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CIO AS STRATEGIC ARCHITECT

Shaping business through technology and strategy

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**JEEVAN
THANKAPPAN**
MANAGING EDITOR

The strategic architect era has arrived

2026 will not be remembered as the year of another technology trend. It will be remembered as the year leadership changed shape. Across industries, the CIO is no longer the custodian of systems; they are becoming the architect of enterprise direction, resilience, and growth.

For years, organisations invested heavily in platforms, cloud migrations, and experimental AI pilots. But maturity has arrived. Today, the real question is no longer what technology to adopt, but how to turn technology into sustained business value. As highlighted in the latest edition of The Titans, innovation and resilience are no longer competing priorities; they are mutually dependent pillars shaping the modern enterprise.

The shift is profound. Technology leaders are now deeply embedded in boardroom discussions, translating complexity into strategic foresight. Decisions around AI adoption, cybersecurity posture, and digital operating models are no longer technical debates; they are business imperatives tied directly to trust, revenue, and long-term competitiveness.

What distinguishes the new generation of CIOs is architectural thinking. Rather than chasing isolated innovation wins, they are designing layered ecosystems where stability and experimentation coexist. Core systems remain secure and predictable, while modular innovation layers enable rapid change without risking the foundation. This balance allows organisations to move faster while remaining resilient in a world defined by constant disruption.

Equally important is cultural transformation. The strategic architect mindset extends beyond infrastructure into talent, governance, and sustainability. Digital leaders are building teams that combine business fluency with AI literacy, ensuring innovation is responsible, measurable, and aligned with enterprise goals.

Ultimately, the CIO's evolution reflects a larger truth: technology is no longer supporting the business, it is the business. The organisations that succeed in 2026 will be those led by architects, not operators; leaders who design for adaptability, scale intelligence responsibly, and shape the future with intention rather than reaction.

Jeevan Thankappan

MANAGING DIRECTOR

Tushar Sahoo

CO-FOUNDER & CEO

Ronak Samantaray

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Akashdeep Singh: akashdeep@gecmmediagroup.com

MANAGING EDITORS

Jeevan Thankappan: jeevan@gecmmediagroup.com

Arun Shankar: arun@gecmmediagroup.com

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Rehisha: rehasha@gecmmediagroup.com

CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER

Anushree Dixit: anushree@gecmmediagroup.com

CHIEF COMMERCIAL OFFICER

Richa S: richa@gecmmediagroup.com

DIGITAL MARKETING HEAD

Santosh Pania: santosh@gecmmediagroup.com

COMMUNICATIONS LEAD GCC

Jennefer Lorraine Mendoza: jennefer@gecmmediagroup.com

IT MANAGER

Vijay Bakshi: vijay@gecmmediagroup.com

PRODUCTION

S.M. MUZAMIL: muzamil@gecmmediagroup.com

Mohammed Kagzi, Abdullah A. Hameed

CREATIVE LEAD

Ajay Arya

SR. DESIGNER

Shadab Khan

CONTENT WRITER

Kumari Ambika

SUBSCRIPTIONS

info@gecmmediagroup.com

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AMERICA PHONE NO: + 1 732 794 5918

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CIO as strategic architect

Dr Majeda Al Marzooqi, Director – IT Service Delivery & Operations at EDGE Group, shares how the CIO role is evolving from technology leader to strategic architect in 2026.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

The role of the CIO has evolved decisively from managing technology assets to architecting intelligence, resilience, and enterprise adaptability. Today's CIO is accountable not just for systems and platforms, but for how digital capabilities shape strategic decision-making, risk posture, and long-term organisational confidence.

In practice, this means the CIO is embedded in shaping enterprise strategy from the outset. Technology is no longer a downstream enabler; it is a strategic design instrument. My focus has shifted towards architecting AI-

ready data foundations, resilient digital operating models, and governance frameworks that allow the organisation to move faster without increasing risk.

The CIO's value now lies in designing optionality, ensuring the enterprise can respond to disruption, scale intelligence, and absorb change without destabilising the core. This architectural mindset is what differentiates modern CIO leadership from traditional technology management.

Q WHAT STRATEGIC PRIORITIES ARE TECHNOLOGY LEADERS FOCUSING ON FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THESE PRIORITIES BEING ALIGNED WITH LONG-TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY GAINS?

Technology leaders are prioritising foundational



DR MAJEDA AL MARZOOQI

Director IT Service Delivery &
Operations
EDGE Group

capabilities that allow AI, data, and automation to scale responsibly and sustainably. Rather than chasing short-term innovation wins, the focus is on building enterprise-grade intelligence platforms, resilient architectures, and simplified ecosystems that compound value over time.

One major priority is data maturity and decision intelligence, ensuring that data is trusted, governed, and usable across the organisation

so AI can meaningfully enhance planning, forecasting, and operational execution. Another priority is cyber resilience, not as a defensive function, but as a strategic enabler of growth and digital trust.

Critically, technology investments are being evaluated against business outcomes such as adaptability, speed of strategic execution, risk reduction, and service continuity, rather than delivery milestones alone. This alignment ensures that digital

investments strengthen the enterprise over the long term, regardless of how specific technologies evolve.

Q IN 2026, HOW ARE TECHNOLOGY LEADERS BALANCING INNOVATION WITH RESILIENCE, AND WHAT PRINCIPLES ARE GUIDING THE DESIGN OF IT STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE STILL SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

In 2026, innovation and resilience

are no longer competing priorities, they are mutually dependent. Innovation without resilience introduces unacceptable risk, while resilience without innovation erodes relevance. The balance is achieved through intentional architectural design and disciplined governance.

A core principle is layered architecture. Mission-critical systems are designed for stability, security, and regulatory assurance, while innovation is enabled through modular, AI-enabled layers that allow rapid experimentation without exposing the enterprise to systemic risk.

Another guiding principle is resilience by design, particularly in cybersecurity, data integrity, and business continuity. AI-driven monitoring, predictive risk analytics, and automated response capabilities are increasingly embedded into core operations, allowing the organisation to anticipate and absorb disruption rather than react to it.

Agility is therefore not achieved by bypassing controls, but by designing intelligent controls that scale with complexity.

Q HOW ARE CIOs AND TECHNOLOGY LEADERS INCREASINGLY ENGAGING WITH CEOs AND BOARDS TO SHAPE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING, AND WHAT CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS ARE THEY NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD RATHER THAN SIMPLY SUPPORT?

CIOs are now central to enterprise risk, growth, and resilience conversations at board level.



In 2026, innovation and resilience are no longer competing priorities, they are mutually dependent. ”

Engagement with CEOs and boards has evolved from performance reporting to co-ownership of strategic outcomes.

Technology leaders are expected to lead discussions on AI governance, cyber resilience, data ethics, digital sovereignty, and technology investment trade-offs. These are no longer technical topics; they are strategic imperatives with direct implications for reputation, regulatory exposure, and long-term value.

Boards increasingly look to CIOs for judgement, not just expertise, clarity on where AI should be scaled, where risk must be contained, and how technology choices today shape enterprise viability tomorrow. The CIO's role is to translate complexity into strategic foresight, enabling

confident decision-making at the highest level.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

Decisions around scaling, pausing, or retiring technologies are grounded in architectural discipline rather than innovation enthusiasm. The first principle is measurable enterprise impact. AI and digital platforms are scaled only where they demonstrably improve decision quality, resilience, efficiency, or service outcomes.

The second principle is architectural coherence. Platforms that strengthen integration, reduce duplication, and support AI-driven insights across the enterprise are prioritised. Technologies that increase fragmentation or create hidden operational risk are deliberately constrained or retired.

The third principle is operational and ethical sustainability. This includes cyber exposure, data governance, talent readiness, and long-term cost structures. Responsible AI adoption is central to these decisions, ensuring transparency, accountability, and trust.

Retirement decisions are positioned as strategic maturity, not retrenchment, evidence that the organisation is evolving its architecture with intent.

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS



as siloed ownership and risk-avoidant behaviours that prevent the organisation from leveraging intelligence effectively.

These transformations are justified through business-focused narratives: reduced operational risk, faster strategic execution, improved resilience, and lower long-term cost of ownership. Stakeholders are engaged early with transparent roadmaps, clear risk mitigation strategies, and measurable outcomes, reinforcing trust and shared accountability.

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

Success as a CIO is defined by enterprise confidence, the confidence to make bold decisions, adopt AI responsibly, and navigate uncertainty without compromising stability.

Beyond KPIs, impact is measured by decision quality, organisational resilience, and the organisation's ability to adapt at pace. It is reflected in strong trust between technology and the business, in architectures that enable rather than constrain strategy, and in leadership conversations that focus on opportunity rather than limitation.

Ultimately, success means that the enterprise is more intelligent, more resilient, and better prepared for disruption than it was a year ago. That is the true measure of a CIO acting as a strategic architect of the enterprise.

AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

Future-ready organisations are architecting teams around capabilities and outcomes, not technologies alone. Digital teams increasingly combine business expertise, AI literacy, data science, cyber resilience, and delivery excellence.

A strong emphasis is placed on AI fluency across leadership and operational roles, ensuring that teams understand not just how to use AI, but how to govern, challenge, and scale it responsibly. Continuous learning is embedded into the operating model, not treated as a side initiative.

Culturally, resilience, accountability, and psychological safety are prioritised. Teams are empowered to experiment within clear guardrails, learn rapidly, and adapt.

This balance of empowerment and discipline is what enables sustained innovation without operational fragility.

Q WHAT TYPES OF LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE TECHNOLOGY LEADERS PRIORITISING FOR REDESIGN OR REMOVAL IN 2026, AND HOW ARE THESE TRANSFORMATION DECISIONS BEING POSITIONED AND JUSTIFIED TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

Technology leaders are targeting legacy constraints that limit AI adoption, slow decision-making, and increase systemic risk. This includes fragmented data environments, tightly coupled systems, manual processes, and governance models that cannot scale with digital complexity. Equally important are cultural and structural legacies such

Redefining CIO Impact

Amro Jaber Ahmed Ibrahim, Senior Digital Transformation Expert at the Ministry of Justice, outlines how CIOs are shifting from managing technology to shaping enterprise strategy, balancing innovation, resilience, and long-term value creation.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

From technology leader to strategic architect — what changed & what it looks like now, the essential key shift is the “shift in mandate” represented in the following

From delivery to design: Less “owning projects,” more designing enterprise capabilities, target-state architectures, and value flows.

From cost center to growth catalyst: IT is accountable for revenue enablement, customer experience, and new-business incubation.

From platforms to portfolios: We manage capability portfolios (e.g., personalization, real-time

decisions, digitized operations) with explicit value hypotheses and ROI guardrails.

What this looks like in practice today:

Business capability maps drive roadmaps, not tech stacks.

Product operating model: Cross-functional product teams (business + tech + data + risk) with OKRs tied to business outcomes.

Architecture boards adjudicate trade-offs (speed vs. resilience vs. cost) using transparent decision records.

Financial fluency: Technology investments tracked as multi-year capital allocation with stage gates against value metrics, not just delivery milestones

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-



AMRO JABER AHMED IBRAHIM

Senior Digital Transformation Expert
Ministry of Justice

TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

I strongly believe that the top strategic priorities for the year should be aligned with Long-Term Growth, illustrated with the five following key priorities:-
Priority #1:- Unify the Data Foundation

- Deliver a governed, real-time data fabric with privacy-by-design, lineage, and ML-ready datasets.
- Business outcome: Faster

time-to-insight, monetizable analytics, trusted AI.

Priority #2:- AI-at-Scale with Guardrails

- Move from pilots to productized AI (e.g., intelligent customer service, dynamic pricing, demand sensing), with model risk management and human-in-the-loop controls.
- Business outcome: Margin expansion, CX uplift, and productivity at scale.

Priority #3:- Modernize the

Core (ERP + Platforms) with Composable Architecture

- Strangle-fig legacy: carve out domain services, deploy API-first, gradually decouple.
- Business outcome: Reduced change cost, agility for new business models.

Priority #4:- Cyber Resilience by Design

- Assume breach. Zero trust, identity-first security, immutable backups, tabletop exercises.
- Business outcome: Lower

operational risk, regulatory confidence, insurability.

Priority #5:- Product Operating Model & Talent Flywheel

- Build persistent, outcome-oriented product teams; invest in engineering excellence and FinOps.
- Business outcome: Sustainable velocity and reduced unit cost of change.

For each priority, it should be tied to 3–5-year capability horizons and value theses (revenue, cost-to-serve, risk reduction), not short-term tool rollouts.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU BALANCE INNOVATION WITH RESILIENCE? AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

In my perspective as a Digital Transformation expert, thriving in 2026 requires a disciplined balance between rapid innovation and operational resilience. Organizations must build a technology and operating model that can absorb disruption, accelerate experimentation, and protect mission-critical capabilities—all at the same time. The following enhanced design and operation principles reflect this balanced approach.

Design Principles

1. Dual-Speed, Composable Architecture
2. Patterns Over Projects
3. “Design for Failure” as a Cultural Norm
4. Value-Based Risk Posture



I strongly believe that the top strategic priorities for the year should be aligned with long-term growth 🗨️

Operating Principles

1. Innovation Sandboxes with Governed Progression
2. FinOps + GreenOps as Non-Negotiable Drivers

By combining dual-speed architecture, pattern-driven reusability, design-for-failure engineering, and value-based risk controls—with disciplined operational practices like FinOps, GreenOps, and structured innovation pathways—enterprises build a digital foundation that is both agile and unshakeable.

Q HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOs NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

Partnering with the CEO and Board — Conversations CIOs Lead Now

- Enterprise strategy via digital capabilities: How capability maps unlock new revenue pools, adjacencies, and M&A integration.
- AI governance & ethics: Model risk, IP provenance, privacy, explainability—CIOs lead the operating model, not just the tooling.
- Cyber and operational resilience: Board-level scenarios, regulatory readiness, cyber insurance posture.
- Capital allocation for platforms: Treating platforms as infrastructure for growth with transparent ROI and depreciation schedules.
- Workforce transformation: Skills mix, productivity, and change adoption to realize value from investments.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

Scale, Pause, Retire — How We Decide & The Architectural Principles

Decision criteria:

- Valueralization: Demonstrated outcome vs. hypothesis; time-to-value and payback.
- Risk & compliance: Data sovereignty, IP risk, auditability.
- Integration fit: API/event maturity, vendor lock-in, portability.
- Total cost of ownership: Run + change + exit costs; carbon intensity.

- Operability: SLOs, MTTR, runbook maturity.
 - Architectural principles:
 - Composability & open standards (avoid monolith lock-in).
 - APIs and events as first-class citizens.
 - Data once, productized, governed (data products with SLAs).
 - Cloud-smart (not cloud-only): Right workload right environment (SaaS, PaaS, edge, on-prem).
 - Security & privacy by design with least privilege and continuous verification.
 - Cost & carbon observability baked in (FinOps/GreenOps).
 - Actions:
 - Scale: Patterns/products with proven unit economics and demand.
 - Pause: Pilots without a path to operationalization or unclear risk posture.
 - Retire: Redundant platforms, technical debt hotspots; fund transformation via tech debt buy-down programs.
- Enablement platforms (DevEx, Data Platform, ML Platform, API Platform) run by Platform Engineering.
 - Centers of Enablement for architecture, SecOps, FinOps, and SRE practices.

Capabilities & culture:

- T-shaped talent: Deep skill + adjacent fluency (e.g., data engineers who understand product metrics and privacy).
- Engineering excellence: CI/CD, IaC, trunk-based development, test automation—measured via DORA and SPACE metrics.
- AI literacy for all: Secure AI usage, prompt engineering, model risk basics.
- Incentives tied to outcomes (customer NPS, cost-to-serve, resilience), not ticket volume.
- Communities of Practice and internal guilds to scale patterns and mentorship.

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

Talent & Culture — Architecting Future-Ready Teams

Team topology:

- Product-aligned squads (business + engineering + data + design + risk) with end-to-end ownership.

Q WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

Legacy Constraints We're Redesigning or Dismantling in 2026

- Monolithic ERPs / tightly coupled cores → Domain-aligned services with anti-corruption layers and phased carve-outs.
- Point-to-point integrations → Event-driven architecture with canonical schemas and API gateways.
- Siloed data marts → Data mesh/fabric with governed,

discoverable data products.

- Manual controls and change approvals → Policy-as-code, automated compliance, change risk scoring.
- Capex-heavy refresh cycles → Product-based Opex models with value-based stage gates.

How we justify it:

- Build CFO-ready investment cases linking technical debt removal to lower run-rate, faster time-to-market, and reduced risk exposure.
- Use before/after unit economics (e.g., cost per order, lead time for change, failure-induced downtime).
- Pilot → scale based on quantified deltas (cycle time, defect escape rate, SLA adherence).

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

Defining Success as CIO in 2026 — Beyond KPIs

Enterprise impact lenses:

1. Growth Enablement
2. Resilience & Trust
3. Velocity & Quality
4. Economic Efficiency
5. Adoption & Behavior Change
6. Sustainability
7. Talent Health

Narrative of impact: A quarterly Strategy-to-Impact report that ties investments to customer outcomes, financial performance, and risk posture—supported by living architecture and a transparent decision log.

Architecting trust and resilience in digital finance

Basharit Rafique, CTO of GCC Exchange, explains how the CTO role now balances innovation, regulatory compliance, and enterprise resilience to drive sustainable growth in 2026.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

The CTO role has evolved into a steward of digital trust and enterprise resilience. Beyond enabling technology, the role now architects regulatory-ready platforms, data governance, and risk-aware innovation. In practice, this means designing digital ecosystems that balance growth with compliance, ensuring technology decisions reinforce institutional credibility and long-term sustainability.

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW

ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

Our priorities centre on scalable digital platforms, unified data governance, and regulatory resilience. These initiatives are designed to support sustained growth, faster regulatory adaptability, and future product innovation, rather than delivering isolated technology improvements or short-term efficiencies.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU BALANCE INNOVATION WITH RESILIENCE? AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

Innovation and resilience are no longer trade-offs. We



BASHARIT RAFIQUE

CTO
GCC EXCHANGE

architect modular, policy-driven environments where experimentation is controlled, auditable, and secure, while core systems are protected through layered controls, continuous monitoring, and regulatory-aligned architectures. This allows agility without compromising operational or regulatory stability.

Q HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE

DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOS NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

My engagement with the CEO and board focuses on digital risk, regulatory readiness, AI governance, and long-term platform sustainability. CTOs are increasingly expected to lead conversations on how technology shapes enterprise risk posture, regulatory confidence, and strategic optionality, not simply support execution.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

We apply clear architectural principles: regulatory compliance by design, data sovereignty, security, and measurable business value. Technologies that enhance transparency, automation, and scalability are accelerated, while initiatives that introduce complexity, risk, or unclear accountability are paused or retired.

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

We are cultivating teams that combine deep technical capability with regulatory literacy and



My engagement with the CEO and board focuses on digital risk, regulatory readiness, AI governance, and long-term platform sustainability. ”

business understanding. Our focus is on building a culture of accountability, continuous learning, and ethical innovation, ensuring our digital workforce is prepared for evolving regulatory expectations and emerging technologies.

Q WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

We are addressing legacy architectures that limit transparency, scalability, and regulatory responsiveness. These transformations are justified through clear links to risk reduction, operational resilience, and the ability to respond proactively to regulatory change while supporting future growth.

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

Success is reflected in the enterprise's confidence to scale, innovate, and comply simultaneously within this highly regulated financial landscape. My impact is measured by how effectively our digital architecture strengthens regulatory confidence, operational resilience, and long-term business optionality—enabling secure growth across markets while consistently meeting supervisory expectations beyond traditional delivery metrics.

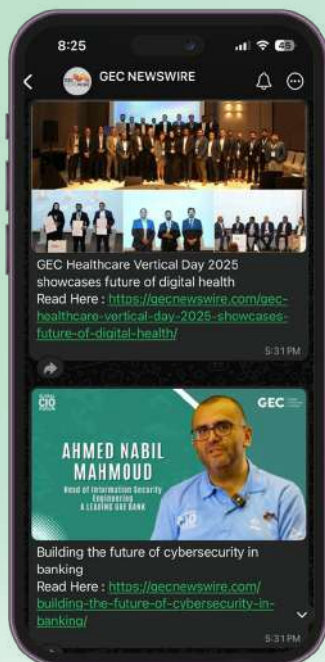


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Future-ready operations for 2026

Syed Kareemuddin from The Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Saudi Arabia, highlights how digital operations and cybersecurity now underpin enterprise agility, enabling the organisation to innovate rapidly while staying secure and compliant.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

In day-to-day practice, this evolution shows up as:

- CIOs participating in strategic planning and investment decisions
- Technology initiatives being measured by business impact, not just delivery metrics
- Stronger partnerships with business leaders, vendors, and ecosystems
- A balance between innovation and governance, ensuring speed without sacrificing control
- In short, the CIO has moved from “running IT” to “designing the future of the organisation.”

As we enter the new year, this strategic architect role is not optional—it is central to how organisations remain competitive, resilient, and relevant in an increasingly digital world.

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

The strategic priorities for the year ahead are intentionally designed to create sustained business value, rather than delivering isolated or short-term technology wins. Each priority is anchored to long-term growth, resilience, and competitiveness, with technology acting as the enabler—not the end goal.



SYED KAREEMUDDIN

IT OPERATIONS & CYBERSECURITY HEAD/CIO
THE COCA COLA BOTTLING COMPANY OF
SAUDI ARABIA

What differentiates these priorities from short-term technology wins is that success is defined by business outcomes: revenue enablement, cost-to-serve reduction, speed to market, risk reduction, and customer trust. Technology investments are sequenced as part of a multi-year roadmap, ensuring today's decisions strengthen tomorrow's options.

Ultimately, the strategy is about architecting capabilities that endure—so the organization can

grow faster, respond to change more effectively, and remain competitive well beyond the year ahead.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU BALANCE INNOVATION WITH RESILIENCE? AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

Innovation today must happen quickly, but not recklessly. This

means creating environments where experimentation is encouraged at the edges—through modular architectures, cloud-native platforms, and sandboxes—while the core systems that run the business remain stable and tightly governed. Decoupling front-end innovation from back-end systems allows new ideas to be tested and scaled without putting critical operations at risk.

What this looks like in practice

- Core systems are modernised and stabilised, while innovation happens through APIs and digital layers
- Cloud and automation provide elasticity without compromising control
- Security and resilience metrics sit alongside innovation KPIs at the executive level

Ultimately, in 2026 the CIO's role as a strategic architect is to design an ecosystem where the organisation can move fast, adapt continuously, and remain secure—ensuring innovation fuels growth while the core business stays protected and resilient.

Q HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOS NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

This year, partnering with the CEO and the board is less about reporting on technology performance and more about shaping enterprise-wide decisions.



Innovation today must happen quickly, but not recklessly. ”

The CIO is increasingly expected to act as a trusted advisor, bringing a technology-informed perspective to the organisation's most critical strategic conversations

Ultimately, the CIO's partnership with the CEO and board is defined by trust and influence. By translating technology into strategic, financial, and risk language, CIOs help shape decisions that determine the organisation's future—not just its IT roadmap.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

As AI, cloud, and data platforms mature, the challenge is no longer access to technology but disciplined decision-making. Determining what to scale, pause, or retire is guided by clear architectural principles that prioritise long-term value, resilience, and simplicity over novelty.

What this looks like in practice

- AI use cases are scaled only after proving value and ethical robustness in production
- Cloud investments focus on platform efficiency and resilience, not unchecked consumption
- Legacy systems are retired incrementally through strangler patterns and API layers
- Architecture reviews focus on reducing complexity, not adding new tools

Ultimately, the guiding architectural principle is intentional simplicity. By scaling what compounds value,



pausing what distracts, and retiring what no longer serves the strategy, the CIO designs an ecosystem that remains agile, resilient, and aligned with long-term business objectives.

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

Talent and culture are now as critical to enterprise architecture as platforms and systems. In the new year, architecting digital teams is less about optimising for today's delivery and more about building capabilities that can evolve as technology, markets, and business models change.

Ultimately, architecting for future readiness means designing teams that can learn faster than the pace of change. By focusing on

capabilities, culture, and adaptable operating models, the CIO ensures digital teams deliver today while remaining ready for whatever comes next.

Q WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

In 2026, the most deliberate architectural work is focused on dismantling legacy constraints that limit speed, resilience, and growth. These constraints are not only technical—they are embedded in processes, funding models, and mindsets. Addressing them requires both intentional redesign and a clear business narrative.

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU

AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

Looking ahead, success as a CIO this year is defined less by what is delivered and more by what the organisation is able to do because of the foundations, decisions, and behaviours put in place. Beyond traditional KPIs, impact is measured by strategic influence, organisational capability, and long-term optionality.

A key measure of success is whether enterprise strategy is no longer constrained by technology. If the business can enter new markets, launch products faster, integrate acquisitions smoothly, or respond to disruption with confidence, that reflects architectural success—even if it is not tied to a single delivery milestone.

Shaping systems, not just technology

Adam Lalani, CTO at Alliad, explains how modern technology leadership blends innovation, resilience, and business impact to design cross-functional systems that drive measurable growth.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

Over the past year, my remit has shifted from “own the stack” to “shape the system”—not just the technical system, but the operating model, culture, and business mechanisms that technology enables. In practice that means I architect capabilities that cut across functions (procurement, QA, finance, operations), and I measure success by business outcomes rather than feature releases.

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-

TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

Productise AI into revenue-enabling capabilities with clear security sign-offs and builder cadence.

Harden digital trust – elevate our cyber posture so growth isn’t fragile.

Architect AI ready data backbone across functions to connect decisioning with clean, governed data

Cloud-smart economics and resilience - tie platform choices to value streams, reliability, and operating cost—not hype cycles.

The industry dialogue we’re part of emphasises exactly that.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU BALANCE INNOVATION WITH RESILIENCE? AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES



ADAM LALANI

CTO
Alliad

THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

I run a dual-speed architecture: an “edge” where we experiment with new technology and domain specific pilots, and a “core” with strict SRE/Change windows, rollback plans, and zero-trust controls. Nothing goes into production without strict adherence to guardrails in place.

Q HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE

CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOS NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

I maintain a regular rhythm with our CEO, Rashad Sinokrot, that includes a fortnightly strategic catch-up—to frame trade-offs and tempo (where we go fast, where we stabilize). We’ve also moved beyond “supporting decks” to lively and engaged discussions at Exco level that are now enterprise

conversations – not IT slots.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

- Cloud smart over cloud first
- Platform before point solution
- Security and operability as gate checks
- Value-stream fit and user experience
- Finops discipline



Anything that lowers operational drag is on the table – stakeholders will always back such initiatives when the outcomes are evident. ”

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

I organise around builder pods (cross-functional), domain champions and open training rituals – culture is the multiplier; the architecture helps, but capabilities are improved by clarity, safety and momentum.

Q WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

Anything that lowers operational drag is on the table – stakeholders will always back such initiatives when the outcomes are evident.

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

- Compounded business time returned to the front line
- Risk reduced without slowing growth
- Maintaining Enterprise confidence – visible to our leadership and the market. If we can look back and say our architecture made people’s work easier, our business safer, and our growth more deliberate—that’s a good year.

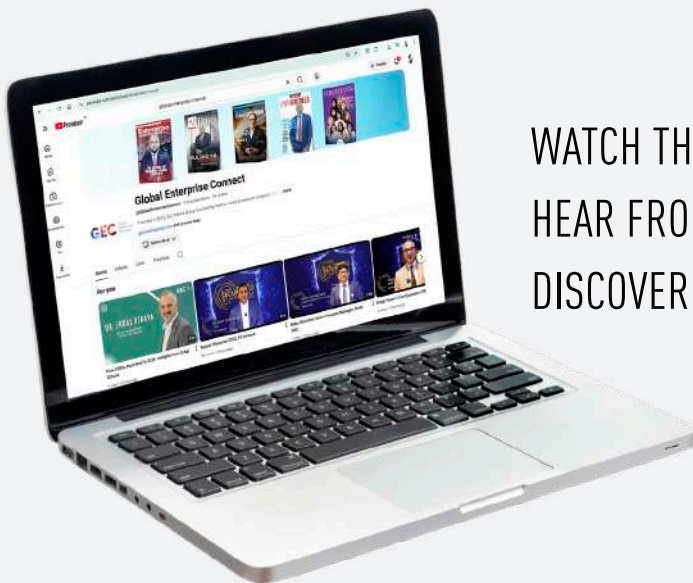


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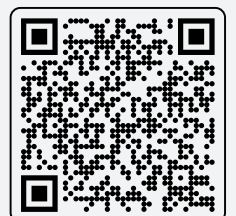
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Tech that matters

Mohit Duggar, Director of IT at Millennium Hotels & Resorts, shares how modern CIOs drive innovation, resilience, and sustainability to deliver seamless, personalized, and future-ready guest experiences.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

In our hospitality organisation—the CIO role has transformed dramatically from being a back-office tech manager to a core strategic architect. Historically, we focused on keeping systems like PMS (e.g., Oracle Opera) and POS (e.g., Oracle Symphony) running smoothly, ensuring uptime for reservations and payments. Now, in 2026, I'm deeply embedded in board-level discussions, designing IT architectures that drive revenue growth, guest personalisation, and sustainability.

In practice, this means I'm not just implementing tools; I'm architecting ecosystems. For

instance, we integrate AI-driven RMS (Revenue Management Systems) with IoT for smart rooms to predict guest preferences and optimize pricing dynamically. I lead cross-functional teams to align tech with business goals, like using data lakes for predictive analytics on occupancy trends.

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

My top priorities for 2026 focus on sustainable, scalable growth:
AI-Enhanced Guest Experiences: Scaling generative AI for hyper-personalized services, like chatbots integrated with CRM that recommend tailored amenities based on past stays.



MOHIT DUGGAR

Director of IT
Millennium Hotels & Resorts

This aligns with long-term growth by boosting loyalty and lifetime value, not just quick upsell wins.

Sustainable Tech Infrastructure: Migrating to green cloud platforms and edge computing for energy-efficient operations, such as optimizing HVAC in properties via IoT. This supports ESG goals, attracting eco-conscious travellers and investors for enduring market positioning.

Data-Driven Resilience: Building

a unified data platform using middleware to integrate PMS, POS, and external channels. It's geared toward long-term agility, enabling real-time insights for crisis response rather than siloed fixes.

These priorities are vetted against 5-year projections, ensuring they compound value through network effects, like data synergies across properties.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU
BALANCE INNOVATION

WITH RESILIENCE? AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

Balancing innovation and resilience are about layered architectures: innovate at the edges while fortifying the core. In hospitality, this means adopting microservices without disrupting legacy systems like PMS.

Practically, I use a "resilience-by-design" framework:

Agility Layers: Containerized apps (Kubernetes) for rapid deployment of new features, like contactless check-in apps, allowing A/B testing without full overhauls.

Safeguards: Zero-trust security models and redundant hybrids (on-prem + cloud) to protect HSIA (High-Speed Internet Access) and payment gateways. We simulate disruptions via chaos engineering to ensure uptime during peak seasons.

Governance: Quarterly innovation sprints balanced with risk audits, prioritizing projects with high ROI and low disruption (e.g., AI for predictive maintenance over unproven metaverse integrations). This ensures we innovate to stay competitive while resilient against cyber risks or supply chain issues.

HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOs NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

In 2026, my partnership with the



Success in 2026 is defined by transformative impact: Enabling a YoY growth in digital revenue streams and achieving zero major breaches 🗨️

CEO and board is collaborative and proactive. I co-chair strategy sessions, presenting tech as a growth lever, not a cost centre. For example, I led a board discussion on AI ethics in guest data usage,

influencing our privacy policies. CIOs now led conversations on: Digital Transformation ROI: Quantifying how investments in booking engines drive revenue uplift through better conversion rates.

Risk and Opportunity Mapping: Leading cyber resilience talks, like adopting blockchain for secure loyalty programs, to mitigate threats while unlocking new revenue.

Sustainability Metrics: Driving ESG reporting via BI tools, aligning tech with corporate goals.

WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

Decisions are guided by principles like modularity, scalability, and value alignment:

Scale: Proven tech with high adoption, like AI in chat interfaces if it shows efficiency gains in guest services.

Pause: Emerging but unripe tech, such as full metaverse integrations, if ROI isn't clear amid regulatory flux - monitor via pilots.

Retire: Legacy systems dragging performance, like outdated on-prem servers, if cloud alternatives reduce costs and improve speed.

We use a decision matrix: Assess against criteria like interoperability, security and business impact. Annual tech audits with tools like Gartner benchmarks ensure we're future-proof, retiring silos for unified platforms.



Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

I'm architecting teams around hybrid skills and continuous learning:

- **Structure:** Cross-functional pods blending IT with hospitality experts, using agile methodologies for faster iterations.
- **Capabilities:** Upskilling via partnerships and AI literacy programs to handle tools like predictive analytics in RMS.
- **Culture:** Fostering innovation through hackathons on guest tech and remote-friendly tools. We measure via engagement surveys and retention rates

Q WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

Key redesigns include:

- **Monolithic PMS Overhauls:** Dismantling old Fidelio setups for cloud-native alternatives, enabling real-time integrations with channels.
- **Siloed Data Systems:** Consolidating disparate databases into a central lake, dismantling outdated ETL processes for modern data meshes.
- **Outdated Networks:** Redesigning wired HSIA for 6G/Wi-Fi 7 meshes, improving guest satisfaction scores.

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU

AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

Success in 2026 is defined by transformative impact: Enabling a YoY growth in digital revenue streams and achieving zero major breaches.

- **Beyond metrics** like system uptime (99.9%) or project delivery (on-time 95%), I measure impact through:
- **Strategic Influence:** Board adoption of my recommendations, e.g., AI governance frameworks.
- **Innovation Adoption:** Employee and guest feedback on new tech.
- **Long-Term Readiness:** Benchmarking against peers on agility indices, ensuring we're architects of a resilient, guest-centric future.

Shaping digital resilience

Yuosof Radi, CIO at Alkhabeer Capital, shares how the modern CIO role goes beyond technology management to designing resilient, scalable, and strategically aligned digital foundations.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

The role of the CIO has evolved decisively from managing technology to architecting enterprise capability. Today, the CIO is no longer defined by systems ownership or operational efficiency alone, but by the ability to shape how technology enables strategy, resilience, and long-term value.

In practice, this shift means the CIO is deeply embedded in business planning, risk discussions, and investment prioritization. The focus has moved from selecting tools to designing scalable, compliant, and adaptable digital foundations that support the organisation's future

direction.

As a strategic architect, the CIO ensures that digital capabilities are intentionally designed to serve the business agenda. Technology becomes a deliberate instrument to enable business outcomes, rather than a standalone objective. This perspective has been shaped by a career that began deep in infrastructure and operations and gradually expanded into enterprise strategy, resilience, and governance—where accountability for outcomes matters as much as innovation itself.

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

The strategic priorities for the



YUOSOF RADI

CIO
Alkhabeer Capital

year ahead are centered on building durable value rather than delivering isolated technology wins. These priorities typically fall into three interconnected areas.

First, strengthening enterprise resilience by embedding availability, cybersecurity, and regulatory alignment into the core architecture. Second, enabling customer-centric digital experiences that simplify journeys, improve transparency, and reduce friction through

automation. Third, positioning data as a trusted strategic asset that supports faster, better-informed decision-making.

What distinguishes these priorities is their long-term orientation. Each initiative is assessed not only on delivery success, but on its contribution to scalability, risk reduction, and sustained business confidence.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU
BALANCE INNOVATION
WITH RESILIENCE? AS A

STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

Balancing innovation with resilience requires intentional architectural design. Innovation must move fast without destabilizing the core business. This is achieved by designing stable foundational systems while allowing controlled innovation at the edges.

Core platforms are optimized for reliability, compliance, and predictability, while innovation layers are structured to support experimentation, analytics, and emerging capabilities without introducing systemic risk. This approach allows organisations to remain agile while protecting trust, continuity, and operational integrity.

The CIO's role is to ensure innovation is progressive and responsible—advancing the business without compromising its foundations.

Q HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOS NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

The CIO today is expected to actively shape enterprise-wide decisions, not simply support them. Engagement with the CEO and board increasingly focuses on strategic trade-offs: speed versus control, innovation versus risk, and scalability versus cost.



The strategic priorities for the year ahead are centered on building durable value rather than delivering isolated technology wins. ☺☺

Rather than presenting technology roadmaps, the CIO frames discussions around capabilities, exposure, and long-term options. This positions technology leadership as a strategic advisor, enabling the board to make informed decisions grounded in both opportunity and accountability.

The ability to translate technical complexity into clear business implications is now a core expectation of the CIO role.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

Technology decisions are guided by architectural discipline rather than market momentum. Platforms are evaluated against clear criteria: business relevance, integration readiness, risk profile, and long-term sustainability.

Capabilities that demonstrably improve outcomes and align with enterprise architecture are scaled. Initiatives that generate interest but lack a defined value pathway are paused. Technologies that add complexity without proportional benefit are retired.

This disciplined approach ensures the digital landscape remains intentional, coherent, and aligned with strategic priorities.

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE



FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

Future-ready digital teams are built around adaptability, accountability, and continuous learning. The focus is less on static roles and more on developing architects, integrators, and problem-solvers who can operate across domains.

Digital capability is increasingly distributed across the organisation, with IT acting as the orchestrator of platforms, standards, and governance. Culture plays a decisive role—teams must be empowered to challenge legacy thinking while operating within clear architectural guardrails.

This approach ensures readiness not just for current demands, but for emerging business needs.

WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU

INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

Legacy constraints are often as much organisational as they are technical. In 2026, the focus is on simplifying fragmented platforms, reducing manual processes, and breaking down silos that slow execution and obscure accountability.

These transformations are justified through a clear business lens: improved resilience, faster decision-making, reduced risk, and better transparency. Modernisation is positioned not as a technology upgrade, but as an enabler of scale, confidence, and operational clarity.

LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

Success is not measured solely by KPIs or project milestones. It is reflected in the organisation's confidence in its digital foundations—confidence that systems will scale, data can be trusted, risks are understood, and innovation can proceed responsibly.

A successful CIO leaves behind an enterprise that is structurally stronger, more adaptable, and better equipped to make informed decisions. That is the true measure of impact as a strategic architect of the enterprise.

Shaping the digital core

AlMutaz Mahd, IT GM at Almajal Alarabi, shares how the CIO role has evolved from managing systems to architecting enterprise-wide digital foundations that drive growth, efficiency, and strategic decision-making.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

The CIO role today is no longer about running systems. It's more shaping the business. Over the past years, my role evolved from technology leader to strategic architect as we redesigned core processes across finance, HR, procurement, and operations. Instead of implementing tools, I now focus on building the digital foundations that enable growth of business and departments, considering cloud adoption, data strategy, integrations, and automation across the group. In practice, this means I'm sitting earlier in business discussions, influencing strategy, and designing

future-state operating models, not just IT projects. "IT is leading the business nowadays".

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

My priorities this year are very clear and very business-driven. First, eliminating manual work by ensuring data always comes from its original source — whether internal systems or external government platforms. This removes errors, speeds up processes, and gives teams more time to focus on value, not data entry.

Second, we're leveraging cloud tools for integrations, extensions, and automations.



ALMUTAZ MAHD

IT GM
Almajal Alarabi

Cloud readiness dramatically reduces provisioning, setup time, and overall project duration, which means faster delivery with higher quality.

Third, I'm pushing for a completely paperless organisation. In Saudi Arabia, the government has already moved to digital identities and digital forms, so the private sector must keep up. There is no reason for any business to still rely on paper.

Fourth, we're building ecosystems around real business

flows—not forcing the business to adjust to technology. From supplier registration on external portals, to warehouse receiving via mobile apps, to OCR-based invoice recognition—technology must serve operations and remove friction.

Fifth, timely decision-making is a priority. Leaders must get the right information at the right moment. That's why I'm strengthening analytical reporting that connects data from multiple systems and

departments.

And finally, we're focusing on high-volume, repetitive processes because these have the biggest impact on employee satisfaction and operational efficiency. Simple transactions like leave requests should never be manual—these are touchpoints that affect the entire organisation.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU BALANCE INNOVATION WITH RESILIENCE? AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

Innovation without resilience creates risk; resilience without innovation creates stagnation.

In 2026, we balance both by designing modular architectures, which are cloud-first & integration ready. Every new initiative is evaluated on stability, security, and scalability. This allows us to pilot and test new ideas, i.e. AI, automation, mobility apps without huge investment or time.

Q HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOs NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

My partnership with the CEO and board is deeper than ever. CIOs are no longer just supporting decisions—we're shaping them. I lead conversations around digital investment, cybersecurity posture,



Innovation without resilience creates risk; resilience without innovation creates stagnation. ”

ROI from cloud and AI adoption, and how technology supports expansion and operational efficiency. I ensure technology is part of every strategic decision, not an afterthought.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

We follow clear architectural principles: business value, integration potential, cost-to-run, and long-term sustainability. If a solution drives efficiency and scales across subsidiaries—like our supplier portal or HR integrations—we expand it. If it adds complexity or duplicates capability, we pause it. Legacy systems that limit automation or data access are retired. The goal is a simple, unified, cloud-first architecture where every system has a clear and measurable purpose.

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

Technology doesn't transform companies, people do.

This year, I'm shaping digital teams around agility, cross-functional collaboration, and ongoing enhancement. We're investing in upskilling, certifications, and building internal capability around cloud, integrations, cybersecurity, and data. My aim is to create a



culture where the IT team thinks like partners to the business, not service providers. Initiating ideas and enhancement in every aspect. Educating the staff is also important, in professional and personal use of technology. Not accepting manual transactions, rejecting exceptions without business justification and securing their personal and financial information is critical for every person from CEO to tea boy in remote area.

Q WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE

TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

We are intentionally dismantling siloed legacy processes, manual HR tasks, fragmented procurement cycles, outdated on-prem systems, and non-integrated data sources. Moving to unified platforms like Oracle, integrating recruitment with HRMS, automating supplier qualification, and eliminating redundant systems frees the business to scale. I justify these moves by demonstrating clear ROI: reduced workload, faster cycle times, better compliance, and improved decision-making.

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU

AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE ENTERPRISE?

Success for me goes beyond system uptime or project delivery. It is defined by how much technology accelerates the business. If leaders make faster decisions because data is clear, if employees are more productive, if customers feel the impact of our efficiency, and if we reduce cost while enabling growth—that's real success.

My impact is measured by how much we move the organisation forward, not just how many projects we complete.

Building digital confidence

Shailesh Mani, Group IT Head at DBMSC, reflects on the CIO's evolution into a strategic architect - balancing innovation with resilience, aligning technology with long-term business value, and addressing one of today's most pressing challenges: building the right digital talent for the future.

Q AS WE STEP INTO A NEW YEAR, HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CIO EVOLVED FROM TECHNOLOGY LEADER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION? WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE TODAY?

Over the years, the CIO role has moved well beyond keeping systems running and costs under control. Earlier, the focus was largely on infrastructure stability, application delivery, vendor management, and ensuring IT operations were reliable and efficient.

Today, the expectation is very different. The CIO is increasingly involved in shaping how digital, data, and AI capabilities support the business model, drive growth, and manage risk. While operational excellence still matters, the role now extends into revenue discussions, resilience planning, and enterprise-

wide transformation. In practice, this means acting as a strategic partner to the business rather than functioning purely as a technology owner.

Q WHAT ARE THE TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES YOU HAVE ARCHITECTED FOR THE YEAR AHEAD, AND HOW ARE THEY ALIGNED WITH LONG-TERM BUSINESS GROWTH RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM TECHNOLOGY WINS?

The priorities for the coming year are driven by business outcomes, not by technology for its own sake. With technology evolving at a rapid pace, the focus is on choosing initiatives that genuinely support long-term growth and competitiveness.

A major area of attention is improving business processes through AI and data engineering. These investments are expected



SHAILESH MANI

GROUP IT HEAD
DBMSC

to deliver tangible benefits such as better decision-making, improved efficiency, and meaningful cost savings. The intent is simple: technology initiatives should clearly show how they contribute to business performance and the bottom line.

Q IN 2026, HOW DO YOU BALANCE INNOVATION WITH RESILIENCE? AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT, HOW DO YOU DESIGN IT STRATEGIES

THAT ENABLE AGILITY WHILE SAFEGUARDING THE CORE BUSINESS?

Balancing innovation with resilience is one of the biggest challenges facing CIOs in 2026. On one hand, the business needs speed, experimentation, and new ideas. On the other, core operations must remain stable, secure, and dependable.

The approach is to build a strong and reliable IT foundation, while creating safe spaces for innovation. This allows teams

to experiment and move quickly without putting critical systems or customer trust at risk. Innovation should never come at the cost of stability.

Q HOW ARE YOU PARTNERING WITH THE CEO AND BOARD THIS YEAR TO INFLUENCE ENTERPRISE-WIDE DECISION-MAKING? WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE CIOs NOW EXPECTED TO LEAD, NOT JUST SUPPORT?

In today's environment, technology decisions are business decisions. CEOs and boards can no longer afford to view technology as a back-office function. As a result, the CIO's partnership with the CEO and board has become essential. CIOs are now expected to actively contribute to strategic conversations, particularly around AI, digital platforms, and long-term scalability. The role is to act as a trusted advisor, helping leadership understand where technology can create value and where it introduces risk. A key part of this dialogue is ensuring technology investments are seen as long-term enablers of growth, rather than discretionary expenses.

Q WITH AI, CLOUD, AND DATA PLATFORMS MATURING RAPIDLY, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO SCALE, WHAT TO PAUSE, AND WHAT TO RETIRE? WHAT ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES GUIDE THESE DECISIONS?

With AI, cloud, and data platforms maturing quickly, not every technology deserves to be scaled, and not every legacy system should be replaced immediately. These



One of the toughest challenges for CIOs today is not access to technology, but access to the right talent. ”

decisions must be grounded in business reality.

The key question is always: Does this technology genuinely help our business operate better, grow faster, or stay more resilient? Cost, complexity, legacy data, and long-term sustainability all play a role in these decisions. Technology changes are made thoughtfully, not reactively, with a clear understanding of their impact on the business.

Q TALENT AND CULTURE REMAIN CRITICAL IN THE NEW YEAR - HOW ARE YOU ARCHITECTING DIGITAL TEAMS AND CAPABILITIES TO ENSURE FUTURE READINESS, NOT JUST CURRENT PERFORMANCE?

One of the toughest challenges for CIOs today is not access to technology, but access to the right talent. Finding and retaining people who understand both modern technologies and business priorities is increasingly difficult. The digital talent stack is the concept which is still on its initial stages of adoption. Organisations should adopt a policy of moving towards a combination of human talents along with digital talent model with the help of AI and Data engineering platforms. This means building stable, adaptable teams with deep skills in AI, data, cloud, and resilience, organised as product or platform owners who continuously evolve their domain for the entire business support rather than creating a project based / technology-based team. This creates deeper accountability, stronger skills, and better alignment with business goals.

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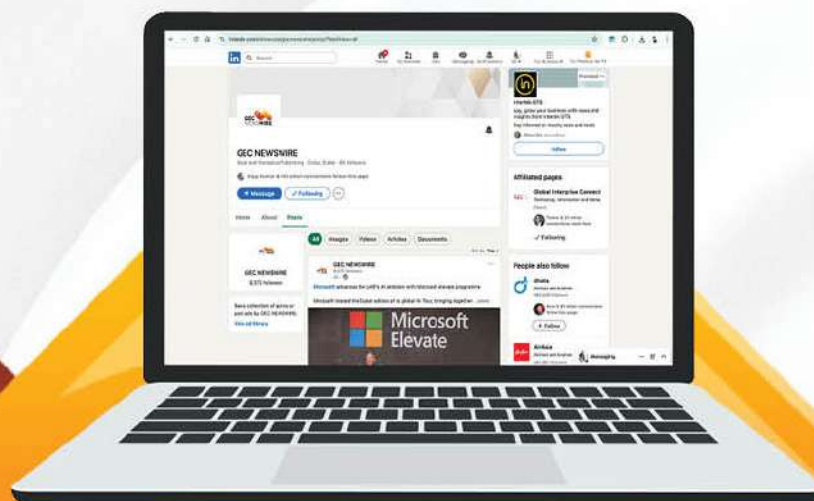
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Q WHAT LEGACY CONSTRAINTS ARE YOU INTENTIONALLY REDESIGNING OR DISMANTLING IN 2026, AND HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY THESE TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVES TO BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS?

In 2026, dismantling legacy constraints is a deliberate strategic act, not a technical exercise. Dealing with legacy constraints is one of the most important—and often most uncomfortable—responsibilities of a CIO. These constraints may exist in technology, processes, organizational culture, or even in long-standing business assumptions.

If left untouched, legacy systems

can quietly increase security risks, drive up costs, and slow the organization down. The CIO's role is to clearly explain these risks to leadership, supported by data and real-world impact, and to make a strong case for change. Modernization is not about replacing systems for the sake of it, but about protecting the organization's future growth and stability.

Q LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS FOR YOU AS A CIO THIS YEAR? BEYOND KPIS AND DELIVERY METRICS, HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR IMPACT AS A STRATEGIC ARCHITECT OF THE

ENTERPRISE?

Success as a CIO goes far beyond delivering projects on time or keeping systems running. It is about the confidence the business has in its technology foundation. When business leaders say, "We are able to move faster and with less risk because of how our technology is structured," that is a real measure of success. Ultimately, a CIO's impact is seen in how well the organization can adapt to change, manage uncertainty, and continue to grow. Technology should make the business stronger and more flexible, not more complicated—and achieving that balance is what defines success.

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