The Future of Microsoft Teams

by Joe Davis

In my first technology job about 25 years ago, I worked in a windowless room furnished with two banquet tables for desks. At one table, I would build Windows 95 PCs. At the other table sat two consultants from Microsoft.

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I noticed that they spent most of their time working in a program I had not used before, and when they were kind enough to demo it for me, I was fascinated with what I saw. It seemed more useful than anything I had seen a computer do before. I felt like I was seeing the future, and that this program was going to be on every office computer in the world. That program was Outlook 97.

Outlook certainly wasn't the first e-mail program on the market, but the way it brought a to-do list, a calendar and a contacts list into the same interface made it novel – particularly for its time. Innovation doesn't always mean that something new is created where nothing existed before. In fact, it's often the combination of existing things in a new way that has the greatest impact.

I was reminded of the early days of Outlook as I prepared to give a presentation about Microsoft Teams at ILTACON 2022. Much like Outlook, Teams is an aggregator of content that can mostly be viewed in other ways, but its strength is bringing all the content together in "one pane of glass." In doing so, it creates a focused work environment for video and audio conferencing, chat, calendar, documents and even the opportunity to plug-in third-party apps. This approach has resonated with modern knowledge workers, and it struck me that Microsoft Teams is probably the most important piece of desktop software since Outlook 97.

Given the similarities of the two packages, I began to think about what the future might hold for Teams. And since my intuition about Outlook turned out to be accurate, I was inspired to come up with five predictions about the future of Teams.

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ILTA's annual technology survey, which has only tracked Teams data since 2021, shows that 65% of the respondents are using Teams for online meetings, and 58% are using it to collaborate via chat. It should come as no surprise that the pandemic played a significant role in the technology being adopted that quickly, but it was not Teams that received the biggest boost from having to accommodate remote work – it was Zoom. In March of 2020, Zoom went from being a "nice to have" to a "must have" virtually overnight. IT departments put everything else on hold in order to get Zoom deployed across their enterprise so that business could continue. After that initial deployment, IT was able to get back to its scheduled projects, and for many companies that included replacing Skype for Business with Teams.

It is not an overstatement to say that Zoom saved business communications – and maybe business itself. It was so easy to use that your grandmother could use it, and throughout the pandemic, many did. But eventually business users realized that Zoom was a bit of a one trick pony. It did videoconferencing well, but it didn't do much else to facilitate all the other ways that businesses needed to collaborate. Teams, on the other hand, is like a Swiss army knife that included a variety of tools to handle video and audio conferencing, chat, document storage, and the ability to plug in additional apps.

Skype for Business reached its end of life in the summer of 2021, but with the pandemic still keeping most business users working from home, Teams did not receive the kind of promotion or training that most companies provide for a new software deployment. This has led to Teams being the most powerful software that people are afraid to use, but that is quickly changing. I believe we are going to find a significant portion of our work shifting from other platforms into Teams, and the following are five changes we will see in the legal ecosystem in the next several years.

Prediction #1

External collaboration with clients via Teams will be common by 2025

So much of legal technology is exclusive to law firms that it has been easy to avoid sharing it with our clients – in fact, the real or perceived complexities of document management, eDiscovery, document drafting tools, and legal research can make it a challenge to collaborate with clients. Teams is an enterprise technology, so our clients are just as likely to be using it as law firms are. It is only a matter of time before clients come to expect that they will be a part of shared teams or channels, and it will be difficult for firms to skirt the issue. Those that try may find their clients leaving to work with more accommodating firms. Or worse, the client may decide they want to host the collaboration site in their Teams tenant rather than the firm's. This is a frightening prospect, and no firm wants to choose between losing control over the work product and losing the client.

In order to prepare for external collaboration, people first need to get comfortable with internal collaboration. Creating teams for administrative departments, location-based groups (i.e. the New York office), committees and projects is an ideal way to introduce people used to Teams interface with minimal concern for ethical walls or information governance issues.
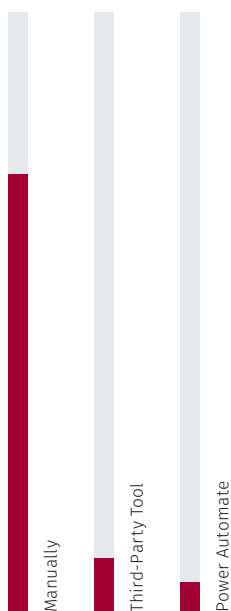
Prediction #2

Provisioning teams via Power Automate will be a core IT skill by 2025

Even as people begin to understand the internal value of collaborating in Teams, discussions should be underway about how teams are created.

How does your firm provision Microsoft Teams?

Manually

Third-Party Tool

Power Automate

The 2022 ILTA Technology Survey shows that about three quarters of the respondents are creating teams manually, 9% are using a third-party tool, and 5% are using Microsoft's Power Automate. While manual creation is a logical way to get started, this is a process that should be automated and tied into an approval process like the new business intake process. Not every client or matter needs a team, but users should be able to easily get a team created as they are opening a matter as well as after the matter is opened. There should also be a process to create a team for projects that do not have a client/matter number. Teams provisioning is not just a concern for the legal industry but for any enterprise, and so it seems logical that Power Automate will emerge as the standard way to create teams. Power Automate is part of a group of tools that Microsoft calls the Power Platform. These tools, including Power BI, Power Pages and Power Virtual Agents, are targeted at power users and low-code developers rather than end users. Many companies are beginning to use the Power Platform to automate processes, create reports and build chatbots, and Microsoft continues to add functionality to this toolset. Since creating teams manually is not scalable, IT teams will add Teams engineers with Power Automate skills and begin creating their teams this way.
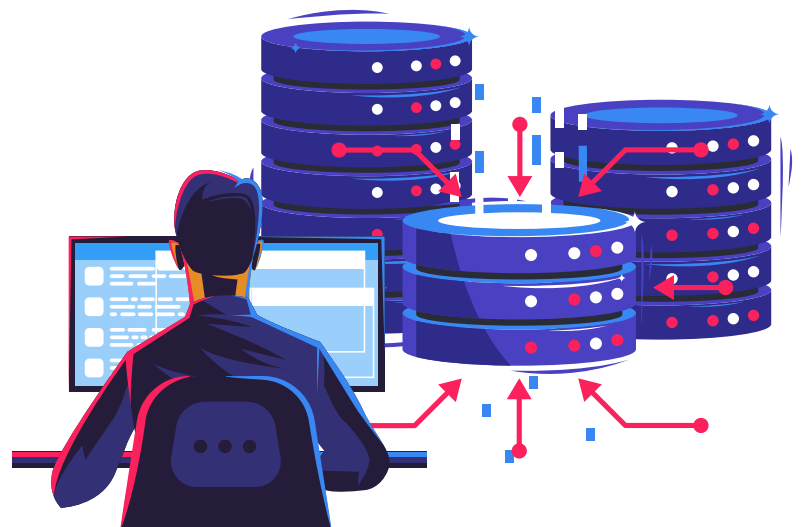
Prediction #3
Teams engineers will overtake DMS engineers in legal by 2025

Since documents are the stock-in-trade of the legal industry, document management has long been recognized as a critical part of the legal software stack. Traditionally, firms and corporate legal departments have employed groups of document management system (DMS) engineers whose job is to maintain the system that allows lawyers to store and search for documents and email. As it becomes more common to shift the DMS to the cloud, those engineers have likely found themselves with a little more free time on their hands. Hopefully they have used that time to understand the Microsoft 365 ecosystem, because even more engineering resources are going to be needed around Teams as the platform grows in popularity.

Teams is not a "set it and forget it" kind of system. In addition to the updates and enhancements Microsoft makes regularly to the entire M365 platform, the constant creation and maintenance of teams will require engineers with a broad understanding of security, information governance, knowledge management and legal workflow. Factoring in the integrations with other Microsoft apps within the Teams interface (i.e. Planner, OneNote, etc.) as well as third-party apps like DocuSign, iManage and NetDocuments makes this ecosystem at least as complex as an on-premises traditional DMS.

Another type of integration that requires consideration is the method of applying ethical walls within Teams. If the documents in your DMS are subject to ethical walls, you are going to want the documents, channels, and teams in your Teams instance to be subject to ethical walls as well. Since Teams is still a relatively new platform, you will want to be running a recent version of your ethical walls software to ensure it is compatible with Teams.

Prediction #4

Native Legal Document Management will be common in Teams by 2025

The legal world is not generally known for being on the cutting edge of technology, but one area in which it has been particularly strong is document management. Requirements like unique document numbers and metadata fields have effectively been able to keep the number of legal DMS choices in the market to a minimum. Some forward-thinking firms and vendors had tried to use early versions of SharePoint as a DMS with little success.

The legal DMS market has been mature for years, so there has been little impetus to change systems other than for cost savings. As more law firms and legal departments collaborate internally and externally with Teams, the traditional model that places documents in a separate silo begins to make less sense. Users are going to want their documents available in the same interface as their posts and other collaboration tools, and those documents can be stored, attached to posts, searched for, and even edited without leaving Teams. Additionally, Teams provides the co-authoring capabilities that traditional DMS models have struggled to offer but have long been on the wish lists of attorneys and their clients.

The major players in the traditional DMS market offer apps that serve as add-ins within Teams. While these tools make it somewhat easier to access documents from the DMS, those documents are still stored in a separate silo. Having those documents stored natively in SharePoint (which is effectively the back-end of Teams) allows for them to be seamlessly available to all the features in Teams.

Prediction #5

Teams will be a common choice for telephony by 2025

Teams was designed to be a replacement for a variety of systems, but one that may not be obvious is the corporate telephone system. Building on the capabilities of Skype for Business, Microsoft 365 can now act as a hosted phone system with Teams as its front end. This setup has a variety of advantages from an administrative point of view, including that it is managed in the same manner as the rest of the 365 platform. End users get to handle their calls in the same interface as the rest of their communications in both the desktop and mobile versions of the Teams client, and transfer calls seamlessly between them. The pandemic has made users much more comfortable making calls from their computer, so people are more likely than ever to be willing to trade their handset for a headset. And for those who swear they will never give up their physical phone, Teams can work with those as well.

One significant reason to switch to Teams telephony is the cost. M365 license costs will vary, but overall telecom costs are likely to drop significantly. In preparing to present this topic at ILTACON, I talked to one consulting company with about 50 users that was initially a Zoom telephony client and reseller. They switched to Teams because they felt the audio call quality was significantly better than Zoom. In doing so, their telecom bill dropped from about $3000 per month to about $300. As contracts for VOIP systems come up for renewal, many of them will be replaced by Teams-based systems.

A lot has changed in the 25 years since Outlook 97 made its debut, and the pace of change only continues to increase. Teams itself has evolved significantly in its short history, and some have even questioned whether it will completely displace Outlook as the industry standard communications tool. Microsoft could even retire Outlook, but only after it adds one feature that is still missing from Teams: email. Even if Outlook continues to be the tool for managing email, Teams will be the place where we collaborate.

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