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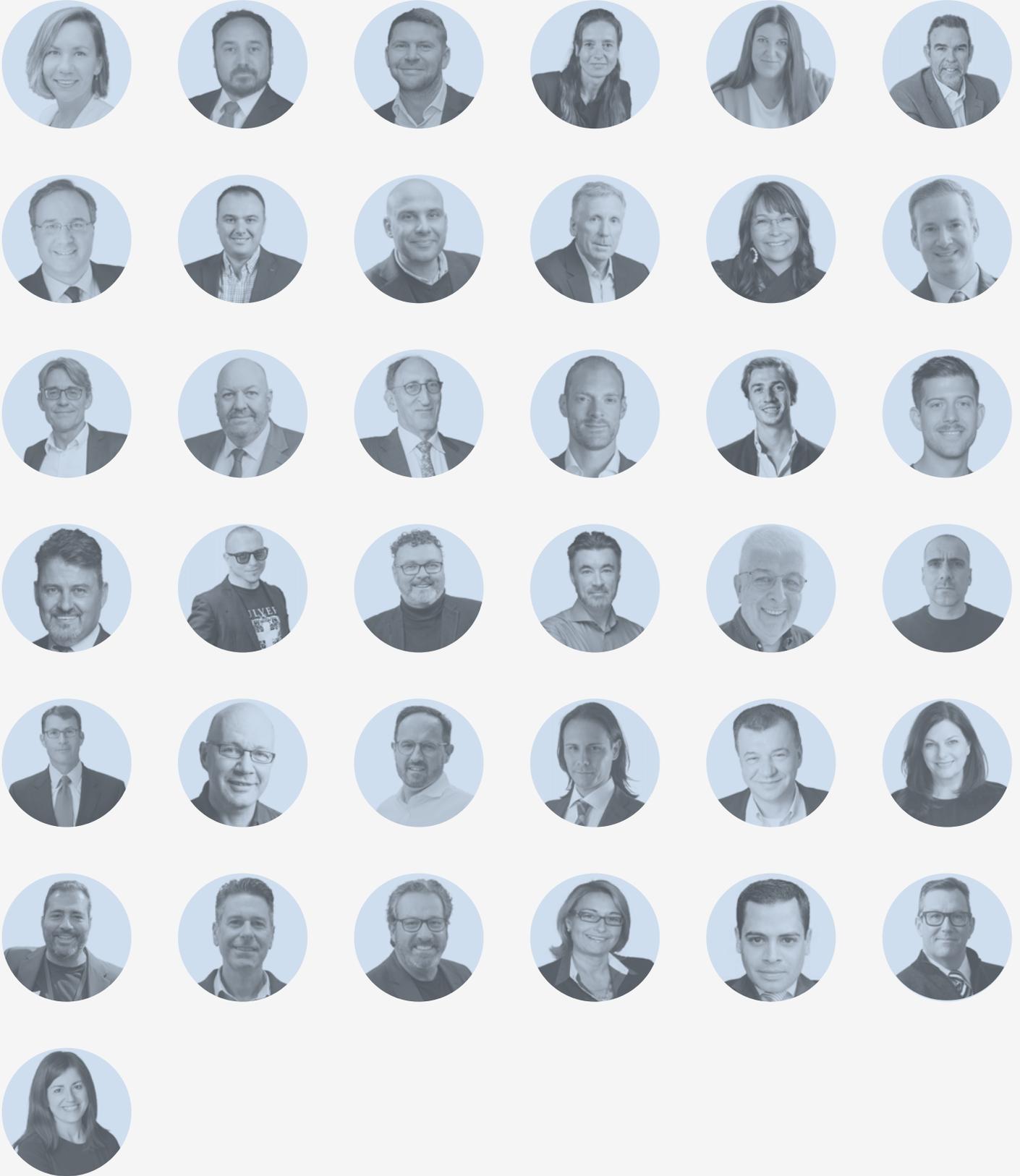
How Hotel-Brand Tech Leaders Are Redefining the CIO Role

Viewpoint

Technology no longer sits quietly in the background of hospitality - it is the business. And at the intersection of this transformation stands the modern CIO: no longer a systems custodian, but an architect of change, a translator of complexity, and increasingly, a strategist at the very core of decision-making. This shift was tangible at the first-ever HFTP CIO Summit EMEA in Barcelona. What began as a gathering to discuss AI, data, and infrastructure quickly evolved into something more profound: a shared realization that the traditional CIO archetype is dissolving. The role is being reimagined in real-time, fluid, cross-functional, and increasingly guest-facing.

We posed a deceptively simple question to attendees: "How is your role changing as technology evolves?" The answers were not only illuminating but revolutionary. It's no longer about tools - it's about timing. It's no longer about systems - it's about strategy. And it's no longer about tech support - it's about business leadership.

ANDREW EVERS
Group Director of IT, Rocco Forte Hotels

The CIO role has moved far beyond infrastructure. We're no longer just maintaining networks - we're shaping the future of the guest experience. In luxury hospitality, where detail defines value, the convergence of guest service and technology is now absolute. There's no longer a boundary between them.

Today's CIO is expected to contribute to revenue growth, understand business models, anticipate operational challenges, and align digital strategy with brand values. Our influence spans privacy compliance, service design, and commercial outcomes. This is a strategic seat at the table - not a technical one in the server room.

One major focus area for me right now is personalization. We're building a unified guest view - collapsing silos across spa, dining, and accommodation to deliver a seamless experience. True luxury is about relevance, and AI helps us deliver that at scale.

There's a misconception that luxury should be untouched by AI. I disagree. The most refined experiences can be enhanced - not diminished - by intelligent systems. What matters is the orchestration: decisions must remain human, but they should be *informed* by AI. That's what I call 'hand-thought' service - curated by people, powered by data.

MUSTAFA GOKCEN
Global Head of Information Technology, Cheval Collection

Technology has become central to our business planning. IT is no longer a support function - it's a strategic pillar. I'm increasingly involved in shaping commercial roadmaps, evaluating distribution platforms, and making long-term investment decisions. My agenda isn't about fixing issues tomorrow; it's about anticipating what technology will define us three to five years from now.

The real power of AI isn't in flashy front-end features, but in what it enables behind the scenes. Automating routine back-office tasks frees up our teams to focus on what truly drives value - deeper financial analysis, revenue optimization, and

strategic foresight. This shift is essential if we want to scale efficiency sustainably.

Yet, the greatest barrier to progress remains integration. We manage over a hundred platforms, many of which still operate in isolation. Until we break down those silos and create a unified data ecosystem, we're only scratching the surface of what's possible. Innovation without integration is just noise. To build intelligence, we first need coherence.

LEON SMALLBONE
Assistant IT Director, Firmdale Hotel Group

We're witnessing a cultural shift in how technology is adopted within hospitality businesses. End users are increasingly tech-literate - they're evaluating tools on their own, consulting peers, and coming to IT with clear preferences. This has fundamentally changed our role.

Where we once dictated systems from the top down, we're now enablers of bottom-up innovation. Departments are selecting platforms that suit their needs, and IT's task is to ensure security, interoperability, and long-term viability. The result? A more collaborative and engaging environment, where shared ownership of systems aligns everyone toward common goals.

Looking ahead, AI will accelerate this transformation. It can take over manual tasks, deliver intelligent insights through conversational reporting, and help staff make faster, better-informed decisions. This isn't about replacing people - it's about removing friction, freeing up time, and shifting our collective focus from administration to strategy.

TIAGO ALVES
Director of IT Operations /Regional Director of IT, EMEA and APAC Belmond

At Belmond, we're reimagining the role of IT from system deployment to strategic enablement. Our work begins with understanding the operational vision - not just supporting it, but co-architecting solutions that align technology with frontline goals.

Automation plays a crucial role in this evolution. By integrating AI-driven processes, we relieve our staff from repetitive tasks, allowing them to focus on what truly matters: delivering exceptional, human-centered guest experiences. Technology becomes the silent partner, enabling - not replacing - the artistry of hospitality.

A key milestone in our transformation is the development of a proprietary booking engine. Our previous platform limited both innovation and data control. By building our own system in-house, we now own the full stack - from infrastructure to guest data. The engine integrates seamlessly with our website, PMS, and dining systems, creating a unified digital ecosystem.

We've also taken ownership of our API layer, following a philosophy similar to Apple's: when you control both the hardware and software, you can deliver a more refined, consistent, and adaptive experience. For us, that means building a flexible, fully integrated architecture - designed for the future, tailored to Belmond.

FERGUS BOYD
Hospitality Consultant

My journey has taken me from IT and digital into the world of revenue and asset management. Today, I advise at the CXO level, helping businesses bridge the gap between technology, customer expectations, and commercial performance.

Infrastructure alone doesn't move the needle anymore. IT leaders must understand strategy, brand positioning, and guest experience design. The real value lies in connecting the dots - turning technical fluency into business foresight. That requires both analytical rigor and creative thinking.

Not everyone brings that hybrid mindset, but those who do are uniquely positioned to drive meaningful transformation. Many seasoned IT executives should consider stepping into advisory, startup, or board roles, where their insight can shape long-term direction.

If I had to spotlight one technology for the next 12 months, it wouldn't be generative AI - it would be robotic process automation. RPA is practical, proven, and poised for a comeback. Tools like UiPath can streamline repetitive back-office workflows in finance, marketing, and operations. It's the kind of tech that delivers measurable ROI without the hype. While AI steals headlines, RPA gets things done.

ALEJANDRO VIDALES
VP of Technology, OKU Hotels

Our role as technology leaders is becoming increasingly strategic. In a landscape where innovation moves fast, staying reactive is no longer enough. We're expected to identify the right partners, vet scalable solutions, and - most importantly - ensure their seamless integration into the fabric of the business.

There's more visibility on CIOs than ever before. Senior leadership looks to us not just for operational support, but for direction. If you're not proactively shaping the digital roadmap, you're already behind.

At OKU Hotels, we're still a young brand, building our technological foundation from the ground up. That's why my top priority right now is cybersecurity. I'm seeking a unified, end-to-end solution - one that blends fraud prevention, data loss protection, and threat detection into a single, cohesive platform.

Security isn't a back-office concern anymore. It's a business enabler. In hospitality, trust is currency - and safeguarding it requires systems that are both intelligent and resilient.

MARK GAGE
Executive Director of Information Systems, Tanzerra Resorts

At Tanzerra Resorts, our decentralized structure means each property operates independently - and that's by design. But it also means silos can emerge. Over the past year, my priority has been to break down those barriers through better communication, shared tools, and stronger team cohesion. We've rolled out new PMS and payment platforms, along with operational tools like ALICE, but the real transformation comes from how people use them.

With a lean team spread across remote locations, my role has evolved from pure IT management to training, coaching, and leadership. I'm investing time in upskilling my staff - not just in cybersecurity, but in operational awareness.

I come from the floor: bellman, F&B, front desk. That background shapes how I lead today. I want my team to grasp the full guest journey, not just the backend systems. When a front desk printer goes down and guests are lining up to check in, that's not a technical hiccup - it's a service failure.

We're training our team to think beyond tickets and uptime, and to respond with hospitality-grade urgency. Technology doesn't just run hotels - it shapes the guest experience. And understanding that is where good IT becomes great hospitality.

ANONYMOUS CIO
Top-5 Global Hotel Group

Technology leadership is no longer confined to infrastructure - it's now embedded in the strategic core of the business. We're entering a phase where transformation is business-led, and technology's role is to support and accelerate that vision.

Today, IT leaders are expected to go far beyond system maintenance. We're actively shaping customer experiences, defining use cases, and contributing to measurable business outcomes. This requires a deep understanding of both the organization's commercial strategy and its operational realities.

One of the most profound shifts on the horizon is architectural: the PMS is no longer the gravitational center of the tech stack. The future is CRM-led. Platforms like Salesforce are enabling unified guest profiles that extend across marketing, sales, and service.

This model puts data at the heart of hospitality. When guest information is centralized and accessible, it can power truly personalized experiences across departments. The PMS will still matter for core operations, but it's no longer the brain - it's becoming one component in a broader, data-centric ecosystem.

JUDI BLAKEBURN
Chief Commercial Officer (CCO), Watergate Bay Hotel

The CIO dimension of my role has undergone a radical transformation. What was once a marginal aspect of my responsibilities has now become central. I'm spending an increasing amount of time exploring technology, running internal pilots, and translating emerging tools into real-world use cases.

AI, in particular, is no longer a buzzword - it's a necessity. With growing business demands and limited team expansion, improving productivity isn't optional; it's strategic. We're actively exploring how AI can support functions like marketing, HR, and even legal. Teams are buried under documents, and the ability of AI to accelerate analysis while enhancing output quality is game-changing.

One colleague recently told me how difficult it is to maintain concentration when reviewing dense documentation. That resonated deeply. AI, when applied correctly, doesn't replace people - it empowers them. It helps us do more, better, with less friction. That's the real opportunity: using intelligent tools to elevate human work, not eliminate it.

MARCO CORREIA
CIO, Mercan Properties

The CIO has become a strategic partner. Two decades ago, IT often reported to finance - today, we help shape the business itself. Our role now spans every department: HR, finance, operations, and even frontline services like housekeeping and F&B.

In Europe, however, regulatory frameworks - particularly around AI and guest profiling - introduce constraints that must be navigated carefully. Innovation cannot come at the expense of compliance. That's why our responsibility isn't just deploying technology; it's enabling *responsible* adoption across the organization.

My focus is on applied AI - specifically, analytical tools that solve real problems. One powerful example is visual-driven room inspections. A housekeeping supervisor can film a room, and AI instantly highlights what's missing: towels, pillows, amenities. It's fast, consistent, and reduces the chance of human oversight. This is not a concept - it's happening.

We need to move beyond the novelty of generative AI and focus on what creates measurable operational value. Analytical AI offers that. It's not about replacing people, but about giving them tools that make quality scalable.

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