



**CIONET**

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

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**COPING IN CHAOS.  
HOW TO SURVIVE  
(AND THRIVE) IN  
UNCERTAIN TIMES**



**cognizant**



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## Coping in chaos. How to survive (and thrive) in uncertain times

From economic uncertainty to governance, security and trade concerns, today's IT leaders face unprecedented challenges that require them to navigate, and thrive, in chaos. That, at least, is the proposition of a new sequence of events from Cognizant and CIONET.

The 'Coping in Chaos' series is designed to explore the macro trends (and those closer to home) that are impacting organisations across the economy. It also seeks to identify the actionable strategies, set and led by the IT organisation, that will provide active leadership and positive results. The series will pinpoint key areas such as cash flow management, supply chain risks, and workforce transformation, and explore how technology can play a pivotal role in building a resilient future.

Here are some key takeaways from our event in June that saw a dozen leading IT executives come together for a roundtable discussion.

### 1. The black swans are multiplying

In 2007 the essayist Nassim Nicholas Taleb published a book called, 'The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable'. It soon won popular acclaim and helped frame the global financial crisis that soon followed. The book focused on the random events that underlie our lives, events that are hugely impactful but difficult to predict. He called them black swans to signify their rare quality. And yet in the recent past, it seems as if such events are occurring more frequently.

Asked to consider whether IT leaders are being asked to cope with more chaos than in previous decades, our keynote interviewee observed: "In the last five years, we've had Covid, we've had Brexit enacted, we've had the Suez Canal issue, we've had all the Ukraine war, we've had President Trump reappear, and then the new global tariffs he's imposing." Black swans everywhere.

Working for a shipping and logistics company, the March 2021 blockage of the Suez Canal proved among the most demanding of these events. An extreme example of the supply chain volatility that can afflict other industries, it has taught him the benefits of data that is "interconnected and stitched together", as well as the need for improved predictive analytics.

President Trump's trade tariffs, meanwhile, are proving a headache for organisations across the economy. Not only firms having to absorb the costs – or pass them on to customers and clients – they are having to deal with the Trump's indecision, too. Business abhors uncertainty. Our keynote interviewer acknowledged the tariff impacts but thinks his industry, at least, was ready. Aware of the likelihood of increased tariffs, most logistics firms began mitigating the likely impact late last year. "People have been stock piling, getting ahead of the game."

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## 2. Macro challenges, yes, but don't underestimate the micro challenges, too

One attendee took issue with the premise of discussion. He argued that today's macro volatility disguises less visible – but no less impactful – instability. Senior technology leaders have been dealing with disruptive events for decades. Those events, he said, tend to be closer to home – technology systems and processes that are not fit for purpose. "What do you think happens when somebody needs to change their address?" he asked rhetorically, referencing a typical data management problem. "How many different systems do you have to go to in order to change that address?"

Others agreed, pointing to the negative impact of legacy systems. "We keep building this pyramid of technology. Towards the very top is this shiny new system but the foundation underneath isn't strong enough to do everything that the shiny thing on top promises it will," one IT leader sad. And don't forget, he said, that "today's legacy is yesterday's shiny."

Sometimes budget restraints prevent the legacy being replaced. And sometimes it comes down to fear. In industries such as financial services, a mainframe will remain in place because an organisation – lacking the in-house skills to handle the decommissioning properly – will keep it operational to avoid running up against the regulator. Here, compliance concerns can enable inertia. The result? Aged systems remain in place and freelance Cobol coders of pensionable age earn £1,500 a day to troubleshoot.

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### 3. Shadow AI is a contributor of chaos. And possibly a symptom, too

The next frontier of chaos, said one voice around the table, is the emergence of shadow AI. The phenomenon – the latest incarnation of shadow IT – sees business functions bypassing to the IT department to spin up a proof of concept, armed with commercially-available generative AI (GenAI) tools and a company credit card. “Ours is a very competitive industry,” he said. “[Those experimenting are looking] for new ways to win the client’s money.”

Another attendee took a harsher view, insisting that the existence of shadow AI is an indication of weak IT leadership. “CIOs must look at themselves and ask, ‘What is it about the IT that I’m running that’s not good enough?’” If the IT department was run effectively, goes this argument, there would be no need to deploy technology in the shadows.

Meanwhile, AI can act as a balm to be applied in volatile times. A number of those at the roundtable lobbied for the use of GenAI as a means of bringing order to the chaos – using it to assist in the creation of briefing papers, business plans, process fine-tuning among other use cases. And because company boards are fully aware of the potential of AI, they ought to be aware of the need to address some of the legacy contributing to the chaos. “Management is realising that if we don’t fix our estate, we can’t leverage AI,” said one attendee.

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### 4. The cyber threat is changing, and it’s adding to the chaos

The recent cyberattack on British retailer Marks & Spencer provided the springboard for a discussion on cyber security. Many reflected the view that the fundamentals of the threat remained the same. However, AI is increasing the scale – and in some cases the sophistication – of attacks. This, in turn, is adding to the chaos as business scramble for an appropriate response.

A recent case illustrated the new threat. Namely, a deepfake recording that convinced an employee at a large construction firm that his CFO was instructing him to transfer large amounts of money. He duly moved \$20 million. Some organisations are using AI to counter AI but as one acknowledged, today the bad actors can “hammer my firewalls until they find a way in.”

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## 5. The old maxim holds: never let a crisis go to waste

"My best year as a CIO was 1999," insisted one attendee. He was referring to a world – a generation ago – that was preparing to mitigate the effects of the Y2K bug. Imminent danger loosened the purse strings and ensured that IT leaders got a hearing from very top of the organisation. "Limitless budgets, little in the way of a business case, no governance concerns – and we bought everything on the market."

Not every crisis elicits such a response. Nevertheless, periods of volatility undoubtedly provide opportunities to enact change. Take Covid-era lockdowns, for example. One attendee recalls how pre-Covid, his call centre staff remained in centralised offices despite a strong business case for remote working. It took a pandemic-enforced lockdown to propel the business into the virtual world. "A crisis got a technology strategy through, a strategy that was considered for years too hard to do."

If a leader can get ahead of a crisis so much the better. For example, those who identified the possibilities of GenAI several years ago and used the time to get their chaotic data strategy in order, are in a much better position to prosper today.

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## 6. Different times requires a new kind of talent

"When are we going to stop hiring people that look like us?" asked one attendee, alluding to recruitment processes rooted in unconscious bias. She argued that the best way to build a resilient talent pool is to stop looking for "vectors of ourselves" and instead seek out "a much more diverse range of people".

"We should purposefully reach out and interview and speak to people that are different to us, within our own organisations as well as from the outside," she said. This includes embracing neurodiversity. The speaker, herself diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), said those displaying a variety cognitive behaviours add new layers to the talent pool.

“Seeking out “diversity of thought” – to borrow the phrase of another contributor – prevents groupthink and is more likely to add resilience to an organisation when in chaos abounds.

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## 7. Crisis management necessitates the gift of storytelling

Communication matters – and it matters most in times of crisis. The IT director who meets chaos with chaos choose only to share tales of disaster with the board is unlikely to last long. That was the consensus view from around the table. In the words of one: “I struggle with the CIO who goes into a meeting with the c-suits and says, ‘Without [this piece of kit or budget commitment], the world ends’.”

Instead, the CIO should be “someone who can educate, tell stories, and build trust.” Storytelling, said another guest, is about taking the c-suite “on a journey” – setting expectations and looking at problem-solving through the prism of business outcomes. “It’s not enough to be a techie,” he said.

In politics the metaphor “pitch rolling” is often used for this type of expectation management – storytelling that prepares the public for a change in policy, for example. One attendee said his metaphor of choice is “nudge”, equally popular in government departments. A form of behavioural economics, nudge steers particular decision making through subtle interventions.

Today’s CEOs are open to this kind of interaction, said the attendee, because they recognise of the positive role technology plays in a way previous generations of IT leaders failed to do. “At the executive level, there is appreciation not only of the technology but also the change it can deliver.”

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‘Technology – Overcoming Uncertainty with Innovation’ – the first in CIONET’s ‘Coping in Chaos’ series, convened in association with Cognizant – took place on Tuesday 10 June 2025 at the South Place Hotel, London.



## About CIONET

CIONET is the leading community of more than 10,000 digital leaders in 20+ countries across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Through this global presence CIONET orchestrates peer-to-peer interactions focused on the most important business and technology issues of the day. CIONET members join over a thousand international and regional live and virtual events annually, ranging from roundtables, programs for peer-to-peer exchange of expertise, community networking events, to large international gatherings. Its members testify that CIONET is an impartial and value adding platform that helps them use the wisdom of the (IT) crowd, to acquire expertise, advance their professional development, analyse and solve IT issues, and accelerate beneficial outcomes within their organisation.