

THE BOARDROOM

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

LONDON · JULY 2026

INDUSTRY REPORT



**WE'RE BETTER
IN A CRISIS.
THAT'S THE PROBLEM.**

Every function in the room described being faster, clearer and braver under crisis than in business as usual. The mission isn't surviving the next one. It's building the behaviour in before you need it.

01 SYNOPSIS & PURPOSE

Stop treating crisis capability as emergency mode.

In a world of political and economic disruption, the corporate world can feel like crisis after crisis. As a senior leader you are under pressure to respond quickly, navigating the unknown, reacting to circumstances that keep moving, and maintaining control without the full picture. A strong Plan A is a good start. But if it fails, what do you do next?

The Boardroom Club convened senior leaders across Operations, Finance, Technology, People and Commercial to test that question against someone who has answered it for real. Ahead of the evening we interviewed guests on their organisations' approach to crisis management, operational resilience and decision-making under pressure. Afterwards, we called them back.

What came out of those conversations was not a list of gaps in tooling. Few named technology as their primary constraint.

What they named was time, ownership, rehearsal and trust, and, repeatedly, an uncomfortable observation: that the way their organisation works in a crisis is better than the way they work the rest of the time.

This report explores how senior leaders across five functions think about crisis, resilience and decision-making when the information is incomplete and the clock is ticking. It is built from three sources: interviews conducted with guests before the evening, the table discussions on the night, and follow-up calls with attendees afterwards.

The Boardroom Club held the group discussion in a private room at Sushisamba around a keynote from cave diver John Volanthen, whose account of the Tham Luang rescue provided the reference point for everything that followed.

THE QUESTION PUT TO EVERY TABLE

“When it comes to crisis management, business agility and operational resilience, what is the biggest external risk your company is facing in 2026?”

AND BEHIND IT

- Are you focused on a few major initiatives, or letting a thousand flowers bloom?
- What metrics are you using to assess whether this is working?
- Will the second half of 2026 be better than the first? If so, why – and how?

02 CONTRIBUTORS

The room.

Senior leaders from across Operations, Finance, Technology, People and Commercial, joined us on the evening.

OPERATIONS

Delphine Rech-Guitel

EMEA COO, TP ICAP

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Global Security Operations & TRM
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Deputy Chief People Officer, NHS SWL ICB

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Chief of Staff, Munich Re

03 OUR PARTNER

Introducing Cognizant.

Cognizant engineers modern businesses, helping clients modernise technology, reimagine processes and transform experiences so they can stay ahead in a fast-changing world. Sector leaders from Cognizant hosted each table on the night, guiding the discussion and reporting back to the room.



DAVID INGHAM

**Client Partner - Media,
Entertainment & Sport, Cognizant**



DAVID SEXTON

VP & Head of Insurance, Cognizant



CHAKRADHAR GOOTY AGRAHARAM

**Global Intelligent Automation
Leader, Cognizant**

When organisations discuss resilience, attention often falls on the functions most associated with managing risk — cyber, risk, legal, compliance and operations — each critical. Yet the strongest message from business leaders is that resilience is rarely determined by any one function in isolation; it's determined by how well an organisation connects knowledge that already exists across the business.

This matters because risk rarely stays within a single function — a challenge in one area can quickly affect others. Most organisations already possess the information needed to respond effectively; the challenge is rarely a lack of expertise or data, but the difficulty of bringing it together quickly enough, often separated by processes and reporting structures never designed for today's pace.

As a result, resilience increasingly feels less like a question of control and more like a question of visibility. Organisations that achieve this respond more quickly when circumstances change — not because they have better information, but because they can access and apply it more effectively.

This creates an opportunity as organisations explore AI. Much of the conversation focuses on productivity and automation, yet there is an equally important opportunity to make organisational knowledge more accessible — helping leaders connect information that already exists but is difficult to surface when it's needed most.

Few organisations can predict every challenge, and fewer still will have complete information when it matters. The objective cannot be the perfect plan for every scenario — it is an organisation that can draw on what it knows, adapt when circumstances change, and act decisively when the unexpected occurs. The best prepared won't be those with the most information, but those that can connect knowledge, make it accessible, and use it well when it matters most.

04 OUR KEYNOTE

John Volanthen

Cave diver.

World record-holding British cave diver. Named one of TIME magazine's Heroes of the Year for his role in the 2018 Tham Luang rescue in Thailand.

John began caving at 14 and has been at the forefront of cave exploration and rescue for more than two decades. In June 2018, twelve boys and their football coach were trapped several kilometres inside a flooded cave system in northern Thailand. John and his diving partner were the ones who found them alive, nine days in.

The rescue was chronicled in the National Geographic documentary *The Rescue*, in the book *Thirteen Lessons That Saved Thirteen Lives*, and in the film *Thirteen Lives*.

He did not come to the room to talk about bravery. He came to talk about method and the room noticed. Several guests said afterwards that the detail which stayed with them was his description of himself as risk-averse: not a man who enjoys danger, but one who has built a discipline for operating inside it.



“The story is super impactful and provides some translatable takeaways for senior leaders. It was the best presentation I have seen at an event.”

Renato Paco, Global Cloud Director, Sky

“John is a really interesting role model. He did things differently when stakeholders were not fully bought in and that takes bravery. We could all learn something from that.”

Stella Vig, Medical Director For Secondary Care, NHS England

05 OPERATIONS

The bottleneck isn't information. It's authority

Operation functions can almost always see a crisis forming. What they frequently cannot do is act on it, because the authority to decide sits several levels above the people holding the information. The delay that follows is not an intelligence failure. It is a design choice.

The fix is structural and unglamorous: decide in advance who may act without escalating, and rehearse until the plan has been proven rather than merely written.

1 Push the decision down, deliberately

Tier decision rights before the next incident, one level close to the event, one making the major calls. Authority should follow the data, not the org chart. Written down in advance, this removes the single largest source of delay in a live response.

2 Volume is not visibility

More monitoring does not produce faster decisions if everything arrives at the same desk with the same urgency. Triage before escalation, so what reaches a decision-maker is already a decision, not a queue.

3 An untested plan is a hypothesis

Plan, rehearse, execute, in that order. Rehearsal is the only mechanism that reveals the difference between a document and a capability, and the organisations most confident of their readiness are consistently the ones that have watched a test fail.

4 Write a second playbook

Everything above assumes an incident with a start time. Client attrition, reputational drift and gradual capacity erosion never set off an alarm, and so never get a response. Slow-burn risk needs its own plan and its own named owner.

THE VERDICT

Resilience is not a plan you hold. It is a set of permissions you have already granted and tested against a scenario that has already broken once.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING

- Tier your decision rights this quarter and publish who may act without escalating.
- Make monitoring triage before it escalates, a queue is not a decision.
- Run the rehearsal, not the review. Anything untested is a hypothesis.
- Build the slow-burn playbook and give it an owner.

Scenario planning is the easy part. Ownership isn't.

Finance has largely solved the mechanics of preparedness. Risk registers exist, committees meet, scenarios are modelled and continuity teams are funded. What remains unresolved is considerably simpler and considerably harder: who, precisely, owns each scenario, and what are they incentivised to do about it.

A plan without an accountable owner is a document. And in a crisis, documents do not act, people with authority and a reason to use it do.

1 Attach a name and an incentive

Every top-five scenario needs a single accountable owner, and that ownership needs to show up in how they are measured. Where accountability is diffuse, response is slow regardless of how good the modelling was.

2 Say what will not change

In a crisis, most organisations announce what is changing. Far fewer state what remains constant, which strategic priorities still hold unless the crisis itself has altered the strategy. That constancy is a stabiliser, and its absence costs more than the disruption.

3 Experience is a purchasable asset

Under pressure, people fall back on having done it before. Not on skillset, on memory. If nobody in the room has the experience, either put someone in the room who does, or run the exercise that manufactures it. Both are cheaper than learning live.

4 Watch risk-aversion wearing the costume of diligence

Protecting the customer and avoiding the decision look identical in a steering committee. Heavily customer-facing businesses are particularly exposed to this, and the transformation it delays is usually the one that would have reduced the risk.

THE VERDICT

Preparedness is not a budget line or a modelling exercise. It is a list of names, each attached to a scenario, each with something at stake.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING

- Name a single accountable owner for each top-five scenario, with the incentive attached.
- State explicitly what will not change in a crisis, before one arrives.
- Buy the experience, hire it into the room or manufacture it through exercise.
- Audit where risk-aversion is doing the work of diligence, and separate the two.

07 TECHNOLOGY

Documented is not proven. Test it, or you don't have it.

Technology leaders were the least willing of any function to claim readiness, and they were right to be. Recovery plans fail in ways that paper cannot reveal: dependencies nobody mapped, sites that were assumed reachable, restore processes that have never been run end to end under time pressure.

Cyberattack and ransomware are now genuine all-hands scenarios. The distinction that matters is not between organisations with plans and organisations without them. It is between plans that have been rehearsed and plans that have only been approved.

1 Run the recovery, don't read it

Unannounced, end to end, with the people who would actually be available. Publish what broke. A disaster recovery capability that has only ever been described is an assumption with a budget attached.

2 Legacy debt is a risk multiplier

It belongs on the risk register with an owner and an exposure, not on the modernisation backlog behind the features. As the attack surface expands, the interest on that debt compounds faster than the roadmap retires it.

3 Continuity cannot live inside IT

If the business does not fund business continuity, the business does not own it, and will not behave as though it does when tested. It is a question of when, not if, which makes it a board-level allocation rather than a technical one.

4 Plan for AI on both sides of the ledger

AI is expanding the threat landscape and the defensive toolkit simultaneously. Anything that treats it only as a capability, or only as a threat, is describing half the position.

THE VERDICT

The only credible statement about your recovery capability is the date you last tested it, and the list of what failed when you did.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING

- Run one unannounced recovery test this quarter, and publish what broke.
- Move legacy tech debt onto the risk register with an owner and an exposure.
- Relocate continuity ownership and funding into the business.
- Write AI into the risk paper as both threat and defence.

Trust is the capability. Everything else is logistics.

A crisis runs on discretionary effort, people working late, crossing functional lines, improvising, telling you the uncomfortable thing early. None of that can be requisitioned at the moment it is needed. It is prepaid, through how the organisation behaves when nothing is wrong.

This makes the people function's contribution to resilience less about crisis training and more about whether the basics are done consistently, and whether it is safe to make a decision that turns out to be wrong.

1 Trust cannot be built during the incident

It is accumulated in ordinary conditions, through consistency, candour and doing the basics well. Organisations that treat culture as a crisis-time asset discover during the crisis that they have not been paying into it.

2 A plan that needs its author isn't a plan

Document to the standard where a stranger could pick it up and act. Auditable, explicit, free of the assumed knowledge that lives only in the head of whoever wrote it, who may well be unavailable.

3 Name who absorbs the pressure

Someone senior has to stand between technical teams and stakeholder anxiety so the people fixing the problem can concentrate on fixing it. If that role is not assigned, it defaults to whoever is least able to refuse.

4 Permission to be wrong precedes willingness to decide

Leaders who cannot recover from a failure will slow the organisation down. Emotional resilience and the ability to move on are operational capabilities. The constraint on building them is time and prioritisation, not appetite.

THE VERDICT

You cannot ask for discretionary effort at the moment you need it. You can only have already earned it.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING

- Document plans so a stranger could run them, then have a stranger try.
- Assign, by name, who absorbs stakeholder pressure during an incident.
- Make recovery from a failed decision explicit and expected, not tolerated.
- Treat the training gap as a prioritisation problem, because that is what it is.

Your drag isn't technology. It's the approval chain.

Commercial leaders named speed as the defining pressure of operating now - pace of decision and delivery, held against quality, usually at global scale and against client-driven KPIs. The instinct is to look for a technology answer.

The counter-intuitive finding is that in large organisations the technology is rarely what slows a response. The reviews, approvals and sign-offs standing between a decision and an action are.

1 Count the gates

Map how many approvals sit between a commercial decision and a customer-visible action, then remove the ones that exist for comfort rather than control. This is the single highest-yield speed intervention available to most commercial functions, and it requires no procurement.

2 Consequence moves people faster than mandate

Where teams understand the real economic and human cost of failure, what downtime actually does to a customer, urgency becomes intrinsic. Process mandates produce compliance. Understood consequence produces speed.

3 Give intuition a seat and a rule

Experienced instinct is data that has not been written down, and in fast-moving situations it frequently outperforms the model. The useful discipline is not choosing between gut and logic but stating in advance when instinct is permitted to override the analysis.

4 Separate customer protection from decision avoidance

The two are indistinguishable in a meeting and opposite in effect. Fear of customer impact routinely delays the transformation that would have reduced customer impact. Name which one is operating.

THE VERDICT

Speed is not bought. It is released, by removing the approvals that exist for reassurance rather than control.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING

- Count your approval gates and delete the ones that exist for comfort.
- Lead with consequence, not process, make the cost of failure concrete.
- State in advance when experienced instinct may override the model.
- Separate customer protection from decision avoidance, explicitly, in the room.

10 PARTNER CASE STUDY



Resilience is a program, not a project.

How Oxford University Press reduced operational risk, creating the foundations for faster change.

"Sometimes the greatest resilience risk is not a sudden crisis. It is complexity that has accumulated quietly over time, making it harder to see risk clearly and respond decisively when it emerges."

CONTEXT

For Oxford University Press (OUP), more than 500 years of history had been accompanied by a technology estate that had grown organically across a global organisation. When a new Global Technology function gained oversight of the estate, it discovered ageing and unsupported infrastructure, single points of failure and significant risks to business continuity and recovery. Maintaining that environment was also consuming investment that could otherwise support transformation.

The challenge was therefore bigger than replacing old technology. OUP needed to reduce immediate risk while creating an environment capable of supporting whatever came next.

ACTIONS TAKEN

Its longstanding technology partner Cognizant approached the transformation as a **sequence of connected initiatives** rather than a single modernisation project. Executive sponsorship sat on both sides, supported by a **joint steering committee** and governance framework designed to identify and manage risks as the programme evolved. A **demand-management function** helped prioritise new projects, while individual initiatives began with clearly defined outcomes and an architectural blueprint for delivery.

THE MISSION IMPOSSIBLE PARALLEL

That approach has a strong parallel with the conversations at Mission Impossible. Leaders repeatedly highlighted how complexity, limited visibility and unclear ownership can make organisations more vulnerable when disruption occurs. OUP's programme established the structure and governance needed to manage risk and change without every decision needing to reach the top.

IMPACT & OUTCOMES

Across OUP, the programme strengthened disaster recovery, modernised data centres, enabled hybrid working, moved workloads into the cloud and created greater visibility over technology spend.

75%

REDUCTION IN
END-OF-LIFE
EQUIPMENT

~1,000

ON-PREMISES
SERVERS
DECOMMISSIONED

~2/3

OF WORKLOADS
MOVED TO THE
CLOUD

20%

FALL IN HIGH &
CRITICAL
VULNERABILITIES

30%

REDUCTION IN
LICENCE
EXPOSURE

THE TAKEAWAY

Leaders gained greater visibility into technology risk, clearer governance and a stronger foundation for decision making as circumstances evolved. Organisations cannot prepare a perfect response for every possible disruption. They can, however, remove known vulnerabilities, establish clear governance and create an operating environment that gives leaders more choices when circumstances change.

11 THE PATTERN

Five themes, one root cause.

Across five functions and two rounds of interviews, the same five themes recurred regardless of who was speaking. Read together, they describe a single structural problem rather than five separate ones.

1 Decision-making under pressure

The single most consistent theme in the room, named by every function without prompting. Not the mechanics of deciding, but the psychology of committing while the picture is still moving.

2 Trust and stakeholder buy-in

A close second, and nobody claimed to have solved it, particularly with stakeholders who would rather you weren't there. Trust was described as the foundation of the discretionary effort a crisis demands.

3 Planning versus rehearsal

Everyone plans. Far fewer rehearse. The leaders most confident about their readiness were consistently the ones who had tested it and watched it fail.

4 Risk, honestly priced

The right call can be the least-worst option. Saying that out loud is what makes it available to a team.

5 Instinct against structure

The tension between gut and logic went unresolved and several leaders argued it should. The useful question is not which to trust but when each is permitted to win.

THE ROOT CAUSE

None of these five is a technology problem. Almost nobody named tooling as their main constraint.

What they named was time, ownership, rehearsal and trust and every one of those is something an organisation already demonstrates it can produce, at speed, the moment something breaks.

The capability exists. It is only being switched on by emergencies.

12 CONCLUSION

You already know how to do this.

The capability is not missing

Every organisation represented in the room could describe itself performing well under acute pressure: faster decisions, clearer ownership, less politics, more candour, people working across functions without being asked. That is not a hypothetical target state. It is a documented behaviour, observed repeatedly, in businesses that otherwise describe themselves as slow.

What a crisis actually removes

A crisis does not add capability. It removes obstacles, it suspends the approval chain, collapses the hierarchy, makes the priority unarguable and gives people permission to act without complete information. Which means the interesting question is not how to respond better next time. It is which of those obstacles you could remove now, deliberately, while nothing is on fire.

The mission

Volanthen's method was never about heroism. It was a library of plans, rehearsed until they held, with the authority to act sitting wherever the information was. Those are management choices, available on an ordinary Tuesday. The organisations that make them will not need a crisis to look like their best selves, and will be considerably better placed when one arrives anyway.

The mission is to stop needing the crisis.

“You already know what good looks like, because you do it every time something breaks. Clear ownership. Decisions made closest to the data. Permission to act without the full picture. None of that is emergency mode, it's just good operating. The mission is to stop needing the crisis to unlock it.”

The Boardroom Club, Mission Impossible, London 2026

THE BOARDROOM CLUB

The Boardroom Club is an exclusive network of senior business leaders who want to drive change within the complex and evolving world of large organisations. By surfacing the right topic at the right time with the right question, we create the right conversation to deliver the right answer. In doing so we help our members be a catalyst for change and a true leader within their organisation.

“Championing debate and deliberation couldn’t be more important amongst senior leaders in today’s world of crisis after crisis. This authentic experience generated authentic conversations, leading to authentic insights. Without meeting peers in an environment like this, you don’t really test your ideas.”

James Harris, Club Founder, Boardroom Club

The insights in this report were drawn from a private event of C-Level executives and other senior decision-makers, facilitated by James Harris, Founder of The Boardroom.

We would like to thank our sponsors for their event and report contributions:



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