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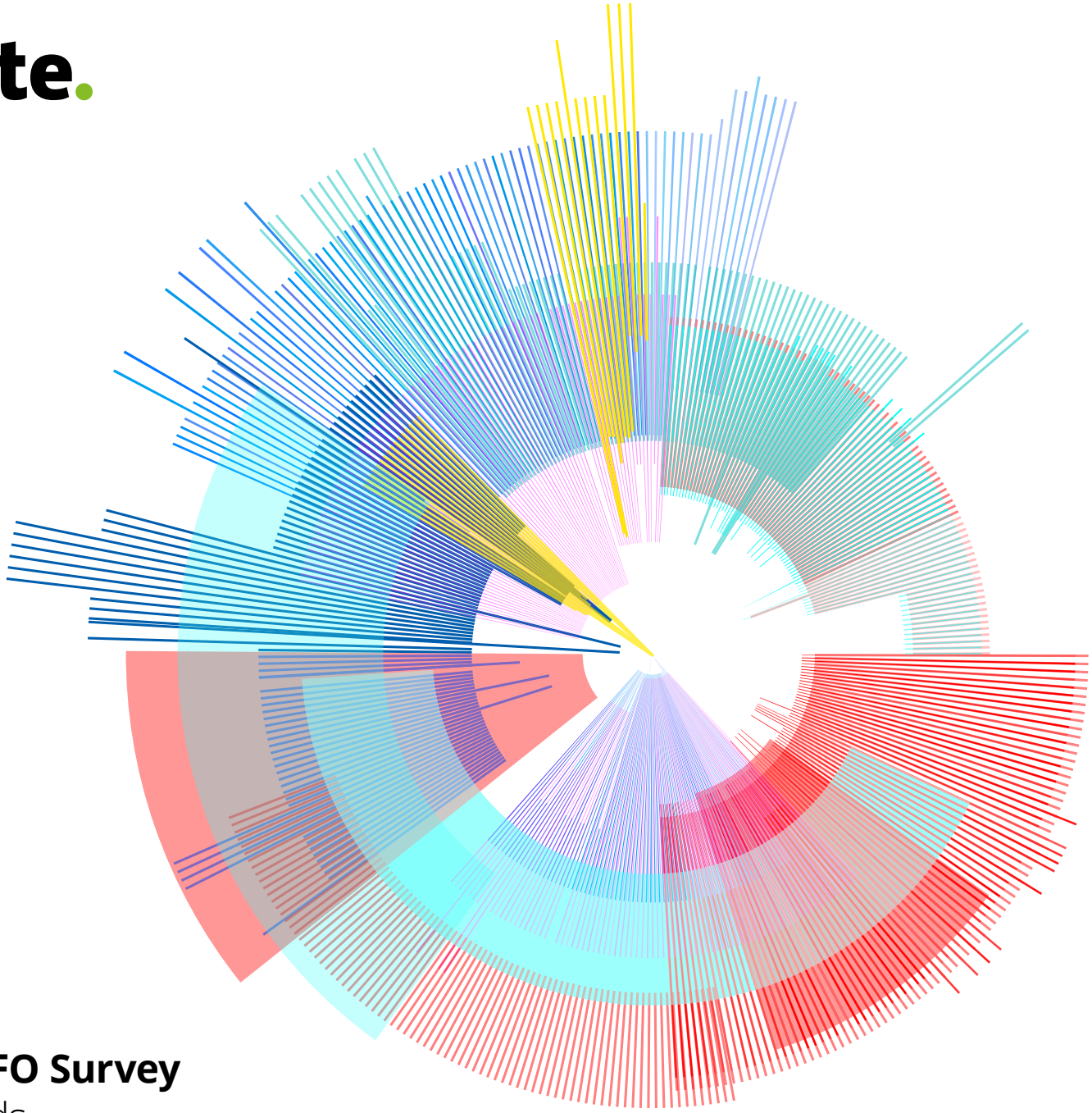
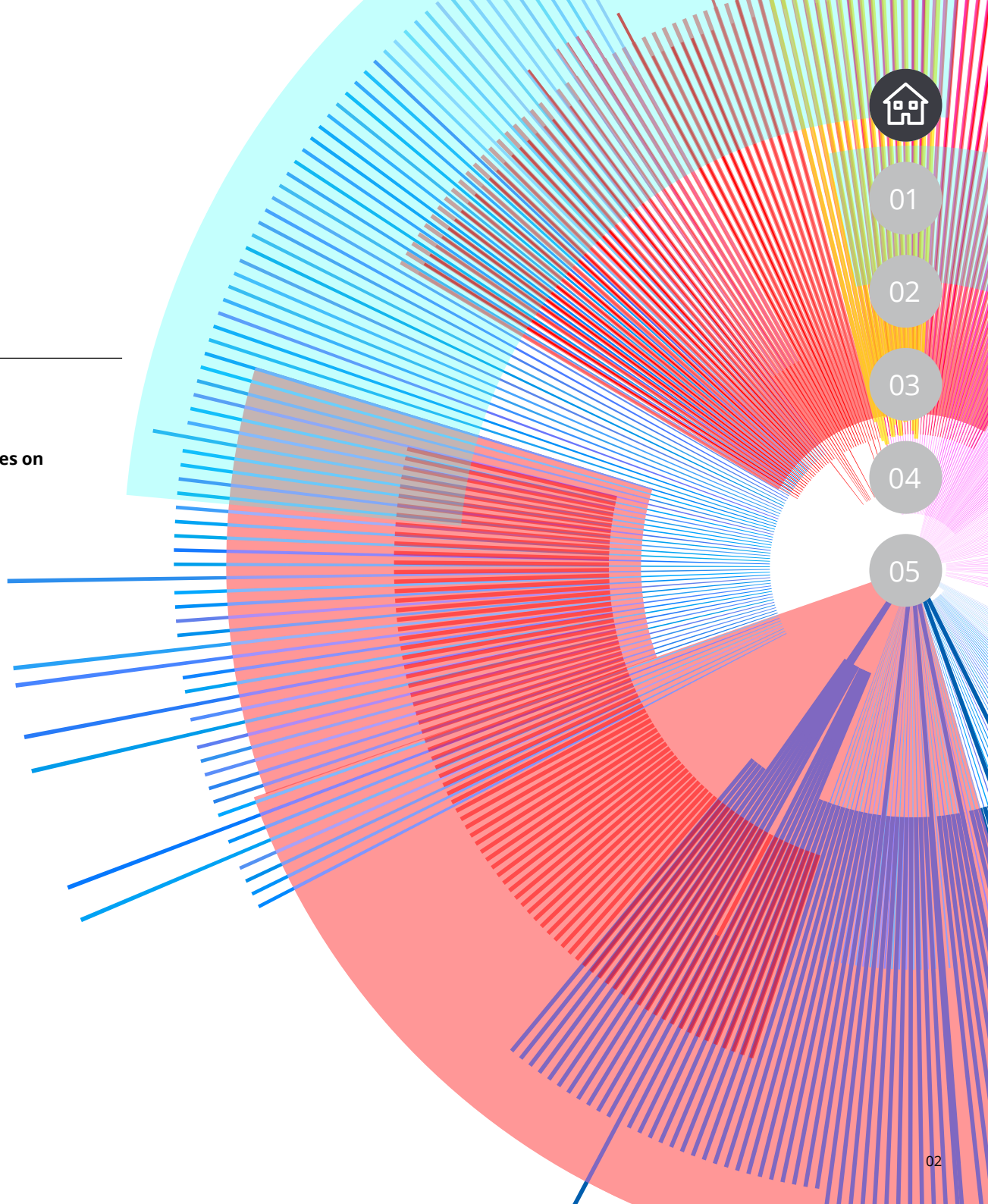


European CFO Survey

Into the woods

Autumn 2019

Contents



Foreword

As part of our broader commitment to supporting business leaders across the globe in their strategic decision-making, we are pleased to present the tenth edition of the Deloitte European CFO Survey.

Since 2015 the survey has given voice twice a year to about 1,500 Chief Financial Officers from across Europe. The report provides an overview of CFOs' hiring and investment intentions, their views on critical business risks and strategic priorities and the factors they currently consider vital for success. Due to its wide geographical reach, the consistently high number of participants across a range of different industries, and the privileged viewpoint of CFOs, it provides reliable insights into how European companies view the economic environment and how they are reacting to it.

With the global economy and trade becoming more unpredictable and growth weakening in European economies, it would be easy for business leaders to focus on their near-term challenges and lose sight of profound, long-term issues affecting their business. Chief among them is climate change, which is creating fresh challenges and changing, too, the way in which consumers, employees and shareholders perceive companies and interact with them.

In this edition we therefore report on the extent to which companies are feeling the pressure to act on climate change and on the measures they are taking.

We hope you find the views set out in the report bring an interesting dynamic to your discussions and trigger further debate. To discuss any specific aspects of the report, please contact one of our Deloitte leaders, whose email addresses are given at the end of this document.

Christopher Nuerk
Managing Partner, Clients & Industries

Executive summary

Confidence across European businesses has deteriorated further in recent months as economic growth has slowed.

The share of CFOs feeling less optimistic about the financial prospects of their companies increased again compared to the Spring 2019 edition of the survey and is now at the highest level since the beginning of the series in 2015. Expectations on the evolution of revenues and margins also fell to their lowest since the survey began. Weak business sentiment is also having a concrete impact, with companies much less willing to invest or add to their workforce.

The negative mood is widespread: in 15 of the 19 countries represented in this survey there was a decline in the majority of the indexes measuring business confidence and expectations. In ten of the countries all the indexes have deteriorated since the spring. Some industries are much gloomier than others, with CFOs in the automotive, and industrial products and services sectors, which are most exposed to developments in international trade, the most pessimistic. However, expectations have also declined substantially in industries that depend more on still resilient consumer demand, which had previously remained more upbeat.

It is weakening demand that is the main concern for CFOs across Europe in this edition of the survey. Shortages in skilled labour are now less in focus – though they continue to be seen as one of the top risks. The strategies companies are prioritising to deal with challenging economic conditions are becoming more defensive, with cost cutting the top priority for CFOs in a majority of countries.

As companies deal with what would appear to be a business cycle in decline, they also need to keep in mind longer-term trends that are of profound importance. Investors, regulators and the general public are focusing increasingly on sustainability, and, above all, the enormous challenges posed by climate change. The special questions in this edition of the survey aim to shed light on the extent to which companies are feeling the pressure to act on climate change and on the types of measures they are taking.

The results reveal that companies – particularly larger ones – are indeed feeling pressure from different sources to act on climate change and are taking action to address the issue.

However, these actions so far seem in the majority of cases to be reactive rather than strategic. Few companies are taking a structured approach and incorporating management of the risks created by climate change in the company's governance. Yet they are likely to need to do so if they want to be able to connect with a new generation of consumers and investors.

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The economic landscape

Macroeconomic update

Over the past 18 months, global economic growth has slowed down and future prospects worsened markedly.

While in April 2018 the IMF expected global growth of around 4% for 2019, over time the forecasts have been revised steadily downwards, so that the growth rate for this year is now expected to be below 3%. Many major economies – among them Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom – even experienced negative economic growth over recent quarters.

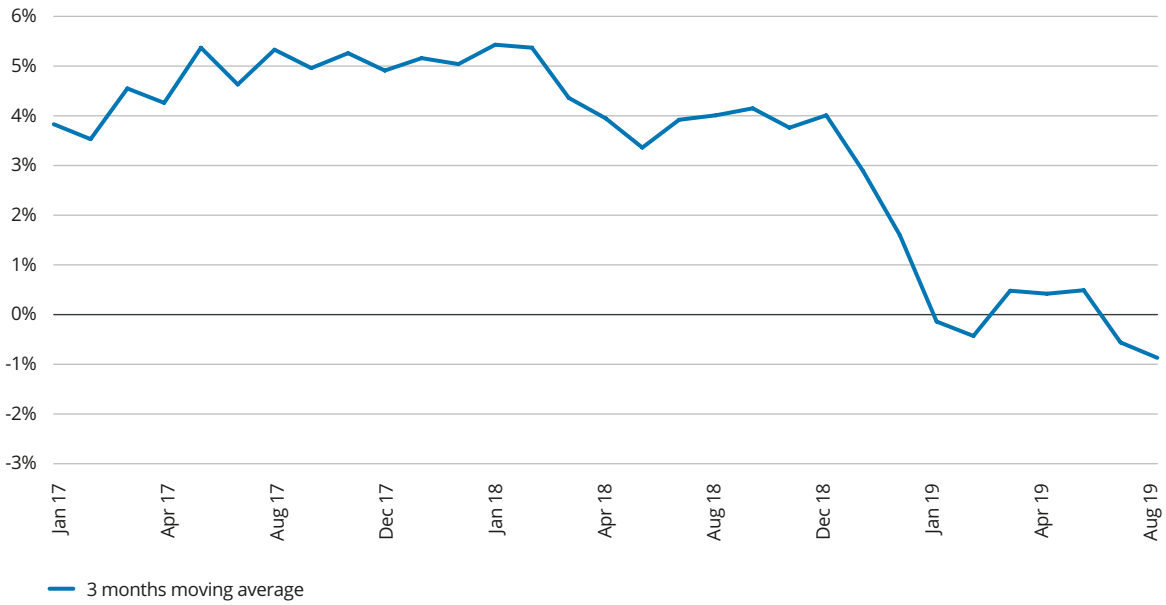
To some extent, the global deceleration in economic activity can be seen as the natural development of a business cycle, with its peaks and troughs. However, heightened policy uncertainty, accentuated in particular by a protracted period of high trade tensions, is exacerbating the cyclical slowdown.

Since the beginning of the trade tensions between the US and China in Spring 2018, growth in global trade declined substantially (Chart 1). This factor, coupled with the unpredictability of the trade policy moves have triggered a slowdown in investments and lowered the demand for capital goods, this way hitting negatively the manufacturing sector and thus the economic growth of those countries with a stronger industrial basis.

According to estimates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the loss of global GDP induced by the direct and indirect effects since the beginning of the trade conflicts could amount to $700 billion by 2020 – roughly the annual GDP of Switzerland.[1]

A protracted weakness in the manufacturing sectors could easily spread to the service sector and to households' consumption, which so far have been resilient and acted as a growth engine particularly in the Euro area.

Chart 1. Merchandise World Trade growth rate, year-on-year seasonally adjusted



Source: Deloitte calculations based on data from CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis

A change in the global climate seems unlikely in the immediate future. Although trade talks between the US and China continue, a sustainable agreement looks hard to reach. Tensions escalated further over the summer and by year end all US imports from China risk to be subject to tariffs, with the average tariff rising from 3.1% to 24.3% in less than two years.[2] Furthermore, trade disputes risk spreading to other US trade partners, notably the European Union. As the result of a World Trade Organization (WTO) ruling, a range of European goods worth $7.5 billion are now subject to US tariffs. The possibility of duties on European auto exports to the US looms large, as time is running out to conclude an EU-US trade deal. Another WTO ruling, allowing the EU to impose retaliatory tariffs on US goods, is expected next year.

There are also other threats to global growth. China's economy has continued to slow and its import demand remains weak despite the growth-supportive policies that the government has adopted over the past year. Although more measures to help consumer demand are being prepared, large-scale fiscal stimulus similar to that in 2009 is not on the cards.

In Europe, meanwhile, protracted uncertainty about Brexit and the terms of the future UK-EU relationship are delaying investment decisions, causing slower growth. Globally, the buoyant demand of recent years has waned and seems unlikely to return anytime soon.

Against this backdrop, central banks worldwide have loosened their monetary policy. The European Central Bank (ECB) has pushed interest rates further into negative territory and has resumed its bond-buying programme. At the same time, governments across Europe are planning to adopt more expansionary fiscal policies. The Dutch government has announced an increase in spending on healthcare and housing and the creation of a national investment fund. The German government has signalled that it might be ready to respond with substantial fiscal stimulus should the economy head into recession although for the time being it is continuing to aim at achieving a balanced budget next year. Discussions are taking place on how to revamp the EU's fiscal rules to make the block more resilient and able to respond to negative economic events.

Faced with this range of challenges the world economy is vulnerable but it continues to grow, – albeit too slowly. The risk that growth will give way to recession has increased but still may not materialise. If central banks and governments both respond with fiscal and monetary policy the current slowdown may be contained and economic prospects could improve.

Globally, the buoyant demand of recent years has waned and seems unlikely to return anytime soon.

A fog of uncertainty descends

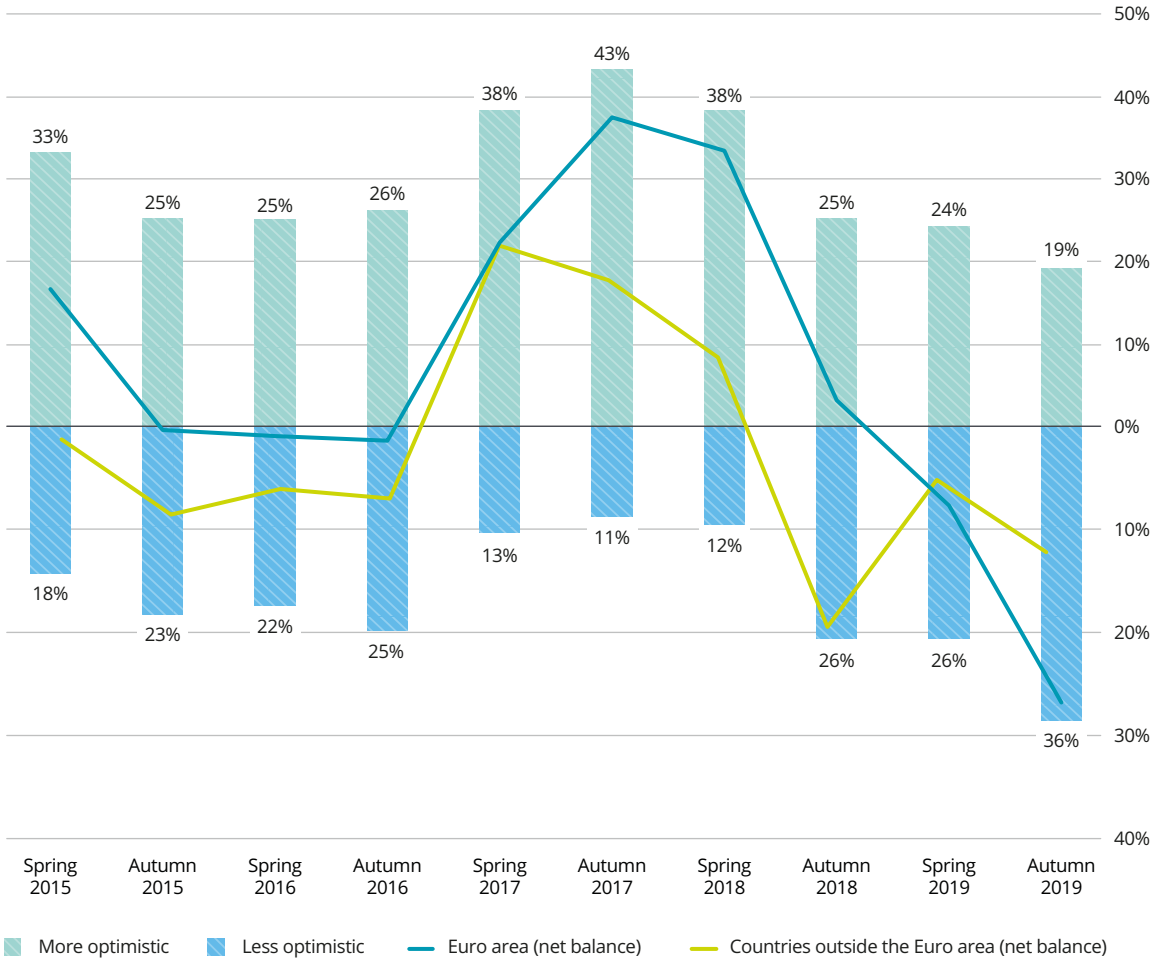
Fading optimism

Optimism is in short supply among the Chief Financial Officers of European businesses.

Compared to the previous edition of the European CFO survey, the share of CFOs reporting that they feel more optimistic about the financial prospects of their company has dropped from 24 per cent to 19 per cent. At the same time, the share of those feeling less optimistic increased from 26 per cent to 36 per cent – the highest since the survey began in 2015 (Chart 2).

The decline in sentiment is considerably more marked in the euro area – where the net balance of -24 per cent represents a big deterioration from the -3 per cent in the spring and the weakest since 2015 – than outside it, where the decline is from 0 to a net balance of -8 per cent. On a country basis CFOs in Germany and the UK are the most negative about future prospects, with almost half of them (46 per cent in Germany and 44 per cent in the UK) feeling less optimistic than a few months ago. But the mood is more gloomy almost everywhere.

Chart 2. Financial prospects over time (net balance %).
Compared to three months ago, how do you feel about the financial prospects for your company?*

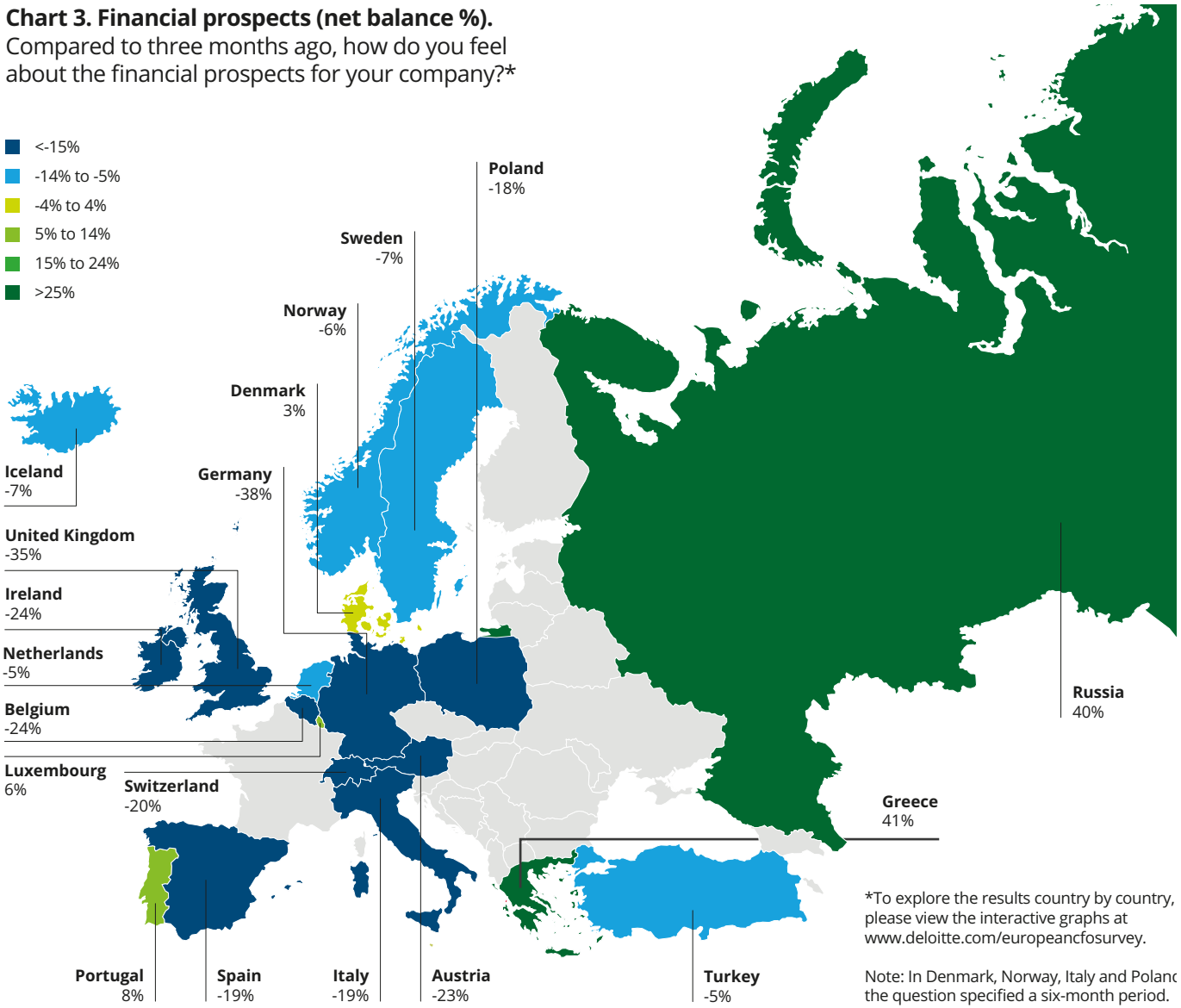


*To explore the results country by country, please view the interactive graphs at www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey

Business sentiment deteriorated in 14 of the 19 countries surveyed, so that in just five countries (Denmark, Greece, Luxemburg, Portugal and Russia) do the number of optimistic CFOs outnumber those who feel less optimistic (Chart 3).

The disruption in global trade and related increase in uncertainty seem to be at the heart of the deterioration in sentiment. The decline started in the spring of 2018 as early trade skirmishes took place and its magnitude has increased each time tensions have escalated – as in the autumn of 2018 and in recent months. The negative mood is concentrated in industries that are more export-oriented and embedded in global value chains. CFOs in the automotive sector, industrial products and services, and transport and logistics are the least optimistic of all. Their mood has deteriorated most since the Spring 2019 survey. Furthermore, across industries there is a significant negative correlation between business sentiment and company size (measured by yearly revenues): the larger the company, the more likely it is that its sentiment has deteriorated, probably because larger companies tend to be more export-oriented and therefore affected by the downturn in trade.

Chart 3. Financial prospects (net balance %).
Compared to three months ago, how do you feel about the financial prospects for your company?*



*To explore the results country by country, please view the interactive graphs at www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey.

Note: In Denmark, Norway, Italy and Polanc the question specified a six-month period.

Risk appetite drops further as uncertainty continues to rise

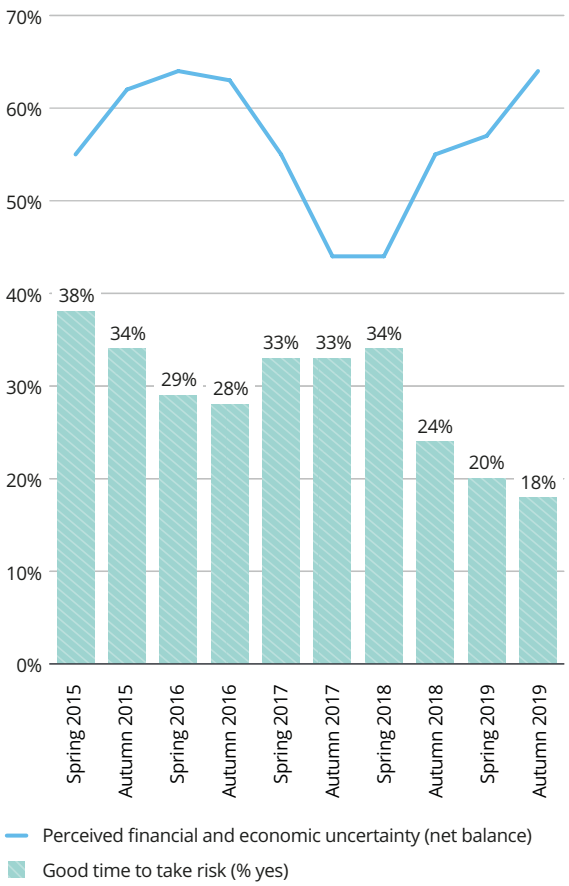
The increase in tariffs and protectionist measures over the past 18 months, as well as the difficulties finding common ground on the terms of the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union are proving more than just passing trends. A structural shift in the global trading system and more generally in how countries work together seems to be occurring. It is therefore not surprising that CFOs across the European continent rate the external economic and financial environment as highly uncertain, and that the perceived level of uncertainty has increased further compared to the spring.

Across all countries, almost seven out of ten CFOs (69 per cent) now rate the current level of uncertainty as high or very high. The proportion is even higher within the eurozone, with 73 per cent of CFOs considering uncertainty high or very high, up from 63 per cent in the Spring 2019 edition. Perceived uncertainty has also increased in countries outside the euro area but to a smaller extent, so that the gap in perceptions between CFOs inside and outside the euro area has widened further compared to six months ago.

As the external business environment becomes more unpredictable, so risk appetite wanes. Less than one in five CFOs consider this a good time to be taking on risk, the lowest share since the beginning of the survey (Chart 4). Once again, the decline in risk appetite has been more marked in countries within the euro area and in industries more directly exposed to the global trading system – such as automotive, industrial products and services, and transport and logistics.

The perceived level of uncertainty increased further compared to last spring.

Chart 4. Uncertainty and risk
How would you rate the general level of external financial and economic uncertainty facing your company? Is this a good time to be taking greater risk on your balance sheet?*



*To explore the results country by country, please view the interactive graphs at www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey

The gloom goes on

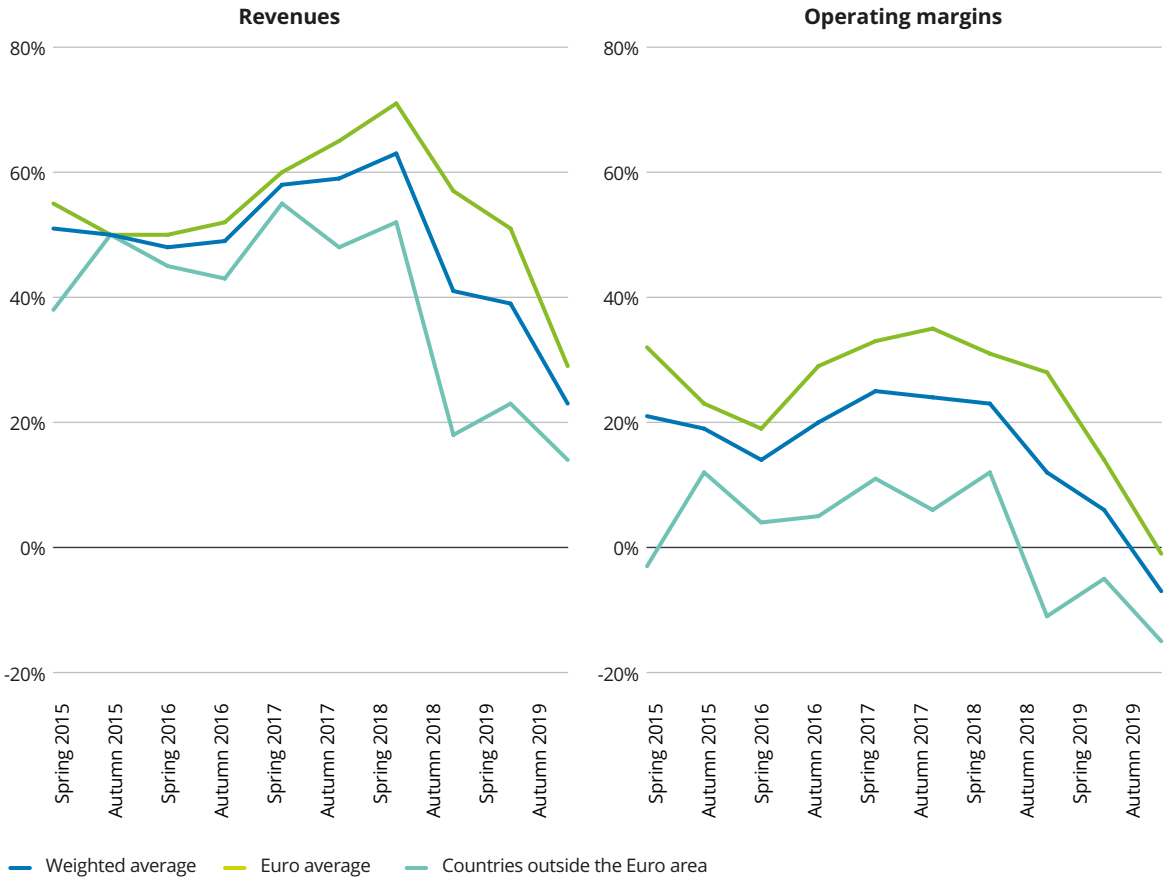
Expectations for revenues and margins at an historical low

The gloom about the current business climate stretches ahead for the next 12 months.

Expectations on the evolution of revenues and margins have dropped further since the last survey, to new lows. The outlook for operating margins appears particularly negative. For the first time CFOs expecting a decline in their company's margins outnumber those expecting an increase. The net balance is therefore negative.

The decline in expectations is geographically quite widespread, with net balances declining in 13 countries for revenues and 16 for operating margins, although the magnitude of the decline is steeper in countries within the euro area for both indicators (Chart 5).

Chart 5. Revenues and margins over time (net balance %). In your view how are revenues/margins for your company likely to change over the next 12 months?*

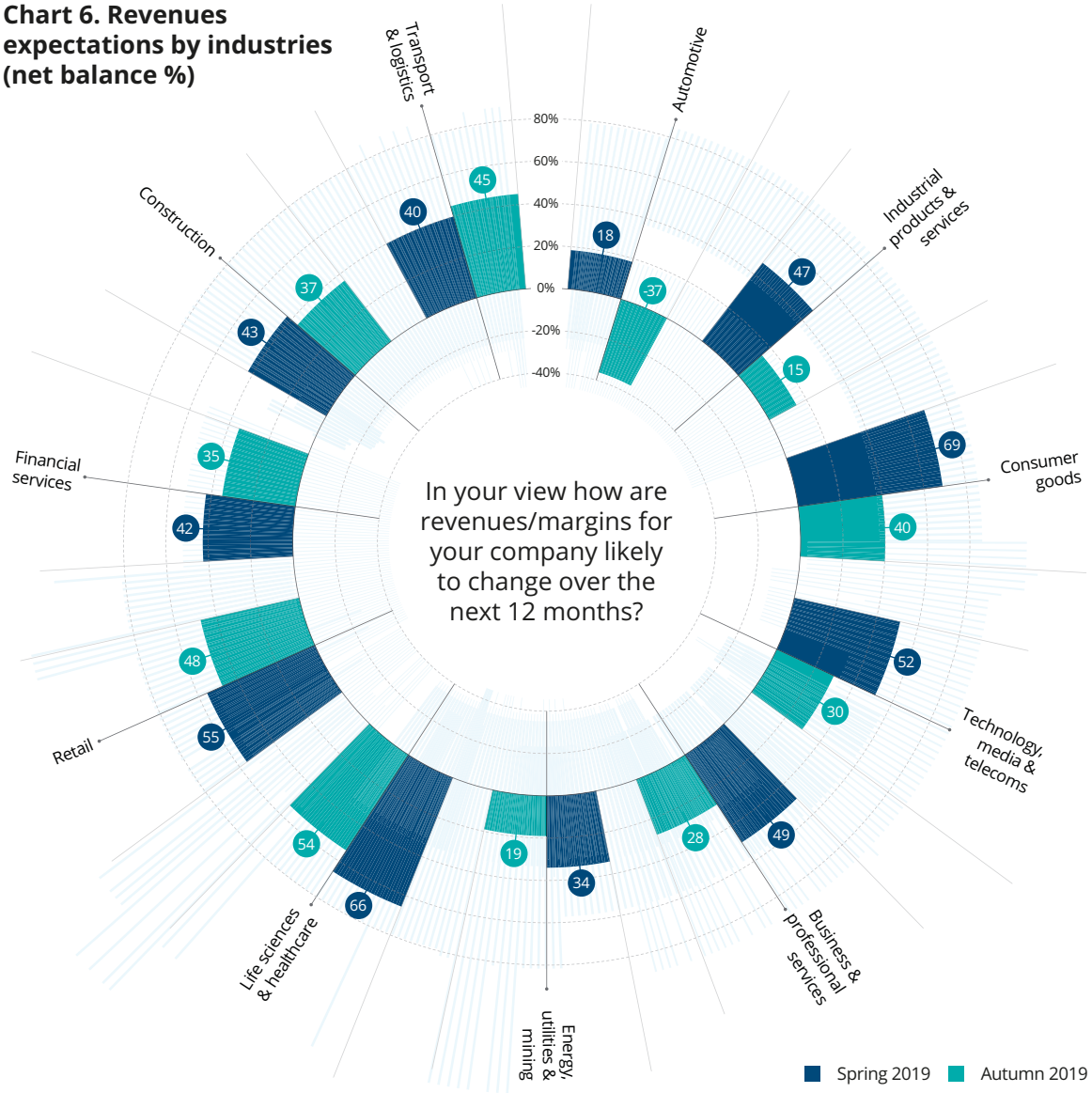


Note: In the UK CFOs were asked, "How are revenues/margins for UK corporates likely to change over the next 12 months?"
*To explore the results country by country, please view the interactive graphs at www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey

A look at expectations across industries adds more details to the picture. Expectations about revenues dropped most in the automotive, and the industrial products and services sectors for the third time in a row and the magnitude of the dip was larger than in the previous edition of the survey. This suggests that the bottom of the negative cycle has not yet been reached.

The deterioration in revenue expectations was not, however, confined to export-oriented sectors. The consumer goods sector and technology, media and telecommunications experienced the third and fourth largest drops in the net balance of revenue expectations (Chart 6). Although the index remains generally positive, the cross-sectoral decline in expectations reveals that the weakness in economic momentum is spreading.

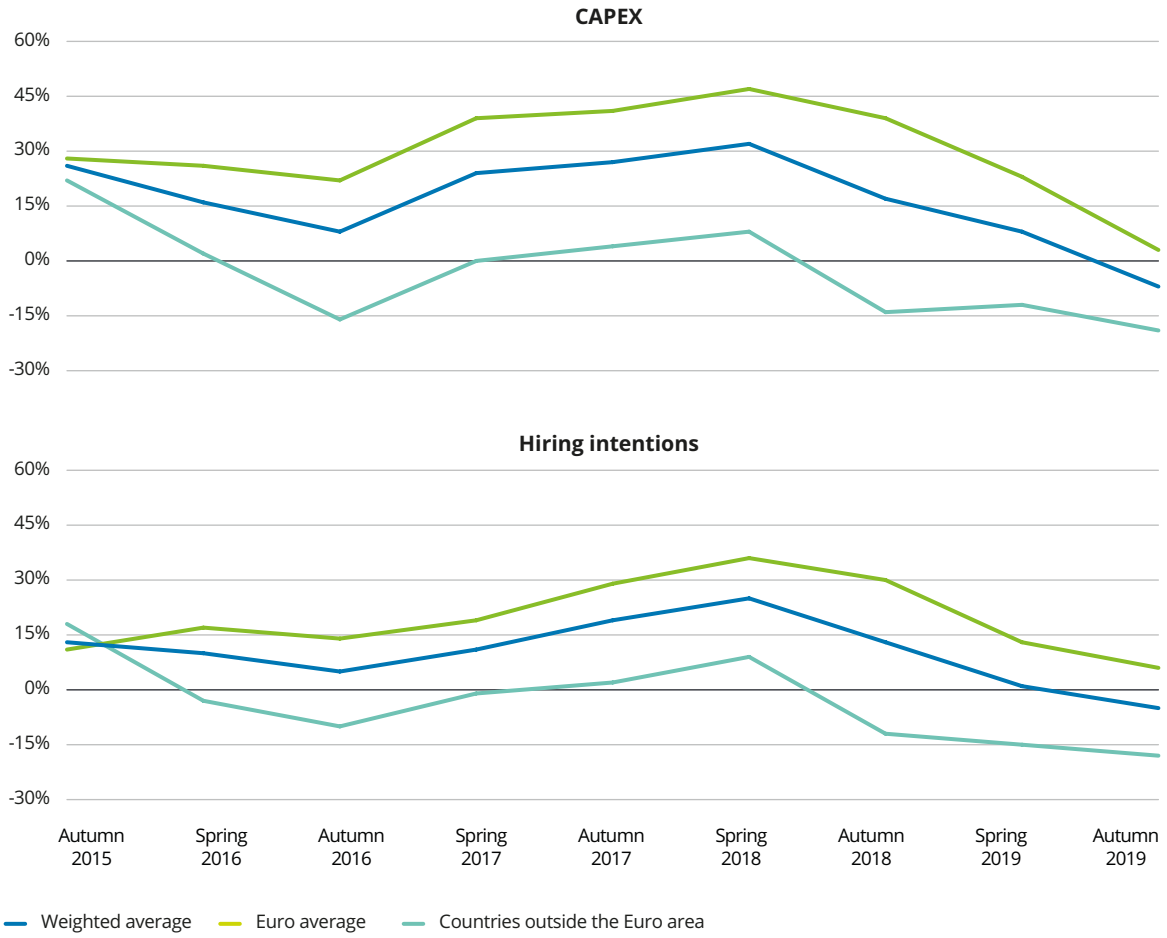
Chart 6. Revenues expectations by industries (net balance %)



Investments and hiring intentions continue to slide

Companies across Europe have also turned bearish when it comes to investment decisions. For the first time since the beginning of the survey, the net balance of intentions on capital expenditure (CAPEX) turned negative, as slightly more CFOs plan a reduction rather than an increase in CAPEX over the next 12 months (Chart 7). That a relative majority of respondents (40 per cent) expect to keep their investment spending the same offers little comfort. In an uncertain environment it is sensible to postpone long-term investment commitments. But investment plans have been in retreat now since the spring of 2018 and, if it persists, this restraint threatens to have a long-lasting impact on potential growth. The accommodative monetary policy adopted by central banks, which keeps businesses financing costs low, is intended to counter this risk. It seems however that unless confidence is restored the monetary medicine is not going to revive investment soon.

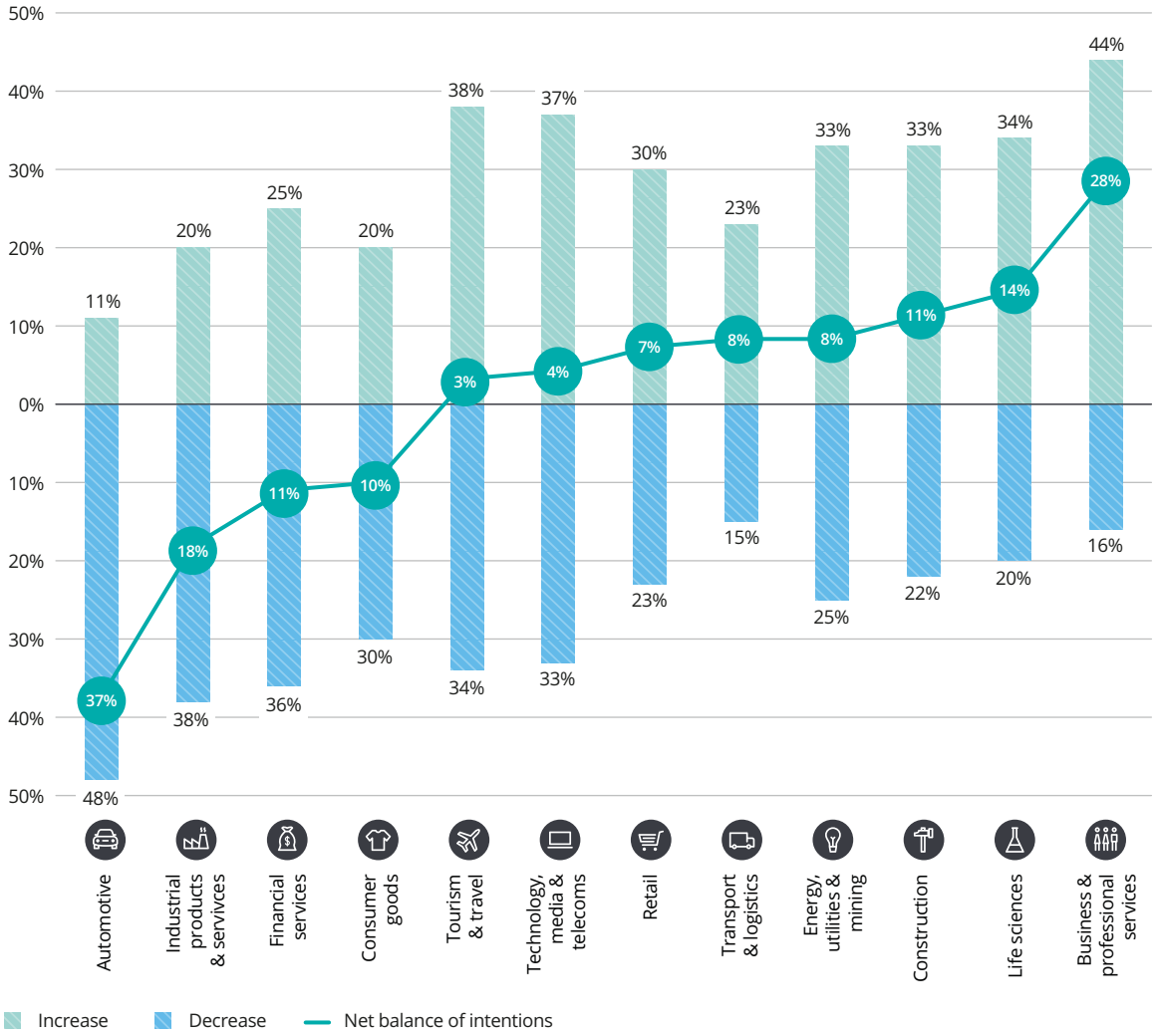
Chart 7. Capital expenditure CAPEX and hiring intentions over time (net balance %).
In your view how are capital expenditures/number of employees for your company likely to change over the next 12 months?*



Note: In the UK CFOs were asked, "How are capital expenditures/the outlook for hiring for UK corporates likely to change over the next 12 months?" *To explore the results country by country, please view the interactive graphs at www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey

In line with the trends in other indicators, the outlook for hiring intentions has deteriorated and the overall net balance has turned negative too (Chart 7). For countries within the euro area, however, the hiring intention balance remains positive except in the case of Germany, where it has entered negative territory for the first time since the euro crisis. This probably reflects manufacturing's important role in the economy. Indeed, unsurprisingly, the breakdown of the results reveals that automotive, and the industrial products and services lead the group of industries with quite negative expectations. Almost half the CFOs in the automotive sector plan to reduce their headcount while only 11 per cent plan an increase. The net balance of hiring intentions is also negative in industrial products and services, financial services and consumer goods (Chart 8). Although in other sectors the net balance remains positive, many of them have experienced a decline since the spring. The negative outlook in crucial sectors and the overall softening of hiring intentions are worrying as the buoyant labour market in many countries across Europe has boosted household spending and thus supported economic growth. A significant weakening in the labour market leading to a decline in consumer spending would mean companies face weakness in domestic demand as well as in export markets.

Chart 8. Hiring intentions by industry.
In your view how is the number of employees for your company likely to change over the next 12 months?



Inflation expectations

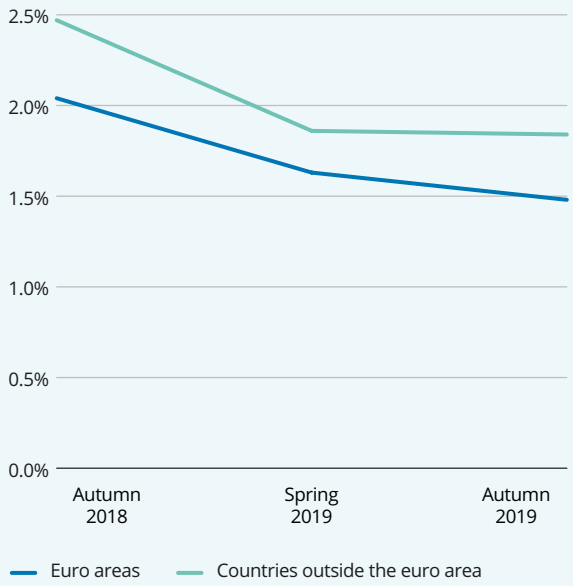
The expected level of inflation plays a decisive role in many important decisions companies make, such as their price and wage setting. Understanding the direction in which firms' inflation expectations are moving therefore provides pointers to where wages, prices and the real economy are heading. In the current low interest environment in which central bankers are wary of deflation, evaluation and management of price expectations has also become increasingly important to them. Over the past three editions of the survey, CFOs lowered their expectations both for the average inflation rate in the 12 months ahead within their own country and the euro area as a whole. In this latest edition of the survey the slide is less pronounced. Among CFOs in the euro area the expected inflation rate dropped by 0.16 percentage points (pp) to 1.48 per cent, a much smaller fall than the drop of 0.41pp between autumn 2018 and spring 2019.

Among CFOs operating outside the euro area expectations for the inflation rate within the eurozone remained almost unchanged (-0.02 pp), against a drop of 0.61pp between the previous two editions of the survey (Chart 9).

Interestingly, the inflation rates expected by euro and non-euro area companies over the next 12 months are in both cases higher than the 0.8 per cent rate recorded in September and higher than the 1.30 per cent consensus forecast of professional forecasters.[3]

Although weak price expectations further underline the challenging external conditions CFOs foresee, the fact that the slide has been more contained and that companies see prices rising from current levels might suggest at least a slight rebound in prices is likely. This might also suggest that the September announcement from the ECB of a new round of monetary stimulus has indeed affected CFOs' price expectations.

Chart 9. CFOs' expectations on the average inflation rate in the euro area. What do you think the inflation rate (for the Consumer Price Index) will be in the euro area in 12 months' time?



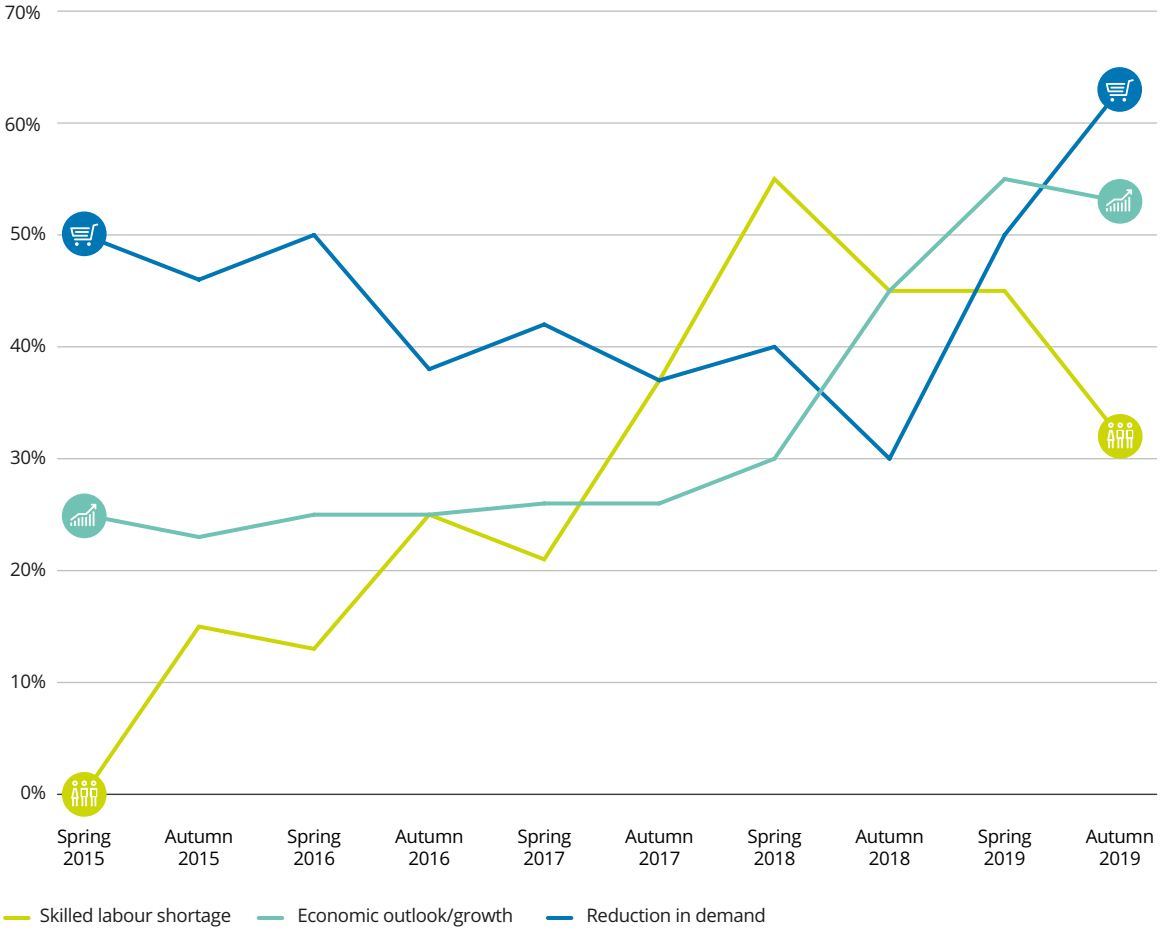
*To explore the results country by country, please view the interactive graphs at www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey

Weakening demand is now the principal concern

As in the previous edition of the survey, concerns about the economy remain in the forefront of CFOs' minds across Europe. In two-thirds of the countries (12 of the 19), CFOs point to a weakening in demand as one of the top three factors posing a significant risk to their businesses in the next 12 months. The number of countries where CFOs named weaker demand as the top risk has increased quite rapidly over the past two editions and is now the factor named most often. This is another alarm bell, warning that businesses now see a weakening in household spending as a real threat.

Shortages in skilled labour are mentioned as one of the top three risks in one-third of the countries – three less than in the previous edition – slipping further behind concerns about the overall economic outlook and geopolitical risks. It continues to be nonetheless a prominent concern, far more so than in 2015, when weaker growth and macroeconomic worries also troubled businesses (Chart 10).

Chart 10. Evolution of perceived business risks (% of countries where specific risks rank in the top three).
Which of the following factors are likely to pose a significant risk to your business over the next 12 months?*



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The labour market in many European countries remains tight – and indeed much tighter than in 2015. However, a weakening of the labour market might not solve the bottlenecks companies face because the skills necessitated by technological change and the changing nature of work may continue to be difficult to find.

Given the deteriorating outlook and increased uncertainty, business strategies are becoming slightly more defensive. As in the spring, cost reduction and control remains the top priority in almost half of the countries (9 out of 19). In general, a defensive strategy ranks as the top priority in 11 countries – two more than in the spring edition. Nonetheless, the mindset remains slightly tilted towards growth-oriented strategies, with more expansionary rather than defensive strategies among the top three priorities of businesses in ten of 19 countries.

It is worth noting how, despite the renewed focus on defensive strategies, digitisation remains, as in the previous edition of the survey, one of the top three strategies in about a quarter of the countries. Its relevance as a strategic priority has increased steadily in recent years and that seems unlikely to change now, even if business sentiment is cooling. Many companies appear to consider digital transformation fundamental to their strategy toolkit, independent of the ups and downs of the business cycle.

Cost reduction and control remains the top priority in almost half of the countries. A defensive strategy ranks as the top priority in 11 countries – two more than in the spring edition.

Feeling the heat

Pressure is mounting on companies to act on climate change

In recent years, business sustainability – how companies manage environmental, societal and governance issues – has come increasingly into the spotlight, with climate change the central focus.

Public awareness and concern about climate change has risen in many countries since 2013[4] and over the past year public protest has surged, led, in particular, by young people. In response government and regulators are stepping up their efforts. More than 60 countries and 100 cities around the world are adopting net-zero carbon emission targets – with the UK and France recently joining Sweden and Norway in the group of countries that have already enshrined the targets into national laws.[5] Central banks are increasingly integrating climate-related risks into financial stability monitoring and micro-supervision.[6]

Investors, too, are making the climate central to their activities. As of 2018, more than US$ 30 trillion of funds was held in sustainable or green investments in the five major markets tracked by the Global Sustainable Investment Alliance, up by 34 per cent in just two years.[7] Almost 400 investors representing more than US$35 trillion in assets under management (AUM) have signed the Climate Action 100+ initiative, committing to drive actively corporate action on climate change.[8]

At the recent UN climate summit, a group of the world's largest investors, with more than US$2 trillion in AUM initiated the Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance, committing themselves to reaching carbon-neutral portfolios by 2050.[9]

Given these trends, the special questions in this edition of the survey aim to shed light on the extent to which companies are feeling the pressure to act on climate change and on the actions companies take.

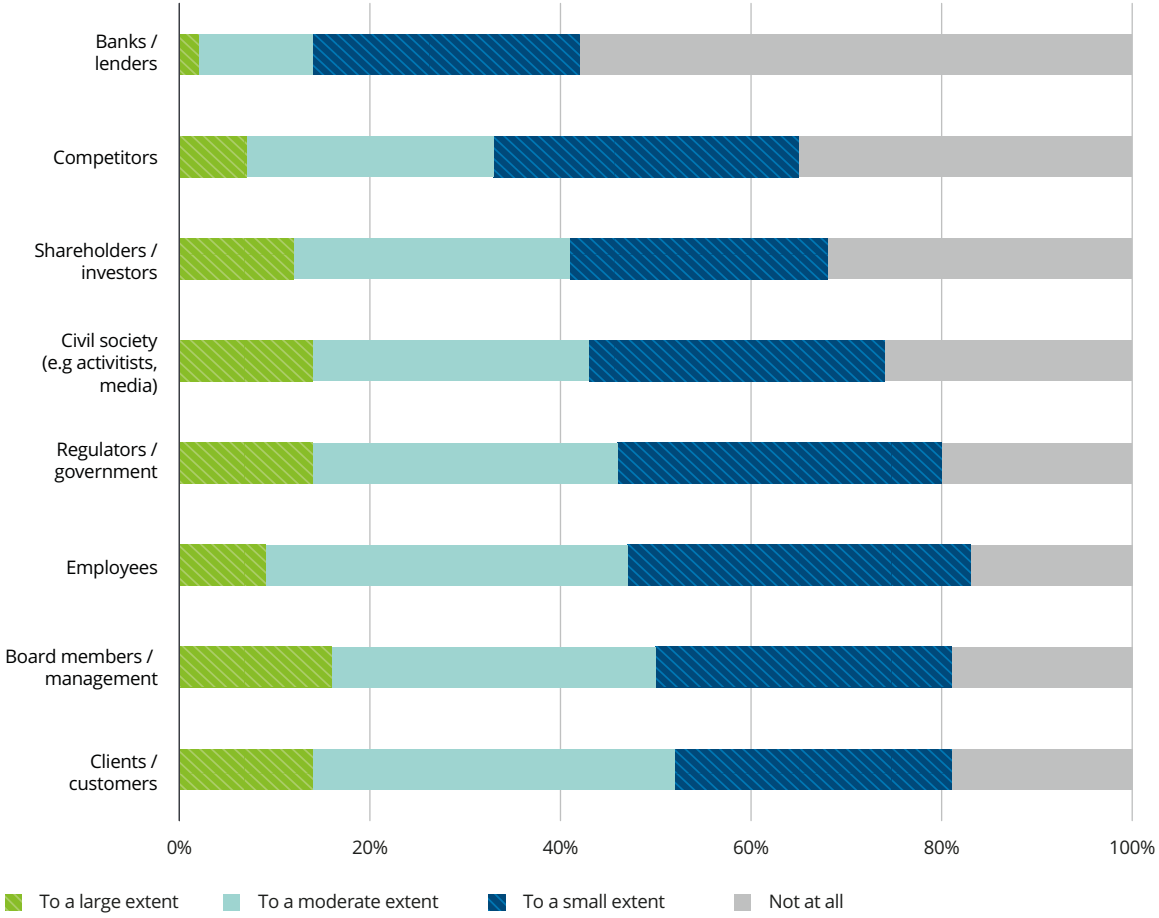
What the results reveal is that the pressure to act on climate change is coming directly from several directions. Clients and customers are the stakeholders named most often as a significant source of pressure but employees also make it into the top three, with 47 per cent of respondents feeling the pressure from them to a moderate or large extent (Chart 11). With skills shortages remaining an important concern (see chart 10), acting on climate could be a differentiator for companies as they seek to attract and retain the talent they need.

More than 60 countries and 100 cities around the world are adopting net-zero carbon emission targets – with the UK and France recently joining Sweden and Norway in the group of countries that have already enshrined the targets into national laws.

Not all companies, however, feel the pressure to act in the same way. About 30 per cent do not feel significant pressure from any stakeholder, while for 19 per cent the pressure comes from one or two stakeholders at most – regulators and civil society, usually. Larger companies (defined as those with annual revenues of €1 billion or more) are more likely to feel the pressure from several sides, with almost two-thirds (61 per cent) of CFOs reporting that they feel the pressure to act from three or more stakeholders and almost 70 per cent under pressure from clients. By contrast, the regulator is the main source of pressure on smaller companies (that is, with annual revenues of up to €100 million).

When it comes to actions taken, most companies turn to increasing their energy efficiency and, in 47 per cent of cases, using more climate-friendly equipment. These measures often benefit from government incentives and offer long-term cost reductions. Fewer companies adopt a more systematic approach and properly assess climate-related risks or include them in their governance processes – although companies feeling the pressure to act on climate change from three or more stakeholders are more likely to be taking these steps.

Chart 11. Pressure to act on climate change felt by companies from different stakeholders.
To what extent does your company feel pressure to act on climate change from the following stakeholders?



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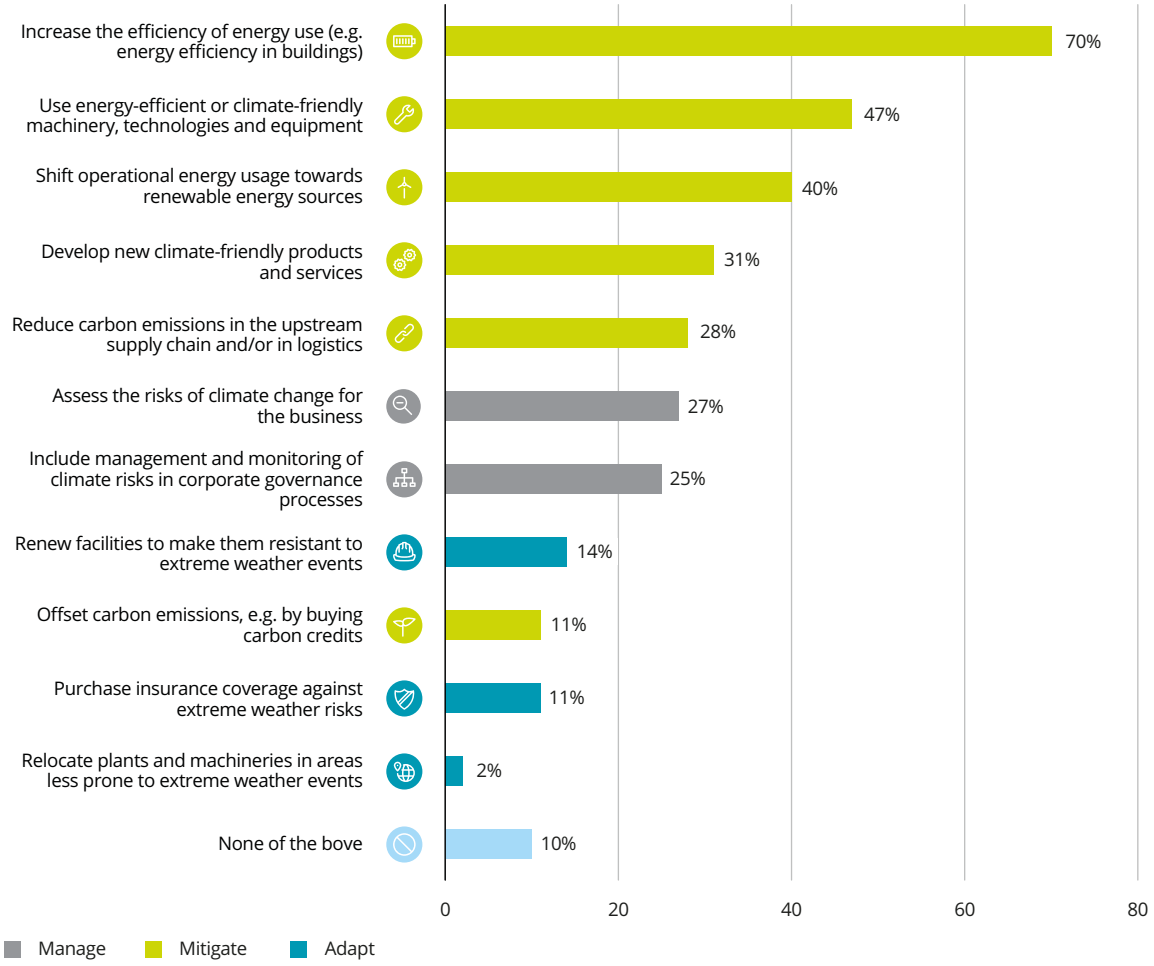
The results also reveal a relationship between the source of pressure to act and the kind of measures put in place. Therefore while 42 per cent of the companies that feel the pressure from their clients to a moderate or a large extent are developing new product or services, only 21 per cent of those who do not feel client pressure do so.

In general, companies appear quite reluctant to engage with other companies within their supply chain to reduce carbon emissions. Only 28 per cent of respondents report doing so. Difficulties coordinating with other companies and probably a lack of financial incentives to do so may be the reason. Finally, very few companies are adopting measures to adapt to and deal with changing climate patterns, such as revamping their facilities or purchasing insurance (Chart 12).

Although companies are feeling the pressure and many are taking action to deal with climate change, about half (51 per cent) have not yet adopted any firm carbon emission targets, while only 8 per cent have targets in line with the Paris agreement and 27 per cent have set their own targets (the remaining 14 per cent are unable to provide an answer).

Chart 12. Measures taken to manage, mitigate or adapt to climate change.
Is your company taking or about to take any of the following measures to manage, mitigate and/or adapt to climate change?



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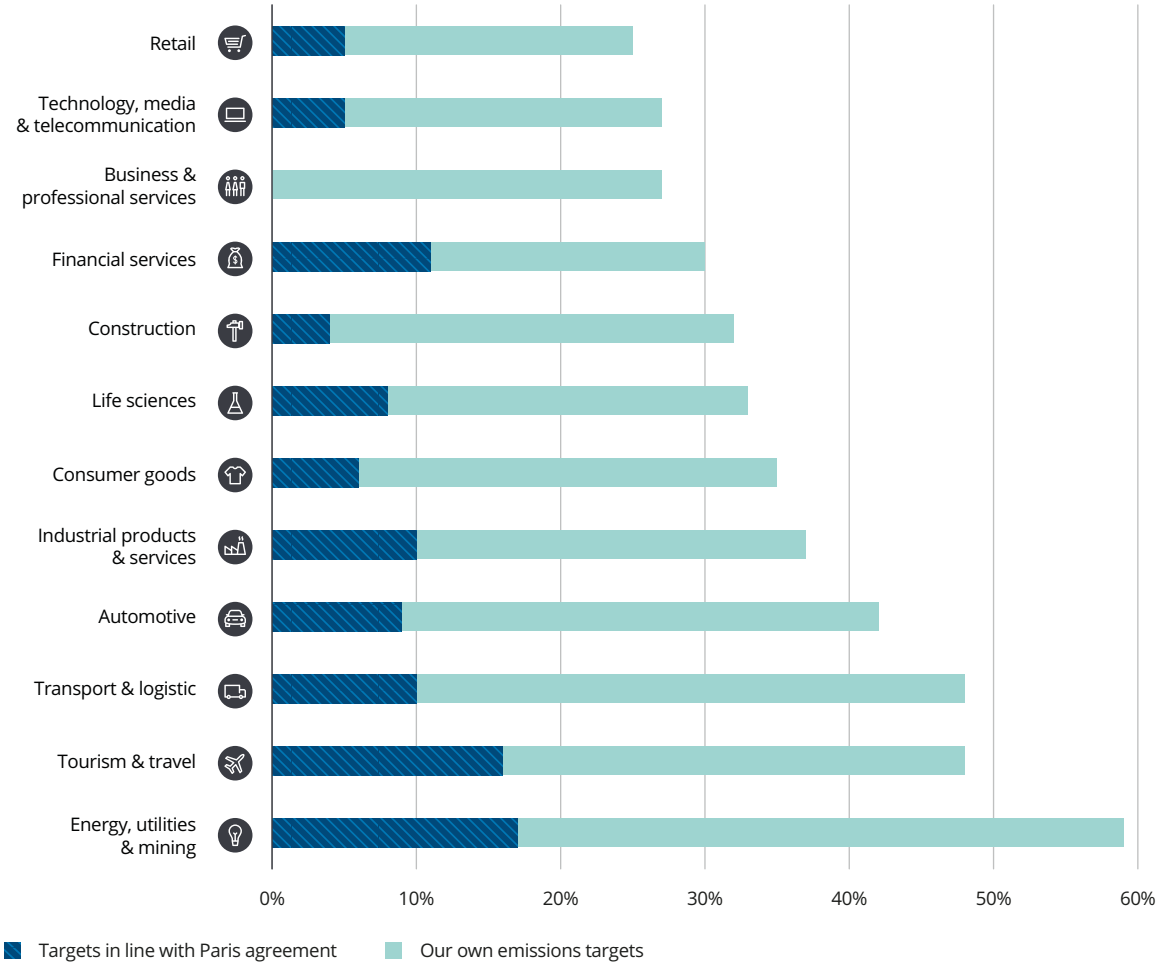
The proportion of companies with some kind of emission targets in place increases when pressure comes from stakeholders. Who these stakeholders are also makes a difference. The share of companies with some kind of emission targets in place increase from 25 per cent among those who do not feel pressure from investors, to 49 per cent among those who do. Also those companies where the pressure is coming from their own management or from the regulator are more likely to have some emission targets in place. Commitment also varies across industries. The energy, utilities and mining sector is the only one in which a majority of CFOs report that they have targets in place (Chart 13).

Taken together the results reveal that companies are hearing the message from their various stakeholders and are reacting. But the actions taken so far seem in the majority of cases to be reactive rather than strategic. The issue of climate change is transforming how consumers, employees and shareholders perceive companies and interact with them. Businesses need not only to manage their potential climate change risks but also include the topic in their strategic plans because doing so will be crucial to maintaining their relationships with their most important stakeholders.

Chart 13. Companies with emissions reduction targets by industry
Has your company put in place emissions reduction targets in line with the Paris agreement?



*To explore the results country by country, please view the interactive graphs at www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey

About the European CFO Survey

About the European CFO survey

The European CFO Survey is part of a global cohort of surveys benchmarking the current and future intentions, sentiment and opinions of Chief Financial Officers in Europe. The survey in its fifth year represents the views of **1,371** CFOs based in 19 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank all participating CFOs for their support in completing this survey. We would also like to thank the CFO Survey Teams in each of the countries that collected the data from local CFOs. All data management was done by Ram Sahu.

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The data

The findings discussed in this report were collected from 1,371 CFOs in September 2019. Some of the charts in the survey show results as an index value (net balance). This is calculated by subtracting the percentage of respondents giving a negative response from the percentage giving a positive response; responses that are neither positive nor negative are deemed to be neutral. Due to rounding, not all percentages shown in the charts will add up to 100.

For further information and a more detailed analysis please visit www.deloitte.com/europeancfosurvey.

To contact us please email us at europeanCFO@deloitte.co.uk.

Sample composition by geographic location

Country	
Germany	11%
Turkey	9%
Spain	8%
Denmark	8%
Switzerland	8%
Norway	7%
United Kingdom	7%
Italy	6%
Sweden	5%
Iceland	5%
Portugal	4%
Luxembourg	4%
Russia	3%
Netherlands	3%
Greece	3%
Belgium	2%
Austria	2%
Poland	2%
Ireland	2%

Sample composition by industry

Industry	
Industrial products & services	14%
Financial services	13%
Retail	9%
Consumer goods	9%
Construction	9%
Energy, utilities and mining	9%
Technology, media & telecommunications	8%
Transport & logistics	5%
Life sciences	4%
Business & professional services	4%
Automotive	4%
Tourism & travel	2%
Others	10%

Sample composition by business size

Annual revenues	
Less than 100 million euro	35%
Between 100 and 999 million euro	44%
1 billion euro and more	21%

Endnotes

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Responsible publisher: Deloitte University EMEA CVBA, with registered office at B-1831 Diegem, Berkenlaan 8b.

Designed and produced by Deloitte CoRe Creative Services, London. 259583