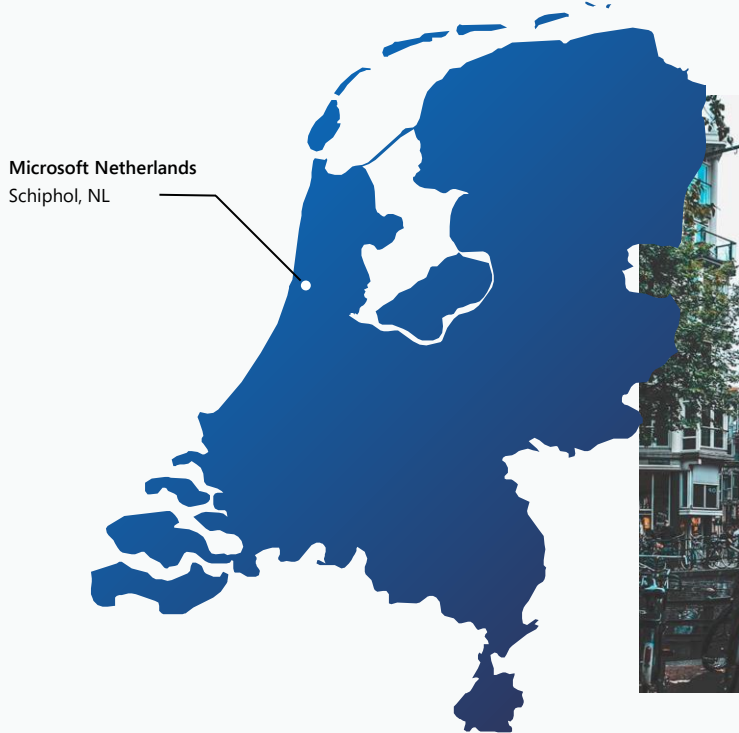


# Running on ritual

How Microsoft Netherlands used data and relentless experimentation to reinvent the way it works





To help employees find balance and better serve customers and partners, a cultural transformation team conducted a radical test: when they had no office to get to, how would office workers work?

Days before the 2018 New Year, the brisk Amsterdam cold was settling into the city's streets and canals and Ernst-Jan Stigter was beginning to wonder if he was about to make a major visionary move or take things too far.

As GM of Microsoft's Netherlands subsidiary, he had been helping to steer, along with a group of involved employees, a full renovation of the organization's office, a six-story glass edifice located on the outskirts of the city alongside the swooping planes of Schiphol Airport. But early on, Stigter and his team had decided that they would not simply rebuild the space. They would use the opportunity to take the next big step in a relentless experiment their organization had been conducting for more than a decade. Since 2005, Microsoft Netherlands has been obsessed with finding ever-new ways for employees to work and engage with customers, believing that if it harnessed the latest research in behavioral science and productivity, it could end up with happier, more innovative workers and stronger partner and customer relationships.

In short, the team was constantly trying to figure out not so much how to squeeze more into their days—more emails, more projects, more checkboxes checked—but how to get more out of their days—more focus, more balance, more relationship-building and collaboration. How, as they put it, to find “more life in a day.”

Against the backdrop of a broad transformation Microsoft embarked upon after CEO Satya Nadella came onboard in 2014, the Netherlands office was seeking to future-proof its workforce and accelerate success. It was a natural next step for the change-hungry team with a growth mindset, which had begun pioneering innovative office space and prioritizing work-life balance for employees before either was part of the mainstream business paradigm.

That culture of experimentation and customer obsession is how Stigter ended up feeling more than a little nervous as an important milestone loomed in January 2018. He and about 800 of his reports and other Microsoft employees were preparing for an almost unheard of exercise, one undertaken voluntarily as part of this new wave of transformation: while the Netherlands office was closed for 10 weeks of renovations, there would be no official temporary workspace.





The transformation team would use the office closure to enact a radical test: when they had no desk or chair or office to get to, how would office workers work?

The experiment wasn't for shock value. To the contrary: the team intended to learn everything it could about what people truly needed to work well, act nimbly, and feel engaged, analyzing data collected via a powerful Microsoft tool to quantify behaviors along the way. Would they collaborate more intentionally with peers and customers? Would their networks grow, or shrink? What they learned, they intended to infuse into their team's evolving rhythms, habits, and spaces to create a culture of increased openness for customers and partners.

"There's no behavioral change without an intervention," Stigter said. "Our intervention was that there would be no office. And within those boundaries, we hoped the possibilities would be endless. It sounds like a contradiction, but it's not.

"It is scary to face the unknown. But I believe in times of change, all you can do is intentionally use the tools in your toolbox."

As Stigter told his employees on closing day in December when they all walked out the office doors for the last time, it was “a chance to leave old conventions and routines behind us.”

When the office finally re-opened, it would be a very different kind of place. Seventy percent of the new building—all but two floors—would be open to customers, partners, students, and entrepreneurs, compared to the current 30 percent. No employees, not even leaders, would have their own desks (in fact, there would be very few actual desks in the building at all). The newly planned building would contain dozens of distinctly designed spaces to encourage everything from intensely productive focus time to spontaneous living room collaboration to time off to refresh.

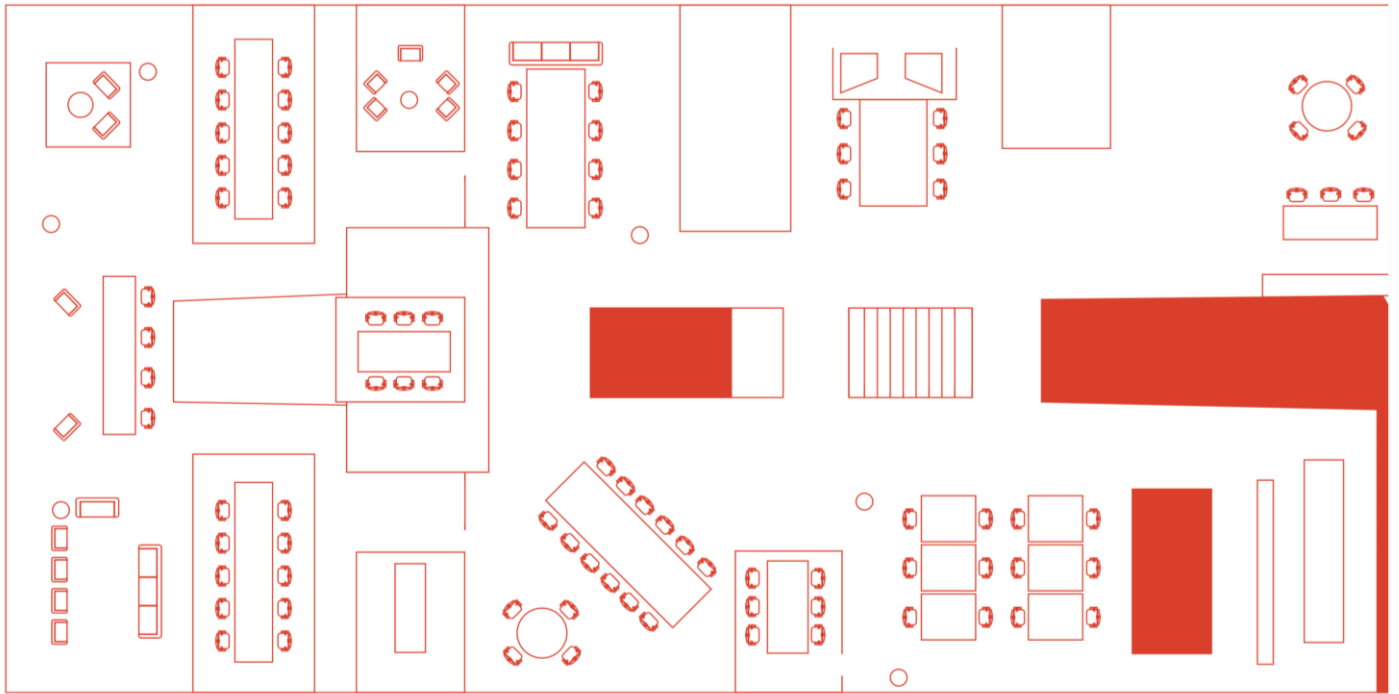
When it was all said and done, the team hoped physical design would act as a vehicle for culture change, and that they could quantify the impact of that change with data they had right at their fingertips but had never harnessed before.

They would just have to survive 10 weeks with a workforce spread to the Dutch winds, first.

“There’s no behavioral change without an intervention. Our intervention was that there would be no office. And within those boundaries, we hoped the possibilities would be endless. It sounds like a contradiction, but it’s not.

Ernst-Jan Stigter  
Country GM, Microsoft Netherlands





## More collaboration, better balance

Back in the mid-2000s, after years of strong growth, the Microsoft Netherlands team was facing a challenge that reflected the broader trends of the rapidly evolving technology industry. Business models and markets were changing; the product landscape was getting saturated; and the Netherlands subsidiary had to find new ways to reach customers. Meanwhile, the “always on” work culture we now know so well was just beginning to snowball, and information workers wanted new tools and systems to both power their productivity and find work-life balance.

Netherlands leaders became inspired by a Microsoft white paper titled “The New World of Work,” which also became a speech by then Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates at the 2005 Microsoft CEO Summit. They decided to adopt a new philosophy of flexibility to better empower people. They worked with researchers and surveyed employees to find out what they needed. They launched a new building; created a blueprint for work that gave employees the tools and permission to work anywhere, anytime; and built a set of principles around communication, responsibility, and measurement. Employee satisfaction and sales soared, while real estate and administrative costs dropped.

**Things were good. But the next team of Netherlands leaders would soon be reminded that the future quickly becomes the “now.”**

Recently, the annual survey started to reflect dropping employee satisfaction scores and an increase in perceived workload and feelings of burnout. What had felt revolutionary a decade earlier—open workspace, the tools to work remotely—no longer felt like enough for employees, who were trying to juggle competing demands and digital intrusions as they strove to better connect and co-create with customers and partners. Leaders hypothesized that workloads might not actually have increased, but that employees increasingly lack the ability to focus and prioritize, which made things feel worse.

They realized that they needed to get beyond employee polls to truly understand how work happened and how it should change. They needed to quantify work objectively.

“We realized we had to evolve again,” said Ineke Hoekman-Van Hassel, director of business transformation for Microsoft Netherlands. “We had to ask: How can an office help to harness attention and enhance collaboration, both external and internal? And what do employees need to do it?”



# Rituals reinvent work

Fast forward to the second week of January 2018. Michel Bouman, territory channel manager for Modern Workplace in the Netherlands, found himself good-naturedly but somewhat awkwardly walking the sidewalks of his Amsterdam suburb with a selfie stick, narrating a vlog about how the no-office experiment was going—in a video he eventually titled “Help! Working at home with small children.”

It was all part of a new routine for the employees, which was sometimes smooth and other times left them feeling adrift. Employees created a varied system of work during the closure—sometimes working from home with their cats or kids, making coffee as often as they wanted and blasting Red Hot Chili Peppers, as one employee confessed; traveling to drop-in spaces, sometimes through debilitating traffic; even logging in from other countries as Stephanie Visser did.





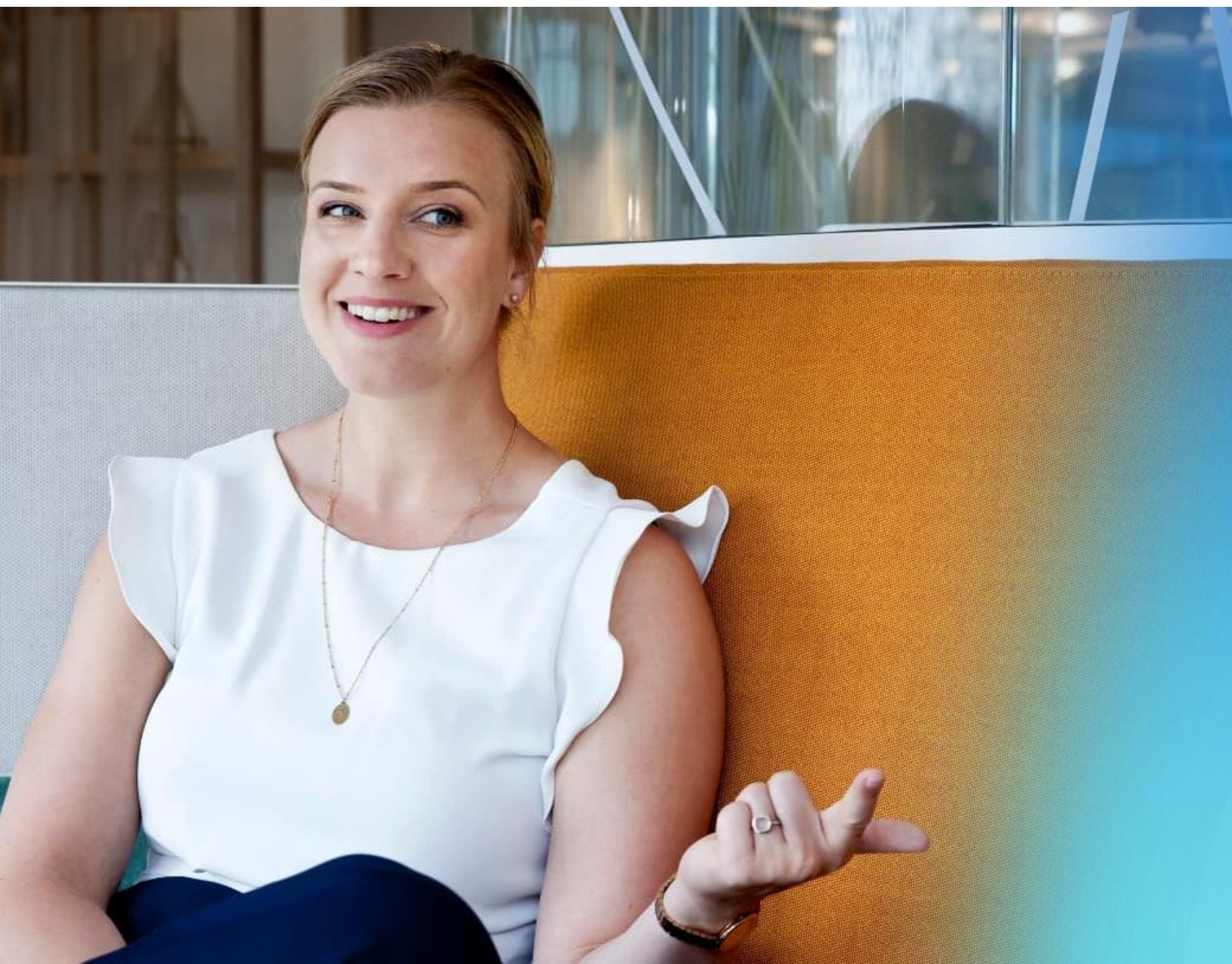
Visser, a software engineer, decided the office closure and culture refresh was the perfect time to try something she'd dreamt of for a while—working from the road. She worked from cafes over steaming plates of stew and from Microsoft's Budapest office, and she fit in sightseeing during the day because she was free to finish work later.

"I got this restart button, and I used it," Visser said. "I ended up learning a lot about myself. I discovered I'm fresh in the morning but not at my most focused in the afternoons. I can be easily distracted, like many of us, but some new techniques I picked up helped me."

Visser read blogs and contacted productivity experts for tips, sharing some on the vlog she kept during the office closure. She developed a new daily routine, which includes morning exercising and meditating, reading or watching something with news value over breakfast, and writing down one goal for the day before getting to her most important focus work.

During the office closure, employees were radically transparent about their experiment, reaching out to more than 160 partners and customers who shared their workspaces.

One upside of nomadic office life was this opportunity to enrich networks, said Kim van der Veer, an account executive who traveled to partners' offices often and vlogged about her experience. "Before the closure, I came to our office every day, 9 to 5. Now I had permission to be less rigid. I met so many new people," she said. "Culture change started, and my mindset followed."





We team up.



We respect focus time.



We contribute in engagements with others.



We are OPEN for everyone.



We allow ourselves time to refresh.



We always make conscious choices.

One thing that helped ground employees before, during, and after the closure were six guiding “rituals.” The transformation team, led by Ineke Hoekman-van Hassel, had worked with 200 employees, researchers, and business psychologist Tony Crabbe to develop the rituals to crystallize values and help shift the culture. The rituals helped employees during the closure, especially if things got sticky—like when Bouman had to join a remote meeting with the senior leadership team while also supervising his kids. He reminded himself that connecting with his team and being his authentic self didn’t have to conflict.

Employees sensed the journey, with all its ups and downs, was helping them change. Before too long, it was time to measure how.

## Measuring a mobile workforce

By the time the office doors had closed for the 10-week renovation, the transformation team had already done a lot of work quantifying employee needs and behaviors. They had partnered with University of Utrecht the year before to study employee focus and attention. Among their findings: only 39 percent of participants were able to say no to work requests that did not fit their focus; 33 percent acknowledged that electronic devices kept them from doing their work; and only 57 percent had a way to keep themselves from being disturbed. And while most participants felt proud of their work and inspired by their job, the study also revealed that a large percentage found their job stressful and couldn't detach from work when they got home.

Based on those findings and the overall goals for the Microsoft as a whole, leaders and the transformation team decided to focus their journey on changing behaviors in two areas: attention and intentional collaboration. Goals included growing internal and external collaboration and networks, reducing double-booked meetings and evaluating recurring meeting attendance, prioritizing focus time, and saving collaboration for afternoons. Employees were invited to workshops and given tools and support, including automatic prompts to block focus time; an organization-wide commitment to 45-minute meetings instead of one-hour ones to preserve the last 15 minutes for refresh time; and communications that reminded employees to fully engage by not multitasking in meetings.

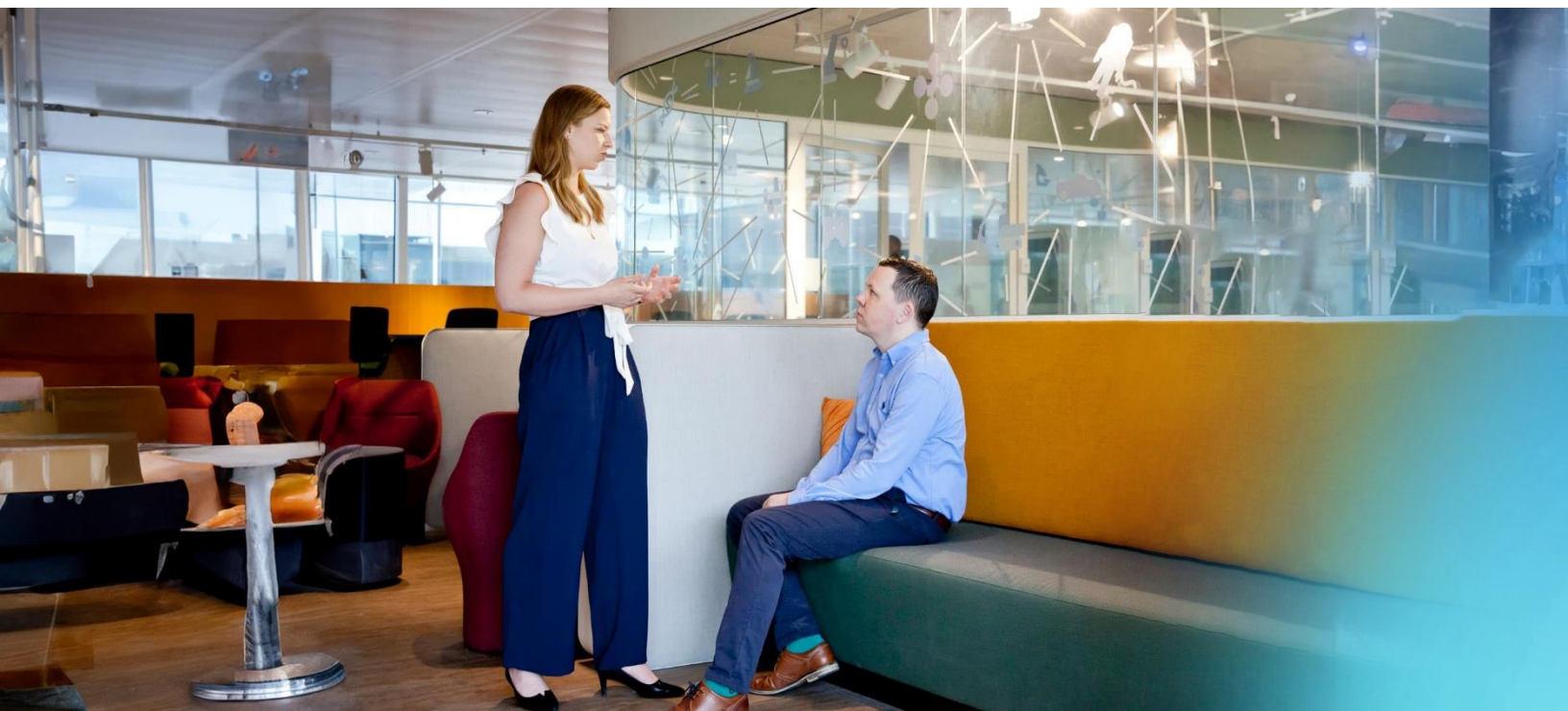


To measure the impact and decide where to go next, the transformation team utilized Microsoft Viva Insights, a product that aggregates and de-identifies metadata from everyday work in Office 365 to show patterns within an organization and surface valuable insights about how work gets done. Early data looking first at the office closure period showed some interesting outcomes from the now entirely mobile workforce

Closing the office increased some types of collaboration, mostly internally: Netherlands employees collaborated with each other 9 percent more.

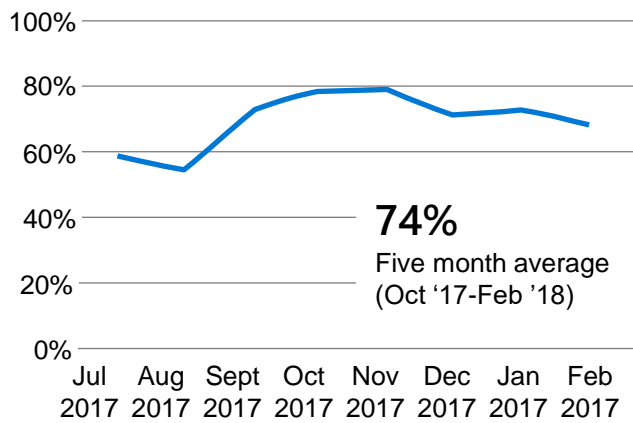
Closing the office spurred more conscious choice-making: Employees had found the freedom to shift their working hours due to the flexibility of the office closure, resulting in a 21 percent increase in internal collaboration outside of traditional 'working hours.' "It's easier to create refresh time during the middle of the day when working from home," one employee admitted during one of the team's regular ritual dialogue sessions.

Blocked focus time increased an average of 1.8 hours per week per employee. Aided by Viva Insights, which acts as a personal productivity assistant for employees, offering them private metrics to track and change their collaboration, focus, and work-life balance habits—employees were able to improve their focus even through the office shutdown.

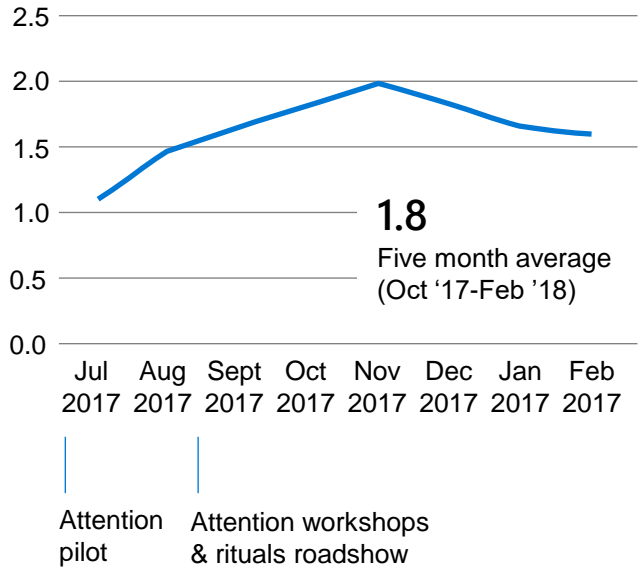


### More people are intentionally blocking focus time since the pilot, workshops & rituals roadshows

Numbers of employees blocking focus time per week\*



Average Focus time blocked per week\* (hours/week)



## Customer obsession and employee focus

Finally, March rolled around. As the city came back to life from the winter cold, Microsoft employees cut the ribbon on their new building and moved back in.

Throughout the building, the new emphasis on openness and collaboration with customers and partners was immediately noticeable. In the public arena of the first floor, startups, scaleups, and corporate partners could explore the Customer Experience Center to learn how to grow their business and accelerate their digital success. They could collaborate with technical architects in briefing suites and socialize with Microsoft employees in the bar and restaurant. On the second floor, visitors could use the education zone and get hands-on technology experience.

On the third floor, workers and visitors could refresh in the Xbox room and meet or work at long conference tables, intimate bar tables, or in activity-based meeting rooms. Visitors could explore the sensor-laden Connected Livingroom to experience technology of the future seamlessly blending life, work, and wellness.

On the fourth floor, employees found a living-room-like layout, where everything from furniture to connected features enables planned and spontaneous collaboration with customers, peers, and partners.

Above that, employees discovered two additional floors just for them. On the "Work Floors," spaces were designed and delineated based on research and the data the transformation team had tapped into. Employees would start their day in the Social Hub to connect casually. The Collaboration Hub was for co-working in small or large groups or for light individual tasks where employees wouldn't mind activity around them. Finally, there was the Focus Area: a large library-like space accessible only by hallways lined with heavily draped, noise-canceling curtains. The strict rule was total silence, to empower deep focus anytime, for everyone.

Finally, the top two bonus floors of the building housed drop-in workspace reserved via membership. Many of Microsoft's customers and partners would use the offices, facilitating collaboration amongst themselves and with Microsoft.

Armed with their learnings from 10 weeks as office nomads and the guidance of their new rituals, employees began to adapt.

They put new meeting habits into practice. They stopped working every Monday and Friday for a 3 PM social refresh in the building's Social Hub or the bar on the ground floor. With the focus on openness, customers and partners streamed in, working and meeting with employees in the new collaboration and co-creation spaces. During a recent month alone, the building had more than 7,000 visitors.



The transition team was eager to see whether their change program and redesigned space would result in the desired goals. Again, they used their new data-driven approach to find out via Viva Insights.

Some of the insights from the post-renovation measurement period:

External collaboration with customers and partners increased among most teams, with the Partner and Customer Success units up the most—16 and 18 percent respectively.

The percentage of employees with high network diversity (employees who worked across many segments, or teams, in the organization) increased.

Blocking of focus time by employees increased by 20 percent.

The use of 45-minute meetings, instead of 1-hour meetings, soared.

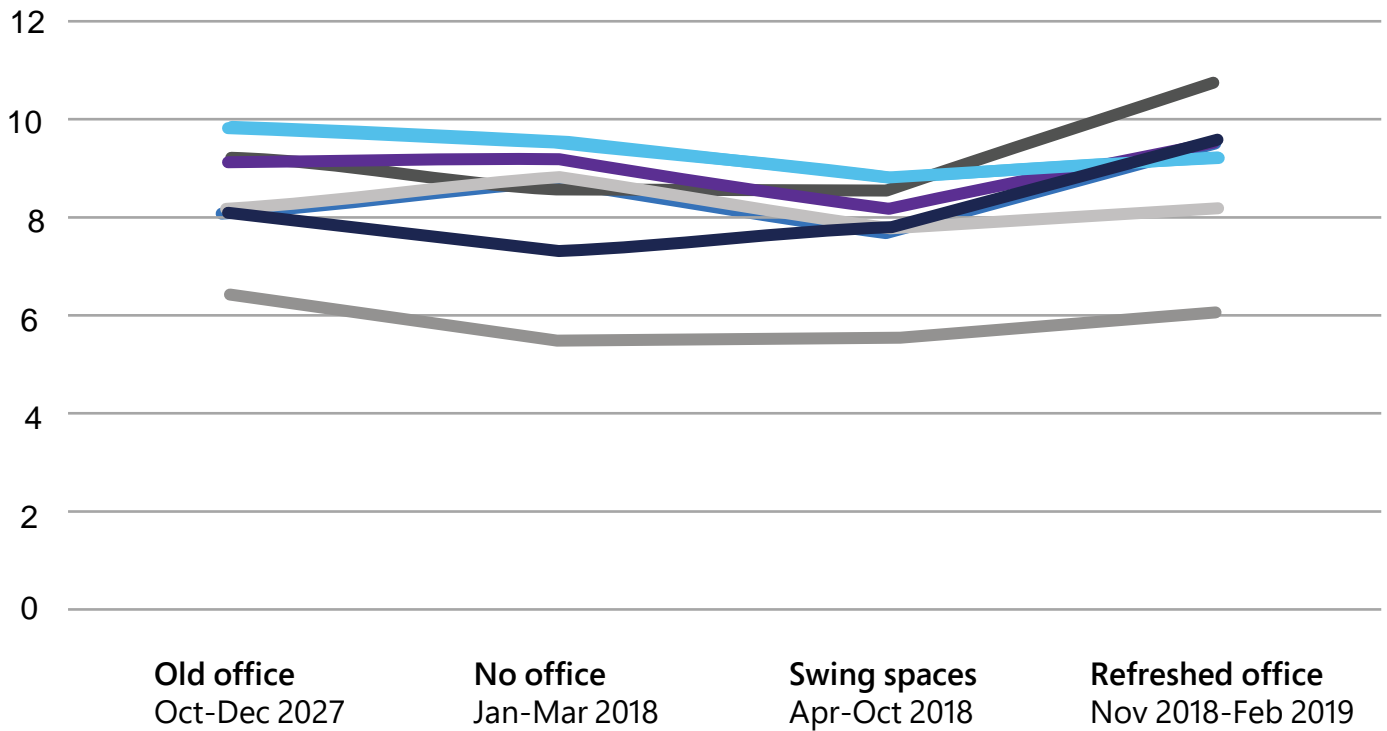
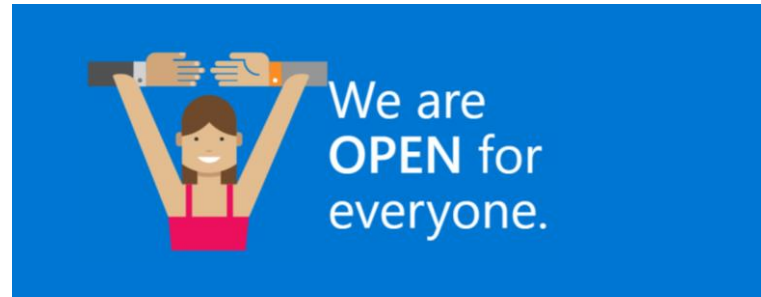
After the closure and re-opening, the 2018 employee survey showed a 5 percent increase on work-life flexibility and an 8 percent increase on a related metric around workload and work-life balance. The positive impact continued: this year, the 2019 employee survey showed work-life flexibility up 6 percent since the closure, and up 10 percent on the question about workload enabling work-life balance.

But leaders also learned there's more work to be done. Viva Insights showed that conflicting meeting hours were high, especially among managers, and had in fact increased. And while employees were more aware of the harm of multitasking in meetings, data showed no significant reduction in multitasking hours. Finally, employees overall were not collaborating as much cross-team as leaders hoped.

The new office fuels the 'We Are Open' Ritual



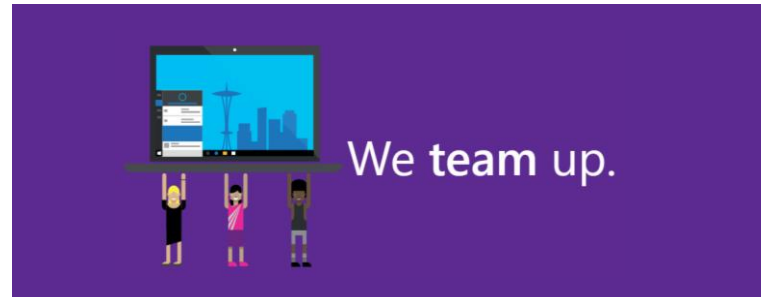
# The new office fuels the 'We are open' ritual



- +1.5h SMC-OCP
- +0.3h Commercial
- +1.5h CSU
- +0.3h Commercial
- -0.6h Public sector
- 0h Services
- -0.4h M&O

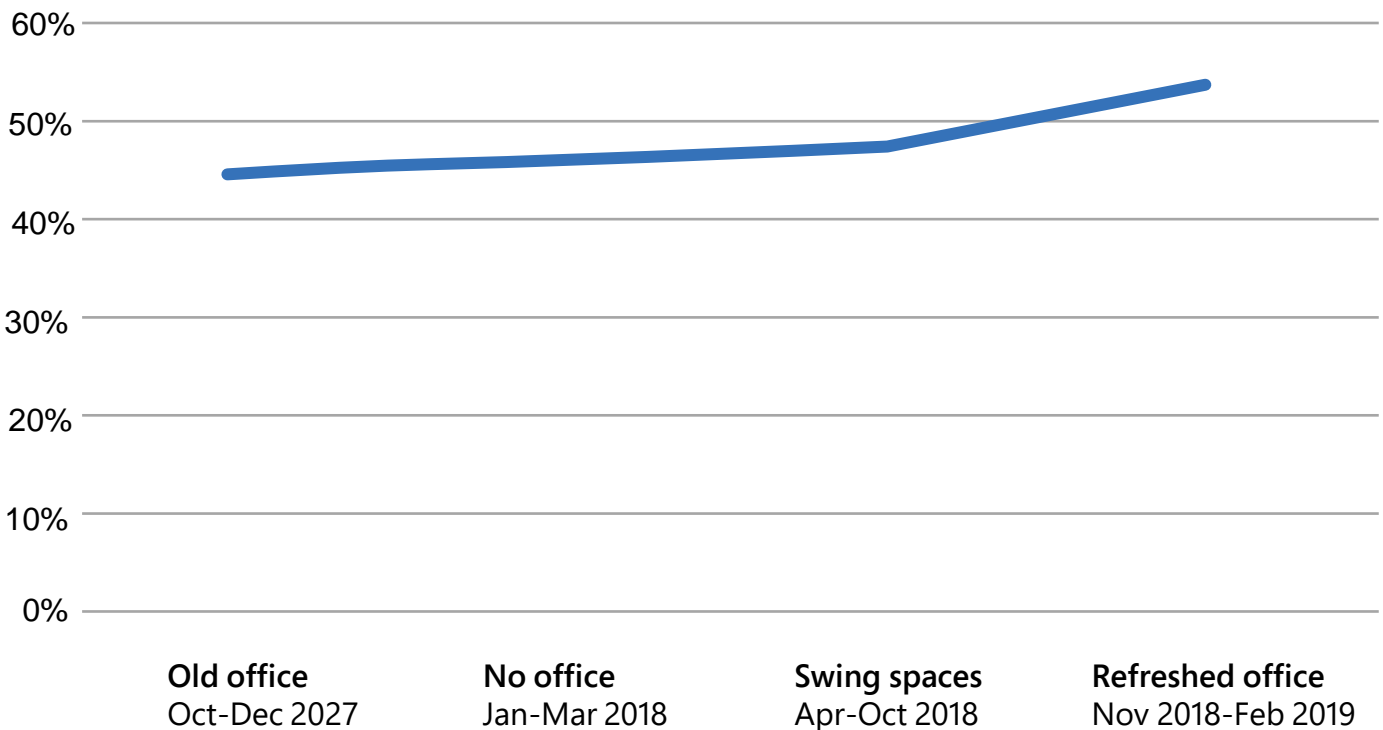
Most segments have increased collaboration in the new office, particularly partner (+16%) & customer success unit (+18%)

# The new office encourages teaming up



## % of individual with high network diversity by segment

High network diversity + at least 6 different segments in your network considering 7 segments in total



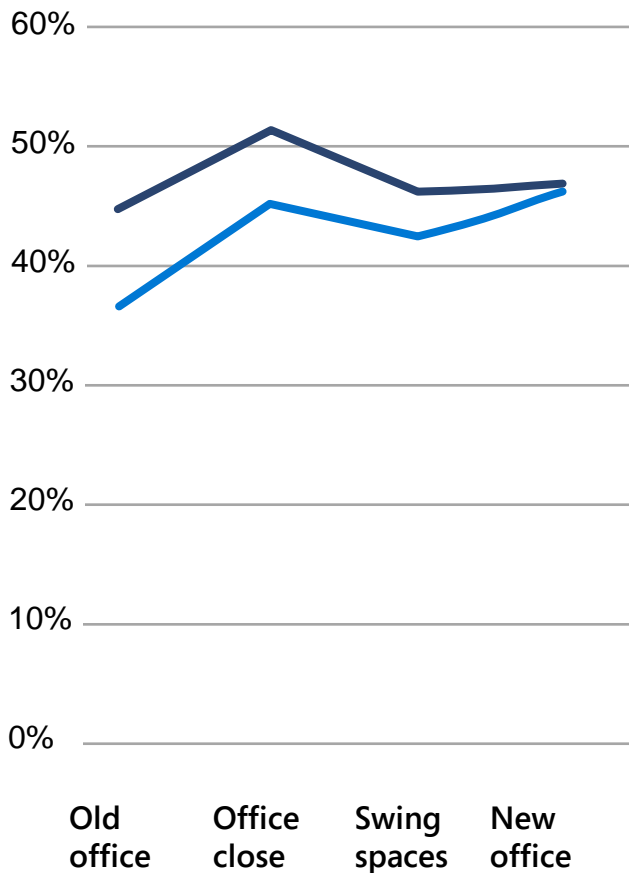
Microsoft Netherlands FTE's in M&O, services, SMC-OCP, CSU, STU commercial & public sector

\*A segment is considered part of your network if you've had at least 1 meaningful connection with a person from that segment in the last 4 weeks. A meaningful connection is defined as having at least 1 meeting with that person in a group smaller than 5 people.

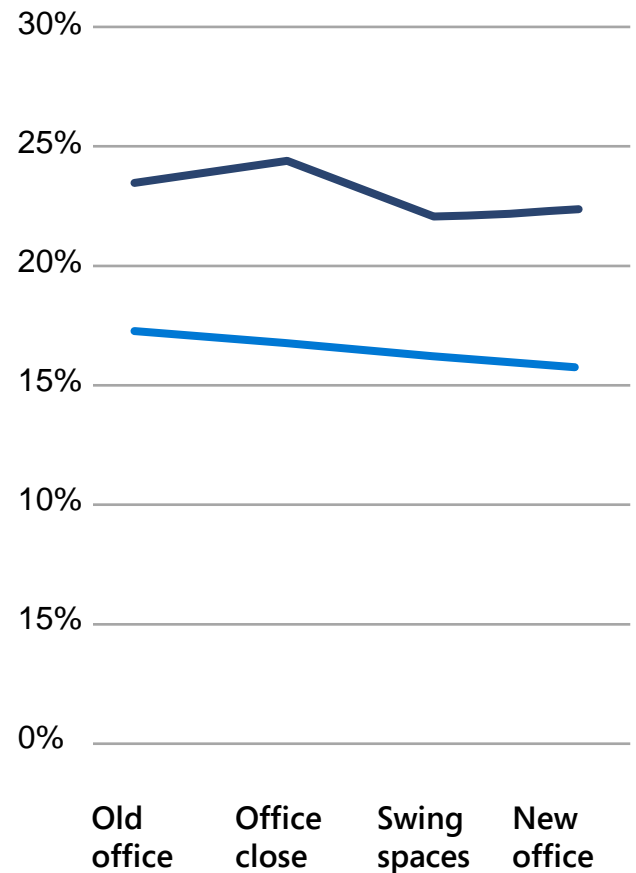
# The new office encourages engagement



% of conflicted meetings



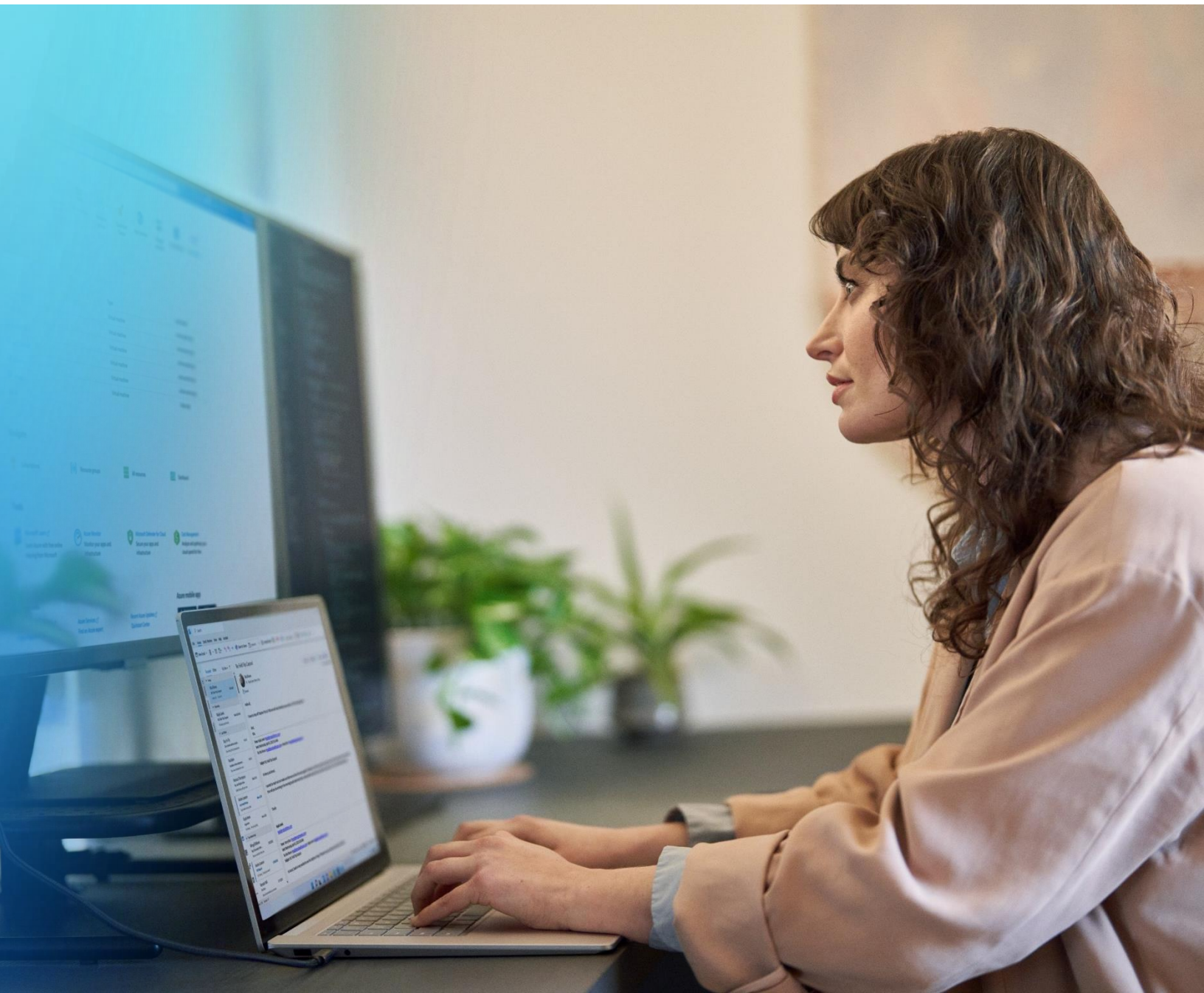
% of conflicted meetings



- NL all manager
- NL all individual contributors

However, the most important metric of success is not whether all their experiments work perfectly, transformation leaders say, but that now they can quantify behaviors and implement the right design interventions to enable culture change.

“We now have the behavioral data informing us on blind spots and the next change initiatives as we go,” said Florine Segers, who served as transformation program manager for the Netherlands team and is now a Viva Insights analyst.



## Looking forward

It's all a process, and they are far from done.

"The journey is what matters," said Evelien Vredeveld, senior communications manager. "You have to create culture change bottom up. The rituals are a common language we all have now to understand common rules for our future success."

It's all a process, and they are far from done.

The team is also learning how to help shift culture in their customer and partner organizations, and within other Microsoft teams they work with around the globe, said Rawan Shalhoub, Microsoft Netherlands HR director.

Recently at a global meeting, many attendees from outside the Netherlands group were checking email or zoning out of the action. Netherlands employees now noticed how unproductive this was.

"But you can't say, 'can you get off your screen please?' the way we are now able to do with each other," Shalhoub said. "We have learned what collaborating intentionally means and it has become our ritual, but we now need to influence others."

One idea that has come up is to make a practice of kicking off every international meeting with one or more of the rituals, as a way of introducing the concept and power of rewiring culture to others, Shalhoub said.

In fact, many partners and customers have been asking about how to assess and transform their own work behaviors and culture. The Netherlands team has been talking to them about their own quantitative approach, the critical need for an ongoing and objective measurement tool such as Viva Insights, and how data-driven rituals can play a key role in the rhythm of work.

"But we emphasize that you cannot shortcut this, and you can't really templatize it," said Segers. "It's a process of discovering what is the life of your company."

"Our journey is a conversation starter on transformation and culture change," Stigter emphasized. "A spark. We took Microsoft's mission to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more and internalized it to its deepest core."

## 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.

### Author:

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[aka.ms/VivaInsights](https://aka.ms/VivaInsights)