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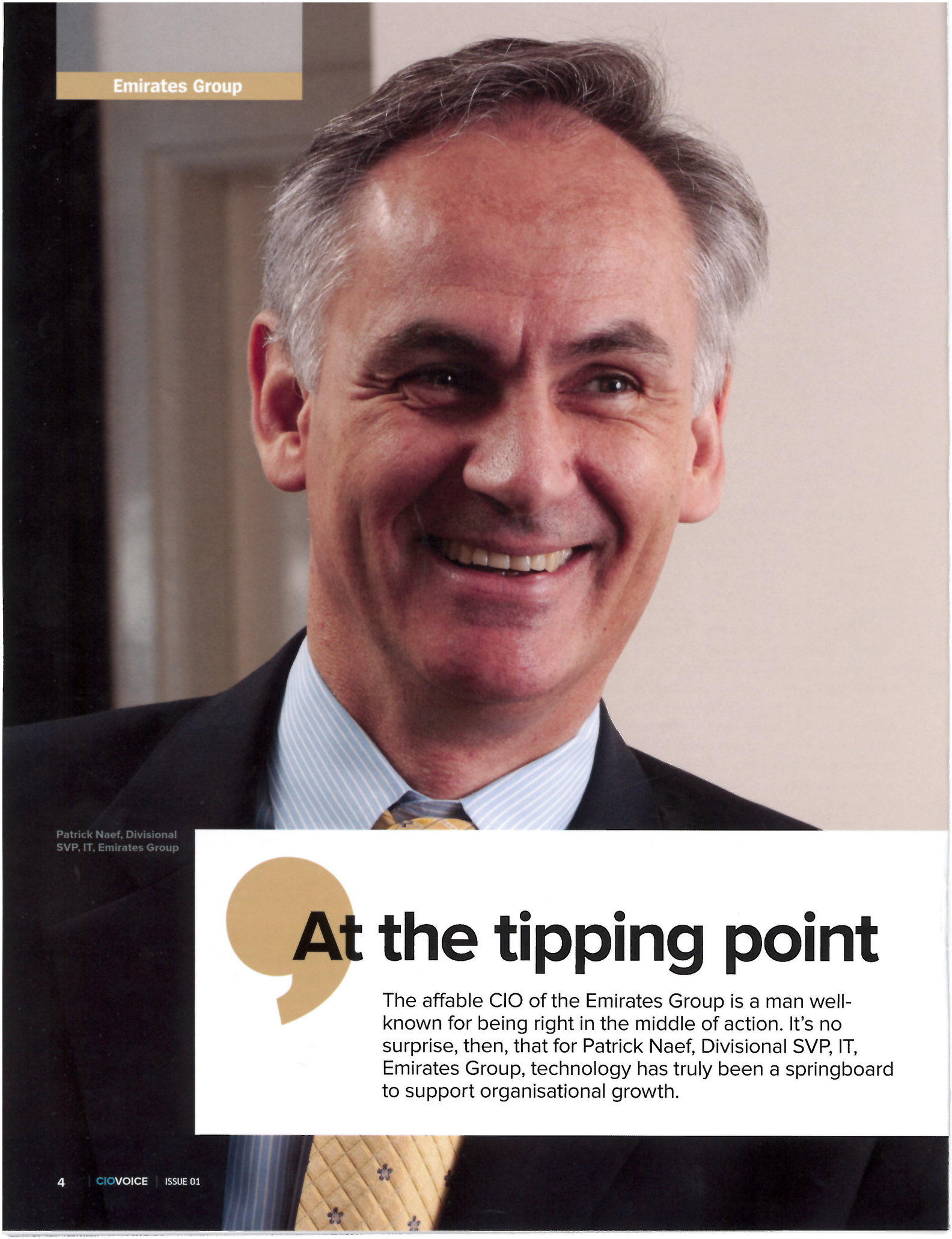
Growth through innovation

Some of the Middle East's top names partner with HP Software to drive business again



Patrick Naef, Divisional SVP, IT, Emirates Group

At the tipping point

The affable CIO of the Emirates Group is a man well-known for being right in the middle of action. It's no surprise, then, that for Patrick Naef, Divisional SVP, IT, Emirates Group, technology has truly been a springboard to support organisational growth.

As Naef and his team gear up for the next phase of growth for the Emirates Group, three objectives will continue to drive the focus — strategy, IT automation and emerging technology. "Similar to many other large organisations, we too struggle with legacy. This means that we often face situations where we are forced to trade off innovation for routine maintenance and systems management. But going forward, the focus for us is to improve the use of IT tools within the IT organisation," Naef shares.

The objective has translated for the IT group into a five-point strategy; consolidation, standardisation, governance, re-usability and integration.

"We have a one-in-and-one-out policy, which means that for every new system we implement we retire at least one legacy implementation. In some cases we replace more than one system at a time," Naef says.

But how does he make more room for innovation?

This is probably the one question that Naef keeps asking himself and the team. "Emirates is gearing up for its next big growth phase and with a fleet of 26 A380s and 64 more on the way, we have to keep asking ourselves how we can grow to support the business. Either we scale up on resources, or we scale up on how we use the resources," he says.

That's where IT automation and innovation has stepped to help. "Automating business processes has helped us use IT more strategically, and for years we have been investing in automating commodity processes. Resources are also managed more efficiently," he says.

"Automation has certainly helped us steer away from time-consuming and routine work, and helped us spend our time understanding emerging technologies that can deliver greater innovation to the business," Naef explains.

Emerging technologies: follow the buzz, sort the hype

Talking about innovation, the conversation would be incomplete without a peek into how Naef keeps tabs of emerging technologies. "I've learnt that with buzz words we need to be careful. But at the same time, I've also understood that it makes sense to invest early in some trends to understand the technology better," he shares.

He's candid when he talks about how Emirates could have invested a lot earlier in mobility. "We've made up for lost time now and we are investing heavily in mobile technologies. We tried at one point to hazard a guess on where this market would go, not having to develop apps for each of the commonly used platforms. Common standards and development environments such as HTML-5 will take longer than expected to mature and gain acceptance, so we are doomed to having to catch up and develop mostly native apps for different platforms in parallel," he says.

This learning has also translated into a twin-pronged strategy for evaluating new technology areas. "We've come up with a plan to have two levels of strategy — a long-term one, and a short-term plan which will allow us to experiment and trial new technologies to learn more about their benefits," Naef explains.

Interestingly, a new team has also been carved out for assessing opportunities for innovation in the mobility area, and new projects are already on their way. Among expected launches are mobile apps for applications that serve the Emirates Group staff, including a mobile app for staff seat availability, mobile front end for the ERP system, purchase approvals and a Twitter-like intranet tool for cabin crew communications.

Go where people are

The innovation buck does not stop with mobility. Naef and his team are already looking at how they can build extensions to the overall plan. "The tipping point for any technology adoption happens when we take the applications to where the people are, because the value of any collaborative network grows exponentially with the number of people using it," he says.

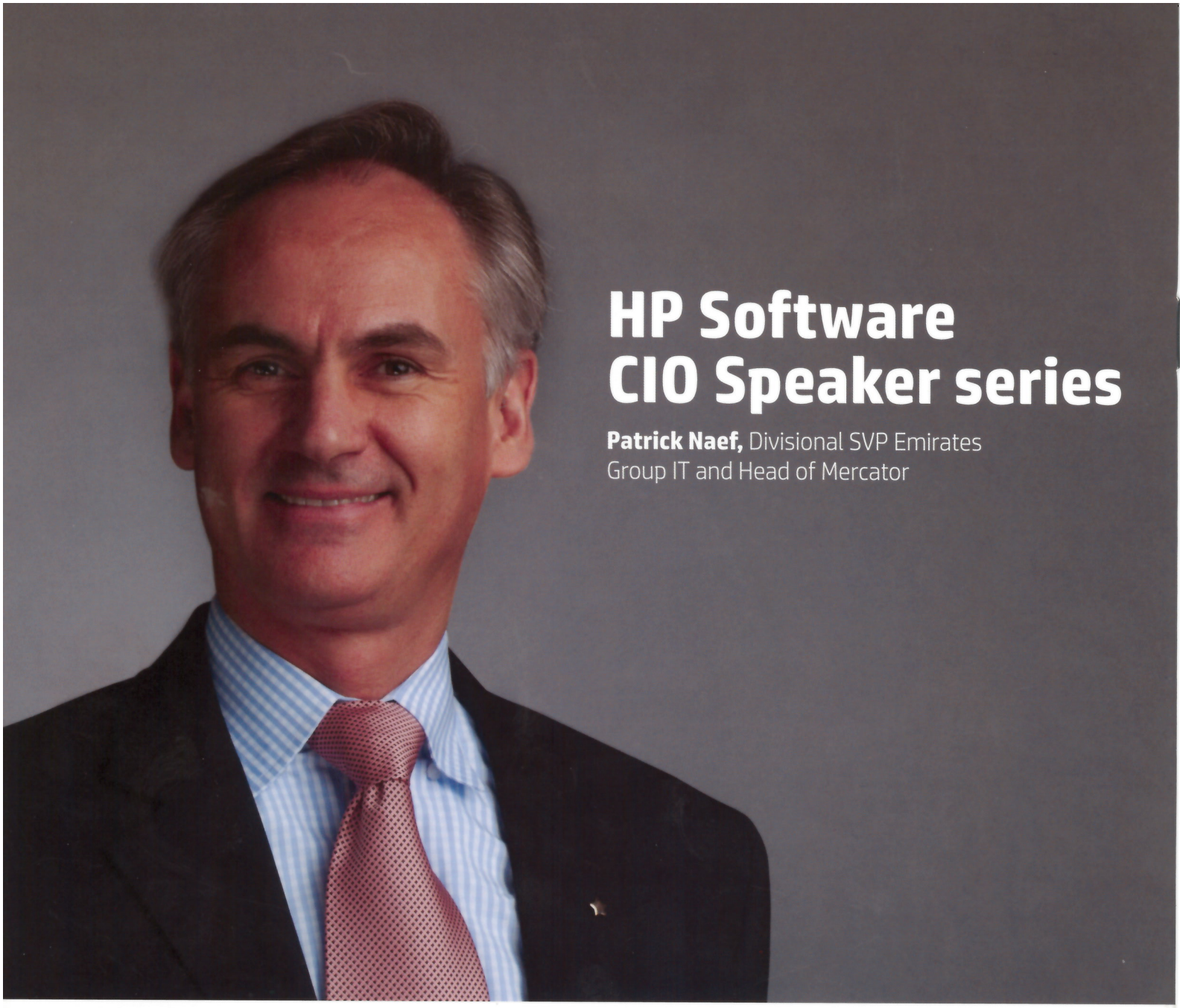
An outcome of this learning has translated into BYOD (bring your own device) trials currently underway at the group. "We are today already offering our staff e-mail, calendar and access to contacts on personal devices. There are three options we are piloting for a complete BYOD offering; virtual desktop access where all corporate applications can be accessed, e-mail and calendar by porting a native application on the device, and file access through an enterprise-class file sharing service," he shares.

Looking ahead

At Emirates Group IT, the action never stops. Looking ahead, the team expects to spend more time building Big Data information architectures to facilitate faster access to information and grid computing solutions in order to utilise the compute power of idle PCs. The group has also started to transition towards a private cloud environment.

"Innovation has become a culture at the Emirates Group and it's impossible to slot this into a process or a productised approach. So we'll keep thinking and innovating," Naef emphasises.

Emirates has a fleet of **26** A380s and is adding another **64**



HP Software CIO Speaker series

Patrick Naef, Divisional SVP Emirates Group IT and Head of Mercator

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