



# 2026 BUSINESS TRENDS REPORT

INNOVATION IMPACT

**symbol awards**

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# About the report

The Business Trends Report brings together expert insight on what's changing, what's coming, and how businesses can stay competitive in 2026. It highlights trends already taking shape across industries and those gaining momentum for the year ahead.

This past year showed us how quickly businesses adapt when they need to. Going forward, our research and the input from our jury point in the same direction — smarter use of AI, more practical sustainability efforts, stronger focus on customer experience, and workplaces that offer greater flexibility and support.

While we prepared the report, I kept coming back to one thought — the teams that pay attention to these shifts will walk into 2026 better prepared and ready to overcome challenges. I hope these trends help you plan, adapt, and take the next steps with confidence.

Ready for what's ahead? So are we.



**Ovanes  
Ovanessian**

Co-founder,  
Symbol Awards

# REPORT METHODOLOGY

The trends in this report were shaped through a combination of our internal research and the insight we gathered from [Symbol Awards 2026 jury members](#). Our team reviewed market analyses, innovation reports, and data from previous award editions, including the most awarded countries, agencies, and categories.

We also ran a dedicated survey where jury members shared their thoughts and voted for the **top three trends they believe will matter most in 2026**. Their diverse experience helped confirm and refine the direction of each trend. Together, these perspectives offer a more complete and reliable view of how business innovation is likely to evolve in the year ahead.

## Summary of findings

31%

Artificial Intelligence (AI)  
and Generative Models

20.7%

Customer Experience (CX)  
and Personalization

10.3%

Data-Driven Innovation  
and Real-Time Analytics

10.3% Sustainability and ESG

8.0% E-commerce and Immersive Retail

6.9% Digital Transformation and Agility

4.6% Quantum Computing

4.6% Future of Work and Hybrid Models

2.3% Cybersecurity and Data Protection

1.1% Autonomous Systems and Robotics

# The 2026 shift

**Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Generative Models** will move beyond content creation and start handling real decisions, multi-step tasks, and everyday work that used to take teams hours.

**Customer Experience (CX) and Personalization** will focus on anticipation, as brands use connected data to adjust journeys at the right time before customers ask for anything or drop off.

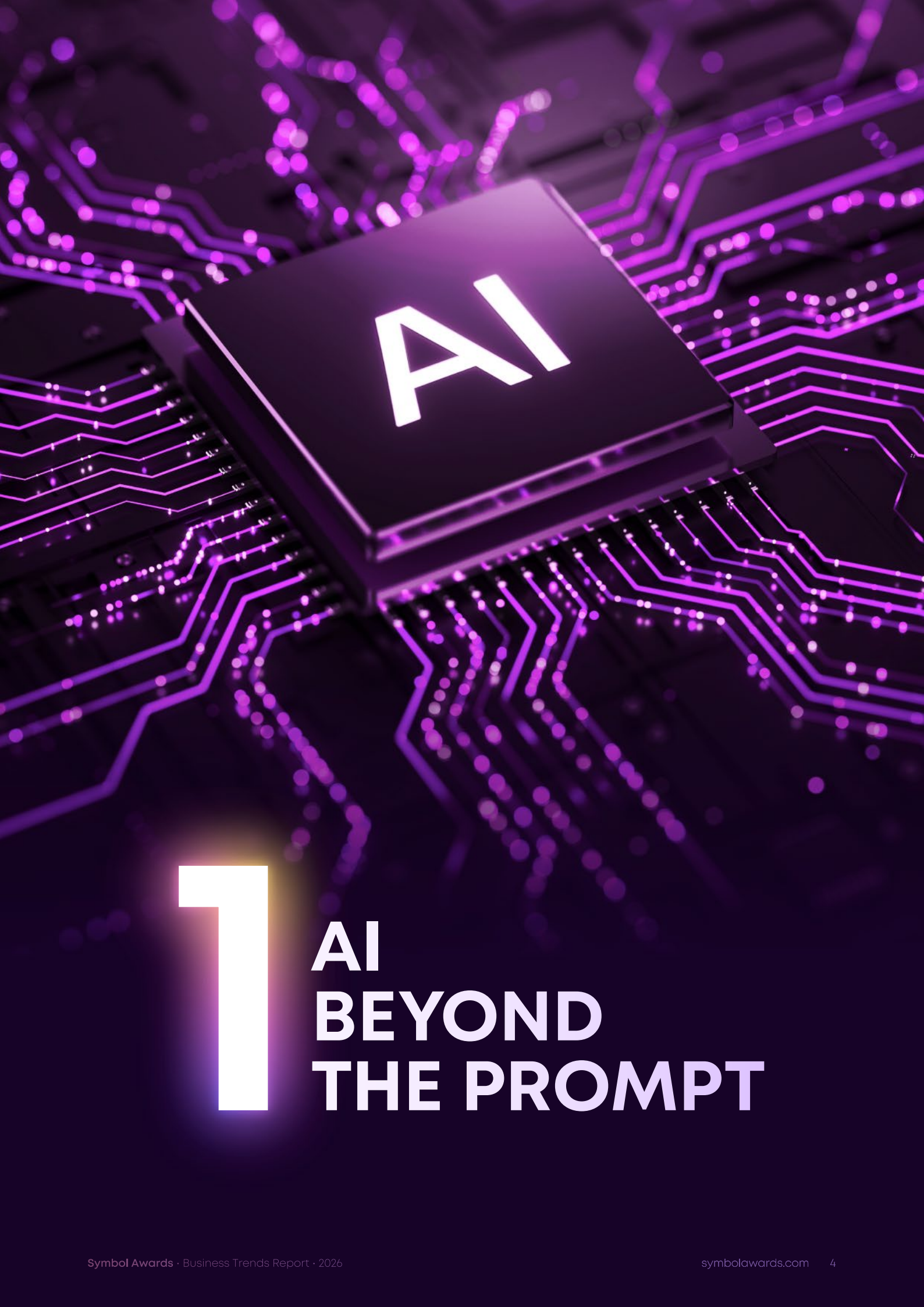
**Data-Driven Innovation and Real-Time Analytics** will support faster decisions with live data, helping teams improve products, pricing, and customer experience as things change.

**Sustainability and ESG** will shift from broad commitments to practical actions, with companies preparing for stricter reporting, clearer carbon goals, and closer supply-chain visibility.

**E-commerce and Immersive Retail** will become more interactive and helpful, with AI shopping assistants, virtual try-ons, and smoother checkout flows shaping how people buy online.

Overall, 2026 will bring more pragmatic changes that make work smoother and easier to navigate.





# 1 AI BEYOND THE PROMPT

# Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Generative Models

In 2026, AI will shift from responding to prompts to delivering complete outputs across operations, marketing, and creative work. Companies will rely on AI agents to plan, organize, and produce materials with less supervision, making everyday tasks faster and more consistent.

## The evolution of AI work

AI will step into everyday tasks and take on work that used to slow teams down.

- **AI agents will coordinate multi-step workflows** like reporting, content planning, and task routing, improving speed and reducing manual follow-up.
- **AI-generated videos, CGI assets**, and visual variations will become standard tools in marketing, helping teams create engaging content quickly and at scale.
- **Companies will introduce well-set AI-use guidelines** to manage data, protect integrity, and ensure automation supports reliable decision-making.

Today we live in the era of the economy of attention. You see thousands of ads every day, making it impossible to focus and pay attention. Top-performing companies are more than twice as likely to be using AI for marketing, as well as CGI and AI videos, which capture attention and evoke emotions.



**Olga Loktionova**

PR Director,  
CAPSBOLD Creative  
Marketing Agency

## The human experience

Daily work will feel lighter as AI tools handle the busywork and support the parts people care about most.

- **Teams will hand off repetitive tasks** such as drafting visuals and marketing resources, giving them more time for strategy and final creative work.
- **Employees will use AI tools** that learn their style and preferences, making everyday collaboration faster and more predictable.
- **Managers will spend less time coordinating** small tasks and more time shaping ideas, guiding teams, and planning long-term projects.

**Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:**

AI-DRIVEN BUSINESS INNOVATION

PROCESS AUTOMATION INNOVATION

AI-POWERED SERVICE





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# HYPER- PERSONAL TOUCH

# Customer Experience (CX) and Personalization

Customer experience is getting more responsive, shaped by what people do and need in the moment. With connected data, companies can spot those needs earlier and offer support that feels timely and not intrusive.

## How companies will shape customer journeys

These changes will help companies anticipate customers' needs and adjust their journeys in real time.

- **Predictive analytics will spot intent earlier** and help teams choose the right message or support, so customers get timely responses without extra steps or guesswork.
- **Unified customer data** connects sales, service, product-use, and marketing signals, giving companies a clearer view of each person's next need.
- **Dynamic content tools** will adjust emails, pages, and offers automatically, replacing generic messages with versions that match customer behavior.

For 2026, I fully expect to see hyper-personalised customer journeys to become standard practice where smart spaces, tailored content and audience participation are all seamlessly woven together to create unique, socially-amplified, brand-to-consumer experiences.



**Terry Olivo**

Associate Creative Director,  
George P Johnson  
Experience Marketing

## What customers will notice on their end

Interactions will feel more natural, with fewer repeats and roadblocks.

- Recommendations, timing, and content will align better with people's habits, **without asking them to search, repeat actions, or put in extra effort.**
- **Support will be easier to reach and even more helpful**, making it simpler to solve problems and move forward without extra delays.
- **Journeys will feel smoother** across apps, websites, and in-person interactions, with fewer repeated steps and more consistent flow.

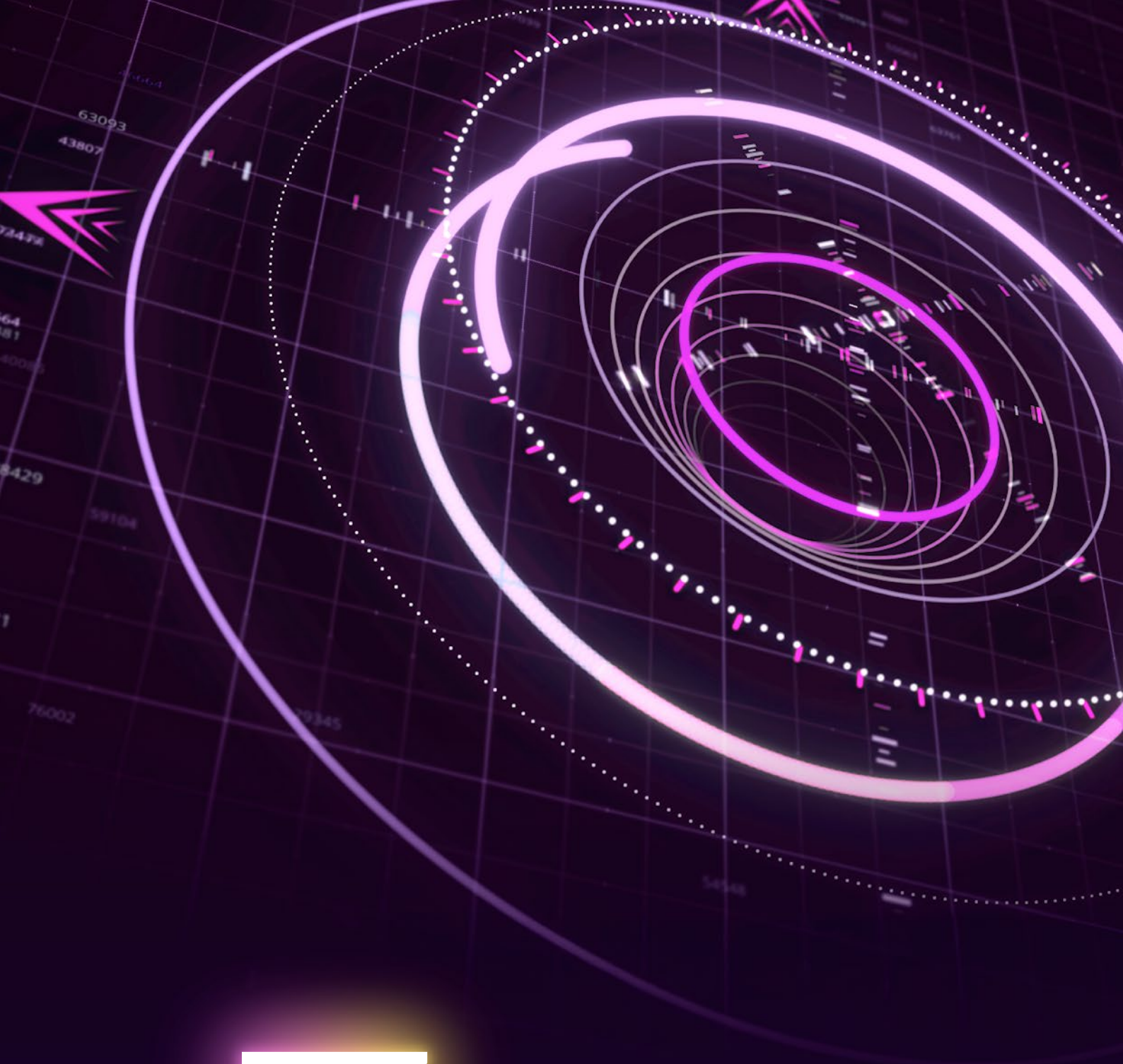
Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:

CUSTOMER-CENTRIC STRATEGY

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE SERVICE

DIRECT DATA-DRIVEN STRATEGY





# 3 DATA-DRIVEN COMPASS

# Data-Driven Innovation and Real-Time Analytics

Data is becoming a go-to tool for smarter choices. Instead of waiting for old reports, companies will use live signals to see what's happening now. It will work like a real-time compass, helping teams improve products and spot new opportunities faster.

## The next stage of data-led decisions

Data will guide decisions in the moment, giving organizations a clear view of what's happening now instead of relying on old reports.

- **Real-time dashboards will show what's happening now**, rather than looking back at older reports, helping teams spot problems sooner.
- **Connected systems will pull information from sales**, support, and operations into one place, giving teams a complete view to act on.
- **AI models will spot patterns humans might miss**, directing key calls on pricing, inventory, and customer needs more accurately.

The brands that win in 2026 won't be the biggest or the loudest, they'll be the most relevant — using data and insight to create experiences that feel tailored, human and effortless at every touchpoint.



**Sive Buckley**

Managing Partner,  
Born Creators Group

## What this means for people at work

Information will update itself in the background, making it easier for people to react quickly and cut down unnecessary manual work.

- **Teams will understand what's working** sooner because data will be easy to read and easy to act on.
- **Employees will do fewer manual reports** as AI tools update information automatically in the background.
- **Customers will get smoother experiences** because teams can adjust things quickly when something looks off.

Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:

USE OF DATA

STRATEGIC PLANNING & FORESIGHT

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING STRATEGY





# 4 CLEAR PATH TO SUSTAINABILITY

## Sustainability and ESG

Sustainability will take an even clearer path in 2026. Instead of broad commitments, companies will focus on actions they feel confident showing to regulators, partners, and customers.

### Where companies will take action

Sustainability work will become more measured and part of daily operations.

- **Businesses will set defined carbon-reduction pathways** supported by data they can verify and report with confidence across operations, partners, and supply chains over time.
- **Supply chains will be mapped more closely**, giving companies a better visibility into materials, partners, and environmental impact, including the sourcing of raw materials.
- **Circular practices** such as reuse, repair, better material selection, and recovery will become a normal part of product and operations planning company-wide.

With tech always evolving, and climate change continuing to have an effect on our lives, I see the Events Industry reinventing how to measure our carbon footprint, especially in the age of AI.



**Beth Lawrence**

Event Strategist,  
Beth Lawrence Meetings  
& Events

### What teams will notice in everyday work

Teams will spot these changes in the tools they use, the choices they make, and gain more visibility into how each choice supports their long-term goals.

- **Teams will use tools to track energy use**, waste reduction, and progress toward sustainability targets, supported by dashboards that make data easy to monitor.
- **Employees will follow firmer standards for responsible sourcing**, material choices, production, and vendor selection, helping ensure every step meets sustainability criteria.
- **Customers will gain more transparency** into how products are made and how companies are reducing their footprint over time, from materials to final delivery.

**Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:**

CLIMATE AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION PROGRAM

RESOURCE EFFICIENCY TECH INNOVATION





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# INTELLIGENT PRODUCT DISCOVERY

## E-commerce and Immersive Retail

E-commerce will become more personalized and easier to use, as customers get help from AI tools, social platforms, and more lifelike previews. Businesses will make the path from choosing to checkout smoother, so people spend less time clicking around.

### How companies will evolve their online retail

Retailers will rebuild online shopping so that choosing, comparing, and checking out are easier and intuitive.

- **AI will act like a digital shopping assistant**, helping customers compare products, spot better options, and move through choices faster with less effort.
- **AR try-ons, virtual showrooms**, and long livestream sessions will help people explore products more clearly before deciding to buy.
- **Checkout flows and payment tools will become lighter and quicker**, reducing drop-offs and helping customers complete their purchases.

E-commerce is evolving, and immersive retail is stepping into the spotlight. In 2026, I see massive growth in brands tapping into live retail, especially through social media.



Siphesihle Mgudlwa

Co-Founder, CEO,  
VIBE Experiential Agency

### What shoppers will experience on their end

Making purchases will become more guided, visual, and easier from search to checkout.

- **Finding the right product will be easier**, with suggestions that match their preferences, budget, or routine, based on customers' behavior.
- **Social shopping moments** — from influencer streams to real-time product demos — will make buying more interactive and informative for buyers.
- **Support will come faster through chat**, voice, or visual search, cutting down scrolling, so customers find answers quicker with less effort.

Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

OMNICHANNEL SERVICE STRATEGY

INFLUENCERS CAMPAIGN



6

**AGILITY  
ARCHITECTED**



# Digital Transformation and Agility

Digital transformation is now part of everyday work. Companies want systems they can adapt and scale without the usual slowdown. This lets teams test ideas, adjust early, and fix problems without starting from scratch.

## How businesses will stay flexible

In 2026, more organizations will rely on systems they can adjust or expand quickly without disrupting the ongoing work.

- **Old, heavy systems will be split into** smaller parts that teams can change, update, and improve over time without breaking daily work or core processes.
- **API-first tools will help different** teams and systems share data smoothly, so work moves faster without delays or manual handovers.
- **Headless setups will let companies change** layouts, content, and features without touching the core system or slowing everything else down.

Being agile and adaptable has always been the secret to success and sustainable business growth, but keeping up with the rate of change has been the barrier. Until now. AI will enable us to pivot then develop and test solutions far faster than we ever could.



**Lauren Clemett**

Director,  
The Audacious Agency

## How this will impact daily tasks

Work will move step by step, letting teams adjust quickly, test ideas earlier, and solve problems before they arise.

- **Projects will grow in cycles,** giving teams room to adjust, test ideas, and improve along the way steadily.
- **IT and business teams will work side by side, sharing goals and decisions,** not in separate corners any longer.
- **Learning new tools will become a normal part of work,** since updates and changes will happen all the time.

Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION TEAM

DIGITAL CHANGEMAKER

SERVICE TRANSFORMATION LEADER





# 7 QUANTUM LEAP IN COMPUTING

# Quantum Computing

Quantum computing will take a noticeable step forward in 2026, moving from lab research to early practical use. Instead of replacing classical systems, it will support them by tackling problems that are too large or too complex to solve any other way.

## Where companies will make progress

New quantum tools will help teams explore options that were too complex to even consider with traditional computing.

- Early quantum algorithms will help teams explore thousands of possible outcomes at once, **improving planning in areas like logistics, finance, and product design.**
- Security teams will start preparing for stronger, “quantum-safe” protection to **keep long-term data secure as computing power grows.**
- **Material science and chemistry teams will test quantum-powered simulations** to design stronger, lighter, or more efficient materials faster than before.

Quantum computing will further accelerate progress like nothing we have ever seen before. It is critical, therefore, that we balance innovation with ethical practices so that humankind and Mother Nature do not get sacrificed at the altar of commercial growth.



**Kevin Dunckley**

Chief Sustainability Officer,  
HH Global

## What teams will notice in everyday work

Departments will rely on hybrid setups and updated security practices, combining current systems with early quantum features that speed up analysis and decision-making.

- **IT departments will experiment with hybrid setups** that combine classical and quantum tools to solve complex problems faster and more efficiently.
- **Security teams will regularly review encryption standards** to keep company data protected and resilient well into the future ahead.
- **R&D teams will get access to early quantum platforms** that help them explore “impossible” scenarios that traditional computing can’t handle.

**Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:**

R&D TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION

TECHNOLOGY IN BUSINESS STRATEGY

BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY PIVOT



A woman with long blonde hair is sitting in a meditative lotus position on a dark surface. She is wearing a light-colored button-down shirt and denim jeans. Her eyes are closed, and her hands are raised in a mudra. The background is a blurred office space with shelves and plants, all tinted with a deep purple color.

# 8

**OUT OF  
THE 9-TO-5  
BOX**

# Future of Work and Hybrid Models

Work will open up even more in 2026. The old 9-to-5 frame will loosen as companies build more flexible routines that support people's well-being. Skills will matter more, learning will stay steady, and digital tools will keep everyone connected from anywhere.

## How companies will shape the workplace

Employers will focus on skills, flexible routines, and training tools that fit into everyday work.

- **Teams will hire based on skills**, not just job titles, so people can shift grow into new roles more easily, and grow more easily over time.
- **Training will blend into daily work**, with short, simple lessons that keep employees engaged instead of overwhelmed.
- **VR and AR will turn training into a hands-on game**, helping employees practice safely and remember faster.

By around 2030, many jobs that exist today will no longer exist or will be replaced by robots, innovation, machines, and artificial intelligence. It's important that we focus on all those sectors, on how to improve and move toward the future.



**Carolina Ribera**

Director of Events  
and Sponsorships,  
Hispano Suiza

## What employees will notice in their day-to-day

Work will become easier to manage day to day, with smoother collaboration and a stronger focus on well-being.

- **Work schedules will take on a more flexible rhythm**, mixing home, office, and everything in between without stress.
- **Wellness support will grow**, with tools that notice early signs of burnout and encourage healthier routines.
- **Collaboration will be smoother**, as shared digital spaces make remote teamwork like being in the same room.

**Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:**

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

INCLUSION ENTREPRENEUR





9

# A STITCH IN TIME SECURITY

# Cybersecurity and Data Protection

In 2026, keeping data safe will be a top priority. As companies use more connected tools and AI systems, security will shift from assuming trust to checking every step. New protections will detect breaches early and keep sensitive information safe.

## Where companies will make progress

Security will improve across all systems, with built-in checks at every step and earlier stops for potential threats.

- **Security tools will check every request** before access is granted, so approved users and systems get in.
- **AI will monitor unusual activity** patterns and stop threats before they spread within systems and networks.
- **Data will be encrypted by default**, keeping sensitive information protected even if a system or account is compromised.

Cybersecurity in 2026 is a business decision, not a technical one. When security is treated as a core business priority, teams can focus on growth instead of damage control.



**Ovanes Ovanessian**

Co-founder,  
Symbol Awards

## How will this show up in everyday work

Day-to-day work will have stronger protection built in, keeping accounts and data safer.

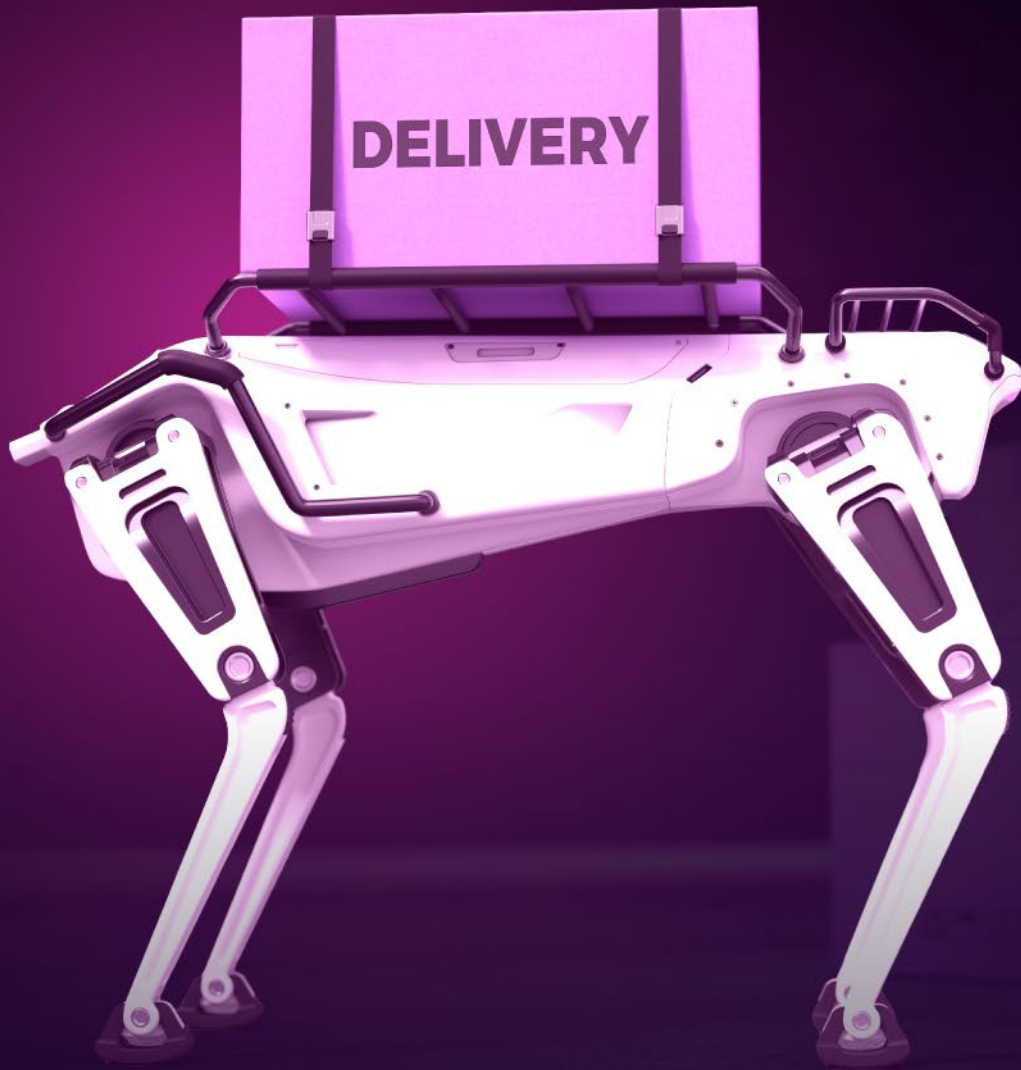
- **Logins will change**, with more verification steps that are quick and keep accounts safer across systems.
- **Teams will get easy-to-follow guidelines** on how data is stored, shared, and cleaned up properly.
- **Security checks will run quietly** in the background, helping prevent issues before anyone notices them.

**Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:**

CAMPAIGN – CYBER SECURITY

RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY PIVOT



# 10 SAFETY NET OF AUTOMATION



# Autonomous Systems and Robotics

Automation is moving past fixed machines into tools that can adapt and work safely with people. In 2026, smarter robots and autonomous systems will take on more hands-on, repetitive, and precision-heavy tasks, giving teams room to focus on work that truly needs human thinking and judgment.

## Where automation will start to change work

Routine responsibilities will shift to robots, allowing teams to spend more time on choices, thinking, and creative solutions.

- **Robots will take over repetitive or precision-heavy tasks**, giving teams more time for planning, problem-solving, and creative work.
- **Cobots will work alongside people and adjust in real time**, to keep daily operations smoother and more reliable across shared workspaces.
- **Smart factories will use connected robots that learn from data**, improving speed and accuracy without stopping production.

The companies that win will be those that combine automation with human judgment, using data not just to measure outcomes, but to actively shape them in real time.



**Ugo Okolo**

Senior Enterprise Customer  
Success Manager —  
Michael Management

## Differences employees will see

Automation and robotics will blend into daily operations, helping teams stay focused and keep work moving smoothly.

- **Routine steps like lifting, sorting, and checking will shrink**, since automated tools take over the most repetitive parts of the job.
- **Workplaces will feel safer** as robots handle heavy loads and higher-risk tasks that could put people at risk.
- **People will guide robots through simple controls**, making the technology easy to work with and quick to learn.

Symbol Awards 2026 categories to explore this trend:

PROCESS AUTOMATION INNOVATION

OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

WORKFLOW TECH INNOVATION

# Conclusion

With new tools and new opportunities, 2026 is a chance for businesses to hit the ground running. Companies are rolling up their sleeves, embracing new technology, and creating workplaces that put their teams first. As these trends take shape, Symbol Awards will shine a light on the work that sets the pace for everyone else.

So, step forward and claim your symbol of excellence at [symbolawards.com](https://symbolawards.com)



## A huge thank you to our contributors

A big thank you to all who contributed their expertise to this report.

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# About the report

Symbol Awards were created as a sister brand to Eventex, the global awards for events and experience marketing that have been celebrating excellence since 2009. Today, Symbol Awards bring that legacy into the wider business world, honoring creativity, innovation, and outstanding results across industries.

With participants from 60+ countries, Symbol Awards serve as a global benchmark for business excellence. Winning a Symbol award is more than recognition — it's a mark of distinction that sets organizations, teams, and leaders apart on the world stage.

For more industry insight and what's coming in 2026, follow Symbol Awards.

