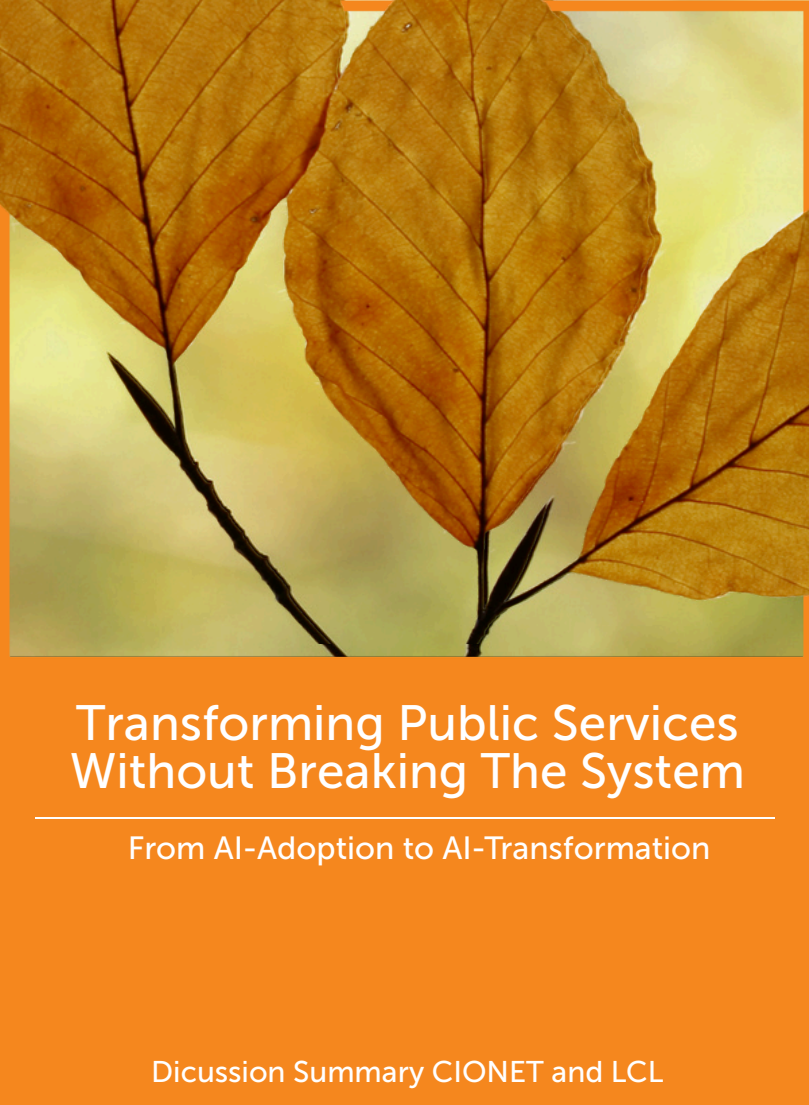
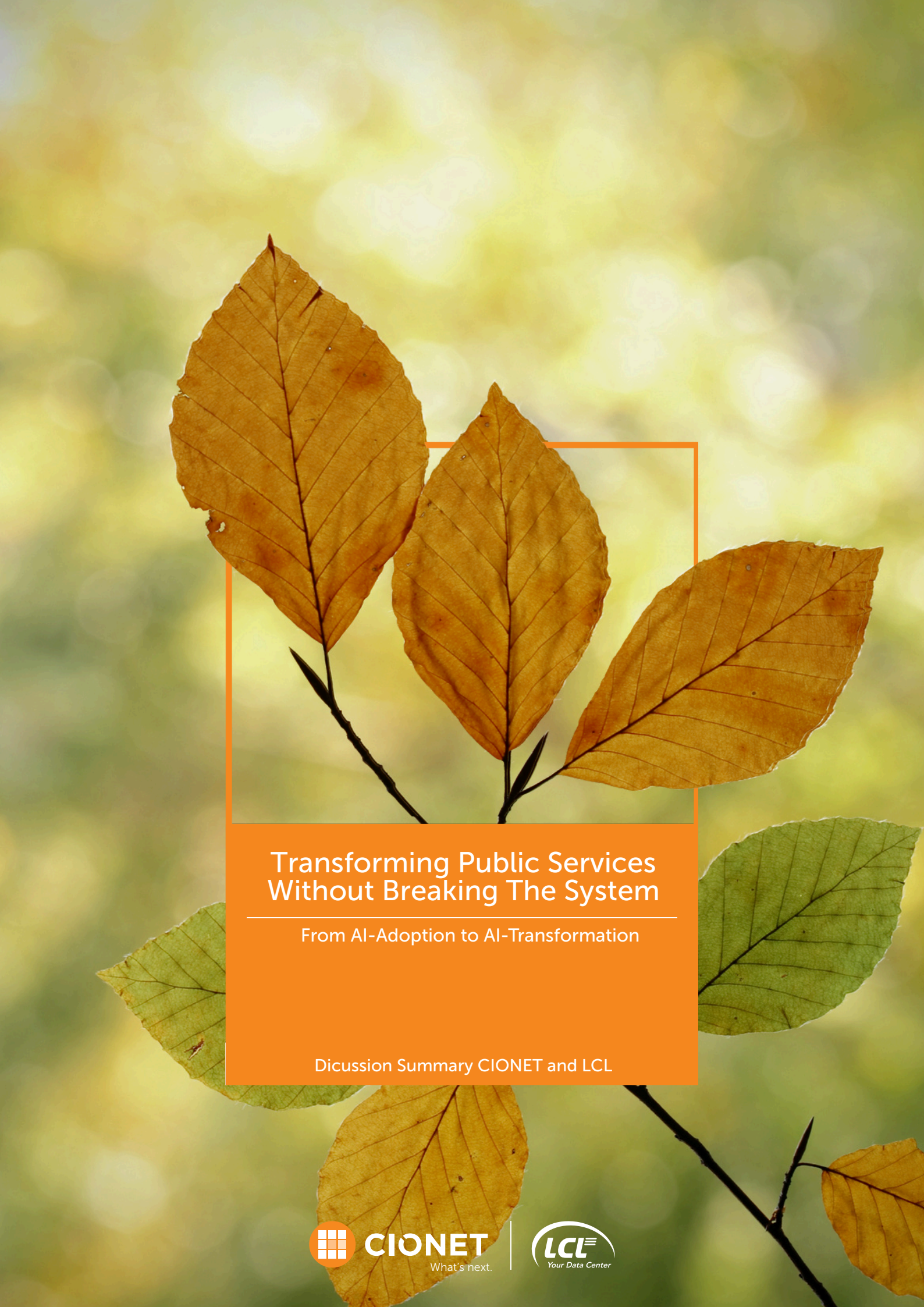




Transforming Public Services Without Breaking The System

From AI-Adoption to AI-Transformation

Dicussion Summary CIONET and LCL



CIONET
What's next.





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KEY QUESTIONS

On Tuesday, 16 June 2026, CIONET, in close partnership with LCL Data Centres, hosted an exclusive roundtable discussion titled "Transforming Public Services without Breaking the System: From AI-adoption to AI-transformation". Held at The Table in Boortmeerbeek, this unique event gathered chief digital officers, technology directors, CISOs, and operational leaders representing public administrations, healthcare networks, and critical infrastructure. The evening's brainstorming session was led by Daniel Eycken, a partner and moderator at CIONET.

Being a first mover is highly risky, especially for a public-sector or regulated organisation working with public funds. Private entities are driven by survival and immediate competitive pressures, whereas public and healthcare institutions must innovate responsibly without wasting taxpayer or institutional budgets. At the same time, the staggering pace of Artificial Intelligence places significant pressure on existing operational models.

This roundtable set out to address a core set of defining questions:

1. Are public entities merely painting an expensive AI coat of paint over old processes, or are they successfully re-engineering operational foundations?
2. How can public frameworks and multi-year master contracts survive technological cycles that shift multiple times before a tender is launched?
3. As agentic AI emerges, how do critical infrastructure players (NIS2) balance the pressure to innovate against digital sovereignty, strict data privacy, and a heavy reliance on foreign tech giants?



THE DEBATE

The Illusion of "AI-isation" vs True Transformation

"We should not only explore AI in small sub-processes or small tasks, but we should also rethink our processes. AI is offering a unique opportunity to re-engineer and optimise our entire functioning."

Youri Segers, CEO of Digipolis

The opening exchange cut sharply through the standard marketing noise surrounding Artificial Intelligence. Youri Segers, CEO of Digipolis (the IT partner for the City of Antwerp), delivered a powerful call to move away from superficial AI-adoption toward genuine, structural transformation.

In setting the stage, Youri introduced a vital conceptual distinction, warning against what he calls "AI-isation". This tactical pitfall occurs when an organisation rushes to hand out standard Microsoft Copilot or Gemini licences to its entire workforce, allowing individuals to try small tactical tricks at the edges of their jobs.

To push past slow, top-down mandates, Youri explicitly declared 2026 the "Year of AI" at Digipolis by launching a decentralised matrix prototyping programme directly on the work floor. They appointed approximately 60 "AI Ambassadors" across the organisation, including business analysts, technical analysts, and project leaders. These professionals are actively tasked with experimenting within their daily routines to re-envision how their specific roles and workflows should look in two to three years' time.

This structural shift changes how public services interact with citizens and signals the potential death of the traditional website. User behaviour is moving rapidly away from visiting standard municipal portals or typing queries into search bars. Citizens now expect direct, conversational answers from LLMs and automated agents. Consequently, Youri revealed that he had stepped on the brake, putting a major new website development project completely on hold. In his view, traditional content management systems will be rendered entirely obsolete within two years by out-of-the-box market tools that instantly bridge the gap from standard data environments to automated agent services.

Furthermore, true transformation can provide measurable headcount efficiency if planned correctly. For instance, Youri cited a standard municipal procurement team handling repetitive, structured purchasing files. By treating AI as an operational commodity rather than an additive tool, an organisation can turn this workforce into a team of highly productive individuals who perform the collective work of many, thereby allowing the remaining headcount to be reallocated to higher-value tasks.

The Macro Framework Burden and the Token Trap

Providing the macro view across the Flemish administration, Steven Vermeulen, CIO at Digitaal Vlaanderen, offered a grounded reality check regarding large-scale deployments and the legal friction inherent in public frameworks.

Steven noted that within major public administrative bodies, the ability to dive into decades of unstructured documents, slides, and historical content is an operational game-changer. In the public sector, on any given subject, someone has inevitably already written it or expressed it. AI provides the engine to instantly extract, reuse, and build upon this collective experience, shifting the focus from individual capability to true collective intelligence.

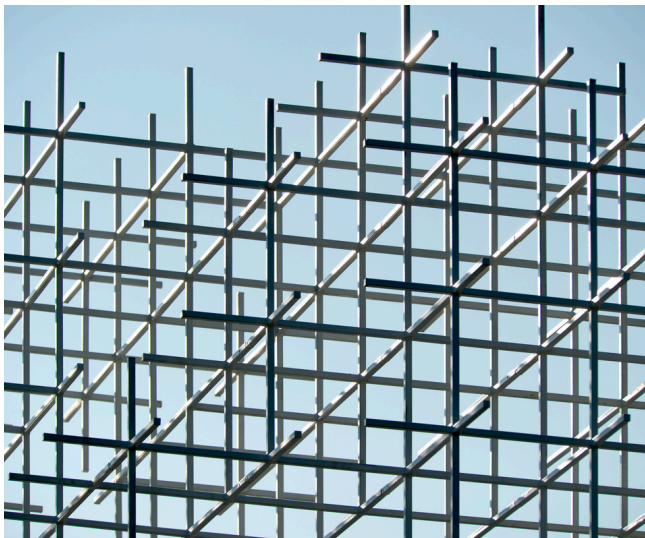
However, Steven also detailed the immense challenges of executing this vision under current European procurement laws, outlining the Procurement Paradox. To avoid the massive disruption and overhead costs of moving data centres or changing core application setups every three years, public entities routinely extend framework vehicles up to seven years. Steven is currently drafting public tenders for a massive framework scheduled to launch in 2029 and running until 2035. Attempting to predict technical requirements for 2035 is an impossible task.

This regulatory rigidity shifts public sector behaviour away from opportunity-driven innovation toward a strictly spec-driven culture. Dirk Deridder (CTO at Smals) noted that public administrations lack the operational room to manoeuvre or to chase fast-moving market features; they are legally constrained by parameters established years in advance. Even deploying standard commercial plugins generates friction. Dirk shared that the tender process took nearly an entire year just to launch their GitHub Copilot rollout for 650 developers. This creates a continuous flow conflict. Dirk Deridder supported Steven's point, arguing that procurement regulations were designed for static objects, such as building a defined number of physical bridges, rather than for continuous, highly integrated cloud technologies. When an organisation purchases an enterprise platform and later requires an advanced AI coding plugin, procurement departments often object, demanding an independent market competition for that specific plugin. This regulatory constraint forces teams to introduce disparate, external systems that must be awkwardly bridged, actively working against technological cohesion.

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“The earning model on AI is not yet very clear. We do see productivity gains on a personal level... but we can not quantify and prove them at the level of the entire organisation yet.”

Steven Vermeulen, CIO of Digitaal Vlaanderen



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Ultimately, Steven warned that the financial model of large-scale public AI rollouts remains highly uncertain. Digitaal Vlaanderen executed a major public sector deployment of 10,000 Microsoft Copilot licences, negotiating a low initial price. While users quickly became dependent on the AI assistant, the long-term cost reductions have been entirely offset by explosive, recurring token fees charged by external providers. Senior developers work more efficiently with automated code generation, but their total cost of delivery has increased due to the ongoing token expenses.

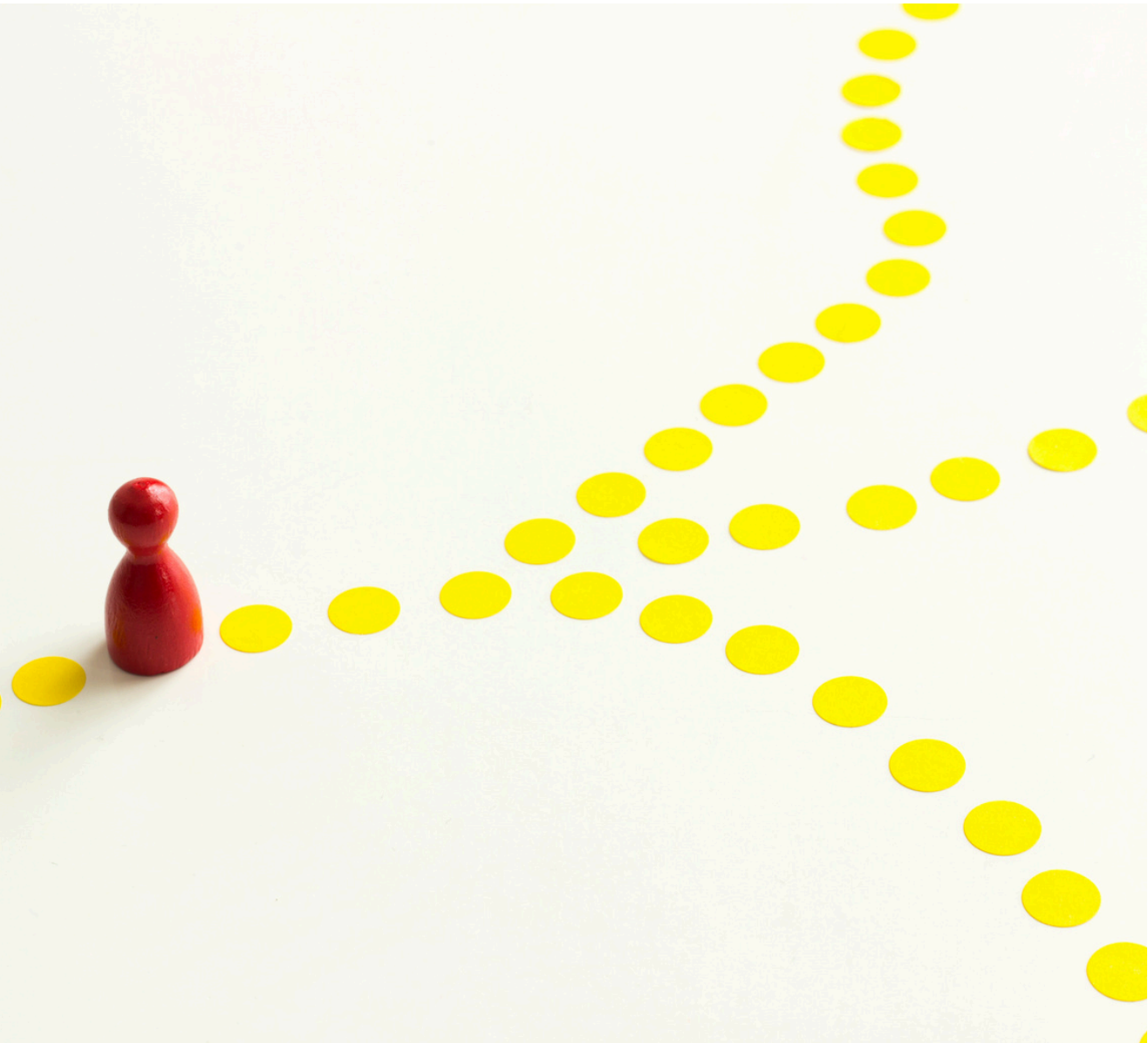
High Stakes, Digital Dependencies and Clinical Realities

In bringing a vital, non-IT perspective to the table, Maarten Walravens re-anchored the conversation around the life-and-death stakes of technological dependency and regulatory compliance in healthcare environments.

Maarten detailed a chilling scenario regarding the loss of manual baseline skills, pointing to a recent cyber-crisis at AZ Monica where the hospital was forced to turn off all digital networks for an entire month, reverting operations completely to physical paper. For younger nurses aged 21 to 25 who have spent their entire careers in fully digital environments, a paper-driven ward can be completely alien. Maarten stressed that there are no automated "pop-ups" on paper to prevent clinical mistakes, highlighting the critical danger that occurs when a workforce loses its manual operational baseline skills.

“At the hospital, there's already a full table. So if you put something new, a new investment, on it, there is something on the other side that has to fall from the table. That is a reality...”

Maarten Walravens, Deputy CMO & Disaster Coordinator at AZ Maarten



The NIS2 Burden and the Mythos Patching Trauma

This growing operational vulnerability is further compounded by a dual layer of regulatory weight and immediate cybersecurity crises.

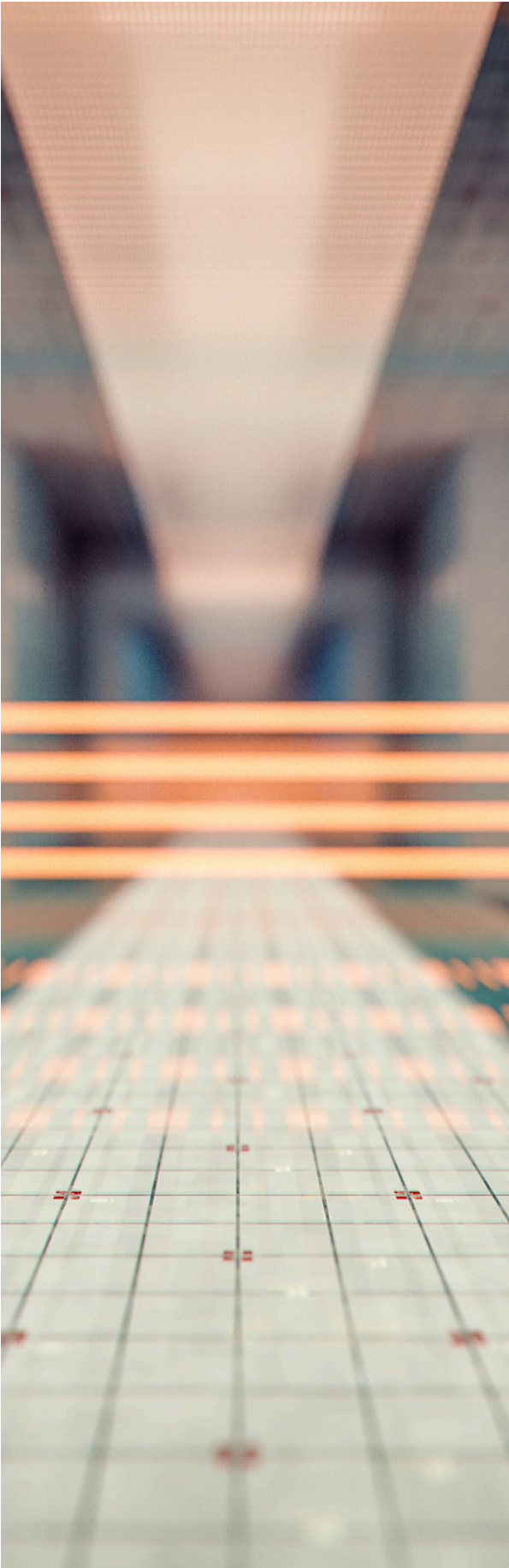
On the one hand, overarching security regulations like NIS2 impose a massive administrative and governance burden, stretching internal teams already running at maximum capacity to document compliance and navigate legal frameworks.

On the other hand, IT managers are facing an entirely distinct, acute patching "trauma" driven by frontier AI capabilities. Steven Vermeulen noted that monitoring metrics have fundamentally shifted: with the arrival of highly advanced, autonomous models like Anthropic's Claude Mythos, the window for defence has collapsed.

Dirk Deridder described the relentless requirement to apply emergency security patches immediately within a strict 24-hour window as genuinely traumatic. Instead of following standard, heavily governed administrative workflows, this accelerated cycle completely breaks traditional, stable release management processes, forcing organisations into a continuous state of operational panic as they try to outrun automated vulnerability discovery.

Shadow AI and Floor Governance

Compounding this systemic strain is the issue of shadow AI and standalone tools on the hospital floor. Software vendors frequently approach doctors directly, offering advanced clinical tools or image recognition models for free on a short-term, standalone trial basis. Once clinicians become accustomed to the immediate utility of the tool, they approach the ICT department demanding an immediate enterprise network connection. Maarten, highlighted the need for a robust governance framework around ICT and security. If a vendor or clinical team initiates an unauthorised trial outside the agreed processes, the demonstration is immediately stopped. At the same time, clear expectations are set that adherence to these procedures is essential, as repeated non-compliance could impact eligibility for future tenders.





Trust, Accountability and the Rise of the Automated Black Box

The core obstacle to true AI transformation within the public sector is not the technical logic itself, but legal accountability, data privacy, and the societal threshold of trust.

Maarten Walravens noted a fascinating inconsistency in how society evaluates human versus machine error. In clinical environments, communities accept a 70% to 75% diagnostic accuracy rate from human physicians without systemic revolt. Yet, if an automated AI radiology engine achieves a documented 95% accuracy score in detecting pneumonia, people tend to reject the tool if it falls short of 100% perfection. This led Maarten to ask a striking ethical question: Is it right to withhold a diagnostic system that consistently outperforms human averages simply because it is automated?

Yet, the legal reality under new European frameworks remains inflexible and ultimate legal accountability cannot be transferred to software. Under the European AI Act and NIS2 directives, the Chief Medical Officer and the executive board retain absolute liability for patient safety. Hospitals now run mandatory legal literacy courses for doctors to ensure they understand that even when using an AI model, the individual clinician remains fully accountable for the final diagnostic outcome.

This reliance on technology also poses severe operational risks during outages. Automated medical systems do not replace human reasoning; they process deep historical data patterns over long timelines, leaving the human expert free to manage context, nuance, and direct patient contact. Clinicians possess a critical diagnostic gut feeling, known in Dutch as a "niet-pluis-gevoel". An automated early-warning system can look at a patient's electronic vitals and declare them stable, while an experienced nurse, observing a subtle physical cue, knows something is wrong. AI models cannot replicate this human intuition; they must serve as a backup to human oversight, not a replacement.

The Paradox Of Emergency Governance And Crisis Automation

Beyond daily clinical administration, public sector leaders face the ultimate test of accountability during multi-agency emergency management. Vincent Boucheron (Service Public Wallon) pushed the roundtable to consider high-velocity decision-making during severe disruptions, such as a major Seveso industrial failure or a nuclear facility crisis. In these high-pressure scenarios, massive volumes of critical telemetry, pharmacy stock data, and environmental parameters must be compiled across independent public bodies and private pharmaceutical supply lines within a collapsed timeline.

Vincent argued that during a crisis, institutions must cross a specific trust threshold and accept automated decision stacks. When data overloads human cognitive capacity, a swift automated decision executed by an integrated machine system is functionally superior to human executive paralysis. Yet, as Taco Mulder (Federal CISO) countered, implementing automated crisis coordination is impossible without explicit data containerisation and strict data hygiene up front.

Cyber security tools have operated this way for years; when managing two million infrastructure anomalies across a healthcare network within 24 hours, reliance on automated Extended Detection and Response (XDR) systems is a necessity. The real obstacle to extending this automation to civic workflows is data maturity; if baseline data ingestion is flawed, automated outputs risk amplifying systemic failures under stress.

CONCLUSION AND WRAP-UP

The discussion made one thing abundantly clear: the greatest challenge facing the public sector is not adopting Artificial Intelligence, but transforming organisations in a way that preserves trust, accountability and resilience.

Across government, healthcare and critical infrastructure, participants agreed that AI has already demonstrated its ability to improve individual productivity and support better decision-making. The real opportunity, however, lies beyond simply adding AI to existing processes. It lies in redesigning the way public services are organised and delivered.

Doing so requires several foundations to be in place. High-quality, well-governed data remains essential. Procurement models must become flexible enough to accommodate technologies that evolve far faster than traditional contracting cycles. Governance frameworks need to strike a careful balance between innovation and control. And as organisations become increasingly dependent on AI, questions around sovereignty, resilience and accountability will only become more important.

Perhaps the strongest message of the evening was that AI should not replace human judgement, but strengthen it. Whether in hospitals, government agencies or emergency response organisations, participants consistently argued that technology must augment human expertise rather than remove responsibility.

Acknowledgements

CIONET and LCL would like to sincerely thank all speakers and participants for openly sharing their experiences, challenges and perspectives throughout the discussion. The quality of the debate reflected the willingness of public-sector leaders to exchange ideas honestly and learn from one another. It is precisely these peer-to-peer conversations that help shape the next generation of digital leadership.

Enabling Transformation

These discussions also highlighted that successful AI transformation depends on more than software alone. Secure, reliable and scalable digital infrastructure forms an essential part of the equation. As organisations deploy increasingly demanding AI workloads while navigating European regulations such as NIS2 and the AI Act, the underlying infrastructure must be able to support both innovation and compliance.

In that context, infrastructure partners such as LCL have an important role to play: providing secure, high-performance data centre environments that allow public organisations to innovate with confidence, while maintaining the resilience, availability and data protection that critical services require.

Ultimately, technology providers, public institutions and policymakers all have a shared responsibility. AI transformation will not be achieved by any single organisation, but through collaboration across the entire ecosystem.



About CIONET

CIONET is the leading international community of digital and IT executives, connecting more than 12,000 CIOs, CTOs, CISOs and senior technology leaders across Europe and Latin America. Through a curated programme of over 500 annual events, research initiatives and peer-driven exchanges, CIONET enables executives to share insights, benchmark strategies, and address the most pressing challenges in digital transformation.

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About LCL

LCL offers premier infrastructure expertise in co-location facilities. Operating five independent data centres across Belgium (Aalst, Antwerp, Diegem, Gembloux, and Huizingen), LCL provides advanced connectivity solutions for multinational corporations, government bodies, and telecom operators. Tier III certified and fully compliant with ISO 27001, ISO 45001, ISO 9001, and ISO 14001, LCL combines operational safety with sustainability as a pioneer within the European Climate Neutral Data Centre Pact.

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