EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Contrivus

Mr. Fawad Abdul Kader

Founding CEO- Contrivus and Former Country Manager, Paymob

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ICMA: You have recently taken over as CEO of Contrivus. What inspired you to take on this role, and what are your main goals for the company?

Fawad A. Kader: Taking on the CEO role at Contrivus was a natural progression shaped by my firsthand experience leading digital transformation initiatives. One of the most recurring challenges I observed was not just building digital channels or workflows—it was the lack of operational capacity to support those digital experiences. Customer expectations have shifted to real-time fulfillment, yet behind the scenes, organizations often remain reliant on manual, labor-intensive processes for KYC, compliance, and operations. This reliance not only drives up costs but also introduces inefficiencies and a higher risk of human error—making the "digital" experience incomplete. At Contrivus, my goal is to address this very gap. We aim to position ourselves as a leading intelligent automation provider in the MENAP region, helping businesses scale with efficiency, agility, and intelligence by reimagining their operational backbone through AI and RPA.

ICMA: Based on your experience at Paymob and NIFT, what do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities in Pakistan's digital financial services?

Fawad A. Kader: Pakistan's digital financial ecosystem sits at a critical inflection point. On one hand, there are significant challenges that continue to slow progress—such as fragmented infrastructure, limited interoperability between systems, low levels of financial literacy among users, and a lack of unified strategic direction across stakeholders. Too often, we also see efforts focused on perceived problems or cosmetic innovation rather than addressing foundational issues like user onboarding, trust, and merchant enablement. However, despite these challenges, the opportunity is enormous.

Pakistan has a large population outside the formal financial system, growing smartphone and internet penetration, and a young population eager to engage with digital tools. Add to that the policy momentum driven by the State Bank of Pakistan—with initiatives like Raast and frameworks for digital banks—and the conditions for transformation are stronger than ever.

The real opportunity lies in building locally relevant, problem-first solutions that are simple, trusted, and scalable. This means going beyond payments and wallets to solve real business and consumer pain points—whether that's digitizing small merchants, enabling micro-credit for underserved populations, or automating compliance for fintechs and banks. What's needed now is alignment across the ecosystem—banks, fintechs, regulators, and investors—to drive forward innovation that's inclusive, sustainable, and tailored to Pakistan's unique context.

ICMA: How can automation tools like Robotic Process Automation (RPA) help banks and businesses become more efficient in Pakistan and the MENAP region?

Fawad A. Kader: RPA holds transformational potential for banks and businesses across Pakistan and the MENAP region—especially in an environment where operational capacity, speed, and accuracy are critical but resources are often stretched. At its core, RPA allows organizations to automate repetitive, rules-based tasks that typically consume large amounts of human effort—such as compliance checks, data entry, customer onboarding, reconciliations, reporting, and service desk operations. These are areas where errors are common, timelines are tight and scale is hard to manage manually.

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In markets like Pakistan, where cost pressures are high and operational inefficiencies can limit digital scale, RPA provides a unique advantage: it enables institutions to expand capacity without linearly increasing their workforce or infrastructure. For example, banks can onboard thousands of customers digitally while keeping compliance turnaround times within minutes rather than hours or days.

Beyond efficiency, the real value lies in freeing up human capital to focus on more strategic and creative tasks—like improving customer experience, innovating products, or driving growth initiatives. This shift from labor-intensive operations to smart, technology-enabled workflows is essential for long-term scalability and competitiveness.

In the MENAP region, where many institutions are simultaneously undergoing digital transformation and expansion into underserved segments, automation helps bridge the operational gap—allowing digital strategies to succeed not just in design but in execution. Ultimately, RPA is not just a cost-cutting tool—it's an enabler of scale, resilience, and customer-centric agility. When combined with AI and analytics, it becomes a foundational layer for truly intelligent operations.

ICMA: In your view, what makes a digital payment solution successful in a market like Pakistan?

Fawad A. Kader: Success in Pakistan's digital payment landscape doesn't come from flashy features or quick launches—it comes from getting the fundamentals right. In my experience, there are four core pillars that determine whether a solution can scale and sustain: simplicity, trust, ubiquity, and patient capital.

First, simplicity is non-negotiable. The average user in Pakistan spans a wide range of digital literacy levels, so the solution must be intuitive enough for anyone—from a tech-savvy urban user to a rural shopkeeper—to use without friction. If users can't understand or use it easily, adoption stalls no matter how sophisticated the backend is.

Second, trust is essential. In a country where cash still dominates and digital fraud is a growing concern, people need to feel that their money and information are secure. That means not just building secure systems but also investing in user education, dispute resolution, and responsive support. Without trust, even the most innovative platforms will fail to build a loyal user base.

Third, ubiquity—being present across daily touchpoints—is what turns a payment solution into a habit. It's not enough to be available in a few apps or stores. True success lies in being deeply integrated into people's everyday lives: paying bills, sending money to family, shopping, paying school fees, or even buying from a street vendor. The more useful the platform becomes in diverse real-world contexts, the more indispensable it becomes.

Finally, patient capital plays a pivotal role. Pakistan's market requires investors and operators who understand the local landscape and are willing to take a long-term view. Building infrastructure, trust, and market readiness takes time. Solutions that prioritize long-term impact over short-term revenue often emerge as category leaders. Unfortunately, the sector has seen too many examples of premature exits or pivots due to impatience or misaligned expectations.

Personally, I believe success in Pakistan's digital payments space hinges on building sustainable, realistic, and locally relevant models—with an unwavering focus on user needs and market resilience. It's not about racing to be first; it's about staying the course and becoming essential.

ICMA: When launching the e-Pay Gateway at NIFT, what key lessons did you learn that still influence your work today?

Fawad A. Kader: One of the most important lessons I took from launching the e-Pay Gateway at NIFT was the power of partnerships and ecosystem orchestration. Aligning diverse stakeholders—banks, billers, fintechs, and regulators—around a shared vision is not easy, but when done right, it becomes the driving force behind sustainable change. We weren't just launching a product—we were laying the groundwork for

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interoperability and trust in digital payments, and that required deep alignment at both the strategic and operational levels.

The second lesson was that solving real, painful problems is what gives technology staying power. With e-Pay, we addressed fundamental issues around manual reconciliation, fragmented payment experiences, and lack of visibility for billers. These were not just inefficiencies—they were daily operational headaches for large institutions and SMEs alike. By focusing on these pain points, we built something that was not just adopted but valued. That experience shaped my approach: always anchor innovation in real-world problems, not just theoretical use cases.

Another critical learning was that compromising on core elements—architecture, security, compliance, or user experience—just to move faster or fit budgets is a trap. In a market like Pakistan, where trust and reliability are hard-won, cutting corners can erode long-term impact. Some trade-offs delayed integrations or limited adoption because certain partners weren't fully ready. That reinforced my belief that the foundation of any digital platform must be solid and future-proof—even if it takes longer to build.

Lastly, I learned that resilience and clarity of purpose are non-negotiable. Ecosystem shifts, regulatory delays, or stakeholder misalignment are part of the journey. What matters is staying grounded in your mission and being flexible in execution while uncompromising on quality and trust.

These lessons continue to guide me at Contrivus today as we help businesses in the MENAP region digitize and automate with purpose and precision.

ICMA: You have worked closely with banks, regulators, and fintech companies. What needs to improve to help digital payments grow faster in Pakistan?

Fawad A. Kader: To accelerate the growth of digital payments in Pakistan, we need a shift in mindset, policy, and infrastructure—across both public and private sectors.

First, there must be stronger collaboration and sandbox-style experimentation between regulators, banks, and fintechs. We need to move away from compliance-first thinking to a more balanced approach that allows for controlled innovation. Regulatory sandboxes can enable startups and incumbents to test new solutions in real-world conditions without fear of regulatory penalties—this is critical for validating new business models and driving innovation that fits our unique market.

Second, open banking and API-first ecosystems must become a national priority. While some progress has been made, we still lack consistent technical standards and regulatory clarity that would allow data and services to move freely and securely between financial institutions. This limits interoperability, which in turn restricts user adoption and innovation.

Third, traditional players must evolve their approach to partnerships. Many banks and large institutions still see fintechs as threats rather than enablers. For digital payments to scale, we need banks to be more open, agile, and partnership-oriented. That means shared infrastructure, faster onboarding, and co-creating products that are market-fit.

Fourth, we need patient capital and long-term thinking. Most digital payment models in emerging markets take years to become profitable. Without investors and ecosystem players willing to support the industry through this maturity cycle, innovation will continue to stall at proof-of-concept stages.

Fifth, government policy must remain stable and forward-looking. Frequent shifts in leadership, lack of clarity around tax policy, or changing directives for financial institutions create uncertainty. The momentum from SBP's progressive stance must continue with alignment from ministries, FBR, and provincial bodies.

Finally—and perhaps most critically—we need a paradigm shift where cash becomes more expensive to use than digital. Right now, cash remains frictionless and cheap as the cost of cash is never passed down directly to the people, while digital transactions often involve costs, hurdles, and trust barriers. Incentives must flip this dynamic in favor of digital payments. The public sector can lead by example by digitizing all its disbursements and collections, from salary payments and subsidies to utility and tax payments. Only with aligned incentives, consistent policy, and true public-private partnership can we achieve mass-scale adoption of digital payments in Pakistan.

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ICMA: How do you see data and analytics helping financial services become more secure, efficient, and customer-focused?

Fawad A. Kader: Data and analytics are foundational to the future of financial services. When used strategically and ethically, they can unlock a new level of security, efficiency, and customer centricity.

At the core, data allows institutions to shift from reactive to predictive operations. Instead of waiting for customers to request services or flag issues, banks can use behavioral data, transaction histories, and contextual insights to anticipate needs and offer tailored solutions—from pre-approved credit to financial planning nudges. This not only improves customer experience but also builds loyalty through relevance and timeliness.

From a security perspective, advanced analytics and AI-powered models enable real-time fraud detection and risk mitigation. By recognizing patterns and anomalies in customer behavior, institutions can proactively flag suspicious activities, reduce false positives, and prevent losses—without degrading the user experience.

Data also plays a transformative role in credit scoring and financial inclusion. In markets like Pakistan, where formal credit histories are scarce, alternative data—like utility payments, telco usage, or business transactions—can help build more inclusive credit models. This expands access to finance for underserved segments, especially MSMEs and gig economy workers.

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Operationally, data analytics help financial institutions become leaner and smarter. For example, through process mining and automation analytics, banks can identify inefficiencies, bottlenecks, and redundancies—allowing them to optimize workflows, reduce turnaround times, and lower costs. However, all of this hinges on a responsible and ethical data strategy. Data must be collected, stored, and used transparently—with robust governance, customer consent, and cybersecurity safeguards in place. Without trust, even the most sophisticated analytics capabilities will fail to gain traction. In short, data isn't just a back-office function anymore—it's a strategic asset. When leveraged responsibly, it can be the engine that drives smarter decisions, deeper customer relationships, and more resilient financial systems.

ICMA: What advice would you give to young professionals who want to work or build careers in fintech and digital innovation?

Fawad A. Kader: First and foremost: stay curious and stay grounded. Fintech moves fast, but it's not just about chasing trends like blockchain or AI—it's about solving real problems. You need to develop a deep understanding of both technology and human behavior. That means knowing how a payment switch works is just as important as understanding why a shopkeeper hesitates to go digital.

Don't wait for the perfect role or title. Start where you are. Whether you're building a prototype, joining a hackathon, interning at a startup, or shadowing someone in product or compliance—the best way to grow is by doing. Get your hands dirty with real problems, even if they seem small or unglamorous at first. These are often the stepping stones to meaningful innovation.

Learn to collaborate across disciplines. Fintech is not just for developers or bankers. It's for storytellers, analysts, designers, legal minds, and problem solvers. Build your ability to communicate across functions and bridge gaps between business, tech, and regulation.

Also, embrace failure as part of the process. Many of the most successful fintech professionals I've met have had projects that didn't work—but they learned fast, adapted, and kept moving forward. That mindset is invaluable.

Finally, remember: credibility comes from execution. Fancy slides or ideas will only take you so far. What matters is your ability to ship, to solve, and to scale. Keep sharpening your craft, stay open to feedback, and surround yourself with people who challenge and inspire you.

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If you are passionate about fintech and digital innovation, there's never been a better time to start. The ecosystem is young, the problems are real, and the opportunity to make an impact is massive.

*The Editorial Board thanks **Mr. Fawad Abdul Kader, Founding CEO- Contrivus and Former Country Manager, Paymob,** for sparing his precious time to give an exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.*