

International COO Community (iCOOC)

COO Interview: Brian O'Neill

COO, TTO & Global Head, Group
Transformation Standard Chartered



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Brian is the Chief Operating Officer for Transformation, Technology & Operations, and from May 2024, he is also the Global Head, Group Transformation.

Prior to joining Standard Chartered in 2022, Brian was COO Chief of Staff and Risk Director at Lloyds Banking Group in the United Kingdom.

With a career spanning 27 years in the banking sector, Brian has held senior leadership positions at both Lloyds Banking Group and National Australia Group.

A majority of his career was spent in the United Kingdom before relocating to Singapore in 2022, bringing with him a wealth of knowledge and a different perspective that he applies to his current global role.



His expertise lies in Risk Management, focusing particularly on Operational Risk and Technology Risk. He has extensive experience in driving efficiencies and transforming banks to become more client-focused and data-driven.

Prioritising operational resilience amid technological change

As COO of a multinational financial institution, you are championing operational resilience. Explain what you mean by that and how you plan on achieving it?

At Standard Chartered, our goal is clear – we aspire to redefine what it means to be a client-focused, data-driven digital bank. To achieve that, our services must be perpetually stable and reliable, not just for our clients, but for our business partners as well.

Operational resilience – a bank’s ability to adapt and function amidst major disruptions – is an essential priority for all COOs. Commitment to operational resilience can shape our future, ensuring we continue to meet and exceed the expectations of those who depend on us.

We should always ask ourselves: How can we individually and collectively strengthen our resilience? What innovative measures can we implement to safeguard our operations against unforeseen challenges?

We need to work closely with regulators to ensure compliance, while providing our clients and businesses on-demand services whenever and wherever they need. Operational resilience extends beyond just availability, covering cybersecurity, data quality, IT resilience, product resilience and geopolitical resilience.

We also scrutinise every third-party we work with and ensure our teams continually elevate their service offerings and experiences across our vast networks in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

While each jurisdiction has unique nuances in its operations and regulatory requirements, our core principles remain consistent. This helps us to consistently deliver client-centric services reliably, whilst incorporating specific country requirements.

The Bank is working to maintain momentum on the simplification and harmonisation of its technology estate. How are you doing this?

Since we introduced our bank-wide Fit for Growth programme in February 2024, we have embarked on a bold journey to transform our ways of working. We are radically shifting from being “risk-focused, client-aware” to becoming “client-focused, risk-aware.” This shift is all about streamlining, standardising, and digitising our business to boost our efficiency and productivity.

Our ultimate goal is to accelerate our transformation agenda and deliver even better results for our clients and our teams.

As part of our digital transformation, we have grown the capabilities of our technology significantly, both organically and through targeted acquisitions. This growth is driven by our intent to meet unique client requirements and develop systems tailored for specific client segments.

Our adoption of modern, sophisticated technologies improves our process efficiency and infrastructure robustness. For example, APIs can streamline operations by offering unified solutions to diverse client bases. This approach also enables us to consolidate and reduce technology sprawl across different segments.

We are focused on removing duplication and overlap of responsibilities across teams – for example, in future we will not need multiple onboarding systems for private banking, retail, or commercial clients.

The core functionalities remain the same with small nuances enabling us to cater to those different groups in the right ways.

Digitising the bank also means streamlining outdated processes. Traditionally, many banks tend to focus on digitising the front-end of their services so that clients have a seamless interface, while paying less attention to the back office processes, leaving them slow and complex.

Our aim is to fully digitise the end-to-end client experience and re-engineer core processes of the bank to make turnaround times much faster, reduce manual errors, and deliver sustainably higher returns.



What are some of the best-in class tools the bank is utilising to provide secure and resilient technology?

As a bank, we are exploring and experimenting with tools like GenAI responsibly across three broad themes: general content generation and analysis, communication channels, and engineering. We continually monitor emerging trends and technologies and are always on a lookout for new opportunities and business models that could potentially shape the future of banking.

The proliferation of new technologies unlocks new opportunities but what is more important is the way technology can help us understand our end-to-end client journeys. Technology is not just about making our core banking system and digital banking more resilient; it is also vital in helping us understand our broader digital ecosystem.

By understanding the end-to-end client experience, and what can interrupt our services, we are well-positioned to respond in a timely and resilient manner. This also extends to the tools and capabilities provided by the third parties we work with.

Building out a service catalogue to understand the key components of our tech infrastructure allows us to stress-test those systems through scenarios, test what that might go wrong and understand the adjustments required.

It is more about understanding those end-to-end processes than a specific technology tool.

While the usage of tools like artificial intelligence (AI) and generative AI has the potential to be incredibly helpful in easing the burden of repetitive manual tasks, we also need to think about the risks involved. A combination of regulation, legislation, and collaboration between public and private sectors to address these risks meaningfully is critical, and we are already engaging with some of our key regulators on this.

From a tech-engineering standpoint, these tools can support in creating code, analysing code, and looking for vulnerabilities across our infrastructure. They can also help with creating design scaffolds that our engineers can easily add to, along with potentially bringing huge benefits to financial crime screening.

However, it is critical to safeguard confidential data and implement adequate controls to mitigate any biases that AI may inadvertently introduce.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing COOs in the finance sector over the next 12 to 24 months and why?

As a bank, we are continually working hard to manage the complexities that come with rapid technological advancement with these key directives in mind: firstly, we must continue serving our clients in a consistent and sustainable way – this should be the primary focus in ensuring our operations and technology are running well.

Secondly, we must balance this with the level of strategic change the organisation is comfortable with. Thirdly, we need to keep pace with technological advancement while ensuring regulatory compliance.

As we progress with our digital transformation, another challenge is ensuring we have people with the right skills in place. As a bank, we are undertaking a multi-year journey of developing future skills amongst our colleagues by focusing on continuous learning, to balance appropriately between ‘building’ and ‘inducting’ skills into the Group.

For instance, our SC aXess Academy helps us ensure the skills of our engineering workforce are continually upgraded and recalibrated to match the ever-changing demands of the market.

Finally, to thrive in today’s dynamic environment, banks need a proactive approach to operational resilience. A connected, continuous, and technology-driven approach to risk management empowers banks to not only stay ahead of the curve but also foster a culture of resilience that drives sustainable growth.

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