

On the way **BACK UP**



TO MARK THIS YEAR'S **GITEX TECHNOLOGY WEEK**, NETWORK MIDDLE EAST TALKS TO THE REGIONAL LEADERS AT THE NETWORKING INDUSTRY'S BEST-KNOWN VENDORS TO GET THEIR VIEWS ON SOME OF IT'S MOST CONSPICUOUS TRENDS IN 2011

No one could hide the fact that the global recession's impact on IT strategies was nothing less than devastating. Budgets were slashed, projects were put on hold and engineers were handed their cards en masse.

The Middle East, of course, was in no way immune to this impact. Dubai, frequently viewed as the region's innovation and technology focal point, was itself battered during the downturn.

However, many of the Middle East's most prominent IT representatives are arguing that 2011 has seen something of a resurgence in ambitious technology strategy. For one, Tarek Ghoul, general manager, Gulf, Levante and Pakistan, at networking giant Cisco, says that many regional governments are eagerly investing in ICT as a way of diversifying their economies away from natural resources.

"There is a real drive and leadership to do substantial reform and efforts in areas that are going to ensure higher sustainability and diversity from an economic perspective," he believes. "All of the leadership in the Gulf [countries] are talking about knowledge-based economies. You're seeing greater efforts on what they're going to do with education and human capital development, and there's a greater focus on healthcare, public safety and security."

According to Ghoul, for the most part the region is still one strewn with greenfield opportunities, with little legacy when compared to the likes of Europe and North America. He argues that this makes it more plausible for governments and enterprises in the Middle East to



leverage innovative technology strategies. Ghoul believes that organisations in our part of the world are increasingly waking up to the fact that IT should be an enabler, not a hindrance.

"These economies have little legacy to deal with and so that is... of interest to us. If you look at the socio-economic factors in those countries, what the role of ICT can play to further advance reform and modernisation to that bloc, the leadership are thinking 'you know what? ICT is a strategic national asset for us,'" he reckons. "[ICT is] no longer an expense cost, in some places ICT is the strategy. It's not only an enabler

- when you go to education, ICT is in some places the strategy for development - so that makes it extremely exciting for us."

While experts generally hold up cities such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Cairo as examples of regional technology hubs, Ghoul says that further flung Middle Eastern territories are also putting technology at the heart of their economies. "When you look at the Levante region, like Jordan and Lebanon, they are very rich in human capital resources, because of the old heritage when it comes to education," he points out. "When you look at Jordan, which is very interesting, 14%-15% of the GDP now comes from ICT."

Yasser Zeineldin, CEO of UAE-based managed services provider eHosting Datafort, believes that the political strife seen across the region this year has been one of the determining factors in terms of CIO strategies. For the first few months of the year, MEA territories including Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen were rocked by violent unrest in the so-called 'Arab Spring', leading to regime changes in some states.

Zeineldin claims that the Arab Spring has had a direct impact on IT policy. "In the last year we've seen more focus on disaster recovery and business continuity planning, which has probably been driven by some of the unrest in the region," he says. "We've seen clients in other Gulf states [outside the UAE] and other parts of the Middle East, who have come to us and asked for disaster recovery capabilities just in case - not necessarily because [of the] unrest, but just as a safe guard to their data and to their systems."

"We're seeing a number of banks go outside of their own country because of political unrest, and some of the disaster recovery requirements [are just] good planning, because disasters are not necessarily political, they could be flooding, earthquakes, etc. But [the unrest] did spark the thinking in organisations that had not considered it before."

Mahesh Vaidya, CEO of storage and security systems integrator, ISIT Middle East, also believes that stronger emphasis on disaster recovery and business continuity has been a running theme through 2011. "These days everybody is talking about disaster recovery, especially with all these problems that are happening across the Middle East. They're talking about disaster recovery sites in safe havens like the UAE," he explains. "People are looking at not only data availability, but also application availability. Some of [their] applications are mission critical, so they don't want them to be down for more than few minutes. You need to have one-click fail over or automatic fail over."

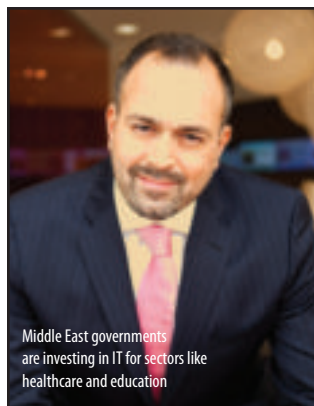
Like eHDF CEO Zeineldin, Vaidya also believes that cloud computing has become a focus for regional CIOs, but he disputes any assertion that Middle East businesses are eager to engage public – or external – cloud service providers. Rather, Vaidya argues that local organisations are more interested in the prospect of building their own private clouds using scalable infrastructure that is hosted within their own firewall. He says that these internal clouds can provide their own cost benefits. "A lot of CIOs are now talking about internal clouds. The main thing is about cost savings - they

want to be a service provider for their business units, so [IT] becomes a profit centre rather than a cost centre," Vaidya explains. Using these private clouds, he continues, businesses can use a single interface to directly provision new, virtual infrastructure, from servers, to storage, to networking.

In comparison, public cloud services are less attractive to



National governments are waking up to the threat of cyber attacks



Middle East governments are investing in IT for sectors like healthcare and education



organisations can't take their data outside the UAE. There is a lot of paranoia around the cloud."

Samer Zein, regional director at HP Networks, believes that this year has seen enterprises in the Middle East place rising importance on the energy efficiency of their IT infrastructure. "There has been a lot of reception from CIOs to improve [energy efficiency]. It's very important because it's part of the total cost of ownership of any typical data centre," he explains. Zein advises that private sector organisations follow the lead of those regional governments that are putting energy efficiency at the heart of their IT strategy, such as the UAE and Qatar. He says that by doing so, CIOs can not only lower their operating costs, but also free up cash for spending on more innovative projects. "It helps IT managers to lower the cost of their operations and thus they can allocate more and more of their budget to things like innovations," he believes.

ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

Nidal Abou Ltaif, VP, emerging markets, at communications provider Avaya believes that increasing levels of customer service has been a key focus for enterprises in the region this year.

A notable aspect of this trend though has been the role of managed services, Abou Ltaif believes. He says that services providers in the Middle East are more and more focusing on

businesses in the region, Vaidya believes. "One of the main reasons is bandwidth, so first of all the reliability of the links is very poor and bandwidth is very expensive," he says. "Another thing is security, if you're replicating into the cloud [you have to ask] 'where is the cloud located, and where is your data going to reside?' - a lot of

"National governments are finally realising the risk of cyber attacks," says Eugene Kaspersky