Transcript: “Reshaping the workplace: why AI is a double-edged sword”

Pathways to Zero Barriers Episode 6, Season 3

Introduction

Jessica Rafuse (00:00)

I truly believe accessibility is a sales differentiator, and it is the next AI advantage. When we start talking about the demographics, the number of people with disabilities, the spending power of people with disabilities, that is when we hear our customers say, oh, okay, if I procure accessible technologies, I am serving my customers better.

Judith Hermetter

Welcome to Pathways to Zero Barriers. Today we're looking at how AI-powered assistive tech is reshaping the workplace, and why it's a double-edged sword. Join us as we look at Microsoft's responsible AI framework and how to balance rapid innovation with community-led accountability.

Tom Butcher (00:50)

Hello, my name is Tom Butcher with the Zero Project. Welcome once again to our third season of Pathways to Zero Barriers podcasts. This season, we will be focusing on assistive technology innovation around the world. And in this episode, some of what's going on in Redmond, Washington State, here in the US, which is the HQ of Microsoft, and subsequently around the world. As an aside, I had the honor earlier this year to participate in a panel discussion at Microsoft's Ability Summit held at their headquarters in Redmond. But that aside, it's great to have with me here today Jessica Rafuse. Jessica is both Senior Corporate Counsel and Head of Global Partnerships at Microsoft.

If I have it right, Jessica is responsible for Microsoft's engagement with organizations that focus on people with disabilities and accessibility overall. Jessica, from Seattle to Seattle, welcome. It's absolutely great to have you with us. How are you doing? And how's fall in Seattle?

Jessica Rafuse (02:12)

Thank you, Tom. It is so nice to see you again. Fall in Seattle is actually beautiful this year. We usually get quite a bit of rain by this point in the year, and I'm looking out at a blue sky day.

Tom Butcher (02:26)

It's absolutely wonderful. You're lucky. As I mentioned earlier, I'm looking out at rain. But after two weeks of absolutely stunning weather, hey, I can't complain. Anyway, Jessica, before we actually dive into our conversation, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about yourself, how you got to do what you're doing, and where you are now, particularly in the context that, if I remember rightly, you studied Spanish and history of art at university. And then once you've told us, I'll jump into the first question. So how come you're doing what you're doing?

Jessica Rafuse (03:09)

Si, si, si. Es correcto.

You are right. I did study two topics that perhaps seem very different and not aligned with my career in tech. But I am a real believer in following your passion. And wherever your passion takes you, that is where you will find success.

My journey started, I guess, way back in the beginning, when I ran slower than the other kids. My parents took me to the doctor and they said, “She's playing baseball. We want her to run faster.” And they said, “Surprise, your daughter has muscular dystrophy.” Of course, I was eight years old at the time, and it has been a long journey through the medical field, but ultimately it's landed me in a place where I am today, understanding my diagnosis, but also my identity as a disabled woman who uses a wheelchair to get around.

So that is, I think, a keystone part of my life and who I am, that acceptance. But also now recognizing that a lot of really great things have come into my life, and the joy that I've had in my life is thanks to this unique experience that many other people have with disability.

Tom Butcher (04:35)

Thank you very much indeed. That's a great basis for us to start. And I will fire away with my first question. So, in your position at Microsoft, what do you see as the state of play of assistive technology innovations you're seeing out there? Whether it's in the context

of the intersection of accessibility, assistive technology, and AI, or that of assistive technology and workspace adaptations.

I'd like to add to that. I remember that something from the Microsoft 2026 Responsible AI Transparency Report really stuck out to me, which was, I quote: “For us, responsible AI is not a one-time exercise, but a continuous discipline. We strengthen safeguards by probing evolving capabilities and limitations, observing how systems perform in the lab and in the real world, and iteratively improving how AI is designed, evaluated, and governed.” So, with the Microsoft context and the context I mentioned above, how do you see things?

Jessica Rafuse (06:02)

Tom, what an exciting time. I think the pace of business, the pace of this AI economy is moving so quickly that we are in the thick of it. And I just want to take a moment to recognize that that doesn't always feel comfortable. And rightfully so, there's a lot of fear associated with AI. And I think the quote you shared from the transparency report, I don't know if it makes us feel better about the risks that are associated with AI. But what I hope the takeaway from that is, is that Microsoft has spent a lot of time thinking about these issues. The issues of the AI workforce, the issues related to what jobs will come, what jobs will go.

We've spent a lot of time talking about how to build, and then we spent a whole lot of time doing just that, taking the policies and turning them into technology that we hope can be trusted. We take that responsibility very seriously at Microsoft. So although those are a lot of words in the transparency report, they are well thought out and taken very seriously.

Tom Butcher (07:21)

Right. In that context, before I move on, one of the things which always strikes me with a huge question mark is the speed at which everything is moving. Does Microsoft think that the speed is going to continue at this breakneck speed? Or are things going to slow down? Are things going to speed up? Are we going to hit a wall in a very unpleasant way? I just don't really have any feel, not being in the midst of it, for what the momentum is like.

Jessica Rafuse (08:04)

It's dizzying. Admittedly...

Tom Butcher (08:06)

Yes.

Jessica Rafuse (08:08)

...very fast. In all of my career, I don't think I've seen the pace of business quite this fast. And for people with disabilities, which is really my area of expertise, I think that there are more tools to help us keep pace, should we want to. I think the focus on how fast we're moving is an important one, but I want to make sure that the underlying issue is not speed, but rather it is responsibility. Right? So if we are building from the start technologies that are responsible and accessible, and we think that those are one and the same, then the pace that comes along with it can be trusted. But it takes a lot. In order to do that, it takes intent, it takes purpose, it takes a transparency report.

But I think what I'm seeing with our customers and my team... I know I have a couple of lengthy, too-many-words titles as well. But part of my team works on what we call commercial impact. So I have folks that are accessibility subject matter experts working hand in hand with our Microsoft sellers. Those salespeople I view as such an intriguing opportunity because although we have a large number who are participating in accessibility, hungry to learn, and want to talk to their customers about accessibility, the majority of them might not even know what the word means.

On our team, we are trying to accelerate accessibility with everyone internally at Microsoft, but also with our customers. I think that's truly how we scale. We help other folks, companies, organizations, and partners talk about accessibility and build accessible technologies. And then we are more likely to live our mission. Our mission at Microsoft is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more. And we cannot have that achievement without accessibility.

Tom Butcher (10:25)

Great, thank you. And I'd like to take you up on your mention of salespeople and ask you about two things. One, because I need some clarification, and two, because I'm going to pose something: if you're a salesman, would you say that? I know it's very glib to say it, that accessibility is the next AI advantage. So that's the first question. And then in that context, could you explain a little bit to our listeners that concept, but also the whole concept of frontier firms and what frontier firms are doing? Because then that gives us an idea of a kind of infrastructure ecosystem that is developing.

Jessica Rafuse (11:20)

Absolutely. Thank you for asking. And you're not the only one. A lot of our customers are coming to Microsoft and they're saying, how do we join this AI economy? How do we become a frontier firm? And so we're helping folks across industries to have that AI advantage in their own businesses.

And I truly believe accessibility is a sales differentiator and it is the next AI advantage. When we start talking about the demographics, the number of people with disabilities, the spending power of people with disabilities, that is when we hear our customers say, “Oh, okay, if I procure accessible technologies, if I build accessible technologies, I am serving my customers better.” And I think in the time that we are in today, that absolutely is an advantage for our customers to be able to sell directly to their customers and the customers of their customers, including the 1.3 billion people with disabilities around the world, in their products. I also think I'm talking too much, Tom.

I think we're also seeing this in the data. We did a survey of people with disabilities who were using agentic AI solutions within their workplace. We saw that 91% of people with disabilities said that they saw agentic tools as assistive technology for them. So their definition of an assistive technology is one that was created with and for them, one that helps them to do their job better and creates additional productivity for them. They believe that agentic solutions are right up there with other AT that they use. And I think we have to trust people with disabilities to tell us when they think products are working well for them and when they aren't.

So is accessibility an AI advantage? I think if you can empower your workforce, all of your workforce, including those with disabilities, then yeah, it is.

Tom Butcher (13:48)

Great. I would like you to explain, if you could, a wee bit about agentics. For our listeners' etymology: agent, hence agency. Could you tell us a little bit about agents for agency? What does that actually mean? Because from what I've observed, it is the most powerful tool, or one of the most powerful tools, that's out there. And I think it would be really useful for us to learn a little bit more about how agents work and what solutions they can offer.

Jessica Rafuse (14:30)

AI has been around for a long time. I think we can start there. Since the fifties, we have created technologies that were artificially intelligent. And what is new today is that we are able to ask the agent to do things for us and on our behalf. Basically, we are empowering people to be agent bosses. You partner up with an agent and then you boss them around. I think that's especially important for people with disabilities, who are desperate for that agency, just like anyone else. We want to be able to make decisions about how we work. Agents are allowing that.

I just came back from vacation and I asked my agent to do some work for me. Catch me up on this dreadfully overwhelming inbox. I think I had 8,000 unread emails. And of course, all of them did not come in during the week that I was gone. But just seeing that number, you know, the little number on the upper left of your...

Tom Butcher (15:35)

Overwhelming.

Jessica Rafuse (15:37)

Absolutely overwhelming. So I asked my agents, I asked Copilot, to help me organize them. Not only that, I asked it for a plan. I said, what do I do? I'm overwhelmed. And I can speak to it as though it is a companion. It's someone sitting next to me in the office. How do I get through all of these emails? Help me to prioritize them. Delete the emails which I know are strictly spam. And respond to the emails where I can review the draft in advance and let you know if it's okay to send it.

Tom Butcher (16:16)

Wow. And you can, as it were, I'm using the term very loosely, program it to do what you like. Or maybe not what it likes, but to achieve whatever aims you want. Is that correct?

Jessica Rafuse (16:33)

Yeah, you can boss it around.

Tom Butcher (16:35)

Wow, that would be terribly useful in a home situation. That'd be lovely. And no, sorry, what did I say? Anyway, to move on from agentics. What do you see the current market, slash landscape, to be for these kinds of innovations?

Jessica Rafuse (16:59)

Well, there are a few things. When it comes to the AT industry, we're talking about technologies that were built for a specific reason. This is specialized, often entrepreneurial, and increasingly more and more connected with the broader technology ecosystem. Microsoft has a responsibility to embed accessibility into our products, to create products that include people with disabilities so that they serve people with disabilities. But I think we're very cognizant of the fact that we absolutely need to have those specialized tools that are created by the AT industry.

What I think is missing is that we can do a better job of creating clear pathways for AT companies, for the industry, to build on our platforms. We want them to be able to thrive because ultimately we want people with disabilities, we want all of our customers, to have choice, to have that agency that we talked about. So if we can create an ecosystem where AT companies thrive on the Microsoft platform, then I think we get to a point where we can reach more and more people with disabilities.

Tom Butcher (18:27)

A question on that. Do you find yourself at Microsoft being, as it were, the repository of knowledge for the needs and requirements of persons with disabilities that the AT companies either don't have the time to collect, or, dare I say it, in some instances are not interested in collecting? Do you find yourself more and more, or maybe less and less, taking on that role of saying, “This is what you need to do, this is what you need to address”?

Jessica Rafuse (19:10)

That's a very interesting take on it. I think we strive to, and all companies should strive to, have a really firm acumen on what the disability experience is. But we should also be humble enough to say that we will never understand every user and every disability scenario. So we have to partner with the community. We have to partner with the organizations that know disability best. Those NGOs and those disabled persons' organizations truly are the repository of what people with disabilities are looking for. So yes, let's always strive to know more and more, but never eliminate the lived experience that is aggregated from those NGOs.

Tom Butcher (20:07)

Extending that a little bit further, how do you think it's best to grasp the opportunity, which is the opportunity to make the ecosystem more connected rather than collapsing specialized AT into mainstream technology? Because there's always a temptation to do the latter. But if you do the latter, I think you can miss out on myriad opportunities, some that we can see, some that are obviously going to appear in the future.

Jessica Rafuse (20:46)

There's a lot of choice in that. There are a lot of options for ways in which we can stay connected, and we dabble in many of them. The point is we have to stay connected with that industry. We have to talk to them often. We have to have a rhythm of business with them. We have to have ways for them to contact us. We have to be able to triage their feedback. And then we have to be able to be transparent about whether or not we can act on it.

If I could give advice to any organization that is hoping to build an accessibility program, maybe the best thing we've ever done is create the Disability Answer Desk. This is a free service where any customers with disabilities who are using our products can reach out to us and share what works, share what doesn't work, and share what they want to see. This also applies to anyone at the enterprise level. It could be an AT company, it could be a big business, it could be an SMB. They can all come to us and say, “I have an employee that works for me. They're beginning to lose their vision. They're not able to use Excel in the way in which they did before. How do I help them?” And by having the Disability Answer Desk, we get all of that feedback from our customers and hopefully help them along the way too.

Tom Butcher (22:20)

I remember learning about that when I was up in Redmond and I thought, wow, that's great. Can you tell us about the desk? You can text it, I presume, you can email it, can you talk to people on it? How does it work, and is it distributed, I think is the main term to use, or is the desk actually concentrated and situated in Redmond?

Jessica Rafuse (22:51)

That's a good one. The Disability Answer Desk, or DAD. We love an acronym.

Tom Butcher (23:00)

It's sexist though.

Jessica Rafuse (23:02)

Well, we have a Ma as well. We have a Microsoft Accessibility agent. And folks like to talk to Ma sometimes more than they like to talk to Dad. But again...

Tom Butcher (23:13)

Cheers!

Jessica Rafuse (23:15)

People want a quick solution and they're just trying to find that one feature. What's the shortcut key for me to be able to use Sticky Keys? I think all of us know that one. It's Shift. But if they're looking for that piece of information, they can do that directly through Ma, Microsoft Accessibility. And if they want to have a conversation with someone, a human, they have a lot of options, like you mentioned. They can pick up the phone, they can text, they can email. We have American Sign Language available. And it's also available in, I think, around 15 markets around the world, so there's some language preference as well.

How are those folks distributed? Well, I sit just down the hall from a few very brilliant support desk staff who are able to receive the piece of feedback, and then they talk amongst themselves. They say, “Have you ever seen this before?” They can go into our database and see whether or not this is a request that we've received from many customers. Is this a request that is brand new to us? And that will help them triage and get that information over to the engineering teams.

Tom Butcher (24:30)

Right. And thinking about the advice that you give, do you advise others to set up Mums and Dads?

Jessica Rafuse (24:41)

Yes. I don't know if I am qualified enough to give advice to anyone. Please...

Tom Butcher (24:48)

But...

Jessica Rafuse (24:49)

...it's more of a question I would ask. If I have a customer that is struggling with a particular issue, we got a letter from a regulator, for example, I would ask them, “Well,

how do you receive feedback from your customers before that regulator reaches out to you in the first place? How can we prevent the harm from happening?" And I think that gets them thinking about what sort of channels they have already. Are those channels ones that need additional attention to their accessibility? It doesn't help anyone if you've got a website that isn't accessible for screen reader users. But it's getting them thinking about what their current ecosystem is for customer support, and then asking the questions about what is missing for the lived experience of disability.

Tom Butcher (25:44)

And thinking about what you've just said, I have an inkling that that might speak to the lawyerly part, L-A-W-Y-E-R-L-Y, of who you are, particularly as it were, answering questions prophylactically, or preventatively, so that you don't have a regulator coming down on you. Is that correct?

Jessica Rafuse (26:12)

It is correct. If you have any listeners who are lawyers, I think they will commiserate: once a lawyer, always a lawyer. But I think Microsoft has been really clear in our call for regulation around AI. We have said that we need frameworks as an industry. All of those folks that are creating AI solutions need to understand what the guardrails are. And we've called for regulation.

We've participated in the process, specifically the European Accessibility Act, which is probably the latest and the brightest of the regulations that we've seen around accessibility. We wanted to make sure that our expertise is useful, and had an interactive process where we can share the experiences that we've had as technology creators and makers. So I think the way that we handle regulation might be different from other companies, but we certainly see that there's a place for...

Tom Butcher (27:20)

I think you do an incredibly good job balancing being a lawyer with everything else that you do. Not least that I can understand absolutely everything you're telling us, and so often that is not the case when I speak to lawyers. It sometimes can be difficult. I'd like to move on and look at current trends, developments, and challenges for the types of solutions that we've been talking about, particularly in the context of two things: personalization and multimodality. And I think it would be really, really useful to find out where you think things are going, whether they're going somewhere different from whence they came, and just your take on trends.

Jessica Rafuse (28:22)

One of my favorite things to do when I'm out and about is to ask users, “What do you want to see in accessible and inclusive technology?” Because I can take those little gems, those little nuggets of expertise, and share them with our engineers. And there is nothing an engineer wants more than to delight their customers. So I'll come back and say just exactly what you explained: personalization.

I talked to someone who is blind in Minnesota and they're looking for a way that they can personalize that experience. They want to have magnification and they want to pair that together with a screen reader. They want screen readers to use voices that are either more verbose or less verbose. Those types of nuggets are very valuable to our engineering teams. I think it goes beyond just what we think standard accessibility might be, things like font or access to screen readers. It's also languages. It's also personalization of your voice, if we think about custom neural voices. And it's also the option to turn on, turn off, and change your mind. So that's what personalization kind of means to me in the conversations I've had.

Tom Butcher (29:44)

And what about multimodality?

Jessica Rafuse (29:46)

This again is choice. I have a woman on my team who has a type of ALS or MND, and she has a different experience in the mornings as compared to in the afternoons. Sometimes she's feeling tired and she wants to use text to speech and speech to text. And sometimes she's feeling like the stylus pen that she uses is a better experience for her. So being able to speak, being able to use audio, being able to use tactile, all of these are choices that people are asking for from our...

Tom Butcher (30:26)

Essentially they meld into the whole issue of personalization. As they say, horses for courses, it's what works. What I'd like to do now is to move on to challenges, and two challenges that appear to me to be, particularly at present, really important. On the one hand, accuracy and representation. And then on the other hand, that perennial challenge of speed versus responsibility. What are your thoughts on both of those two? They're very different. But again, rather like multimodality and personalization, there are intersections and integrations.

Jessica Rafuse (31:15)

Yeah, representation. I think the risk, and we can come back to the risks and the rewards of AI, is that if we do not have the data sets in order to build an inclusive AI, then people will get left out. Some of the examples that we've discovered are in what we call red teaming. That's where we go and we play around with the technology and ask it to create things for us. We have seen that assistive technology is woefully underrepresented in visual data. So someone's cane, for a blind person, might not be a white cane. It could be a wooden cane. And any person who is familiar with the blind community would say this is not an authentic representation.

Probably the most notable is when we had one of our customers come to us and say that she asked AI to create an image of a person who was of short stature, someone with dwarfism. And the result was woefully offensive. It created an image of a small person, like a child, and this person was wearing candy cane striped pants. They had pointed ears and they had shoes with bells on them. Clearly, the understanding of the system was that dwarfism was equivalent to the holiday representations of elves. That is absolutely not an accurate representation of people with dwarfism. And the AI had messed up. Now, it was a hallucination, because it didn't have enough data of what people with dwarfism actually looked like. So we acquired more data. We've worked with Little People of America. We've worked with organizations outside of the United States to acquire more imagery of people with dwarfism that was a more accurate representation.

Tom Butcher (33:24)

Am I not correct? Yeah, I know that story and I think it's absolutely wonderful, not least because of the results that came from that one person getting in touch with you. But if I'm not wrong, it's not only that area, you're now looking at representations of persons with visual impairments and a number of other disabilities. So it was something which went wrong at the beginning, but it has led to so much positive work coming out.

Jessica Rafuse (34:06)

Better output. Yeah. It really has. And we cannot red team every scenario. So we need to have that feedback. Going back to, you know, my number one piece of advice, which is to collect the feedback. But the output is better for all customers. So that's one reason to do it. That's one reason why accessibility is the next AI advantage. It creates better outputs when it's more inclusive. And I would also say that it builds greater trust with our

customers when they understand that we will look after a concern that they have and will do our best job to improve the experience.

Tom Butcher (34:49)

Right. Yeah, which is the obvious way to do it. But quite often the obvious is not obvious. Sorry, that's really trite.

Jessica Rafuse (34:59)

No, I think what you're saying I can relate to because of the obvious. I remember when we were first taking a look at what generative AI, agentic AI, could do for disability scenarios. And I said, “Tell me a story about a woman in a wheelchair, me, who is a lawyer.” And it came back and it said, “I'm sorry, but I can't do that.” Okay.

Tom Butcher (35:29)

All right.

Jessica Rafuse (35:30)

Apparently we can't create stories about people in wheelchairs. So perhaps the pendulum swung a bit too far. It said we need to protect the disability community by not creating stories, imagery, or output about them. Okay. That's an overcorrection. So there is a balance there, to teach and train these models to understand that disability is a strength. No need to apologize to someone who is blind, no need to have sympathy or pity for them, but rather you are following the instruction of the user to create something that can be empowering to them.

Tom Butcher (36:12)

Right. Absolutely. Can we go back and can you speak a wee bit about the whole issue of speed versus responsibility, and the fact that responsibility is built into the development process from the start, if you're going to be successful?

Jessica Rafuse (36:38)

Yeah. I mean, this falls into what I think is one of the biggest challenges we're facing today. Speed is the outcome, speed is the symptom. But if we pull back the layers of the onion a little bit more, speed isn't the cause. The cause is that we are looking after accessibility bugs too late. And when I say we, I mean the industry, all of technology.

So we are making a very intentional initiative, a project embedded into our company culture at Microsoft, that we call Shift Left. And Shift Left means starting at the

beginning of the technology life cycle, the beginning of creation. We are training our AT and AI developers across Microsoft to build accessibility into their processes early and often. That means coding, that means leveraging existing AI tools, that means keeping a human in the loop for that, testing all the way through the process until we release that product, making sure that people with disabilities are included every step of the way. But shifting left means start early and do it often.

Tom Butcher (38:01)

I think that's great. Before I move on to AI, and we book ourselves in for the next six weeks of discussions... No, but before moving on to AI, I'd really like to look at partnerships. In an article that you wrote, you said that Microsoft's responsible AI framework includes fairness, reliability and safety, privacy and security, transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness. And that through the responsible AI framework, Microsoft partners with companies around the world who are providing accessible products and services.

Since a great deal of what you do concerns partnerships, could you tell us a little bit about the partnerships and communities that you create, and perhaps a few real-life examples in the form of what you've been doing with Global Symbols and Cboard?

Jessica Rafuse (39:14)

My team is called Accessibility Activate, and I have some very brilliant disabled folks who work on my team that are attempting to do just that. We want to be able to accelerate accessibility with and through others. So they spend a lot of time with NGOs. They spend a lot of time with commercial partners, with the AT industry, and they share the resources that we have. Microsoft has always been very open to sharing what we've created. That doesn't mean it's going to work for everyone. It doesn't mean it's going to be helpful for everyone. But I really believe in this culture that we have where if there's something that benefited us internally, give it away. Give it to others.

And one of those things is the responsible AI framework that we created. In this era of AI, so much of the technology that's being built is being built by smaller companies, startups, just starting out of the gate, new apps, new developers. Although, of course, the big tech companies are very strong in this area as well. The larger tech companies likely have those policies in place. We already have a responsible AI framework, and we've seen when it works and when it doesn't, and we can share those best practices. What we want to do is to be able to share what we have with others so that hopefully it gives them

a bit of a leg up as they begin to build the technologies as well. So we spend quite a bit of time doing just that. We've created trainings and skilling programs that have reached eight million people. And where those trainings are helpful, by all means, I hope others take them and use them internally as well.

I mean, at the end of the day, the worst kept secret that I have is that I want to make the world a more accessible place. And that's what is important to me. I am, of course, very fortunate that I have a platform like Microsoft in order to do that. But that's how I sleep at night. That's why I wake up in the morning and I'm excited to go to work, because I think with this large company and platform and resources that we have, although of course limited, I'll be able to reach more people with disabilities and create more accessible experiences.

Tom Butcher (41:47)

And that appears to me to be a natural progression from partnerships to communities, and the fact that whilst partnerships are quite often transactional, communities are not. Would you say that you've seen that sort of progression in the work that you've done?

Jessica Rafuse (42:10)

There's always a role for community in all that we do. And that is a value that we try to share with our partners as well. You brought up a couple of great examples. One that really comes to mind for me right now is OneCourt. OneCourt is an AI solution for people who are blind attending sporting events. So I love football. I love soccer.

Not American football. And during the FIFA World Cup, it was such an incredible experience to watch folks who are blind have this device in their hands that creates a tactile representation of what's happening on the pitch. So they can feel the ball moving, they know who has possession, and they know why their fellow fans are cheering in the middle of the stadium. And whether or not you like sports, that is an experience of inclusion. So we partnered with OneCourt to help them build on Azure, a Microsoft platform, so that they could create an inclusive experience using our technology.

Tom Butcher (43:27)

Right. Thanks for that example. I was going to ask a question about AI, but I think any question that I ask about AI is redundant on the basis of what you've been telling us. So can I go back, and if you are able to talk about it, can you tell us a little bit about what

you've done with Global Symbols and Cboard? I think people would be really interested in those real-life examples too.

Jessica Rafuse (43:56)

Absolutely. So those specific examples are separate, but they cover the same area of interest. This is for folks that are not using their voice to communicate. With Global Symbols, if you remember back in elementary school, when kids who were not using their voices to communicate, the teacher would need to print out a list of symbols. It could be a picture of their book, a picture of their math test. And they would use those printouts in order to communicate amongst each other. We've come a long, long way. And this is because of the AT industry, creating technologies that can be more instantaneous. We compiled that, and by we, I mean Global Symbols, with AI so that they are far more discoverable, to create communication between the teacher, between the friend, between the spouse, and the person who's not using their voice to communicate.

What I love about Cboard is that this is a disabled-CEO-led company that is truly innovative. Martin is brilliant. He knows exactly what his community needs because he spends a whole lot of time with them and because of his own lived experience. So with Cboard being powered by AI, we are taking the genius that is within Martin and Cboard, and we're allowing it to scale. So all credit goes to those two organizations.

Tom Butcher (45:32)

Great, thank you very much. Jessica, I'd like to ask a very quick question on AT and AT adaptations. Do you see that there is still space for AT adaptations that are not powered by AI?

Jessica Rafuse (45:54)

Yes, absolutely. And it's an important one to call out. I think about my own experiences and what I need in order to be productive and happy and love my job, and much of those are not digital at all. So a couple of things. I think a lot of the technologies that are being created that in the past haven't been AI powered might be, and we don't know it. And then the second thing is there are a lot of physical adjustments that any company can make that don't have much to do with digital at all.

A few examples for me: when I travel, and I love to travel, I'm a glutton for punishment though because it's not a great experience for wheelchair users, but I just keep doing it. When I do travel, I bring with me a personal care attendant, an assistant who helps me.

And he's a real person. Not digital at all. But I need to make sure that the company, my employer, has the processes and the infrastructure in place to make that happen. First things first, a centralized accommodation fund. My boss never knows how gorgeously expensive it is for me to travel with someone else. They know that I'm worth it. Because they put that through a centralized fund, she never sees the cost it is for me to travel with someone else.

I think that's a really important part of making sure that people with disabilities have mobility in an organization where they can move to a different team. Maybe you get a boss that's not as inclusive, not as caring about accommodations. And that's a good way for you to take those costs and put them in a central location. So yes, I think that there is a space for every type of accommodation. And I think it needs to be a process where the manager and the employee have a transparent conversation about what's needed to support them.

Tom Butcher (48:00)

And if I'm not wrong, there is of course in that always the issue of personalization. Some people prefer analog to digital, and maybe the two can serve the same purpose, but it's a matter of choice and you need to give people the choice.

Jessica Rafuse (48:19)

Choice, multimodality, all these themes that we were talking about related to digital, I think are true for those accommodations in the built environment or adjustments. I know that our team has centralized American Sign Language support, or sign language support, that goes through a central office at Microsoft. Some folks choose to have an interpreter with them in the room, in the conference room. And some prefer to have a remote or a virtual interpreter. And so that comes down to choice. And sometimes we don't know how to create processes and we kind of make it up, but it's part of our culture to try things and to fail fast.

Tom Butcher (49:06)

Great, thank you very much. I'm cognizant of the time. It has been absolutely fascinating, and I will try to sum up our discussion in three takeaways. I see the first one being: accessibility is the next AI advantage. It reaches more customers with greater business outcomes.

The second is essentially Microsoft's definition of AI: responsible AI must be accessible AI, and vice versa. Accessible AI must be responsible.

Jessica Rafuse (49:47)

That's right.

Tom Butcher (49:48)

And therefore, accessibility, representation, and responsibility need to be built into AI from the very beginning. So you shift very, very far left. That would be my second takeaway. And then the third takeaway is really close to home for you, which is that partnership is an essential part of product strategy. Better together, because if you have partnerships, you can fill the gaps. Would you say that those were three good takeaways from our discussion?

Jessica Rafuse (50:31)

Brilliant, Tom. I think those are fantastic. If I could just give some parting thoughts on this: I recognize where we are at, and we talked about this a little at the beginning. This is a time that is ripe with risk. It's a little bit scary. The pace is causing a lot of alarm for folks, and we need to take that very seriously. There are risks associated with AI. That makes responsible and accessible AI even more important.

But we also started talking about art and art history. And I know that you have an artist very near and dear to your heart. We both share a love for art. I have been spending a lot of time thinking back about the very first time there was a photograph of a human being. 1800s in Paris. This is a picture of, of course, the camera wasn't sophisticated enough and had an exposure time that only allowed for someone who was truly standing still to be captured in the image. So there is likely a gentleman. He has perhaps a top hat on and he is getting his shoes shined. You're there, you're still for quite a bit of time when you're getting your shoes shined.

When this first image of a human being, this photograph, was created, the arts industry, the artists around Paris, were up in arms. “Art is dead” were some of the quotes. “We'll never be able to recover the industry of portraiture.” And I think those fears were warranted. But take a look at what happened afterwards. Picasso came along and he said, “Well, I don't need a photorealistic portrait of someone. I'm going to create Cubism.” Surrealism. What did Dalí do? Dalí's self-portrait is like a melting candle wax or a piece of

molten lava, is how he described himself, all the way through to the pop artists who were creating pixelated images.

We are in a similar time and space right now where the technology is creating insecurities about what jobs will be left for us. What is the potential of human creativity when technology is building off of what we've done in the past? These are very good ethical questions for us to be asking right now. But I hope that we all can leave with a bit of optimism that the creativity and the artistry and the human ambition is something that technology will never be able to replicate.

Tom Butcher (53:18)

I agree. I don't think it ever will. And hopefully it never will. Thank you for adding that. Jessica, I'm not going to let you go, I'm afraid. There's always something that I ask my guests either during an interview or during a podcast, which is: could you give our listeners and me a single call to action to take away with them?

Jessica Rafuse (53:50)

Yes, I've got homework for everyone.

Tom Butcher (53:52)

Fire away.

Jessica Rafuse (53:53)

I think my call to action would be to have a conversation with someone with a disability. It could be a loved one, it could be someone that you work with, and ask them what they want to see in the AI economy. And I think we'll be surprised at the diversity of those responses. I think that will teach us a whole lot about where we are today as a society. But it's also going to teach you a whole lot about what the potential of technology can do for our community. So “ask an expert” is my one call to action for folks, because now is the time for us to be having these conversations about ethics and what that means for our community.

Tom Butcher (54:40)

Thank you. So, to steal from the real estate field, location, location, location, it's feedback, feedback, feedback.

Jessica Rafuse (54:54)

I love that.

Tom Butcher (54:56)

It's pretty cliched and a bit naff, as they say in England. Jessica, thank you once again for joining us, sharing with us not only what you're doing, but what Microsoft is doing, sharing your experiences, so much of your wisdom from so many different fields, whether it's being a lawyer or whether it's history of art. We haven't had much Spanish except for the football. And football, football, football. Yes, that's right. Thank you. It's been absolutely great.

And listeners, please look out for our next episode.

Judith Hermetter (55:39)

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