

## Business

# AI pushing firms beyond paper and Excel, but culture still a key driver



Digital transformation in the Gulf has often been defined by systems: new platforms, new modules, new cloud deployments. But walk into the back offices of some of the region's largest conglomerates and you still encounter a very different reality - cartons of receipts, payroll binders stacked in storage, and operational processes quietly held together by Excel.

This isn't negligence. It's a consequence of how Gulf enterprises grew rapidly, horizontally, and through tight-knit human networks that made structure secondary. But today, the non-oil sector accounts for nearly 78% of GCC GDP and much of the region's corporate activity now lies in services, trade, logistics and manpower-intensive industries.

For years, digitisation meant modernising specific functions or replacing legacy systems. But as the region stands on the brink of AI-native enterprise technology, the question has shifted: can organisations transform not just their tools, but their behaviour?

It is still common to see warehouses with boxes of documents going back years. Those records contain institutional memory, but not institutional accessibility. People in the office can't access any of it. It's information, but it's not usable.

A vendor invoice from 2016 may exist, but only in a carton. A payroll structure from 2008

✦ The event is in progress in Dubai.

sits in a binder. Project documentation depends on whoever remembers where it was filed. Excel fills the gaps until it can't.

Abinav Raja, Managing Director at Ramco Systems - a global enterprise software company pushing automation and AI-native platforms into the region's mainstream - describes the starting point bluntly.

"It comes down to making the shift as frictionless and easy as possible," he says. "Many companies know they need to modernise, but because it feels difficult, they avoid it. The business is running fine, so they ask, 'Why should I shift?'"

Excel works until the business scales. After that, it becomes a bottleneck disguised as a solution.

Many Gulf enterprises now want to leapfrog straight to modern, AI-enabled platforms. But the experts caution that readiness is technical as much as it is behavioural.

"We find the real challenge isn't choosing a system," Raja explains. "It's convincing organisations to let go of the comfort they've built around manual processes."

That comfort is powerful. For years, companies relied on the people who "knew" the system rather than on the system itself. Departments built their own templates, their own checks, their own

## DUBAI

But today, the non-oil sector accounts for nearly 78% of GCC GDP and much of the region's corporate activity now lies in services, trade, logistics and manpower-intensive industries

shortcuts. Change disrupts not just the workflow but the identity of the people who built it.

This is why the transformation conversation, at its core, is less about software and more about internal willingness to re-wire long-established habits.

One of the reasons the region has struggled with earlier generations of enterprise systems is structural. Much of the Gulf's economy is service-heavy. Workforce-intensive industries - staffing companies, facilities management, outsourcing providers, consulting firms - run on people, not materials. Traditional ERP systems were not built for these environments.

"A workforce-led business has complexity that manufacturing-style systems cannot capture," says Sandesh Bilagi, Ramco's Chief Operating Officer. "You need to understand deployment, compliance, shift patterns, costing - the whole lifecycle of people operations."

He points to companies across the region managing tens of thousands of contingent workers, often across multiple clients. The scale is enormous, and the administrative burden even more so. The shift to platforms centred on people - what he calls Service Resource Planning (SRP) - rather than inventory reflects the economic reality of the Gulf more accurately than earlier models ever did.

The new frontier, of course, is AI. Enterprise leaders want systems that can read documents, pre-configure policies, answer queries conversationally and reconcile data across departments. The appetite is high; the caution is equally strong.

"In our environment, the AI lives where the customer lives," Raja says. "It doesn't cross borders, and it doesn't mix between clients. So for example, the AI, the same AI will not work for three core customers simultaneously and there's no risk of data being pulled from one tenant to the other."

The Gulf's insistence on locally hosted, tenant-isolated AI is reshaping how platforms evolve. But it also challenges adoption in a healthy way - forcing enterprises to anchor intelligence in governance, not convenience. Raja believes the shift will take time, but not for lack of capability. "The technology is ready," he says. "Organisations are still deciding how ready they are."

"Today's AI performs like a junior developer," Raja says. "You still need senior oversight. AI can help you write faster, but it cannot sign off."

Ramco's own teams have seen productivity rise by 30-40% after using AI tools. What used to take hours now takes minutes. But senior architecture, security and interpretation remain human responsibilities. As Sandesh puts it, "AI removes grunt work. It doesn't remove judgment."

Staff Reporter, Gulf Today