The Executive September Reset:

Priorities for Leaders and Businesses in H2 2026

10 minute read

For senior leaders, September has always functioned as a kind of second January: a moment when the pace of business returns, priorities sharpen and the final stretch of the year comes into view. Here we consider two consequential questions executives should be asking right now: what do I need to further strengthen my leadership and, what does my organisation need to do differently to deliver the strategy?

The first half of 2026 has provided plenty of evidence. AI has moved rapidly from experimentation towards production. Geopolitical uncertainty is becoming an operating condition rather than an exceptional disruption. Boards are demanding greater evidence of transformation and execution. And for executives considering their next career move, the leadership market is becoming more selective about the experience it values.

The challenge for the second half of the year is to decide what matters most, build the capability to deliver it and act before circumstances force the decision.

For executives, September is a useful moment to reset personal priorities, sharpen their leadership proposition and consider what the market will value next.

For businesses, it is the moment to turn the lessons of H1 into a shorter, more decisive agenda for H2.

FOR EXECUTIVES CONSIDERING TRANSITION: HOW TO PREPARE FOR A MORE SELECTIVE LEADERSHIP MARKET

In 2026, the traditional September reset matters for executives considering a transition more than ever because the leadership market has changed immeasurably in a matter of months.
The number of opportunities is not the only issue. The definition of a credible executive candidate is changing too.

The UK labour market remains subdued. Vacancies fell to around 707,000 in the three months to July, their lowest level outside the pandemic period since 2014. Yet there are early signs of stabilisation: the REC/KPMG permanent placements index stabilised in July, ending the longest downturn on record, with 45 consecutive months of decline.

For an executive considering a transition, this is not a market to sit out until conditions improve. Nor is it one in which simply being available, experienced or senior is enough. The opportunity is to become much clearer about the problem a board would hire you to solve.

What has changed in the executive leadership market? The first lesson is that executive hiring has become more selective, not simply smaller.

Boards continue to use external appointments but are increasingly discriminating about the experience they buy. External CFO hiring hit a global high for the first quarter of 2026, at 47% of appointments, and boards recruiting externally are increasingly choosing candidates who have already held the title elsewhere: 42% of newly appointed CFOs in Q1 2026 had prior public-company CFO experience against a historical average of 35%.

That points to an important distinction. Boards may be prepared to take a chance on someone moving into a role for the first time, but they are less likely to take a chance on someone whose experience does not clearly address the problem in front of them.

This is particularly important for executives who have spent years building broad leadership experience. “Experienced commercial leader” is no longer a compelling proposition. “I have led two international restructurings, rebuilt an underperforming operating model and taken a business Through an acquisition” is much more useful to a board facing one of those situations. The second lesson is that when boards do go outside, they are increasingly paying for directly relevant experience rather than for outside perspective alone.

Anyone preparing for a leadership transition should therefore define their market by the business problems they can credibly solve, rather than by their current or previous job title.

WHAT LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES WILL MATTER MOST IN H2 2026?

AI continues to shape the market and keep it in a constant state of flux, demanding close, month-by-month, sometimes week-by-week, awareness of how it is changing.

Executive AI literacy should mean understanding what AI does to the economics and operating model of an organisation, not simply being able to discuss ChatGPT, copilots or the latest model.

Agentic AI is a good example. It is moving towards enterprise use, but the market is not yet at the point where most organisations have transformed themselves around autonomous agents. Frustration at the lack of tangible progress and ROI is setting in, while governance is failing to keep pace in many organisations, carrying substantial risk.

The opportunity for executives is therefore to demonstrate that they can truly lead through the consequences: understand the foundational change that is needed and identify the specific organisational challenges and opportunities AI transformation is being called on to address, rather than simply show familiarity with the tools and what they can do.

Can you identify where AI can materially improve productivity or customer experience? Can you redesign workflows rather than simply add another technology layer? Can you decide which decisions should remain human? Can you manage the workforce implications, data risks, governance and accountability? Can you explain the return on investment to a board?

These are now leadership questions, not technology ones. The changing market has also brought new skills shortages which carry a premium. The valuable executive is becoming more capable of connecting technology, people, strategy and commercial outcomes, not more technical at the expense of being human.

FOR EXECUTIVES PREPARING FOR A TRANSITION IN H2 2026, FIVE CAPABILITIES DESERVE PARTICULAR ATTENTION:

1. AI-enabled strategic thinking Understand how AI could change your industry's economics, operating model, workforce and competitive landscape. You do not need to build the technology. You do need to be able to make decisions about it.

2. Transformation under pressure Turnaround, restructuring, integration, cost reduction, productivity and operating-model change are increasingly valuable experiences because boards need leaders who can deliver change rather than simply describe it.

3. Decision-making in uncertainty Geopolitical disruption, changing regulation, technological change and economic volatility mean executives increasingly have to make consequential decisions without perfect information. Demonstrate how you have done that.

4. Organisational and talent redesign AI will change jobs, workflows and management structures. Executives who understand how to redesign organisations, retain critical talent and build new capabilities will have an advantage.

5. Board and stakeholder leadership A successful executive increasingly has to reconcile employees, investors, customers, regulators and boards whose priorities may not align. Showing that you can manage those tensions is part of demonstrating readiness for the next level.

RESETTING BUSINESS STRATEGIES

Aside from the geopolitical and wider economic concerns which we examine in our regular quarterly executive outlooks, arguably the biggest developments over H1 2026, which should now be snapping into focus and into action across all sectors, were:

- The shift of AI, and especially agentic AI, from pilot to production
- Questions around automation and workflow redesign to enable successful AI integration
- Leadership capability and change-readiness as the real transformation bottleneck
- Closing the execution gap by adjusting working models to account for disruption as a permanent condition, rather than a temporary challenge, and turning strategic ambition into delivery capability
- For most of the past two years, executive conversations about artificial intelligence have been structured around deliberate caution: test and learn, start small, build a proof of concept, establish the governance before scaling. That window has now closed in most sectors.

By mid-2026, leading organisations are building towards having agentic AI systems - autonomous AI capable of taking decisions and actions rather than merely providing information - running in full production and making or directly influencing operational decisions across supply chains, customer interactions, finance functions, HR processes and strategic planning.

The shift from AI as experiment to AI as infrastructure has happened rapidly and across multiple functions. In H2 2026, the key strategic question has moved on to whether organisations have the governance, oversight and accountability structures to manage what is already running.

External auditors reviewing AI systems at enterprise organisations have repeatedly found meaningful gaps between what boards believe is running and what actually is, with evidence that a portion of deployed systems may not be formally registered, owned or governed at all.

Almost three-quarters of boards have only moderate or limited AI expertise, according to KPMG's Global AI Pulse Survey, leaving many without a firm grip on the principles of successful and safe AI-led transformation, including strategic oversight, technology and security oversight, workforce transformation, trustworthy AI standards and board process evolution.

The regulatory environment is tightening rapidly and major asset managers are beginning to factor AI governance maturity into their assessments of institutional risk. Boards that cannot demonstrate informed oversight of how AI is acquired, implemented and monitored are creating liability for the organisation, for individual directors and for the executives accountable for the functions where ungoverned AI is operating.

The first priority of the autumn board cycle should therefore be a detailed audit of what AI is running in the organisation across every function, who owns the governance of each system, what the oversight framework looks like and whether it meets the standards investors and regulators now expect.

LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY IS BECOMING THE TRANSFORMATION BOTTLENECK

The next question is more fundamental: does the organisation have the leadership capability and change-readiness to turn these technologies and strategic ambitions into results?

Technology can increasingly be acquired. Capital can be allocated. Strategies can be designed. But neither AI nor any other transformation programme delivers value without leaders who can translate strategic intent into organisational action.

This is becoming one of the most significant constraints on transformation.

The challenge is not simply whether leaders understand what needs to change. It is whether they can create the conditions for change to happen at pace.

That requires a different kind of leadership capability: the ability to make difficult decisions with incomplete information, redesign operating models, challenge established assumptions, bring people with them and maintain accountability when the organisation is under pressure.

It also requires leaders to understand where organisational resistance is legitimate and where it is simply inertia.

Transformation rarely fails because the strategy is impossible to understand. More often, the gap emerges between what leadership says needs to happen and what the organisation is actually capable of doing. That makes change-readiness a strategic capability, not an HR initiative.

Boards and executive teams should therefore be asking: Do we have the leadership capability required to deliver the strategy we have approved? Where are our transformation programmes being slowed by organisational capacity rather than technology? Do leaders have the confidence and authority to make the decisions required? Are we redesigning roles, structures and incentives to support the change? Is accountability for transformation genuinely clear at executive and board level?

The organisations that answer these questions honestly will be better placed to convert AI investment, operating-model change and strategic ambition into measurable outcomes. Those that do not risk accumulating transformation programmes without transformation.

GEOPOLITICS AS AN OPERATING CONDITION

The critical insight from our ongoing analysis has been that executives should build endemic trade uncertainty into planning as the baseline condition from which strategy is designed.

Most planning functions still default to a central case with optimistic and pessimistic variants tacked on. That model assumes disruption is exceptional. If geopolitical friction is now structural, organisations need scenario-based planning genuinely integrated across finance, investment, supply chain and corporate security functions.

The autumn budget cycle is where that integration either gets built or is deferred again.

THE AUTUMN TEST: WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE NOW?

The most useful question for senior leaders returning in September is therefore not simply, "What did we achieve in H1?" It is "What have we learned, what needs to change, and what decisions can no longer wait?"

For executives considering a transition, that means taking a hard look at the leadership proposition they are presenting to the market. What business problems can they solve? What evidence demonstrates it? Which capabilities will make them more relevant to boards in the next phase of their career?

For organisations, it means confronting the execution gap. Has the business built the leadership capability, governance, talent and operating model required to deliver its strategic ambitions?

Has your organisation learned to prepare for and respond in real time to pressures that have emerged or accelerated in H1, such as those outlined above? Or has leadership been frozen in a watch, wait and defer pattern, pushing decisions sideways or into the long grass?

The leaders who will drive meaningful progress through the second half of 2026 are those who return with a shorter list of decisions that need to be made and the clarity, courage and prioritisation discipline to make them so they set the pace into 2027.

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