

# Data Impact Leadership Forum

Evolving skills in a  
data-driven world

Roundtable Report November 2024

MBNI



# Introduction



## Evolving skills in a data-driven world

**T**he latest meeting of the Data Impact Leadership Forum examined the topic of evolving skills in a data-driven world.

The breakfast session, developed by MBN Solutions and hosted by Brodies LLP, took place in a room overlooking Edinburgh Castle in November, bringing together 30 influential data leaders from a range of sectors across Scotland.

The Forum heard keynotes from Data & Technology Consultant Elizabeth Hollinger and Mark Hunter, VP of Analytics and Product Operations at Wise,

with both giving keynotes before the Forum opened up to a group discussion on the topics.

The Forum is member-led driven by the problems facing its members, and this discussion focused on the challenges associated with the changing role of the data team - given the rapid pace of change in technology adoption and deployment in today's data driven market places.

The Forum is dedicated to bringing together a community of data leaders to share experiences, tackle common issues and facilitate the development of joint initiatives to deliver impact through data.

# Synopsis

## Building data teams

**B**uilding on success in London, the Data Impact Leadership Forum gathered industry leaders for the first time in Scotland to explore effective strategies for building successful data teams, fostering collaboration and adapting to technological advancements.

Elizabeth Hollinger emphasised the importance of hiring beyond traditional STEM roles, highlighting the value of diverse skill sets, such as communication and creativity, to create well-rounded data teams.

Mark Hunter of Wise shared his experience with a product development approach where teams are empowered to shape product decisions, and analysts are supported by a structured career map to ensure clarity and consistency.

There was general agreement across the session that in order for data teams to perform optimally, first the foundations must be in place; effective infrastructure, architecture, data governance and



modelling are key. Organisations must know where they want to deliver business value, and then build from there.

Other speakers echoed the need for upskilling and cross-skilling, recognising the challenge of keeping up with rapid advancements across multiple data disciplines.

Legal and compliance issues were also a focal point, with Steve Coates and Martin Sloan emphasising the importance of involving legal expertise early in data projects to align goals with regulatory requirements.

## PARTNERS



# 10 key takeaways

**1** The distinction between skilled roles is diminishing and cross-functional teams are more effective for collaboration and knowledge sharing

**2** Looking beyond traditional STEM qualifications can yield talent with strong communication and creative skills, essential for impactful data work

**3** Upskilling existing employees, especially in the context of AI and emerging technologies, is a cost-effective way to address skills gaps

**4** Cross-skilling across engineering, data visualisation, analytics and governance roles is becoming increasingly common but requires careful management to avoid overwhelming team members

**5** Mark Hunter of Wise highlighted the importance of career maps to ensure analysts have clear & consistent growth opportunities within a large decentralised organisation

*The session  
Chair  
wrapped  
up the  
roundtable  
with key  
takeaways  
from the  
session*

**6** Wise's approach to mission-driven, empowered teams to make decisions and set their own roadmaps

**7** Engaging legal teams early in data projects helps align business goals with regulatory requirements, preventing potential roadblocks

**8** As organisations scale, centralised governance teams are crucial to maintain consistency and support decentralised structures effectively

**9** Technological changes demand that data teams and organisational structures be flexible and adapt continuously, led by strong, visionary leadership.

**10** Establishing a solid governance framework is essential for enabling decentralised data structures and maintaining consistency as teams grow. This helps ensure that all teams follow standardised practices and speak the same language when it comes to data, preventing chaos at scale.

## Join Forum waiting list

This Forum is dedicated to bringing together a community of data leaders to share experiences, tackle common issues and facilitate the development of joint initiatives to deliver impact through data. To attend discussions like this one, you can join the waiting list by scanning the QR code.



# Forum Attendees

Name	Position	Company
Michael Young	CEO	MBN Solutions
Joshua Smith	Associate Director	MBN Solutions
Shannon McKechnie	Managing Director	MBN Solutions
Ian Davey	Founder	FinTech-Tables
Mark Hunter	VP Analytics & Product Operations	Wise
Elizabeth Hollinger	Data & Technology Leader	Independent Consultant
Shaun Milne	Reporter	FinTech-Tables
Robert Smith	Head of Strategic Analysis	Standard Life
Andy Gall	Head of Data Solutions	People's Postcode Lottery
Ewan Nicolson	Head of Data Science	Forecast
Arshad Ahmed	Group Head of AI Platform	Lloyds Banking
Asia Faulds	Data Science Manager	TrustPilot
Athina Zitrou	Head of Business Analytics	Scottish Water
Robbie Hunter	Head of Business Intelligence	Optima Partners
Colin Parry	Founder	Head for Data
Martin Sloan	Partner IP, Tech & Data	Brodies
Howard Barber	Director of Data Analytics & Insight	Golden Charter
Neil Carden	President EMEA	Blend
Steven Coates	Founder	Brainwave
Marilena Karanika	Head of Data Innovation	Experian
Stuart Thomson	Senior Director, Analytics	Ex-Skyscanner
Mandy Bath	Head of Technical AI	Merkle
Heather Thomson	CEO	DataLab
Nicola Briselden	Head of Data Analysis	NatWest
Alan Tomney	Co-Founder	Data Insights AI
Simon Axon	Financial Services Industry Director	Teradata
Damian Grech	Senior Director, Engineering	FanDuel
Robert Betts	International Private Bank Technology Lead	JP Morgan Chase & Co
Andy Doyle	Chief Strategy & AI Officer	Utopi
Alistair Adam	Head of Data Science	Optima Connect

# Discussion 1

## United approach needed to keep up with pace of change

*New ideas and collaboration vital for organisations looking to keep up with data-driven economy*

**C**ollaboration, adaptability and looking outside the STEM bubble for skilled colleagues is key for data leaders maintaining stability within organisations and staying ahead of the digital curve, a meeting of industry experts has been told.

The Data Impact Leadership Forum heard a keynote talk from Elizabeth Hollinger, an expert in leading data and technology teams, who addressed the evolving nature of technology and the adaptability needed to stay ahead of the innovation curve.

Reflecting on almost 20 years working in the technology sector, she told how she has witnessed the pace of change first hand and outlined examples of leadership strategies to take advantage of emerging technologies.

“Every business has data at its core”, she said. “We have no option in the data and tech industry but to be on top of evolving trends and technologies because if not - you’re left behind quickly.”



Elizabeth said achieving data success should focus on how teams collaborate across business functions, in particular harnessing the unique skillset data analysts bring, a role she said was often overlooked.

“When recruiting business analysts, I looked for strong communication skills and intentionally searched outside of STEM categories,” she said, “looking for people who had arts degrees. In these subjects, students typically write essays in the course of their degree which naturally leads to strong communication skills and a good understanding of how to present information. These skills set them up well

to be the conduit between business and technical teams.”

“So, it’s important to look beyond STEM. We need a wide range of skills and experiences to make our teams successful.”

Citing data visualisation as another example where leaders could think differently she shared “One of the best data viz people I worked with was a girl in London who had a creative arts degree specialising in textiles. That degree choice is not an obvious one for a career in data, and demonstrates that people with a variety of skill sets can add a huge amount of value.”

“Data visualisation is key to making data accessible and effective. Presenting data in a meaningful way helps tell the story and supports people making data-driven decisions. And people who come from creative backgrounds are excellent at doing this.”

At Aggreko, where she led a fully centralised data team to support the global business, Elizabeth ensured collaboration was embedded into the ways of working.

She explained: “There are lots of different ways that you can structure data teams in an organisation, you can have fully centralised teams, or alternatively teams that are decentralised and fully embedded within the business. Or perhaps somewhere in the middle with a hub-and-spoke model, where the centre helps set principles and coordinate. There is no one right operating model and the approach will depend on the structure of each business.”

“But regardless of the team structure, the most important thing within any data team is collaboration.”

“To make sure that you’re going to have maximum impact with data, understanding the business domain is key. Joining the business knowledge with the data and technology acumen means that we can create practical data solutions that are effective in supporting insight-driven decision making.”

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**Presenting data in a meaningful way helps tell the story and supports people making data-driven decisions. And people who come from creative backgrounds are excellent at doing this**

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**Elizabeth Hollinger, Data & Technology Leader Independent Consultant**

How to recruit the right skills mix for a data team is also vital, she said. Issues in finding the right talent, saw her adapt her approach to overcome the lack of availability while working for major organisations.

“I started to look outside of traditional routes for hiring junior staff, and started an apprentice programme to support the team,” she said, “The apprentices we recruited provided such excellent input to the team, and in a very cost effective way for the business.”

“There’s also a huge pool of untapped talent in experienced hires. People who have been carrying out traditional technology roles such as SQL DBAs who can easily upskill to new cloud based roles. These employees have excellent experience in the work environment and can add huge value in a new role whilst also providing them an opportunity to learn, grow and develop in their career.”

“And in recruiting roles traditionally, making sure you develop a good working relationship with some trusted suppliers who understand your business and strategy, the types of skills you need, and the culture within your team is important.”

The conversation turned to AI as a hot topic in the data and tech industry, Elizabeth added: “I’ve heard so much scaremongering in the news about AI is going to come and take our jobs, the overall workforce will be reduced, and many roles will be automated.”

“However, I do believe that roles will change, and that people will change with them. We need to upskill people to be able to use the new tools and technology to help them carry out tasks more efficiently.”

“I truly believe AI will enhance and augment human decision making and ultimately improve our ways of working. There are already many good examples of where AI is being used for good, such as early cancer detection, and I think we’ll see more of that in the near future.”

# Discussion 2



## Collaboration key for building data teams

*Roundtable hears how organisations need to work together internally to further growth goals*

**T**he shift to a collaborative approach to building teams was highlighted by fellow speaker Mark Hunter, VP Analytics & Product Operations at Wise, who shared how he leads an Analytics team within the context of Wise, which is very mission-driven and has empowered cross-functional product teams.

"We have three products: Wise Account for consumers, Wise Business for businesses and Wise Platform, through which we enable banks and large enterprises to offer fast, secure and cost-effective international payments for their customers directly within their own platforms."

To do that, Wise's product organisation





is a collaboration of colleagues from various disciplines like product management, engineering, analytics, data science, design, and research.

“Our squad and tribe structure is our method of support for our cross-functional teams. The way that we think about it, our teams are our unit of progress, that’s where we ship code and develop our product on behalf of our customers”

“We really try to empower our cross-functional teams- they are the experts in their own respective domains. They conduct their own primary customer research, they perform their own analytics, and they themselves set the product roadmap for their team.

Such independence does bring the challenge of ensuring consistency across teams. “I don’t want some analysts to feel like they’re getting blocked in terms of their career progression, while others advance faster.” To manage this, Wise has implemented a career map for analysts.

Mark explained: “The career map is mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. It describes the way an analyst generates impact at Wise. If an analyst is doing all of these things, they are likely having an impact.”

“We make sure we tie development conversations and compensation decisions back to the career map ... even if it’s challenging for leads to provide

feedback on every dimension.”

“If we have a career map, it shouldn’t just be sitting on a drive somewhere. It has to be referenced during compensation conversations and development discussions.”

### *Group Discussion*

Further discussions on the day centred around the willingness of organisations to invest in skilled teams at the right times and scale, how to get the best from existing talent through opportunities, finding recruitment partners who understand specific needs of an organisation as roles evolved, and a significant focus on the implications of legal and compliance activity in pushing out products.

Mandy Bath, Head of Technical AI at creative content solutions providers Merkle, said the distinction between skilled roles was less than before and had far reaching implications.

She said: “We’ve seen with the fast pace of changes happening that when we are looking at cross-skilling, the lines between the roles are naturally blurring more and more every day, and that makes sense, cross-skilling across those roles also makes sense to some extent.

“But it makes it much harder to keep up to date with all the changes if you have to know engineering, and data visualisation, and analytics, and data science, and





governance, and keep up with all of the changes in all of those areas.

“We found that really, really quite difficult. In some certain instances, we’re having to actually reverse that and say, okay, you need to stay up to date on the advances in this particular area and then you can roll out that knowledge to the rest of the people.

“Otherwise it’s just totally overwhelming because of the fast pace of moving.”

That perspective was shared by Athena Zitrou, Head of Business Analytics at Scottish Water.

“I completely agree with that” she said: “We have a business across a number of areas recruited in our team, people that really wanted to develop and become data engineers, that are particularly attracted to certain areas.

“So, it is important to give those people space to develop and to learn and to become specialists in their area.”

Marilena Karanika, Head of Data Innovation at Experian, cautioned against leaving experts to work in silos. She said: “What I found is that a sole data scientist in a large organisation doesn’t work, they do need to be in teams.

“They don’t have to be in one central analytics hub in the organisation. But it’s much better to be in at least groups within the organisation that have relevant

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**Marilena Karanika,  
Head of Data  
Innovation at  
Experian**

skills. They can bounce ideas off each other and so on.”

Instead, she said, rotating colleagues so they could share knowledge while building their own understanding of the business through collaboration, was significantly more effective and beneficial for those involved.

“What we found lately that works most is having teams that work for specific products like analytical data science teams, that might work with different product managers, they might work with different engineering teams, you might rotate them around, but not every one month, like you rotate them every 12 months roughly,” she said.

“They get a feel of the data, they get a feel of the models, and you don’t rotate all of them to a new project, you just go, oh, we have a career path, an expectation of the skills that they should be learning in terms of stakeholder management and technical skills.

“And you go, “maybe this next project of yours is going to be in the insurance domain with a slightly different group”, But again, you’re using similar techniques. You don’t change everything in one go.

“This keeps people that want to learn motivated, but also gives you flexibility of people that are learning at their own pace, or they prefer less frequent change, to be on the same platform, the same thing, do what they really know how to do best without moving about.

“It allows some flexibility because there’s not one style that fits all. Some people like to change.

“Some people just want to be experts in what they do.”

Damian Grech, Engineering leader at sports betting giants FanDuel, also spoke of the vital importance of governance, and the particular benefits at scale. He said: “This is where the governance team becomes really important.

“I saw the journey from six people doing everything to now, currently, around 200 people - between engineering, analytics, science, etc, and throughout these almost



five years, we went from centralised to decentralised to anywhere in between, like the hub and spoke model.

“It’s like a pendulum every year. You shifted a bit, but for the hub and spoke or decentralised model to work really well, you need to have a governance team in place.

“You need to have that policing system and for the centralised team to enable the rest of the decentralised, and that that’s why if I compare now to maybe four or five years ago, I see a pleasant shift.

“In recruitment previously we were all going to recruit data engineers, data scientists .... Now we’re treating it more like software engineering where you’re looking for a Python engineer, an SQL engineer or a data security engineer, or a data platform engineer where people or companies are looking for more specific skills, and then they might embed them in one self-sufficient team or multiple teams.

“We’re targeting for more specific skill sets to bring into our organisations where I think four or five years ago that wasn’t the case.

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**Finance  
had to get  
into those  
conversations**

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**Alistair Adam,  
Head of Data  
Science, Optima  
Connect**

“We’re currently doing a hub and spoke where we have a centralised team of platform engineering that enable others and self-serving other people.

“Without that, it would just fail. It would be chaos.

“You’d end up in a place where we had 6,000 analysts and most of them were like: ‘who’s a customer? We have three million customers? We have 10 million customers? we have 30 million customers?’ - because of the varied definition of a ‘customer’ that everyone can come up with.

“Once you start building those building blocks and serve others, that just makes everything easier and you’re talking the same language.”

Alistair Adam, Head of Data Science at solutions providers Optima Connect, highlighted how the value attached to making such decisions could also be central to having effective structures.

He said: “Going back a few years now at one bank, it tracked every single thing they did and each data science and analytics project had a value attached to it.

“Finance was brought into those conversations as well. So, if you had delivered X, Y and Z within the project, you couldn’t just say well, I probably did a million pounds of benefit. Finance’s involvement meant it wasn’t marking your own homework.

“Finance had to get into those conversations and that meant that the head of the analytics function there could demonstrate the value of the work the team delivered.”

Simon Axon, Financial Services Industry Director at Teradata, said one thing everyone could expect and prepare for to some extent, was the fact that technological advances and the need for evolving skills would keep on changing.

He said: “I think a couple of things you can predict in any business is organisational design is going to go through cycles and everything’s going to come back again.

“Whether you centralise it or virtualise, whatever the ‘people model’ is, the technology changes - we’re doing things now that six months ago we didn’t even dream about.

“There’s such rapid change on the technology side, so it’s the ‘people model’ that needs to be robust to adapt to that change.

“Having that strong leadership and executives, understanding where the value is created, I think is an important component.”

That pace of change, and how decisions are arrived at, had particular impacts on those looking at legal and compliance issues.

Steve Coates, the CEO and co-founder of AI-powered analytics pioneers Brainnwave, highlighted a potential minefield of a disconnect between data licences companies hold and how they intend to use the data.

He said they aren’t always aligned with the business goals of those using it, meaning specialist skills may be needed to bottom out any issues.

“We spend a lot of time integrating lots

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**Don’t be afraid of lawyers. My job isn’t to tell you not to do something, it’s to find a way to make it work**

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**Martin Sloan,  
Partner for the IP, Tech and Data team at Brodies LLP**

## Coming up in 2025

This Forum will be meeting regularly in London and Scotland in 2025. If you are interested in joining the Forum or attending future sessions, please contact [Michael@mbsolutions.com](mailto:Michael@mbsolutions.com)

of data sets, both external and internal to clients” Steve said, “And in our experience, they will have different data licences.

“You almost need a data licence architect.”

“What we found is that most partners we work with, almost always their data licences aren’t suitable for what we want to do. When you talk to them about what you want to do with the data, they’re always really relaxed about it. They’re like, ‘Oh yeah, that’s fine, we don’t mind that’.

“You end up saying, ‘Well, I need it in an email.’ If you’re building products that then become embedded in organisations that drive big value decisions, it’s almost the house of cards that it’s built on is a bit shaky.

“But you kind of have to do that when you’re in our world.”

Martin Sloan, Partner for the IP, Tech and Data team at Brodies LLP, pointed out that legal teams are often brought in when the project is already far along in development.

He said: “One of the things that we see a lot from the projects we’re involved in is coming in too late in the day.”

“At that point, you’re too far down the line in terms of the design of what you’re trying to do or the objectives, which means it is hard to make changes to ensure compliance without causing delay or additional development work.”

He said the key was to engage legal expertise from the very beginning of any data project.

He explained: “What we always say is, if you can involve legal input early - whether you have the benefit of an internal legal team or external counsel - that really helps. It ensures that the project is aligned with legal requirements from the outset.”

That meant a better chance of ensuring compliance with privacy laws, data governance regulations, and intellectual property licensing.

“Don’t be afraid of lawyers. My job isn’t to tell you not to do something, it’s to find a way to make it work,” he said.



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