

Thoughtworks Global CIO Survey 2026: Who governs enterprise AI?

Middle East: Structural responses are prominent, workforce upskilling less so

Executive summary

Saudi Arabia and the UAE both show a strong emphasis on leadership and governance structures as organizations adapt to AI. Hiring a Chief AI Officer is selected far more often as a planned action than in the global sample. The two markets differ in the pressures CIOs report, but both raise a practical question about whether organizational structure and workforce capability are receiving equal attention.

Key findings

CAIO hiring is a particularly prominent planned action. 44% of Saudi respondents and 45% of UAE respondents select hiring a CAIO among actions they are taking or planning over the next 12 months, compared with 27% globally.

Saudi CIOs report ownership and workforce pressures. Fragmented ownership across business units is the most frequently cited scaling challenge in Saudi Arabia at 36%. Workforce disruption is the most frequently cited outcome for which Saudi CIOs say they are personally accountable without full authority to influence it, at 43%.

UAE respondents report especially strong governance pressure. 98% agree AI adoption is happening faster than governance structures can

adapt. Governance and compliance is the most frequently cited scaling challenge at 37%, while 97% agree central IT would still ultimately be held responsible for security or compliance failures caused by independently purchased AI tools.

Workforce upskilling is selected less often.

Just 8% of Saudi respondents and 5% of UAE respondents identify upskilling the wider workforce as an action taken or planned in response to changing technology leadership structures, well below the 15% global figure.

Large enterprises show a particularly unsettled leadership picture. In the combined Middle East sample, among respondents from organizations with more than 1,000 employees, 20% say a CAIO has already been appointed and 80% say they are looking to hire one. In the same group, 88% say they are expanding the CIO role to oversee enterprise-wide AI strategy and implementation.

What this suggests

For the Middle East, the focus is on leadership design rather than a simple race to appoint new roles. The data shows a range of CIO and CAIO structures alongside governance and ownership pressures.