**Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast Series**

**Detail: Episode 69**

**Olivia Neal [host], Joe Whittinghill [guest]**

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. I’m your host, Olivia Neal. Now, we don't normally have guests from Microsoft on the podcast, but today we're going to be discussing building a learning culture, and I think there are some interesting lessons to be learned from how Microsoft has done this, particularly given the scale and complexity of working across 220,000 employees in 115 different countries. When I joined the organization, four years ago, it was clear how important the concept of a 'growth mindset' was within the company. And with the pace of technological advances in the past couple of years, that ability to keep learning has never been more important. So, I'm delighted to welcome Joe Whittinghill, Microsoft's Chief Learning Officer, to the show today to share more about how Microsoft are approaching this.

Joe, thank you so much for joining us today. Welcome to the show.

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** Thank you for having me.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I wondered if we could just start by giving our listeners a little bit of context on what your role is and what that means within the organization of Microsoft.

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** So I’m the Chief Learning Officer and Corporate Vice President of Microsoft. One of my responsibilities is to bring together all of the learning organizations that we have in the company. And we’re actually setting up learning organizations in every single group as we speak right now.

 One of my chief roles is to make sure that all of that works together in a very effective and efficient way. But we also are responsible for leadership development, for employee development, manager development and just all things learning across the company.

My prior role I also ran talent management. I’ve led the culture work since I came back to HR. I spent 10 years in finance, before I was asked to come over and take this role.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, Joe, that’s quite a transition to move from a finance background into HR and into learning. How did that transition go for you and how did learning become such a passion for you?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** Yeah, it was quite a switch. I have my background, I have a master’s in organization development. So I’m a strategy and org design person by training, and there’s a lot of behavioral science built into that. But it was an interesting transition because finance operates in one very specific way and HR a very different way.

It was a great personal example for me of having to use, you know, what our – we’re all very serious about, which is a growth mindset, and for me personally to having to retrain on how to operate in a new, you know, internal culture, but then also to think very differently.

And in the role that I have now, it is essentially it’s all the countries that we operate in.  We have employees in over 115 countries worldwide. So everything we do is this global scale, which makes it for me personally a great challenge to think about how do we reach all 220,000 Microsoft employees in the most effective way possible.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think that scale, both in terms of number of employees and number of different countries that these employees are based in, is one of the things that makes this such an interesting discussion. And I’m interested in knowing how you think about what it means to have a learning culture, because I think within Microsoft, we talk about learning culture, we talk about growth mindset a lot, which are really powerful levers that we have in the company, but what does having a learning culture mean?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** So a learning culture refers to an environment that promotes and supports continuous learning and personal development. You know, and it’s characterized, you know, formally by a number of things, but these are the – the key components. One is, is that the organization values knowledge and skill building, as we know we all do.

Number two, when you have a true learning culture, there is personalized learning, so the ability of the individual to find the learning that they need to complete their day job, you know, and make sure that they are skilled in doing that, but also looking at developing skills for their next role or for as their role advances.

And a component of that then is the learning assets have to be very discoverable, so it’s easy for people to find them. Or what we’re moving to now, and I’m sure we’ll talk about in a minute, is we finally are achieving learning in the flow of work.

And then if you really, truly have a learning culture, the organization is constantly adapting and making sure that what is being provided is relevant and/or just providing a buffet of learning to the employees.

And so, that’s why, you know, when we think about how we have Viva Learning now, when I first came into the role, we created  the learning portal. So we have a single pane of glass that all employees start, and then they can go find either learning very specific for their role or generally to learn about growth mindset, learn about our culture, learn how to be a better colleague to someone or a better people manager or leader.

And that is where then you will see, do we value learning, and so that the organization is saying, we do want you spending time getting better at who you are as a professional, your job today, your job tomorrow. And we used to call it learning all the time, but a great definition now is, you know you have a learning culture when it’s an always-on learning environment.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I think particularly in the environment right now where we’re seeing such huge strides forward, almost continuously in terms of artificial intelligence, in terms of cybersecurity, that ability to have a learning culture, which is always on, is one of those important foundations which gives every employee in the company the ability to keep up to date with the new trends, with new offerings, new expectations from customers. And hopefully, that’s one of the things that you’re really seeing as a result of that.

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** Absolutely. And that’s where this point around relevance comes into is that we need to make sure that what we’re providing, whether we consider it as learning, but also just knowledge management, the ability for employees to understand about AI, or more specifically about particular products, or the ability to change how they’re interacting with customers or how they’re selling or how we’re marketing, all of those are great examples of – of making sure that we aren’t talking about fluffy training. We’re talking about really building the skills and abilities of all of us in the company so that we can be more successful, and of course, in turn, then our customers are more successful.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I think you’ve highlighted there some really tangible things. So you’ve talked about personalized learning and making sure that people are served and can access the things that are really relevant for them and their specific job, bringing that into the flow of work and having this single pane of glass where people can access the learning that’s relevant to them and track their progress through that.

I’m interested also in understanding a little bit more about the global nature of the role. And you mentioned having employees in 115 different countries. Is there anything that you have to think about in terms of tailoring approaches to learning for different countries or different cultures, or do you try and use a kind of company-wide approach and then have the expectation that people will adapt to that?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** It’s actually both. So when we go to do training plans or learning plans, or even if we’re doing the culture work, we think about how we are using different implementation tactics and what is our aim.

And so, as a representative example, we always start with the learner and we think about, , our colleagues, our employees, and we say, are we really thinking about them as an individual, and what is the individual lived experience that employee is going to have as they are doing their job?

Because again, the broader definition of how do you learn is it really is on the job is the best way to learn anything. And we know that. And so we want to make sure that employees understand as you are getting better at doing something, if you’re experimenting with Copilot or actually using Copilot with your customers to get some task completed or an achievement completed, that in and of itself is learning.

And then the second part is, is just simple observation, is watching something or listening to something to have a better understanding of how to do that task. And then, of course, there’s formal training that we all know about. And a key one, and I know we’re starting to think about this in a lot more expansive way, is just coaching and mentoring. And so, there’s each one of those actions, people don’t always consider that to be learning, but it is. And so that’s where we start with first, what is the experience the employee has day to day, whether it’s informal learning or with their manager or with colleagues.

Second, we look at teams. We always like to say that Microsoft, you know, is 220,000 of these individuals, but we have about 28,000 people managers that we have to reach all the time. So that next level we think about is how are the managers and their teams getting what they need to be successful.

And then the last one is, is yeah, when we’re going to go to the whole company. And so, we step back and say, if we have to reach every country, if we have to reach all 220,000 employees, that’s an enterprise move; what does that look like?

And you then hit on what makes the job very interesting. On just about anything we do, not only in learning but across the company, is then what are all not only the country laws and regulations we need to make sure we’re in compliance with, but there can be down to the level of provinces or state level laws or county level laws that we need to make sure that we’re also in alignment with as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Okay, so lots of complexities there. And I think what you said around the role of managers and teams in that is an interesting thread to pull on a little bit as well, because within Microsoft, as within all public sector organizations, people are incredibly busy. There are huge amounts of demands on people’s time, and learning doesn’t always make it to the top of that priority list.

Is there anything that you’ve done to encourage and drive people to prioritize that time for learning within those very high pressured environments?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** So we’ve asked all managers to make sure that they’re talking about learning, and then, you know, the word we’re starting to increasingly use is skilling, all the time with their teams and saying, are we going to have a learning day? Are we going to allocate time to talk about – you know, a postmortem or an after-action review is a type of learning, and – and talking about that and saying there is designated time we all should have?

At my own group we have a learning day once a month, and that we use it in two half days is the way it’s actually working today, where we really focus on skill building and making sure that people are getting what they need to be successful.

You know, my advice to everyone is if you want to keep up with the modern age of AI, if we aren’t all playing with Copilot and really understanding it and thinking through how AI is going to change not only our customers but ourselves, that’s where we’re going to start to have problems, and we’re going to fall behind because it is just an absolute imperative now that people are increasing their skills and knowledge every day.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I really like that idea of having that designated time, and as a team as well, so that you don’t have people trying to book in meetings at that slot or pull you out to other things.

And you’ve clearly been evolving your approach as learning needs and as skilling needs have evolved over the past few years. Are there any lessons that you’ve learned as you’ve been going through this process and or that your team have learned? Is there anything that surprised you as you’ve been doing this?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** I think a number of the big aha’s that we have is number one, if people know my background at all, I’m an eager amateur neuroscientist. And so, we introduced the neuroscience of leadership about nine years ago into the company and versus saying, let’s talk to you first about how to lead, we said no, let’s first start with why do you think and feel the way you do?

And that has helped not only with us in landing what does a growth mindset really mean, that it’s not just a bunch of fluffy words, as I’ve said before, but it’s a real mindset shift of how to be, you know, a continuous learner and to be more open-minded and be aware of your biases.

So one was, when we think about the neuroscience of learning is people have very short attention spans by nature. Our brains are naturally, believe it or not, the word that the neuroscientist uses. our brains are naturally lazy. And – and partially the reason that is, is when you are super focused on any task, whether you’re reading or trying to complete something, it is burning a lot of calories. And so, that’s where you hear about where people get distracted. It’s actually just the brain needs to switch off from high intensity mode to low intensity mode about every 18 to 20 minutes. It can only go for so long.

And so the learning, the second thing we’ve had is you’ll notice trainings are getting shorter and shorter. So our formal trainings, we are absolutely asking all the learning teams to make sure that formal learning is as brief as possible, because it gives them, the learner, time to absorb that, and then you can break it up and have a follow-on session if you need to.

But one is understanding how the brain works. Number two is shortening up learning. I think number three is this concept of we now use Viva Learning of this single pane of glass where I just go to Viva Learning as your starting point, either from Teams or straight to Viva, or we also have, of course, MS Learn. But to have these designated single sites versus just this plethora of SharePoint sites all over the place has also been a big transform for us.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** But it’s fascinating the length of time or the shortness of time that people concentrate for. And I think that’s good for us because we try and keep these podcasts at about 25 minutes. So hopefully that means we’re right in the right zone.

So you mentioned keeping people up to date and building those skills continuously in Copilot, in AI. Within the sphere of learning, are you thinking about how to use new technologies to help people in their learning and in their skilling journey? Are there any examples of ways in which you’ve been doing that?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** So this is what’s exciting. Last week, I had 46 Chief Learning and Talent Officers from the S500 on campus in Redmond. And what’s ironic, when you look at the roles within major organizations, whether it’s governmental, whether it’s nonprofit or even, you know, for profit, the – the learning officer, who’s ever the chief learning or the chief talent officer actually spends a tremendous amount of time thinking about technology.

And it isn’t just for reach; it’s also something we refer to as players. And so, the way you as a learner interact with on-screen learning or even in the classroom, we spend a lot of time thinking through how to engage the learner and then to make sure that there is memorable outcome. So when they leave, it isn’t just, oh, check the box, I completed that, but we’ve actually done something that produces, you know, a demonstrable behavioral change and skill change for that person.

And this is where, you know, with Viva and for the listeners remember that the front UI is the LXP, the Learning eXperience Platform. And companies are going to use a lot of those. Whether it’s Viva learning, whether it’s EdCast cast, whether it’s Degreed, there’s lots of those. Behind that is a whole lot of Microsoft technology, but also third-party technology.

And we’re okay with that because Microsoft isn’t trying to say we’re going to give you your whole stack for learning. What Microsoft wants to do is to say, we have a great learning experience platform called Viva Learning. We also have teams. But a key component for learning professionals is M365 is just as important as all of the learning tools in making sure that the learners can get to the learning that they need.

But where we are now with AI is we are truly at the cusp of learning in the flow of work. So as you’re doing a task, where we’re going, like with Copilot is we will start to then prompt back to the learner and say to them, it looks like you’re trying to work on this spreadsheet; can we give you some help with that? Or it will look at a calendar and say, it looks like you’re going to be having a meeting with your manager; have you prepared your one-on-one? Or the flip side with the manager, this employee is coming in; are you ready to have that performance conversation with them, but also remember to recognize them for the successes that they’ve had.

So those are some examples of where the AI is going to be prompting the human to do certain things, but also then, of course, the human can use the AI to go get answers or ideas that they may not have had otherwise.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So there’s a good number of practical tools, approaches, and opportunities to implement learning and skilling. But building that learning culture as a whole is such a big organizational change. It’s something that Microsoft has been on an ongoing journey to do to build that growth mindset, build that learning culture, and of course, keep doing it; as new employees join the company, keep that learning culture, something that is important and core.

For public sector leaders who might be in organizations at different stages of maturity in this journey, do you have any advice on them of where to get started, how to get going?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** I would start by having the conversation with the organization around what are the business objectives that you are going after that you don’t feel that you have the skills within the organization to accomplish that task or that outcome.

So I spend, ironically, a fair amount of time with militaries because that is an absolute example of a learning culture, because they are working on missions that literally are life or death related. And so, training and learning are critical.

And there is the training to do the task at hand, like but I have had multiple conversations with the U.S. Navy, and it quickly moves to a conversation around knowledge management.

And so, the customer may be saying, you know, we think we’re doing okay on skilling, but we’re also having an issue around making sure that knowledge is being passed on to the next person. In this case, it would be from one commander of a ship to the next commander of the ship, because there’s a lot of tacit information and tacit knowledge that gets developed.

And that’s where then we have other tools that our customers can use, whether it’s analytic tools that we’re very good at, or whether it is things like topics or Viva Engage or SharePoint, quite frankly. But the ability to find the information, and we all know that term to be discoverability, is critical.

And so throughout all of this, that when you start with the organization, say to them, where are you feeling confident that you’re on top of the skills and knowledge that you need to go get the next task done or the next business goal done? And then where are you feeling you need more work. .

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And you mentioned the military there, and that is such a fantastic example of a set of organizations that have to have a growth mindset built into the way that they operate.

Are there any other organizations whose work you’ve been inspired by when you think about building a learning culture, anyone who you look to and think, wow, these folks have got it nailed?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** So I go out about twice a year on these big customer tours. And so, my last one last fall was India, Japan and Australia, where I spend three to four days in each country literally visiting six to eight customers a day. It’s pretty packed. And some of them are public sector. Some of them are private, obviously, or nonprofit.

But when I look at some of the work that the Australian government is doing to be able to get to the training needs for the Australian civil servants themselves, they are also going through a similar process.

And they have developed some great learning approaches. And it started with, again, just having time and then really getting down to the skills that they need to deliver so that they can, you know, serve the citizens of Australia much better. So, that was one example.

The UK government, they are all over apprenticeships. And we have an apprenticeship program, actually multiple inside of Microsoft. But there, that is learning on the job. And so, one of their beliefs is the more they can rise and raise up people who aren’t necessarily going to be college graduates to have the skills that they need to be successful, that is a net benefit overall to society.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s fantastic. Thank you. Well, I think that actually brings us to the end of the questions that I have for you. Is there anything that I didn’t ask you or we didn’t cover, which you wanted to share?

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:**  Maybe the last piece of advice is I just hope everybody understands that, you know, this whole concept which is so true, that in addition to having a growth mindset, you know, number two is, you know, get super clear on what your personal passion is, your personal purpose.

And the more you’re achieving that in your day job and helping the company be successful, but that you also feel satisfied and rewarded in the work that you’re doing, that’s really the big unlock when you have that binding of employees saying, I’m doing what I love to do, and I’m getting better every day at doing what I’m doing, and I’m helping Microsoft and in turn, our customers be successful. That’s a win all around.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think that will really resonate, because I know that public servants around the world are doing these jobs because they are committed to serving citizens in whatever role it is that they’re doing. So I think that’s a really nice tie across.

Thank you, Joe, so much for joining us.

**JOE WHITTINGHILL:** Well, thanks for having me, and good luck to everybody.

[Music.]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Joe Whittinghill, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. If you're interested in finding out more digital skills and building a learning culture you can visit our website at aka.ms/publicsectorfuture. Please do send us your questions and feedback. You can find me on LinkedIn or email us at ask-ps@microsoft.com. Thank you and see you next time.

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