SECURANCE CONSULTING

Advantage of Insight AI

PREDICTIONS

FOR 2026 AND BEYOND

THE FUTURE OF CYBERSECURITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CYBERSECURITY 2026 PREDICTIONS

Cybersecurity enters 2026 with threat velocity and operational complexity outpacing traditional defenses. AI-driven attacks are becoming more autonomous and adaptive, ransomware campaigns are expanding into coordinated, multi-vector operations, and identity-based access has replaced the traditional perimeter as the attacker's preferred entry point. Organizations also face growing exposure from software and AI supply chains, while advances in quantum computing move closer to undermining the cryptographic foundations many environments still rely on. At the same time, state-sponsored intrusion campaigns increasingly target identity providers, cloud ecosystems, and operational technology (OT), creating systemic risk across critical infrastructure.

In response, regulators and cyber insurers are raising expectations for cybersecurity performance by requiring stronger validation and greater operational visibility. Across industries, these threats carry direct business consequences, including data loss, downtime, regulatory penalties, and lasting reputational damage. As a result, leaders are prioritizing proactive cybersecurity measures not only to meet external requirements, but to protect core operations, customers, and brand trust.

Seven major shifts will define how cybersecurity evolves in 2026 and beyond:

- AI will accelerate both attacks and defensive automation.
- Ransomware will evolve into multi-vector, multi-party extortion (Ransomware 3.0).
- Identity will become the enterprise's most critical control point.
- Supply chain and AI model integrity will emerge as top risks.
- Quantum readiness will shift from future planning to active preparation.
- Compliance will shift from paper-based attestations to operational proof.
- State-sponsored operations will intensify across civil infrastructure and identity systems.

This white paper explores each shift in depth and outlines practical steps cybersecurity and business leaders can take to prevent adverse operational impacts and build resilience for 2026 and beyond.

PREDICTION 1

AI-DRIVEN ATTACKS AND DEFENSES WILL CONTINUE TO ACCELERATE

AI-driven attacks are becoming faster, more scalable, and increasingly autonomous. Adversaries are using AI models to automate reconnaissance, accelerate vulnerability discovery, generate highly convincing phishing content, and adapt malware and payloads to evade static and heuristic detection. As attack tooling matures, the time between vulnerability disclosure and exploitation continues to shrink, while the number of viable attack paths expands.

Advances in deepfake technology further amplify this risk. Real-time audio and video impersonation of executives, support staff, and trusted partners is becoming more accessible, enabling attackers to exploit high-trust workflows across voice, video, and collaboration platforms. AI-assisted social engineering increases the likelihood of fraud, credential compromise, and unauthorized access without relying solely on technical exploits.

Defenders are responding by embedding AI into security operations to operate at machine speed. AI is increasingly used for telemetry normalization, behavioral baselining, anomaly detection, and automated security operations center (SOC) workflows. Defensive effectiveness now depends on the ability to process high-velocity data streams, detect deviations in near real time, and coordinate response actions across cloud, endpoint, identity, and network environments.

Organizations that fail to operationalize AI-driven detection and response will face longer dwell times, more severe intrusions, and higher recovery costs. As AI-assisted attacks continue to evolve, security teams must shift from detecting isolated indicators to identifying attacker behavior and intent. Those that do not integrate AI into their detection, analysis, and response workflows will struggle to keep pace with machine-driven threats.

Required Organizational Capabilities

- AI-Driven Anomaly Detection:
  - Behavioral baselining across endpoints, networks, and identities.
  - Real-time deviation scoring to accelerate triage and investigation.
- Threat Behavior Modeling:
  - Detection based on activity sequences and intent rather than signatures alone.
  - Pattern recognition to identify complex, multi-stage attacks.
- Large Language Model (LLM)-Assisted SOC Workflows:
  - Automated alert enrichment and prioritization.
  - Natural-language querying of logs and telemetry to reduce investigation time.
- Adversarial Testing of AI Models:
  - Assessment of vulnerability to evasion, data poisoning, and prompt manipulation.
  - Integration of red teaming and penetration testing for AI-enabled systems.

As attackers adopt more autonomous techniques, security operations must increasingly operate at machine speed. Organizations that do not augment detection and response with automation and AI will face higher operational burden and increased impact during incidents.

Real-World Conditions

In mid-September 2025, Anthropic disrupted a cyber espionage operation in which adversaries used autonomous AI agents to support reconnaissance, target selection, and attack planning with minimal human oversight.

Anthropic's model-misuse monitoring identified anomalous usage patterns consistent with automated reconnaissance and adaptive planning rather than legitimate automation.

The activity highlights how AI-assisted reconnaissance can accelerate intrusion workflows and expand exploitable attack paths, increasing pressure on defenders to detect and respond quickly.[1]

PREDICTION 2

RANSOMWARE 3.0 WILL EVOLVE

Ransomware is evolving into a more destructive, multi-vector threat. Often referred to as Ransomware 3.0, this next phase combines encryption with data theft, extortion, and disruption across cloud, identity, and supply-chain pathways. Ransomware as a service (RaaS) continues to expand, enabling operators with limited technical expertise to launch enterprise-grade attacks.

Attackers increasingly target the systems organizations rely on for recovery, including backup repositories, hypervisors, and cloud storage. They also use AI-enabled voice cloning and social engineering to impersonate executives and compress payment decisions during active incidents. In parallel, secondary extortion increasingly affects downstream partners and customers, expanding the operational and reputational consequences of a single compromise.

Organizations should implement immutable backups and isolated recovery environments to restore systems after an attack, along with data loss prevention controls to reduce the risk of exfiltration. Identity hardening helps limit lateral movement and privilege escalation, while regular ransomware simulations and tabletop exercises validate recovery and decision-making under real-world conditions.

Required Organizational Capabilities

- Resilient Backup and Recovery Architecture:
  - Immutable, write-once backups protected from administrative tampering.
  - Isolated recovery environments segmented from production networks.
  - Regular testing of backup integrity and restoration objectives.
- Cloud and Data Exfiltration Controls:
  - Data loss prevention across infrastructure, platform, and software as a service (SaaS) environments.
  - Monitoring for abnormal data movement and large-scale exports.
  - Encryption and access controls aligned to data sensitivity and regulatory requirements.
- Identity and Privilege Protection:
  - Identity hardening to reduce lateral movement and privilege escalation.
  - Conditional access and step-up verification for high-risk actions.
  - Continuous review of service accounts, automation credentials, and standing privileges.
- Incident Readiness and Decision Governance:
  - Regular ransomware simulations and tabletop exercises involving executive leadership.
  - Predefined decision frameworks for ransom demands, legal escalation, and communications.
  - Coordinated playbooks across incident response and legal teams, cyber insurance providers, and third parties.

Organizations that lack these capabilities will face higher downtime, greater data loss, and increased likelihood of coerced payments as ransomware campaigns continue to scale in speed and impact.

Cyberattacks in the United States
reportedly rose by **146 percent** year over year.[2]

PREDICTION 3

IDENTITY WILL BECOME THE NEW ENTERPRISE PERIMETER

Identity is becoming the most critical security boundary. The attack surface has shifted from devices and networks to users, service accounts, roles, tokens, and API keys. As organizations expand across multi-cloud, SaaS, and hybrid environments, identity, not network location, is the primary determinant of access and a consistently targeted control point. Because authentication and authorization govern interactions across distributed systems, mismanaged identity can become a central point of failure.

Key challenges include:

The rapid multiplication of service accounts. Automation tools, applications, and cloud services create accounts that can retain excessive permissions and stale credentials.

Privileged access spreading across SaaS and cloud platforms. Broadly granted admin roles and duplicate permissions create persistent privilege sprawl.

An increase in multi-factor authentication (MFA) fatigue attacks. Adversaries may flood users with authentication requests and exploit confusion. They may even impersonate members of the IT support team.

Vulnerabilities and weaknesses in password-based authentication. Password reuse and widespread credential exposure increase the success rates of credential stuffing and brute-force attacks.

> **Identity** will fully replace the network as the primary attack surface. [3]

Required Organizational Capabilities

- Passwordless Authentication:
  - Adoption of passkeys, biometrics, and other standards-based mechanisms.
  - Reduction of shared secrets that can be phished, reused, or stolen.
- Continuous Identity Assurance and Verification:
  - Real-time evaluation of user and device trust using behavioral and contextual signals.
  - Adaptive access decisions that respond dynamically to risk.
- Just-in-Time (JIT) Privileged Access:
  - Temporary, on-demand provisioning of elevated privileges.
  - Continuous monitoring of privileged activity to limit lateral movement and escalation.
- Identity Threat Detection and Response (ITDR):
  - Detection of compromised identities and anomalous access patterns.
  - Identification and response to privilege misuse across cloud and enterprise environments.
- Zero Trust Access Enforcement:
  - Least-privilege access and continuous verification across users, devices, applications, and workloads.
  - Explicit trust decisions that reduce blast radius when identities are compromised.

As identity becomes the primary security boundary, organizations that fail to continuously verify and govern access will face increased risk and faster compromise.

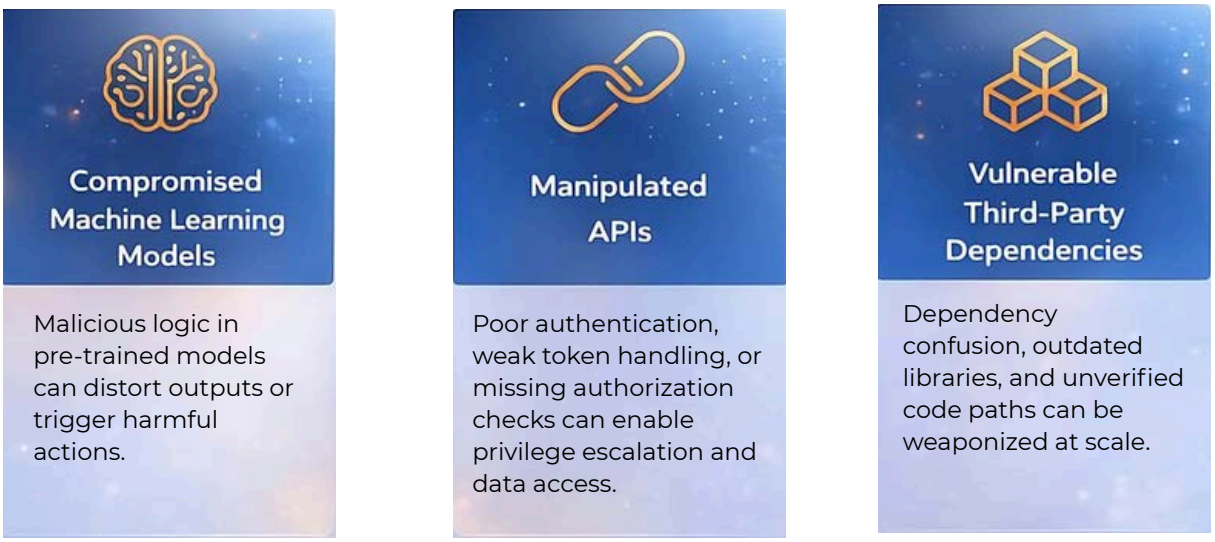
81 percent of organizations
plan to adopt zero trust by 2026.[4]

PREDICTION 4

SUPPLY CHAIN AND AI MODEL INTEGRITY WILL BECOME CRITICAL RISKS

Organizations face growing exposure from compromised supply chains and manipulated AI systems. The software supply chain now extends beyond traditional vendors to include pretrained models, open-source libraries, datasets, APIs, automation pipelines, internet of things (IoT) devices, and cloud services. Each component introduces transitive trust relationships that are rarely fully validated or continuously monitored.

Attackers increasingly target upstream elements, like training data, update mechanisms, dependencies, and third-party integrations. A compromise in any linked component can cascade across connected systems, influencing outputs, escalating privileges, or inserting dormant malicious logic that activates under specific conditions. Of particular concern are:



Required Organizational Capabilities

- AI and machine learning supply chain verification:
  - Validation of model and dataset integrity using cryptographic signatures and checksums.
  - Lineage tracking and controlled retraining workflows to ensure trusted deployment and updates.
- Continuous vendor risk monitoring:
  - Ongoing assessment of third-party security posture and incident history.
  - Monitoring of update practices and dependency changes to maintain current downstream risk visibility.
- Software bills of materials with integrity tracking:
  - Maintenance of detailed inventories covering software and AI components, including models, datasets, dependencies, and APIs.
  - Verification of component provenance and integrity during updates, patches, and configuration changes.
- Third-party segmentation and monitoring:
  - Isolation of external services, integrations, and dependencies to limit trust scope.
  - Continuous monitoring of integration points to contain compromise and reduce blast radius across connected systems.

As digital ecosystems grow more interconnected, a single upstream compromise can cascade across multiple systems and organizations. Continuous verification of models, code, and third-party dependencies is essential to reducing systemic cyber risk.

PREDICTION 5

QUANTUM READINESS WILL BECOME A STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Quantum computing poses a long-term threat to widely used public-key cryptography. While large-scale, fault-tolerant quantum computers are not yet available, progress in quantum hardware and algorithms has moved quantum risk from theoretical to preparatory. Adversaries may already be collecting encrypted data today for future decryption, threatening the long-term security of information with extended retention requirements, such as health records, financial data, intellectual property, and government communications.

To mitigate this risk, organizations should begin planning for a transition to post-quantum cryptography (PQC). PQC refers to cryptographic algorithms designed to resist attacks from future quantum computers. The transition is operationally complex because cryptography is embedded across applications, devices, identity systems, APIs, and third-party dependencies.

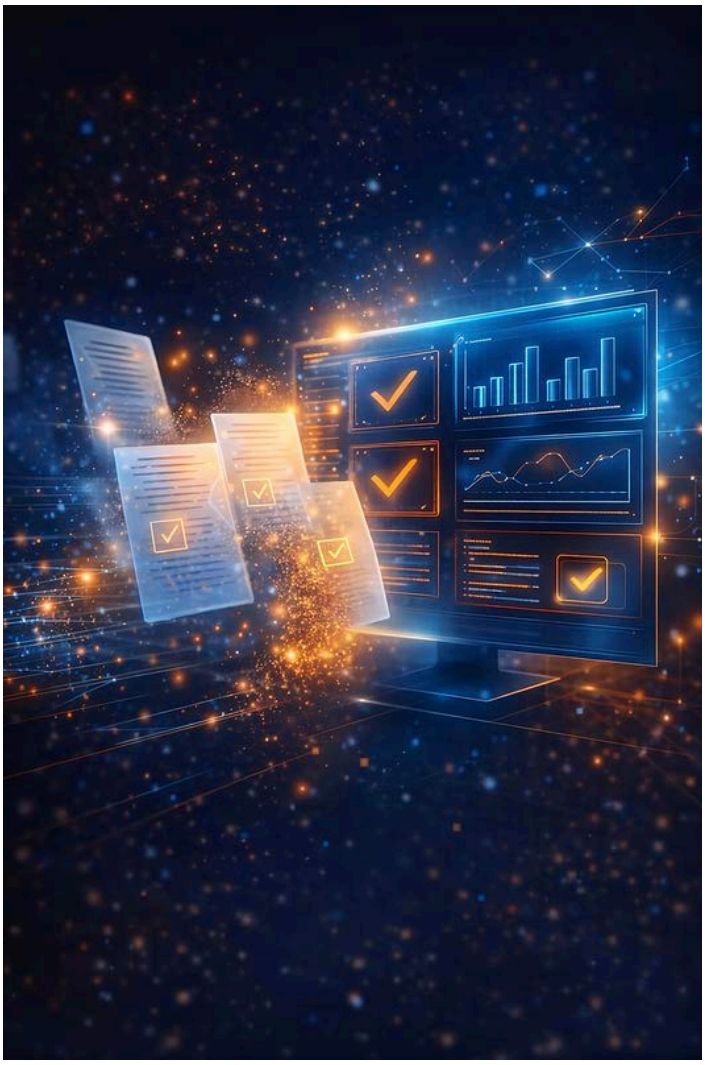
Required Organizational Capabilities

- Cryptographic asset inventory:
  - Identification of systems, protocols, data flows, and integrations relying on encryption.
  - Mapping of cryptographic dependencies across applications, devices, and third parties.
- Post-quantum cryptography (PQC) evaluation and testing:
  - Assessment of NIST-recommended PQC algorithms.
  - Testing of hybrid cryptographic approaches to support phased migration.
- Architecture and vendor alignment:
  - Integration of quantum-readiness requirements into future system designs.
  - Alignment of vendor contracts and roadmaps with PQC expectations.
- Planned migration and governance:
  - Definition of timelines, resources, and dependencies for cryptographic transition.
  - Monitoring of regulatory and standards guidance related to PQC.

Quantum risk is long-term rather than immediate. Starting preparation early reduces future disruption and avoids costly remediation when standards and mandates mature.

PREDICTION 6

COMPLIANCE WILL SHIFT TOWARD PROOF, NOT PAPER



Compliance expectations are moving away from point-in-time assessments toward verifiable, continuous evidence of security performance. Regulators, insurers, and boards increasingly expect organizations to demonstrate not only that policies and procedures exist, but that controls operate effectively under real-world conditions.

In many sectors, this shift is reinforced by evolving regulatory expectations, including increased emphasis on continuous monitoring, documented risk assessments, and timely incident reporting. As environments grow more dynamic and distributed, traditional annual audits and periodic testing may not reflect true operational security posture. New requirements include mandatory validation of security controls, shortened breach reporting timelines, expectations for demonstrable continuous monitoring, and increased sector-specific oversight that elevates governance accountability and operational transparency.

Required Organizational Capabilities

- Continuous monitoring and telemetry:
  - Full-stack visibility across cloud, network, identity, application, and OT environments.
  - Centralized, audit-ready telemetry outputs.
- Automated control validation:
  - Continuous testing of configuration baselines and access controls.
  - Detection of security drift and control degradation.
- Real-time incident evidence capture:
  - Automated documentation of detection, investigation, and response actions.
  - Support for shortened regulatory disclosure timelines.
- Governance and audit evidence pipelines:
  - Alignment of operational metrics with board and regulator expectations.
  - Time-bound, repeatable evidence of control effectiveness.

> Cybersecurity market growth projections suggest **continued investment in operational maturity, continuous monitoring, and demonstrable control effectiveness.**[5]

Evidence-driven compliance signals a broader shift in expectations, requiring organizations to show that controls function in real-world conditions, not just on paper.

PREDICTION 7

STATE-SPONSORED ATTACKS WILL INTENSIFY ACROSS CIVIL INFRASTRUCTURE AND IDENTITY SYSTEMS

State-sponsored cyber operations are likely to intensify as adversaries pursue persistent access to critical infrastructure and cloud ecosystems. Nation-state groups increasingly target identity providers, federated systems, OT gateways, and cloud control planes to obtain systemic footholds that can be activated during geopolitical crises. AI-assisted reconnaissance can help these actors map dependencies, automate discovery, and identify exploitable trust relationships across IT and OT environments.

As identity becomes the foundational trust layer across distributed systems, attackers can achieve broad access by compromising credentials, tokens, and identity infrastructure. Compromised identities enable malicious actors to disguise privilege escalation, administrator impersonation, and lateral movement across cloud, on-premises, and third-party environments as legitimate activity.

OT networks face renewed pressure as identity, remote access, and IT–OT convergence extend trust relationships into operational environments. Some state-sponsored groups focus on long-term pre-positioning within energy, water, transportation, and healthcare to enable disruption or coercive leverage during escalation.

Real-World Conditions

China-Linked Threat Groups Target U.S. Critical Infrastructure

In 2025, U.S. government agencies issued advisories describing continued activity in critical infrastructure environments by threat groups linked to China.

Public reporting described long-term access across sectors and the use of compromised credentials, misconfigurations, and edge device exploitation—often relying on built-in administrative tools to evade detection.

Officials characterized these intrusions as pre-positioning campaigns designed to enable future disruption rather than immediate sabotage.[6]

Required Organizational Capabilities

- Identity-centric threat detection and response:
  - Continuous monitoring of identity providers, privileged roles, and authentication activity.
  - Early detection of anomalous access patterns and credential misuse.
- Hardened cloud and identity infrastructure:
  - Protection of identity providers, federation services, and signing keys.
  - Continuous validation of access configurations across cloud environments.
- Segmented and monitored IT–OT trust boundaries:
  - Clear separation between enterprise IT and OT environments.
  - Controlled and continuously monitored pathways between IT and OT systems.
- Geopolitical threat modeling and response readiness:
  - Integration of geopolitical intelligence into risk assessments.
  - Predefined escalation paths and exercises for suspected state-sponsored activity.

State-sponsored campaigns are shifting toward long-term pre-positioning within identity, cloud, and OT environments. Organizations that fail to detect and contain identity-centric intrusions early risk sustained access and heightened national and regulatory consequences.

SUMMARY

Cyber threats are increasingly defined by speed, scale, and systemic impact across interconnected digital environments. AI-assisted adversaries are accelerating reconnaissance and decision-making, ransomware campaigns are expanding into multi-vector extortion models, and identity has become the primary control plane under attack. At the same time, growing exposure across software and AI supply chains, long-term cryptographic risk, and sustained state-sponsored pressure are raising the stakes for organizational resilience and readiness.

These shifts coincide with a fundamental change in how cybersecurity effectiveness is judged. Regulators, insurers, and boards increasingly expect evidence that security controls operate continuously and perform effectively under real-world conditions. Compliance is moving away from static documentation and periodic assessments toward operational proof supported by continuous monitoring, measurable outcomes, and audit-ready evidence generated during normal business operations.

As cybersecurity threats continue to accelerate in speed and complexity, organizations should evaluate how these trends apply within their own environments. Focused maturity and risk assessments, validation of identity and ransomware controls, and continuous alignment between threat intelligence and compliance programs are becoming essential. For organizations seeking an independent perspective, **Securance** provides senior-led cybersecurity assessments and advisory support to help validate controls, identify gaps, and prioritize practical improvements for 2026 and beyond.

ABOUT SECURANCE

Securance has more than two decades of experience helping organizations combat evolved cyber threats, build effective risk management programs, align with compliance standards, and increase operational efficiency. Our comprehensive approach integrates proven methodologies, dependable expertise, and each customer's unique requirements to maximize the benefits and long-term value of each assessment.

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13916 Monroes Business Park, Suite 102, Tampa, FL 33635 • 877.578.0215

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