and still using manual systems to a significant degree rather than using automation. The trend is clear: Organizations are shifting decisively from manual processes and legacy systems toward advanced, specialized trade-technology solutions.

The reasons for this sudden huge leap in technology adoption are manyfold and likely include:

- an urgent need for data-driven decision-making because of tariff-induced trade volatility
- a recognition of the importance of trade to organizational success
- the need for efficiency gains to counteract tariff-induced costs
- a move to counteract under-staffing and under-resourcing, and to alleviate increasing operational pressures

In addition, the strategic elevation of the trade department is not only an acknowledgement of the importance of the trade function itself but provides trade leaders with greater influence with C-level management to secure more technology resources. Trade technology is increasingly viewed by organizations not only as a means to improve efficiency, but also as a tool to help the entire organization more effectively manage in today's volatile trade environment.

FIGURE 6:

State of technology adoption and exploration

Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Usage of technology rising

Not surprisingly, adoption rates of several key technology solutions are markedly higher this year.

Trade/supply chain data analytics is the most widely used trade technology, with 58% of respondents saying their organization has deployed this tool. This recognizes that data-driven decision-making is increasingly essential to manage the complex and volatile trade and tariff landscape.

More than half of respondents also report that their organization is using automation for enterprise resource planning (56%), supply chain management (55%), or supply chain visibility (54%), indicating widespread technology usage across various trade functions.

Room for additional tech expansion

At the same time, current low adoption for tools and platforms involving global trade management (32%), managing tariff changes (7%), and managing classification changes (4%) suggest there is still considerable room for leveraging technology to further increase efficiency and improve processes.

Several major trade functions are still lacking in widespread use of automation, as shown in the Thomson Reuters Institute's *2025 Tariff Report*,[1] published in April.

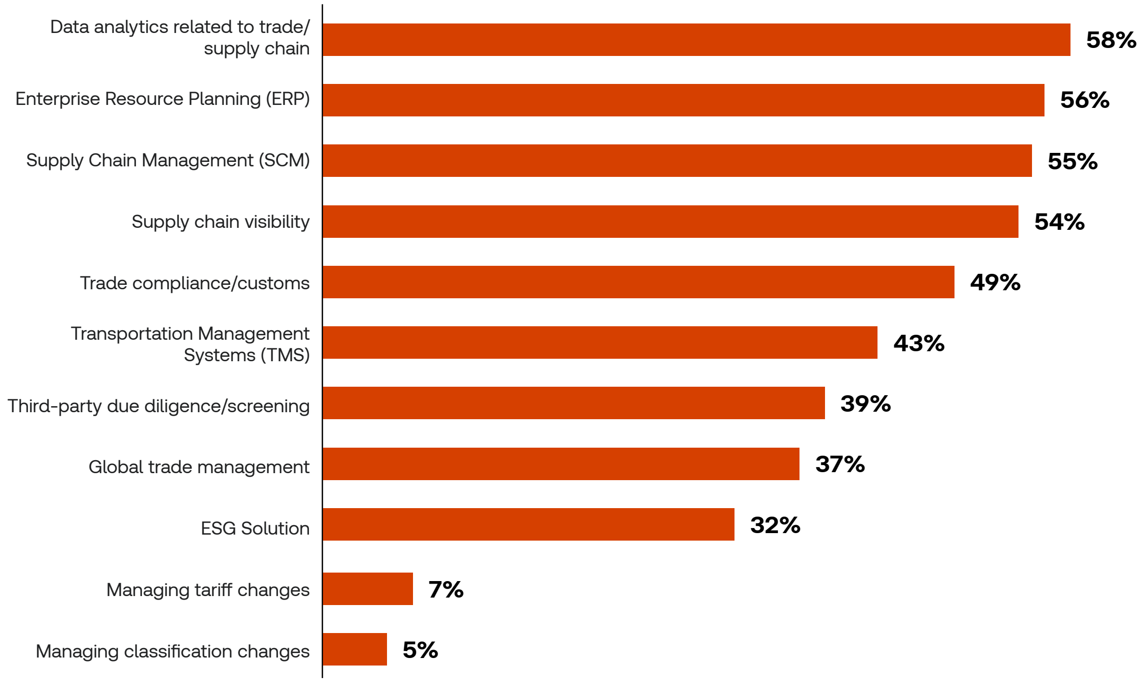
While more than half of trade professionals who responded to that earlier survey said their organization uses technology for analysis of trade lanes, identifying risks and opportunities in trade routes, scenario planning and supply chain mapping, less than one-in-four are currently using automation to identify potential savings through special trade programs such as Foreign Trade Zones, organizing import and export processes, and automating compliance with Free Trade Agreements.

Similarly, only 7% of respondents to this year's *Global Trade Report* say their organization is using software or online service providers to stay up to date on tariffs. With tariffs changing seemingly overnight as nations negotiate trade agreements or impose retaliatory tariffs, accurate and up-to-date information is essential for enabling agile, informed decision-making.

1 *Corporate tariffs survey: Mitigating global trade challenges*; Thomson Reuters Institute (April 23, 2025); *available at* https://tax.thomsonreuters.com/en/insights/reports/corporate-tariffs-survey-mitigating-global-trade-challenges/form.

FIGURE 7:

Current technology usage



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

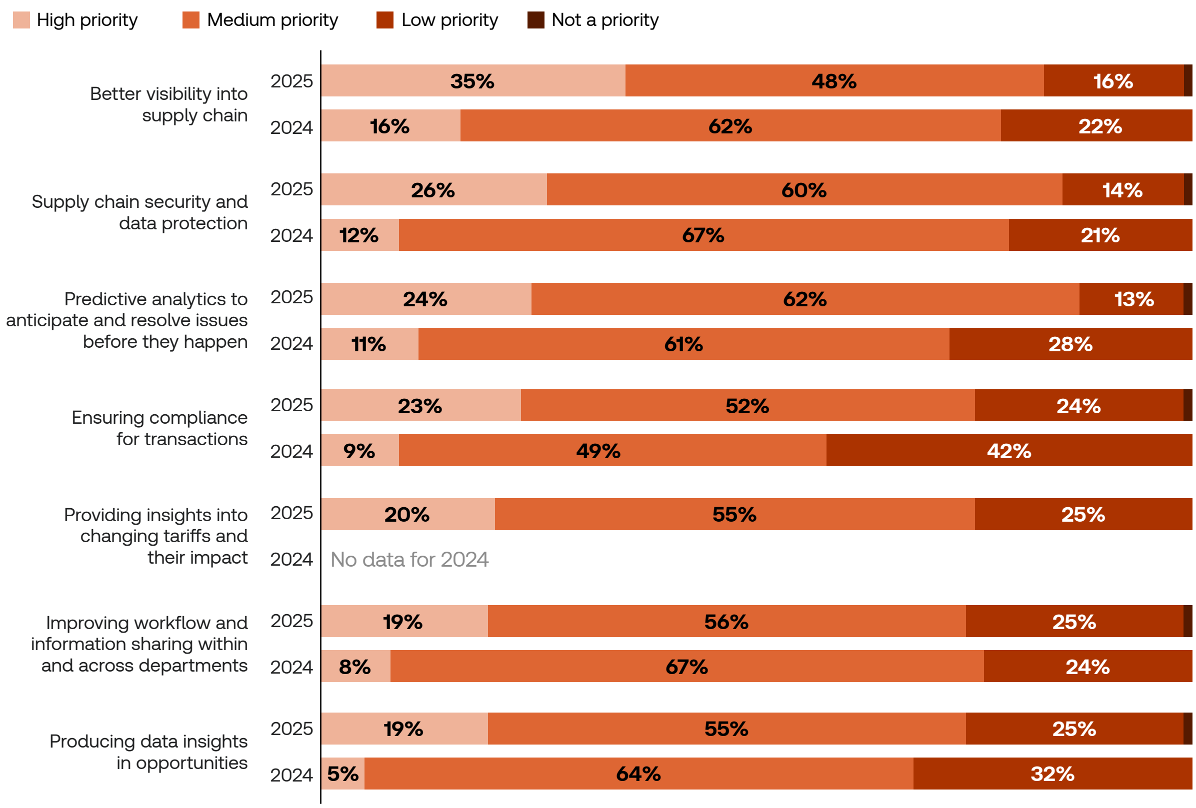
Technology investment priorities

As far as upon which areas trade professionals are focusing their growing technology budgets, better visibility into supply chains is most frequently mentioned as a high priority. Other top priorities include supply chain security and data protection, predictive analytics, transaction compliance, and insights into tariff changes and their impact.

This aligns with supply chain and regulations being far and away the top strategic priorities for the next year, clearly demonstrating that corporate trade leaders are moving decisively to deploy technologies to meet those strategic priorities.

FIGURE 8:

Technology investment priorities



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

The TR Institute's View:

Forward-thinking organizations have critical opportunities to close existing technology gaps and gain competitive advantages. New technologies can improve supply chain visibility, compliance, early identification of and resolution to problems, identification of new opportunities, and support of data-driven decision-making.

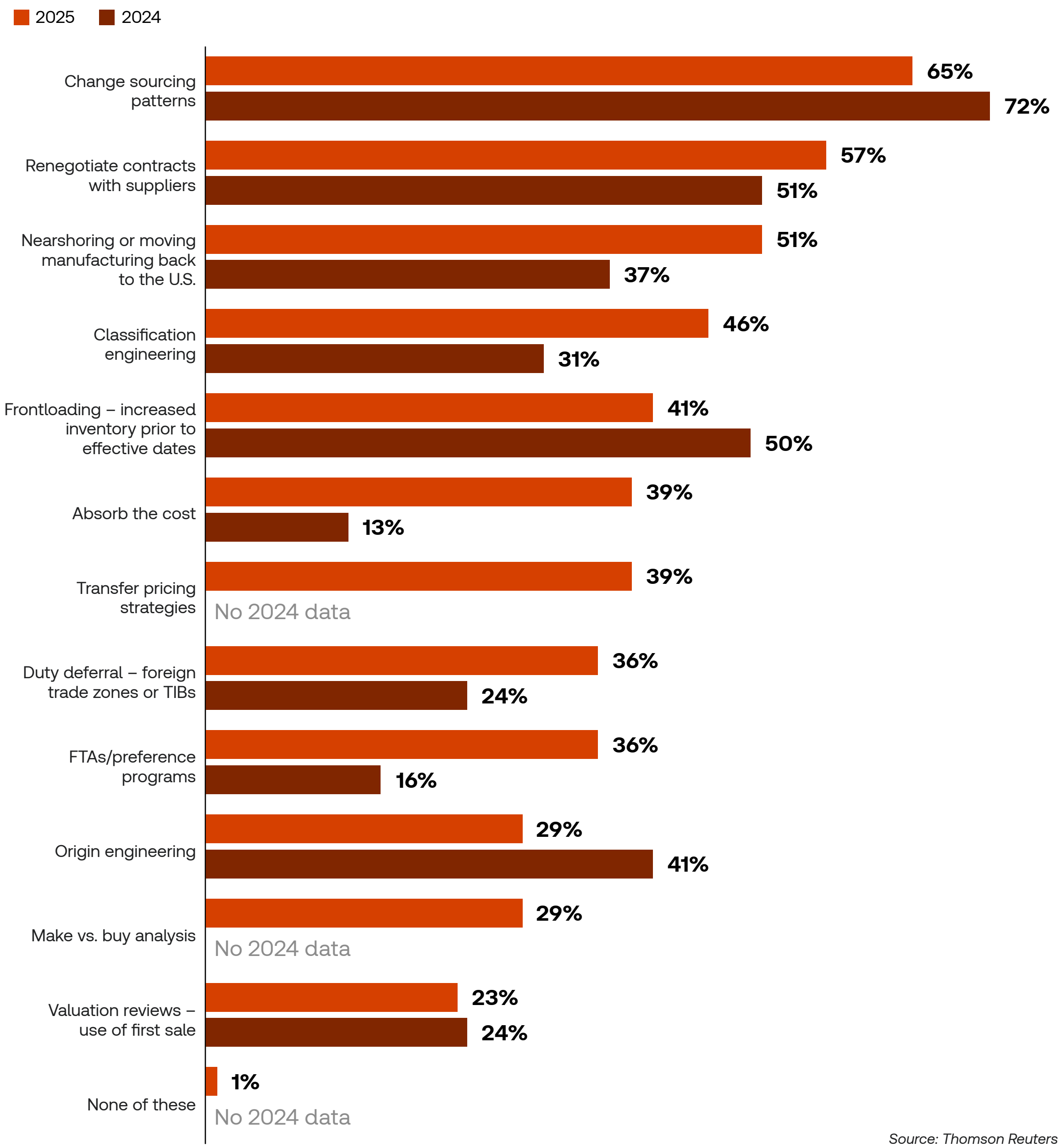
The recent jump in technology adoption and exploration — while certainly welcome — is merely a starting point. Collaboration with IT is essential to implement the technologies, integrate them, and ensure that proper training is provided to facilitate both successful adoption and effective usage.

Tariff mitigation strategies

The new technologies and other tools will likely be put to good use as organizations employ or consider a diverse array of mitigation strategies in response to tariff pressures. (As mentioned, the previously published *2025 Tariff Survey* recently examined how the strategies have shifted in 2025 under the new US tariff regime.)

FIGURE 9:

Mitigation strategies being used or considered for U.S. tariffs



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

One of the most significant changes is that 39% of respondents report that their organization is either absorbing or considering absorbing tariff costs rather than passing them on to customers. Last year, barely one-in-eight (13%) said their organization was either doing or considering it. The reluctance prior to this year was understandable, as that strategy carries significant implications for profitability. The three-fold jump in willingness to pass tariff costs on to customers is one of the sharpest indications of how dramatically the global trade environment has shifted this year.

In addition, the substantial increase in respondents who say their organization is willing to consider absorbing tariff-related costs may indicate that competitive pressures are limiting companies' ability to pass costs downstream. For trade leaders, this underscores the importance of finding operational efficiencies and strategic workarounds to minimize tariff impacts without compromising market position.

The most common tariff mitigation strategy, cited by 65% of respondents, involves changing sourcing patterns. This indicates that businesses are fundamentally restructuring their supply chains to reduce tariff exposure. In addition to changing sourcing patterns, a majority (57%) of respondents report their organization plans to renegotiate contracts with suppliers. One trade professional described the increasing need to reshuffle supplier relationships, saying: "Changes in tariffs cause uncertainty in shipping and procurement, which raises logistical costs and makes maintaining agreements with exporters more difficult."

Nearshoring and reshoring strategies also have gained significant traction, with more than half (51%) of respondents saying their organization is either moving or considering moving manufacturing to the United States to avoid tariffs. This represents a notable increase from previous research in which a little more than one-third of respondents (37%) said this.

It's worth noting that the rapid shift in tariff mitigation strategies also likely reflects the growing voice and responsibilities that trade professionals have in strategic planning. They are clearly able to influence planning and help execute major changes in operations across supply chains, manufacturing, finance, and more. This growing influence can help trade professionals enable their organizations to move quickly in adjusting to the shifting trade environment.

Recommendations for trade professionals

Leading trade departments are moving swiftly to track and understand the rapidly evolving global landscape, while providing data-driven, actionable insights and strategy options to their organizations.

While some trade departments are moving boldly and others more cautiously, survey respondents identified several initiatives and strategies that can immediately help their organizations to successfully navigate the current trade environment.

Capitalize on closeness to upper management

Trade professionals should take advantage of their new-found influence in the C-Suite through several actions, including:

- Building regular reporting that highlights trade department actions and how results are benefitting the business
- Developing executive briefings and dashboards that translate trade team actions into specific, measurable business impacts
- Leveraging multiple touchpoints to point out the benefits of having the trade department as a strategic partner to the business

Prepare for near term policy volatility

Build scenario models, brief sales teams and customers, and maintain auditable decision logs to defend classification and valuation choices.

Establish comprehensive systems for regulatory tracking and updates

Ensure up-to-date information and real-time alerts are in place to monitor changes across the entire scope of the organization's trade footprint.

Operationalize cross-functional collaboration

Maintain channels of communications across business functions so that information, plans, and feedback can flow freely between corporate departments.

Form an inter-departmental "trade risk council"

Set up a cross functional *trade risk council* as a working group with the involvement of Finance, Operations, Procurement, Compliance, and IT teams. This council should:

- Share tariff and export control updates weekly
- Run disruption playbooks and ensure the council understands pre defined responses and triggers
- Convert informal collaboration gains into a structured oversight framework

Long-term changes for organizations

The current environment also provides important opportunities for trade leaders to leverage their strategic elevation to institute long-term measures that could help position their organization for on-going success.

Prioritize insights and analytics for real-time visibility and control

Trade leaders should prioritize technology resources for data analytics across the entire supply chain and ensure systems are fully integrated across all levels of supply chains and markets. They should also utilize AI assisted product classification to improve efficiency, ensure data consistency, reduce errors, and enable more nimble decisions.

Don't let tariffs distract from other issues

While tariffs and their effects clearly dominate current trade priorities, other strategic priorities also remain in place, such as regulatory concerns (outside of tariffs), competition, and labor and staffing issues, among others. It's imperative that trade departments not lose sight of other issues that have an important bearing on trade operations. Leaders should remain vigilant and up to date on the total scope of trade-related issues to ensure proper planning.

Incorporate long-term perspectives in planning

Many trade professionals say they believe the volatility triggered by US tariffs will endure beyond the current US administration, which underscores how trade functions need to maintain a long-term view of markets. Decision-making and scenario planning must be viewed through both short-term and long-term strategic lenses for stability, planning, and building appropriate organization structures to execute strategies.

View trade capabilities as a strategic differentiator

While effective execution by the trade department is essential for the business, trade professionals can also contribute towards higher-level strategic objectives. Smooth, reliable supply chain operations and regulatory compliance should be seen as merely table stakes in supporting the business. Looking beyond that, involvement in early-stage strategic planning can produce opportunities for trading functions to identify new markets, proactively adjust trading partners, and streamline supply chains. This can result in significant competitive advantages for the organization.

Looking beyond the horizon

The picture that's coming into focus for trade professionals across the world is one of *functional transformation*. As complexity intensifies across every dimension of global commerce and the importance of trade to businesses grows, the corporate trade department's role is increasingly becoming that of a strategic business partner. That means this challenging environment is actually providing unprecedented opportunities as we are seeing proactive trade departments gaining influence, resources, and strategic positioning that would have been difficult to foresee just a few years ago.

As we saw in 2025 and going forward into 2026 and beyond, trade is no longer merely an execution layer of the supply chain — it is becoming a strategic layer of the enterprise overall.

In this environment, trade professionals and their organizations should be preparing systematically for sustained volatility rather than hoping for a return to stability. They need to be willing to reconsider everything from trading partners to re-configuration of supply chains, production footprints, internal workflows, and more.

Those organizations that will thrive in this environment are those that recognize trade as a strategic function worthy of increased investment and focused executive attention. They also view technology not as a cost but as an investment that could become a force-multiplier for human trade expertise and experience. And they maintain focus on both operational excellence and strategic value creation from their trade functions.

As strategic value creator, the trade department can drive new business opportunities and competitive advantages

Looking forward, the current challenges present a unique opportunity to embed trade's expanded responsibilities across the organization on an ongoing basis, while building capabilities that can provide the business with enduring resiliency and competitive advantages. Most importantly, trade leaders need to capitalize on this moment of organizational attention and resource availability to build their department into one that will provide their organization with competitive advantage for years to come.

The challenges of 2025 are significant and will certainly continue into 2026 and beyond, and the road ahead may still appear chaotic and uncertain. However, these challenges pale in comparison to the opportunities available to those businesses that approach trade management with strategic vision, technological sophistication, and organizational courage.

This report clearly shows that this transformation is already underway. The question is not whether it will continue, but which organizations will lead it, and which will be left behind.

Methodology

The *2026 Global Trade Report* is derived from a survey of global trade professionals from the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Latin America, and the Asia-Pacific region. Most are upper-level executives, directors, and managers at corporations, with roles involving various aspects of global trade, including operations, logistics, procurement, supply-chain management, and compliance.

Respondents answered a 15-minute online survey; and open-ended responses were encouraged for many of the questions. A total of 225 professionals took the survey, with 53% representing companies ranging from those with less than US$5 million in global annual sales revenue to those with less than US$100 million in global annual sales revenue; another 16% came from companies with global annual sales revenue of between US$100 million and US$500 million, and 31% came from companies with global annual sales revenue of more than US$500 million.

Participating companies were required to have US$5 million or more in annual sales, of which at least 10% had to come from import/export activities. The vast majority of participating companies (84%) are involved in both import and export activities. All companies import and/or export goods, products, materials, and services, while no participating companies import or export only services.

The highest number of respondents came from the manufacturing sector, but the survey also included companies involved in retail trade, technology and electronics, logistics, and ecommerce. Participating companies were nearly evenly distributed between privately held and publicly traded companies.

The report also includes findings from the *2025 Tariffs Report*, as cited.

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