

# Oral History of Michelle September

Interviewed by **Becky Monk** for the Microsoft Alumni Network

October 3, 2024

## Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Michelle September as conducted by Becky Monk on October 3, 2024, at Microsoft Studios in Redmond, Washington. This interview is part of the Microsoft Alumni Network's Microsoft Alumni Voices initiative. The goal of this project is to record the institutional history of Microsoft through the recollections of its former employees, so that the information may inform and inspire future generations.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word captured through video rather than written prose. The content reflects the recollections of the interviewee. The following transcript was edited by the Microsoft Alumni Network, which holds the copyright to this work.

## Interview

Becky Monk: Thank you for being here Michelle. The first thing we're going to do is I'm just going to have you get the hard part out of the way, which is saying your name, where you live, and the years you worked at Microsoft.

Michelle September: My name is Michelle September. I live in South Africa, Cape Town, and I worked for Microsoft from 2003 till 2021.

Becky Monk: Fantastic. Okay. In 30 seconds, what did you do there?

Michelle September: I was, I would like to think a sort of customer-facing resource. My profession was sales or my discipline was in the sales organization. I was always of the opinion everyone in Microsoft

should be customer-facing or some role. Sales is always in our roles. So, my primary role was sales.

Becky Monk: Thank you. Alright, let's go way back to the very, very beginning. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Michele September: Yeah, Cape Town. I was born in Cape Town.

Becky Monk: Great. Let's do that one again. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Michele September: I was born in Cape Town, South Africa, and I grew up in a little neighborhood called Elis River.

Becky Monk: Tell me about your family.

Michele September: Very small family, mom and dad and brother. I'm the youngest.

Becky Monk: You're the youngest. Oh my gosh. What was it like growing up? What was the neighborhood like? What if you're setting the scene for people who don't know that area, that region, tell me what that neighborhood was like and what you were like as a family.

Michele September: Both parents worked and blue-collar workers and they put us through school. And when I mean school, I mean not college, not higher education school. And that was also during Apartheid years in South Africa. And that was at the time, think about the 1980s where there were a lot of uprising and protests. So, I'll give you an example, my high school here, I wrote exams with the army, the military overseeing us because they wanted to make sure that we don't protest during exams. So that was sort of the mindset. In fact, one year of high school in I think it was grade eight, my parents sent me to boarding school because it got really bad for us as school kids when police—what we would call the Apartheid Police— would just come in the middle of the night and burst into your house and arrest you, right? Because they took videos or they had pictures of you or they had what we would call spies, and they

would pinpoint where you stay. And my parents were very strict so I could never do that. But they were just so concerned that they sent me away outside of Cape Town for a year so that I can be in a safe learning environment.

Becky Monk: I mean I can't even imagine being in that situation and constantly worrying like that. What was it that you talked about wanting to do after...I mean your parents putting you through basically high school? Did you have aspirations to go on to college?

Michele September: Yeah, at that time you had limited options with regards to where you could go. So teaching was one and I wanted to go to nursing school. That was sort of where I could go in my dreams, I could go there. There was this ceiling, you couldn't go further because your world was very limited because remember there were sanctions, we weren't exposed to a lot and information. So your dream was the one thing I knew, and my parents instilled, was education. But at that time the government gave you part [garbled] for teaching and nursing. So that's where it could go. And that's what I did. I applied for nursing. College was very strict. I got into nursing college. I was very excited about that.

Becky Monk: You got into nursing college? How did you then end up working at Microsoft? Because am I right you didn't get your nursing degree?

Michele September: I did. I did not get my nursing degree. I did not see the nursing college. I got in, I got my approval letter and then your intake is in April next year we are excited to have you. And then I decided to earn extra money and go and help out at an IT store, and that was it. I never went to the college, I never saw the nursing college. I was sold. It was a whole new world that opened for me. So, I started, that's where my IT career started.

Becky Monk: Okay. What was it about working there? What was it that sparked your imagination that said this is what I want to do?

Michele September: It was a new world. It was a world of possibilities. Now remember at that time it was not necessarily Microsoft because Microsoft at that time was not necessarily in the country because of sanctions. This is pre-Nelson Mandela's release from prison. So, they were still negotiating that sort of Unity Government. So, there were still riots going on, so it's still a different world. And now I'm in this world where first time that I was exposed to a computer, et cetera. But I was curious. I was just so curious. It was like this new world open and this new world of possibilities I didn't dream of, "I'm going to go work for Microsoft" because remember that time Microsoft was not in the country. It was just the possibility of technology and what you can do and this information. And I remember I had a typewriter in school and I was typing, I did like 27 words per minute.

Becky Monk: Me too, me too. I had a typewriter. There weren't really a lot of options we were exposed to either. Okay, so you got to see this technology, and you were curious, and it excited you. So, did you continue working at the IT store? How did you end up in the technology industry?

Michele September: So we had a distributor for Microsoft in the country. That was the only way Microsoft software would come into the country, right through this distributor, what we would now call part of the channel. But at that time, they were Microsoft basically. And I remember this rep used to call on us in this little store and I said, "I want to work for you." And I continued to say that and she was like, what are you going to do? And I can't even remember what I told her, but I just gave her a list of things that I will do. And one day she came to me and she's like, are you still interested? I'm like, yes, of course I'm interested. And I applied for the job. I remember one of the interviews was like how would you sell ICE to an Eskimo? I don't think I knew what an Eskimo was at that time, but I had a story to tell. But that's how I got into that distributor world, learning about channel, learning about partners, learning about Microsoft software licensing. And that's where I met the person who introduced me to

Microsoft. Who was that person? That person was a lady by the name of Albi Breen.

We worked together and I had this thing as we didn't have a lot of money my parents, but the one thing they installed was and led by example was a real good work ethic and always wanting to be the best. And my curiosity impressed her because eventually she got to Microsoft and when she was there she recruited me or asked me if I'm interested. I had to go through the whole interview loop, but I made obviously an impression on her and she recruited me into Microsoft.

Becky Monk: That's so wonderful. Tell me about what changed in the world so that Microsoft could open in South Africa, and how quickly did after the change did Microsoft open its offices there?

Michele September: It was actually in the midst of that negotiation they opened. So for example, I worked for that distributor for six years, so it was a while I worked for them. And in that time Microsoft actually opened offices. So they opened in 1992 in Johannesburg a small office. They actually, in fact, what happened and in that 1992 the negotiations with Nelson Mandela release his negotiation, what he wants, why he's going to be president, conditions for him being president. That was still being negotiated. But Microsoft came in at the right time with that change. Looking back, I would almost say it was almost like it was orchestrated because it came in at the right time into the country to the point where Nelson Mandela opened the second office, the big office, I think the building they're in now, Nelson Mandela opened that office for Microsoft, which is great.

Becky Monk: Yeah. Were you there at that moment?

Michele September: No, I was, no, I wasn't there. I wish I was there.

Becky Monk: That would have been exciting to see. Alright, so you got your job. You told them how you'd sell ice to an Eskimo. I love that. Tell me about your first day at Microsoft.

Michele September: That I had to pinch myself people. Can I just go back, take a few steps back? When I was in my transition into this IT world, one foot in my first car, I bought it from a gentleman and it was like that poor car got stuck so many times with that car. But when he sold me this car, he said to me, people like you, this is what you can afford. You will never have an expensive car and you will never leave where you are. But you know what, today I thank him for it because that was my push and that was my drive. Okay, so take it back 10 years or so later and I hook into Microsoft. I have to pinch myself that I, not knowing that the Microsoft culture, you never arrive basically. And I say that with I loved it, everything of it. But yeah, so it was just such a surreal moment walking in and I was in awe of everything. I was just so proud of that. I made it, I got in, but I walked in, owned the building. I've been there before. But yes, I remember the feeling it asked me what was my outfit, where my desk was. Can't remember that. But I do remember the feeling of walking into that building. Fantastic. What was your first role? My first role was internal sales. At that time the role was called customer relationship manager.

Becky Monk: Okay. And where was this? Was this in Public Sector?

Michele September: No, this was just customer relationship and across all industries, just across industry support for the sales organization.

Becky Monk: What did that entail? What were your tasks?

Michele September: I worked in Cape Town, so I supported the sales organization, not necessarily specific teams, internal sales. So everything they can't pick up, I would pick up or go with them to join sales calls, customer visits a lot that I did because at that time the partner account manager was on some extended leave, something to that

effect. And they asked me to step in and I stepped in and that was magic. I loved it. Once again, that curiosity, what is that role like? I was curious about that and the stretch. What can I do more? How can I learn different parts? I was really curious about that.

Becky Monk: Yeah. So for everybody who's not familiar with the way Microsoft labels its jobs, what did that entail?

Michele September: Okay, so customer relationship manager at that time Microsoft had this program called customer and partner experience we're big on the customer and partner satisfaction service would go out and we would get scores back and where we need to improve. So that was huge and it's a huge commitment. In fact, it was on commitments at that time. We used to call it commitments and part of my role was to ensure that the customer, so the account teams, the partner teams have everything that they needed to support their goals. So I would like to articulate as at that time, my first role in Microsoft was what we would now call a junior role, if I can call it that.

But typical Microsoft, it's not that it still, every role in the organization plays a part. It contributes to a bigger objective and also roles, you kind of do more than what your role requires. That just was Microsoft at that time. It's not that you'd all this headcount, you would always do more than what your role prescribed. And I signed up for that. So when I would step into a partner role because someone is on an extended vacation or extended leave would be I would manage, I would be standing for the PAM for the partner account manager or I would step into an account executive role while the person is out. If we have forecast meetings and we are going to miss the number for the quarter, we all collectively how we are going to make that number. If that means we are going to have campaigns, then it's like what kind of campaign are we going to run? Is it going to be a through partner campaign? Is it going to be directly with customers? So that is the support that we would give to at that time the office of the Cape Town office, the territory to

make number. Ultimately everyone just jump in and make the number.

Becky Monk: Fantastic, thank you. Thank you for that detail. I think people will have a good picture of what that was like. So after a few years you became an account executive with Microsoft in the Public Sector. What was that role? I know I feel like being in the Public Sector, especially in South Africa after things were just kind of shaking out politically, that must've been a really interesting role. Talk a little bit about the role and what it was you were doing.

Michele September: Yeah, so after 18 months, 18 months in that first role I got into Public Sector account exec for specifically local and regional government. But also because I was in the, in Cape Town, Cape Town is the legislature city for the government. So, a lot happens here as well. So, my role was more than just an account executive, which was great. I got to connect with government officials, go to the opening of parliament. Microsoft played a huge role at that time because technology started to play a role in government at that time. We were also at a time where Microsoft influenced policy for the government at that time. So, my Public Sector role was a mixed board was of, I worked very closely with corporate affairs at that time. Now Brad Smith's organization at that time, they played a massive role in Public Sector in how we drive policy within governments in various countries obviously. But in South Africa at that time obviously it was really key and instrumental and it's looking back now to it's how many years, 20, 21 years later, how that work has paid off significantly.

Becky Monk: How so?

Michele September: Microsoft is seen as this trusted advisor for government. It plays such, I would call it's the corporate citizen of the government.

Becky Monk: Was that something that you had ever seen before, companies having that kind of sway, that kind of influence on government?



Michele September: Yes. I have, especially international companies, not what we call multinational companies coming in and having that influence in government. And I would probably say also even at that time winning with the government more so than Microsoft, the difference Microsoft was in it for the long term. Like Microsoft is still sitting at that table. In fact, Microsoft is still driving conversations at that table where some of them have fell off, right? They're no longer there. But because of that strategic engagement, it was a long-term effect. It was a sustainable growth effect and continues to be that. And even though it had sort of separate at that time it was government of unity, various governments have come in flavors. It's still predominantly the ANC, but sort of very different players and it continues to have that strategic role within government.

Becky Monk: I love that. What do you consider your crowning achievement in that role while you were there?

Michele September: So I wanted to make it my own role. I wanted to be, I remember I said to my manager that I want to be the best account manager. That was my mission. That was what I wanted or my personal growth. I wanted to be the best account manager and I realized I needed, if I wanted be the best account manager, I need to understand my customer or I need to make the number and I need to understand my customer and I need to make my customer happy. High set scores or customer set scores we used to call it. And in order to do that I needed to have a deep, deep understanding of the industry. And government is a very complex industry as you would know, but it's also the most rewarding industry in terms of what you put in. You get out and I worked for a company, Microsoft, that had a vested interest to be known in Public Sector to do the work in Public Sector. And the work sometimes is not just, oh go sell technology. The work is how can we help government be better governments and help citizens and deliver citizen services, all that basic services, how technology can

empower governments to do that. And sometimes that means our role is though we are a sales organization, we sometimes needed to look at a bigger picture and put the sales role aside and look at that trusted advisor, strategic partner role. And I feel that has paid off, they made the right decisions at the right time and it has paid off.

Becky Monk: Yeah. You talked a little bit about needing to learn so much, really understand the government, understand your client. You had a mentor that helped you who wasn't at Microsoft. Tell me a little bit about that.

Michele September: Yes, I had a mentor. The mentor was former CIO, or at that time he was the CIO of City of Cape Town, a very well-known, CIO. He actually won a CIO of the Year Award I think in Europe. So very well known. He was tough as nails gave us a really, really hard time. Remember at that time Microsoft was also very new in this Public Sector because we were busy building our Public Sector competency. And he would, every time it's like you guys come in and it's nice to see because we always would come in with energy. We are the energy people, the young kids, the new kids on the block and we would always get a meeting and he said, but be relevant to my business, be relevant to government. And you always would get me on that. And you know what, I would be the one who would say that. So, we would bring people into meetings and after they leave you're like, can you ask them to be more relevant to my business? Okay, that was his name. Teach me how to do that. Teach me how to be more relevant to government. Teach me how government operates, and would you be my mentor? And he agreed to be my mentor, changed my world, ignited that passion for government, and it's just never left me.

Becky Monk: That's fantastic. That's just amazing. I tell me then, okay, you've been there in that role for a while. How did you end up moving into the worldwide role and what was the title for that worldwide role?

Michele September: So yeah, I relocated to Redmond in 2010, and I was looked at for that role earlier in 2010. But what happened, it was I signed this really big deal with the local government, another city. It was another client, and they were net new to Microsoft. And this is a client that two years before 2010, so that's in 2008, they told me over our dead body will you, Microsoft, sign a deal with us? That's what the customer told us in a meeting. And that's what you have to give Microsoft, give us a challenge and we'll go out of way to show you why you will do business with us. And we did that in the most constructive sustainable way that today currently that is Microsoft's biggest customer on the continent from a revenue perspective. And they, in fact, after I relocated, this is the CIO who called me while I was in the states to say, I just want to let you know we are moving to Azure, and we will be the first government department that's moving to Azure.

But what happened is we listened to the customer, we didn't push when he said that we are like game on, we'll show you why you will buy from us. We are not going to sell to you. You will buy from us. And it meant at that time we knew they were noncompliant that we had to. That year I took a knock on my quota that I didn't, that's the only year in my sales career that I didn't make my number but intentionally because we didn't want to audit the client, we didn't want an audit deal and we agreed that we will look at it long-term. The next year they signed the deal and the orchestration of that deal was there was quite a few people involved and that's how I got noticed. I would assume I still had to go through the interview loop and all that, but that's how I got noticed in Microsoft Redmond. And I remember the VP at that time was a lady by the name of Linda Zecher and she said to me, but you're coming over for three years and we want to learn and scale the work you've been doing in provincial or regional government and then you need to go back to South Africa.

Becky Monk: Why was it a three-year gig?

Michele September: They tried to start a program where you'll get that field expertise into Redmond and sort of this mutual field come in, share and scale that sales knowledge and then also learn from other areas and then you go back with that skillset back to your country. Not that you have to, it was just this program that they tried to launch at that time.

Becky Monk: Got it. Okay. Had you ever been to the U.S. before this move?

Michele September: Yes, because I have been to the U.S. with Microsoft, thank you. Remember back in the day, we used to have something called MS 101. When you joined Microsoft, you would come for one week to Redmond and they called it MS 101 for new hires and I think there was MS 102 that was for the technical track and they would stay for two weeks, but for sales it would be one week. And you had all these people coming to you. You're just in awe, right? Because you get all these people that you see on stage at MGX, and they will come into the room and talk to you about this strategy, et cetera. So yes, I've been to the U.S. before that, remember we used to have these annual sales conference, I remember MGX, MGB. It had different names, but it was this conference someplace different. I remember Atlanta, Orlando, all those places. So yes, I've been there in the US. Strangely enough, I never thought that I'll move to the U.S. It was never that, oh, I'm going to live in the U.S.

Becky Monk: So what was it about a role at the corporate headquarters in Redmond that made you say, yeah, I'm going to pick up and I'm going to move?

Michele September: Curiosity to learn more. Because we used to call it "the mothership," who would not want to go into the mothership and learn about the company? And it was this, think about it, you'd go to these MGX gigs and you would see these people on stage and you're like, I just want to learn more about what they're doing, how they're doing it. And that opportunity is yes, I will be there. And yes, in 2010, the weekend of Thanksgiving I arrived in the U.S.

Becky Monk: Fantastic. Okay, you're here. What were you working on when you got here first?

Michele September: My primary role when I moved to Redmond... my primary role was to develop partners for local and regional government around the world. Sort of think about it as we used to call it industry partner, development manager or lead. And you work with the different regions in expanding or recruiting partners to sell into Public Sector. And by that is how do you enable them to sell into public? How do you enable partners to sell into Public Sector? Because that is the only way as an organization that we scale is through our partner ecosystem. And because Public Sector was fairly new, this industry selling thing was fairly new. Well not that, not fairly new, but we just did not have that stretch of partners that could go and sell for us to be successful as an organization to go sell into the market.

Becky Monk: Okay, so let me ask it this way. You have mentioned that the Trustworthy Computing Initiative that Bill Gates talked about — available, reliable, secure — as standard services that really helped make a breakthrough really in the Public Sector. Tell me more about that and why it was so important to your customers and really to the company.

Michele September: So in the early 2000s, if we remember that time, it's a lot happening with Microsoft with regards to Windows patch updates, and we were the new kid on the block so people were throwing everything at us and we needed to elevate ourselves as a strategic technology partner. And I still believe it today, in fact it was probably if we look at where Microsoft is today with security, the Trustworthy Computing Initiative in the early 2000s that Bill Gates kicked off was the beginning of that, the beginning of Microsoft security status as the player was Trustworthy Computing.

If we think about Microsoft that time, this young kid on the block, the cool kids and we embarked on this journey of trustworthy

computing, it leaves me in awe of the leadership at that time that could come up with that because even today there's still legs of that trustworthy computing in the company, but it elevated our status with our customers more so in Public Sector, I would probably say more so in regulated industries. When I say regulated industries, I include financial services because it's a highly regulated industry. How I use that was when customers would raise objections of why they can't trust us or why our software is not reliable, we would bring that in. But if you remember, that was almost a campaign on its own. They gave us all the resources to go and have that conversation from customer decks, from technical resources to have that conversation.

And I think behind that they also put a lot of the changes into that patch updates, that service patching that I think Tuesday patch day that they would put that in and those resources and those frameworks into play that supported this initiative. So it wasn't just a theoretical thing, it was very core to the company. So core to the company that once again legal and corporate affairs got involved and allocated resources. I think a whole division for this, it was the TWC, Trustworthy Computing. We have to have abbreviations, acronyms. They allocated the legal and corporate affairs division just for TWC. That is I believe when we embarked on strategic selling, we didn't call it then because we weren't cool, we didn't come up with those words. But that was the beginning of this very mature organization is like we grew up as a company doing Trustworthy Computing and probably on a leadership level they had that all figured out way before it came to us.

But when it hit the market and customers, it changed the game for Microsoft, it just elevated the company as a trustworthy partner. There was so much magic into that initiative in terms of getting us a seat at the table. And you know what, sometimes we didn't have the answers and sometimes yes we still had issues with patches et cetera, but the fact that we could have that conversation, the fact

that we could talk roadmap to clients, the fact that we could give them access to our service patches, that changed the game for us with these regulated industries and customers and our conversations.

Becky Monk: Fantastic, fantastic. I want to move on because it didn't go back to Africa. You stayed here in the U.S. so when your three years in that first role were done, what kept you here? How did you end up staying?

Michele September: I really enjoyed what I was doing, and it has that whole thing at Microsoft at that time we would talk about your first year when you're in your role the first year it's very uncomfortable in your new role you dunno what you're doing, you're learning and then you year two you sort of just getting used to and your team and getting going in your role and the third year you just knock it out of the park, you just hit it on all cylinders and I was that. I was like, but there's so much more work to do. And at that time it was very entrepreneurial because Public Sector was this thing that we didn't quite know what sort of different cycles and I remember at that time we used to have something called material review where I think it was no one had holidays in December and in January all the leadership travel to the U.S. to Building 33 or somewhere there. Just have these discussions about the strategy for the next year. Product development, it's where engineering sales, everyone comes together, and I wanted more of that. There was just so much more to learn. I wasn't ready to leave.

Becky Monk: When did you move into your next role and what was that next role?

Michele September: I stayed in Worldwide Public Sector and my roles in Worldwide Public Sector changed. I was there for five years so it changed—good changes—and, in 2015, I moved to the Modern Work—now called M365 product marketing organization—because they were looking to how do we bring Public Sector into our product

marketing organization and take our product to market with a Public Sector flavor. So, they just started their Public Sector Industry, or I probably should say introduced the next step for the product marketing organization.

Becky Monk: And your role was go-to-market for all of this?

Michele September: Yes, my role was go-to-market for Public Sector in the M365, or Office 365 or Modern Work, the various names product marketing group. Yes.

Becky Monk: So, what were the challenges? It was new for the Public Sector, but what were the challenges when you were going to market when you were doing this product launch within the Public Sector?

Michele September: There was more of an opportunity for Public Sector in Office 365, M365. I think what we realized is we were leaving revenue on the table because we know that relevant to our client and then it was kind of one of those things we would call the best kept secrets. We had all the compliance, we meet all the compliance, we meet still today, right? Regulatory requirements, we can check all the boxes, but how do we tell that story and that story you tell with that Public Sector flavor. So that was the opportunity and also how do we tell the story which would resonate to Public Sector customers that the features of the product can deliver on their requirements, their needs, their industry, what they need. And that's what we were trying to capture with this new Public Sector flavor in the bg. What also started to happen, we were looking at these various data centers and how at that time we call it data center expansion but also market expansion.

Becky Monk: We've got about a half hour left, so let's quickly go through your next career steps and then we can get into some of the other things that we want to talk about. So after this role, you had another two more roles within Microsoft. What were those roles?



Michele September: Yeah, so I was in the Modern Work product marketing group until 2018 and after that I moved to Modern Work in consultancy services, or Microsoft Consulting Services, also Go to Market around industry. So, this industry sort of the common thread, and it's how do you once again take consulting services offerings, integrate Public Sector industry and take that to market. I was with that group until 2020, and then I moved to Modern Work engineering.

Now that was my dream job to work in engineering. I was fascinated by the engineering organization, how they work, how they get the product, the conceptual side of the product to when the product gets to marketing and it didn't disappoint. I learned all that. The special group of people learned so much from them, but it was also at a time where the way people buy were different. It wasn't the same.

You couldn't just go say and I'm a salesperson, I want to have an appointment. People were looking for credibility and once again, Microsoft started doing that. I know Scott Guthrie's organization was leading on that, on technical selling. How do we get our engineers in front of customers, especially your regulated industries again and actually the results on that was really, really good in terms of accelerating of decisions of the Microsoft platform and they did a really good job and no disrespect to engineers, but they're a little bit awkward in front of customers, but they actually really, really, once they get over that they are phenomenal and I see that shift in the market, it's continued to go that way where customers want to hear from the source and they almost forgive their awkwardness. In fact, that is what makes it so special. They can sit for hours with these guys and just listen to them and I see that even post Microsoft, that trend still going where customers prefer, not say prefer, it's the balance between the sales and the technical, but I think it's no longer where engineer stays in the office and just a technical or the sales organization goes out. I think the customer's going to hear both.

Becky Monk: Yeah, I think a lot of that probably is your customers are now more sophisticated, at least in technology, the words don't scare them, the tech words don't scare them as much.

Michele September: Yes, customers are more sophisticated, they are more informed. So you don't get away with we will give you a discount. They have more of a vested interest by the stock. They actually also want to know more context to the technology and also future vision innovation on the technology side of how that in their world will make their world better and achieve their objectives. Right?

Becky Monk: Yeah, what a magnificent career, a magnificent arc with the company. When we talk about all of the layers of Microsoft, talk to me a little bit about the social impact of Microsoft because you are dealing with the government, you are dealing with the Public Sector. So social impact I would think in your realm, and correct me if I'm wrong here, it didn't just mean the Giving Campaign. Tell me what that meant to you, what social impact at Microsoft means to you.

Michele September: For me, social impact is outside of the Giving Campaign, local grants, all that. Pretty good stuff, but in Public Sector it is a mission. So, if you speak to people in Public Sector, our career was mission driven. It wasn't just a job, it was mission-driven. It was how literally we believe we go out there and we make governments better and by making governments better, we are making it better for citizens. We are making it better for educators, for health professionals where health is part of government in some of those countries where government can do the work of government and how technology empowers them to do that, to deliver on their mandate. How do you use technology for people who go out and vote and not having to queue for hours or days to vote, but where they can cast the democratic vote in a timeless matter because of technology where you have people, I remember one of the things I had to do was open a learning center. It was a multi-generation

Learning center so during the day it was open to adults and after school for the kiddos, for children, school-age children. And we opened it during the day and people talk about this and they probably think it doesn't happen, but when you go and you see these people in their eyes literally pop out because the first time they see a computer, adult women and they take the mouse and they put it on the screen. When you witness that, you know that you have so much work to do. So that technology is not just for the view, but technology is inclusive, it's for everyone, but the hope brings people because it just unlocks these possibilities for them to education digital literacy. And you must remember we are not talking about uneducated people, we just talk about people that has not been exposed to technology. Even government officials, I had government officials, senior government officials that pull me aside, ask me, can you help to train me so that I can understand how to use technology.

Now we all know government officials and just have egos, but you can imagine what it took from that person to ask me that and then ask if I come into train that I don't announce it, that I do it very quietly and that is what the philanthropy in Microsoft, what it sort of meant to me when I worked at Microsoft was how do we broaden that circle to everyone and that's still today my mission of how do I broaden that circle that hope that that was in the woman's eyes that I see that in other folks and we have still so much work to do, but we have the tools, it's just a matter of the scale and we are working on that.

Becky Monk: I love this. You've talked a little bit about why that is personal to you, why the Microsoft vision is very personal to you. Why do you think that it did become so personal to you that Microsoft mission and that mission driven approach?

Michele September: Because technology unlocked my potential. Technology changed my world. It gave me hope. It allowed me to dream. It changed my

world entirely. And the responsibility is on me to make sure that I open that for the people that's coming behind me, for the children, for the women behind me, that me and many others that we pave the way for them. So it is personal because how it empowers you, the knowledge, the access, especially in Africa, it means that what I want to tell people is you don't have to leave the continent or your country to go to the West or go to another country. Technology allows you to stay with your family. That is what technology does. It brings you that you don't have to move to a city or the next bigger city or the next best country. No, you can do it where you are. We can do that for you and that's how technology has evolved over the years. Now how are we going to do that on Microsoft does that, as we all know, if you look as the company matured, we also matured. We all grew up in Microsoft and we learned so much and the experience is so valuable. Now how do I share that global experience that I have opening data centers in Germany, in France, in the U.S., how do I bring it back here? Now if I can do that and we look at all the current and former Microsoft employees and we all do our part for where we are in the world, we can literally change the world, right? So when we used to say that at Microsoft people, you guys are smoking, it sucks. What are you doing? Why are you saying that? It's just a tagline. No, it's not. It was our reality and we continue to do that post-Microsoft because it never leaves you. It just never leaves you.

Becky Monk: I've always been amazed that every single one of you takes that "changing the world," you actually have the mindset that you can do that and you take it out into the world and it's amazing to me. It really is. So, lessons... I want to talk a little bit about the things that you learned at Microsoft because as you said, you grew up at Microsoft, so many people say they've grown up at Microsoft. What are the big lessons that you take with you out into the world?

Michele September: My time post-Microsoft, I couldn't find a company that I could connect with on that deep level. When I say company, I mean a

multinational. Microsoft almost has an unfair disadvantage because of its stack of modern work of the productivity suite of how it relates to people.

Michele September: It was more than a job. It was more than employee and employer. It was deeply personal. I think in some ways it was intentional. If we remember at these conferences how the leadership would bring these people in, how we changed people with disabilities, how technology, technology help developers, people from disadvantaged communities, countries, but also remember [Microsoft] Research used to have a session at these events and they would tell us of things that would happen 10 years from now, right? House of the Future and Factory of the Future and all that. Where are you going to find that? Where are you going to find maybe technology but not the energy? Not that willpower, not that deep rooted personal mission of we can do this and we are doing it.

It's not just a dream. We are living the dream. So the thing I would tell people is live it, experience it. Make it yourself a reality. Make it your reality. The one thing I realized that I wish I'd done more of have more fun, I took it way too seriously but I worked in a very serious industry. There was always work to do for me. Philanthropy is not just another org in Microsoft, it's the heartbeat of Microsoft. It is the core of what we do. That's what differentiates us. We do things to change the world. We started what we are going to put a PC in every home and at now where we are going to allow people to go after their potential to reach their potential. It's ongoing. We are still doing it. We continue to do it post Microsoft. As a Microsoft alum, I continue to do it. I don't know how not to do it. It's in my DNA, right?

Michele September: And then I would probably say learn as much as you can. There's always these opportunities to learn. I feel my secret sauce is probably the curiosity. It's being curious. There's so much to learn in this company and I had the privilege of working in five different

orgs, so I feel I really know the company well. The heartbeat of it. It has its own personality, its own character, it's buzzing and always treasured. That's my learnings. It's just so much. Oh one thing, one of the things at Microsoft that I think people, we don't give ourselves credit for in something we need to continue to do. Microsoft wrote the book on channel, we owned it and we really understand that world of partnership. I would encourage Microsoft to continue with that in terms for that scale and where we are and where we need to go and the work that still needs to be done. We need that partner ecosystem to scale and to reach. So continue to write chapters and chapters of that book and ignite that ecosystem to take it to the next level.

Becky Monk: Fantastic. What do you think is Microsoft's legacy?

Michele September: Microsoft's legacy in the world and it continues to do that year over year. Sometimes events happens and Microsoft steps into it, the right time, right place and one of the things for example is the way we work or the world works and we always talked about that before COVID new way of work things we do, but it really stepped in as a company in that COVID period sort of this, it was ready to step in an innovative way in how we work and how people look at in terms of how we work, how we learn, how we communicate, how we play together, allowed us, gave us a platform to do that in a time when the world needed it and it continues to do so. I think coming back and see how M 365 or Microsoft 365 is, people talk about it now. As I remember years ago people would say Google it and we would say never, no one will say Bing it when Bing just came out. But now M365 is the new Google. People talk about it. People are proud to be associated with M365 because it stepped into that void and it continues to do so in terms of Microsoft Teams, in terms of people giving people access to information when they need it, where they need it. That's innovation.

So very proud of that. In terms of the legacy of Microsoft, if you look at Azure and how Azure has transformed the way companies operate, companies work, how government has been transformed with the cloud and how it helped them to deliver on their mandate to citizens, right? Cloud services. So Microsoft, the vision is phenomenal that from a technology that we just step in and we are able to drive these very innovative technology, whether it's on the productivity side and cloud platform and then we say, oh on top of that we bring in accessibility so that everyone can be included in this innovation and people with disabilities can find these really cool ways to communicate.

Becky Monk: What would you like your legacy within the company to be? What are you most proud of?

Michele September: My proudest moment at Microsoft being part of Microsoft is that me being at Microsoft empowered someone like me outside, that daughter to dream that they could be here, and that they can. Being part of this great company and then also my legacy in terms of my actual role would be of course Public Sector. That I believe that the way I pushed my customers, whether it was parliament, whether it was city or provincial government, that they continue to build and use technology to deliver on their mandate to be bold and sort of adopt the cloud. That the gentleman who said "over my dead body" eventually gave way and is like, "I'll embrace Microsoft," and he bolds. His own legacy, he's known for that, that he's bold. That legacy... that it just would be the Public Sector in terms of the Partner Ecosystem we recruited in Public Sector. That Public Sector's now an industry on its own. It's in everything that we do as a company. I still see myself as part of the company that what Microsoft does as a company and I'm proud of the fact that I was part of that era where we build a solid Public Sector foundation for Microsoft to continue to build on and we technology proved to be so relevant to governments, healthcare sector, financial services with Microsoft plays a neutral in security, all of that.

Becky Monk: Tell me a little bit about moving back to Africa, back to South Africa.

Michele September: So in 2021, I decided that there's still work to be done in my country, South Africa. And I've learned so much, so so much on this global platform that it was time to give back in terms of experiences, in terms of that scale of go-to-market engines, product marketing, business development strategies. But also the one thing I learned is especially from a partner ecosystem, there was just a lot of work to be done. But then also how do you go back and go back to that little neighborhood, that house, this river and say to the people, "Now you can dream. Let me tell you about that dream, what it looks like" because people don't know what they don't know, but when you tell them about this world and that they can step into that world, in fact that world wants them to step in.

That is what I'm doing. I wanted to give back to my community. I realized once I moved back, it's not just my community but it's to the continent because I joined the Alumni Network and that has given me the platform as Microsoft Alumni Network Africa Club lead to work with people across the continent and we do amazing work. Alumni do the most amazing work in their communities. But once again, it's that curiosity is that we do this, we can change the world. We will change the world, and then we still have Microsoft in that sort of big brother mode supporting us with resources we could leverage. So I'm doing all the things about Microsoft that I love. I'm doing, I'm doing product marketing, I'm working with partners, I'm doing philanthropy work. Yeah, I get to do all of that exciting stuff post-Microsoft.

Becky Monk: Fantastic, fantastic. I know we've only got a few minutes left, and I know it's late your time, but is there anything that we didn't touch on that you really want to touch on?

Michele September: I would just like to touch on the one thing that I didn't get to do and I'm so worried I'm not going to get it right because for me this is super important is that last part of the legacy, which is I hope



future generations will regard Microsoft as the company that consistently pushes the boundaries.

Becky Monk: Let me ask you to look ahead and at what the future holds. Look into that crystal ball, what do you hope for Microsoft?

Michele September: Looking ahead, I am enthusiastic about the potential of AI and what it unlocks for the world once again, and the Quantum Computing, and how these technologies can solve complex problems for the world. Once again, both on righteous from a technology perspective, but also real-world problems, how it can resolve those issues for the world and the promises of solving these problems for the world and these global issues will just unlock so much growth once again for the world, but also for the continent already. If I look at Africa, 80% of Africans are using AI daily in some sort of fashion. So, the growth in that is huge for us. But more so from a Microsoft perspective, I hope future generations will regard Microsoft as a company that consistently pushes the boundaries as a company and its people of technology and innovation while it upholds its commitment to ethical practices and social responsibility.

Becky Monk: Thank you for being vulnerable and sharing that. I really do appreciate that, and I appreciate you so much.

Michele September: Yeah, just make it fun. I was truly very vulnerable. Becky, thank you for how you manage this and you made it so much easier. I was so nervous.

Becky Monk: Oh gosh. You're a, a total pro. Thank you.

Michele September: You made it very easy. And the way you ask the questions and for crying with me. Thank you for asking me to participate in this means so much to me.