

2026

# Economic Outlook Report



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## About this report:

The Greater Wausau Chamber of Commerce distributed a survey early in 2026 to ensure that the voice of business and the community was heard. Employers and professionals from across the region were invited to weigh in on the economic issues that matter most, with their insights helping to inform the priorities outlined in this report.

## Welcome

Greetings!

As our organization and team move to advance the Greater Wausau Chamber of Commerce's 2025-28 Strategic Plan, gaining understanding and guidance from our members and business community is essential. Our efforts to better position resources and direct activities are comprised through Business Retention and Expansion visits with local companies, Member Engagement Roundtables and a robust Economic Outlook survey.

The 2026 Economic Outlook Report is a brief, yet informative report that provides perspectives from companies in diverse industry sectors (manufacturing, health care, finance, retail/commercial, not for profits,

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etc.) and small, medium and large sized enterprises. The report briefly reflects on business in 2025 and then looks forward to employer perspectives for 2026.

Please spend a few minutes reviewing this report and feel free to reach out to myself or members of our team if you have questions, suggestions or insights on what we've assembled here.



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Chamber of Commerce*

# Economic Outlook Report

# Business Performance in 2025 Compared to 2024

## 1. Revenue (Gross Sales)

- 45.45% expected higher revenue
- 33.77% expected the same
- 20.78% expected lower revenue

**Interpretation:** Nearly half of the businesses expected revenue to increase, indicating a generally optimistic outlook for market demand and sales conditions in 2025. About one-third anticipated stable revenue, suggesting that some sectors foresaw steady market conditions without significant growth. Meanwhile, around one-fifth expected a decline in revenue, possibly reflecting concerns related to competition, sector-specific challenges, or broader economic uncertainty.

**Overall trend:** Businesses generally anticipated positive sales growth in 2025.

## 2. Profits

- 34.25% expected higher profits
- 35.62% expected the same
- 30.14% expected lower profits

**Interpretation:** Profit expectations appeared more mixed than revenue expectations. While a considerable portion of businesses anticipated higher profits, a slightly larger share expected profits to remain unchanged, and nearly one-third anticipated lower profits. This suggested that although many businesses expected sales to increase, they were concerned about factors that could affect profit margins, such as rising operational costs, labor expenses, or inflation.

**Overall trend:** Businesses showed uncertainty regarding profit growth despite optimistic revenue expectations.

### 3. Employment

- 28% expected higher employment
- 52% expected the same
- 20% expected lower employment

**Interpretation:** More than half of the businesses expected employment levels to remain unchanged, indicating that most firms anticipated maintaining their current workforce. Only about one-quarter expected to increase hiring, suggesting a cautious approach to workforce expansion. A smaller portion anticipated reducing employment, which could have reflected cost management strategies or operational adjustments.

**Overall trend:** Employment expectations indicated stability rather than significant expansion in the labor market.

### 4. Capital Investment

- 33.78% expected higher investment
- 52.70% expected the same
- 13.51% expected lower investment

**Interpretation:** Most businesses expected their capital investment levels to remain stable, while about one-third anticipated increasing investments. Only a small percentage expected to reduce investment, suggesting that many firms maintained a moderate level of confidence in future economic conditions and planned to continue investing in equipment, technology, or infrastructure.

**Overall trend:** Businesses demonstrated a cautious but stable investment outlook.

## Overall Summary (2025)

Overall, businesses generally expected stronger revenue performance in 2025 compared to 2024, although profit expectations were more uncertain due to potential cost pressures. Employment and capital investment were largely expected to remain stable, reflecting a cautiously optimistic outlook rather than aggressive expansion.

# Projected Business Performance in 2026 Compared to 2025

## Overall Outlook

Businesses show moderate optimism for 2026, particularly in revenue growth, while expectations for profits, employment, and capital investment are more cautious. Most firms expect stability rather than large changes in operational areas.

### 1. Gross Sales (Revenue)

- 61.33% expect higher revenue
- 26.67% expect the same
- 12% expect lower revenue

**Interpretation:** Revenue expectations are strongly positive. Nearly two-thirds of businesses anticipate sales growth, suggesting confidence in market demand and economic conditions. Only a small share predicts decline, indicating limited pessimism about market activity.

**Implication:** Businesses may expect higher consumer spending, improved market access, or pricing adjustments in 2026.

### 2. Profits

- 46.67% expect higher profits
- 33.33% expect the same
- 20% expect lower profits

**Interpretation:** Profit expectations are positive but more cautious than revenue expectations. The gap between revenue optimism (61.33%) and profit optimism (46.67%) suggests concerns about rising costs (labor, materials, or operations).

**Implication:** Businesses may expect revenue growth but tighter margins.



### 3. Employment

- 28.95% expect higher employment
- 61.84% expect the same
- 9.21% expect lower employment

**Interpretation:** Most firms plan to maintain current workforce levels. Hiring growth is modest, with fewer than one-third expecting to expand employment.

**Implication:** Businesses may focus on productivity improvements rather than workforce expansion. Labor markets may remain relatively stable in 2026.

### 4. Capital Investment

- 31.08% expect higher investment
- 56.76% expect the same
- 12.16% expect lower investment

**Interpretation:** Investment expectations are mostly stable. About one-third expect increased investment, indicating selective expansion or modernization rather than aggressive growth.

**Implication:** Firms may prioritize efficiency upgrades, technology adoption, or cautious expansion.

### Key Insights (2026)

1. Revenue optimism is strongest
2. Profit growth is more uncertain
3. Workforce stability dominates
4. Investment growth is moderate

## Summary (2026)

The projections suggest a stable-to-growing business environment in 2026, characterized by expected revenue growth, moderate profit improvement, steady employment, and cautious investment behavior.

# Primary Growth Strategies for Survey Respondents

## 1. Expanding Within Current Markets (42.31%)

Organizations prioritize increasing market share, selling more to existing customers, and improving distribution within current regions.

## 2. Entering New Markets (17.95%)

Some firms are pursuing geographic or customer segment expansion, though at a lower rate due to higher risk and cost.

## 3. Mergers and Acquisitions (1.28%)

Rarely used due to financial and integration challenges.

## 4. Strengthening Management (0%)

Not viewed as a primary growth strategy.

## Overall Insight

Businesses favor organic, lower-risk growth strategies over structural or high-risk approaches.



## Greater Wausau Region as a Place to Do Business

### Overall Sentiment

- Excellent: 10.39%
- Good: 44.16%
- Average: 29.87%
- Below Average: 15.58%
- Poor: 0%

**Key Insight:** The region is viewed positively overall, though most ratings fall under “Good” rather than “Excellent,” indicating room for improvement.

## Challenges of Doing Business in the Greater Wausau Region

### Top Challenges

- Talent attraction: 32.47%
- Proximity to larger markets: 18.18%
- Cost of doing business: 15.58%

### Least Challenges

- Infrastructure: 2.60%
- Productivity/work ethic: 3.90%

**Insight:** Workforce availability is the most significant constraint.

# Improving the Regional Economy

## Top Priorities

- Support SMBs: 19.48%
- Business attraction: 15.58%
- Workforce alignment: 14.29%
- Childcare: 14.29%

## Lowest Priorities

- AI adoption: 1.30%
- Policy advocacy: 2.60%

## Economic Vitality Outlook – Greater Wausau Region

- Positive: 56.41%
- Neutral: 29.49%
- Negative: 14.10%

## Economic Vitality Outlook – State of Wisconsin

- Positive: 57.69%
- Neutral: 34.62%
- Negative: 7.69%

## Generative AI Adoption by Respondents

- 36.36% incorporating into strategy
- 24.68% experimenting
- 24.68% uncertain
- 11.69% awareness stage

## Likelihood to Recommend the Region to Others

- Average score: 7.09 / 10

**Insight:** Moderately positive sentiment with opportunity to convert neutral stakeholders into strong advocates.



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