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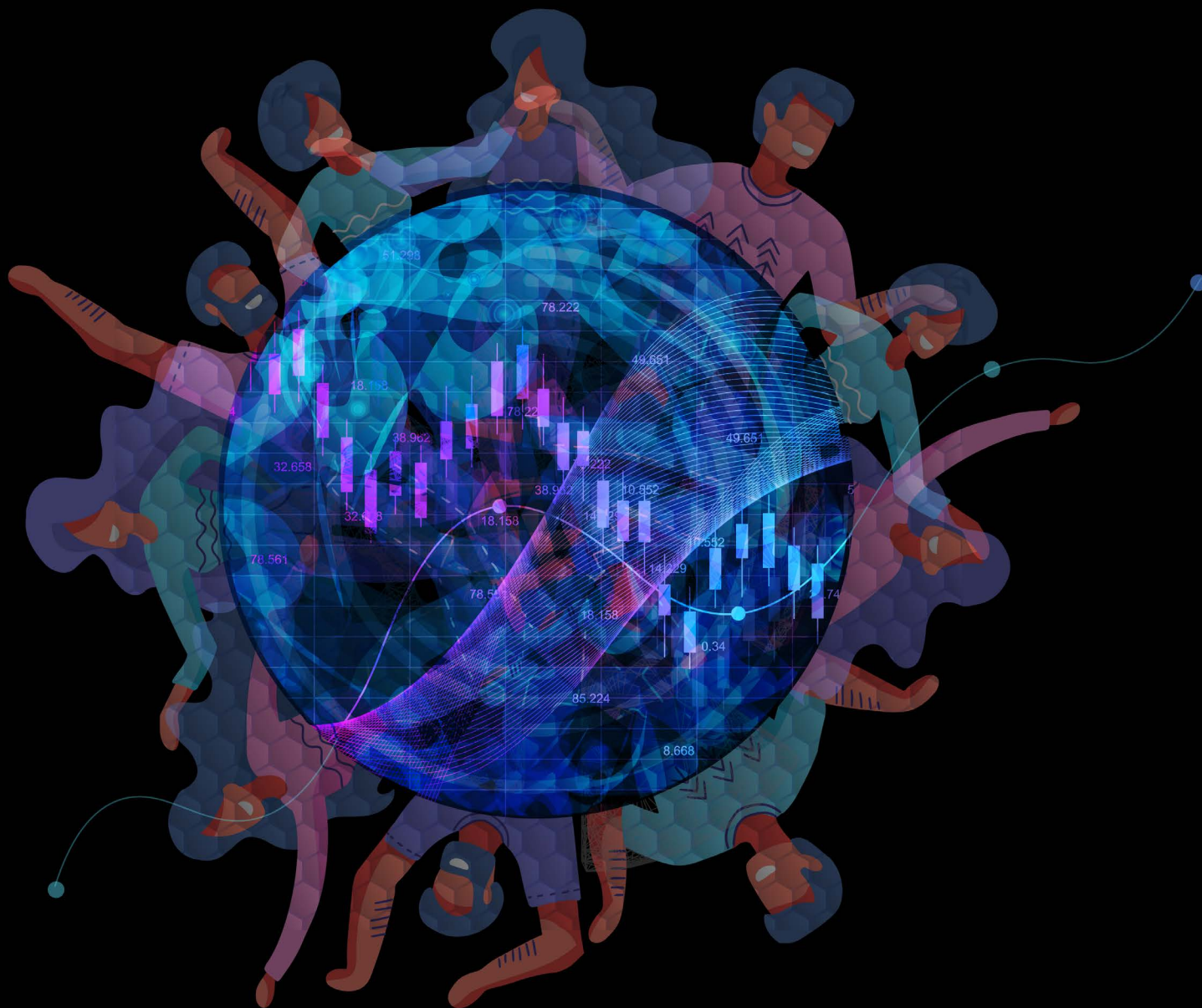
Aware

Harnessing your organization's collaboration and sentiment data
Drawing the fine line

Using your existing collaboration conversation data effectively and ethically to drive critical decisions

The world of work is more digitally enabled than ever before. Millions of individuals who used to go into an office daily or weekly now spend their days behind a screen. Recent surveys show 67% of remote workers want to remain remote either full- or part-time even post–COVID-19.[1]

This transition to remote work accelerated the adoption of collaboration tools that enable workers to communicate more efficiently, boosting productivity and engagement. About 61% of organizations surveyed as part of the _2021 Deloitte Human Capital Trends_ report said that they would focus on reimagining work and leveraging technology differently going forward as opposed to 29% before the pandemic. On a recent earnings call, Microsoft announced that the number of daily active users of Teams skyrocketed 260% to 115 million between March 2020 and October 2020.[2] Facebook recently announced that the Workplace collaboration platform has 40% more paid subscribers in May 2021 compared to May 2020.[3] Zoom had 30 times growth in daily meeting participants, from ten million in December 2019 to 300 million in April 2020.[4] Slack announced a 42% increase in paid customers from 2020 to 2021.[5]

Aware's own customer research showed that users sent an average of 184% more messages across collaborative platforms compared with March 2020.

Simultaneously, the increased use of these tools unleashed a treasure trove of collaboration data that can create meaningful and actionable insights to build resilience against the negative implications of COVID-19 and its effect on the workplace.

The intentional, ethical use of collaboration data is critical to building and maintaining organizational trust.

Data privacy is one of the most important components in supporting the ethical use of this data. To build trust with workers, organizations should start by transparently sharing information regarding what data is collected, what it is used for, and why. Organizations then need to define clear data privacy controls and processes for employees to opt out (or in). This includes making sure any analytics tools include functionality to fulfill a data subject access request and/or complete an individual's request to exercise their right to be forgotten, as outlined by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Aware and Deloitte are both advocates of employee privacy and rights. As such, this piece explores how to balance the importance and effectiveness of the potential insights with ethical and sustainable usage: the "fine line."

Using collaboration data for insights versus risk mitigation

Many organizations already use collaboration data to fulfill legal and regulatory compliance obligations or to monitor and enforce acceptable use policies. Yet, the same companies grapple with using this data to add value to the organization.

This data could:

- Help bring organizations back to the same or better levels of productivity and engagement that they had before the pandemic without requiring everyone to physically return to the workplace;

- Drive meaningful conversations between leaders and staff, which is key to building trust, innovating, and executing on the organization's strategic objectives;

- Guide organizations to a better understanding of potential issues, common themes, overall sentiment, and an authentic Voice of the Employee; and

- Mitigate risk for the organization, better engaging the organization, boosting retention, and enhancing focus on well-being and employee psychological safety where it is needed the most.

So why haven't more organizations dug into this game-changing data to derive insights? Why not use data to place big bets, support transformations, or improve experience for employees?

Who owns the data?

Employers largely have access to employee calendars, emails, and collaboration data; so there is no immediate risk in analyzing it. A common objection stems from privacy concerns, but many organizations already leverage monitoring tools such as security cameras, badge scanning, web browsing, and more. Organizations have an obligation to protect both the security of the company and the safety of its employees, which includes governance and oversight within collaboration. Another common objection is related to the ethics of using the data to drive decisions related to workers. This is where the "fine line" really deserves deep discussion and consideration.

Simply put, in most organizations, the enterprise owns collaboration data. If an email is sent between employees within an organization, there is an expectation that the email message and its contents belong to the organization. One could reasonably argue that collaboration data also falls into that category.

All corporate emails, collaboration platforms, chat, and calendars carry a significant volume of data. As such, the organization is under an obligation to serve as a good steward of that data. The employer must not only protect the data itself, but the employees who use the data.

At the highest level, this means that organizations must comply with privacy regulations, such as those established by the GDPR, the APAC privacy law (PDPA), and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), by not only providing the ability for employees to opt in, but also affording the ability to opt out when they leave the organization (commonly referred to as the "right to be forgotten").

However, organizations should also consider a more human-centric approach to its obligation of protecting employees. Real-time conversation platforms open the door for chatty, informal discussion that can sometimes take a toxic turn. In order to demonstrate good stewardship of the data, employers are under an obligation to protect the psychological safety of its workers without placing the burden on the individual to surface instances of harassment, discrimination, microaggressions, or other toxic behaviors.

Who should be able to see this data?

Who can access and see this data truly depends on the use case. For example, when monitoring for conduct and communication compliance, the legal and compliance teams need to see the message content and context in order to create an informed action plan. Alternatively, infosec teams would need access if monitoring for secrets-sharing or other insider threats. Even in these situations, the number of people and roles with direct access should be limited and easily audited.

Companies need to be abundantly cautious about who has access to individual-level data, especially when artificial intelligence, such as a sentiment natural language processing model, is used with the data. A manager cannot unsee information that indicates a direct report is potentially toxic or a flight risk, for example; this would be extremely damaging, particularly if the characterization is false.

With anonymized, aggregated data, wider access might be acceptable, though still largely dependent on use case. Viewing the overall sentiment related to a companywide announcement can help executives and corporate communicators see the impact of the announcement. Understanding aggregate trends in sentiment or commonly discussed themes within a specific group or business unit would allow business leaders to drive change and proactively respond to brewing issues.

In any case, permissions play a vital role in good stewardship of collaboration data. Organizations should intentionally limit the scope of permissions based on each use case, taking care not to overextend unnecessary access.

What decisions should be made or tempered based on this data?

Although tempting to say collaboration data has all the answers, it is based on conversations between multiple individuals, existing in a complex communication network. Furthermore, the conversations do not necessarily capture the organizational context that exists within other sources.

Organizations need to proceed with caution when arriving at conclusions that affect important business decisions, making sure to consider full context and not just a single data point. Using this data to make automatic decisions about a person or group is strongly discouraged and, in our opinion, would cross that "fine line" of ethical use.

A legal team, however, might use collaboration messaging data as a supporting component to a litigation case or internal investigation. Additionally, organizations could use trends in collaboration data to identify potential areas of concern and pinpoint where additional context-gathering is needed prior to acting or reacting. In fact, in *Benebone v. Pet Qwerks, et al.*, No. 8:20-cv-00850-AB-AFMx (C.D. Cal. Feb. 18, 2021), California Magistrate Judge Alexander F. MacKinnon granted the defendants' motion to compel the production of Slack communications, stating that "requiring review and production of Slack messages by Benebone is generally comparable to requiring search and production of emails and is not unduly burdensome or disproportional to the needs of this case—if the requests and searches are appropriately limited and focused."

Organizations could also look to aggregate anonymous trend data to proactively inform leaders with regard to the topics (and related sentiment) that are top of mind with workers. This information can be used not only to drive dialogic change in the organization, but also to advise corporate communications and internal initiatives.

Examples of organizational impacts made using this data intentionally and ethically

Multibillion-dollar tech company improves productivity by 60%

A multibillion-dollar technology company was convinced that it needed to organize into 14 distinct functions to get its work done because it was so complex. However, employees reported how hard it was to get work done and pass a message between departments. For the individuals executing the work on a daily basis, organizational friction created significant barriers to share critical and essential information across the 14 functions, impairing the ability of teams to deliver their full value to the organization.

Using collaboration data, the organization teamed with Deloitte to:

- Visualize actual employee interactions using network analysis;

- Discover that teams were collaborating across the organization in four distinct groups rather than by their function, each centered around an unspoken mission (i.e., customer-centricity, maintaining the core, speeding growth);

- Clarify organizational roles and interactions through adaptable organization design solutions; and

- Optimize the way work gets done via functional consolidation, removing organizational barriers to collaboration.

The impact resulted in a 60% improvement in productivity by:

- Creating empowered teams to drive toward clear goals, with the focus on achieving each specific mission;

- Increasing the flow of information and collaboration by removing silos and organizational barriers;

- Providing teams with the autonomy to execute with accountability driven through business sponsorship; and

- Accelerating achievement of business goals through the overall agility and focus introduced to the organization.

Multinational company with frontline staff stabilizes sentiment, avoids productivity loss

A multinational company with a large frontline employee workforce was in mergers and acquisition conversations when employees caught wind of potential changes to the business. This created an environment of fear, uncertainty, and doubt as rumors and hearsay quickly spread across the organization's internal collaboration platforms.

This organization used collaboration data and Aware's insights platform to:

- Identify the brewing distraction and drop in sentiment within hours, not days or weeks;

- Proactively understand the breadth and depth of the rumors within the organization and identify common themes;

- Quickly implement an informed, focused communication strategy to address employee concerns; and

- Drive authentic, real-time conversations on collaboration platforms where leaders could publicly engage and reinforce messaging to the workforce.

The organization avoided an estimated 600,000 hours in lost productivity by:

- Addressing the issue immediately, rather than waiting days or weeks;

- Alleviating employee anxiety while simultaneously building trust and open communication with leaders; and

- Stabilizing sentiment within days—all the while maintaining integrity—allowing for raw, candid conversations, but not toxicity.

Passive collaboration data is the most impactful data companies have access to and are not widely using today. As organizations learn to harness this data with a strong stance on ethical use, we will see an explosion of collaboration data used to make meaningful decisions, mitigate risk, and improve employee experience.

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how Deloitte has been using data to enhance adaptability.

Learn more

about how Aware unlocks people insights from collaboration data.

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