

Executive Summary

"The Future of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in 2026" – Update on the Expert Survey Regarding Current and Future Challenges

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For the fourth time, following the surveys conducted in 2014, 2017 and 2020, the expert survey The Future of the Mittelstand 2026 was carried out to identify the future challenges facing Mittelstand businesses. For the first time, artificial intelligence (AI) was used to identify Mittelstand-related topics from news reports. These topics were subsequently grouped into twelve fields of action comprising a total of 109 subtopics. Representatives from economic policy, academia and business associations then assessed their significance as future challenges for Mittelstand businesses. A total of 232 experts participated in the survey.

Maintaining competitiveness is the key challenge

As in previous expert surveys, maintaining the innovation and competitiveness of the Mittelstand remains the foremost challenge for Germany's Mittelstand businesses. According to the experts, this will require not only strengthening firms' capacity for innovation but also improving labour productivity.

Bureaucracy remains a persistent challenge

Alongside maintaining competitiveness, reducing bureaucracy remains one of the key challenges. In particular, the experts consider documentation and reporting requirements to be in need of substantial reduction. They place a considerable burden on businesses, tying up human and financial resources that could be deployed more productively.

Addressing the shortage of skilled workers remains a major future challenge

In contrast to previous expert surveys, in which employee retention was identified as a key challenge, the current survey places greater emphasis on attracting skilled workers. The experts anticipate the impact of demographic change, which will lead to an increased demand for labour as the so-called "baby boomer generation" increasingly retires. In addition, rapid technological developments are making the recruitment of skilled workers with job-specific and digital skills more challenging.

Artificial intelligence and digitalisation as cross-cutting issues

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digitalisation represent a key challenge that cuts across almost all fields of action. The use of AI is primarily associated with innovation potential, as it can be integrated into work processes and help increase labour productivity. Continuous training for employees is a key prerequisite for this, enabling them to develop the necessary skills and capabilities. At the same time, experts also point to the risks posed by cyberattacks, inadequate IT security and a lack of digital data sovereignty.

Sustainability is declining in importance

Despite the continuing challenges in the areas of sustainability and climate protection, the experts attach considerably less importance to the field of action “shaping the green transformation” compared with previous years. This may be because other issues are currently perceived as more pressing. In particular, safeguarding competitiveness, increasing bureaucratic burdens and the shortage of skilled workers are already having a direct impact on the Mittelstand and are shaping its priorities for action. Against this backdrop, sustainability and climate protection are tending to move into the background, without, however, losing their fundamental relevance.

The outbreak of the war in Iran had little impact on responses

Although the war between the US/Israel and Iran triggered an energy price shock and increased uncertainty regarding energy supplies, this development is only partially reflected in the experts’ responses. Only in the field of action “ensuring energy and raw material supplies” are the more efficient use of energy and the transition to renewable energy mentioned more frequently. Given the potential for tighter energy supply conditions, the expansion of renewable energies is becoming increasingly economically attractive for businesses.