



The rise of the AI-enabled CFO in the Middle East



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Organisations in the Middle East are investing heavily in digital transformation. Finance is at the forefront, giving CFOs an opportunity to use AI not just to improve efficiency, but to shape strategy, strengthen credibility and drive diversification.

A shifting mandate

CFOs in the Middle East face growing demands from boards, regulators and investors who expect faster insights, sharper forecasts and unwavering integrity. Artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as an ally, streamlining processes and opening new possibilities for strategy and risk management. Yet with these opportunities comes responsibility. CFOs now sit at the centre of an AI-enabled transformation that must deliver both efficiency and trust.

This dual pressure to capture AI's benefits while safeguarding confidence in financial systems is pushing organisations in the region to accelerate adoption. National visions such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's National AI Strategy 2031, Qatar's National AI Strategy and others in the region have placed advanced technology at the centre of economic diversification and finance is one of the proving grounds.

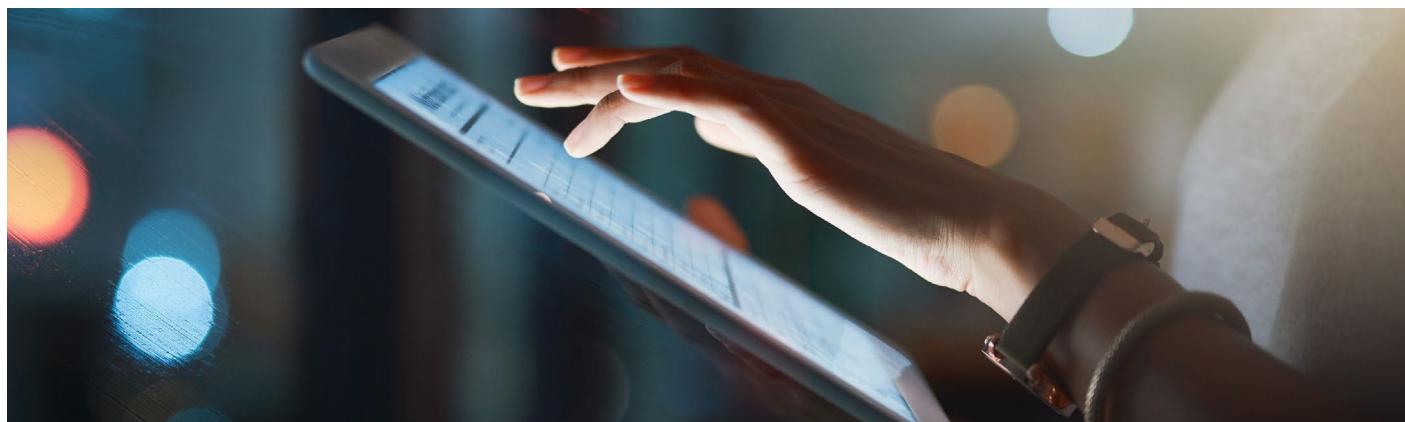
This top-down emphasis is being matched by the private sector, where recent PwC research shows

88%

CEOs in the Middle East adopted generative AI (GenAI) in the past 12 months,¹ well ahead of global peers and 70% expect it to boost profitability in the year ahead.

With Middle East CEOs adopting AI faster than global peers, CFOs risk falling behind if finance does not keep pace with the boardroom. This momentum makes finance not just a user of AI, but a benchmark for how the technology can reinforce credibility and resilience across the wider economy.

¹<https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/ceo-survey/28th-ceo-survey-middle-east-findings-2025.html>

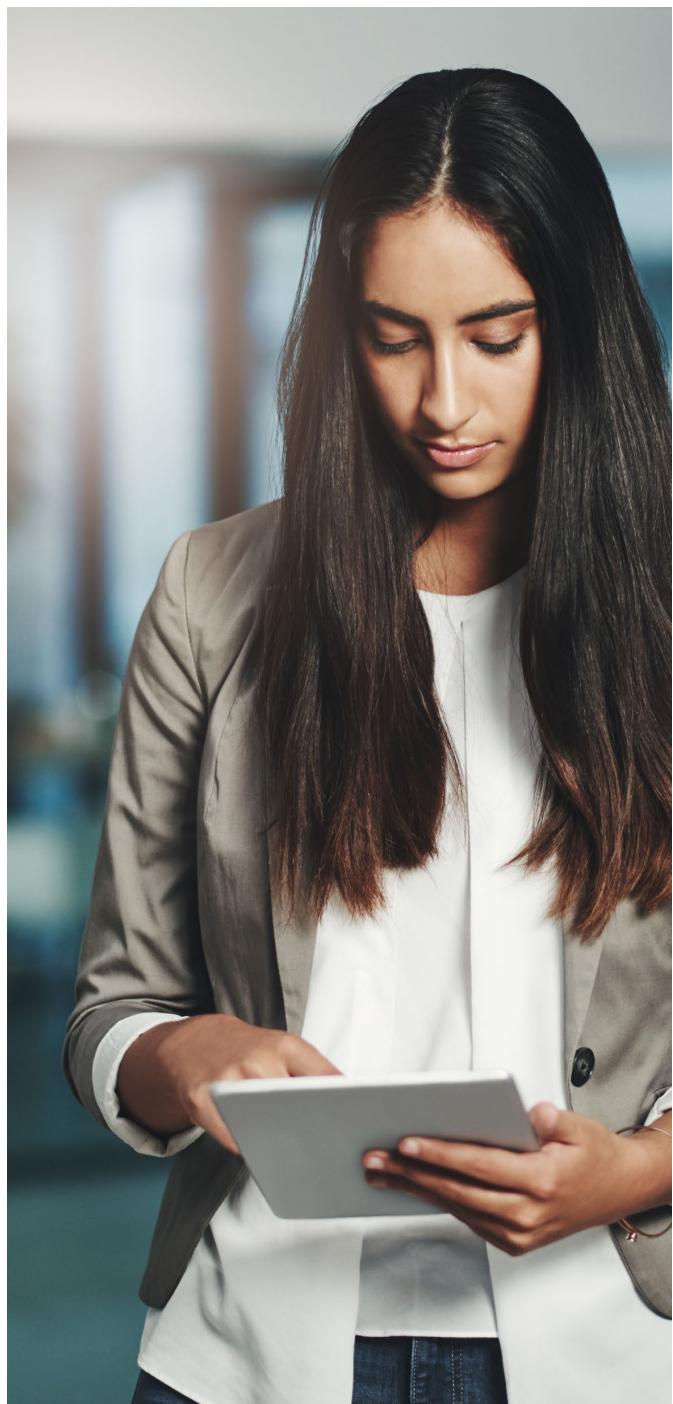


From transactional excellence to strategic foresight

Historically, Middle East finance teams were measured by efficiency – closing books quickly, ensuring compliance and producing reliable reports. AI is extending this mandate. Machine learning algorithms can reconcile transactions in seconds, AI agents can generate draft reports, and predictive models can highlight anomalies before they escalate into risks.

In a region shaped by oil price swings, shifting tax regimes and rapid regulatory change, this pivot from process to insight is no longer optional but essential for resilience.

AI frees finance professionals to focus on delivering insight, not managing process. For CFOs, the expectation is moving towards being a strategist and risk navigator who can use AI-driven insights to inform investment decisions, capital allocation, and business resilience strategies. The finance function becomes not just a recorder of value, but a generator of it.



Trust as the new currency of AI in finance

With every new capability comes a deeper question of confidence. As PwC's thinking on the "new architecture of trust" highlights, institutional credibility rests on four pillars: competency, accountability, transparency and ethics. These qualities are vital in finance, where investors, regulators and boards depend on the accuracy of data and the integrity of reporting.

For CFOs, responsible AI means embedding governance, explainability and fairness into every system. Algorithms must be auditable, decision processes transparent and data safeguarded in line with local regulation and international standards.

In the region, this imperative is reinforced by reforms such as the UAE's Federal Data Protection Law¹ and Saudi Arabia's capital markets governance updates,² which demand higher levels of accountability and disclosure.

The urgency is clear. PwC's 2026 Global Digital Trust Insights: Middle East findings³ shows that 80% of organisations in the region will increase

their cyber budgets, compared with 50% globally. Almost a quarter reported breaches costing US\$1m or more in the past three years. The Middle East now ranks second globally, with an average cost of over US\$7m per incident.⁴

As investment and accountability converge, responsible AI becomes both a financial and governance priority, essential to managing risk, building resilience and safeguarding long-term trust.

These findings underline why CFOs cannot treat trust as secondary. It's a direct driver of resilience and competitiveness in financial markets. Building confidence in AI-enabled finance functions therefore requires CFOs to work closely with risk, compliance and assurance colleagues. The challenge is not simply to move fast, but to ensure that innovation is matched by governance and that speed never outpaces control.

¹ <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/services/consulting/documents/uae-data-privacy-handbook.pdf>

² <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2596542/business-economy>

³ <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/publications/ai-and-quantum-readiness-reshape-cyber-resilience-in-the-middle-east.html>

⁴ <https://solutions.fixed.global/en/news/cybersecurity-trends-in-the-gulf-region-for-2025>

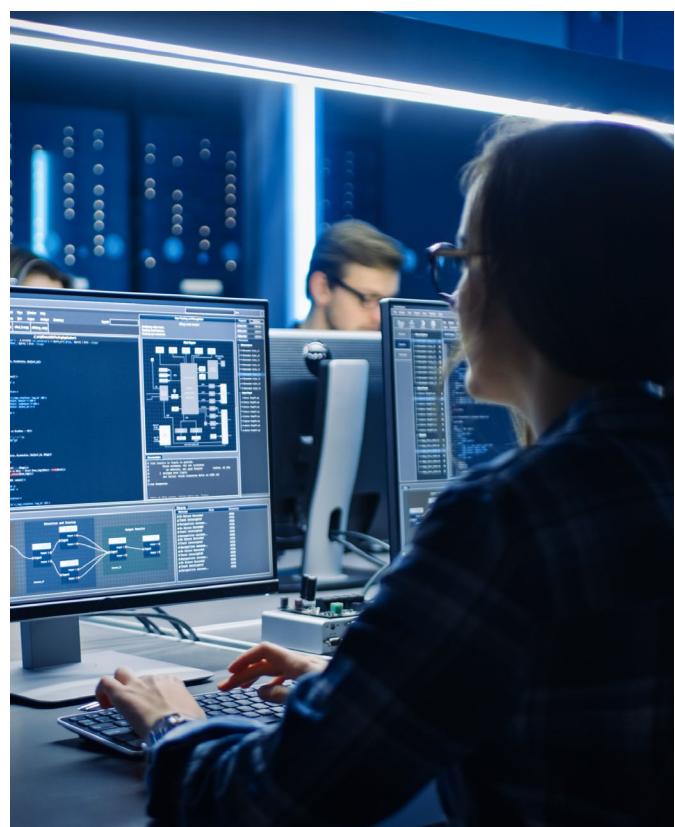
The evolving CFO role in the Middle East

The CFO's responsibilities in the Middle East are expanding in scope and significance. The traditional role of safeguarding financial integrity remains central, but AI is introducing new risks that demand closer oversight. Biased models, reliance on third-party platforms and cyber vulnerabilities all raise the stakes. CFOs must therefore ensure that the financial data flowing into and out of AI systems is accurate, complete and compliant. This increasingly requires active collaboration with internal audit, external assurance providers and regulators.

CFOs are also emerging as strategic advisors to the business. With AI-enabled forecasting and scenario modelling, finance leaders can test multiple market conditions and stress-test investment strategies. In sectors such as energy, real estate and logistics, which are pillars of GCC economies, CFOs can apply these insights to optimise capital structures and navigate regulatory shifts with greater confidence.

The role is also becoming transformational. Once seen as the most conservative part of the enterprise, finance is now often the first function to pilot digital adoption at scale. CFOs who deploy AI responsibly within finance set the tone for innovation across the wider organisation and reinforce their position as standard-setters for organisational innovation.

Trust and ethics are now central to the CFO mandate. As AI systems make or inform financial decisions, finance leaders must embed ethical principles into design and deployment. This stewardship role aligns with the region's broader push to strengthen corporate governance and transparency, reflected in recent regulatory reforms across GCC capital markets. In this way, the CFO becomes not only a financial leader but a protector of organisational reputation.



Key applications of AI in finance



Automating financial reporting:

AI agents can assist in variance analysis and prepare draft financial narratives, cutting complexity and freeing capacity for higher-value work. For Middle Eastern companies reporting under both local and international standards, these tools can cut complexity and free up capacity for higher-value work.



Simulating multiple market conditions:

AI enables finance teams to simulate multiple market conditions – critical for a region exposed to oil price volatility, shifting trade flows and fast-moving geopolitical factors. This capability equips CFOs with insights to engage more effectively with boards and investors.



Detecting suspicious transactions:

Machine learning can identify suspicious transactions, unusual patterns, or regulatory breaches in real time. This strengthens anti-money laundering (AML) efforts, ensures VAT compliance and reinforces financial system integrity – areas of acute importance across the Middle East.



Streamlining processes at scale:

Robotic process automation (RPA) augmented with AI is streamlining everything from invoice processing to reconciliations. This not only reduces costs but also shortens cycle times, improving agility in an increasingly competitive landscape.

Navigating the challenges

The promise of AI is significant, but so are the hurdles. For CFOs in the region, the main challenges include:



Data quality and integration:

Many organisations still operate with fragmented legacy systems or siloed business units, making it difficult to achieve a single, reliable source of financial truth. PwC's Digital Trust Insights Middle East 2026¹ highlights that only 30% of Middle East organisations have implemented enterprise-wide data quality capabilities, compared with 41% globally, leaving gaps that limit the value of advanced analytics



Regulatory uncertainty:

Middle Eastern jurisdictions are developing AI and data protection frameworks, requiring CFOs to stay ahead of compliance requirements. The UAE's Federal Data Protection Law and Saudi Arabia's recent capital markets governance reforms are setting higher bars for transparency and accountability



Skills and talent:

Finance teams need new capabilities ranging, from data science literacy to ethical risk assessment. Governments are investing heavily in national skills programmes, but upskilling within finance functions remains essential. PwC's CEO Survey shows that 55% of Middle East leaders see skills shortages as one of the top risks to growth, underlining the urgency of building finance talent that can work alongside AI.



Change management:

Moving from process-focused to insight-driven finance requires more than new technology. It demands cultural change in organisations that have often been conservative or family-owned in their approach to finance. The ability to shift culture and mindset will be as important as technical implementation

¹<https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/publications/ai-and-quantum-readiness-reshape-cyber-resilience-in-the-middle-east.html>



A roadmap for Middle Eastern CFOs

To lead responsibly and effectively, CFOs in the region should focus on three priorities:

- 1 Build trusted AI foundations:**
Invest in strong governance frameworks, risk controls and assurance processes. Ensure AI tools are explainable, fair and compliant with both local and international standards. Trust must be at the heart of every AI initiative.
- 2 Empower talent with new skills:**
Equip finance teams to work alongside AI by interpreting results, challenging models and applying professional scepticism. Partnerships with universities, regulators and training providers across the region can accelerate this capability.
- 3 Position finance as a transformation leader:**
Pilot AI responsibly in finance to demonstrate value and set an example for other functions. Use AI-driven insights to shape strategy, engage stakeholders and strengthen credibility in capital markets and communities.

A new era of financial responsibility in the age of AI

The next five years will see a transformation of finance in the Middle East, reshaping its leadership. AI is giving CFOs new instruments of foresight, resilience and confidence. But with that comes a heightened responsibility to ensure technology amplifies human judgement, rather than eroding it.

For Middle Eastern CFOs, the task is to harness AI's potential, mitigate its risks, and embed trust as the guiding principle. In doing so, they can help ensure finance is both guardian and generator of value in the region's economies.



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