

# The Tradeoff Economy: New Research from CBIZ, The Ohio State University and the National Center for the Middle Market Reveals How Middle Market Leaders Navigate High-Stakes Decisions Amid Uncertainty

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**Research finds that 9 out of 10 leaders who prioritize innovation reported year-over-year revenue growth, with 51% growing by 10% or more**

Cleveland, March 18, 2026 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- CBIZ, Inc. (NYSE: CBZ), a leading national professional services advisor, today released a new report, "[The Tradeoff Economy: How Decision-Making Mindsets Shape Middle Market Performance](#)," developed in partnership with the National Center for the Middle Market (NCMM) and The Ohio State University Fisher College of Business.

According to [NCMM](#), there are nearly 200,000 U.S. middle market businesses that represent one-third of private sector GDP, employing approximately 44.5 million people. These businesses outperformed through the financial crisis (2007–2010 period) by adding 2.2 million jobs across major industry sectors and U.S. geographies, demonstrating their importance to the overall health of the U.S. economy.

"The Tradeoff Economy," based on a survey of 400 U.S. middle market CEOs, CFOs, and COOs, explores how middle market leaders manage the rising number of critical decisions they face to stay competitive in today's complex business landscape. Amid ongoing challenges such as cost pressures, talent shortages, regulatory hurdles, and economic instability, executives must often weigh conflicting priorities—including growth versus profitability and speed versus precision.

The report shows that a leader's approach to these tradeoffs, not just the decisions they make, can greatly impact company performance. This helps explain why similar companies in the same markets often achieve very different outcomes.

"This research emphasizes that middle market leaders constantly face tradeoffs as they aim for growth and margin improvements," said Brad Lakhia, Chief Financial Officer at CBIZ. "Understanding the decision-making mindset behind those choices provides leaders with a clearer framework for managing investments—in technology, artificial intelligence, talent, and innovation—and how to maintain performance amid uncertainty."

## **Key findings from "The Tradeoff Economy"**

- **Four decision-making mindsets shape performance:** disciplined growers, performance protectors, centralized innovators, and decentralized accelerators.
- **Growth remains the primary strategic driver**, but companies vary widely in how they pursue it.
- **The Middle Market is aligned across several foundational tradeoffs:**
  - 78% choose accuracy over speed
  - 75% choose quality over cost
  - 78% prioritize long-term value over short-term gains
- **When cost pressures intensify**, 49% of middle market leaders say they would protect customer service or customer experience, while only 25% would sacrifice it. Innovation investment is more at risk, with 53% saying they would reduce investment in research, development, or innovation.
- **Companies that focus on innovation report stronger growth** and higher confidence in their future performance. Nearly all consider themselves ahead of competitors and have positive outlooks for the next six months.

## **What this means for middle market companies**

The research also highlights several implications for middle market leaders navigating today's economic environment:

- **Cost and margin management remain critical** as companies balance expansion with financial discipline.
- **Talent strategy is becoming a defining differentiator**, from hiring and retention to workforce upskilling.
- **Technology investment is accelerating**, with top-performing companies aggressively digitizing operations.
- **Scenario-based decision-making is increasingly essential** as leaders face more complex and frequent tradeoffs.
- **Strategies must reflect different leadership mindsets**, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

"The data indicates that although no single mindset ensures success in all environments, companies focusing on innovation generally experience stronger growth and higher confidence," said Doug Farren, Executive Director of the National Center for the Middle Market. "We also notice a strong consistency in core priorities—leaders predominantly prioritize accuracy over speed, quality over cost, and long-term value over short-term gains."

Download the full report [here](#).

## **About CBIZ**

CBIZ, Inc. (NYSE: CBZ) is a leading professional services advisor to middle-market businesses nationwide. With industry

knowledge and expertise in accounting, tax, advisory, benefits, insurance, and technology, CBIZ delivers actionable insights to help clients anticipate what is next and discover new ways to accelerate growth. CBIZ has more than 9,500 team members across 23 major markets coast to coast. For more information, visit [www.cbiz.com](http://www.cbiz.com).

### **About the research**

This report is based on a 15-minute self-administered online survey fielded in December 2025 to 400 middle market business leaders and decision-makers from companies with annual revenues between \$10 million and less than \$1 billion. The sample includes respondents from three key industry segments: consumer and industrial products (N=208) construction (N=105), and real estate (N=87). A working research team, including experts from NCMM, Fisher College of Business faculty, CBIZ, and other subject-matter specialists, designed the survey questions.

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