



NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
THE MIDDLE MARKET

# 2Q | 2020

## MIDDLE MARKET INDICATOR

**In Unprecedented Times,  
the Middle Market Strikes  
a Cautious Path Forward**

IN COLLABORATION WITH



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
FISHER COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

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# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced conditions never before seen in the eight-year history of the Middle Market Indicator (MMI). Fewer companies than ever say their past-year performance has improved: 37%, compared to the historical MMI average of 63%. Twenty-five percent say performance has deteriorated, nearly double the worst rate on record, reached during the 2012 Greek bailout and fiscal cliff debate. The proportion of executives expressing confidence in the local economy fell to a record low. Similarly, the proportion confident in the national economy has fallen to a level not observed since 2013.

Average past-year revenues declined by 3.7%, the first time the middle market has reported a negative number for year-over-year growth, and more than 10 percentage points below the historical average growth rate of 6.6%. About two out of five firms (42%) reported lower revenues, compared to 13% for the year ending 4Q 2019. The employment growth rate was also negative, dropping to -4.4%, meaning the middle market shed jobs like the rest of the economy. This also is the first time the middle market has failed to add jobs. Three-quarters of executives say their workforce size either decreased (32%) or remained the same (43%) in the 12 months ending 2Q 2020.

Many companies have put investment plans on hold. Asked what they would do with an extra dollar in 4Q 2019, 70% said they would put the money immediately to work, with the rest saying they would put it aside either as a cushion or to fund future investments. Today that number has fallen to 52%, the second lowest figure ever. Two-thirds of these savers would hold it as cash, in a rainy-day fund, while just one-third would hold it for future investments. For those who would put the money to work for their business, the top investment destination is information technology. The proportion forging ahead with expansion plans has dropped. In the next 12 months 37% say they will enter new markets, compared to 50% in 4Q 2019. Thirteen percent expect to build a new facility, versus 24% at the end of 2019.

Despite the changing business climate, there have been only minor shifts in the middle market's core challenges. The pursuit of growth and the need for talent continue to act as the most pressing issues for executives. The economy is a growing challenge, jumping ahead of costs and competition in this report. The proportion of executives who rate cost as a top near-term external challenge fell by 11 percentage points, to 6%.

All that said, the middle market sees better times ahead. Executives overwhelmingly believe sales in the next three months will increase from their June levels. This has lifted the Short Term Index<sup>1</sup> —which had plummeted in March—back to its December 2019 level, although the magnitude of the expected rebound is unclear. Looking ahead a full 12 months, revenue and employment growth projections are far below what they were when last year ended. The middle market anticipates 2.0% revenue growth, the lowest forecast on record and substantially below average actual revenue growth of 6.6% since 2012. In December, companies predicted 4.9% revenue growth. Executives expect employment to shrink by 0.2% in the 12 months ahead, the MMI's first negative employment projection; but if it holds true, it means that the middle market expects to stanch the job losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is worth noting that the data in this survey were collected in the first two weeks of June 2020. At that time, American states had begun to reopen for business, some widely, some more cautiously. New COVID-19 cases had fallen in the hard-hit Northeast, but the surge in cases in the South and West had not yet become evident. Considerable uncertainty remains. Companies' plans and performance will depend on how the pandemic evolves, and on the ability of society and science to contain it. Successful prevention, mitigation, or treatment would support growth and employment, but even under the best circumstances it will take time for the middle market to recover.

<sup>1</sup> The Short Term Middle Market Index reflects leaders' expectations for sales, demand, and overall business conditions for the three months ahead.

## Middle Market Indicator

*from the National Center for the Middle Market*

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### *How is the research conducted?*

The MMI surveys 1,000 CEOs, CFOs, and other C-suite executives of America's middle market companies on key indicators of past and future performance in revenues, employment, and allocation of cash. The survey also reports middle market company confidence in the global, U.S., and local economies and identifies key business challenge areas. The survey was designed to accurately reflect the nearly 200,000 U.S. businesses with revenues between \$10MM and \$1B, the lower and upper limits on middle market annual revenue. The survey is designed and managed by the National Center for the Middle Market. This quarter's survey was fielded between June 1–12, 2020.



## Revenue Growth

*Executives predict modest growth*

Middle market revenues have declined sharply since the pandemic began. Following year-over-year growth of 7.5% in 4Q 2019, revenues shrank by 3.7% in 2Q 2020. This 11.2 percentage-point change in the growth rate is the largest since the MMI was launched. More companies report a revenue drop (42%) than a rise (38%), another first. In 4Q 2019, revenues rose for 72% and fell for 13%. The smallest firms (revenues of \$10 million to \$50 million) experienced the steepest contraction, at -5.9%, compared to 8% growth in 4Q 2019. Core firms (revenues of \$50MM to \$100MM) produced 0.7% growth. Revenues for the largest companies (revenues of \$100MM to \$1B) shrank by 1.8%.

The middle market anticipates 2.0% growth in the next 12 months. Projections were strongest for core companies (3.9%) with 50% expecting growth and 15% declining revenue. Larger companies predict 2.6% growth, with 37% foreseeing a rise and 19% a decline. Similarly, nearly twice as many smaller businesses see revenues climbing (41%) versus falling (21%), although they expect slower growth (1.1%).

2Q'20  
**38%**

of middle market companies reported positive revenue growth.

2Q'19  
**77%**

### PAST 12 MO.

#### MIDDLE MARKET

2Q'20

**-3.7%**

4Q'19 **7.5%** 2Q'19 **8.5%**

### NEXT 12 MO.

2Q'20

**2.0%**

4Q'19 **4.9%** 2Q'19 **5.4%**

### PAST 12 MO.

#### S&P 500

2Q'20

**-13.9%\***

4Q'19 **4.3%** 2Q'19 **5.2%**



## Employment Growth

*Employment will continue to decline, although marginally*

Employment declined by 4.4% in the year ending June 2020, compared to 5.0% growth in 4Q and 4.1% in 3Q 2019. The retraction marks the worst performance in the MMI's history. In comparison, U.S. unemployment rose from 3.6% in January to 11.1% in June. Nearly a third of middle market companies reduced employment, compared to 14% in 4Q 2019. The number of companies increasing employment dropped from 48% to 24%. Those increasing employment by 10% or more fell from 27% to 12%.

Core companies report the smallest reduction (-0.6%) followed by large (-3.6%) and small companies (-5.9%). The declines have been steepest in wholesale trade (-11.6%) and retail trade (-5.5%). The only sector registering an increase is financial services (1.3%).

For the coming 12 months, 25% of firms expect employment to expand, down from 42% in 4Q 2019. Twenty-one percent expect payrolls to continue shrinking. Overall, companies believe employment will fall by 0.2% in the coming year, compared to a 4Q 2019 projection of 3.5% growth.

2Q'20  
**24%**

of middle market companies added jobs.

2Q'19  
**55%**

### PAST 12 MO.

#### MIDDLE MARKET

2Q'20

**-4.4%**

4Q'19 **5.0%** 2Q'19 **6.4%**

### NEXT 12 MO.

2Q'20

**-0.2%**

4Q'19 **3.5%** 2Q'19 **4.8%**

### LARGE CORP.

#### ADP (Past 12 Mo.)

2Q'20

**-10.0%**

4Q'19 **2.3%** 2Q'19 **2.3%**

### SMALL BUS.

2Q'20

**-9.1%**

4Q'19 **0.7%** 2Q'19 **1.0%**

\*2Q numbers include only companies who have reported 2Q earnings results. Numbers change as more businesses report financial results.

## KEY FINDINGS



## Economic Confidence

*Confidence falls sharply*

During 2019, economic confidence trended downward slightly, from high levels recorded in 2018. In 2Q 2020, confidence declined the most since the launch of the MMI. Confidence in the global, national, and local economies fell at least 15 percentage points below their five-year averages. Although local confidence has been a bedrock feature of the middle market, this quarter the proportion of executives saying they are at least somewhat confident in the local economy fell by 25 percentage points, from 89% to an historic low of 64%. There appear to be few regional differences in the degree of confidence in the local economy; in fact, companies in the Northeast, where COVID-19 had hit hardest

during the time of this survey, had slightly greater local-economic confidence than companies in the South, Midwest, or West.

Although confidence in the global and U.S. economies declined, these figures have not reached the lows recorded in 2012. The percentage of leaders saying that they are at least somewhat confident in the U.S. economy dropped to 57%, from 83% in 4Q 2019. For the global economy, the rate fell from 68% in 4Q 2019 to 49%. That number has been declining since the onset of the trade wars in 2018. This report marks the first time since 2015 that it has dropped below 50%.

## GLOBAL ECONOMY

2Q'20



**49%**

CONFIDENT /  
SOMEWHAT CONFIDENT

4Q'19 **68%** 2Q'19 **69%**

## NATIONAL ECONOMY



**57%**

CONFIDENT /  
SOMEWHAT CONFIDENT

4Q'19 **83%** 2Q'19 **82%**

## LOCAL ECONOMY



**64%**

CONFIDENT /  
SOMEWHAT CONFIDENT

4Q'19 **89%** 2Q'19 **89%**



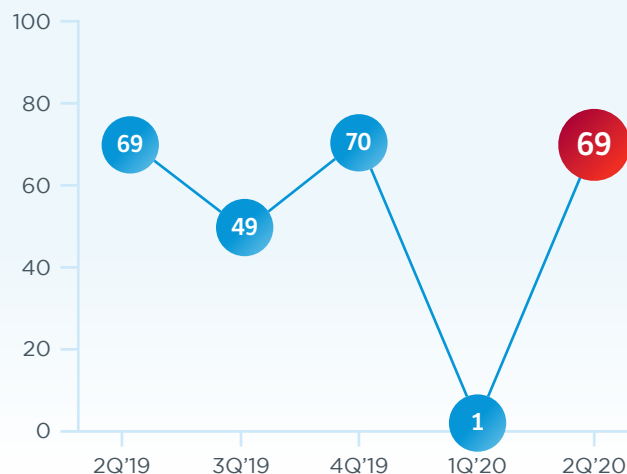
## Short Term Index

*Three-month outlook improves*

The Short Term Index gauges leaders' expectations for sales, demand, and overall business conditions for the three months ahead. Currently, the Index is at 69, close to its level in 4Q 2019 (70) and above 3Q 2019 (49). This quarter's score is supported primarily by expectations for improved demand and sales in the quarter ahead. Nearly three times as many respondents expect both stronger demand (46%, versus 16% who expect it to be weaker) and increased sales (47% versus 17%). Executives anticipating a better business climate (39%) outstripped those who foresee a less favorable one (22%) by nearly two-to-one.

In "COVID-19 and the Middle Market," a survey of 260 executives conducted in March 2020, the Short Term Index declined to 1, the lowest level ever. The rise this quarter means executives expect better conditions in 3Q than in 2Q, when lockdowns severely restricted business. However, the Index does not measure the magnitude of any increase (or any decline); it simply shows the direction in which sales, demand, and overall conditions will move.

## PAST 12 MONTHS



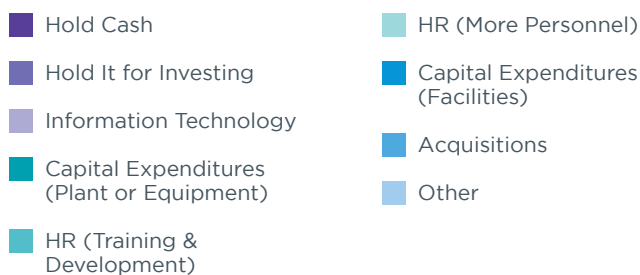
Short Term Index is calculated by taking expected net positive change in business climate plus expected net positive change in demand plus expected net positive change in sales over the next 3 months.



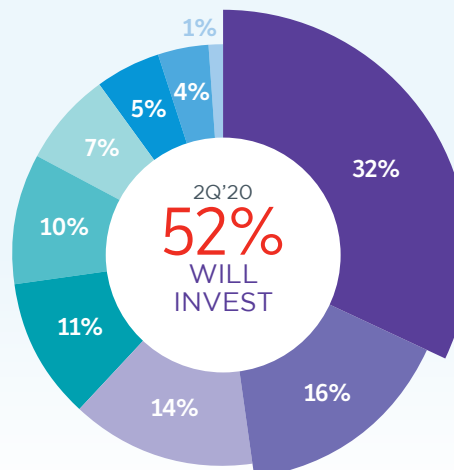
## Capital Investment

### Caution remains high

Middle market executives are increasingly cautious, preferring to hold cash versus investing it back into the business. If given an extra dollar, 70% of middle market executives in 4Q 2019 said they would put it to work for their business, just one percentage point below the 2018 all-time high. This quarter, amid high uncertainty, only 52% are willing to put that money to work immediately, one percentage point from the low recorded in 2Q 2012. The top destination for such investment is information technology, followed by new plant or equipment. Of the 48% who said they would save the money, two-thirds would hold more cash while the other third would hold it in anticipation of future investments.



### ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT ALLOCATION



## Key Challenges

### Economic concerns rise as cost worries fall

The top short-term internal challenges for the middle market continue to be core business issues, such as boosting sales and revenue. The proportion of executives citing these has remained largely flat since early 2019. Talent follows at 54%, a three-percentage point drop since 4Q 2019. For the longer term, talent has been the most frequently cited top challenge since 2017, and it remains so today.

The proportion of executives concerned about costs fell to an all-time low for both the short (13%) and longer term (11%). Forty-one percent say

COVID-19 is among the top three challenges in the short term, but only 24% believe it will rank that high over the next 12 months.

For external challenges over the next quarter and year, other than COVID-19, business and government issues remain the most common concerns. The state of the economy moved ahead of both costs and competition on the list of challenges. This is the first time since 2017 that the economy has not ranked lowest among short-term concerns.

### SHORT TERM CHALLENGES (Next 3 months)

#### INTERNAL CHALLENGES

1. BUSINESS	59%
2. TALENT MANAGEMENT	54%
3. COVID-19	41%

#### EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

1. COVID-19	38%
2. BUSINESS	37%
3. GOVERNMENT	21%
4. ECONOMY	17%
5. COMPETITION	13%

### LONG TERM CHALLENGES (Next 12 months)

#### INTERNAL CHALLENGES

1. TALENT MANAGEMENT	52%
2. BUSINESS	42%
3. COSTS	11%

#### EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

1. BUSINESS	35%
2. COVID-19	24%
3. GOVERNMENT	22%
4. ECONOMY	15%
5. TALENT MANAGEMENT	12%

## KEY FINDINGS

## Spotlight

### Caring for the Caregivers

No industry has been more essential in the last six months than healthcare, a category that includes hospitals, medical practices, pharmaceuticals, and other life-sciences companies.

While essential, middle market healthcare businesses have been very negatively affected by the pandemic. Revenue fell more sharply for retailers and wholesalers, unsurprisingly due to lockdowns; but healthcare came in next worst and its drop was steeper than retail's. For healthcare, the past year revenue growth rate plummeted 11.5 points, from 7.9% in December to -3.6%. (Retail fell 10.6 points.) The industry forecasts growth of 1.4% over the next 12 months, below the overall middle market's 2.0% prediction.

Above and beyond the revenue challenges, healthcare companies face daunting management and strategic issues. By a substantial margin, healthcare executives are most likely to predict needing to make substantial and long-lasting changes in how they operate and run their businesses for the safety of employees and customers. And pretty much across the board, healthcare executives are most likely to say that the next six months will bring problems like delayed investments, staff cuts, general disruption, supply shortages, cash crunches, and the need to impose and endure significant restructuring.

## Likelihood of Business Impact over the Next Six Months

*Percentage of companies responding that impact is extremely or very likely*

	TOTAL MIDDLE MARKET	BUSINESS SERVICES	MANUFACTURING	WHOLE-SALE TRADE	RETAIL TRADE	CONSTRUCTION	FINANCIAL SERVICES	TECHNOLOGY*	HEALTHCARE
DELAYING PLANNED INVESTMENTS	39%	43%	29%	27%	44%	30%	37%	27%	54%
DISRUPTION OF WORK	38%	45%	26%	45%	34%	20%	32%	40%	48%
LAYOFFS	32%	34%	23%	31%	32%	22%	27%	27%	42%
RAW MATERIALS/SUPPLIES SHORTAGES	25%	21%	28%	36%	19%	20%	11%	25%	34%
CORPORATE RESTRUCTURING	22%	23%	15%	26%	22%	17%	16%	21%	30%
CASH PROBLEMS	21%	23%	18%	16%	20%	14%	12%	21%	35%

\*Includes companies also represented in other industries, e.g., computer manufacturers, IT services, healthtech, fintech.

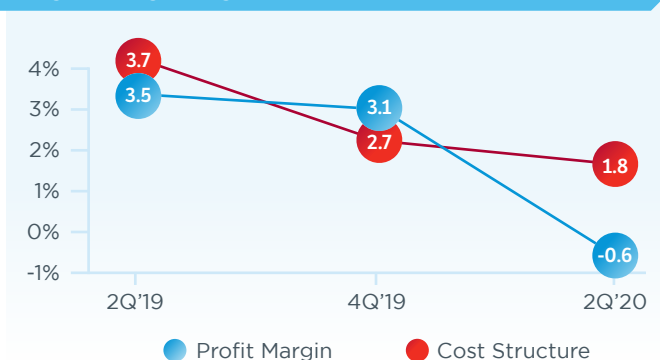
## Profit Margins & Cost Structure

### *Margins dip despite lower costs*

Over the next 12 months, an equal percentage of companies (42%) believe that their costs will rise or stay the same. The average increase is 1.8%, down from 2.7% in 4Q 2019. This increase, the lowest since 2017, is consistent with the middle market's declining concern over costs.

Despite the modest rise in costs, middle market executives expect profit margins to shrink by about 0.6% in the coming year, presumably because of lower revenues. A greater proportion of core companies (37%) expect margins to increase, compared to smaller (35%) and larger (32%) firms.

### PAST 12 MONTHS



*Percentages show changes in the cost structure and profit margin, not absolute percentages.*



# Perspectives

## From “What Happened?” to “Now What?”

Six months ago, as 2020 began, cautious optimism reigned in the middle market. Growth forecasts, expected hiring, and economic confidence were high, although trending slightly lower compared to the robust performance and glowing optimism of the last half of the decade that was ending. The long expansion seemed long in the tooth, but it was still expanding.

Then—boom.

When we talked to middle market executives in March, two weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic and as much of business locked down, 25% feared a “catastrophic” impact on their business. Three out of four—76%—said “ongoing uncertainty” was one of their top three challenges, followed closely by “continuity of operations.” The great economist John Maynard Keynes described uncertainty this way: “About [uncertain] matters there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. We simply do not know. Nevertheless, the necessity for action and for decision compels us as practical men to do our best to overlook this awkward fact.”

*We simply do not know:* That is where the middle market found itself in March. Like someone who had fallen into a gully, the middle market first asked, “What happened?” and moved its limbs to see if anything was broken.

Three months later, one out of eight expect catastrophe—a better number, but still a bad one. Executives still find themselves facing uncertainty (according to 66% in our June COVID-19 report) but they are turning to *the necessity for action and decision*. Executives have gone from reaction to reality. What first? What next? What then? The answer seems to be people and customers first. Get them back and feeling safe. We’ll work it out from there.

## A Hazy Outlook

It is too early to forecast the timing and pace of recovery, or how business will look and feel next quarter, next year, or five years from now. No sooner was this survey completed than COVID-19 cases began to surge in the West and South, where the disease had been relatively quiescent. But in the fog of the future we can discern some ways in which middle market companies—historically the most dynamic and fastest-growing part of the economy—will shape their future.

One is the overall resilience of middle market companies. Though economic confidence is at or near record-low levels, just 17% of executives expect the next quarter’s sales to be down; their estimation of underlying demand for their offerings is essentially unchanged for the last year and a half. Overall, companies expect that the road out of the gully may be a long one, but it leads upward. They also, generally, have the ability to absorb a punch (more than small business) and the agility to respond quickly to an opportunity (more than big business). Tempering this optimism: Just 38% say getting access to the capital they need is somewhat or very easy, while 20% say it is somewhat or very hard, a two-to-one ratio; the corresponding numbers six months ago were 53% and 14%, nearly four-to-one.

Second, the next few months will favor those who prepared beforehand. Forty-seven percent of middle market companies saying they have easy access to capital also say that the impact of the pandemic has been low. Companies with an “excellent” or “very good” long-term growth strategy in place are almost half again as likely to have had a low impact as those less planful. Similarly, companies that give themselves high marks for retaining talented employees are much less likely to say the pandemic hit them hard than companies less attentive to their human capital. The same holds true for companies that invest sufficiently for the future. As companies grow, processes such as planning become increasingly important, a phenomenon we documented during the long expansion.

These capabilities will make for an easier road through the challenging times ahead. The middle market as a whole sees growth of 2.0% in the next 12 months. Those confident in their ability to get capital foresee growth of 6%, while companies that invest sufficiently expect 5.7% growth. The strong strategic planners see 5% growth, and talent-keepers see 4.7% growth.

Third, many executives intend to use forthcoming months not just to recover, but to change. The impact of the pandemic on digital transformation efforts has been slightly more positive than negative: 27% cite a positive impact, 25% a negative. (For companies in business services, 36% see a positive impact; in healthcare, 34%.) This contrasts to largely negative impacts in areas such as capital spending (16% positive, 42% negative) and growth initiatives (21% positive, 52% negative.) It is often said that a crisis can accelerate trends that already exist. COVID-19’s effect on digital transformation appears to be an example.



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The National Center for the Middle Market is the leading source of knowledge, leadership, and innovative research focused on the U.S. Middle Market economy. The Center provides critical data, analysis, insights, and perspectives to help accelerate growth, increase competitiveness, and create jobs for companies, policymakers, and other key stakeholders in this sector. Stay connected to the Center by contacting [middlemarketcenter@fisher.osu.edu](mailto:middlemarketcenter@fisher.osu.edu).



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FISHER COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

From business as usual to business unusual, Fisher College of Business prepares students to go beyond and make an immediate impact in their careers through top-ranked programs, distinguished faculty and a vast network of partnerships that reaches from the surrounding business community to multinationals, nonprofits and startups across the globe. Our students are uniquely prepared and highly sought, leveraging Fisher's rigorous, experiential learning environment with the resources of Ohio State, a premiere research university with 500,000 proud Buckeye alumni.

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THE MIDDLE MARKET

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**Despite Continued Revenue and  
Employment Declines, Executives  
Project a Return to Growth**

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# Executive Summary

Nine months into managing through the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty has lessened for middle market executives. Still, the negative impacts of the global crisis on this critical economic segment persist. Just 40% of companies perceive overall company performance as better today than one year ago—the second lowest number ever recorded by the *Middle Market Indicator* and just a minor improvement over the all-time low, 37%, recorded six months ago. Perhaps more telling, more than a quarter of firms (28%) believe performance has deteriorated over the course of the year, up from 25% in mid 2020.

Declining year-over-year revenue and employment are key factors driving these weak perceptions of overall company performance. On average, middle market gross revenues are down by 1.2% for the past 12 months with nearly two out of every five companies reporting revenue decline. Employment declined 2.2% during 2020 with approximately a third of companies reducing the size of their staff. The proportion of companies that introduced new products or services over the past 12 months and/or that expanded into new markets continued to decline as well while the number taking on new debt increased.

As middle market leaders look toward the new year, sentiment is more positive. It's important to note that, while still negative, the rates of both year-over-year revenue and employment decline have eased since six months ago. And projections for future growth rates have improved, indicating that recovery may be on the horizon. Overall, executives do believe the middle market will experience positive, if modest, revenue and employment growth in 2021. The proportion of firms expecting to expand domestically in 2021 along with the proportion intending to open a new plant or facility are up from six months ago. But not all companies

will share in this forthcoming growth story. Just 44% of all middle market business leaders say they expect to increase revenues in 2021 while 33% expect to create new jobs. Service companies, including business, professional, and technology services organizations, have the strongest predictions for the year ahead.

These service companies share some of the strongest economic confidence levels as well. Across the middle market, confidence appears to be recovering to some degree after plummeting sharply in mid 2020. Global and national confidence levels in particular showed significant increases over the past six months.

Still, many middle market leaders remain cautious when it comes to their own assets. Two out of five executives would hold on to an extra dollar as opposed to investing it. The majority of these savers would hold onto cash instead of earmarking it for future investments. The investors, however, are most interested in information technology, perhaps out of necessity as they continue to look for ways for employees to work remotely.

As middle market companies continue to adapt to doing business in the COVID-19 environment, finding ways to increase sales, respond to fluctuations in demand, and achieve revenue and growth goals will be the major challenges consuming leaders' time and attention. Indeed, these core business issues surpassed talent management concerns as the number one internal business challenge for the first time in more than five years, and they are shared across industries and middle market businesses of all sizes.

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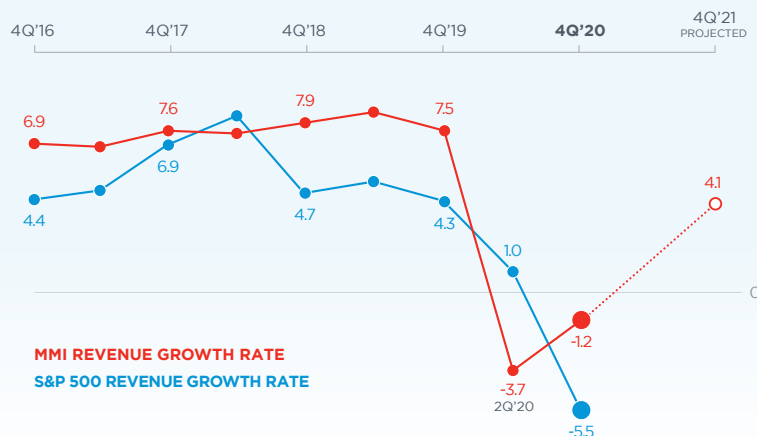
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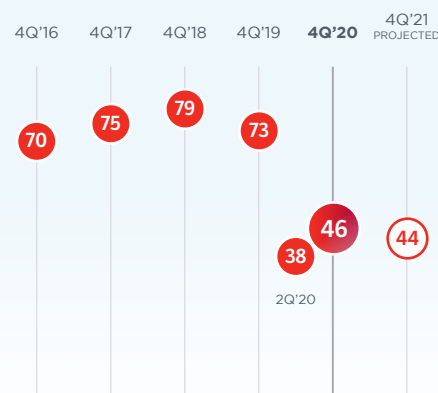
## Revenue

Year-over-year top line revenues for the middle market declined by 1.2% with fewer than half of companies reporting growth. Overall revenue growth is projected for 2021 with 44% of firms expecting to increase sales.

Past, current, and projected revenue growth rates for the middle market and the S&P 500 (%)



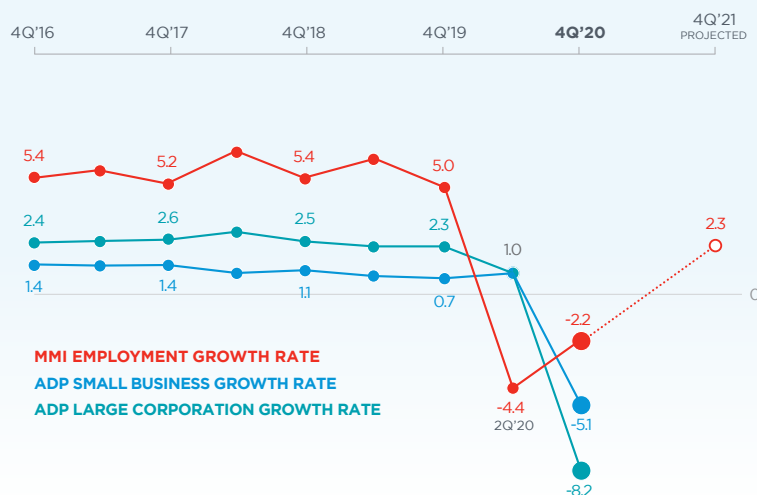
% of middle market companies reporting/projecting year-over-year revenue growth



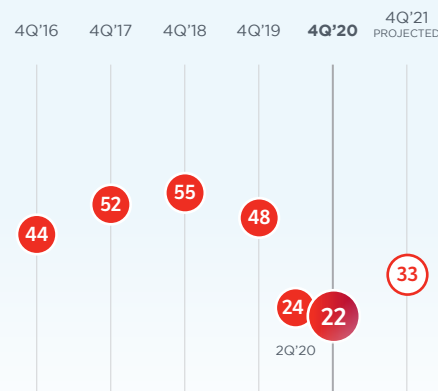
## Employment

Year-over-year middle market employment declined by 2.2% with just 22% of companies adding new jobs. A third of firms expect to increase the size of their workforce in 2021, driving positive employment growth for the middle market overall.

Past, current, and projected employment growth rates for middle market, small, and large companies (%)



% of middle market companies reporting/projecting year-over-year employment growth



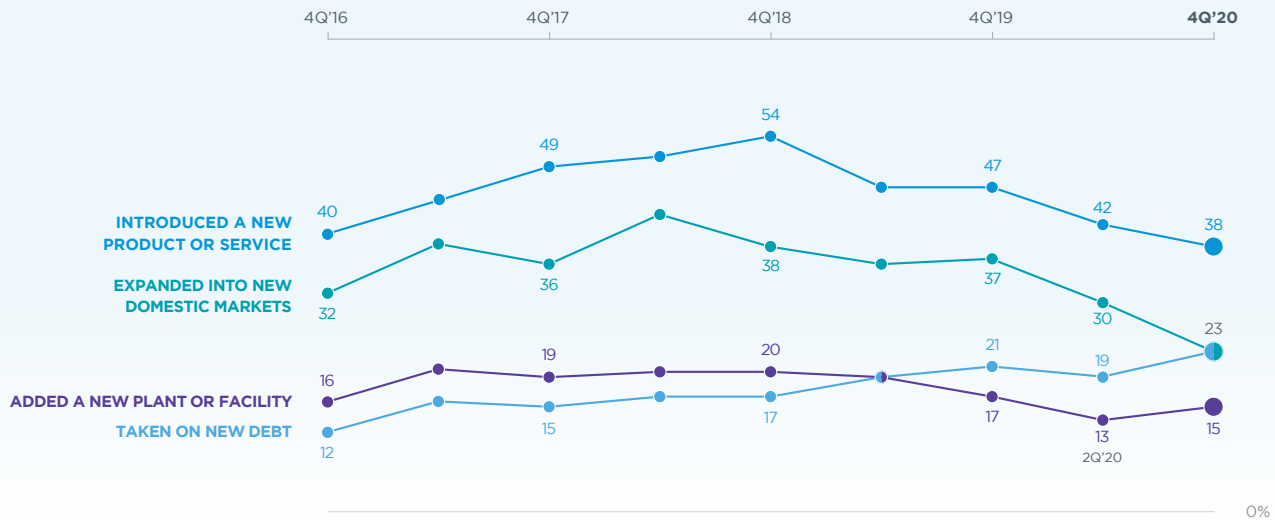
## KEY FINDINGS



## Expansion

*Expansion activity decreased in 2020 while more companies took on new debt.*

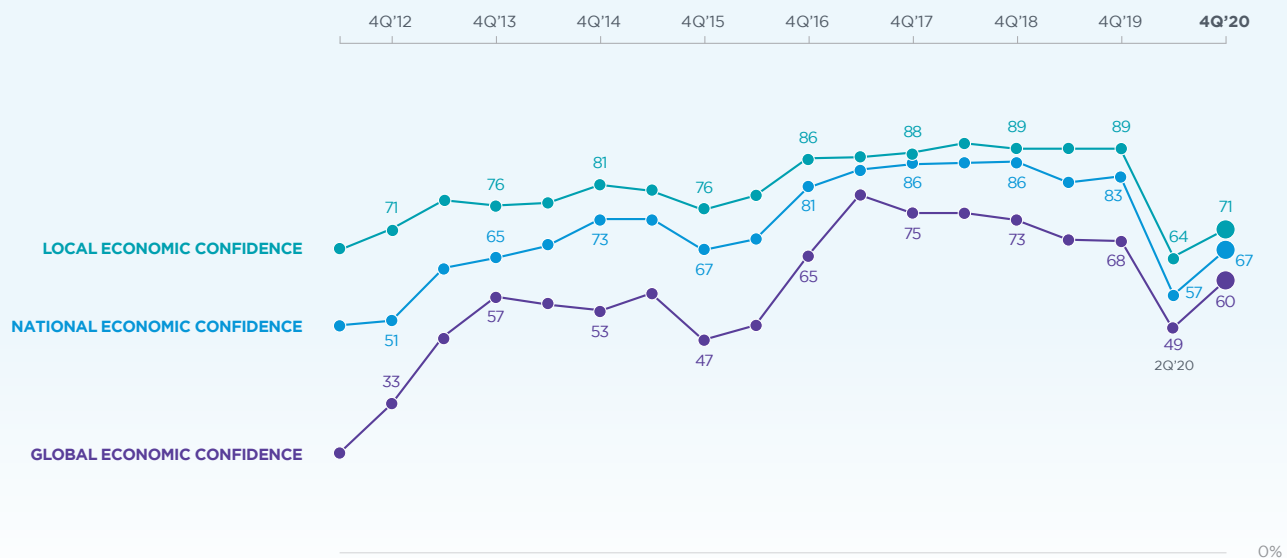
% of middle market companies engaging in expansion activities over the past 12 months



## Economic Confidence

*Confidence levels begin to rise after plummeting in mid 2020.*

% of middle market leaders expressing confidence in the global, national, and local economies

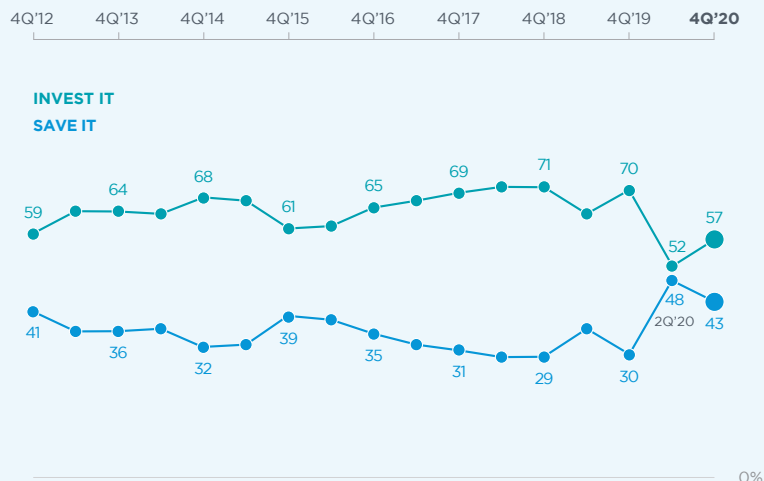




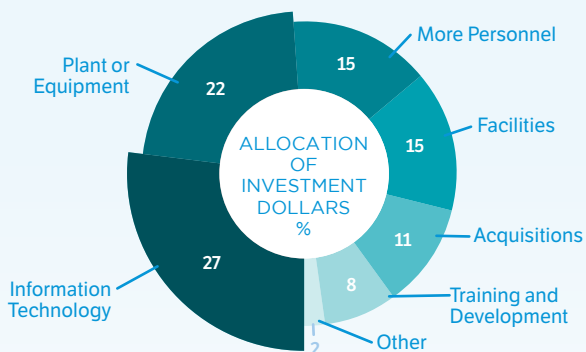
## Capital Investment

*Appetites remain conservative with just 57% of leaders willing to invest extra cash.*

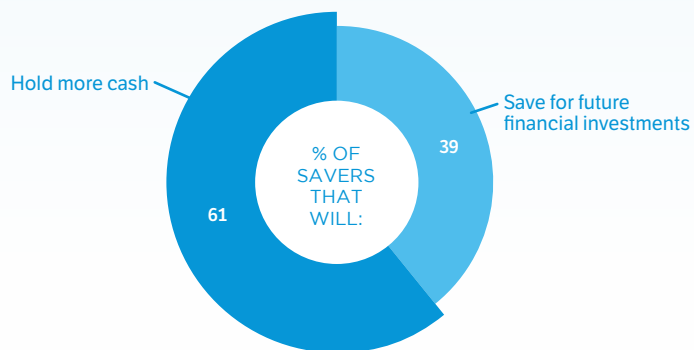
% of middle market executives that would invest vs. save an extra dollar



Information technology is the top destination for investment dollars followed by capital expenditures.



Most savers would hold cash indefinitely.



## Key Challenges

*Executives struggle most with maintaining growth and the ongoing impacts of the pandemic.*

% of middle market leaders citing an issue as a key challenge over the next 12 months

### INTERNAL CHALLENGES

- |                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 1. CORE BUSINESS ISSUES* | 61% |
| 2. TALENT MANAGEMENT     | 50% |
| 3. COVID-19              | 38% |
| 4. COSTS                 | 20% |

### EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

- |                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 1. COVID-19              | 37% |
| 2. CORE BUSINESS ISSUES* | 29% |
| 3. GOVERNMENT            | 21% |
| 4. ECONOMY               | 17% |

\*Core business issues include maintaining revenue and sales growth, ensuring customer satisfaction/retention, and IT/technology challenges.



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