

Privacy Leaders' Views

The Impact of COVID-19 on Privacy Priorities, Practices and Programs

By IAPP Research Director Caitlin Fennessy, CIPP/US

During summer 2020, 21 privacy leaders from industry, government and academia graciously shared their views on the impact of COVID-19 on privacy priorities, practices and programs. Each participated in a 30-minute interview to inform the IAPP and EY's joint research project on COVID-19 and privacy. We captured their experiences, challenges and recommendations in a five-part series, with an [introduction](#) and [immediate industry response](#) covered previously. In this third piece, we share their insights on the new reality and strategic priorities, as articulated by boards and budgets.

The new reality

Across the board, privacy professionals expect that the future will be more virtual, privacy will remain a strategic priority, and as privacy budgets flatten amid increasing demand, companies will automate less-complex data protection tasks.

When asked whether their companies' ways of working would change permanently due to COVID-19 and, if so, whether those changes would have implications for the privacy program, privacy leaders responded with an emphatic "yes." The future, they said, will be much more virtual. The rapid uptick in virtual engagement has transformed both how employees work and communicate, as well as how they engage with customers around the world.

Practitioners expect remote work will be more common in the long term. Privacy teams, in particular, are often dispersed across business units and geographies. This helps them engage with local data subjects and regulators and facilitates compliance with local laws and sector-specific requirements. Practitioners suggested remote work is particularly conducive to the distributed nature of the privacy function and increased adoption of virtual communication tools has greatly improved their teams' communication.

They also welcomed some non-privacy benefits of remote work, saying the flexibility it affords can help create a more diverse workforce longer term, and noted this has been important during the pandemic given its dis-

proportionate impact on women, caregivers and people of color. But, they acknowledged some challenges in the privacy space, as well, particularly with regard to the innovation and creative thinking necessary for “privacy by design,” which, they said, benefits from serendipitous meetings with colleagues and in-person collaboration.

Privacy leaders expect the new, more-virtual reality will impact all aspects of the business, not only where employees work, but also how they engage with customers.

Uber’s Zefo expects “more delivery of everything” to have longer-term privacy impacts. “That will necessarily mean more profiling, more attempts to predict people’s behavior.” She said, “that’s all good-natured in the sense that we want to satisfy more needs, but it brings privacy challenges with it, to make sure that people are not doing things in a biased way or all the other problems that can come along with profiling people.”

Privacy leaders also felt that travel — for sales teams, in particular — would be far less necessary going forward. Sales and customer engagement, like everything else, has moved online and practitioners expect that the efficiencies and cost savings of these shifts could make them lasting.

Ettinger, for instance, said Pfizer has digitally enabled all its sales representatives, making virtual communication possible in 75 countries with 70% of health care providers,

enabling Pfizer to continue supporting health care workers during the pandemic.

For tech- and data-heavy sectors, virtual engagement seems even more natural. Refinitiv’s Artz said, “Our products and services are electronic and data-based, so really, do you actually need people in person to hold hands and have a cup of coffee and make sure that everything is going alright and answer questions?”

The data-oriented nature of the privacy profession and the significant data-processing implications of the pandemic have also ensured that privacy has remained a strategic focus for organizations’ leadership, as many privacy leaders explained.

Budgets and boards

Privacy practitioners recognize the distressing economic realities brought on by the pandemic but said their teams have not been disproportionately impacted and their work remains a top priority, including at the board level.

Citrix’s Lefkowitz spoke of the increased board attention with humor. “If you go back 15 years in privacy, boards had a member who knew how to spell privacy Today, I get out in front of the board and usually within about 10 minutes of the start of the discussion some board member will say, ‘Well, is that legal under privacy laws?’” He added, “You sort of want to get up and hug them, but you can’t because of COVID.”

In our April survey, approximately 60% of privacy professionals said privacy had “not at all” become less of a priority due to the pandemic, while nearly 30% said it has been de-prioritized only “to a small extent.”

FIGURE 1 Mastercard’s Louveaux agreed four months later that privacy has remained “part of the business strategy.” “Nothing’s been cut back,” she said. Her U.S.-based colleague JoAnn Stonier, CIPM, chief data officer, added not all projects will go full steam ahead, but that just means “delay, not denial.”

Practitioners all cited the increased demand on privacy teams, most alongside flat or more heavily scrutinized budgets. Our April survey revealed 72% of privacy professionals expect no or only a small reduction in privacy staff, while 81% expects no or only a small reduction in privacy budgets. Four months later, privacy leaders’ views seemed to align with those early expectations.

Refinitiv’s Artz said she has not seen cuts. In fact, she has onboarded three people out of necessity since the pandemic started.

As a data-centric profession, some privacy practitioners have the benefit of working for organizations that have profited from the move to virtualization and won’t see any negative budgetary impacts at all. Eduardo Ustaran, CIPP/E, a partner at Hogan Lovells in London, said this dynamic is contributing to the growth of the profession. “There are

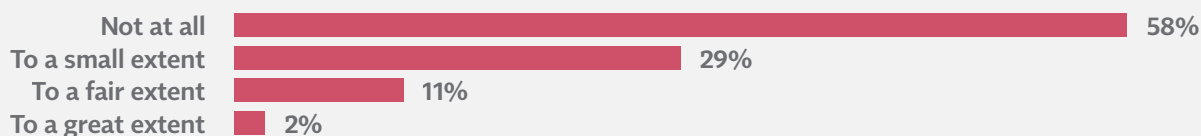
businesses that were insignificant last year, and they are the leaders of the of the modern world today. ... What they probably all have in common is that they need data and information, and they rely on digital technology to operate. ... In an area like ours, which is so directly affected by technology at a time when technology is part of the solution to get out of this challenge, I think the obvious conclusion has to be that privacy professionals will be in demand now and in the future.”

To manage their increased workload and privacy priorities without budget increases, many privacy leaders expect to accelerate already-ongoing efforts to automate routine privacy tasks. They identified authentication, response to data subject access requests, privacy impact assessments and vendor due diligence as areas ripe for automation. Automating these less-complex tasks will free up privacy professionals to focus on bigger-picture privacy challenges associated with the immediate crisis, as well as our more digital and data-driven lives and livelihoods.

As practitioners grapple with and respond to the new reality in the commercial sphere, policymakers, regulators and academics are focused on the longevity of widespread data collection to combat the pandemic and move our lives online and the privacy challenges these changes pose for society writ large. These big-picture topics will be the focus of part four of this series.

FIGURE 1

Has COVID-19 lowered the priority of privacy?



Originally published in “*Privacy in the Wake of COVID-19*” report.

Contacts

Tony de Bos

Global Data Protection & Privacy Consulting Leader

Tony.de.Bos@nl.ey.com

Angela Saverice-Rohan

EY Americas and FSO Privacy Leader

Angela.SavericeRohan@ey.com

Caitlin Fennessy

IAPP Research Director

caitlin@iapp.org

Müge Fazlioglu

IAPP Senior Westin Research Fellow

mfazlioglu@iapp.org