cisco Live !

2026 | Amsterdam

Key take-aways for AI-driven infrastructure

BLOCK

Realising the realities

AI isn't just about the efficiency it achieves. For network and collaboration teams, it's about building the foundations to support and secure AI-driven activities.

It's also about unpicking ambiguous use cases to understand what could actually work for you and your existing estate, then justifying the spend, and optimising its deployment. All this takes the right infrastructure, the correct skillset, and time – a huge focus of this year's Cisco Live in Amsterdam.

The annual conference is really a moment for Cisco to nail its colours to the mast, by unveiling new technologies, challenging current approaches, and even revealing future product plans (under NDA in its Whisper Suites).

It's a conference we find provides an important and healthy dose of inspiration. Not just because Block is a long term Cisco partner. But because Cisco is such a giant in the tech industry. It's undeniable the innovations Cisco engineers produce will one day shape your tech stacks and estates in some form.

But for us to be able to support that, we have to have the latest knowledge and so do our clients. While some of you were at Cisco Live, many weren't. But we want to continue to bring you on this learning journey with us regardless.

So, we've summarised some of the most important findings from Cisco Live 2026. Here, we've delved into what this really means for you, and how it can link to your real-life network, collaboration, and smart building projects.

“It's undeniable the innovations Cisco engineers produce will one day shape your tech stacks and estates in some form.”

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The state of AI readiness

AI is becoming smarter, faster, and always-on. This is going to modernise industries and scale organisations across Europe. However, AI must have infrastructure that's able to support it, as well as the command of people who have the skills to manage it. Currently, only 11% of organisations in EMEA say they're fully prepared for AI. This small percentage is five times more likely to turn pilots into production, according to Cisco. Now, there's an increasing focus on how more organisations can be brought into this AI maturity bracket. This will require digital teams to redefine their mindsets and organisational DNA, as well as think about network infrastructure in new ways.

Key development areas for AI readiness:

- **Time:** How can you increase pace in your organisation? Will you be able to take on crucial new technologies when needed?
- **Trust:** Are you able to protect yourself from AI-driven threats? Can you depend on your existing infrastructure to remain compatible with any future AI investments?
- **Talent:** How can you make sure everyone can benefit and participate in AI? Are you able to upskill staff to work alongside AI developments like agentic?
- **Technology:** Is your infrastructure ready for AI? Can you centralise your data?

59% of organisations have a clear AI strategy in place. While 36% have a full change management plan for AI.

> **We're all living in a time where things are moving fast. We're accelerating in a way I don't think we've ever experienced."**
>
> Gordon Thomson, President, EMEA at Cisco

Agentic AI

There's an ongoing move from using chatbots to deploying AI agents, which will have a consequential shift in how digital teams work and what infrastructure you use. For example, these agents will be viewed as augmented assistants rather than a simple productivity tool. They'll be tasked with doing the things you don't have time to do, you're not good at doing, or can't possibly do. Meanwhile, digital teams will act as supervisors. Cisco announced a series of new products to support digital agents entering the workplace. These include its own silicon G300 chip, Cisco N9300, Cisco 8100, and a new 1.6 terabit pluggable optic.

What's holding digital agents back right now?

- **Infrastructure constraint:** There's not enough power, compute, network bandwidth, or memory.
- **Trust deficit:** People need to feel more safety and security before agent adoption.
- **Data gap:** Publicly-available training data is running out, so more privately-owned data, synthetic data, and machine-generated data is needed.

35% of organisations have clean, centralised data with real-time integration for AI agents.

> **Each one of us at some point in time soon will be supervisors to these agents. And rather than us doing all the work, we'll all be supervising."**
>
> Jeetu Patel, President and Chief Product Officer at Cisco

Firewalling for the AI era

Firewalls have grown into a mixture of physical, virtual, and cloud. But this can get complicated to manage when each firewall has its own policy management requirements, especially if you have a large estate handling sensitive data. However, you can decrease operational efforts and fragmentation here by defining intent and enforcing a single policy layer across all firewalls. The goal is to reduce policy sprawl, lower risks of misconfiguration, and avoid security bottlenecks as the network scales. Cisco engineers have taken this approach with its new Cisco Hybrid Mesh Firewall which can cover the entire infrastructure while being governed by a single policy layer.

What modern firewalling needs

- One place to define policy intent.
- Consistent enforcement across environments.
- Inspection built closer to the traffic.
- Designed for encrypted-by-default networks.
- Less manual policy management.

"AI is rapidly amplifying cyber risks and attack volumes. Keeping pace will require unification of siloed security controls, adopting unified multi-domain security fabrics to improve visibility and control. AI must also support overstretched defenders, with ML and agentic AI capabilities used to support threat detection, prioritise remediation actions and automate deployment of compensating controls."

Paul Yarwood, Enterprise Networks Architect at Block

"Networks themselves are becoming increasingly hybrid, cloud, and multi-cloud. It creates an expanse that adds risk for an organisation."

Rick Miles, Vice President, Cloud and Network Security at Cisco

Quantum networking

Quantum computing is able to solve complex issues much faster than classical computers, especially when a huge amount of data is involved. However, the qubits required to operate quantum computers at this level are usually a stumbling block for most. Cisco is working on this by taking inspiration from a classical computer scale-out approach. Engineers are currently innovating a way quantum processors can interconnect into a quantum network, while remaining compatible with GPUs, CPUs, and classical apps. The idea is to create a distributed quantum computing software stack that would unlock use cases such as decision coordination, secure position verification, ultra-precise time synchronisation, and eavesdropper-proof security.

Three important points to consider:

1. Quantum networking can accelerate the arrival of practical quantum computing by decades through scale-out.
2. Quantum networking is completely different from classical networking.
3. Quantum networking has many practical and commercial use cases in the classical world today.

43% are investing in new data centre capacity in the next 12 months.

> **For all the promise of quantum computing, we're still far away from reality and practicality."**
>
> Ramana Kompella, Cisco Fellow and Head of Cisco Research at Cisco

Collaboration

Designing secure and contextual collaboration systems as part of core architecture is becoming critical with the introduction of AI. This applies to cloud, on-prem, and hybrid environments. Currently, AI-driven collaboration tools are already embedded in meetings, delivering real-time summaries, note-taking, and intelligent assistance as standard. Beyond this, agentic AI pilots are underway in healthcare to ease pressure on frontline teams. There's potential for simple contact centre phone calls to be answered and for requests to be triaged by agentic AI. These innovations support what's been called a connected intelligence approach whereby all communications, regardless of whether they're between humans or AI tools, operate seamlessly together.

Connected intelligence in action

- Intelligent workspaces
- Connected collaboration
- Agentic customer experience
- Secure systems

"AI is rapidly becoming a core part of secure collaboration across cloud, on-prem, and hybrid environments. For Block and our clients, connected intelligence means smarter collaboration, stronger security, and new agentic AI opportunities in healthcare and patient experience - helping teams reduce pressure, improve responsiveness, and deliver seamless communication."

Mike Bailey, Collaboration Solutions Consultant at Block

"Contact centres will have human supervisors and AI supervisors."

Snorre Kjesbu, SVP and General Manager, Cisco Collaboration

Automating AIOps

Organisations are working to deliver network services faster, automated operations, and improve reliability. This has caused a move from traditional DevOps to AI-first operations, whereby AI is embedded across the toolchain rather than added afterwards. The key enabler is the Model Context Protocol (MCP). By exposing enterprise systems and APIs through MCP interfaces, tools such as source control, CI/CD, automation platforms, and observability systems can be accessed safely by AI. This creates a governed integration layer instead of allowing models direct, uncontrolled access. Before introducing autonomous agents, organisations must build a controlled AI platform. This includes identity-aware data access, audit logging, prompt inspection, cost monitoring, and full observability. Cisco's CircuIT platform is demonstrating this approach, combining multi-model LLM access, secure enterprise data retrieval, and agent orchestration.

Fundamental principles for architecture:

- **Data operations:** LLM observability and financial operations (FinOps).
- **Hybrid model/agent orchestration:** Model layer, capacity management, and LLM/agent orchestration.
- **Modular, flexible AI platform architecture:** UI and app layer, agentic layer, tools layer, search engine layer, AI-ready data layer, and ingestion layer.
- **Security:** Security solutions, external tools, and database.

"Treat AI as part of the software platform. Establish governance and programmable interfaces first, then progressively introduce collaborative AI agents across operations and engineering workflows."

Paul Alexander, Chief Architect at Block

> **Right now you might be in pipeline and want to slowly roll AI into an ops view. And then grow to agentic AI over time."**

Shannon McFarland, VP, Cisco DevNet & Cisco OSPO at Cisco

Network management

AI agents are beginning to help network management teams troubleshoot faster, flag issues and their causes, as well as recommend next steps. This ushers in a big change for digital teams, as operators will be able to approve network changes suggested by AI and ask questions, rather than manually interrogating logs. Time-savings could greatly benefit digital teams who currently feel under pressure to deliver more in little time. Capabilities such as zero-touch deployments and automated reporting are expected to be popular here. AI-driven network management also isn't tied to a single operating model, and can be applied across cloud-managed and on-prem environments.

AI's use cases for network operations

- Natural language network queries.
- Automated issue detection and root cause analysis.
- One-click remediation approval.
- Zero-touch access point deployment.
- Automated compliance reporting workflows.

40% of organisations are currently using AI agents to write, debug, test, and deploy code.

> **"You can now talk to your network. You can be alerted that there's an issue. You can ask questions of your network to understand where the issue lies."**
>
> Neil Jacques, VP of Product Management, Switching at Cisco

Remaining energy efficient

AI and its supporting data centres require power, and there's currently not enough to go around – or at least there's an energy loss distribution problem. Cisco engineers are incubating solutions supported by a new type of power: Fault Managed Power (FMP). They believe when you combine liquid cooling with FMP-powered data centres you'll generate a 76% energy cost saving, and 2.3x the amount of compute for the same amount of energy. This may seem outside of a typical digital team's remit, but it's becoming critical to work closely with Estates teams – a dynamic many are still establishing. Buildings and their energy sources are becoming more digitised, and this will only be encouraged if you decide to bring your AI-driven data centres on-site.

Liquid cooling's advantages

- Better cooling efficiency
- Flexibility to scale
- Lower carbon footprint
- Reduced energy consumption
- Possibility to repurpose wasted energy

"Energy efficiency is pushing organisations to think differently about their physical infrastructure. As AI and compute demands grow, power and cooling can't sit in the background any more. The best results tend to come when IT, Digital, and Estates are aligned around shared goals like resilience, energy cost, and sustainability, using common data to make better decisions."

Bob Allen, Director of Smart Buildings at Block

"When we talk about what's going on in the future with energy, one trend is very clear: distributed energy systems and on-site generation."

Denise Lee, Vice President of Engineering at Cisco

Defending an AI cyber attack

Network security has to adapt to AI and this means re-evaluating the design of security systems and how you use defences such as firewalls. AI apps are non-deterministic, which means security defences can no longer rely on static rules. Instead, security measures must understand the context and apply judgment. As a result, Cisco engineers are currently working on building this AI awareness into firewalls and secure access solutions. This is particularly important as AI-driven smart devices and IoT come into play because, while they bring benefits, they also expand attack surfaces. So, now is the time to lay down a new security approach for the network, analytics, and identity, if you're looking to incorporate AI-driven technologies.

Security areas to consider:

- **Agentic identity:** Give your agent an identity. Understand what they do, where they are, and what they don't do. This allows you to monitor, authenticate, and authorise agents.
- **AI workloads:** AI models can ingest poisoned data so they need to be protected. Consider what you need for maximum visibility and control over these environments.
- **Analytics at scale:** Use data from your AI models to prevent attacks by conducting attack path mapping. You may be able to keep your data in a low cost lake for storage and training.

31% of organisations say they're fully equipped to control and secure agentic AI systems. While 72% say they're moderately prepared.

> **"We're rethinking the basic building blocks of what a security system really looks like and how those building blocks fit into the infrastructure."**

Tom Gillis, Senior Vice President and General Manager, Infrastructure and Security at Cisco

Cisco x Block

Block has been a Cisco partner for more than two decades. Together, we create reliable and secure digital infrastructure in some of the most high-stake environments across the UK, including healthcare, education, and enterprise.

Join BlockHeadz

BlockHeadz is our community for networking professionals who share learnings from across the industry.

Membership is free and provides access to:

- Opportunities to network with other experienced architects and engineers in the UK.
- An online hub where members can share knowledge, insight, and real-world experience.
- A forum to troubleshoot complex issues, fix glitches, and solve challenges together.
- Exclusive rewards, incentives, and invitations to virtual and in-person events.

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Key take-aways for AI-driven infrastructure

Build smarter with Block

- We work with you to design, deploy, optimise, and manage your Cisco technology.
  Email: marketing@block.co.uk

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