

United Arab  
Emirates

# UAE Security Insights Report

Extended enterprise under threat

2021



# Introduction

This research was conducted to understand the challenges and issues facing businesses in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) when it comes to escalating cyberattacks. It identifies trends in hacking and malicious attacks, and the financial and reputational impact breaches had in what has been an unprecedented year. It examines UAE organisations' plans for securing new technology, adopting a cloud-first security strategy, and dealing with the complexity of the current cybersecurity management environment.

Read this report to discover how senior cybersecurity professionals plan to adapt to the security challenges of the distributed workplace and evolve defences to make security intrinsic to infrastructure and operations.

## Management Summary:

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- Prioritise improving visibility
- Respond to the resurgence of ransomware
- Continue to address ineffective legacy security technology and process weakness
- Deliver security as a distributed service
- Adopt an intrinsic approach to cloud-first security



# Foreword



## INSIGHTS FROM THE UAE CYBERSECURITY LANDSCAPE

**Rick McElroy**, Principal Cybersecurity Strategist,  
VMware Security Business Unit

Everything is different, and yet the same.

After a year that saw the largest and fastest transformation in work patterns in history, security teams now preside over an ecosystem that is more distributed and heterogeneous than ever before.

Digital transformation programmes advanced rapidly as the cyberattack surface expanded to include living rooms, kitchens, home networks, and personal devices. The remote workforce behaves very differently to the office workforce, accessing the network at unpredictable hours as they strive to stay productive while caring for their families and following government restrictions. As a result, network traffic has changed beyond recognition. Defenders must adapt monitoring systems and trigger points, or risk leaving opportunity for threat actors to use atypical patterns to mask infiltration attempts.

Against this rapidly changing backdrop, some things remain the same: One industry that has not been disrupted by COVID-19 is cybercrime.

The frequency of attacks is high, sophistication continues to evolve, and breaches are the inevitable result.

More than four-fifths (81 percent) of the 250 respondents to our survey said the number of attacks they faced increased in the past year. Of those, 80 percent said attacks increased as a result of more employees working from home. 84 percent said attacks had become more sophisticated.



The result? 80 percent of respondents reported suffering a breach in the past 12 months, and respondents who had a cyberattack reported **1.79 breaches on average per year**. Nor were these minor incidents. In eight out of 10 cases, the breach was a material incident requiring reporting to regulators or the involvement of an incident response (IR) team.

Clearly, security teams are under pressure, and there is little complacency: 69 percent of the UAE CISOs surveyed fear their organisation will experience a material breach in the coming year.

## CISOs can't see into the corners

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Cyberattack volumes have grown, but the rapid pivot to remote working means businesses are still not seeing the full picture. Erratic employee behaviour, personal devices, and home network use reduce visibility, creating blind spots and dark corners where attacks go undetected. Consequently:



**80%**

said attacks increased as a result of home working



**1.79**

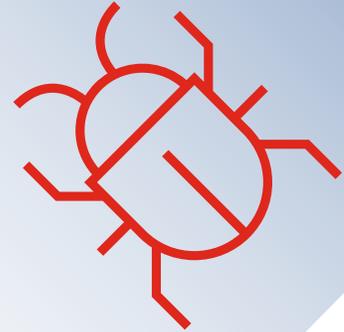
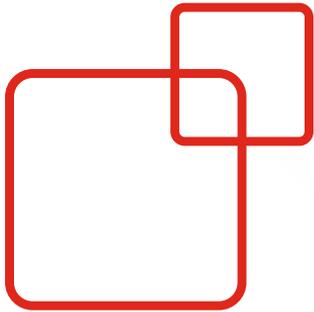
breaches on average have been reported per organisation, per year



**85%**

said they had suffered a material breach





# Process Weakness, Out-of-Date Security Technology, and Third- Party Applications Are the Leading Breach Causes

When asked what is causing breaches, three vectors almost tied at the top to build a picture of external threats and internal weaknesses. Process weakness was the most common cause, at the root of 14 percent of breaches, closely followed by out-of-date security technology and then by third-party applications.



The rapid pivot to work from anywhere exposed organisations that had lapsed in security hygiene and failed to implement multifactor authentication, while the extended enterprise is under increasing tension as third parties introduce significant breach risk.

## Ransomware resurgence

Ransomware returns as a top breach cause as attackers launch sophisticated and lucrative multistage campaigns.



**11%**

**of all breaches  
were caused by  
ransomware.**

However, the rapid escalation in ransomware has added unwelcome tension and was the joint fourth most common breach cause. Multistage campaigns involving penetration, persistence, data theft, and extortion are ramping up pressure as attackers capitalise on the disruption faced by remote workers. In most ransomware attacks, email continues to be used as the most common attack vector to gain initial access.



# Apprehension Around App Development and Consumption

Third-party apps are a common cause of breaches according to our surveyed CISOs. More than three-quarters (78 percent) say their ability to innovate as a business depends on them, so it's not surprising that security teams are focusing on sharpening their approach to consuming and developing them.

More than two-thirds (78 percent) of respondents agree<sup>1</sup> they need better visibility over data and apps to prevent attacks. A similar number (81 percent) agrees that better contextual security is needed to track data security through the application lifecycle. The impact of COVID-19 is recognised as four in five respondents agree they need to view security differently than they did in the past due to an expanded attack surface.

Apps also topped the list as the most vulnerable point on the data journey, but they are by no means the only area of concern.

Workloads are rising significantly as a source of perceived vulnerability.

**22 percent of respondents said workloads were the most vulnerable breach point in the data journey at their organisation, noting this wasn't the case 12 months ago.**

<sup>1</sup> Agree is strongly agree and somewhat agree options combined.





A further 8 percent said they had been the most vulnerable point for more than 12 months. Teams are recognising that traditional antivirus fails to secure server workloads, and misconfigurations are a significant breach risk. This often arises due to a knowledge gap between security teams and infrastructure teams whereby security teams don't know how production workloads are expected to behave, and infrastructure teams aren't experienced in recognising attacker behaviour. This year, we anticipate organisations will be looking to address these gaps and strengthen defences for workloads in the cloud.

On the topic of cloud, our research finds an inexorable shift is underway. Almost all the CISOs we surveyed either already follow a cloud-first security strategy or plan to do so very soon. This is a considerable shift and shows that organisations are accelerating their cloud security roadmap in response to the challenges of COVID-19. It may be a road they were already travelling, but they are putting their foot on the gas in recognition of the imperative for comprehensive cloud-first security for a cloud-first world.

We hope that you find our first **VMware UAE Security Insights Report** revealing and informative.



# Key Findings



## Attack frequency and breach risk remain high

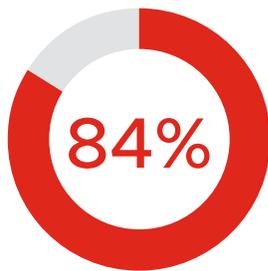
The frequency of attacks is high, their sophistication continues to grow, and breaches are the inevitable result.

**81%**

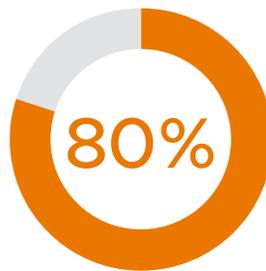
said attack volumes had increased in the past 12 months. The average reported increase among them was 68 percent.

**80%**

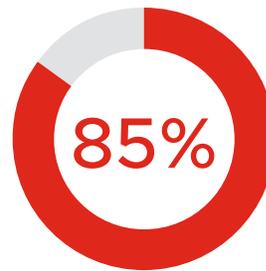
of those who had a cyberattack said attacks increased due to more people working from home.



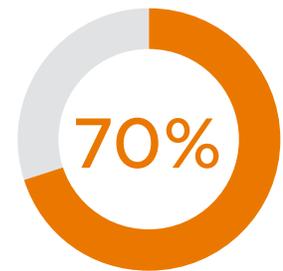
of those who had a cyberattack said attacks were more sophisticated.



have suffered a breach in the past 12 months, with those who have been breached experiencing an average of 1.79 breaches during that time period.



said the breaches they suffered were material.



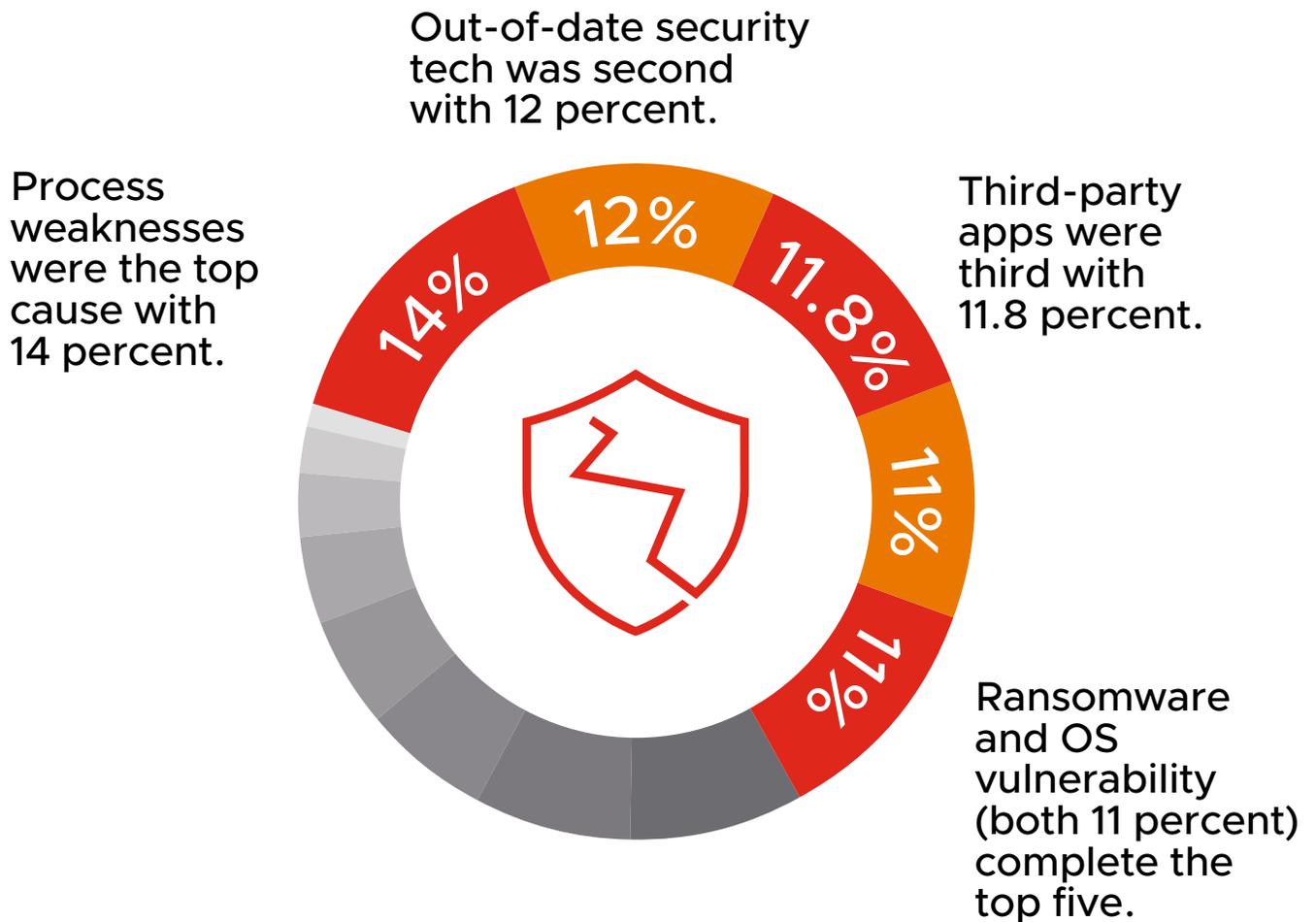
fear a material breach in the next 12 months.



## Process weakness, out-of-date security, and workloads top CISO concerns

The top vectors that cause breaches build a picture of external threats and internal weaknesses.

Top breach causes for those who had a cyberattack:



Apps and workloads topped the list as the most vulnerable point on the data journey, but they are by no means the only areas of concern.



## Expanding attack surfaces have leaders rethinking their traditional approach to security

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The good news is that there is recognition of a fundamental shift in security for a highly connected, remote work-supporting, digital age.



82%

agree they need to view security differently than they have previously as the attack surface has expanded.



81%

agree they need better contextual security in place to track data through the lifecycle.



78%

agree they need better visibility over data and apps to pre-empt attacks.



## Simplification, consolidation and a switch to cloud-first are in the plan for 2021

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Surveyed CISOs appear to be following the path of technology consolidation and the adoption of a more intrinsic approach to security. 42 percent say they are increasing their security budget to achieve these aims.

 **38%** have adapted their security technology to mitigate the risk.

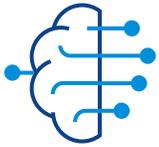
 **37%** are building more security into their infrastructure and apps, and reducing the number of point solutions.

 **33%** have updated their security technology.

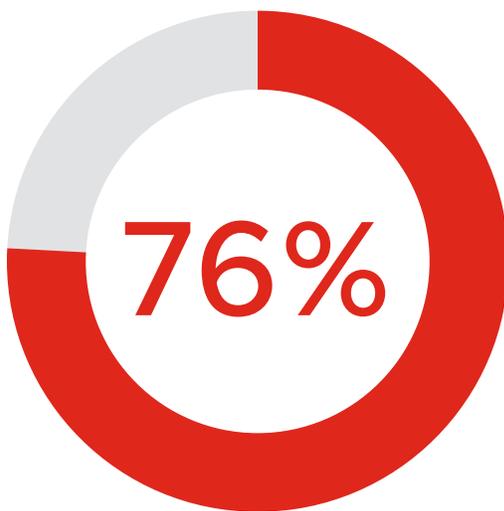
**99%+** have shifted or plan to shift to a cloud-first security strategy.



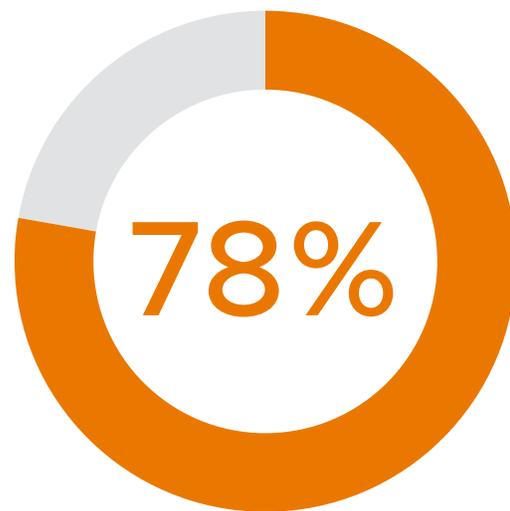
## AI is the next frontier for business innovation, but are security concerns stifling progress?



The next frontier for business innovation is AI as businesses seek an edge to drive more competitive customer services and digital experiences.



Yet, 76 percent of UAE respondents agree security concerns are holding them back from embracing AI/machine learning (ML)-based apps to improve such services.

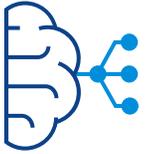


Almost fourth-fifths (78 percent) of respondents agree that their ability to innovate depends on their building and getting apps into the hands of employees and customers more securely.



## AI is the next frontier for business innovation, but are security concerns stifling progress?

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Many respondents are concerned that they're unable to respond to the digital opportunity.

**79%** agree there is too much complexity in the security solutions industry to make them change their security policy, even though they know today's IT security is not working.

**74%** agree their board/senior leadership team feels increasingly worried when they bring new apps/services to market because of the growing threat and damage data breaches/attacks have.

**81%** agree they would like to use more AI/ML in their apps to improve security and services.

**78%** agree they need better visibility over data and apps to pre-empt attacks.



## Securing brand and reputation—does it command more urgency for change?

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Brand and reputation remain the holy grail for businesses, and it is easily lost. However, the reputational impact of security breaches outstrips financial impact.

 **79%** of those who suffered a cyberattack say there was some kind of negative impact on reputation.

 **85%** of respondents had to report to regulators or engage an IR firm to overcome the reputational problems caused by material breaches in the past 12 months.

There is mixed recognition among respondents of the seriousness of these breaches—and a lack of urgency for change despite the increasing threat landscape.

 **69%** are fearful they will experience a material breach in the coming year.

 **31%** have updated their security policy and approach to mitigate the risk.



# Full Survey Findings



## Have you seen an increase in cyberattacks on your company in the past 12 months? If so, by how much?

81 percent of the CISOs surveyed said they experienced an increase in the number of cyberattacks on their organisation in the past 12 months. The average increase experienced was 68 percent. 80 percent of respondents in the healthcare sector saw increases, with an average rise of a staggering 84 percent. 28 percent confirmed they had seen an increase of between 101–300 percent.

Respondents from the government sector fared better than average, reporting attack volume increases of 41 percent overall.

The financial services sector also saw a sharp increase in cyberattacks. 80 percent of respondents stated they had seen an increase, and 46 percent said they had seen more than a 51 percent increase in cyberattacks.

## Has the number of typical overall cyberattacks on your system changed as a result of more employees working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

80 percent of respondents who experienced cyberattacks said they had seen an increase in frequency due to more employees working from home.

90 percent of respondents from government organisations noted an increase in attacks connected to home working, while 84 percent of financial services respondents said the same.

## Have cyberattacks on your company become more or less sophisticated in the past 12 months?

When it comes to attack sophistication, 84 percent of CISOs surveyed who had a cyberattack have seen attacks grow more sophisticated.

Moreover, 60 percent of those who had a cyberattack say the attacks they face are significantly or moderately more sophisticated, indicating there is a plethora of bad actors that continues to develop and enhance attack techniques.

**84 percent of surveyed CISOs have seen attacks grow more sophisticated.**



Evidence suggests the adversary isn't targeting a particular sector with these techniques. The financial services (66 percent), government (74 percent) and healthcare (63 percent) sectors all reported sophistication had become moderately or significantly more complex.

### **What has been the most prolific (i.e., most frequent) type of cyberattack your company has experienced in the past 12 months?**

The UAE attack environment is diverse. While cloud-based attacks are the most prolific type of attack, with 16 percent of respondents citing this, the remaining respondents are experiencing a varied mix of attack types with no single attack type dominating. This underlines the challenges UAE CISOs face; they need to build strategic and tactical responses to an incredibly varied mix of attack vectors and techniques.

Attacks against 5G-related technology are second on the list, with 8 percent of respondents who had a cyberattack seeing this most frequently. This is followed by ransomware and network/app/endpoint attacks being the top attack type for 7 percent of respondents in each case.

Custom malware, SSH, and supply chain attacks each account for 6 percent for those who have been cyberattacked.

Government organisations are more likely to experience cloud-based attacks, with 26 percent of respondents saying this was the most common attack type they experienced. Ransomware is also disproportionately targeted at the government sector, with 15 percent seeing this most frequently. It was also more of a problem than average for healthcare companies, affecting 10 percent.

### **How often has your company been breached by a cyberattack in the past 12 months?**

**80 percent of surveyed organisations suffered a security breach in the past year.**

Four out of five of the CISOs who took part in our research said their organisation suffered a breach as a result of a cyberattack in the past year (80 percent).



The average number of breaches suffered by each organisation was 1.79. Only 6 percent of respondents said their organisation had been breached five times or more.

The manufacturing, engineering, building and automotive sector suffered the highest average number of breaches at 2.13. Financial services companies (2.00) and healthcare (1.82) both suffered above the average number of breach incidents.

Breach frequency is highest at midsize organisations of 1,001–2,000 employees, with each experiencing 2.38 on average.

### **What was the prime cause of these breaches?**

For 14 percent of CISOs surveyed who suffered a cyberattack, the unwelcome discovery that their processes were not as strong as they thought they were led to breaches. Compounding this issue was out-of-date security technology, which was the cause of breaches for 12 percent. The strain exerted by the sudden shift to remote working clearly exposed those areas where policy and technology failed to keep pace with the changing environment.

The responsibility was not all laid at the organisation's door, however, with 12 percent of breaches originating from third-party applications. Further down the list but still significant, 11 percent of breaches were attributed to ransomware, 11 percent to OS vulnerability, and 10 percent to phishing attacks. Once again, this diversity of breach causes highlights the many fronts on which UAE CISOs have to defend their organisation.

Process weakness was a particular problem in government companies, causing one-fifth (21 percent) of breaches. For financial services, out-of-date security technology was the culprit in 18 percent of incidents.

The higher prevalence of ransomware attacks on government organisations translated to 18 percent of breaches in that sector. Phishing attacks were a problem for the healthcare sector, causing 22 percent of breaches.

### **What percentage of the breaches by a cyberattack in the past 12 months do you believe were a material breach (i.e., you had to disclose them to regulators/call in an incident response team to recover, etc.)?**

When a breach does happen, it is serious business. All respondents who had a cyberattack on their company had to report to regulators or engage an IR firm to overcome the problems caused by breaches.



47 percent of respondents who suffered a cyberattack said that between 21–30 percent were material breaches, and a further 29 percent said 31–40 percent of breaches were material.

In the healthcare sector, almost a quarter (24 percent) of respondents said that 41–50 percent of breaches were material.

**100 percent of organisations that had a cyberattack suffered a material breach.**

### What were the consequences of these breaches from financial and reputational perspectives to your company?

Almost half (47 percent) of respondents who suffered a cyberattack said they suffered negative financial impact due to a data breach suffered by their organisation. This is higher than the global average of 24 percent. While there is no federally applicable data protection law in the UAE, organisations are much more aware of the financial penalties associated with data loss.

Interestingly, among government (59 percent), healthcare (49 percent) and financial services companies (46 percent), a high number of respondents said they hadn't experienced any financial impact.

Overall, the effect on brand reputation was greater. 79 percent of respondents who suffered a cyberattack said their brand had been negatively affected by a data breach. 17.5 percent said the damage was severe.

Only 19 percent said there was no reputational loss suffered when a breach occurred.

Healthcare companies were most likely to report severe reputational damage, with almost a quarter (22 percent) saying they had been severely affected. The government sector was most likely to state that no reputational damage had been suffered, with 38.5 percent of respondents reporting this.



## How fearful are you of the material breaches that you believe your organisation will be hit with in the next 12 months?

There is a significant fear factor associated with the potential for material breaches in the coming year. More than two-thirds (69 percent) are very or somewhat fearful that a breach will hit their business.

Both the financial services and government sectors are the most concerned, with 76 percent of respondents from both sectors saying they fear a breach.

## How are you addressing this (the likelihood of breaches), if at all?

When asked about their plans to mitigate breach risk, respondents were prioritising increased budget as well as simplification and consolidation of security solutions with making security intrinsic. Also important were updating technology and internal policy.

42 percent of respondents said they plan to **increase their security budget**. This rose to 56 percent in the healthcare sector.

**37 percent plan to build more security into their infrastructure and apps, and reduce the number of point solutions.**

38 percent said they have **adapted their security technology to mitigate the risk**. We found that the government sector is most likely to take this approach (50 percent). Similarly, 37 percent say they are **building more security into their infrastructure and apps, and reducing the number of point solutions**. This approach was most prominent in the financial services sector (42 percent).

33 percent said they have **updated their security technology to mitigate risk**, an

important tactic given the significant changes to the security landscape in the past year. 40 percent of financial services companies have taken this approach.

31 percent have **updated their security policy and approach to mitigate risk**. The government sector (42 percent) is most likely to take this approach.



## To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements relating to developing and consuming apps in your organisation?

When asked about the changing way they are viewing security challenges around app development and consumption in their organisation, our respondents offered insight into the issues they are facing.

Visibility is a definite concern. 78 percent agree they **need better visibility over their data and apps to pre-empt attacks**. This rises to 82 percent in the government sector.

82 percent of UAE respondents agreed that the changes to the attack landscape brought by COVID-19 require a security rethink, agreeing they **need to view security differently than they have done previously as the attack surface has expanded**. Those in the government (84 percent) and healthcare (82 percent) sectors are more likely to take this view.

More than four-fifths (81 percent) say they **need better contextual security in place to track data/security through the lifecycle**. This points to a prevailing environment where security tends to be threat-centric and reactive. IT leaders are recognising that dynamic environments require a context-centric approach.

**81 percent agree they need better contextual security in place to track data/security through the lifecycle.**

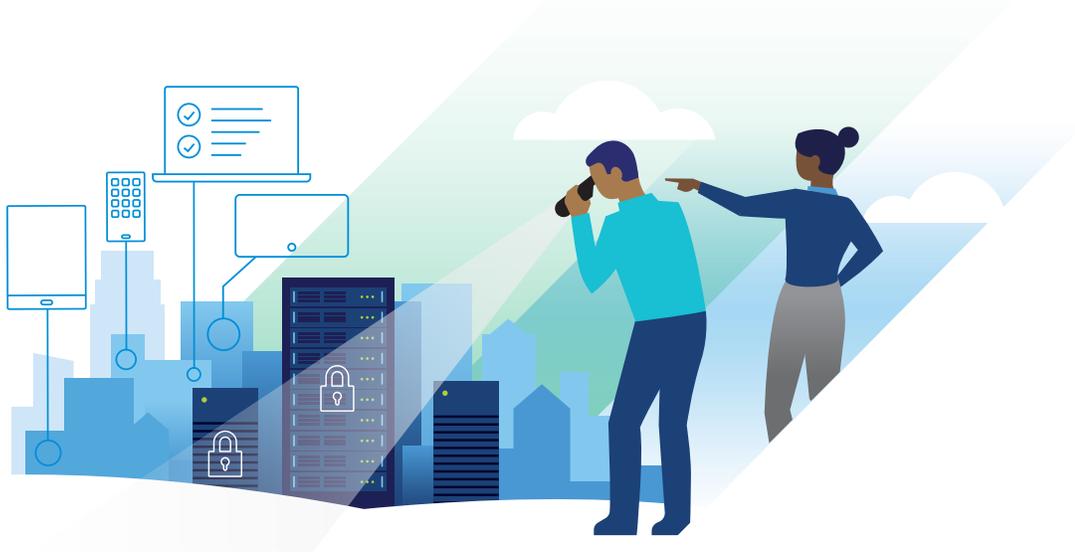
**78 percent need better visibility over data and apps.**

UAE CISOs surveyed are under no illusions about the mission-critical nature of app security to their business. 78 percent agreed that their **ability to innovate as a business depends on their ability to build, manage and distribute apps more securely**.

82 percent of respondents **feel confident in bringing new apps to market because they know they will be secure**.



Asked about their view of AI in secure app development, respondents showed signs of conflict. 76 percent agree **security concerns are holding them back from embracing AI/ML-based apps to improve services**, but 81 percent agree they **would like to use more AI and ML in their apps to improve security and services**.



More than three-quarters of respondents (79 percent) agreed **there is too much complexity in the security solutions market to make them change their security policy even though they know today's IT security is not working**, indicating that vendors have work to do to simplify their proposition into a unified approach.

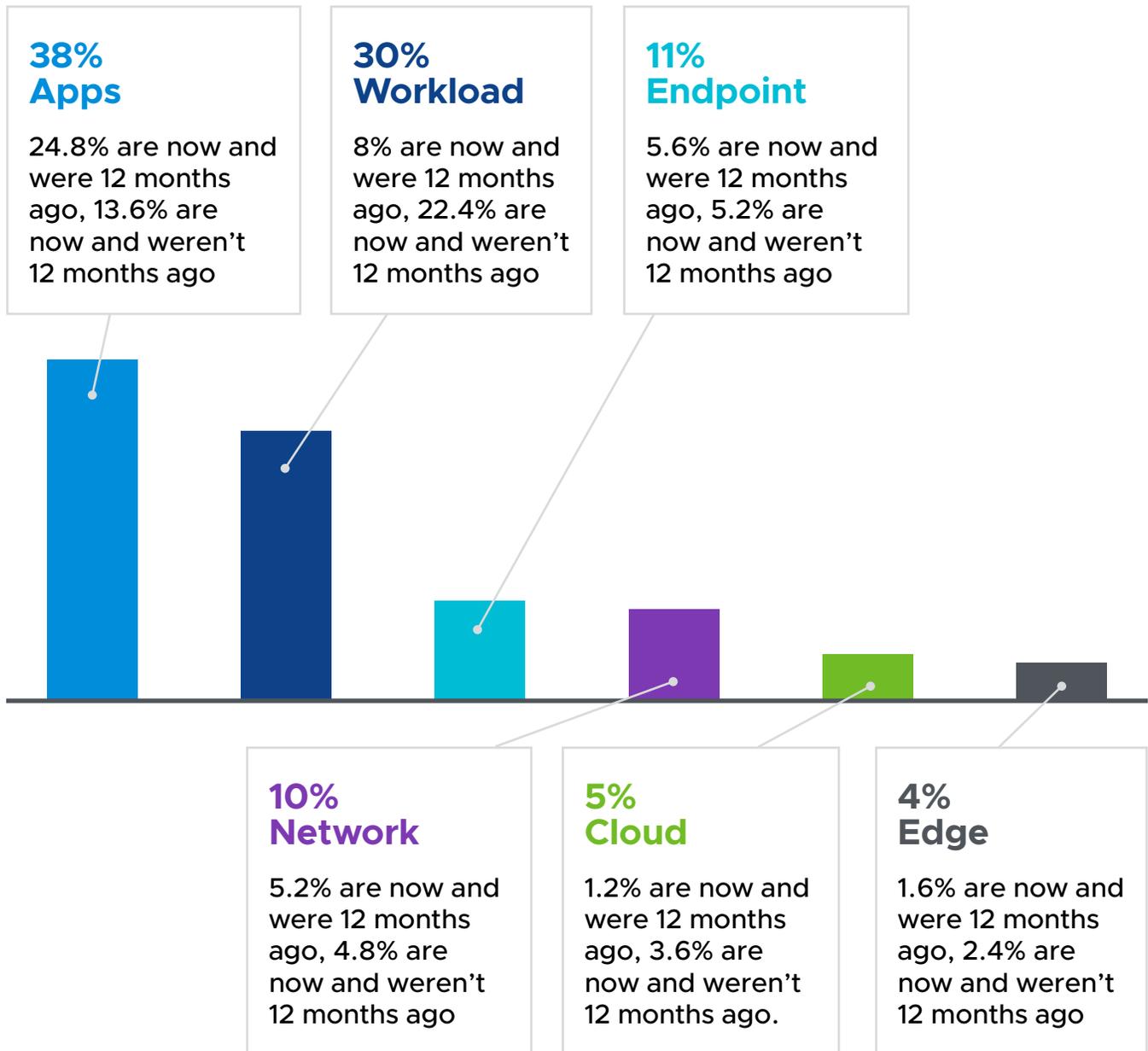
Finally, 74 percent agreed that app security is getting board-level attention, and that their **board/senior leadership team feels increasingly worried when they bring new apps/services to market because of the growing threat and damage data breaches/attacks have**.

**74 percent say their board is increasingly worried about the security risks of bringing new apps to market.**



## What do you believe to be the most vulnerable breach point on the journey of data within your security infrastructure, and has this changed in the past 12 months?

Applications were designated the most vulnerable breach point on the data journey, and it is clear this has been a concern for some time. What is most interesting is that workloads are significantly rising as a source of perceived vulnerability. We are likely to see organisations placing more focus on tackling this risk in the coming year.



## How have organisations coped with the challenges of pivoting to remote working?

We asked surveyed CISOs to rate their success in switching the workforce to remote-first working and whether a security-first approach would have helped a more effective transition.

55 percent agree they've been able to get their workforce up and running remotely, and security has not been a barrier. This is testament to the work of security teams that have been at the heart of operations more than ever before. Healthcare respondents fared well, with 60 percent agreeing they experienced no security barriers to setting up home working. On the other hand, financial services CISOs experienced difficulties, with 26 percent disagreeing that they had been able to get their workforce up and running without problems.

Respondents acknowledge there is always room for improvement, with 67 percent agreeing a security-first approach would have increased their ability to enable employees to work from alternative locations and remain productive. This was also confirmed in earlier [VMware research](#) that found the inability to implement multifactor authentication was the biggest concern for IT professionals in their response to the shift to home working. Now that the profile of security has risen, it should be easier for CISOs to secure board support for a security-first approach.

## Do you use or plan to use a cloud-first security strategy?

All but one respondent stated that they are planning to shift to a cloud-first security strategy—if not immediately, it is firmly on the roadmap. 99.6 percent overall already use or plan to adopt a cloud-first approach to protect the organisation.

**99.6 percent already use or plan to adopt a cloud-first approach to protect the organisation.**

46 percent overall say they have been using a cloud-first approach for more than one year, while 36 percent say they have been cloud-first for less than 12 months. A further 13 percent plan to become cloud-first in the coming year, while the switch is further down the track for 5 percent.

Cloud-first maturity is high among the government sector, where

58 percent have been cloud-first for more than 12 months. 48 percent of financial services respondents have been operating a cloud-first security strategy for more than a year.



# Key Insights and Actions



Our first UAE Security Insights Report finds that senior cybersecurity professionals and the organisations they serve continue to face high-volume, sophisticated threats. These are exacerbated by the pivot to a highly distributed workforce and, though most organisations have managed to shift to remote working, CISOs acknowledge that a security-first approach would have made the transition easier.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 changed the cybersecurity environment significantly and will continue to influence security strategy. For its part, the cybersecurity industry must focus on delivering solutions that reduce operational complexity while robustly protecting the distributed work environments that will become the default future state for most organisations.

Analysis of the survey responses reveals important areas for cybersecurity attention in the coming year.

## Prioritise improving visibility

Organisations have a visibility problem resulting from the rapid switch to home working. The true scale of attacks is hard to discern because defenders can't see into the corners where personal mobile devices and home networks have been grafted on to the corporate ecosystem. Add to this the challenges of monitoring third-party apps and vendors, and the number of blind spots escalates.

Put simply, defenders don't know what they don't know, and businesses are exposed as a result. This limited contextual insight into risk puts defenders at a disadvantage when protecting the extended attack surface. Organisations must prioritise improving visibility into all endpoints and workloads to secure the remote work environment. Robust situational intelligence that gives context to threats will help defenders prioritise and remediate risk with confidence.

## Respond to the resurgence of ransomware

Cyberattacks have continued to increase in sophistication, and ransomware is no exception. Attackers are gaining undetected access to networks, exfiltrating data, and establishing back doors before launching ransom demands and/or directly monetising stolen data. To avoid becoming victim to repeated attacks, organisations need to combine advanced ransomware protection with robust post-attack remediation that detects the continued presence of adversaries in their environment.



## Continue to address ineffective legacy security technology and process weakness

Out-of-date security and process weaknesses continue to pose significant risk to organisations, and the switch to remote working has exposed them still further. As we emerge from the immediate response phase and begin to see the shape of the long-term future, organisations must identify the critical changes to processes and technology needed to support remote and hybrid workers to work securely and reduce risk.

## Deliver security as a distributed service

There was a time when security teams were securing company-owned desktops for employees working on campus, connecting to corporate applications running on servers in a company-owned data centre. The world is a more complicated place today with remote workers connecting to applications running on infrastructure that may or may not be managed, owned or controlled by the company. With so many new surfaces and different types of environments to defend, security cannot be delivered as a litany of point products and network choke points. Instead, endpoint and network controls must be delivered as a distributed service. This means delivering security that follows the assets being protected, no matter what type of environment you have.

## Adopt an intrinsic approach to cloud-first security

The biggest change uncovered by our research is the shift to a cloud-first security strategy. It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of shift that has occurred in such a short space of time; very few CISOs before 2020 described their security strategy as cloud-first. It is the logical result of organisations having to respond to the sudden highly distributed working practices caused by COVID-19.

But moving to the cloud is not a security panacea. Not all clouds are equal, and controls need to be vetted by consumer organisations because if adversaries want to attack at scale, the cloud is the place to do it. As this shift builds momentum, investment in public cloud security will be critical. When you move to a public cloud, you're moving to a very tough neighbourhood where security is contingent on your own actions and those of your neighbours. You may be able to secure your own resources, but you have no control over those sharing that environment with you. Organisations must prioritise securing cloud workloads at every point in the security lifecycle as the great cloud shift continues.

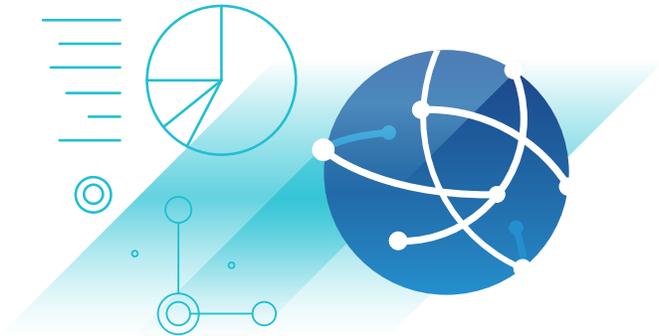


Ultimately, the 2021 VMware UAE Security Insights Report shows an industry that is focused on building on the successes of the past year and responding to the changing threat environment. CISOs have a strong sense of the direction they need to travel and the tools they need to leverage to help stay one step ahead of attackers.

## Methodology

VMware commissioned a survey, undertaken by an independent research organisation, Opinion Matters, in December 2020. **250 UAE CIOs, CTOs and CISOs** were surveyed from companies in a range of industries, including financial, healthcare, government and local

authority, retail, manufacturing and engineering, food and beverage, utilities, professional services, and media and entertainment. This is the first UAE Security Insights Report from VMware. This forms part of a global research project across **14 countries**, including Australia, Canada, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, the Nordics, Italy, Japan, Singapore, and the United States.



## About VMware

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