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ViewPoints

Managing your most human data source: Microsoft Teams



Workers in the United States are experiencing newfound agency inspired by the prolonged work from home mandate. It has provided them the opportunity to prove, **again** and **again**, that they are equally equipped to do their job remotely as they were in person. A decade ago—or, to be honest, in February 2020—this would have seemed infeasible.

This monumental shift in work style has been facilitated by technology that enables real-time, distant collaboration. The most popular of which is Microsoft Teams, a nesting doll of data sources with messages, files, and meetings all wrapped into one. From the perspective of the end user, Microsoft Teams is a powerful tool that enables effective cooperation; however, for data management, compliance, and legal officials, it complicates day-to-day operations.

To uncover current trends in Microsoft Teams data governance, ZL Tech partnered with Osterman Research Group to [survey](#) 143 IT leaders at medium- and large-scale enterprises. This research finds that Microsoft Teams—along with other collaboration platforms—is not just “another data source,” rather it requires specialized management that may not have been taken into account during implementation.

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users before the pandemic to skyrocketing to over 145 million daily users in April 2021. The expeditious rise of the application is a testament to its ability to fill in the gaps of corporate culture and communications. Regardless of its efficacy, it was adopted when companies were not in a position to fully consider its larger, organizational ramifications.

For many companies, the vetting process for incorporating Microsoft Teams did not consist of its usual scrutiny. In the Osterman report, they found that two of the three least influential decision-makers in the Microsoft Teams adoption process were compliance and legal professionals. The lack of risk-centered individuals' influence showcases how little consideration went into investigating the potential compliance and [legal complications](#).

Just over a year in, organizations are already seeing Microsoft Teams data seep into compliance and legal domains. In fact, research shows that 75% of organizations have already required access to retrieve Microsoft Teams data, with the leading reasons being for eDiscovery requests (49%), internal investigations (49%), and compliance audits (30%). Failure to produce this data can result in hefty spoliation charges, non-compliance penalties, and reputational damages. For better or worse, Microsoft Teams has entered the data ecosystem and has proven itself an essential aspect of information governance.

The novel human data source

A more interesting question than *how* Microsoft Teams is affecting governance is *why* Microsoft Teams is affecting governance. Unlike other corporate communication tools, such as email or shared files, collaboration platforms host live conversations. In this regard, Microsoft Teams acts as a replacement to casual "water cooler" talk. Due to its conversational nature, individuals are more unfiltered than they would be over email. Since it feels informal, it is common for colleagues to use the platform to discuss nonwork-related matters. Unlike water cooler talk, however, every message sent over Microsoft Teams is carefully cataloged and persevered.

These candid dialogues offer both massive risk and opportunity for organizations due to how reflective they are of employee attitude and opinion. For legal and compliance, these conversations can add context to a case in a way that traditional records cannot. Take an internal investigation, for example, with every conversation documented, "he said, she said" quickly turns into "Microsoft Teams said." This degree of transparency can unearth aspects of an organization—the good and the bad—that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Microsoft Teams data also holds the potential to re-envision how companies approach understanding and analyzing its workforce. Unlike rigid organizational charts or one-off surveys, analytics into Microsoft Teams data creates a living picture of the enterprise. Notably, network analysis—who talks to whom, how frequently, and about what—can reveal insights into who has the best relationship with a client, who the subject matter experts are, or even who the top performers are. Taking a step further, analyzing the content of messages can reveal employee sentiment in real-time: How are people responding to the company's back-to-office plan? How integrated are new hires into the organization? Are project deadlines causing undue stress? Along with countless other use cases limited only by one's imagination.

However, these opportunities can only be reaped and the opposing risks mitigated if organizations can properly manage this data. Unfortunately, because Microsoft Teams data is uniquely human, a cookie-cutter approach to governing it will not work.

The current state of Microsoft Teams governance

Microsoft Teams offers several native retention capabilities within the platform; however, for many organizations—especially those in highly litigated and regulated industries—it is not sufficient. According to the Osterman study, only 54% of enterprises think Microsoft Teams' native archiving capabilities are fully sufficient for its compliance requirements. Some of the leading concerns respondents noted were an inability to capture source files and documents (48%), quotes (36%), and call audio (35%). These gaps may not be earth-shattering—especially for small businesses in less regulated fields—but they are certainly noticeable. And employees have noticed: 27% of organizations have caught employees using Microsoft Teams to circumvent compliance rules. The operative word being "caught," as not many companies have the data control required to identify individuals who are abusing the platform.

While Microsoft Teams was adopted in crisis, enough time has passed for organizations to begin the process of integrating the platform into its overarching governance strategy. At the onset, most IT leaders were trying to get by with patchwork solutions to meet data

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supplemental management capabilities to integrate Microsoft Teams within the company's larger governance framework.

The future of collaboration data management

As it currently stands, in two years' time, only 40% of organizations believe that native Microsoft Teams data management will be sufficient for its needs. To improve governance, IT leaders expressed a host of additional capabilities needed to complement their native Microsoft Teams retention: search that spans multiple data sources in-place (54%), capture of all Microsoft Teams data (53%), and a single platform for archiving, eDiscovery, and compliance for multiple data sources (53%). In effect, what these IT leaders are calling for is unified governance across data sources in place.

While data management may currently be siloed, the use cases that require it are not: lawsuits need more than files, compliance is not just emails, and analytics require more than Microsoft Teams. The goal of any data management project ought to be to create the most complete picture possible, using each data source to provide additional layers and detailing. An analytics project into employee networks that only looks at Microsoft Teams data misses the countless connections formed over emails and IMs. Without bridging these data ecosystems together, the corporate view will always be limited.

Microsoft Teams may just be one piece of the corporate puzzle, but it is an important one. More so than any other data source, collaboration platforms capture employees in their natural state, making it an incredibly valuable resource to any organization—if they can manage it.



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