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Transforming challenges into enduring value

CEO, LIBAN LAIT

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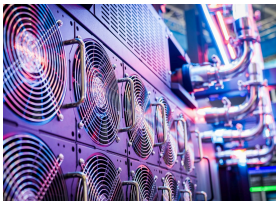
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THE CIO TABLE

FROM THE EDITORS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Leaders Building Enduring Businesses

Every edition of The CIO Table begins with one conversation. This time it is with Ziad Atik, CEO at Liban Lait.

Four decades of leading companies through the Middle East's storms. The chief executive of Liban Lait, Lebanon's largest dairy producer, on growth in one of the region's hardest economies.

Our cover story follows Ziad through the choices that shaped the work, from the early years to the decisions being made now, and asks what other leaders can take from them.

Also in this edition: Companies that last choose the risks they carry. Durability is rarely an accident of age. In volatile sectors such as dairy, the businesses that endure are the ones that decide which shocks to absorb and which to pass on.

Then: Data residency in the Gulf: what technology leaders should plan for. The question has moved from where data sits to who can reach it, and under which law. Four decisions to make this year, and the questions to put to every supplier.

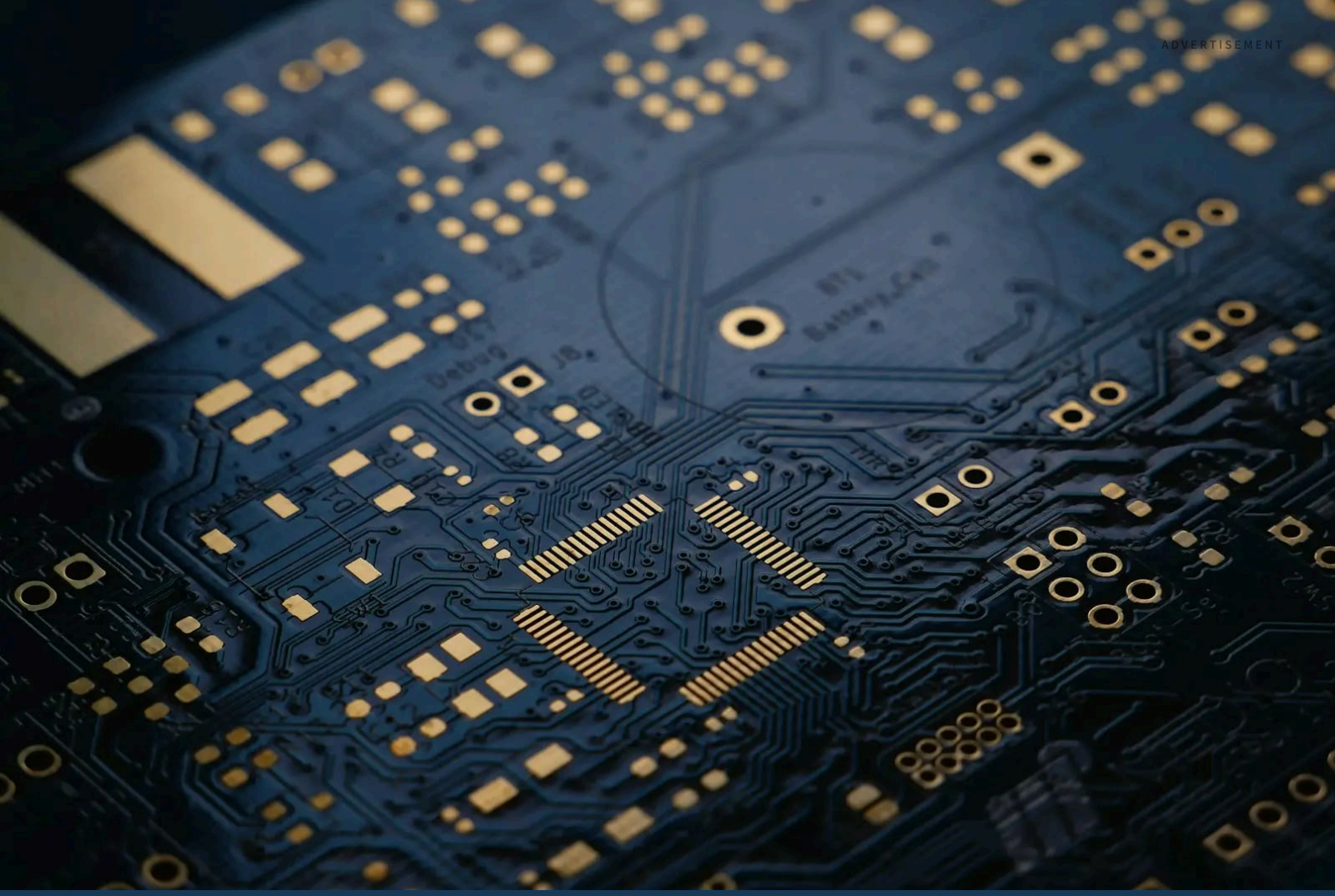
And: Jamie Dimon and the fortress a bank runs on. Two decades at the top of JPMorgan Chase, through a financial crisis and a costly trading loss. What a fortress balance sheet and a standing technology budget say about running a firm for the bad year.

As always, we would like to hear what you would have done differently. The conversation continues at theciotable.com. ■

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COVER STORY

ZIAD ATIK

Transforming challenges into enduring value

In the dynamic yet often volatile business landscape of the Middle East, true leadership is measured not in quiet years of steady profit, but in the ability to navigate storms and emerge stronger. Few embody this definition more completely than Ziad Atik, a strategic CEO whose four-decade career reads like a masterclass in transforming adversity into advantage. As the newly appointed CEO of Liban Lait, currently Lebanon's largest dairy producer, Atik has just delivered a breathtaking performance: 30% year-on-year sales growth and a 70% improvement in net results in a challenging economic climate. This is not an anomaly, it is the latest iteration of a lifelong pattern built on a foundation of perseverance, dedication and always going the extra mile. From FMCG distribution in Lebanon to industrial turnarounds in the Gulf, his journey is a testament to the power of disciplined vision, operational grit and an unwavering belief that people are the biggest asset. His story is not merely one of corporate success, but a narrative of resilient leadership that rebuilds institutions, empowers cultures and redirects entire market sectors toward sustainable futures.

REIGNITING A NATIONAL ICON

When Ziad Atik took the helm at Liban Lait, he encountered a challenge he had mastered time and again: a giant at rest. Lebanon's largest dairy producer possessed market dominance but lacked momentum,

requiring not merely adjustment, but a fundamental reignition. With a "can-do" positive attitude, his first 100 days were about creating stability and signaling intent. He immediately introduced rigorous financial discipline through a zero-based review of all costs, a testament to his focus on efficiency and productivity. Simultaneously, he realigned the leadership team under an open-door policy, appointing key figures with a mandate for agility and accountability. Perhaps most crucially, he demonstrated "boots on the ground" leadership by personally re-engaging with major clients and distributors. "Transformation happens in the market, not just at the strategy table," Atik states. By implementing a structured Customer Relationship Management (CRM) framework, he shifted relationships from transactional to strategic partnerships, guided by transparency and consistency. These decisive actions created the foundation for the deeper process re-engineering that drove the remarkable 70% net result improvement. "It was about restoring organizational agility and reminding everyone, internally and externally, what true market leadership requires." This rapid repositioning showcases a critical principle of his approach: that turnarounds are won not by a single grand gesture, but through the simultaneous and disciplined activation of financial, human and commercial controls.

THE FORMATIVE FORGE

The blueprint for Atik's later turnarounds was drafted not in corporate boardrooms, but on the front lines of commerce. To trace the origins of his approach, one must return to the ventures that shaped his leadership DNA. His professional forge was ZITEX, an exclusive FMCG distribution agency where a 17-year tenure served as his foundational masterclass. Here, starting young, he learned to scale a business from the ground up, expanding points of sale from 150 to 2,500 and growing turnover nearly tenfold. This was his first laboratory for understanding consumer demand, route-to-market efficiency and the critical link between cash flow velocity and growth. This early lesson in building market dominance through relentless execution prepared him for the defining corporate ascent of his early career: The Taanayel Les Fermes–Bonjus Group. Over nearly two decades, he engineered one of Lebanon's most notable commercial triumphs, increasing market share from 25% to 65%, a fourfold lead over the nearest competitor and scaling turnover from $15M to $85M.

This was not just a sales victory; it was a systemic transformation. Atik engineered a culture of rigorous financial discipline, driving down receivables from 40% to just 9% of annual sales. Simultaneously, he slashed overheads and promotional discounts by 80% and streamlined distribution to operate at 35% below the industry average, embedding efficiency into the company's very core. He demonstrated that market leadership is as much about defensive financial strength as it is about offensive commercial expansion. "The lessons of scale and resilience in those early years became the compass for all future leadership," he reflects. "It taught me that sustainable growth is built on operational excellence, not just commercial ambition." This philosophy was stress-tested in the high-pressure environment of AngoAlissar in Angola, where he managed a $400M turnover across commodities and FMCG, leading 900+ staff and consistently exceeding profit targets by 75%. Navigating the complexities of international logistics, foreign exchange and a multicultural workforce under tight margins provided an advanced education in global executive management. This global experience refined his ability to manage vast complexity and multicultural teams under demanding conditions.

RESUSCITATING DISTRESSED ASSETS

Atik's reputation as a premier turnaround architect was cemented in the GCC. As Group CEO of Al Arfaj Holding in Kuwait, he inherited a conglomerate with over 11,000 employees and five consecutive years of losses. Within a year, he executed an enterprise-wide restructuring that reversed the losses, saved $1.2 million and restored profitability. "It was about clarity of accountability and a relentless focus on cash and cost controls," he notes. "In such a situation, you must act like a surgeon diagnose the bleeding, stabilize the patient and only then plan for long-term health. Paralysis through analysis is a luxury a bleeding company cannot afford". But his most numerically dramatic success came as Managing Director of KIMMCO-ISOVER, a joint venture between Alghanim Industries and Saint-Gobain. There, he directed a comprehensive restructuring across the GCC. The results were staggering: at SIIMCO in Saudi Arabia, he drove a 42% volume increase and a 266% surge in EBITDA, while reducing Days

Sales Outstanding (DSO) by 25% across both entities. The commercial and operational groundwork he laid was so robust that in the years following his tenure, both companies, KIMMCO and SIIMCO, reached full production capacity, unlocking significant sustained profitability. This outcome underscores a key aspect of his legacy: he builds transformations that endure beyond his direct tenure, creating systems and momentum that propel organizations forward independently, a core part of his dedication to legacy.

These turnarounds shared a common methodology. "I employ a diagnostic triage focused on Cash, Cost and Customers", Atik explains. He identifies immediate-impact controls like DSO and inventory, to unlock trapped cash, deconstructs cost structures to eliminate waste and re-aligns commercial efforts on profitable segments. "The art is pulling these controls in a synchronized sequence to create the optimum cycle. Improve cash to fund stability, cut costs to improve margins and refocus the commercial engine on profitable growth, each step fuels the next."

THE LEADERSHIP DOCTRINE: VISION, DISCIPLINE, EXECUTION, AND LEGACY

This forward-looking mindset ensures transformation is proactive, not just reactive. "A leader's role is to see these waves forming and position the organization to ride them, not be submerged by them," Atik explains. He points to mega-trends like sustainability, digitalization and supply chain sovereignty as not just challenges, but vectors for innovation and market differentiation.

If vision sets the destination, discipline builds the engine to get there. "Accountability is enforced through transparent, measurable performance. A disciplined focus on Return on Invested Capital (ROIC) ensures every decision creates true value," he states. This rigorous approach transforms strategy from a boardroom document into a lived, operational reality. He promotes governance frameworks like the OGSM model (Objectives, Goals, Strategies, Measures) to cascade strategic intent into actionable departmental KPIs, creating a golden thread from the board's vision to the frontline operator's daily task.

Yet, vision and discipline are ineffective without execution. Atik's talent lies in orchestrating synchronized action across complex organizations. At Liban Lait, execution meant launching three fronts simultaneously: cost control, leadership realignment and client re-engagement. "They were interdependent. We couldn't cut costs without a plan to grow value and we couldn't grow sales without operations delivering reliably," he notes. This holistic execution prevents the common pitfall of fragmented initiatives that optimize one department at the expense of the whole.

To execute a transformation of this magnitude requires a rare cadre of leaders. Atik's hiring blueprint is clear: "I need resilience under pressure, a relentless 'get-it-done' mentality, strategic agility and, the non-negotiable, a proven ability to build trust." He believes transformation is as much about mindset as it is about metrics. "You must show people that restructuring is for their long-term security and empowerment," he asserts. To align culture during restructuring, he leads with radical transparency, involves teams in problem-solving and tirelessly celebrates quick wins. "Sustained morale is built on solidarity, not authority. It cannot be mandated from an office, only cultivated on the ground. People give their best when leaders roll up their sleeves, turning every challenge into a shared mission lived alongside them", this is the essence of his "boots on the ground" and "people biggest asset" principles in action, a philosophy

At a glance

NAME	ROLE	ORGANISATION
Ziad Atik	CEO	Liban Lait

that balances commercial aggressiveness on process improvement with nurturing external partnerships, viewing trust as the ultimate competitive advantage.

His consulting work in the UAE and Lebanon further refined this approach, revealing common gaps in strategy-to-execution disconnect and siloed operations. His solutions were never generic but tailored, installing simple, transparent governance frameworks that connected daily actions to strategic goals. This disciplined focus on governance and Return on Invested Capital (ROIC) is a hallmark. He maintains rhythm through rolling forecasts and weekly performance dialogues. "Accountability is not optional; it is the backbone of sustainable performance."

Furthermore, in sectors from insulation to dairy, he has made safety and performance integrity non-negotiable values. "Safety is the first item on my agenda in every site visit. Performance under unsafe conditions is not performance; it's failure," he states categorically, advocating for a culture where values are operationalized into daily checklists, training protocols and supplier audits, making the abstract tangibly measurable.

A LEGACY IN MOTION

The ultimate test of Atik's doctrine is its capacity to create lasting impact. Ziad Atik's career is a living case study. From his early days scaling ZITEX to his latest triumph at Liban Lait, each chapter validates his core belief: "Leadership is not about overcoming obstacles, it is about transforming them into stepping stones." His vision for the future is clear and twofold. For Liban Lait, it is to evolve from Lebanon's largest producer to its most innovative and sustainable food leader, leveraging partnerships like the one with Candia France to pioneer value-added, health-focused products. For Lebanon's broader industrial sector, he envisions a renaissance of "resilient localization," building self-reliant, export-capable clusters that can provide economic stability regardless of the political climate. He sees the private sector's role as not just profit-driven, but as a cornerstone of national resilience, creating quality employment and upholding world-class standards.

In an era demanding both agility and resilience, his forty-year journey stands as a powerful testament to the fact that with the right framework, even the most daunting challenges can be architected into platforms for sustainable growth and inspiration. Ziad Atik is more than a CEO; he is a builder of institutional resilience, a mentor to future leaders and a visionary who sees in Lebanon's and the region's trials not a story of decline, but the raw material for its next great chapter of growth.

The Atik mantra: A blend of visionary foresight, relentless discipline, flawless execution and a commitment to enduring legacy: a definitive blueprint for leading through uncertainty. ■



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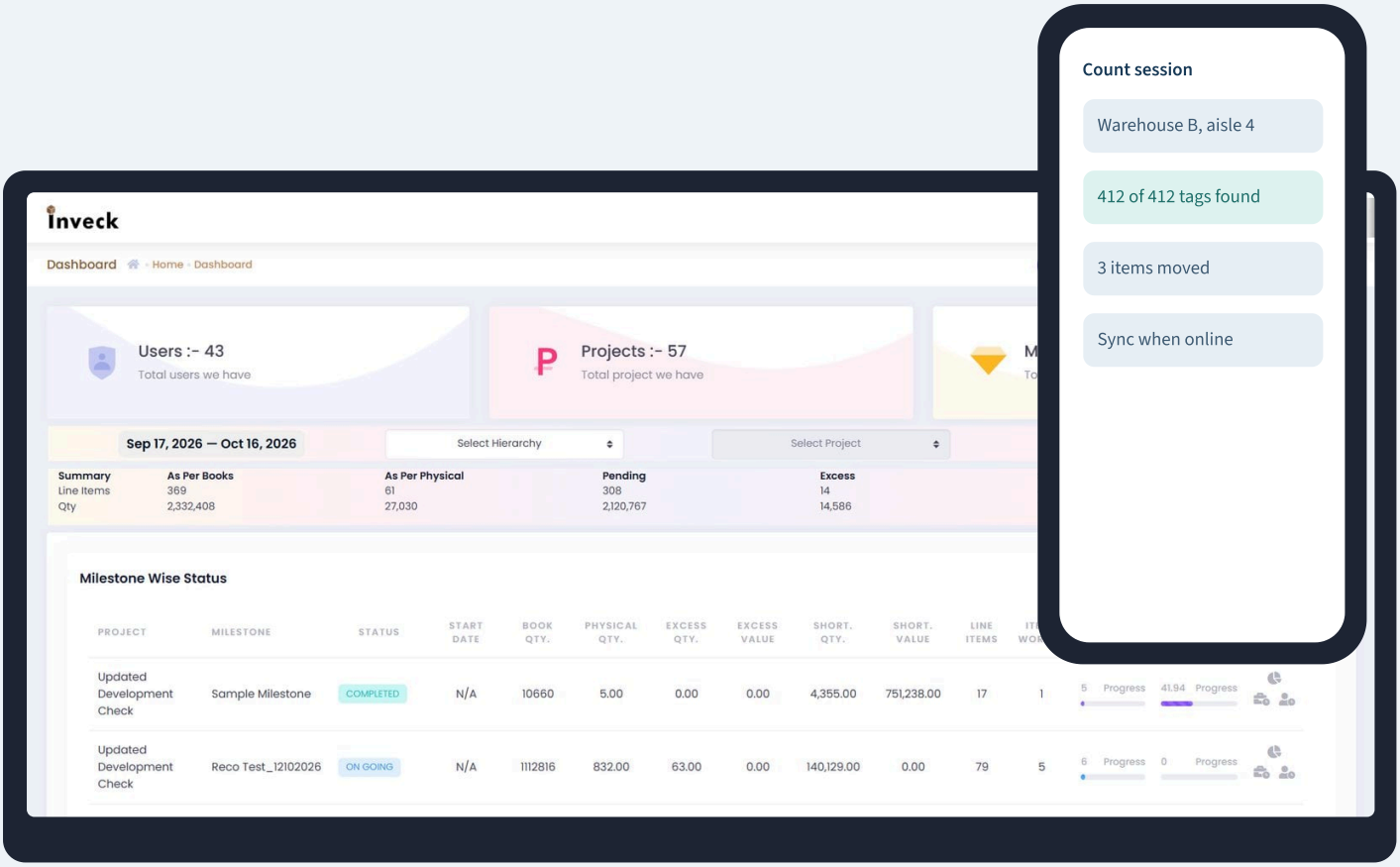
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ANALYSIS

Companies that last choose the risks they carry

Durability is rarely an accident of age. In volatile sectors such as dairy, the businesses that endure are the ones that decide which shocks to absorb and which to pass on.

Japan has 46,708 companies that have been trading for more than 100 years, according to Teikoku Databank's count at December 2025. They make up 3.11% of the companies in its database, the first time the share has passed 3%. Eleven are more than a thousand years old. Manufacturing, retail and wholesale together account for 67.8% of them, sectors that have lived through every kind of shock.

Long life is not a Japanese peculiarity. The 500 largest family businesses in the world generate $8.8tn in revenue and employ 25.1 million people, according to the index compiled by EY and the University of St.Gallen. Of those, 34% are more than a century old and 85% have operated for more than 50 years.

DAIRY SHOWS THE PROBLEM CLEARLY

Age on its own explains little. What survivors tend to share is a habit of deciding, deliberately, which risks belong on their own balance sheet and which are better held by someone else.

Few industries test that habit like dairy. Cows are milked every day whatever the price, raw milk spoils quickly, and the products it becomes, from butter to powder, trade on global markets that move fast.

The FAO Dairy Price Index averaged 13.2% above its 2024 level in 2025, driven by strong import

demand and limited exportable supplies early in the year. By December it was falling, down 4.4% in a single month as butter prices dropped.

Every business in that chain has to decide where the swings land: on farmers, processors, retailers or consumers. A processor that offers farmers a fixed price protects them and takes the market risk itself. One that passes market prices straight through does the reverse. Neither is wrong, but each is a choice about who carries the shock.

In 2026 two large farmer-owned dairy groups answered the question in opposite ways.

TWO CO-OPERATIVES, TWO ANSWERS

On 1 June 2026 Arla Foods and Germany's DMK Group merged. The combined co-operative is owned by about 11,200 farmers in seven countries, handles 19.4 billion kg of milk a year and has pro forma revenue of more than €20bn. Its stated logic is investment at scale, including in reducing its impact on climate and nature.

Two months earlier, on 31 March 2026, New Zealand's Fonterra completed the sale of its global consumer business, Mainland Group, to Lactalis, the French dairy group that reported €31.2bn of revenue in 2025. Fonterra returned NZ$3.2bn of the proceeds to its shareholders and unit holders, NZ$2.00 a share, and kept the ingredients and foodservice businesses it describes as its core.

Fonterra also agreed to supply Lactalis with raw milk for at least ten years and with ingredients, such as bulk cheese, for at least six. The buyer of its brands became a long-term customer for its milk.

The two moves look contradictory but follow the same logic. Arla is carrying more of the chain, betting that scale gives its farmer-owners more control over what happens to their milk. Fonterra is carrying less, handing branded consumer risk to a buyer for whom it is core business and securing contracted demand in return. Each decided which exposure it was best placed to hold.

WHAT DURABLE COMPANIES DO IN GOOD YEARS

For leaders outside dairy the first lesson is about timing. Decisions on what to own and what to hand over are best made when a business can afford to wait for the right terms. Under pressure, the choice tends to be made by lenders, and the terms reflect it.

Ownership matters as well. An owner who expects to hand the business to a grandchild values a cash buffer or a long supply contract differently from one planning to sell in five years. Family firms and co-operatives are not automatically wiser, but their time

BY THE NUMBERS

46,708

Japanese companies trading for more than 100 years

Teikoku Databank, 2025

34%

Share of the world's 500 largest family firms over a century old

EY and University of St.Gallen, 2025

13.2%

Rise in the average FAO Dairy Price Index, 2025 on 2024

FAO, 2026

horizon gives them room to accept a lower return in good years in exchange for surviving the bad ones.

That room has to be used deliberately. A long horizon can also shelter complacency, and a long history is not a strategy. The test is whether owners and managers can still say why each part of the business is worth holding.

In practice that means a risk map kept alongside the financial plan: which input prices the company is exposed to, how quickly it can pass increases on, which customers and suppliers it depends on, and what it would cost to change each. Most of the raw material already sits in procurement, pricing and contract systems. Few companies assemble it in one view, and fewer refresh it as conditions change.

For technology leaders, the same discipline applies to information. Knowing which risks the business actually carries, from price exposure by product to supplier concentration and contract terms that do or do not pass costs on, needs data that most companies hold but rarely join up.

A durable company can say, at any moment, where the next shock will land. That is a data question before it is a strategy question, and it is one the CIO is unusually well placed to answer.

Sources: zaikei.co.jp; ey.com; fao.org; arla.com; fonterra.com; lactalis.com. ■

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ANALYSIS

Data residency in the Gulf: what technology leaders should plan for

The question has moved from where data sits to who can reach it, and under which law. Four decisions to make this year, and the questions to put to every supplier.

BY THE CIO TABLE EDITORS

For most of the past decade, data residency in the Gulf was treated as a question of geography. Where is the server? Is it in the country? Procurement asked, the supplier answered, and a contract clause closed the matter.

That question is no longer enough. Regulators, auditors and, increasingly, boards ask something harder: who can reach the data, and under which law. A database hosted in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi by a provider headquartered abroad may still sit within reach of a foreign court order. A support engineer overseas with administrative rights is, in practice, a point of cross-border access.

WHAT CHANGED

The legal ground has filled in quickly. Saudi Arabia's Personal Data Protection Law has been enforced since September 2024, after a one-year grace period, under the supervision of the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority, and its implementing rules set conditions for transferring personal data out of the kingdom. The UAE's Federal Decree-Law No. 45 of 2021 sets a general regime for personal data but excludes government data, health and banking data where separate legislation applies, and free zones with their own regimes. The Dubai International Financial Centre and Abu Dhabi Global Market each have their own data protection law and regulator. Qatar, Bahrain and Oman have national laws, and other states are building theirs.

Sector rules sit on top. Government data is commonly subject to classification schemes and in-country hosting.



Central banks expect to be consulted, and sometimes to approve, before regulated firms move material workloads to the cloud or offshore. Health data carries the strictest expectations; the UAE's federal law on health information generally requires such data to stay in the country.

The supply side has moved too. The large cloud providers now operate regions in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain, and several offer sovereign or

government variants run by local staff. That removes an old excuse without settling the question of jurisdiction.

WHY IT REACHES THE BOARD

Three reasons. First, the exposure is real: regulators can impose fines, and in licensed sectors the sanction that matters is a restriction on operating. Second, the decisions are long-lived. A choice of provider, region and key management model shapes the architecture for years. Third, the regimes overlap. A group with customers on the UAE mainland, in the DIFC and in Saudi Arabia may hold one customer record governed by three sets of rules. Somebody has to own the reconciliation, and directors will be asked whether they knew where sensitive data sat and who could open it.

FOUR DECISIONS TO MAKE THIS YEAR

Classify the data. Build an inventory that tags each data set by type (personal, sensitive, government, financial, health), by the regime that governs it and by who needs access. Without it, every hosting debate is opinion.

Choose regions by data class, not by application. Some data must stay in the country. Some can be stored locally and replicated elsewhere for resilience. Some can sit anywhere. Check that the services each class depends on are available in the local region; newer services, including some AI tools, often reach smaller regions later.

Settle the transfer basis. Group reporting, shared service centres, round-the-clock support and analytics all move data across borders. For each flow, record the legal mechanism under every regime that applies (contractual clauses, intra-group rules, consent or regulatory approval). Then make the contracts match: data location, subprocessors, notice of government requests, audit rights and exit.

Control the keys. Customer-managed encryption keys, held in hardware under the organisation's control or with a local custodian, are the most direct answer to "who can access it?" A provider that cannot decrypt cannot hand over readable data. The trade-off: the organisation takes on key management, and some managed services work less well, or not at all, with external keys.

QUESTIONS FOR SUPPLIERS

- Which of your staff, in which countries, can access our data or the systems holding it, and how is that access approved and logged?
- If a foreign authority demands our data, what will you do, and will you tell us?
- Can we hold our encryption keys outside your platform, and which services stop working if we do?
- Which of the services we plan to use run entirely in the in-country region today?
- Where do backups, logs, telemetry and support tickets go?
- At exit, how will you return our data and prove it has been deleted?

Ask for the answers in writing and attach them to the contract. The fifth question is the one most often skipped: the primary data may stay in the country while the diagnostic data describing it leaves every night. ■

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LEADERS IN FOCUS

Jamie Dimon and the fortress a bank runs on

Two decades at the top of JPMorgan Chase, through a financial crisis and a costly trading loss. What a fortress balance sheet and a standing technology budget say about running a firm for the bad year.

Jamie Dimon has run JPMorgan Chase since the end of 2005, longer than almost any other chief executive of a major global bank. Through the financial crisis, a costly trading loss and a long run of record profits, his approach has stayed recognisable: keep more capital than you think you need, invest heavily and steadily in technology, and explain your thinking to shareholders at length.

BUILT FOR THE BAD YEAR

Dimon learned banking under Sandy Weill at American Express, Travelers and Citigroup, then ran Bank One before it merged with JPMorgan Chase in 2004. His phrase for the balance sheet he wanted, a fortress, became shorthand for his style. In 2008 that preparation let JPMorgan take over Bear Stearns and the banking operations of Washington Mutual when both were failing.

The record is not spotless. The 2012 London Whale trading losses, running to billions of dollars, showed that risk controls can fail even in a bank that prides itself on them. The response, more oversight and more candour, became part of the story he tells about how to run a firm.

TECHNOLOGY AS A STANDING COMMITMENT

JPMorgan spends more on technology than most technology companies, with an annual technology budget reported at more than 15 billion dollars. The

spending is treated as a permanent cost of staying competitive rather than a project to be approved and finished. Dimon's annual letter to shareholders, often running to dozens of pages, regularly covers cyber security, artificial intelligence and payments alongside the economy and regulation.

WHAT OTHER LEADERS CAN TAKE FROM IT

- Plan for the bad year in the good one. Capacity held in reserve is what lets you act when competitors cannot.
- Budget technology like infrastructure. Steady investment beats bursts of funding that stop when profits dip.
- Write your thinking down. A long, candid letter forces clarity and lets everyone, inside and outside, see the reasoning.

For technology chiefs who struggle to win multi-year funding, JPMorgan offers a useful argument: the banks that treat technology as part of the fortress, rather than an add-on, are the ones still standing after the storm. ■

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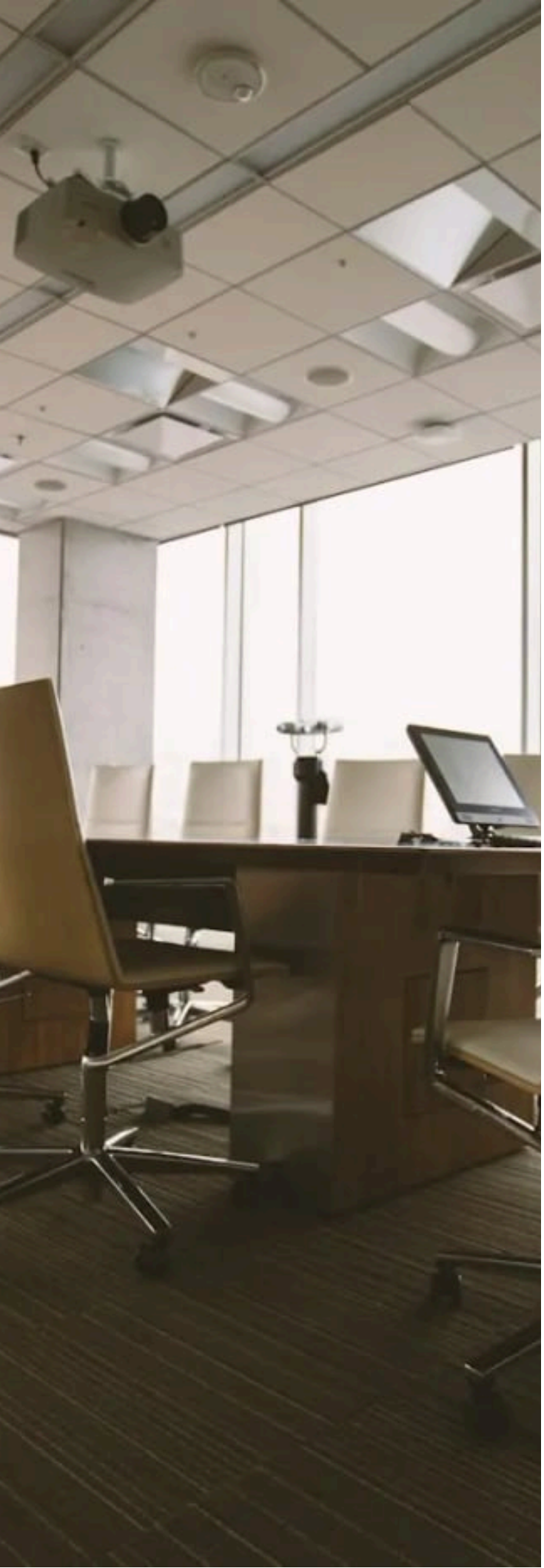


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