2026 TRENDS

SAP

clarkston CONSULTING

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The ECC Deadline Nears

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Embedding AI into Everyday Operations

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New Solutions and Capabilities for a Modern SAP Landscape

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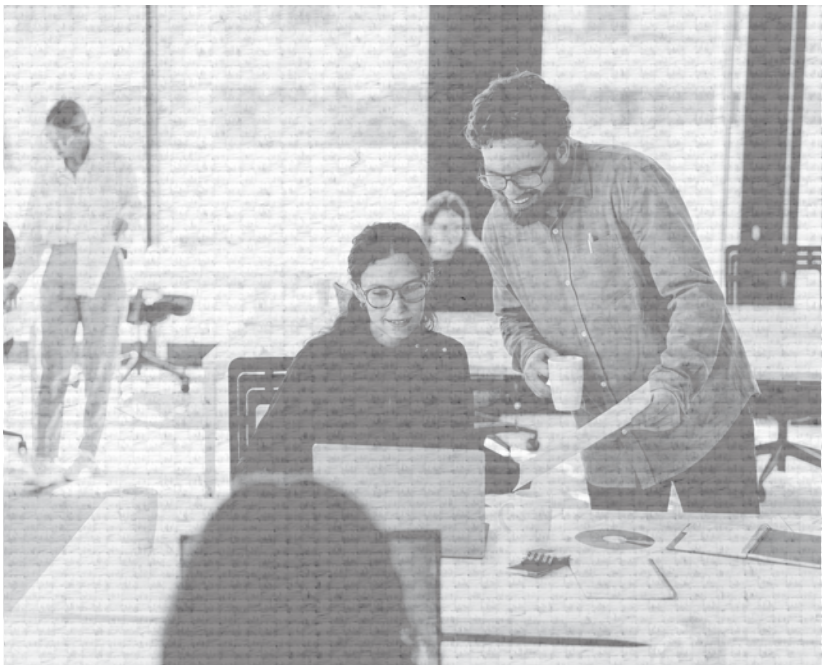
AI-Driven Supply Chains

As organizations head into 2026, many are reaching a turning point in their SAP journey. From Clarkston's experience working alongside hundreds of clients on their SAP initiatives, the conversation has moved away from "what's coming" to "what needs to happen next."

The upcoming ECC end-of-maintenance deadline is forcing long-delayed decisions, while AI capabilities built directly into S/4HANA are becoming practical tools that support everyday work in meaningful ways. We're also seeing clients rethink their data strategy, leveraging SAP Business Data Cloud (BDC) to build confidence in their analytics. SAP's Clean Core approach is also gaining momentum as teams look to simplify their systems and avoid repeating past customization mistakes. Ongoing enhancements to SAP Integrated Business Planning (IBP) further reflect this shift to proactiveness, as planning teams push for faster, more adaptive decision-making that reflects what's actually happening in the business.

From our perspective, 2026 feels less about chasing the next big SAP innovation and more about simplifying landscapes, making smarter use of existing capabilities, and realizing value from investments already made. This report outlines the SAP trends shaping the industry for 2026 and beyond.



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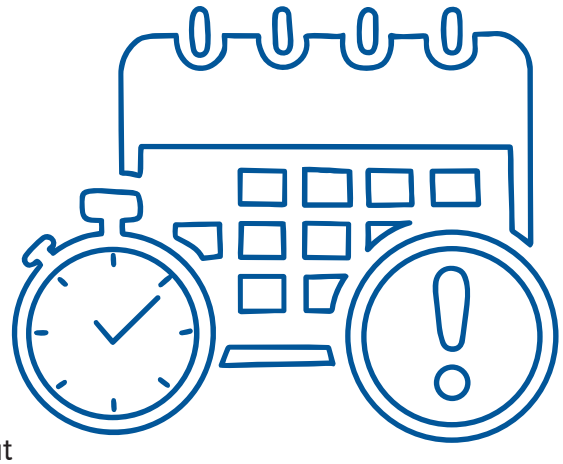
TREND 1

The ECC Deadline Nears



As SAP moves into 2026, both its commercial strategy and technology roadmap point in the same direction: moving the remaining ECC customer base forward while making S/4HANA and Business Technology Platform (BTP) the center of gravity for innovation. In 2025, many organizations were still operating large, highly customized ECC landscapes that have been stable for years but increasingly hard to evolve. We continue to see clients juggling workarounds, third-party tools, and deferred enhancements simply to keep those environments running.

Even with industry estimates suggesting that roughly 60% of SAP customers remain on ECC, the tone of the conversation has changed. SAP is leaning harder into incentives, bundled offerings, and migration accelerators to address the remaining backlog and bring customers onto platforms where new capabilities (like AI-driven features and advanced analytics) are actually being delivered.

Although the ECC support window has been extended, most clients recognize it as planning time rather than a true extension of the status quo. The reality is that meaningful innovation is happening almost entirely in S/4HANA and BTP, and organizations that continue to wait risk spending too much time and too many resources maintaining systems that no longer align with how SAP, or their own businesses, want to operate.

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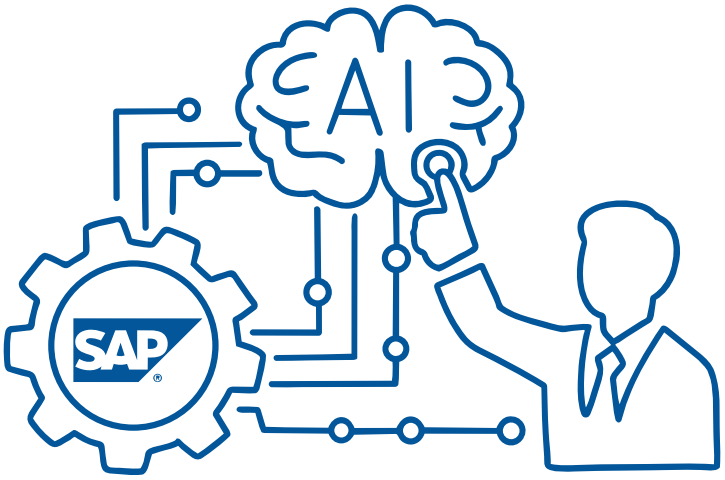
TREND 2

Embedding AI into Everyday Operations



One of the most noticeable changes heading into 2026 is how AI is moving from something people interact with to something that quietly runs in the background of everyday operations. In 2025, most organizations used generative AI in fairly limited ways. Teams would ask questions in plain language or rely on AI for guidance, but the actual work still depended on someone translating those insights into action inside SAP.

As we move into 2026, that model is starting to break down. AI is becoming embedded directly into SAP processes, with agents that understand what's happening in the system and can act without being prompted step by step. Instead of explaining a problem to a generic chatbot, the system can identify issues on its own and move work forward within the application. SAP's AI assistant, Joule, reflects this shift. It's evolving from an advisory tool into something that can take on routine operational work and support entire process flows, reducing the need for constant human intervention.

For many clients, this evolution is driven by practical constraints rather than experimentation. Teams are under pressure to do more with the same resources, and manual handoffs inside core processes are becoming harder to justify. Embedding AI into daily operations is increasingly viewed as a way to keep work moving and remove friction from SAP processes. Organizations that delay this shift will struggle to keep pace with peers who have embedded intelligence into how work gets done.

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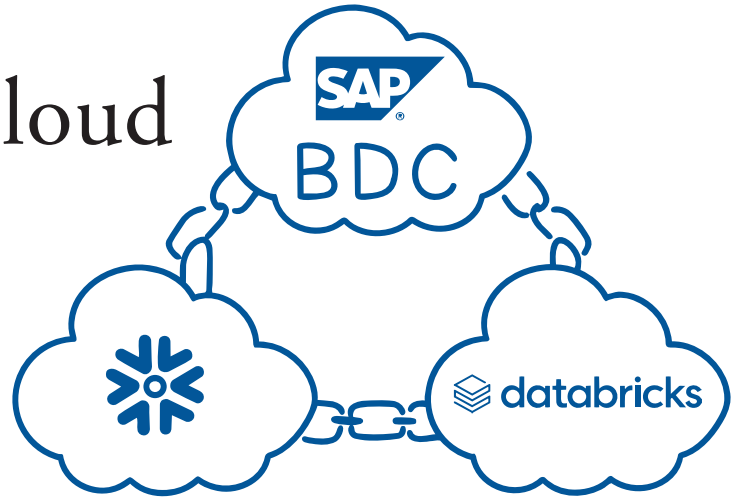
TREND 3

SAP Business Data Cloud (BDC) Partnerships



In 2025, SAP made a clear push to expand the SAP Business Data Cloud (BDC) ecosystem through a set of strategic partnerships aimed at reducing how often enterprise data has to be moved. As we move into 2026, this is forcing businesses to rethink what their data strategy should look like moving forward.

In February 2025, SAP announced its partnership with Databricks. For many clients, this removed the need to build and maintain custom pipelines just to make SAP data usable for analytics or AI. Later in the year, SAP extended the same idea through integrations with Snowflake and Microsoft Fabric, allowing SAP data to be accessed in those environments without copying it out of BDC. In practical terms, teams can work with SAP data in the platforms they already use while still relying on SAP for structure and governance.

The appeal for most organizations is simplicity. Less data movement means fewer brittle integrations and fewer downstream issues when data definitions change. At the same time, these options raise a larger architectural question for IT leaders: *what should my data landscape look like?*

Keeping analytics closely tied to BDC can make data easier to manage and trust, but it can also feel limiting for teams with highly specialized analytics needs. While shifting more activity into Snowflake or Microsoft Fabric provides flexibility, it also places more responsibility on the organization to maintain alignment across systems. As companies plan for 2026, the real decision is less about individual tools and more about what business use cases need to be solved and how they can arrive at the right architecture to do so.

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TREND 4

Clean Core Strategy

Clean Core has become a practical guiding principle for organizations running SAP ERP, especially those on or moving to S/4HANA. At its core, it's about resisting the urge to keep piling custom logic into the system and instead keeping the digital core as close to standard as possible. Many organizations are still dealing with the long-term effects of heavily modified ERP environments, where even routine upgrades turn into major projects and simple changes carry unintended consequences.

SAP's response has been to shift how customization is done. Rather than modifying S/4HANA directly, SAP is steering customers toward extension and integration patterns on BTP, allowing new capabilities to be added without putting the core at risk. For clients, this approach supports ongoing innovation while reducing the operational burden that comes with deep customization.

Looking toward 2026, the challenge isn't deciding whether Clean Core matters but figuring out how to get there from today's reality. Most organizations are starting by taking an honest look at their current landscape, identifying which customizations still deliver value, and mapping out what needs to change next. That kind of clarity is what ultimately puts teams on a more stable footing and makes future upgrades far less disruptive.

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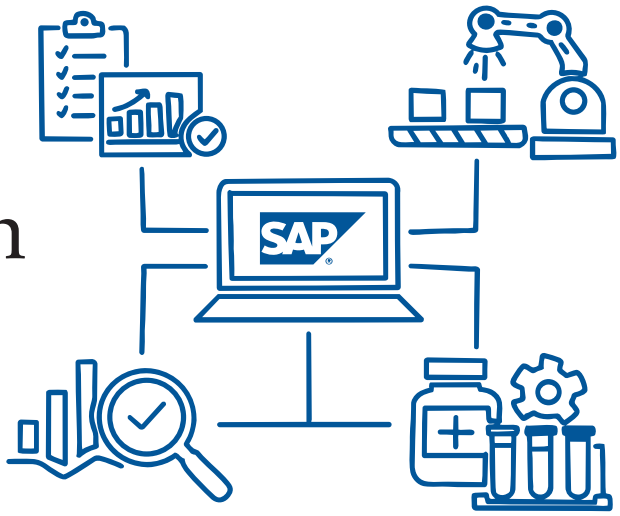
TREND 5

New Solutions and Capabilities for a Modern SAP Landscape



Clarkston is particularly excited about several SAP capabilities arriving in 2026 that we believe will deliver tangible value for consumer products, retail, and life sciences organizations. These enhancements focus on making planning, execution, and manufacturing more responsive and easier to manage.

For CPG companies, planners can now adjust demand forecasts with fixed values or percentages, which makes it easier to react to sudden shifts in the market. Companies in fast-moving categories are using this to update procurement and production plans without rebuilding forecasts from scratch.

SAP is also improving sales and distribution by enhancing inventory visibility across channels. SAP Advanced Available-to-Promise (aATP) updates give organizations a near real-time view of stock and allow them to allocate supply more accurately, even in complex scenarios such as subcontracting. This helps ensure customer orders are fulfilled reliably, regardless of where they originate.

For the life sciences, updates to SAP Digital Manufacturing simplify system architecture and speed the flow of production data. Completed production orders now trigger immediate updates across the business, giving teams timely operational insights. Organizations using these enhancements are finding they can operate more efficiently, maintain better data consistency, and have a clearer picture of manufacturing activity.

While SAP has many additional features planned for 2026, these are the areas Clarkston recommends exploring first. These capabilities highlight SAP's focus on integrating intelligence into core processes and offer tangible opportunities for organizations to modernize their landscapes while improving how work gets done.

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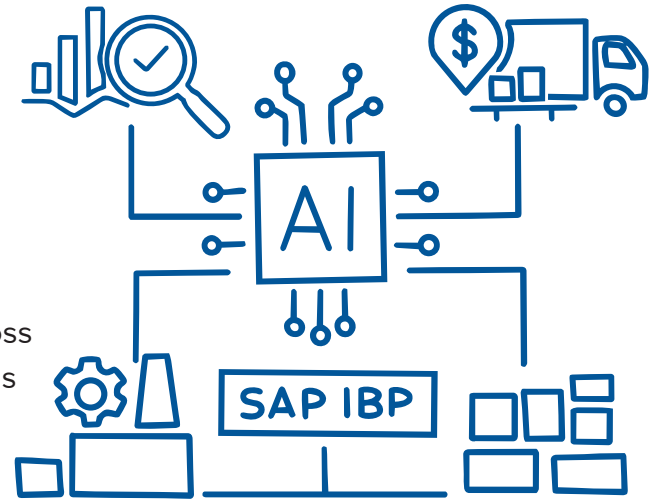
TREND 6

AI-Driven Supply Chains



SAP IBP has been helping organizations connect planning across sales, demand, and supply for several years, but earlier versions relied primarily on traditional statistical forecasting and historical sales patterns. These methods provided a solid foundation, but they were often reactive, identifying trends only after they had already emerged.

Recent updates are changing that. IBP Demand Sensing, in particular, allows organizations to move beyond traditional statistical methods by incorporating high-frequency data such as POS transactions, competitor pricing, social sentiment, and economic indicators. This approach helps planners see what is influencing demand in real time, which is especially valuable in markets affected by shifting tariffs and regulations.

SAP has also introduced AI-driven explainability features that help planners understand why forecasts are trending in a certain direction, highlighting key drivers and unusual patterns. Closer integration with execution systems and the ability to run scenario simulations ensure that demand signals can be translated into supply and production decisions quickly, helping organizations act on insights rather than just observing them.

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Looking Ahead

As organizations in the consumer products, retail, and life sciences industries move into 2026, the focus needs to shift from planning to taking decisive action on SAP initiatives. The approaching ECC end-of-maintenance deadline makes it clear that delays are costly, but it also creates an opportunity to simplify environments that have become difficult to manage due to years of customizations and extended product lifecycles, among other reasons. Organizations should take a hard look at which processes truly need to remain in the core and which can be supported through extensions or integrations.

Clean Core principles remain central to keeping systems agile and upgrade-ready, so planning for which customizations can be retired or moved to extensions will pay off in reduced risk and lower maintenance effort. Enhancements to IBP give planners the ability to react more quickly to changes in demand, making it important to embed scenario modeling and real-time insights into day-to-day planning and execution.

Embedded AI in S/4HANA is now ready to be applied in practical ways, and teams should consider where AI can improve visibility into demand and reduce manual intervention in operational processes. Building trust in data is equally critical; organizations should evaluate how to connect and govern data so that decision-making across retail, manufacturing, supply chain, and other functions is faster and more reliable.

From Clarkston's perspective, the organizations that succeed in 2026 will be those that align SAP strategy to industry realities and prioritize long-term value over short-term fixes.

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