

Balancing work and life under one roof



Editor's Note

COVID-19 impacted people around the world, challenging us to adapt to travel restrictions, school closures, and the removal of barriers between work and life—all at once. So, what does a cross-functional team of engineers, data scientists, analysts, and marketers that lives in the space between workplace culture and data do when presented with the world's largest work-from-home shift?

It, well, does its homework. In this blog series, we'll share real-time learnings as we measured the impact of this unprecedented shift on how one group of employees works, connects, and balances our lives. We hope these insights will teach us something about how work continues to change.



Life as we know has changed for quite a bit: We're working in new environments, juggling new, often competing demands, and trying to stay productive. As we adjusted to remote work, one challenge was top of mind for many: With no physical separation between work and home, how do we strike a balance? Can we draw needed boundaries around our workdays, focusing and collaborating when we need to, and unplugging when the time comes? Are we working longer hours, and managing our days differently? Is our work spilling into the evenings?

We found that our digital communication had become more frequent and more synchronous, and that our meetings had shortened. But what does this mean for how we manage work and life together? We continue our journey to analyze our 300-person team and learn more.

Shifting, stretching into the evenings.



A positive is that I am so quickly able to shift from work to home ... However, I am also finding that I feel my workday is longer too.

We asked our colleagues to share stories about their experiences adapting their work and lives in our new environments. The quote above summarizes a common theme: people appreciated the flexibility to toggle between home and work, but at the same time felt their workdays were getting longer. We wanted to better understand this tension, so we dug back into the data using Microsoft Viva Insights, which enables us to measure our everyday work in the tools we use to connect and collaborate.

Finding: Meeting time increased an average of 1 hour a week per person, and instant messages were up 35 percent

Workdays were definitely getting longer, with nearly 7 out of 10 people experiencing workweeks that expanded by at least three hours. After-hours collaboration increased by 30 percent, validating the sense shared by many of our colleagues that days are longer. And it was clear that work was shifting throughout the day.

Immediately, we wondered what was driving those trends. Responses from a few more colleagues gave us some clues:



I have split my workday into two parts: 9:30 AM–1:30 PM, then 3:30–7:30 PM. This gives me “my time” during sunny hours to do some exercise, household chores, and fuel up.

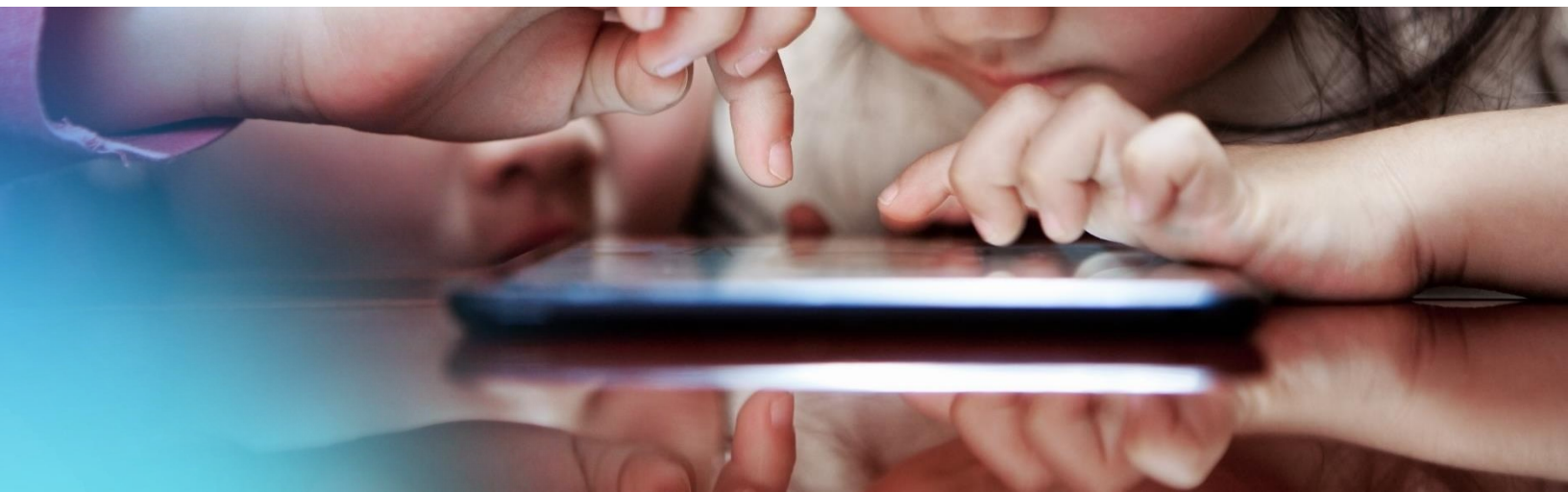
[I’m] working late nights or early mornings to catch up on work.

Kids are at home, [so] I need to provide time during the day to give them attention, support their schooling, and give my spouse a break as we no longer have the school/day care support.

We think of workplace collaboration in two forms: asynchronous (e.g. email) and synchronous (e.g. meetings and instant messages). Interestingly, there was no change in the timing of asynchronous collaboration; we distribute our emails across the day largely the same as we did before. But synchronous collaboration, where at least two people must commit to talking at the same time, has changed.

Across the team, meetings and IMs that were previously concentrated in the mornings shifted.

From our initial analysis, we already knew our weekly meeting time had jumped by 10 percent since we all went fully remote, likely in response to the loss of in-person touchpoints. But here’s the thing: Not only were we collaborating more overall —on average, four hours per week more than before—we also saw some collaboration hours shifting toward the latter half of the day, and into the late evening in particular.

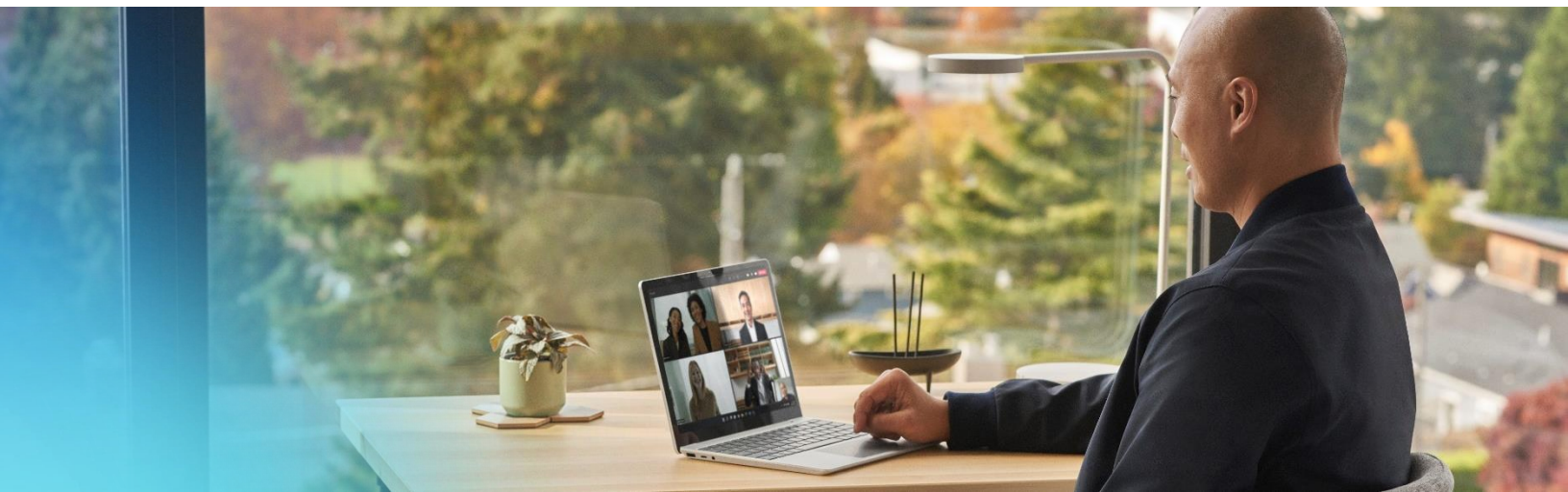


Finding: Morning meetings shifted to later afternoon.

Finding this interesting, we dug in. First, we measured what happened with meetings (we'll take a look at IMs later in the post): The data showed that most of our team has been gradually shifting meetings from mornings to late afternoons, specifically away from the 8–11 AM window and toward the 3–6 PM window.

We might attribute this shift to the flexibility our colleagues have applied to their schedules based on the needs of their households, for example, doing chores or finding time for self-care such as exercising midday. Maybe, too, people are repurposing time from the now nonexistent afternoon commute for meetings.

But regardless of the reason, the fact that we saw significant shifts highlights the adaptability of our organization. There is clearly something causing a need for change, and this data implies that our flexibility is making change possible. Another factor supports this theory that colleagues are shifting their workdays to adapt to non-work demands—the third player in the collaboration time triad: the instant message.



The late evening instant message

While meetings shifted into the afternoons, they didn't spill over into our evenings—it seems, thankfully, that people are still protecting the dinner hour from scheduled calls.

Finding: After-hours instant messages surged.

However, we discovered the increase in collaboration time for our team has still had an impact on our evening collaboration—mostly in the form of instant messaging. Remember we found that morning IMs moved elsewhere? It turns out, they moved to the new “night shift.” Viva Insights data showed the share of IMs sent between 6 PM and midnight has increased by 52 percent on average.

We're accustomed to carving out personal time in the evenings, but our data, and what we heard from colleagues, show this habit of switching off might be getting more difficult for us.





Days feel longer as they end later to make up for lost time.

It feels like work is continuing all the time as I'm more and more getting wrapped up into this 'always on' work culture now than ever before.

For some, this shift in the rhythms of the workday likely reflects that conscious choice or need to manage their work and lives more flexibly:

I'm way more flexible with my time: I start earlier, take a longer break around 4 or 5 PM until 7 or 8 PM to work out or have dinner and then usually log back on again in the evening.

But as some of our teammates have noted, there's a cost to some shifts, such as evening work creep:

The flexibility is nice, but it can be challenging to find balance. Even if I started my day at 9 AM, if a colleague working flex hours sends a message at 9 PM, I feel like I need to respond.

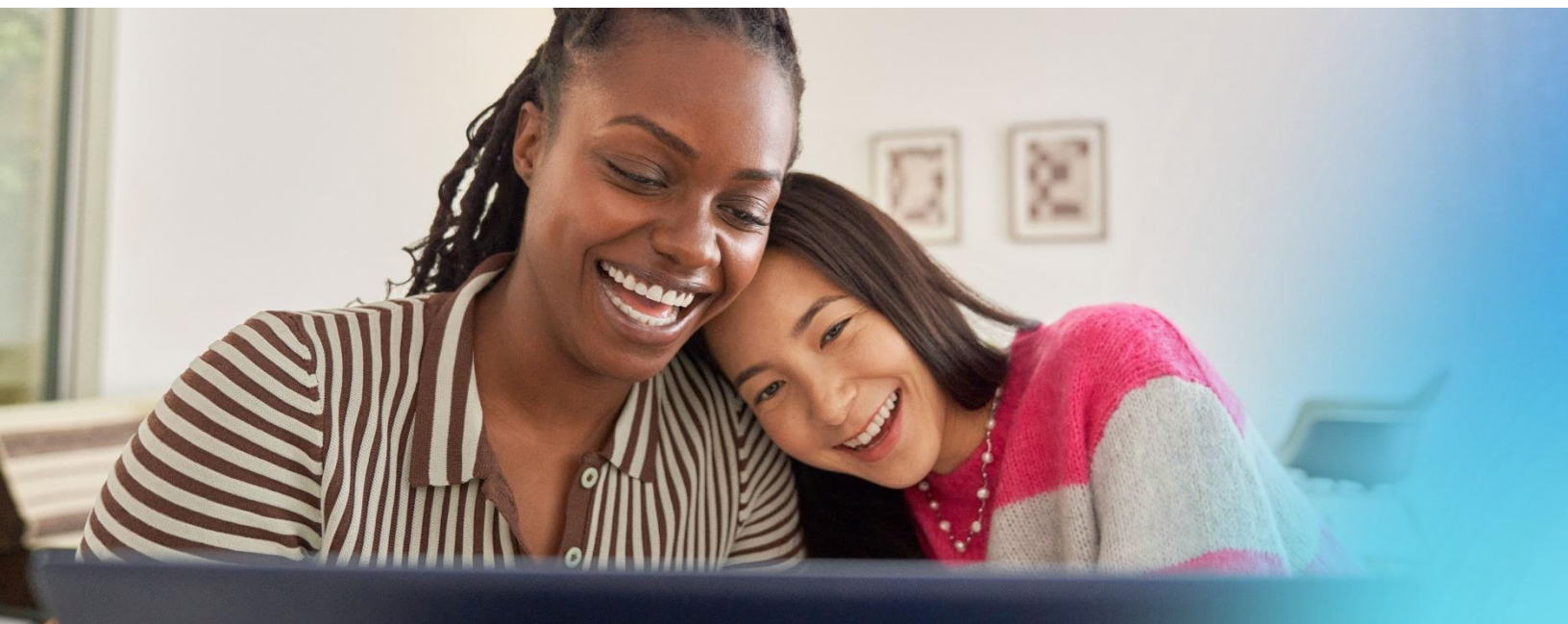
Weekend impacts

With more work creeping into evenings, we were curious about that other sacred bastion of time—the weekend. Are we maintaining our boundaries between work and our lives for a sustained weekend period?.

Finding: Meeting time increased an average of 1 hour a week per person, and instant messages were up 35 percent

To understand what's changing, we looked at the subset of our organization that was best at keeping its weekends free of work before the remote-work period. The data indicates that, like with evenings, digital collaboration creep is happening here, too: 10 percent of the population that previously had the least weekend collaboration—less than 10 minutes—now saw their weekend collaboration triple within the span of a month.

What struck us about these trends—both the uptick in evening collaboration and weekend work—was how quickly organizational norms shifted. The unwritten rules against certain actions seem to have disappeared. The speed at which these norms changed is likely due to the strong network effects of digital collaboration. In other words, a seemingly harmless message here and there can quickly lead to new norms. While we're still trying to understand the impact of these new norms, and time will tell how persistent they are, it's something we now have on our radar. The blurring of personal time and work, especially during evenings and weekends, is not a trend we want to see permeate our culture.





Our workdays and weeks have become longer, and like a puzzle, we're piecing them together in new ways. We saw significant changes to social norms, including, for some, more evening collaboration and more weekend work.

That said, we enjoy and make use of the flexibility to adapt our collaboration patterns to the needs of our home lives. We're carving out a new kind of balance individually and collectively. And the data we're learning from can help us ground an open dialogue about what we need to do our best work.

Methodology: To help us chronicle the journey of our 300-person organization, we draw on data from Viva Insights to help quantify the impact on collaboration, explore the lived experiences of our teammates through interviews, and tap into the knowledge of experts where it helps our understanding.

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Learn more about Microsoft Viva Insights

Every minute, organizations generate invaluable data. Data about how people connect, collaborate, get work done. Data that can help you maintain a competitive edge.

Harnessing this data and knowing where to take action is not easy.

Microsoft Viva Insights uses collaboration and employee sentiment data within the context of your business to analyze workplace patterns and the impact of your Microsoft Copilot investment.

Viva Insights empower leaders with data-driven insights that help them quickly respond to market demands, fuel innovation, and improve business performance.

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