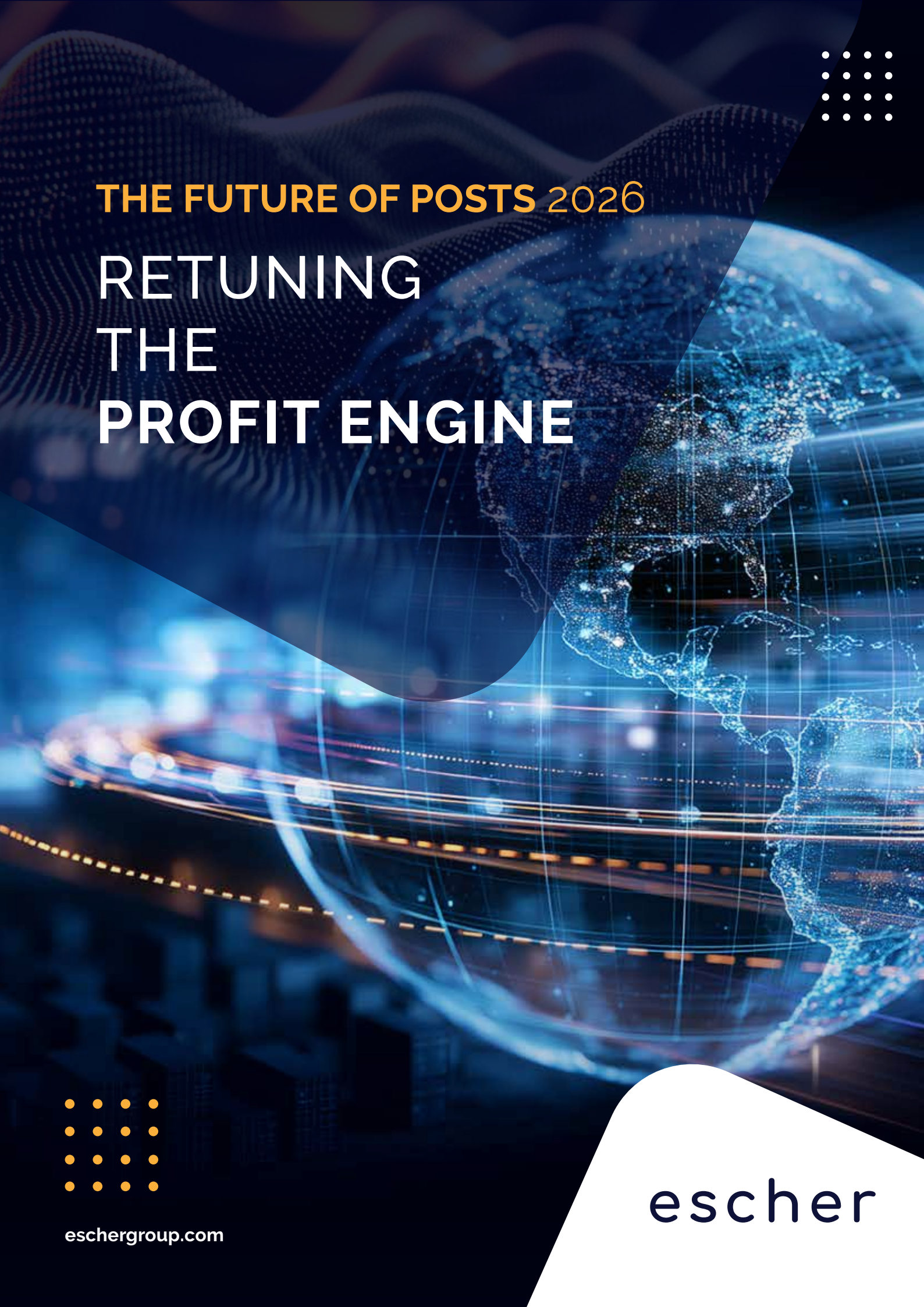




THE FUTURE OF POSTS 2026

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THE
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Escher would like to express its gratitude to all contributors, for sharing their insights and helping make our Future of Posts survey an industry standard.

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Welcome to **The Future of Posts 2026**

It is with great pride, and no small measure of reflection, that I present the tenth edition of **The Future of Posts**. A decade of research, conducted in partnership with postal leaders across the globe, is itself a marker of how far this industry has come. This year, 98 postal operators shared their perspectives on an industry that is confronting real structural pressure while, at the same time, moving forward with a clarity of purpose that is encouraging to see.

The 2026 findings capture an industry in transition. Declining letter mail volumes, rising costs, and intensifying competition from e-commerce platforms and global integrators remain defining pressures. But this year's data also reveals a sector responding with growing confidence. Profitability is improving. Investment in automation, analytics, and digital infrastructure is accelerating. And the conversation around artificial intelligence has shifted, decisively, from experimentation to implementation. For the first time, AI and machine learning rank among the top three investment priorities for the global postal sector, while the share of operators with no current AI activity has fallen from 42% in 2025 to 15% this year.

This year's research also brings into sharp focus the regulatory challenge ahead. Universal Service Obligation reform has emerged as the single most significant non-e-commerce force expected to shape the sector over the next five years, reflecting the growing urgency of aligning public service commitments with the financial realities of declining mail. Navigating that challenge well will require genuine partnership between postal operators, regulators, and the governments they serve.

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to every postal leader who contributed to this year's study. Your insights, your candour, and your willingness to share both challenges and ambitions make this research what it is. I also want to recognise the dedication of the teams at Escher and at Triangle Management Services, whose work ensures the Future of Posts continues to serve as a trusted resource for our industry.

Ten editions in, the picture that emerges is of an industry that is not standing still. It is evolving, purposefully and at pace, toward a future defined by intelligence, digital connectivity, and a broader role in the societies it serves. I hope the findings in this report help inform your strategy and support the decisions that will shape what comes next.



Brody Buhler
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
ESCHER





Executive Summary

The tenth edition of the Future of Posts arrives at a moment of genuine inflection for the global postal sector. While the structural pressures of declining mail volumes, rising costs, and platform-based competition remain firmly in place, the 2026 findings reveal an industry responding with increasing strategic precision. Postal operators are no longer simply adapting to change. They are investing in the capabilities that will determine competitive position for the decade ahead.

The financial picture is cautiously encouraging. Revenue growth has edged up to 41%, its highest level since 2022, while the share of operators reporting improved profitability has risen to 36%, up from 32% in 2025. These are not dramatic gains, but they reflect an important underlying shift: transformation efforts are beginning to show through in financial performance. At the same time, more than three-quarters of operators report that rising costs are constraining their ability to invest, creating a persistent tension between the urgency of modernisation and the capital available to fund it.

The defining theme of this year's study is the emergence of artificial intelligence as a top-tier strategic priority. For the first time, AI and machine learning rank alongside last-mile delivery and cross-border e-commerce among the sector's top three investment priorities. The share of operators with no current AI implementation has fallen from 42% in 2025 to just 15% in 2026, a shift that signals the end of the AI exploration phase and the beginning of enterprise deployment at scale. Separately, analytics and AI have overtaken last-mile route optimisation as the leading delivery network cost-reduction strategy, selected by 53% of respondents.

The competitive environment is also changing in ways that demand strategic attention. Universal Service Obligation reform emerged as the single most significant non-e-commerce force expected to shape the industry over the next five years, cited by 55% of respondents. Meanwhile, 94% identify e-commerce giants' in-house logistics networks as a major competitive threat, a figure that underscores how profoundly platform-based business models are reshaping the logistics landscape. In response, operators are accelerating digital integration, expanding locker and PUDO networks, and positioning themselves within broader e-commerce and government service ecosystems.

Collectively, the 2026 findings point toward a new postal operating model: intelligent, digitally connected, and increasingly integrated within the broader ecosystems of commerce, government, and citizen services. The organisations best positioned to lead will be those that combine operational excellence with AI-enabled decision-making, ecosystem participation, and the financial discipline to invest where it matters most.





Key Findings and Insights

The **Future of Posts 2026** survey highlights:

- ✔ 71% of operators cite declining letter mail volumes as their top business impact, down sharply from 92% in 2025, confirming that volume erosion has become a baseline operating condition rather than an acute crisis.
- ✔ 41% of operators report revenue growth in 2026, the highest level since 2022, and 36% report improved profitability, up from 32% the year before. Transformation efforts are beginning to show through in financial results.
- ✔ AI and machine learning rank among the top three investment priorities for the first time, alongside last-mile delivery and cross-border e-commerce. The share of operators with no current AI implementation has fallen from 42% in 2025 to 15%.
- ✔ 53% of operators now identify analytics and AI as their primary delivery network cost-reduction strategy, overtaking last-mile route optimisation, which held the top position every year since the study began.
- ✔ USO reform is the most significant non-e-commerce force expected to shape the postal sector over the next five years, cited by 55% of respondents, reflecting the growing urgency of aligning public service obligations with declining mail economics.
- ✔ 94% of postal operators identify e-commerce giants' in-house logistics operations as their greatest competitive threat, the strongest consensus position in the entire study and a clear signal of how platform-based logistics is reshaping the industry.
- ✔ 81% of operators are extending their retail networks through smart lockers, and 80% through PUDO locations, confirming the shift from company-owned branch expansion to asset-light, automated network growth.
- ✔ 65% of operators believe increased self-service and improved customer experience will each create the most business value from their retail channels, reinforcing that self-service is now as much a growth strategy as a cost strategy.
- ✔ 59% identify compliance with new regulations as the leading obstacle to cross-border e-commerce growth, surpassing transit times and real-time duty estimation for the first time and reflecting a rapidly more complex regulatory environment.
- ✔ APIs between postal systems and e-commerce platforms achieved the highest importance score of any e-commerce capability in the study, at 8.6 out of 10, confirming that digital connectivity is now as important as physical delivery performance.
- ✔ 78% of operators are investing in hybrid or electric fleets as their primary sustainability initiative, while 77% report that rising costs are constraining their ability to fund future investments across all transformation priorities.
- ✔ 84% of operators are prioritising integration with local and national e-commerce platforms, and new questions on competitive threats, digital ecosystems, and cybersecurity reveal a sector increasingly defined by its connectivity to the broader digital economy.

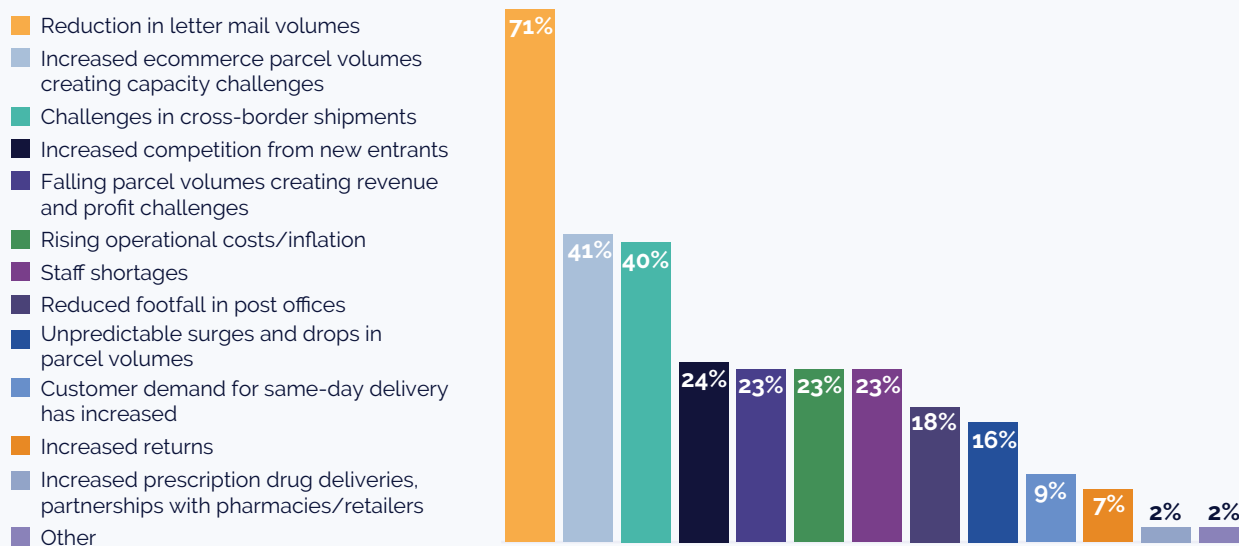
Business Impact, Revenue and Profitability

Pressure broadens as profitability turns a corner

For much of the past decade, the commercial story of the global postal sector has been shaped by a single dominant force: the structural decline of letter mail. The 2026 results confirm that this force remains as present as ever. But they also reveal something more nuanced. The operating environment has grown meaningfully more complex in the last twelve months, with new competitive pressures, rising costs, and the continued volatility of e-commerce growth compounding the challenges that management teams already face. What makes the 2026 findings particularly significant is that this growing complexity is arriving alongside the first sustained signs of financial recovery the sector has seen since 2022.

What impacts have you noticed on your business in the last 12 months?

Percentage of postal operators



71% of Posts cite **declining letter mail volumes** as their top business impact in 2026, down sharply from previous years

Letter mail volume decline remains the most commonly cited business impact, selected by 71% of respondents. The figure is notable in both its scale and its direction of travel: 71% represents a sharp fall from 92% in 2025 and 99% in 2024, suggesting that operators are progressively absorbing mail contraction into their baseline expectations rather than treating it as an active crisis. E-commerce parcel capacity challenges (41%), cross-border shipment difficulties (40%), staff shortages (23%), and falling parcel volumes (23%) all continue their gradual retreat from the highs recorded between 2021 and 2023.

The more telling development in this year's data is the broadening of the impact landscape. Two new options introduced for the first time in the 2026 survey reflect pressures that have grown too significant to leave untracked. Increased competition from new entrants was cited by 24% of respondents, while rising operational costs and inflation was cited by 23%. Taken together, these findings confirm that postal operators are no longer managing a single structural challenge. They are navigating a more complex environment in which mail contraction, parcel volatility, platform-led competition, and persistent cost pressures are all pressing simultaneously.

Cross-border shipment challenges, cited by 40% of operators, have reversed a three-year declining trend, rising from 35% in 2025. This movement aligns with findings elsewhere in the report, where new regulatory requirements and compliance complexity are emerging as growing obstacles to international e-commerce growth. Unpredictable parcel volume surges and drops, cited by 16% of operators, have risen from 9% in 2025, further illustrating the difficulty of managing a network no longer anchored by the predictable rhythms of letter mail.

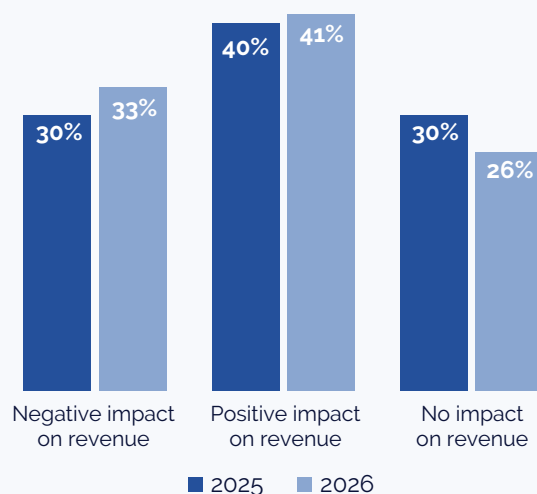
41%

of Posts report **positive revenue growth in 2026**, the highest level recorded in the study since 2022

Geographic segmentation reveals meaningful differences across regions. In EMEA, letter mail decline (76%) remains the dominant concern, consistent with more digitally mature communication markets. Competition from new entrants is considerably more pronounced outside EMEA, reflecting markets where platform-based logistics networks are more advanced and where the competitive threat from e-commerce giants and regional delivery providers is more acute. E-commerce capacity challenges are more evenly distributed across regions, though their relative prominence has eased from the peaks of 2021 and 2022 in all markets.

How has the last 12 months affected revenue & profitability?

REVENUE



Revenue performance in 2026 shows modest improvement on an already recovering trajectory. Forty-one percent of respondents report positive revenue growth, the highest figure recorded in the survey since 2022, up from 40% in 2025, 38% in 2024, and just 27% in 2023. A further 26% report relatively flat revenues, while 33% report declining revenues, down from 55% in 2022. The proportion of operators experiencing revenue decline has fallen by more than twenty percentage points over four years, a meaningful structural improvement even if a broad-based recovery remains uneven.

Geographic segmentation shows a clear performance gap between regions. EMEA operators report stronger performance, with 49% recording revenue growth against the global average of 41%. Revenue performance outside EMEA is more mixed, with a higher proportion of operators in other regions reporting flat or declining revenues. This divergence reflects both different competitive dynamics and the varying pace at which postal transformation strategies are generating measurable financial returns.

The profitability picture offers some of the most encouraging signals in this year's study. The share of operators reporting declining profitability fell to 37%, down from 42% in 2025, 43% in 2024, and 57% in 2023. At the same time, 36% report improved profitability, up from 32% in 2025, 28% in 2024, and just 20% in 2023. This sustained multi-year improvement is one of the clearest signs in the entire survey that transformation programmes are beginning to translate into measurable financial results.

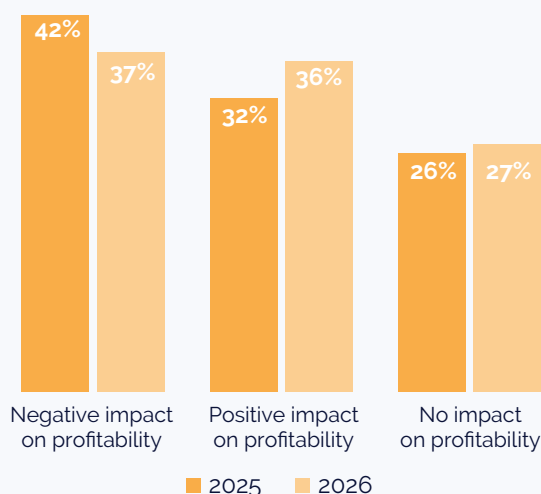
The 27% of operators reporting flat profitability are also worth noting. For organisations that were experiencing active financial deterioration in prior years, stability represents a meaningful improvement, even where it falls short of growth. The pattern also aligns with the investment constraints visible elsewhere in the study, where rising costs are limiting the pace at which transformation programmes can be funded and executed.

Regional profitability data reinforces the divergence visible in the revenue results. EMEA operators report meaningfully stronger profitability outcomes, with 44% recording improvement compared with the global average of 36%. Operators in other regions, particularly those facing more intense competitive pressure and less regulatory certainty, continue to experience greater financial headwinds, with profitability decline more common outside EMEA than within it.

Looking ahead, the 2026 results suggest the sector is at an important juncture. The steady improvement in profitability is encouraging, but it is occurring within a more complex operating environment than the headline figures alone suggest. Competition from platform logistics, cost inflation, and parcel volatility are not temporary pressures. They will require sustained operational and strategic responses. The organisations most likely to build further on recent financial progress are those investing today in network efficiency, digital capability, and data-driven decision-making that will determine competitive position over the coming years.

How has the last 12 months affected revenue & profitability?

PROFITABILITY



For a deeper discussion
on *Postal Trends* click
here



Retail Strategy and Self-Service Transformation

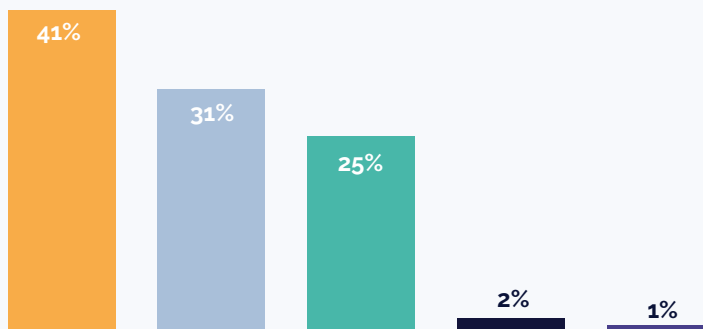
Asset-light and customer-driven: the new retail model takes shape

The post office has rarely faced a more consequential moment of reinvention. The decline of letter mail has reduced the transaction volumes that once justified large branch networks, while the rise of e-commerce has created new and different demands on where and how customers want to access postal services. The response visible in 2026 is not retreat but transformation, as operators progressively shift their retail model away from legacy infrastructure toward a more distributed, automated, and digitally integrated approach to serving customers.

What of the following best describes your #1 retail strategy for the next 12 months?

Percentage of postal operators

- Increase / prioritise self-service
- No major changes - business as usual
- Shrinking our retail network
- Implement start at home
- Replace corporate partner stores



When asked to identify their primary retail strategy for the next 12 months, 41% of respondents selected increasing or prioritising self-service, making it the clear leader for 2026 and a significant shift from 2025, when only 31% placed self-service at the top of their retail agenda and 39% opted for business as usual. The reversal is notable: in 2025, many operators appeared to be consolidating the investments made during the transformative period of 2021 to 2023. In 2026, the direction of travel is more clearly forward.

Prioritising self-service is now the leading retail strategy for postal operators.

Business as usual, selected by 31% of respondents, remains the second most common approach, reflecting those operators who have already modernised their networks or are managing constrained investment environments. Network shrinkage continues its steady rise, cited by 25% of operators, up from 21% in 2025, 15% in 2024, and just 9% in 2021. The six-year trend is consistent: as footfall declines and the economics of maintaining large branch networks come under scrutiny, a growing proportion of operators are choosing consolidation over expansion.

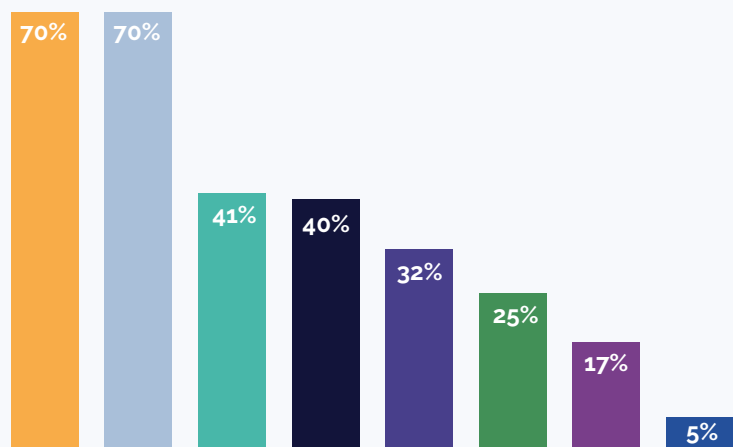
The appetite for self-service transformation is strongest outside EMEA. In Asia Pacific, 55% of respondents identify self-service as their primary strategy, and in Latin America the figure is 48%, compared with 34% in EMEA. In contrast, network shrinkage is most prominent in EMEA (30%), where the rationalisation of legacy branch infrastructure is most advanced, suggesting a geographic divide between markets that are still modernising and those already managing the consequences of having done so.

70% of postal operators identify both **lockers** and **mobile applications** as key self-service technologies in 2026

Which of the following self-service technologies are key to executing on your retail strategy?

Percentage of postal operators

- Locker
- Mobile app for customer transactions
- Kiosk
- Start at home, finish in branch
- Hybrid self-service counter
- Rapid returns solution
- Other
- In-store mobile solution



The self-service technologies selected to support these strategies reveal a broadening of the toolkit available to postal operators. Lockers and mobile applications emerged as the joint leading technologies, each selected by 70% of respondents, up from 60% and 55% respectively in 2025. Kiosks were selected by 41% of operators, up significantly from 24% in 2025, while start-at-home, finish-in-branch services were cited by 40%, up from 27%. The breadth of adoption across these technologies reflects a growing recognition that customers interact with postal services through multiple channels and expect a coherent, flexible experience across all of them.

Hybrid self-service counters, selected by 32% of respondents, remain an important component of the self-service toolkit. Their relative position in 2026 reflects a shift in investment focus: having built out hybrid counter capabilities in prior years, many operators are now directing incremental resources toward locker expansion, mobile capabilities, and kiosk self-service, each of which offers greater flexibility and lower per-unit cost than full counter installations. Rapid returns solutions (25%) continue to feature, reflecting the growing importance of reverse logistics as an integral part of the in-branch service offering.

Regionally, locker adoption is particularly strong in EMEA (75%) and Latin America (65%), while mobile application investment is more evenly distributed across geographies, suggesting that the shift to digital self-service is a global trend rather than a market-specific one. Start-at-home, finish-in-branch services are notably less common in North America (4%), where different consumer expectations and retail formats appear to shape self-service adoption differently.

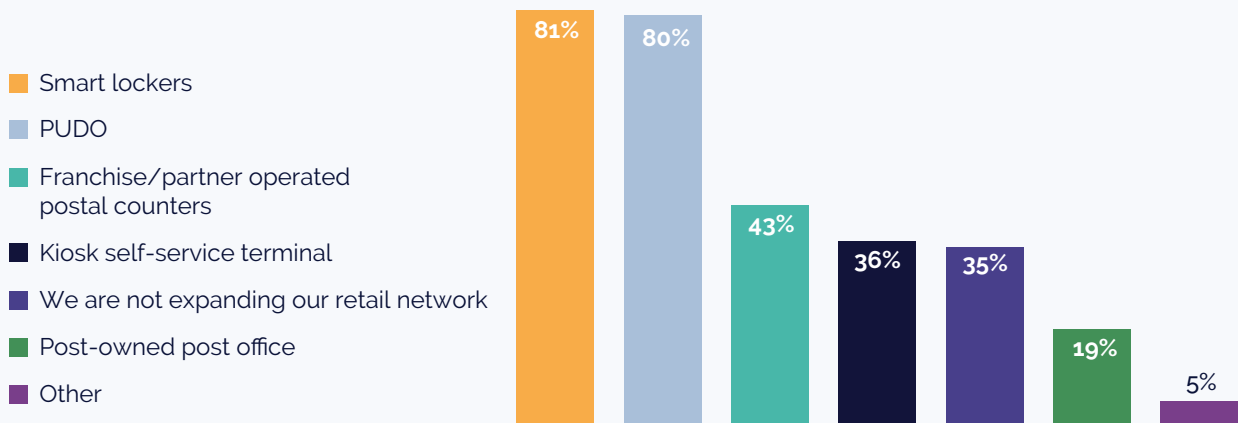
The network expansion data shows the most dramatic movements in this section. Smart lockers are now the leading method of network expansion, selected by 81% of respondents, up from 58% in 2025 and just 17% in 2021. PUDO networks represent an equally significant shift: 80% of respondents identify PUDO expansion as a key growth strategy, compared with 34% in 2025 and 13% in 2021. Both figures represent the highest levels recorded in the survey's history and signal a fundamental reorientation in how operators are approaching network coverage.

The emergence of franchise and partner-operated postal counters as a new option, selected by 43% of respondents, provides further evidence of the industry's move toward asset-light network models. Partner and franchise arrangements allow operators to extend service reach without the capital requirements and operational complexity of company-owned branches, while maintaining brand presence and service standards in communities where full branches may no longer be economically viable.

The 19% of operators identifying post-owned post office investment as a current expansion priority should be read in context: this question asks specifically about expansion and evolution methods, not about the operational importance of existing branches. Owned post offices remain the backbone of most networks. What the data indicates is that operators are no longer growing their footprint primarily through new branch openings. The direction of expansion has shifted decisively toward automated and partnership-based infrastructure.

How are you expanding or evolving your retail network's reach?

Percentage of postal operators



Are **smart lockers**
and **PUDO** the future
of **postal retail**
networks?



Thirty-five percent of respondents indicate they are not currently expanding their retail network, down from 45% in 2024 and 51% in 2023, suggesting that the period of broad network consolidation is giving way to more active, if more selective, growth strategies. Geographic segmentation shows that locker and PUDO expansion is particularly concentrated in EMEA, where 94% of operators are expanding through smart lockers and 91% through PUDO networks, reflecting the more mature alternative delivery infrastructure in European markets. PUDO adoption is notably less developed in North America (6%), where consumer behaviour and retail market structures follow different patterns.

The 2026 retail findings point toward a consistent strategic direction across the sector: more self-service, more automation, more alternative access points, and a reduced reliance on owned branches as the primary vehicle for network expansion. The operators advancing most confidently in this direction are those that have moved beyond debating the case for transformation and are focused on executing it efficiently. The challenge ahead is not whether to build this kind of network, but how to manage the transition from legacy infrastructure while maintaining service quality, accessibility, and customer trust throughout.

For a deeper discussion
on **Retail Networks**
click here



Delivery Network Transformation

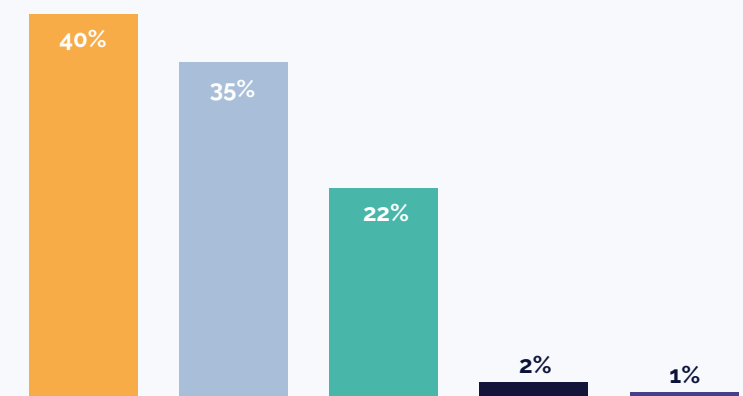
Moving from expansion to optimisation: intelligence leads the next efficiency wave

This year's results describe a delivery network landscape at a clear turning point. Having expanded capacity aggressively during the e-commerce boom years, postal operators are now focused on making better use of what they have built. The emphasis is shifting from network growth toward network intelligence, with efficiency, automation, and data-led decision-making increasingly defining how the sector approaches the challenge of delivering more from existing infrastructure.

What are your plans for your delivery network this year?

Percentage of postal operators

- We are re-thinking our delivery network
- Accelerated our delivery network expansion strategies
- No effect - business as usual
- Delayed our delivery network expansion strategies
- We are shrinking our delivery network



When asked about their delivery network plans for the year ahead, 40% of respondents indicate they are rethinking their network strategy. While this is down from 51% in 2025, it remains considerably above the levels recorded before 2023 and reflects sustained strategic engagement with network transformation rather than a retreat from it. Thirty-five percent are accelerating network expansion, up modestly from 33% in 2025 and substantially from just 9% in 2023, suggesting that confidence in parcel infrastructure investment is returning after a period of caution.

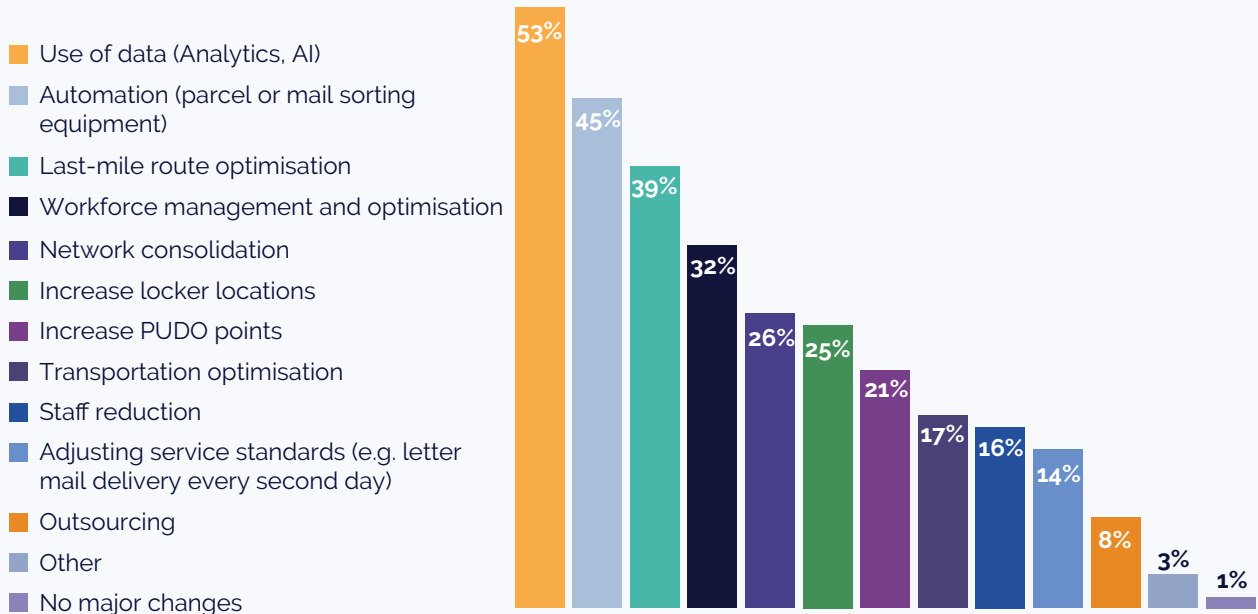
40% of operators are rethinking their delivery network strategy and 35% are accelerating expansion in 2026

A growing 22% report business as usual, up from 13% in 2025. This figure should not be read as complacency. It more likely reflects operators that have completed their most recent transformation cycle and are now in execution and stabilisation phases, managing recent network investments rather than planning the next wave. The proportion of operators delaying or shrinking their networks has fallen to negligible levels, with just 2% delaying and 1% shrinking, down from 14% and 9% respectively in 2023.



What cost reduction (or operational efficiency) strategies do you plan to use over the next 12 months in your delivery network?

Percentage of postal operators



53% of operators now identify **analytics and AI** as their primary delivery network efficiency strategy

Regional differences are pronounced. North American operators show the highest level of network rethinking (69%), well above the global average and reflecting the particularly intense competitive pressure and volatility in that market. In EMEA, by contrast, 39% are accelerating expansion, compared with no North American operators doing so, suggesting that European operators are at a more advanced stage of their network transformation journeys.

The most significant finding in this section, and one of the most consequential in the entire study, is the emergence of data analytics and AI as the leading delivery network cost-reduction strategy. Fifty-three percent of respondents identify this as a priority for the year ahead, up dramatically from 22% in 2025, 16% in 2024, and 18% in 2022. For the first time in the study's history, analytics and AI have overtaken last-mile route optimisation at the top of this ranking, a result that reflects not only growing investment in AI but also a deeper shift in how postal leaders think about where efficiency gains will come from.



Automation remains the second most selected strategy at 45%, up from 42% in 2025, reflecting the continued investment in sorting, processing, and handling equipment that underpins the parcel-first networks operators are building. Last-mile route optimisation, the top-ranked strategy for several consecutive years, falls to third place at 39%, down from 56% in 2025 and 72% in 2021. This decline does not signal a loss of interest in last-mile performance. Rather, it indicates that route optimisation has matured into an embedded operational capability for many operators, and that incremental gains are now being pursued through AI and real-time data rather than through first-generation optimisation tools.

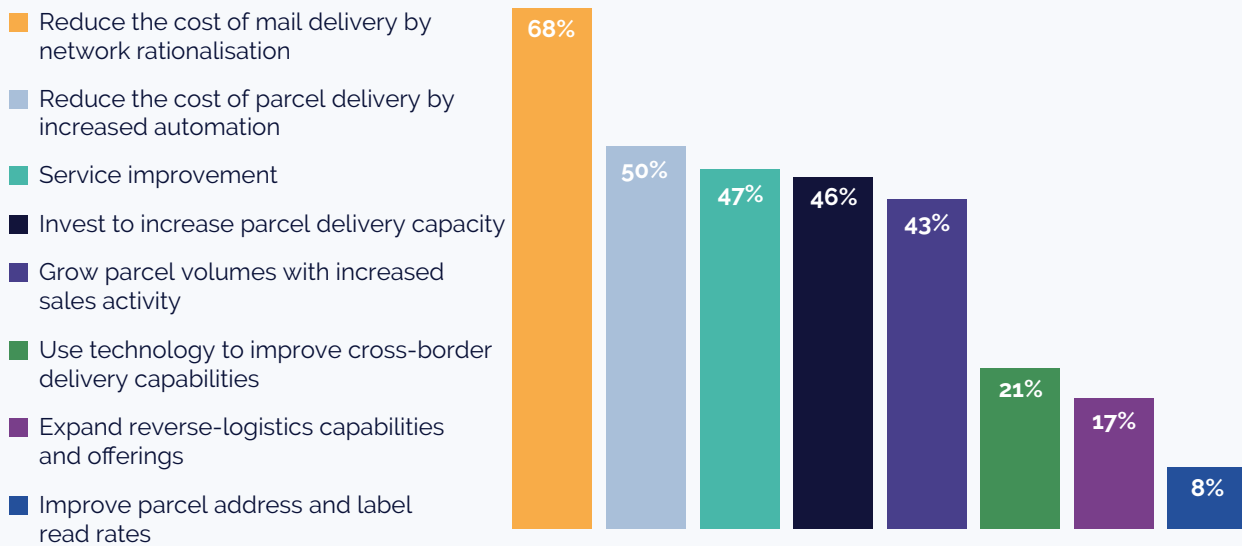
Workforce management and optimisation, selected by 32% of respondents, has fallen from 49% in 2025 but remains significant in an industry where labour represents the largest single cost component. Network consolidation (26%) and PUDO expansion (21%, up from 9% in 2025) complete the picture alongside increasing locker locations (25%), the latter three forming a coherent cluster of network-reshaping strategies consistent with the asset-light direction visible in Section 2.

Adjusting service standards, including measures such as reducing letter mail delivery frequency, was cited by 14% of respondents, up from 7% in 2025. This growth, while modest in absolute terms, is strategically significant. It reflects the practical translation of Universal Service Obligation reform discussions into operational planning. Operators facing the clearest financial pressure from mail decline are beginning to factor service standard adjustments into their efficiency roadmaps, a trend addressed in greater depth in Section 5.

Regionally, analytics and AI adoption as an efficiency strategy is strongest in Asia Pacific (63%) and broadly consistent across EMEA (53%) and Latin America (50%), but notably lower in North America (38%), where last-mile route optimisation remains the top-ranked strategy at 58%, reflecting the more acute delivery-performance competitive pressures in that market.

Which of these best describe your current delivery network priority?

Percentage of postal operators



The delivery network priority data contains one of the most striking findings in this year's entire study. Prioritising parcel volume growth through increased sales activity has fallen from 83% in 2025 to 43% in 2026, a fall of forty percentage points in a single year and the largest single-question movement recorded in the 2026 survey. As recently as 2024, growing parcel volumes was cited by 82% of respondents as a leading network priority. Its decline to 43% represents a fundamental shift in how postal operators are thinking about their delivery networks.

The primary driver of this shift is not declining ambition but changing commercial reality. As parcel volumes have moderated from their pandemic-era peaks and competition from e-commerce platforms and private carriers has intensified, operators are increasingly focused on extracting greater value and margin from existing volumes rather than pursuing growth at any cost. This aligns with a broader theme running throughout the report: the industry is moving from a growth mindset toward a profitable growth mindset.

Reducing the cost of mail delivery through network rationalisation remains the leading priority, cited by 68% of respondents and unchanged from 2025. The consistency of this figure, which has risen steadily from 48% in 2022, underscores the unrelenting financial pressure that declining mail volumes place on network economics. Reducing the cost of parcel delivery through increased automation follows at 50%, up from 46% in 2025.



Reducing the cost of mail delivery through **network rationalisation** remains the leading delivery priority for Posts



A new question this year, service improvement covering delivery speed or reliability, has entered immediately as the third-ranked priority at 47%. Its debut at this level of prominence reflects a growing recognition that competitive differentiation in a crowded parcels market depends increasingly on service consistency and quality, not just cost. Investing to increase parcel delivery capacity (46%) and growing parcel volumes through sales (43%) complete the top five priorities.

Regionally, reducing mail delivery costs through network rationalisation is the leading priority across EMEA (71%), Latin America (65%), and Asia Pacific (63%), confirming that the mail rationalisation challenge is universal. Service improvement is a higher priority in North America (54%) and Latin America (52%), reflecting markets where delivery reliability and speed have become more sharply contested. The use of technology to improve cross-border delivery capabilities (21% overall) scores considerably higher in North America (66%), pointing to the greater cross-border e-commerce activity and associated investment in that region.

Looking ahead, the 2026 delivery network findings describe an industry at an inflection point. The simultaneous decline of volume growth as a priority and the rise of analytics, AI, and service quality as leading objectives suggests that the next competitive battleground in postal delivery will be defined more by intelligence than by infrastructure scale alone. Operators that can combine network rationalisation, data-driven decision-making, and service quality improvement are best positioned to build the efficient, resilient delivery operations that both financial sustainability and competitive intensity will demand.

For a deeper discussion
on *Delivery Networks*
click here



The Emergence of the AI-Enabled Postal Enterprise

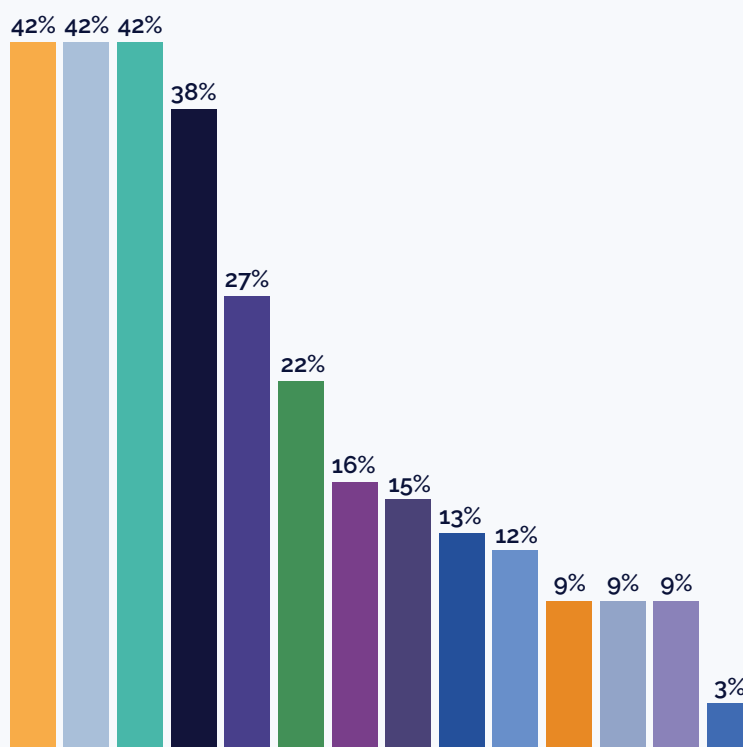
AI joins the top tier as operators target intelligent, diversified growth

The 2026 investment data reveals an industry making deliberate choices under real financial constraint. With more than three-quarters of operators reporting that rising costs are affecting their ability to invest, each strategic priority carries genuine weight. The picture that emerges is one of increasing focus, as operators concentrate resources on the capabilities most critical to long-term competitiveness and defer investments that cannot yet demonstrate a clear return.

What are the most important investment priorities for your organisation in the next 1-3 years?

Percentage of postal operators

- Last-mile delivery
- AI & Machine Learning
- Cross-border e-commerce growth
- Digital transformation
- Improvements in parcel handling and sorting
- Diversified revenue streams
- Domestic ecommerce growth
- Customer experience
- Mobile services for consumers
- Addressing and route optimisation
- Sustainability and green initiatives
- Reverse logistics and returns capabilities
- Delivery automation
- Operations analytics

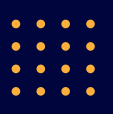


Three investment priorities have emerged in a near-tie at the top of this year's ranking, each selected by 42% of respondents: last-mile delivery, cross-border e-commerce, and AI and machine learning. The composition of this group matters as much as the percentages themselves. Last-mile delivery and cross-border e-commerce have consistently occupied the top investment tiers across recent editions of this study. AI and machine learning have not. Its appearance at this level, matching the industry's two most established growth priorities, marks a significant shift in how postal operators are thinking about the sources of future competitive advantage.

Digital transformation, which was the leading investment priority as recently as 2021 at 63%, continues its multi-year decline, selected by 38% of respondents in 2026, down from 46% in 2025 and 53% in 2024. This decline should be interpreted carefully: it does not indicate declining commitment to digital capability, but rather that many foundational digital investments have been made. The focus is now on targeted applications, particularly AI, analytics, and platform integration, rather than broad digital transformation programmes.

Several other shifts in the investment rankings are worth noting. Diversified revenue streams have risen to 22%, up from 12% in 2025, reflecting the growing recognition that sustainable financial performance requires new service lines beyond core postal delivery. Customer experience, however, has fallen sharply from 30% to 15%. This decline may reflect that customer experience is increasingly being delivered through investments in AI, self-service, and digital integration rather than being pursued as a separate programme. Sustainability and green initiatives have also fallen, from 24% in 2025 to 9% in 2026, possibly indicating that sustainability is becoming embedded within fleet electrification, network redesign, and operational efficiency programmes rather than being treated as a standalone investment category.

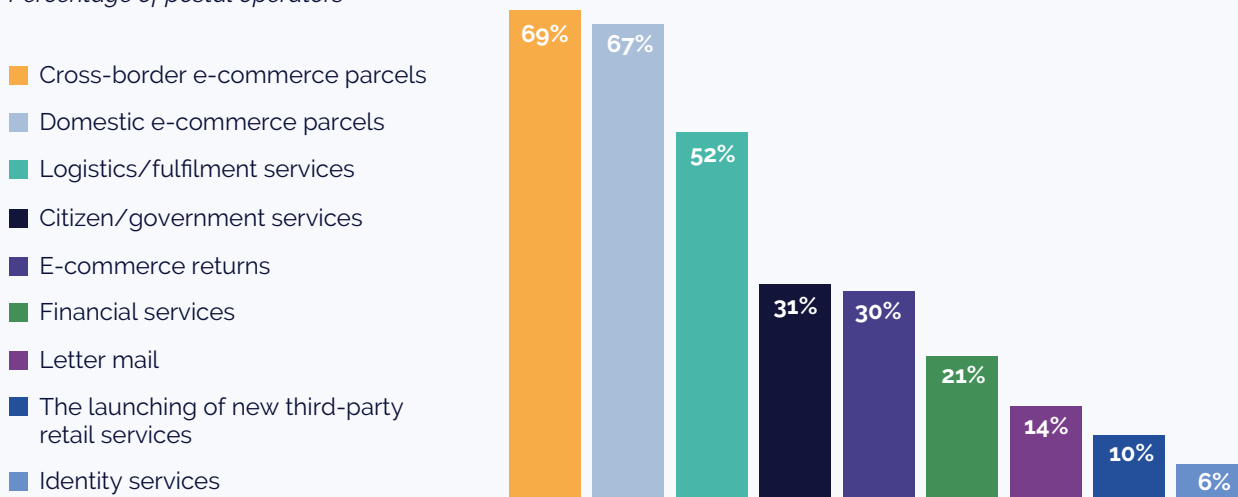
Regional analysis reveals meaningful differences in how AI is being prioritised. Operators in Asia Pacific lead on AI and machine learning investment (63%), well above the global average of 42%. EMEA operators place the highest priority on cross-border e-commerce (53%) and last-mile delivery (51%), reflecting the particular importance of EU cross-border trade flows and last-mile competitiveness in European markets. North American operators show a noticeably lower emphasis on AI investment (24%) but place comparatively more weight on customer experience (46%) and diversified revenue streams (39%), reflecting different competitive dynamics in that market.



For the first time, **AI and machine learning** rank equally among the sector's **top three investment priorities** at **42%**

What are the most important product investments over the next 1-3 years?

Percentage of postal operators



The product investment data shows a sector pursuing both scale and diversification simultaneously. Cross-border e-commerce parcels remain the leading product investment priority, selected by 69% of respondents, while domestic e-commerce parcels follow closely at 67%. Both figures are lower than the 77% recorded for each in 2025, reflecting the moderation of the pandemic-era parcel growth narrative and the growing recognition that competitive advantage will come from service quality and digital integration rather than volume alone.



The most strategically significant development in the product investment data is the prominence of logistics and fulfilment services, selected by 52% of respondents. This represents a major broadening of postal ambition. Rather than competing solely as final-mile delivery providers, a growing share of operators are seeking to capture a larger portion of the e-commerce value chain, including warehousing, fulfilment, inventory management, and integrated logistics services. For many, this represents a transition from being a logistics cost centre in the e-commerce ecosystem to becoming a more central and value-generating participant in it.



Logistics and fulfilment services is now a **top three product investment priority** (52% of respondents), signalling an ambition to capture a larger share of the e-commerce value chain beyond delivery alone.



Citizen and government services, selected by 31% of respondents, remains an important diversification avenue despite falling from 48% in 2025. Financial services (21%), down from 37% in 2025, continues to feature as a relevant investment area, particularly for operators serving underbanked populations or rural communities.

E-commerce returns (30%) and new third-party retail services (10%) complete a product investment picture that is becoming more varied and more commercially oriented. Letter mail, selected by just 14% as a product investment priority, continues its long-term decline in strategic importance.

Regionally, logistics and fulfilment investment is particularly prominent in Latin America (65%) and EMEA (54%), reflecting the growing sophistication of e-commerce ecosystems in those markets and the ambition of local operators to secure a position further up the supply chain.

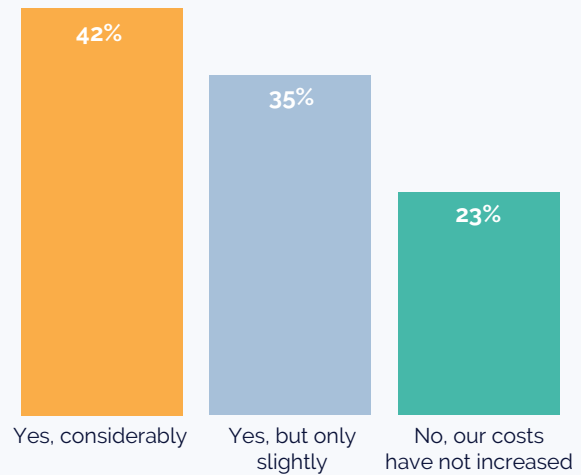
Government and citizen services investment is almost entirely confined to EMEA (30%) and Latin America (37%), with North American operators showing no current appetite for this diversification path.

The investment ambitions visible in the preceding data sit against a backdrop of sustained financial constraint. When asked whether rising costs have affected their ability to fund future investments, 42% of respondents report considerable impact and a further 35% report slight impact. Together, 77% of operators indicate that cost pressures are affecting investment capacity in some way, a figure that underscores the structural tension running through every major investment decision in the sector.

The severity of the impact has shifted in character compared with 2025, when 82% described the impact as considerable and almost none described it as only slight. In 2026, the distribution is more nuanced: 42% considerably affected, 35% slightly affected, and 23% reporting no change. This may indicate that many operators have adapted to the new cost environment and are managing within it more effectively, while the persistent majority reporting some impact confirms that cost constraints remain a defining feature of the investment landscape.

Regional differences are pronounced. North American operators are the most severely affected, with 69% reporting considerable cost impact, the highest figure across all regions and consistent with the broader financial challenges visible in North American performance data throughout this report. EMEA operators show a more distributed response, with 40% reporting considerable impact and 38% reporting slight impact, reflecting a more varied financial environment across the European market.

Has the increase in costs impacted your ability to fund investment for the future years?



77% of operators report that **rising costs** are impacting their ability to **fund future investments** in 2026

Collectively, the investment findings paint a portrait of an industry that knows exactly where it needs to go but faces real constraints in getting there quickly. The concentration of priorities around AI, last-mile delivery, cross-border e-commerce, and logistics fulfilment services reflects genuine strategic conviction. The cost constraint data confirms that executing on those priorities will require careful sequencing, strong financial discipline, and an ability to demonstrate measurable returns from each investment made.

For a deeper discussion
on *Growth Strategies*
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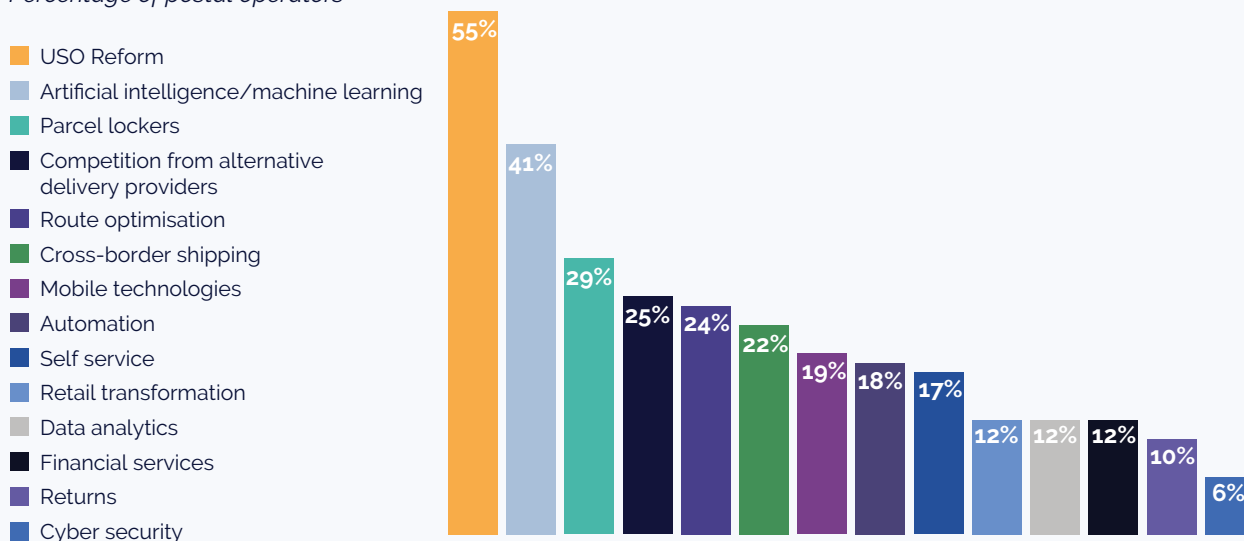
The Forces Shaping the Next Five Years of Postal Transformation

Regulation rises to the top as AI and technology disruption reshape the industry horizon

Postal leaders in 2026 are thinking about their industry's future through a wider lens than previous years have required. Alongside the near-term operational pressures documented in preceding sections, a longer horizon is coming clearly into focus. Regulatory reform, technological disruption, and a maturing e-commerce landscape are converging into structural forces that will define how postal organisations compete and sustain themselves through the remainder of the decade.

Excluding e-commerce, which of the following do you believe will have the greatest impact on Posts in the next five years?

Percentage of postal operators



Universal Service Obligation reform has emerged as the clear leader among the forces expected to shape the postal sector over the next five years, cited by 55% of respondents. This represents a significant increase from 35% in 2025 and 26% in 2024, confirming that USO reform has moved from a background regulatory consideration to the most pressing structural issue facing the industry. E-commerce has led this question every year since the study began and was removed as an option from 2025 onwards to allow for a more nuanced analysis of other forces. USO reform stepping into that leading position underscores the depth of concern around the sustainability of the existing postal regulatory framework.

The urgency is understandable. Letter mail volumes continue to decline year after year, eroding the commercial basis on which universal service networks have historically been funded. Networks designed around daily or near-daily letter delivery are being asked to sustain themselves on parcel volumes that require different infrastructure, different economics, and different service models.

Operators and regulators alike are increasingly confronting the question of how to define, fund, and deliver universal postal services in a world

where letter mail plays a progressively smaller role. The results in Section 3, where reducing the cost of mail delivery through network rationalisation remains the leading delivery priority, further illustrate how central this challenge has become.



USO reform is the most significant force expected to shape the postal sector over the next five years



Artificial intelligence and machine learning hold second place at 41%, up from 29% in 2025 and just 20% in 2023. Its continued rise in this forward-looking question mirrors its prominence in the investment and operational data elsewhere in the report, confirming that AI is now viewed as a transformational force rather than a useful operational tool.



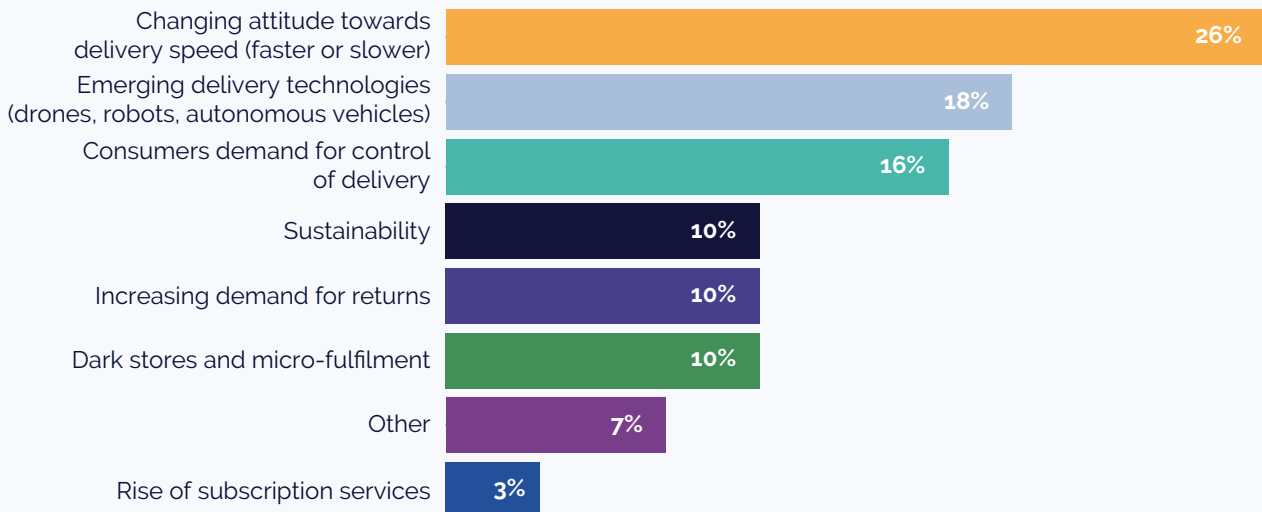
Parcel lockers follow at 29%, up from 26% in 2025, reflecting the growing recognition that alternative delivery infrastructure is becoming a strategic platform rather than a convenience feature. Competition from alternative delivery providers, a new option in this year's survey, was cited by 25% of respondents, its immediate prominence aligning closely with the competitive threat data in Section 10.

Several forces that featured prominently in recent editions have declined significantly. Retail transformation has fallen from 28% in 2025 to 12%, data analytics from 23% to 12%, and automation from 28% to 18%. These declines most likely reflect the maturation of these themes: they are no longer emerging forces to be anticipated but active transformation programmes being executed. Cross-border shipping has also fallen considerably, from 36% in 2025 to 22% in 2026, suggesting that international e-commerce challenges are increasingly being addressed through operational programmes rather than viewed as a distinct structural disruption.

Geographic segmentation reveals important differences in how these forces are perceived across regions. USO reform is the dominant concern across all geographies but is most acute in Asia Pacific (72%) and EMEA (56%), where regulated postal service models are most deeply embedded. North America places considerably more emphasis on AI as a future force (56%) and on competition from alternative delivery providers (48%), reflecting a market where platform-based logistics networks are more advanced and the competitive threat is already more immediate. Parcel lockers attract no recognition as a future force in North America (0%), most likely because locker networks there are already viewed as an operational capability rather than a strategic transformation driver.

Which of the following do you believe will have the biggest impact on e-commerce in the next 5 years?

Percentage of postal operators



When asked specifically about the future of e-commerce, changing consumer attitudes toward delivery speed has moved to the top of the rankings, cited by 26% of respondents, up from 20% in 2025 and 15% in 2024. Its ascent reflects a growing belief that the e-commerce market is entering a more mature phase, where customer expectations around delivery are becoming more nuanced. The conversation is shifting away from the race to offer the fastest possible service and toward a broader discussion of reliability, flexibility, and the trade-off between speed and environmental cost. For postal operators, this represents an opportunity to compete on breadth of service rather than purely on delivery time.

Emerging delivery technologies, including drones, autonomous vehicles, and delivery robots, enter the rankings for the first time in 2026 as a new survey option and immediately claim second place at 18%. Their debut at this level signals a meaningful shift in industry thinking. Operators are beginning to incorporate longer-horizon technology disruptions into their five-year planning, even where widespread commercial deployment remains some years away. The appearance of this option at 18% in its first year suggests that the industry considers these technologies a genuine planning consideration rather than a distant curiosity.

Changing consumer attitudes toward **delivery speed** is expected to have the **greatest impact on e-commerce** over the next five years





Consumer demand for control over delivery, which led this question in 2025 at 38%, has fallen to 16% in 2026. Rather than indicating that delivery control matters less, this decline more likely reflects that operators increasingly view it as a baseline expectation being met through investments in lockers, mobile applications, and flexible delivery options. What was a transformational aspiration in 2025 has become an operational standard in 2026, embedded in the network designs and technology investments documented throughout this report.



Sustainability (10%), increasing demand for returns (10%), and dark stores and micro-fulfilment (10%) sit close together in the lower rankings. Their broadly similar scores suggest a balanced set of secondary concerns rather than any single emerging force claiming precedence. Sustainability's significant decline from 24% in 2025 is perhaps the most counterintuitive finding in this section, though it is consistent with the pattern seen in the investment data: environmental priorities are increasingly embedded within fleet electrification, route optimisation, and network redesign programmes rather than being tracked as a distinct future force.

Regionally, Latin American operators show the highest concern about changing attitudes toward delivery speed (37%), while North American respondents place significantly more weight on consumer demand for delivery control (35%), reflecting a market where last-mile customer expectations are particularly advanced.

The five-year view from 2026 is both challenging and clarifying. USO reform, artificial intelligence, the competitive threat from platform logistics, and a maturing e-commerce customer are not temporary disruptions. They are structural shifts that are accelerating. The organisations best positioned to lead the next chapter of the postal industry are those treating each of these forces as an active strategic input today rather than a distant concern. Regulatory engagement, AI investment, network design, and customer experience decisions made over the next two to three years will largely determine which organisations lead the postal industry through the back half of this decade, and which spend it catching up.

**For a deeper discussion
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Creating Value Through Customer Experience, Analytics, and Operational Agility

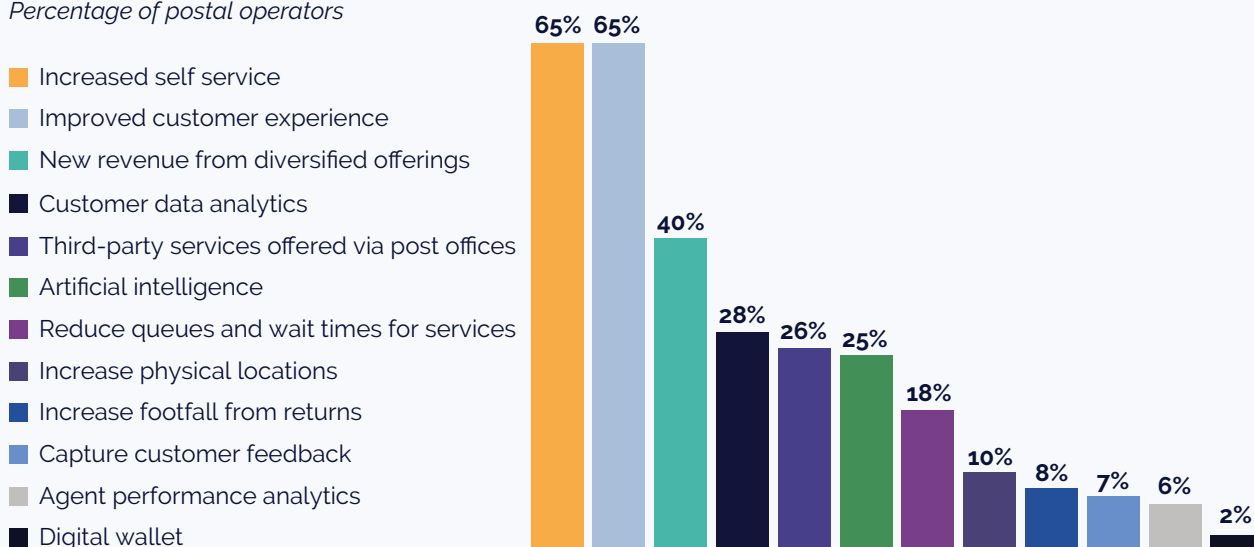
From cost reduction to value creation: the retail channel evolves

The 2026 findings reflect a sector making a clear strategic pivot in how it thinks about its retail networks and operational data. Long treated primarily as a cost centre, the retail channel is increasingly being positioned as a platform for revenue growth and competitive differentiation. Against a backdrop of unpredictable e-commerce volumes and rising cost pressures, the ability to adapt quickly has become as important as the ability to operate efficiently.

Two priorities have emerged as joint leaders when respondents were asked which enhancements would create the most business value from their retail channels. Increased self-service and improved customer experience were each selected by 65% of respondents. In 2025, customer experience led at 63% while self-service stood at 43%. Self-service has now closed that gap entirely, confirming that it is no longer viewed solely as a cost-reduction mechanism. It is increasingly seen as a vehicle for delivering a better customer experience while simultaneously improving operational efficiency.

Which enhancements will create the most business value from your retail channel?

Percentage of postal operators



The most striking movement in this section is the rise of new revenue from diversified offerings, which has jumped from 15% in 2025 to 40% in 2026, making it the third-ranked value driver. This reflects the growing recognition that post office networks, with their physical presence, trusted brands, and established customer relationships, are well positioned to carry a wider range of financial, government, and commercial services.

The finding aligns directly with the product investment data in Section 4, where logistics and fulfilment services and citizen and government services both feature prominently as investment priorities.

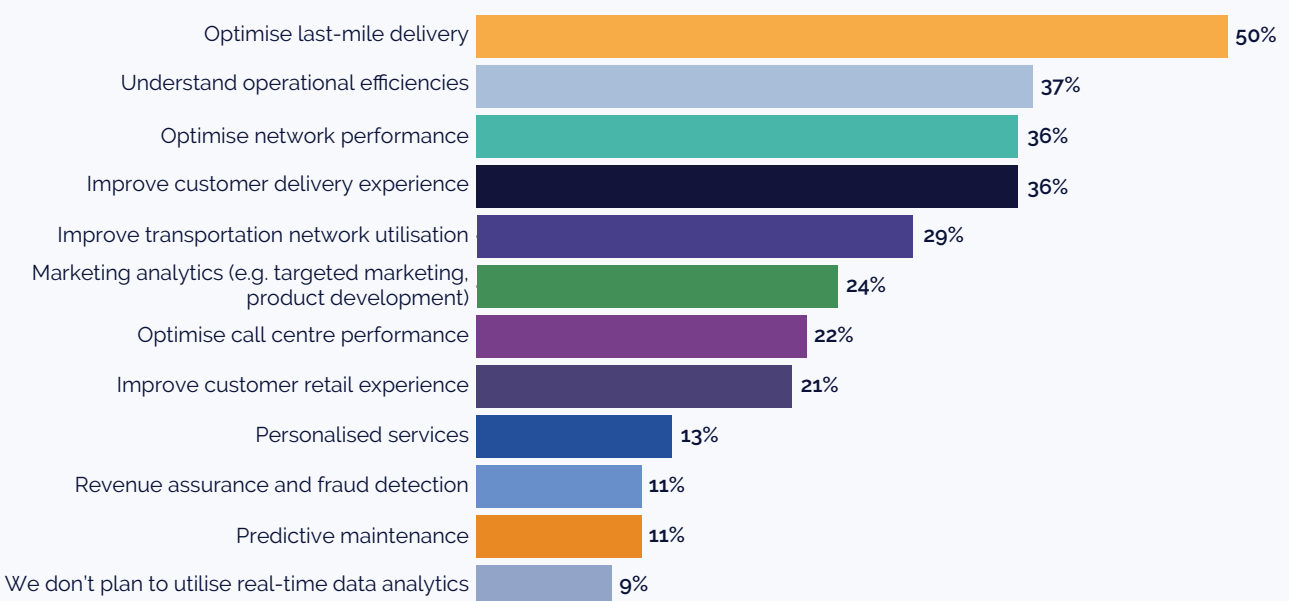
Customer data analytics (28%), third-party services offered via post offices (26%, a new option this year), and artificial intelligence (25%) complete the upper half of the rankings. Their combined presence highlights a retail strategy increasingly shaped by data-driven personalisation, ecosystem partnerships, and technology enablement.

By contrast, reducing queues has fallen sharply from 46% in 2025 to 18% in 2026, most likely reflecting the success of self-service deployments in managing customer flow, and a broader shift in how operators measure retail effectiveness. Regionally, EMEA operators show the strongest emphasis on increased self-service (74%), while North American operators place the highest weight on improved customer experience (75%).

Self-service is now tied with customer experience as the top driver of retail channel value, each cited by 65% of operators

How are you using data analytics?

Percentage of postal operators



50% of operators are using data analytics to optimise last-mile delivery, remaining the leading analytics application across the sector

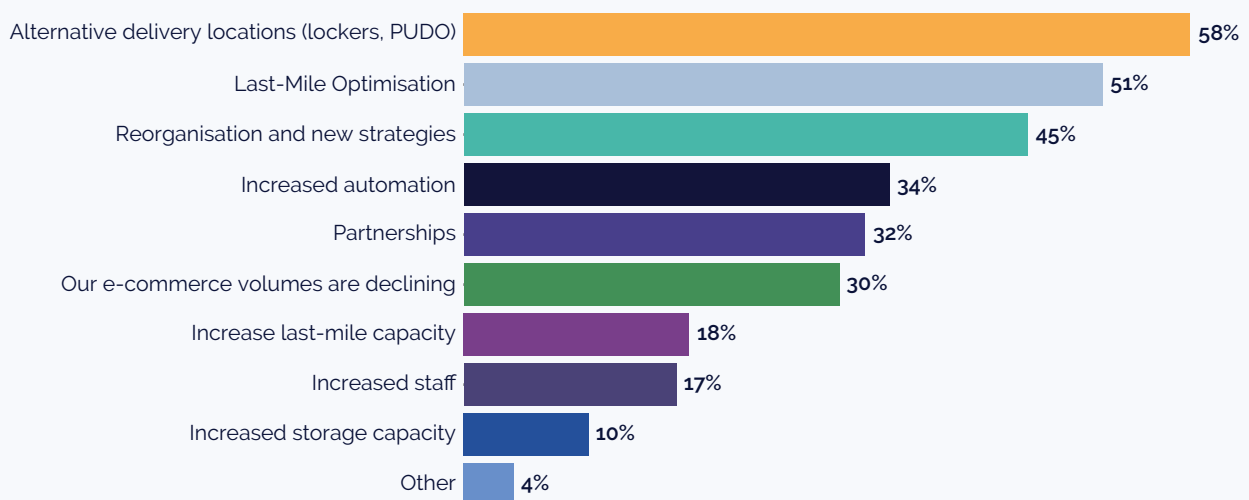
Analytics deployment across postal operations continues to broaden. Optimising last-mile delivery remains the most common application, cited by 50% of respondents, though it has declined from 67% in 2025 and a peak of 77% in 2023. This does not indicate reduced interest but reflects the maturation of last-mile analytics programmes: many operators have built these capabilities and are now directing investment toward newer applications. Optimising network performance (36%), understanding operational efficiencies (37%), and improving consumer delivery experience (36%) follow as the next most common use cases.

The more revealing story in the analytics data is the breadth of emerging applications. Marketing analytics, introduced as a new option in 2026, was immediately cited by 24% of respondents, while transportation network utilisation has risen from 15% to 29%. Call centre optimisation (22%, up from 11%), predictive maintenance (11%, up from 6%), personalised services (13%, up from 5%), and revenue assurance and fraud detection (11%, up from 4%) are all growing year on year. Together, these emerging applications describe an analytics function that is expanding beyond its operational roots and into customer engagement, commercial performance, and risk management.

The share of operators reporting no plans to use real-time analytics has fallen from 15% in 2025 to 9% in 2026, a positive signal that the remaining adoption gap is narrowing. Regionally, North American operators make particularly heavy use of analytics for last-mile optimisation (78%), while EMEA and Asia Pacific show broader application across operational and customer experience use cases.

How is your organisation dealing with fluctuations in e-commerce Parcel Volumes?

Percentage of postal operators



The most significant shift in how operators manage e-commerce volume fluctuations is the emergence of alternative delivery locations as the leading strategy. Lockers and PUDO networks were cited by 58% of respondents, up from 40% in 2025 and the highest figure recorded for this option. Last-mile optimisation follows at 51%, consistent with prior years, while reorganisation and new strategies (45%) and increased automation (34%) remain important tools. The continued decline of increasing last-mile capacity, falling from 40% in 2025 to 18% in 2026, reinforces the broader theme running through this report: operators are no longer seeking to absorb e-commerce volatility by building more infrastructure. They are seeking to respond to it more intelligently with what they already have.

Perhaps the most striking movement in this section is partnerships, which have risen from 10% in 2025 to 32% in 2026, more than tripling in a single year. This reflects a significant shift in how postal operators think about their response to commercial uncertainty. Traditionally, posts have tended to manage volatility through internally owned infrastructure and capabilities. The growing willingness to partner, with retailers, technology providers, logistics specialists, and alternative delivery networks, suggests a more ecosystem-oriented approach to flexibility.

Thirty percent of respondents report that their e-commerce volumes are declining, up from 20% in 2025. This continues a trend observed since 2023 and is a reminder that e-commerce growth is neither universal nor guaranteed. Some operators are experiencing genuine volume contraction driven by competitive displacement, changing merchant behaviour, or regional economic pressures. Regionally, the picture is particularly acute in Asia Pacific, where 59% of operators report declining volumes, significantly above the global average and suggesting that e-commerce market maturity and competitive intensity in that region are creating particular pressure on postal operators' parcel business.

Collectively, the findings in this section describe an industry that is becoming progressively more sophisticated in how it creates value from customer-facing operations and data. Self-service and revenue diversification are redefining what retail networks are for. Analytics is deepening and diversifying across the postal enterprise. And operators are demonstrating greater flexibility in how they respond to a commercial environment where both customer expectations and volume patterns are increasingly difficult to predict.

**For a deeper discussion
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E-commerce Enablement, Returns Transformation, and Cross-Border Growth

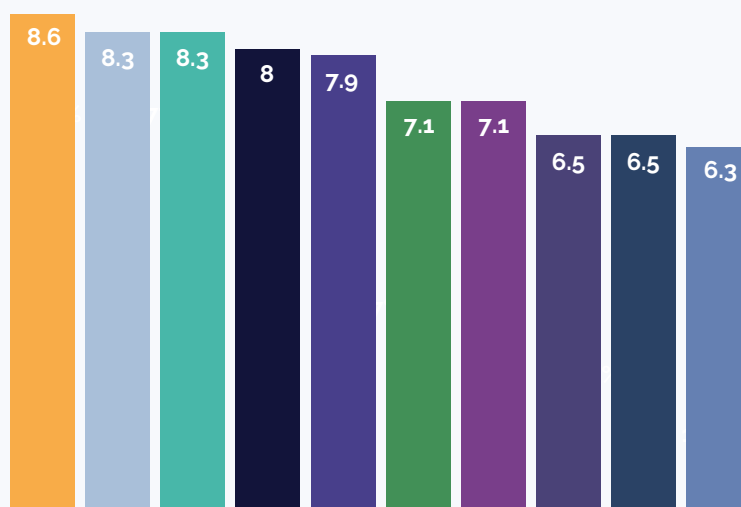
Digital integration, reverse logistics, and regulatory complexity define the new e-commerce battleground

It's becoming clear that postal success in e-commerce depends on far more than moving parcels efficiently. As online commerce matures and the expectations of merchants and consumers grow more sophisticated, competitive advantage is shifting toward the quality of digital connectivity, the ease of the post-purchase experience, and the ability to navigate a cross-border environment that is growing more complex with each passing year.

On a scale of 1-10, how important do you think the following are to the e-commerce industry?

Averages across postal operators

- APIs between core systems and e-commerce sites
- Next day parcel delivery
- Control of delivery timing
- Efficient returns
- Increased network transparency
- Omni-channel expansion
- Automated first-mile processing
- Green delivery
- Same day parcel delivery
- Micro-fulfilment





APIs between postal systems and e-commerce platforms score **8.6 out of 10**, the highest importance rating in the survey

When asked to rate the importance of various e-commerce capabilities on a scale of one to ten, APIs between postal systems and e-commerce platforms achieved the highest average score of 8.6, consistent with 8.6 in 2025 and the top-rated capability every year since tracking began. This consistency reinforces a theme visible throughout this report: digital integration has become as critical a competitive capability as physical delivery performance. Merchants increasingly expect postal services to embed seamlessly into e-commerce platforms, marketplaces, and fulfilment operations. In many cases, the quality of digital connectivity now shapes carrier selection as directly as operational reliability.

Next-day delivery (8.3) and customer control of delivery timing (8.3) follow as the next most highly rated capabilities, both broadly stable compared with 2025 but notably lower than the scores of 9.3 and 8.5 recorded in 2021 and 2022 respectively. This gradual moderation likely reflects the e-commerce market settling into a more mature phase, where reliability and flexibility are increasingly valued alongside speed. Efficient returns has risen to 8, up from 7.9 in 2025 and continuing a steady upward trend, reflecting the growing importance of the post-purchase experience as a differentiator.

Network transparency (7.9) and omni-channel expansion (7.1) are also rated as significant priorities, while automated first-mile processing (7.1) and green delivery (6.5) occupy the middle ground. Same-day delivery and micro-fulfilment score at the lower end of the range, at 6.5 and 6.3 respectively, suggesting that while both retain relevance in specific segments, they are not among the most universally pressing e-commerce requirements. Green delivery's continued decline from a score of 8.2 in 2022 to 6.5 in 2026 is particularly notable: it may indicate that sustainable delivery is increasingly considered a baseline expectation rather than a premium differentiator.

Regional differences reveal interesting divergence in e-commerce priorities. Control of delivery timing scores 9.0 in Asia Pacific, the highest rating for any regional sub-group across all capabilities, reflecting the advanced consumer expectations and competitive delivery dynamics in that market. North American operators rate next-day delivery most highly (8.9), consistent with the delivery-speed competitive environment in that region. Green delivery scores considerably lower in North America (4.5) than in any other region, suggesting that environmental delivery considerations carry less weight with merchants and consumers in that market at present.

The returns data in 2026 reveals a sector where reverse logistics is becoming more widely felt as an operational challenge. The share of operators reporting no increase in returns demand has fallen from 81% in 2025 to 53% in 2026. While a majority still report no increase, the direction of travel is clear: returns are moving from a manageable niche into a mainstream operational consideration for a growing number of postal organisations. The data, combined with the rising score for efficient returns in the e-commerce importance ratings, confirms that post-purchase experience is becoming a competitive dimension of its own.

77% of operators offer alternative delivery locations as a returns strategy, up from 59% in 2025

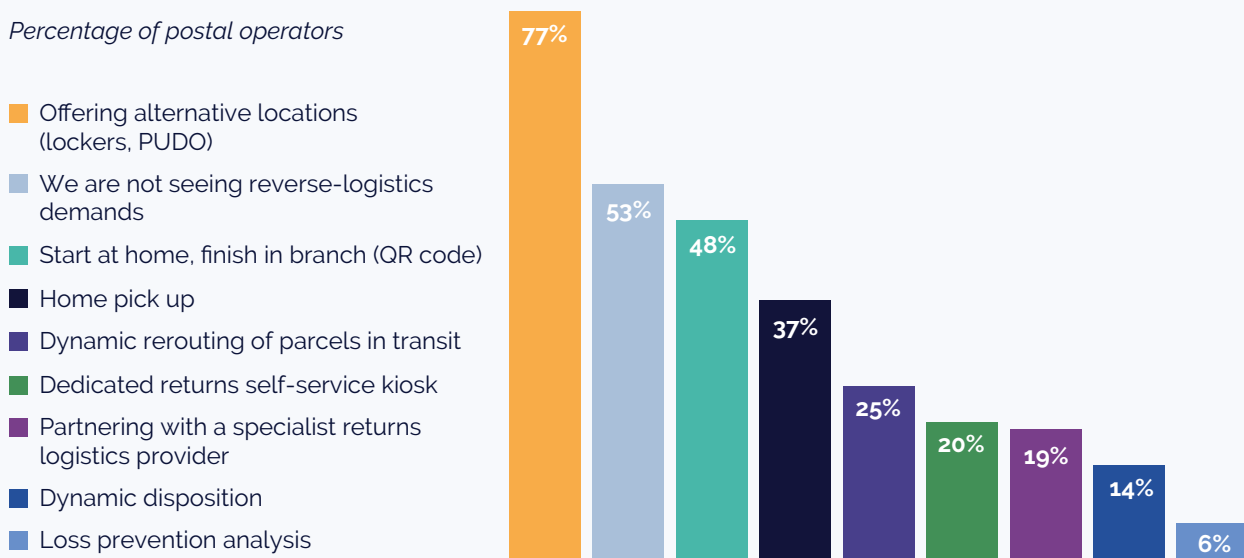
Alternative locations including lockers and PUDO networks are now the leading returns strategy, cited by 77% of respondents, up from 59% in 2025. Start-at-home, finish-in-branch services follow at 48%, up from 40% in 2025, reflecting growing adoption of QR-code-enabled returns that allow customers to initiate the process digitally and complete it at a convenient location. Home pickup, at 37%, continues its gradual decline from 46% in 2025, reflecting both rising operational costs and growing consumer comfort with self-service alternatives.

Partnering with specialist returns logistics providers appears as a new option in this year's survey, cited by 19% of respondents. Its presence at this level in the first year of tracking reflects the same ecosystem thinking visible in the e-commerce volume management data in Section 6: operators are increasingly willing to work with external specialists where it improves service and economics. Dedicated returns self-service kiosks (20%, up from 12%) and dynamic rerouting (25%) continue to grow as components of an increasingly sophisticated reverse logistics toolkit.

Regional patterns are pronounced. Alternative locations are used most widely in Latin America (90%) and EMEA (78%), reflecting more developed locker and PUDO networks in those markets. North American operators show the lowest adoption of alternative locations (21%) but the highest use of home pickup (76%), reflecting different consumer preferences in that market. The proportion reporting no increase in returns demand is highest in Asia Pacific (81%) and North America (73%), suggesting that returns pressure is most acute in EMEA and Latin America at present.

How is your organisation dealing with rising Reverse-Logistics Demands?

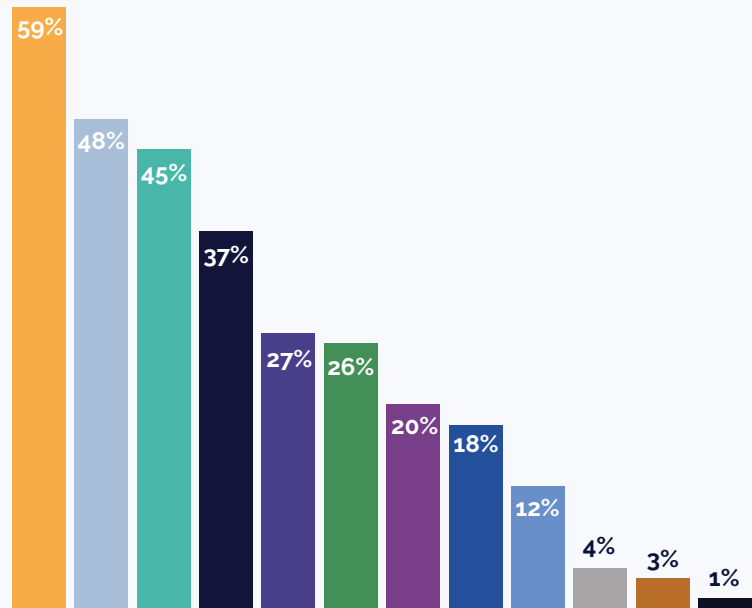
Percentage of postal operators



Main Obstacles to Cross-Border E-commerce Growth

Percentage of postal operators

- Compliance new regulations
- Transit Times
- Real-time tax and duty estimation
- Partial or incorrect electronic data
- New competitors
- Documentation difficulties
- Cost transparency
- Manual processing
- Product classification
- Solutions for cross-border product repair
- Denied party screening
- Product restriction screening



The cross-border obstacle data contains one of the most significant findings in this section. Compliance with new regulations has overtaken transit times as the leading obstacle to cross-border e-commerce growth in 2026, cited by 59% of respondents, up dramatically from 32% in 2025. This represents the largest single-year increase of any option in this question and reflects an international trade environment that has become substantially more complex. Shifting customs regulations, evolving digital reporting requirements, import duty reforms, and product restriction frameworks are all placing greater compliance demands on operators seeking to compete in international e-commerce markets.

Compliance with new regulations is now the top cross-border obstacle at **59%** up from 32% in 2025



Transit times remain a significant challenge, cited by 48% of respondents, broadly stable compared with prior years. Real-time tax and duty estimation (45%) and partial or incorrect electronic data (37%) follow as persistent operational friction points. Together, these three obstacles illustrate a consistent underlying theme: competitive success in cross-border e-commerce increasingly depends on data quality, process transparency, and regulatory accuracy at the point of transaction, not just on physical delivery speed. Merchants and consumers expect predictable landed costs, reliable customs processing, and clear shipment visibility. Postal operators that can deliver all three will be best placed to win cross-border business.

New competitors in cross-border markets (27%) and documentation difficulties (26%) continue to feature, alongside cost transparency (20%) and manual processing (18%). Product classification challenges (12%) have grown modestly from 9% in 2025, reflecting increased scrutiny in automated customs systems.

Regional differences are significant. Compliance concerns are most acute in North America (87%), where recent trade policy and customs reform activity has been most extensive. Transit time uncertainty is most pressing in Asia Pacific (61%), reflecting the complexity of shipping across the region's diverse regulatory environments. Real-time tax and duty estimation is a particular challenge in Asia Pacific (73%) and Latin America (43%), markets where customs processes vary considerably across trade corridors and where landed cost predictability is harder to achieve. EMEA shows a more balanced distribution across the leading obstacles, consistent with the generally more developed customs harmonisation frameworks within European markets.

Taken together, the e-commerce, returns, and cross-border findings paint a picture of an industry where the traditional distinction between physical logistics capability and digital service quality is rapidly dissolving. APIs are as important as delivery networks. Returns design is as important as forward fulfilment. Regulatory compliance is as important as transit time. The postal operators best positioned to grow in e-commerce over the next five years will be those that invest equally across all three dimensions, recognising that competitive advantage in this market is no longer won in any single part of the delivery chain.

**For a deeper discussion
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Sustainability

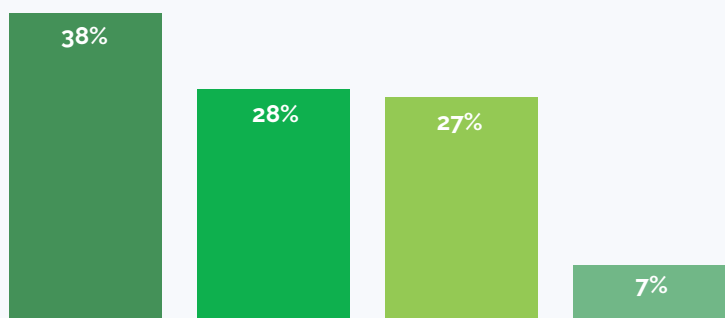
Ambitions are rising but the gap between commitment and delivery persists

In 2026, it appears that the postal industry is becoming more ambitious in its environmental commitments while growing more selective in how it pursues them. As documented in Section 4, more than three-quarters of operators report that rising costs are constraining their investment capacity. Postal operators are responding by concentrating sustainability resources on high-impact, operationally embedded initiatives and stepping back from those that carry significant cost without clear operational benefit.

How would you best describe your company's carbon policy?

Percentage of postal operators

- Carbon neutrality by a future date
- A carbon policy is part of our roadmap, but we do not currently have any active carbon goals
- Carbon reduction by a future date
- We have achieved our carbon goals



The headline finding in the carbon policy data is a meaningful shift toward greater ambition. The share of operators committing to carbon neutrality by a future date has risen from 28% in 2025 to 38% in 2026, while the share targeting carbon reduction has fallen from 44% to 27%. This apparent divergence should not be read as a weakening of commitment. It most likely reflects operators upgrading their existing reduction targets to neutrality targets, representing a step-up in ambition rather than a retreat. The combined share of operators with active carbon commitments of any kind, whether reduction or neutrality, remains broadly stable, but the weight has shifted toward the more demanding standard.

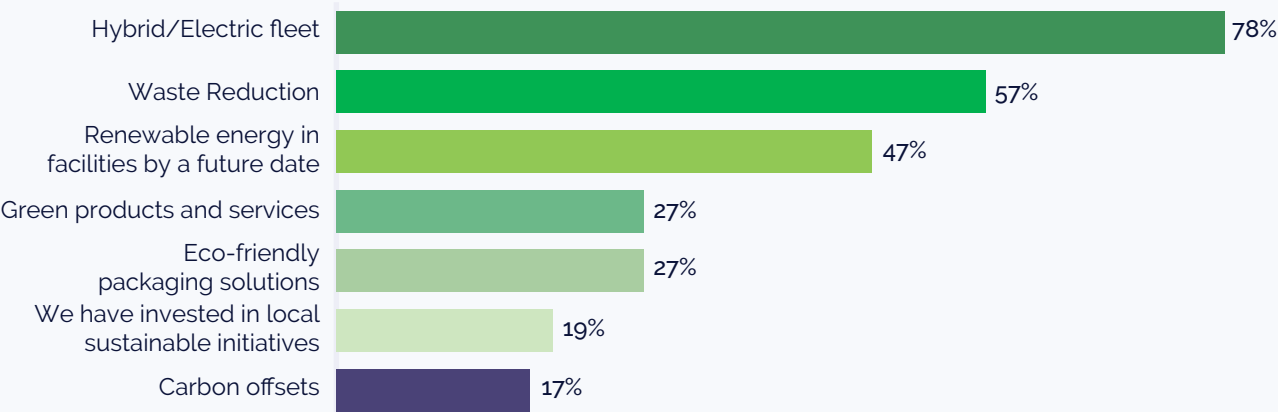
38% of operators have committed to carbon neutrality by a future date, up from **28%** in 2025

Seven percent of respondents report having achieved their carbon goals, up from 3% in 2025. While this remains a small proportion, the doubling of the figure in a single year is a meaningful signal that a growing cohort of operators is moving from aspiration to verified delivery. Twenty-eight percent report that a carbon policy is on their roadmap but not yet active, broadly stable from prior years and serving as a reminder that for a significant minority, sustainability commitments have yet to translate into operational programmes.

Regional segmentation shows EMEA and Asia Pacific leading on carbon neutrality commitments, at 41% and 44% respectively. North American operators show the lowest proportion with active carbon ambitions: 47% report a policy in their roadmap without active implementation, the highest such figure across all regions, and just 14% have committed to neutrality by a future date. Latin American operators report the highest goal achievement rate (18%), though the modest scale of initial targets in some markets may partly explain this result. The regional contrast suggests that regulatory pressure, stakeholder expectations, and access to clean energy infrastructure vary considerably in how they shape the pace of carbon commitment across different markets.

Active & Planned Green Initiatives for Posts

Percentage of postal operators



Fleet electrification remains by far the most widely adopted sustainability initiative, selected by 78% of respondents. While this is down from 86% in 2025, it remains the top-ranked green initiative by a substantial margin. The slight decline from last year's peak most likely reflects the transition from initiating fleet programmes to deploying them: many operators that added hybrid and electric vehicle investments as new priorities in 2024 and 2025 are now managing those programmes as ongoing operations rather than tracking them as fresh commitments.

78% of operators
are investing in hybrid or
electric fleets as their primary
sustainability initiative



Waste reduction (57%) and renewable energy in facilities (47%) remain important secondary priorities, though both have declined from their 2023 peaks of 76% and 73% respectively. Their gradual retreat from those peaks is consistent with the investment pressures documented elsewhere in this report: with capital constrained, operators are directing resources toward the initiatives that deliver the clearest combination of environmental benefit and operational cost saving. Fleet electrification satisfies this dual criterion most directly; waste reduction and renewable energy do so at somewhat longer return horizons.

Eco-friendly packaging solutions appear as a new option in 2026, cited by 27% of respondents, establishing itself immediately as a relevant sustainability consideration alongside green products and services (27%). Both sit in a middle tier of adoption that reflects genuine strategic interest without yet reaching the near-universal adoption of fleet electrification. Local sustainable initiatives (19%) and carbon offsets (17%) all continue to decline from their 2023 peaks of 39% and 34% respectively. These declines suggest a deliberate shift in approach: operators are moving away from initiatives that are difficult to measure, costly to verify, or disconnected from core operational performance, and toward actions with clearer business cases and measurable outcomes.

Regionally, fleet electrification shows broadly consistent adoption across geographies, with North American operators at 84%, slightly above the global average. Waste reduction and renewable energy investment are notably lower in North America (24% and 28% respectively) compared with EMEA (56% and 45%), Asia Pacific (62% and 50%), and Latin America (57% and 52%). This gap likely reflects a combination of regulatory incentive structures, energy market characteristics, and different corporate governance expectations around sustainability disclosure in North American markets.

The sustainability picture in 2026 describes an industry at an important crossroads. Ambitions are rising, fleet programmes are advancing, and a small but growing number of operators are beginning to achieve their goals. But the persistent gap between policy commitment and active programme delivery, visible in the 28% whose carbon policy remains on a roadmap without implementation, signals that execution at scale remains the central challenge. Operators that treat sustainability as an integrated element of their broader transformation strategy, one that generates operational efficiency alongside environmental progress, are best positioned to close that gap under the financial pressures that define the current investment environment.

**For a deeper discussion
on *Sustainability*
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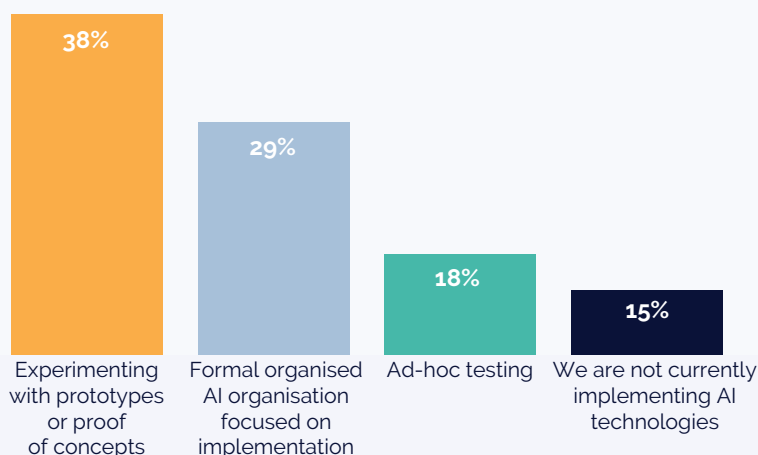
AI Moves from Experimentation to Enterprise Transformation

The conversation has shifted from whether to deploy AI to how to scale it

Artificial intelligence has been a recurring theme throughout this report: the leading investment priority, the top operational efficiency strategy, and the area of sharpest year-on-year change across the study. The data tells a consistent story of an industry in the middle of a significant transition. The shift from experimentation toward enterprise deployment is well underway, the barriers are clearly understood, and the early evidence on financial returns is beginning to accumulate.

The most significant single data point in this year's survey is the collapse of the no-implementation category. Just 15% of operators report having no current AI activity, down from 42% in 2025. In a single year, the proportion of operators sitting entirely outside the AI adoption curve has been more than halved. This is not a gradual trend. It is a step-change, and it has implications for every operator still weighing whether and when to begin.

How would you best describe your organisations approach to AI technologies?



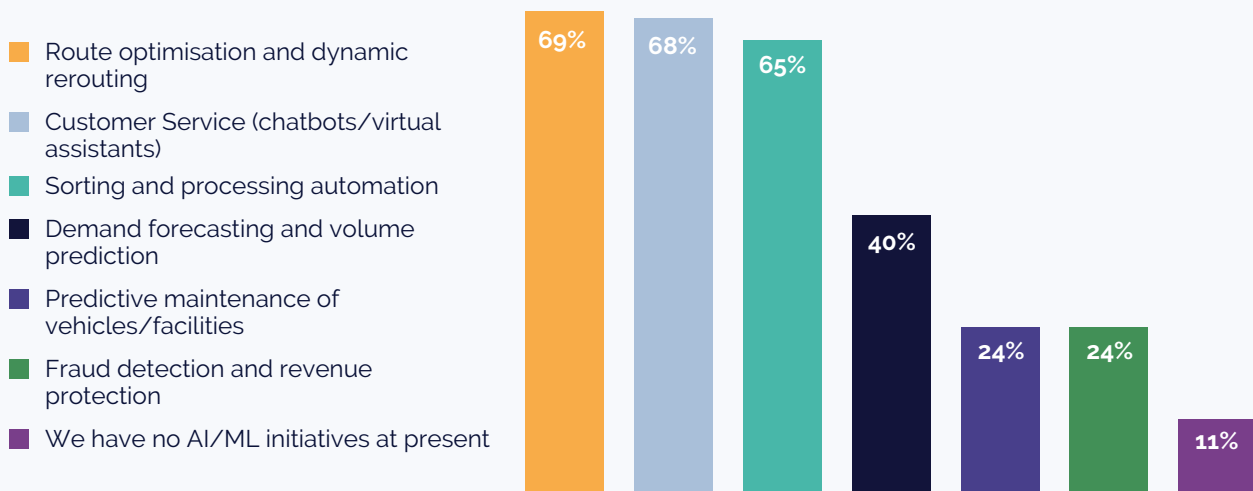
The distribution of AI activity has also evolved meaningfully. Thirty-eight percent of respondents describe themselves as experimenting with prototypes or proof-of-concepts, up from 26% in 2025. More significantly, 29% now report having a formal AI organisation focused on implementation, nearly double the 16% recorded in 2025. The growth of this category is particularly important: it signals that for a substantial and growing minority of postal operators, AI is no longer a technology experiment managed at the project level. It is a core business capability with dedicated structure, governance, and investment. Eighteen percent report ad-hoc AI testing, broadly consistent with 2025.

15% of operators report **no current AI implementation**, down from 42% in 2025

While this group represents a less structured approach to adoption, it nonetheless indicates active engagement rather than absence. Taken together, 85% of respondents are engaged with AI in some form, compared with 58% in 2025. Regionally, EMEA leads on formal AI implementation organisations (34%), while North America continues to show the highest proportion of operators with no current activity (33%), a finding that stands in contrast to North America's overall technology adoption patterns visible elsewhere in the report.

In which operational areas are you implementing or planning to implement artificial intelligence (AI) or machine learning (ML) solutions? Please select all that apply

Percentage of postal operators



Route optimisation and customer service are now the **leading AI application areas**, deployed by 69% and 68% of operators respectively

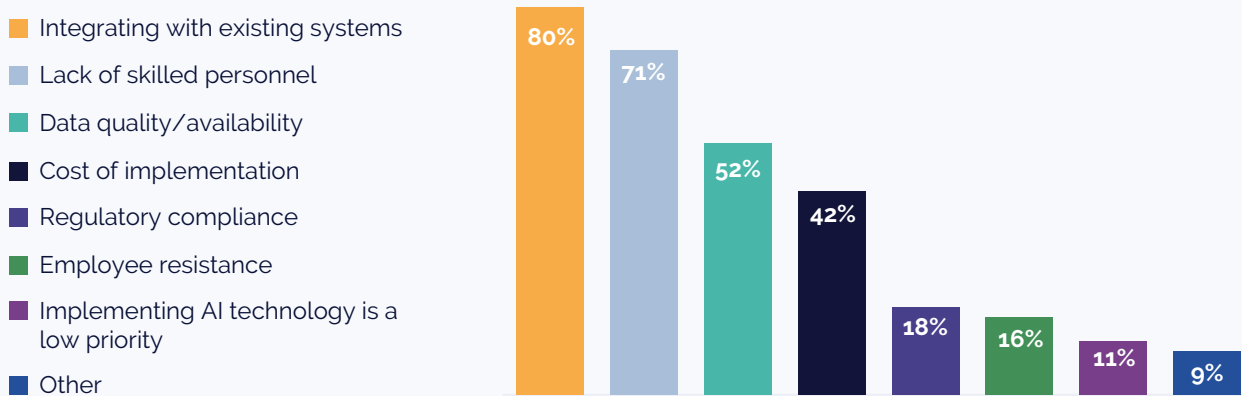
A new question introduced in 2026 reveals where AI is actually being deployed across postal operations. Route optimisation and dynamic routing emerged as the leading application area, selected by 69% of respondents. Customer service, including chatbots and virtual assistants, follows closely at 68%. Sorting and processing automation is third at 65%, reflecting the integration of AI into the physical sortation and handling systems that many operators have invested in heavily over recent years.

Demand forecasting and volume prediction, selected by 40% of respondents, represents another strategically important application. The ability to anticipate parcel volumes accurately improves staffing decisions, transportation planning, facility utilisation, and investment allocation, all of which have become more valuable as parcel volumes have grown more volatile. Fraud detection and revenue protection (24%) and predictive maintenance (24%) complete the primary application landscape, each reflecting the expanding scope of AI beyond its initial operational deployments. Eleven percent of respondents report no current AI or machine learning initiatives, broadly consistent with the 15% reporting no implementation in the AI-approach question on the previous page, confirming the robustness of both findings.

The challenge landscape for AI implementation has remained largely stable, which in itself is a significant finding. Despite the dramatic increase in adoption, the two leading barriers are essentially unchanged year on year. Integration with existing systems remains the top challenge, cited by 80% of respondents, up slightly from 78% in 2025. Lack of skilled personnel follows at 71%, identical to last year. The persistence of these barriers at high levels suggests that broader AI adoption has not resolved the underlying structural challenges: the complexity of legacy IT environments and the scarcity of AI talent remain industry-wide constraints that growing adoption does not automatically alleviate.

What are the main challenges you've faced implementing AI?

Percentage of postal operators



Data quality and availability has grown as a challenge, cited by 52% of respondents, up from 47% in 2025. This is consistent with the finding in Section 3 that analytics and AI has become the leading operational efficiency strategy: as more operators attempt to deploy AI at scale, the limitations of fragmented, poorly governed, or incomplete data sets become more visible and more consequential. The cost of implementation (42%), regulatory compliance (18%), and employee resistance (16%) remain consistent with prior years.

Integration with existing systems remains the **top AI challenge**, cited by **80%** of operators

One of the more encouraging shifts in the challenge data is the decline of low priority as a barrier, falling from 26% in 2025 to 11% in 2026. This reduction reflects the broader shift in how postal leaders view AI: fewer see it as an optional or future initiative. Most now treat it as a current strategic requirement. The challenge has moved from convincing leadership that AI matters to executing it effectively within complex organisational and technical environments. Regionally, integration challenges are most acute in Asia Pacific (96%) and skills shortages are most severe in Asia Pacific (92%) and Latin America (81%), pointing to markets where the gap between AI ambition and implementation capability may be most pronounced.

The cost savings data presents a mixed but ultimately encouraging picture. Fifty-one percent of respondents report they do not yet know what savings AI has generated or will generate, up from 42% in 2025. Rather than indicating stagnation, this rise reflects the composition shift in adoption: many of the operators who have begun AI implementation in the last 12 months are too early in deployment to measure outcomes accurately. The growth of the don't-know group is a by-product of adoption expansion, not a sign that AI is failing to deliver.

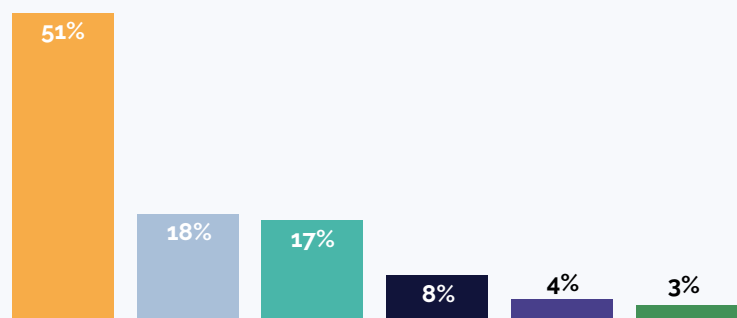
Among those who can quantify results, the distribution has shifted toward higher savings ranges. Eighteen percent now report savings of between 11% and 20%, a category that was barely tracked in prior years, while 17% report 6-10%. Eight percent report savings in excess of 30%, consistent with advanced applications such as autonomous sortation, fleet-wide predictive maintenance, and large-scale demand forecasting. The share reporting very modest savings of 0-5% has fallen sharply from 17% in 2025 to 4% in 2026, suggesting that early-stage pilots are maturing into deployments capable of generating meaningful operational and financial returns. The overall savings profile is still developing, but the direction of travel is clear.

Looking across all four questions in this section, a coherent picture emerges. The debate about whether AI is relevant to the postal industry has ended. More than four in five operators are now engaged with AI in some form. The leading applications, route optimisation, customer service, sorting automation, and demand forecasting, are operational rather than experimental. The barriers are structural and understood. And the early returns, where they can be measured, are beginning to justify the investment. The next phase of the industry's AI journey will be determined by who can scale from experiment to enterprise most effectively, navigating the integration and talent challenges that stand between current activity and the AI-enabled postal operations that a growing majority of operators are working to build.

What percentage of cost savings have you achieved or expect to achieve through AI implementation?

Percentage of postal operators

- Don't know
- 11-20%
- 6-10%
- Over 30%
- 0-5%
- 21-30%



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on AI & Operations
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Competing in the Platform Economy

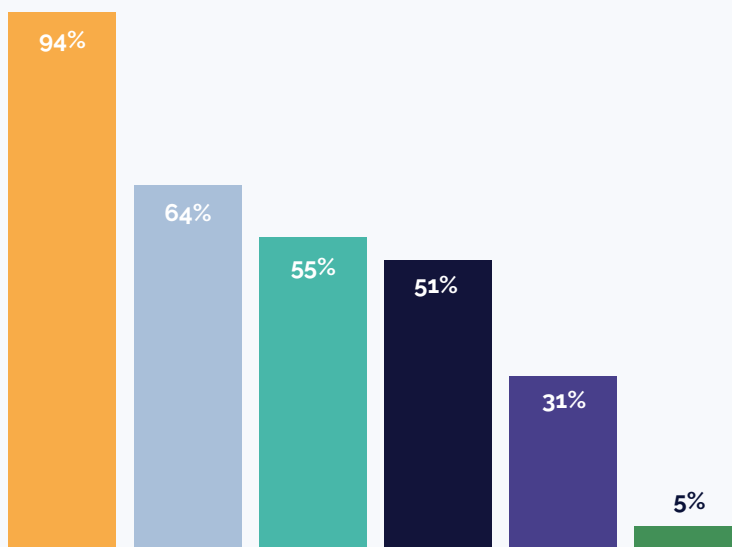
Integration, security, and the future postal ecosystem

The competitive landscape facing postal operators has changed more rapidly in the last five years than in the previous twenty. Traditional rivals remain significant, but the forces most occupying the strategic thinking of postal leaders in 2026 are different in kind: platform-based logistics ecosystems that integrate commerce and delivery, the digital integrations required to participate in modern e-commerce, and the cybersecurity risks that accompany an increasingly connected operating environment.

Which competitors or market forces do you perceive as the greatest threats to your business in the next five years?

Percentage of postal operators

- E-commerce giants' in-house logistics (e.g. Amazon Logistics)
- Global integrators (e.g. DHL, FedEx, UPS)
- Regional courier/startup delivery companies
- Substitution by digital communications (declining physical volumes)
- Emerging crowdshipping platforms (gig economy delivery)
- Other (please specify)



94% of operators identify e-commerce giants' in-house logistics as their **greatest competitive threat**



The competitive threat data opens with one of the strongest consensus positions in this study's ten-year history. Ninety-four percent of operators identify e-commerce giants' in-house logistics operations as their greatest competitive threat. The near-unanimity of this response underscores how profoundly platform-based business models are reshaping the competitive landscape.

E-commerce platforms increasingly control customer relationships, transaction data, merchant ecosystems, and delivery infrastructure. Their ability to integrate commerce, fulfilment, and logistics into a single vertically integrated ecosystem creates competitive advantages that standalone delivery providers find increasingly difficult to replicate.



Global integrators (64%) and regional courier and start-up delivery companies (55%) represent the second and third tiers of competitive concern. Digital substitution of physical communications, cited by 51%, serves as a continued reminder that mail decline has a competitive dimension alongside its structural one. Emerging crowdshipping platforms, selected by 31%, reflect the growing disruptive potential of gig-economy logistics models, particularly in markets where flexible delivery networks can assemble capacity faster than traditional operators can build it.



Regional differences are pronounced. EMEA operators show the highest concern about digital substitution (60%) and global integrators (67%), reflecting the more mature letter mail decline and established integrator competition in European markets. North American operators show markedly lower concern about global integrators (20%) but are considerably more worried about regional couriers and start-ups (79%) and emerging crowdshipping platforms (88%), reflecting the more fragmented and platform-driven competitive dynamics in that market. Interestingly, no North American operator identified digital substitution as a competitive threat, suggesting that for those operators, mail decline is viewed as a structural condition to be managed rather than a competitive force to be countered. Latin American operators show the highest concern about global integrators (86%), reflecting different market structures and the prominent role of international logistics providers in that region.

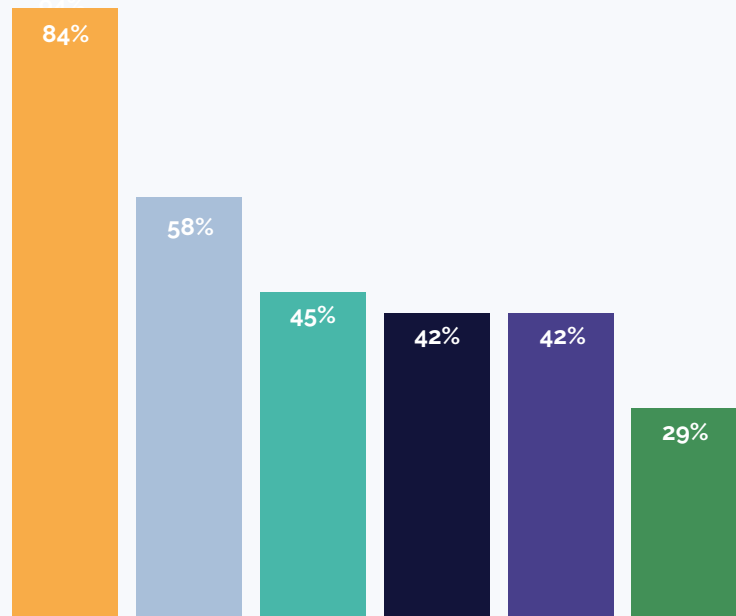
The digital platform integration priorities show a sector actively building the connectivity required to compete within the ecosystems that surround it. Local and national e-commerce platforms are the leading integration priority, selected by 84% of respondents. This figure aligns directly with the competitive threat data: if platform-based commerce is the primary competitive challenge, then embedding postal services within those platforms is a necessary strategic response. The finding also reinforces the APIs score of 8.6 in Section 7, the highest importance rating of any e-commerce capability in the study.

84% of operators are **prioritising integration** with local and national e-commerce platforms

Which digital platforms are you prioritising integrating with to enhance your services? Please select all that apply

Percentage of postal operators

- Local/national e-commerce platforms or shopping carts (API integration with online retailers' systems)
- Global e-commerce marketplaces (e.g. integrating postal shipping with Amazon/eBay platforms)
- Government e-services platforms (to integrate mail with e-government or digital ID services)
- Logistics aggregator platforms (allowing easy access to postal services via multi-carrier platforms)
- Payment and fintech platforms (for seamless transactions, digital payments)
- We are not focusing on new integrations currently

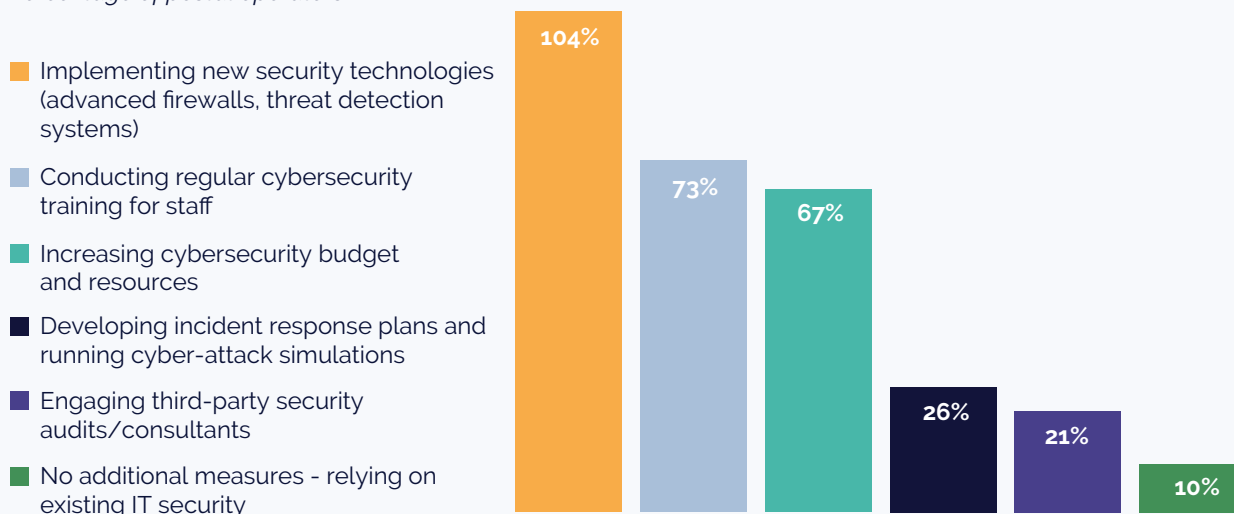


Global e-commerce marketplaces (58%) are the second priority, reflecting the internationalisation of e-commerce and the growing importance of platform-aggregated commerce. Government digital services platforms (45%) are third, reinforcing the continued strategic importance of public-sector integration as both a source of revenue diversification and a mechanism for maintaining civic relevance, a theme present across multiple sections of this report. Logistics aggregator platforms (42%) and payment and fintech platforms (42%) complete a picture of an industry pursuing digital ecosystem participation simultaneously across multiple fronts.

29% of respondents report they are not currently focusing on new platform integrations. This proportion is considerably higher in North America (50%) and lower in Latin America (0%), suggesting that integration urgency varies substantially across geographies. Regionally, Asia Pacific operators show the highest priority for global e-commerce marketplace integration (85%), consistent with the prominent role of large-scale marketplace commerce in that region. The alignment between these integration priorities and the broader strategic themes of the report is direct: the same operators investing most heavily in logistics and fulfilment services, government services, and e-commerce growth are those most actively building the platform connections required to deliver them.

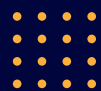
How is your organisation addressing cybersecurity risks as you digitalise operations? Select up to 3 answers

Percentage of postal operators



Increased digital connectivity and AI deployment bring with them expanded cybersecurity exposure. Across all respondents, the implementation of new security technologies, including advanced firewalls and threat detection systems, is near-universal. Regular cybersecurity training for staff follows at 73%, and increasing cybersecurity budgets and resources at 67%. These three actions, technology, people, and investment, collectively represent the core of how most postal operators are building cyber resilience.

The prominence of training alongside technology investment reflects a maturing recognition that cybersecurity is as much a human and organisational challenge as a technological one. As postal operators expand digital services, integrate with external platforms, process larger volumes of customer and transaction data, and deploy AI-enabled systems, the consequences of a significant cyberattack, operational disruption, customer trust damage, data exposure, and regulatory liability, become increasingly severe and increasingly understood at the leadership level.



Regular **cybersecurity training** is now a standard practice for **73%** of postal operators as digital exposure grows



A more advanced tier of cybersecurity preparedness is emerging. Developing incident response plans and running cyberattack simulations, cited by 26% of respondents, and engaging third-party security audits and consultants (21%) characterise a group of operators that has moved beyond prevention-focused security toward comprehensive resilience models. This shift, from assuming attacks can be prevented to planning for rapid detection, containment, and recovery, is increasingly considered best practice across critical infrastructure sectors and is clearly gaining traction within the postal industry. Ten percent of respondents report no additional cybersecurity measures beyond existing IT security, a figure that carries growing risk given the pace of digital transformation documented throughout this report.

The three questions in this section close the 2026 survey with a picture of an industry facing profound competitive pressure from platform-based ecosystems while simultaneously building the digital, operational, and security capabilities required to compete within them. The themes running through this report, from AI enterprise deployment to USO reform urgency, from network optimisation to ecosystem integration, from profitability recovery to regulatory complexity, are not separate challenges. They are facets of the same fundamental transition: the postal operator of the future is no longer simply a national delivery network. It is a digitally connected, data-intelligent, platform-integrated service organisation trusted by citizens, businesses, and governments across a broadening set of activities.

That transition is well underway. The 2026 findings document both its progress and its constraints: the financial pressures that limit the pace of transformation, the talent and integration challenges that complicate AI deployment, the regulatory reform that must accompany mail decline, and the competitive forces that reward those who move fastest. Across all of these, the data reveals an industry that is clear about where it needs to go and increasingly capable of executing the journey. The tenth edition of the Future of Posts does not end with an industry at risk. It ends with an industry at work.

**For a deeper discussion
on a *platform economy*
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Methodology

Escher is an international leader in providing solutions for the postal industry. As a partner to Posts, Escher is uniquely positioned to assess the current state of the postal industry and identify future trends.

Between February and March 2026, our research partners, Triangle Management Services, conducted an online survey of postal leaders worldwide. Responses from 98 postal operators were analysed to provide Escher with current and future growth plans for the global postal industry.



Calculation notes:

- ✔ **Weighted data:** Each operator counts as one unit. Where an operator returned multiple responses, they are combined so it does not outweigh single-response operators, with each respondent taking an equal share of the operator's weight, spread across the answers they selected. Single-answer questions are weighted to total 100%. Multiple-answer questions, such as "select all that apply" or questions that allow up to three selections, are weighted to the equivalent of three selections. Because operators could choose more than one answer, the options on these questions sum to approximately 300%, and a single option may exceed 100%. For rating questions scored from 1 to 10, each operator's score is the average of its respondents' ratings, and the figure shown is the mean of those averages.
- ✔ **Base:** The overall base is 98 operators. As not every operator answered every question, individual questions may have a lower base.
- ✔ **Rounding:** Percentages of .5 and above were rounded up, and those below .5 were rounded down. Where rounding moved a question away from its expected total, individual figures were adjusted by a fraction of a percentage point to reconcile.
- ✔ **Geographic segmentation:** Selected geographic analysis is shown across four regions: Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA), North America, Latin America (LATAM), and Asia Pacific (APAC). Where referenced as a combined grouping, North America, LATAM, and APAC are referred to collectively as the Rest of the World (ROW).



Question Mapping:

Section 1: Business Impact, Revenue, and Profitability

- Q1: What are the main impacts you have noticed on your business in the last 12 months?
- Q2: How would you describe your revenue performance over the last 12 months?
- Q3: How has your profitability changed over the last 12 months?

Section 2: Retail Strategy and Self-Service Transformation

- Q4: Which of the following best describes your #1 retail strategy for the next 12 months?
- Q5: Which of the following self-service technologies are key to executing on your retail strategy?
- Q8: How are you expanding or evolving your retail network's reach?

Section 3: Delivery Network Transformation

- Q6: What are your plans for your delivery network this year?
- Q7: What cost reduction (or operational efficiency) strategies do you plan to use over the next 12 months in your delivery network?
- Q9: Which of these best describe your current delivery network priorities?

Section 4: Investment Priorities Signal the Emergence of the AI-Enabled Postal Enterprise

- Q10: What are the most important investment priorities for your organisation in the next 1-3 years?
- Q11: What are the most important product investments over the next 1-3 years?
- Q22: Has the increase in costs impacted your ability to fund investment for the future years?

Section 5: The Forces Shaping the Next Five Years of Postal Transformation

- Q12: Excluding e-commerce, which of the following do you believe will have the greatest impact on Posts in the next five years?
- Q13: Which of the following do you believe will have the biggest impact on e-commerce in the next 5 years?

Section 6: Creating Value Through Customer Experience, Analytics, and Operational Agility

- Q14: Which enhancements will create the most business value from your retail channel?
- Q15: How are you using data analytics?
- Q16: How is your organisation dealing with fluctuations in e-commerce parcel volumes?

Section 7: E-commerce Enablement, Returns Transformation, and Cross-Border Growth

- Q17: On a scale of 1-10, how important do you think the following are to the e-commerce industry?
- Q18: How is your organisation dealing with rising reverse-logistic demands?
- Q19: What do you see as the main obstacles to your organisation's cross-border e-commerce growth?

Section 8: Sustainability

- Q20: How would you best describe your company's carbon policy?
- Q21: Which of the following green initiatives are on your company's roadmap?

Section 9: AI Moves from Experimentation to Enterprise Transformation

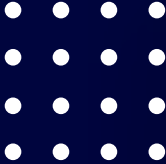
- Q23: How would you best describe your organisation's approach to AI technologies?
- Q24: What are the main challenges you've faced in implementing AI?
- Q25: What percentage of cost savings have you achieved or expect to achieve through AI implementation?
- Q27: In which operational areas are you implementing or planning to implement AI or machine learning solutions?

Section 10: Competing in the Platform Economy

- Q26: Which competitors or market forces do you perceive as the greatest threats to your business in the next 5 years?
- Q28: Which digital platforms are you prioritising integrating with to enhance your services?
- Q29: How is your organisation addressing cybersecurity risks as you digitalise operations?



THE FUTURE OF POSTS 2026



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