Conclusion

The Santander Global Trade Barometer 2026 points to a business community that remains ambitious despite slower growth, geopolitical instability, inflation and changing trade policy. Rather than turning inward, many companies are looking beyond their domestic markets for new customers, stronger partnerships and additional sources of growth.

Internationally active businesses are among the most confident about the future. While international expansion does not guarantee success, businesses with a broader geographic reach tend to see opportunities across more markets and may be less dependent on conditions in any one economy.

That ambition extends beyond established exporters, creating opportunities both for businesses entering their first overseas market and for experienced international firms seeking to deepen or diversify their activity.

Expansion brings greater challenge as well as opportunity. Businesses must navigate unfamiliar regulation, customs, logistics and trade policy while finding partners they can trust. Because these pressures vary by market, there is no single model for international growth or standard package of support.

Resilience is therefore becoming central to international strategy. Businesses are reviewing where they source, produce and sell, seeking a better balance between global reach and regional proximity. This is not a retreat from trade, but a recalibration of how companies participate in it.

The same principle applies to technology. AI can help businesses identify opportunities, reach customers, manage information and improve efficiency. And businesses are investing in AI as their primary priority.

But realising its value will require the skills, governance, integration and safeguards, needed for its practical and responsible application to clearly defined business needs.

Across these challenges, businesses need support combining financial capability with practical expertise. Regulatory guidance, customs support, local insight and trusted connections can help firms assess opportunities and manage cross-border complexity. That support must reflect each business's market, sector and stage of development.

Santander's international footprint and local knowledge position it to support businesses throughout this journey. By bringing together banking services, specialist insight, technology and connections across markets, Santander can help customers make informed decisions and pursue opportunities with greater confidence.

The outlook is demanding, but the direction of travel is clear. Businesses continue to see international trade as an important route to growth, resilience and diversification. Their success will depend on how effectively they turn that ambition into action: choosing the right markets, building stronger operations and drawing on the expertise and technology needed to navigate a more complex world.