



The 2026 guide to starting a business in Dubai: Key trends global SMEs must know

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In Dubai, we do not wait
for change, we make it.
We transform dreams into
a reality that speaks the
language of leadership.

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President,
Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai



Emirates NBD Research's Dubai Economics Outlook for December 2025 forecasts that the city's GDP will grow by 4.5% in 2026. This projection matches the estimated growth for 2025 and exceeds the global averages reported by the International Monetary Fund. This outlook stresses the strategic rationale for starting a business in Dubai in 2026, backed by strong public- and private-sector fundamentals.

Dubai's economy particularly showed steady growth in 2025. According to the Dubai Data and Statistics Establishment, GDP increased by 4.4% in the first half of the year, reaching AED 241 billion. In the second quarter alone, GDP rose by 4.7%, amounting to AED 122 billion. Business sentiment remained optimistic, as indicated by the S&P Global Dubai Purchasing Managers' Index, which consistently stayed above the 50-mark expansion threshold in late 2025. This trend suggests rising new orders and increased confidence in the private sector.

As such, this e-book breaks down how these economic strengths translate into real opportunities in 2026. It covers changes in capital flows, important innovations, major events that encourage deals and partnerships, and the fast-growing sectors shaping Dubai's future. The content should give you a clear, fact-based guide to succeed in the evolving and lucrative business environment of Dubai this year.



Part I

Growth of global wealth and institutional capital in Dubai





Dubai is a leading hub for high-net-worth individuals, ranked among the top destinations for the wealthy alongside New York, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Savills' Spotlight on Wealth Trends specifically cites the emirate's balanced performance across business conditions, family suitability, and long-term wealth legacy. As of mid-2025, the city is home to about 86,000 millionaires and manages over USD 1 trillion in liquid investable wealth, fortifying its financial centre — thereby making doing business in Dubai attractive to global investors.

A cornerstone of this ecosystem is the DIFC Family Wealth Centre, the region's largest family-office platform, with over 1,250 family-related entities and more than 600 specialised partners managing USD 1.2 trillion in global assets. This institutionalised approach to private wealth is central to Dubai's economic integration and business appeal.

Key trends driving Dubai's financial growth include:

1. Institutionalised wealth

Dubai's appeal goes beyond lifestyle migration and includes structured wealth management. DIFC's legal and regulatory framework, which follows common law principles, lets families and business leaders set up lasting structures that combine capital, governance, and investment strategy. This depth explains why opening a business in Dubai increasingly coincides with setting up family offices, foundations and holding companies under one jurisdiction. As a result, capital remains, grows, and is reinvested locally. For global entrepreneurs considering how to start a business in Dubai, the chance to connect private wealth with business operations is now a key advantage in the wider business environment.

2. A pro-growth regulatory model

Dubai has earned trust by keeping its policies consistent, setting clear business rules, and acting quickly on regulations. International rankings, like those from IMD and PwC cited by Savills, consistently highlight the city's ease of doing business and how clear its dispute resolution is. This reliability reduces challenges for cross-border investors executing a long-term market entry strategy in Dubai.

That's why many companies choose Dubai for both starting a business and setting up regional headquarters, especially when dealing with a complex global market. This approach works for both large multinational companies and local SMEs, helping them grow without facing sudden regulatory changes.

3. Globally prominent financial infrastructure

Dubai's financial sector has quickly grown into a complete capital market. As of 2024, the DIFC employs about 44,000 professionals, and more global hedge funds, private equity firms, and asset managers are setting up there. This concentration puts the emirate among the world's top ten hedge fund centres, with plans to move even higher.

Should investors launch a business in Dubai in 2026, they'll arguably find that being close to global capital, private market experts, and large institutions helps raise funds faster and put money to work sooner.

4. Family capital as an economic engine

Family businesses make up about [60% of the UAE's GDP](#) and employ around 80% of the workforce. Their role turns private wealth into productive capital, helping to keep the economy

strong. This structure benefits Dubai SMEs, which often access patient capital and strategic partnerships from family-backed investors. For anyone thinking about starting a business in Dubai, this culture of long-term investment offers a level of stability that is rarely found in more transactional markets.

5. Rising adoption of technology

The strong adoption of new technology in Dubai is arguably a key aspect of the world's confidence in its economic leadership. According to the KPMG Middle East CEO Outlook 2025, 84% of UAE CEOs are still confident about economic growth, thanks to more investment in artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure. This technological momentum directly benefits companies in Dubai and fuels high digital adoption across industries.

Therefore, tech innovators thinking about starting a business in Dubai must understand the level of support granted towards entities with unique ideas and scalable solutions. Special business incentives in the emirate also help connect investment with technology.

Starting a business in Dubai in 2025: A practical guide for first-time entrepreneurs



Read the accompanying article for more information.

Part II

Key innovations set to redefine Dubai's business field in 2026





This year, the emirate is embracing several cutting-edge innovations that promise to boost mobility, connectivity, and business opportunities. Here's a look at the key developments:

1. Dubai Loop: Underground mobility infrastructure

The Dubai Loop, developed by [The Boring Company](#) in partnership with the RTA, is an all-electric underground transit system. Travelling up to 160 km/h, the initial 17 km pilot with 11 stations can carry over 20,000 passengers per hour, with potential expansion to 100,000.

The Loop is a means of improving technology utilisation and advancing the local business environment. Early collaborations or supply-chain positions could be advantageous for businesses that provide digital mobility services, smart infrastructure, retail partnerships at stations, and last-mile transportation. Integration with existing systems like the [Dubai Metro](#) can also support entrepreneurs in penetrating the logistics and mobility tech market.

2. Joby Aviation air taxi service: Pioneering the region's urban air mobility

Joby Aviation's [eVTOL air taxis](#), launching commercially in 2026 under an exclusive RTA agreement, will connect key Dubai hubs like DXB Airport, Palm Jumeirah, Dubai Marina, and Downtown. Each flight carries four passengers

at speeds above 300 km/h. Notably, this most-awaited service will make the emirate one of the first cities in the world to use air taxis widely.

Entrepreneurs can tap into aerial logistics, vertiport management, booking platforms, and maintenance services, while tourism, premium transport, and logistics sectors gain faster, more efficient travel.

3. Etihad Rail: A national passenger connectivity backbone

The [Etihad Rail](#) passenger service will link 11 cities and regions across the UAE, with trains reaching 200 km/h and carrying 400 passengers per journey. By 2030, 36.5 million riders are expected annually.

This network improves access to other emirates, benefiting hospitality, retail, and supply chain ventures near stations. Hence, global innovators looking into ways to start a business in Dubai may find this an ideal gateway to tap into nationwide markets, build regional partnerships, and scale operations efficiently across the UAE.

Major innovations companies in Dubai should be aware of in 2026



Read the accompanying article for more information.

Part III

Must-attend expos and networking events in H1 2026





The first half of 2026 is set to be a vibrant period for Dubai's events calendar, attracting global investors, founders, and innovation leaders. These key conferences and exhibitions will play a crucial role for those considering setting up a business in Dubai — shaping partnerships, funding, and market access. Here's a list of important business events to consider in H1 2026:

1. Gulfood 2026

Gulfood 2026, the world's largest [F&B sourcing event](#), took place from 26–30 January 2026 at DWTC and the Dubai Exhibition Centre in Expo City Dubai. The 31st edition featured over 8,500 exhibitors, showcased 1.5 million products, and welcomed participants from 195 countries. Importantly, new programs included the Gulfood World Economy Summit, Future Food500, and NXT Stage, spotlighting food technology and

emerging trends. The event also introduced dedicated areas for startups, logistics, and AI & automation, with mobility and security support from RTA and Dubai Police.

2. Inaugural PropTech Connect Middle East 2026

The PropTech Connect Middle East 2026 will take place from 4–5 February 2026, at the Grand Hyatt Dubai, hosted by the Dubai Land Department. This event will bring together global developers, owners, operators, brokers, proptech companies, and investors for over 60 panel discussions, 25 workshops, and detailed case studies focused on AI, blockchain, and data analytics.

Significantly, Dubai's real estate market has reached AED 917 billion in annual transactions by the end of 2025, bringing it closer to its long-term goal of AED 1 trillion by 2033.



If you're interested in launching a proptech business in Dubai, this event is an excellent opportunity to connect with regulators, investors, and industry leaders.

3. The first-ever WHX Dubai

The World Health Expo (WHX), formerly [Arab Health](#), will host the largest international gathering of health professionals from 9–12 February 2026, at the new Dubai Exhibition Centre in Expo City, Dubai.

A prominent feature of this event will be WHX Labs (World Health Expo Labs), which will focus on medical diagnostics, laboratory technology, and scientific advancements. WHX Labs, previously called Medlab, will celebrate its 25th anniversary and will take place at the Dubai World Trade Centre (DWTC) from 10–13 February.

4. Dubai AI Week

Scheduled for 7–8 April 2026 at the Dubai World Trade Centre, Dubai AI Week 2026 follows the successful [inaugural event in 2025](#). It will include key platforms such as the Dubai AI Festival and the Assembly for AI, aiming to gather global policymakers, tech leaders, and investors focused on applied AI. The agenda features the FutureTech Launchpad, innovation showcases, workshops, and closed-door roundtables.

The 2026 event expects over 30,000 participants, 700 speakers, 250 sessions, and 25 global tech companies, making it a significant gathering for entrepreneurs interested in Dubai's business landscape.

5. Arabian Travel Market

The Arabian Travel Market will be held from 4–7 May 2026 at the Dubai World Trade Centre. This year's theme is 'Travel 2040: Driving New Frontiers Through Innovation and Technology'. The event will feature sessions on the Global Stage, the Future Stage, and the newly renamed Experience Stage — previously the Business Events Stage as part of IBTM @ ATM.

ATM Travel Tech will focus on artificial intelligence, fintech, immersive technology, and next-generation platforms. It will utilise data from Tourism Economics, Euromonitor, and GSIQ to inform strategic decisions. Additionally, the Women in Travel Forum will return, supported by ICCA.

6. GISEC GLOBAL 2026

GISEC Global 2026 returns for its 15th edition from 5 to 7 May at the Dubai Exhibition Centre, Expo City. This major cybersecurity event is expected to host over 25,000 professionals, 750 brands, and 150 startups — focusing on AI-resilient and quantum-ready security. Highlights include interactive areas like the Global Cyber Drill, Critical Infrastructure Zone, Dark Stage, and the Dubai Cyber Challenge for live demonstrations.

7. Dubai FinTech Summit 2026

The Dubai FinTech Summit, hosted by DIFC, will return as a global meeting point for financial leadership, regulatory foresight, and digital innovation on 11–12 May 2026, at Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai. The summit will gather ministers of finance and economy, central bank governors, senior policymakers, and representatives from over 20 global financial regulators.

The 2026 program stands out for its institutional depth. Leading global bodies and markets are expected to participate, including the International Monetary Fund, the Institute of International Finance, and senior leadership from over five major stock exchanges. The summit will also showcase over 50 fintech companies, including Paytm, Ripple, and Finastra, along with global tech firms such as LinkedIn and Presight.

Setting up a business in Dubai? Here are the top events to watch in H1 2026



Read the accompanying article for more information.

Part IV

High-growth sectors to watch when doing business in Dubai in 2026



1. Human health and social services

The human health and social services sector grew significantly, with a 26% increase in Q1 and 20% in H1. It contributed 1.5% (AED 1.9 billion) to GDP in Q1 and 1.4% (AED 3.3 billion) in H1, supporting a 4% GDP growth in Q1 and 4.4% in H1.

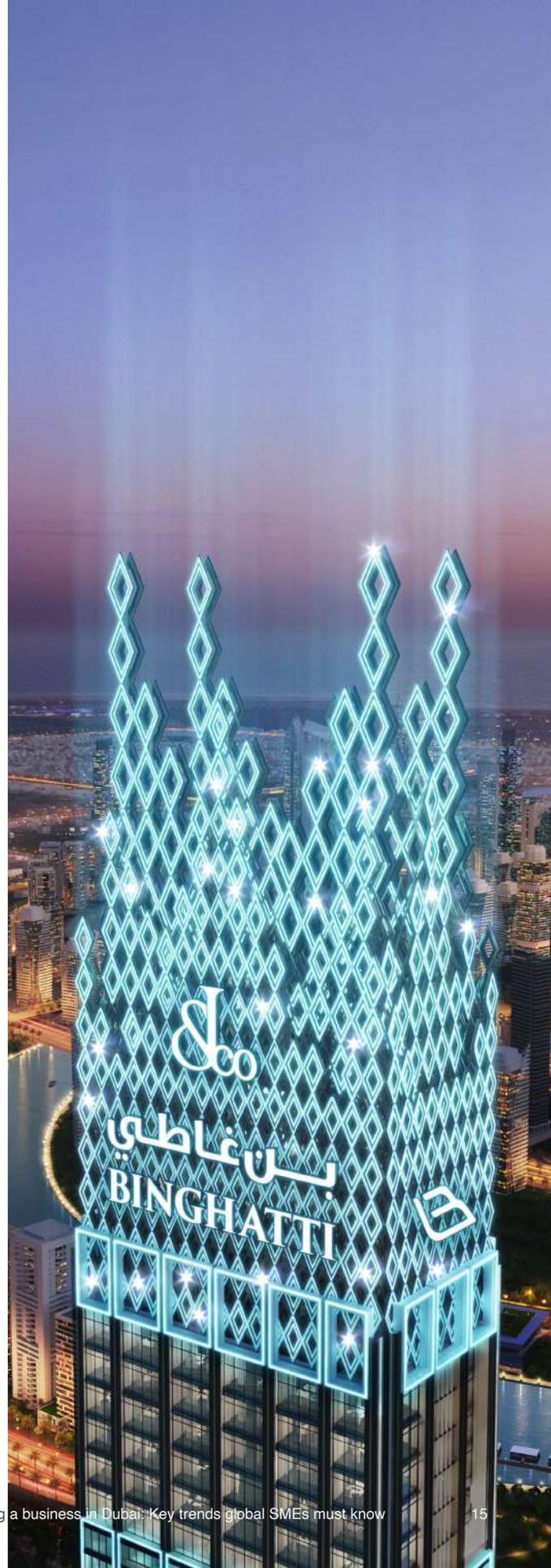
Digital transformation and AI adoption are driving demand for healthcare services, particularly with the introduction of mandatory health insurance for private employees. Growing interest in wellness and preventive care provides opportunities for startups. This sector offers a promising entry point for SMEs, enabling faster market traction and diverse revenue streams in Dubai's evolving healthcare landscape.

2. Real estate and urban development

As highlighted above, Dubai's real estate sector reached a historic milestone in 2025, recording AED 917 billion in transactions across more than 270,000 deals. This performance indicates steady strides towards the Dubai Real Estate Sector Strategy 2033, which aims to raise transaction volumes by 70% to AED 1 trillion.

Commenting on the sector's performance, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, stated via his official X account that Dubai continues to develop all sectors in a manner that creates promising opportunities for those who place their trust in the national economy.

This development was strengthened by real estate investments exceeding AED 680 billion, spread across 258,600 transactions, reflecting a 29% rise in value and an 18.7% increase in





transaction volume YoY. The investor base surged by 23%, with 129,600 new investors, bringing the total to approximately 193,100, of which 56.6% were local investors. Hence, global industry leaders doing business in Dubai may consider real estate, as innovations like tokenised ownership enhance market accessibility.

3. Trade, logistics, and exports

In 2025, the Dubai Chamber of Commerce reported AED 356.5 billion in exports and re-exports, a 15.1% increase year-on-year, following the sector crossing AED 300 billion in 2024. Membership grew to 292,486 companies with 71,830 new registrations. ATA Carnet issuance also climbed to 5,960, valued at AED 5.6 billion — a 30% rise.

The chamber aided 130 local companies in international expansion, a 14% rise from 2024, while new Business Councils for Europe and Latin America improved access to emerging markets. These indicators showcase a growing and efficient trade environment in Dubai.

4. Tourism and hospitality

Tourism remains a major growth engine, with 15.7 million visitors between January and October 2025, with a promising outlook for 2026. Hotel occupancy rates rose to 79.4%, a 2.4% increase year-on-year, and average daily rates reached AED 531, increasing by 6%.

Key markets include Western Europe, the GCC, and South Asia, supported by initiatives like the Dubai Hotel Incentive Scheme. Entrepreneurs should note that favourable conditions are present for starting businesses in tourism and hospitality.

5. Technology, AI, SaaS, and fintech

In the past year, Dubai launched over 580 digital startups, a significant increase from 2024. Around 21% focused on AI, with healthtech, SaaS, and fintech making up another 17%. This surge highlights Dubai's attractiveness to international entrepreneurs, who initiated about 70% of these firms. Dubai Internet City and similar hubs contribute 65% of the tech sector's GDP and employ over 125,000 people.

More broadly, in the UAE, the [November 2025 KPMG report](#) also shows that AI is a key investment focus in the UAE, with over half of CEOs prioritising AI integration — surpassing the global average of 34%. A strong 92% of executives are prepared to implement AI with clear governance. National initiatives like K2 Think, developed by Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence in partnership with G42, reflect the UAE's commitment to measurable value and innovative solutions.

Forecasts for 2026 predict steady growth, with UAE digital technology spending anticipated to hit USD 20 billion, while MENA IT spending could reach USD 169 billion. While Dubai-specific GDP values for tech are not formally published, industry analysts expect AI, fintech, SaaS, and healthtech to be among the fastest-growing contributors to non-oil growth through 2026. If you are thinking about how to start a business in Dubai, now is a great time.

Sectors set for new highs in 2026: Market outlook and performance trends



Read the accompanying article for more information.



Dubai's strong business environment in 2026

In 2026, Dubai stands out due to its strong economy, solid investment, clear regulations, and focus on innovation. The emirate has developed a stable environment where investors can feel confident. Policies are predictable, and infrastructure is built ahead of demand. This helps entrepreneurs and SMEs enter the market, grow, and expand regionally with confidence. Therefore, Dubai's business environment in 2026 is not just profitable but well-structured to support globally focused businesses in the long term.

Additional information and resources



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