Oral History of Jon DeVaan

Interviewed by **Mario Juarez** for the Microsoft Alumni Network

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Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jon DeVaan as conducted by Mario Juarez on July 25, 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

Mario Juarez: Jon, thank you for taking the time to do this.

Jon DeVaan: It's my pleasure to be here.

Mario Juarez: Very excited to have a chance to talk to you. Can you introduce yourself?

Jon DeVaan: My name's Jon DeVaan. I worked at Microsoft from 1984 to 2013, and I had many different titles at Microsoft. I started as a software design engineer and left as a senior vice president

Mario Juarez: So, let's begin at the beginning. Where were you born?

Jon DeVaan: I was born in Minnesota.

Mario Juarez: Minnesota.

Jon DeVaan: And on my 19th birthday I got on the Greyhound bus and went to Oregon State University to go to college.

Mario Juarez: Okay. Now you got to give us the story about how that happened.

Jon DeVaan: It is an interesting story. So I was in high school, my graduating class was 600 people. We had one guidance counselor. And so the regimen for people graduating is you took a personality test. I don't remember the name of it. And so this personality test comes back and says, Jon, your personality matches someone in the Merchant Marine. And that was interesting. And the guidance counselor says, you should probably join the Merchant Marine. And very strange for a landlock place like Minnesota to have that. So I didn't know what I wanted to do. And there was, my father worked for Control Data and I was kind of a data center rat in a way. We'd go to work with my dad sometimes, we'd play land the lunar module on the cyber computer there. And so I said, "Hey, maybe I could work in the data center." There's this thing called Control Data Institute. I applied there, there's an entrance exam. So, I go to see, did I pass my entrance exam? Can I sign up? And the guy sitting behind the desk, he opens my folder, he closes my folder and he says, "You have to go to college." And that's why I applied to go to college.

Mario Juarez: Well, I just would say that it's the Merchant Marine's loss.

Jon DeVaan: It is probably true. There was someone I worked with at Microsoft, now I'm going to struggle with his name. Amar? Remember he was a kind of finance guy. Anyway, he actually worked in the Merchant Marine, he said, and he said he actually was to Serendip, which is the place that Serendipity is named after. So, the Merchant Marine keeps creeping in once in a while.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. Recurring theme. So why Oregon State?

Jon DeVaan: I wanted to do electrical engineering. I wanted to go west of the Mississippi. And then a dart made the rest of the decision.

Mario Juarez: Are you kidding me?

Jon DeVaan: I'm not kidding.

Mario Juarez: Tell me this. You got to tell me this story. Set up the moment. Paint the picture for me.

Jon DeVaan: Like I said, I was aiming west of the Mississippi and so the dart landed in Oregon.

Mario Juarez: Wait a minute, you actually threw a dart? Where was this dart? You got to tell me this.

Jon DeVaan: In my basement. Like all teenage boys, we're always doing stuff in the basement. So yeah, an atlas, kind of leaning against the wall.

Mario Juarez: You just literally threw a dart?

Jon DeVaan: Yes.

Mario Juarez: And it landed on the University of Oregon?

Jon DeVaan: No, Oregon State.

Mario Juarez: Oregon. Excuse me. Thank you. Good. Yes.

Jon DeVaan: That's a very important distinction.

Mario Juarez: Oh no, no, no, I understand. Excuse me. I realize it's a foot, footfall I just made. Right. Okay. So, Corvallis.

Jon DeVaan: And Oregon State was great.

Mario Juarez: And you love that school?

Jon DeVaan: I did. It was really, really good for me. And a little bit of trivia. Jensen Huang and I, we didn't know each other, but we were classmates in the EE program there, and we only got to know each other later working on Windows stuff, but I also, I was not a conformist establishment type person at that age, and the engineering program was a little too establishment and conformist. So I switched to math, which was a very good choice. And math skills actually were really helpful working at Microsoft and doing the job of creating products. And then along the way it was, I figured, oh, I kind of maybe want to get a job too. So I added computer science. So I graduated with math and computer science. It was a really good education.

Mario Juarez: And a great place.

Jon DeVaan: Held my own with all those Harvard, Berkeley, Stanford people that Microsoft liked to hire at the time.

Mario Juarez: Overrated.

Jon DeVaan: All those woke places.

Mario Juarez: So what year did you graduate from?

Jon DeVaan: '84.

Mario Juarez: '84. And did you have a dual degree? Where you do BA in those things? Computer science.

Jon DeVaan: Bachelor of Science actually, or affectionately BS degrees.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, I have a BS degree too, but I think mine's a little different than yours.

Jon DeVaan: And so I didn't quite have enough credits to do both majors. I had to go summer. So I started at Microsoft in September the day after Labor Day in 1984.

Mario Juarez: Wow. Okay now, how in the world did that, you got to tell us the story about how does a Minnesota kid, who got lost on his way to the Merchant Marine, studying math in Corvallis, end up at that point in time at the Microsoft Corp.?

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, so campus recruiting was always a really big thing for Microsoft at that time. I believe it still is. I haven't been here for 10 years, I don't know. But 10 years ago it was still a big thing. And I think that's one of the secrets of Microsoft's success, honestly. I had a friend at Oregon State, he actually had an internship, in fact, Dennis Kennedy, he could be a person that could be sitting in this chair too, like the history of VB [Visual Basic] and all the visual programming languages. He'd be a great person to talk to. He had an internship and when he came back he said, you have to interview with these guys, it's so great. And so I did. And yeah, Henry Burgess, another person who could sit in this chair, came to Oregon State and interviewed me. And then when I came up here for interviews, Charles Simonyi and Jeff Harbers and Ruth Lipscomb. She wasn't Lipscomb at the time. All those people could be sitting in this chair too.

Mario Juarez: Of course, when you say up here, there was no, there was the Burgermaster annex.

Jon DeVaan: Yes.

Mario Juarez: That was the Microsoft. Tell me about what...

Jon DeVaan: The interviews were in the building next to Burgermaster, correct. And we shared it with IBM. And when I started in 1984, there were 600 employees who just started having some people working on international products and marketing across Highway 520 in those low slung buildings over there.

Mario Juarez: What were your first impressions? When you look back and you go into the theater of your mind, paint a picture for us what you encountered, what it was like.

Jon DeVaan: There were two things happened my first week actually that were interesting. First of all, when I showed up, no one knew I was showing up. So there wasn't an office or anything for me. And I actually had to sit in Doug Klunder's office because he happened to be on vacation. Another person who should be sitting in this chair talking with you all. And then, so I was assigned to work on a program for the Macintosh. Actually the Macintosh was just out that the previous January had the 1984 commercial. And so it was called Microsoft File. People might know that as the grandfather or great-grandfather of Access in today's product terms. And that Friday was a program review with Bill, and you'll be shocked to know Microsoft File was behind schedule. This did not entertain Bill very much. So he started going around the table, what have you been doing? What have you been doing? And he got around to me and I said, I can log into email now. And that really kind of set him back. But it was a good moment for me because I saw, you know what, Microsoft really, it's a performance culture, which I appreciated, but it was also, Bill's reaction to that was, oh, and Jeff Harbers says, "Well, he started on Tuesday. We didn't know he was showing up, so he didn't even have an account yet." And so Bill looks at me, he says, "Don't worry, you'll be fine. What have you been doing?" So those were two interesting starting experiences for me.

Mario Juarez: How did that affect you? I mean you couldn't have been, there's no way you could have been prepared for that. Were you prepared for that?

Jon DeVaan: I was not at all prepared for that. And so, I'll say I definitely expected a more organized culture at the time. Thought there'd be training and stuff like that, but there wasn't. It was just get busy and

get to work, which also has its advantages and actually my colleagues were really good to work with. That's another important thing because I had a good education from Oregon State, but I also had a ton to learn. And so it was good to have people that could help me.

Mario Juarez: And you had to learn in a very kind of guerrilla fashion.

Jon DeVaan: Accelerated pace, let's say.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. Trial by fire. Yep.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, thank you. It must have been just the names that you said, it's like a hall of fame at some level and I think all of us that were there, we can compare the names that we see and where these people have made a mark on Microsoft and on the world and then compare them to the people that we encountered at the time. What was the delta between your expectation between what you encountered and what you now know today of the people that you were working with?

Jon DeVaan: So it was really fun to come to a place where there were a lot of smart people. That was really fun. And there were a lot of smart people all over the industry, but Microsoft really worked hard to attract the best people that they could. Another factor really of Microsoft's success I think. And I'm not sure by design, but all those people were given a lot of latitude to go figure things out and do things. I remember, so I worked on File, then I worked on MultiPlan, a name which no one knows anymore, which is say MultiPlan as the father of Excel, then work on Excel version 1.0. And so I was still pretty new. I wasn't even here for six months maybe when I started doing that. And the low person on the totem pole got to do copy protection and I had never known anything about how do disk drives work, how does the media work, how does all the communication go. But I had to figure it out and make copy protection work.

Mario Juarez: What were your job titles in those early years?

Jon DeVaan: So we were software design engineers. I think that's still the job title. And eventually I got to be lead software design engineer and then development manager, those kind of titles. That's another part of the story that comes a little later chronologically. But...

Mario Juarez: In your early years you, like so many of the folks that we're talking to, thrown into the deep water and the water is churning and the currents are strong carrying you all around, obviously you did well. To what do you attribute that?

Jon DeVaan: I was mentioning before, at least for me, there was always support. So if you were willing to say, gosh, I don't know this, do you know this? And people had a curiosity to figure things out together and do the problem solving and that's how it happened. A little bit later on, so working on the first version of Excel for Windows, and this is before Windows 3. This is real mode Windows/286 style programming and there was a lot that nobody knew. So you had to experiment, you had to try things, you had to be creative and figure it out. Luckily at that time, because Windows was so new, there was the Excel team working on Windows at that time. There was also at Aldis and downtown Seattle working on PageMaker. So between the Windows team, the Excel team, and the PageMaker team, we made Windows 2.0 work. And it was a ton of work but also very, very rewarding.

Mario Juarez: And of course at that time were, that was a very secondary thing in the company. I think in some ways it was primary, but if you walked in the door, I walked in the door in 1988 and the buzz walking in the door in 1988 was OS/2.

Jon DeVaan: OS/2, OS/2, OS/2.

Mario Juarez: We are going to forge the future with IBM as our partner. And it looked insurmountable and of course it wasn't long before you

realized there was this thing that was running on people's AT computers with Windows 2.0. It was an interesting side project and I think you all sort of came to this realization. That's actually the thing. How did that feel for you? First of all, was what I said accurate? I mean give me a sense of the landscape of where all of these technologies fit and how somebody new and learning you navigated those wires.

Jon DeVaan: So I think there is a meta point you're talking about translating then to today. So when you think about Microsoft having people working on the Macintosh, Microsoft was the first earliest Macintosh ISV. And Bill understood the power of graphical user interface and so he wanted people working on it and gathering expertise. So having jumped in the water on something uncertain, like graphical user interface very early and learning and figuring it out was a very important factor of success. I would argue that Microsoft at that time was, it was all about, not Windows yet, DOS and OS/2 because OS/2 was going to be the next big thing and apps were kind of an afterthought. So we were toiling if you will, in our relative obscurity, the Word folks were worried about WordStar and WordPerfect. On the Excel team, we were worried about Lotus 1-2-3 and we were focused there. And I think it's to Bill's credit that he wanted diversity of all these approaches. In a way it's like placing, placing bets, but everyone knew who the primary bet was, IBM and OS/2. So another couple people that should be sitting in this chair are David Weiss and Murray Sargent. So, it would be wrong to say that they were insubordinate, but they were virtually insubordinate in working on bringing Windows to the protected mode 386, 83, 86 chip and one day David Weiss says, "Hey Steve, come look what I have."

Nobody understands that enormous bit of historical chance in Microsoft's success.

Mario Juarez: Tell me more about that.

Jon DeVaan: Well, because they could have not been insubordinate and just done OS/2, OS/2, OS/2.

Mario Juarez: This says something about the culture of the time, doesn't it? What does it say about the culture of the time?

Jon DeVaan: There was a certain degree of freedom to go experiment with stuff. It wasn't like the Google 20% time or something like that, but if somebody had an idea they could go work on it.

Mario Juarez: How about failure or mistakes that happened? What was failure? I'm throwing up a loaded question here. What was failure in those early days of Microsoft? What was failure?

Jon DeVaan: So I hadn't started when this happened, but this was the big failure story through the first few years that I was here. So, the first version of MultiPlan for the Macintosh had a bug—because, remember, this is the day software came in boxes with floppy discs sold in retail stores. And so they came to Bill and said, "Bill, we have to recall all this stuff out of the channel. It's going to cost—I don't know what the number was, $5 million?—and fix this bug and ship out new products." And Bill, I wasn't there, I'm relating this third hand. Bill looks down, he says, "Well, some days you come into work and you just waste five, probably expletive million dollars" and said, "but the next day you come and you try to do better." That was it.

Mario Juarez: And that's a conventional notion of failure. If someone was an employee, what could you do to guarantee that you would fail as an employee, and in that brand of failure?

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, interesting question. What would it take to be a failed employee? I think there would be a degree of not owning up to your mistakes. Everyone made mistakes in those days because so much was experimental, so much was new. There were always mistakes and I think if you didn't own up to your mistakes, learn

from your mistakes and improve, you weren't going to last long in the Microsoft culture.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, my observation is if you did that every once in a while and clearly demonstrated and applied what you learned, that was kind of a component of success.

Jon DeVaan: Yes. Particularly in such a new kind of experimental era. No question.

Mario Juarez: When you got here '84, God, I mean, so you were right around IPO. So...

Jon DeVaan: Just before.

Crew: Yeah, just before. And so it's just becoming clear that this isn't a little side of the little up-in-the-corner-of-the-map company, that this is something,

Jon DeVaan: Well, I'd argue until 1995 with Windows 95, Microsoft still was kind of a backwater company. If you were into the tech industry, you knew who Microsoft was. There'd been a certain amount of stock market success to that point. So you might've known, and Microsoft's PR strategy was to have Bill on the cover of magazines and be on the shows. So it's not like we were unknown, but 1995 was the time when Windows was a cultural thing. And it's an interesting lesson for today about, it's really hard to break through to actual cultural consciousness, but Microsoft did that then. People lined up at midnight to buy their floppy discs in boxes from the retail store and it was a big thing.

Mario Juarez: It was like a real holy cow moment when I think we all had moments of epiphany that this company really is something global, something bigger. Did you have such moments? What moments of...

Jon DeVaan: Absolutely. So there are a lot of instances of that. Part of it, this gets back a little bit to your question about the success factors for employees at the time. So, MultiPlan and Excel were a distant last place to Lotus 1-2-3 in the spreadsheet market, and that was true for almost 10 years, and it took a lot of investing and a lot of perseverance, but we were stubborn and a little defiant. So we all applied to the Lotus Development Corp., all the programmers on the Excel team, and then we all proudly pasted the rejection letters on the lights of our offices and kept working. So, that is a little another nugget of the flavor of the culture at the time. I had an interesting experience.

Mario Juarez: That is so awesome. That is so awesome. I just love that. I did not know that. I'm sorry I completely interrupted you, but I couldn't stop.

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, no, that's fine. So when we finished the first version of Excel for Windows, that was, there have been some historic death marches at Microsoft to get products out the door. That was definitely a death march. So I went on vacation for a month and I visited actually Bhutan on that vacation and the people I knew there were USAID workers, so they had one of the, remember the sewing machine laptop of the day, and so I brought some Excel discs with me and we installed Excel on their Amber screen compact, and we had a crowd of 30 people in the room. They were just so excited. They wanted to see this big new thing. So that was really fun and they were expats of all kinds: British and Japanese, and all kinds of different people. So it was really fun to get to demonstrate Excel.

Mario Juarez: Well, you also, you're rendering magic at that point.

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, it was a lot different than what people had been used to.

Mario Juarez: And I think many people in those early days were the carriers of this to our families and friends and communities that we were in. It was always sort of exciting to be able to render magic. Look at this. For

me it was Windows 3.1 to me was the one where we really, from my perspective sort of turn the corner to that this is now the thing on its merits. It just was inarguably valuable.

Jon DeVaan: I have to tell you that the cliche is version 3.0 is when we get it right, there's no waiting till version 3.1. Okay. So get that right.

Mario Juarez: Thank you for that clarification.

Jon DeVaan: But yes, I know what you mean. It took a while.

Mario Juarez: Well, that was very interesting. I do the research and I'm looking at Jon DeVaan and I'm like, your name is associated with really just a significant portion, dare I say, a majority of a lot of the phenomenal products of that era up through the end of your tenure in the company. And you were there with that. You had such a role in Windows, long career in that. Was that by design? First of all, do you feel like that that's the case—that you were fortunate to be involved?

Jon DeVaan: Extremely fortunate. It's very kind of you to say what you just said. Another aspect of working at Microsoft, which I really enjoyed is I pretty much never had the same job twice. And so the amount of personal growth, sometimes being dragged kicking and screaming, but that was a very fun aspect of working at Microsoft, and we achieved that tipping point anywhere in the world. I'd go, whether for work or vacation. People knew what Microsoft was, people knew what Windows was. People knew what Excel was. People would tell stories in the United States, people would say "Why thank you. You put my kids through college," because of the stock price. Internationally, people would say, "I just took a certified professional exam. I'm going to quadruple my income. I'm on Microsoft, thank you very much." Everywhere you would go, you could hear stories like this. It was really...

Mario Juarez: Phenomenal.

Jon DeVaan: Really terrific.

Mario Juarez: And incredibly humbling, isn't it?

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, it's really nice. It's a fantastic thing.

Mario Juarez: Yes. How was it that you kept growing, evolving, rising through the company and having that kind of impact?

Jon DeVaan: I always looked at it as wanting to work on the hard problems, kind of in our little historical timeline now we're getting to the transition from individual apps to Office and that was a very hard problem to solve. There's a big engineering problem to solve. There's a lot of engineering management problems to solve, and that's a thread through my career. When I think about, I mentioned that death march on Excel 2.0, the first version for Windows, nobody wanted to do that again. And so we had to figure out how we do our work, not just what the work is technically in the product, but how we do the work so that we can be successful. And not kill ourselves.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, what changes did you make to keep people from...

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, well, a lot of little things, but basically the whole idea of the daily build and having automated tests that would run at night so that you always had a real picture of where the product was every day is probably the most important change we made at the time. And that continues through almost all the groups at Microsoft to at least 10 years ago. I don't know about now.

Mario Juarez: Is that by design or was it through trial-and-error learning?

Jon DeVaan: It was a realistic learning. If you ever say use Excel and actually do the calculation, you get a very interesting looking curve. So, I don't know, what do you think the chance of a programmer checking in code has a bug in it that's serious?

Mario Juarez: 70%.

Jon DeVaan: 70%? No, thankfully not 70%, but suppose it's...

Mario Juarez: But realistically,

Jon DeVaan: But suppose it, suppose it's 1% and you just map the probability of whatever the team size is.

Mario Juarez: A critical sev one level bug?

Jon DeVaan: So you get this curve where, so you get a degradation of quality, not every bug hoses everybody, but the probability that the collection of bugs that have been checked in that day messing up the build for everybody. As soon as you get to say, 15 or 20 programmers checking in, you have a 50% chance that someone's breaking the build today. So as the teams grew, it was just a necessity. We had to figure out how to keep the normal rate of mistakes from taking the productivity away from the whole team, and that was the tool we used and it was a good tool.

Mario Juarez: Cool. I want to ask a question that I've long thought about and knowing you and watching you. So I'm happy that I actually have the chance to ask this question. When you think about the early days of the company, there were, let's put this as kindly as I can, strong personalities and some sharp edges and a fair bit of what looked like mistreatment of people that was widely accommodated. And then comes Jon DeVaan, who is nice and kind and soft-spoken and somewhat antithetical to this unfair caricature, but a very pronounced one, and continues to just make things better, continues to evolve through the company. His name is always included in all of the things that are the most big bets for the company. You had that run long stretch pretty much all the way until the end. How in the world did you do that?

Jon DeVaan: Again, enormously kind things you're saying of which I can only say I was so lucky to work with so many great people. And it goes a little bit to when I was talking about apps were kind of the

backwater. So all the intensity was on Windows. And I think that intensity fostered or perpetuated, however you want to say it, the very aggressive culture. And partly from that Excel experience, partly from when you have, how many people did we have when we started working on office? Say we had 500 people. Okay, well you can think you're smart enough to tell 500 people what to do every day. Or you think about how do 500 people work together cooperatively and row in the same direction. And that to me is the difference. I mean, there's a role for top-down guidance, that's an important part of it, but there's also a very important role for everyone bottom up being bought in, knowing what they're doing and having the context so that every decision they make every day adds up to what we're trying to accomplish together. So that's what I always tried to do.

Mario Juarez: So what are the competencies list for me? The competencies that are embodied in that?

Jon DeVaan: So first I think there has to be the ability to communicate clearly what the goals are and the ability to assign resources to the things that you want to have happen. So there was a book, it was at the Microsoft Executive retreat one year. It was called “Execution.” It's by Larry Bossidy and who was the consultant guy, Ram, Ram Charan I think was his name. And the lesson from that book, which could have been one email, but it was a book, is what's your strategy? Do you have people working on that? That literally, that's the lesson of the book. It's a very good lesson because in all the, particularly when you're dealing with a highly personality based culture, getting people to agree to work on the things that are the most important is really difficult. So you have to, through communicating and demonstrating that what we're all working on together is making something really good for our customers, and this is the context of the market and all the things that we see.

And the person who best wrote about this is Steven Sinofsky, so I hope he's going to be sitting in this chair too. But Steven and I worked on these ideas about how do you go through that process of understanding the top level information, communicating that well to everybody, picking people to lead teams on the most important things that you want to get done. Having the courage, this is a thing that we pioneered in Office that was really scary at first, but between versions of Office, we would actually open up the org chart. So we would set the org chart according to these priorities, we're going to have a team working on this and this and this and say, if you want to work on that, go, leave your team, go work on that. And I would say maybe maximum 20% of people moved during these periods. But it was a really great way to develop people and a really great way to have people who are enthusiastic about what they're working on. They had that choice, they made that choice. They have to live with that choice. It makes a big difference.

Mario Juarez: What do you regard as the best contributions that you made to the company?

Jon DeVaan: I think the most important contribution I made was the discussion about how we do the work and plan the work is as important as the work itself. It doesn't mean that it's the same number hours doing that, but that you need the best people thinking about that too, not just the big technology idea that's going to solve everything we always had, and I'd say Bill had a predisposition for the person that could have the unifying software theory that solved everything, but we're dealing with a system of human beings here. And that probability I was talking about before, when you have a large number of people working together, guess what? There's error. There's always going to be error. So it's how you set up the system to be able to handle that error and empower people to do the work. It's really important. So that was a lesson from that Excel 2.0 experience. We had to think about how we did our work so we're

not going to kill ourselves for six months. How you got hundreds and eventually thousands of people to work together making Office, and then that same stuff applied later on. So when engineering excellence was started up, this is much later era now, Longhorn is an immense engineering project failure. It's not necessarily a technology failure. There was some of that. It's not necessarily any one engineer failure, it's nothing like that. But collectively it was a failure because the build did not work.

But there were a lot of high profile failures, not just Longhorn at that time. There were projects which were really late.

Mario Juarez: Chicago.

Jon DeVaan: Chicago, that's an interesting story. That was eventually Windows 95 after it was Chicago, it was Windows 93. And I had a bet with a guy named Dennis Adler, another person who could sit in this chair and I still have that bottle of Labatt's blue beer in my office when he said, no, we're going to ship in '93. And I said, there's no way in hell you're going to ship in '93. So I won that bet.

Mario Juarez: You mentioned there's a lot of these just for posterity and also to derive essential and valuable universal lessons. Let's take a little tour through one of these and pick yours. So you said Longhorn. Assume nobody knows anything about it. Give me some context and explain what happened.

Jon DeVaan: So I'd like to pick a different example first. Earlier on because it's easier to understand. So we had in the applications group, we did our big death march to ship Excel. Windows Word was years late. The first version of Access was canceled not once, but twice because the bug list would not converge that they literally threw out the code and started over twice. It was not working in this highly experimental time of graphical user interface programming and programs which are much larger than the memory and capacity of the machines at the time. I mean, there was a lot of new

technology and big problems to solve. So our first kind of offsite, and it was a very interesting story, there was the development manager of Word at the time was a guy named Chris Mason, another person who should sit in this chair.

And so we're at this offsite, Mike Maples, another person who should sit in this chair, had organized this. It was clear our engineering ability was not matching the challenge of the day. And so Chris Mason is there and he says, "You know what? I'm the problem. I am way too optimistic about what I can do in any given day. So I rush and I check in code that has too many bugs in it." And that started a discussion. So that was very courageous on his part actually. And it started a discussion where people were now free to actually look critically about what was going on and kind of get over any CYA or other kind of things. It fits with our discussion before about a successful employee. We'll make mistakes, but then own up to them and learn. So this is a key point in Microsoft's history where we're doing that as a group in the office.

Well, it wasn't Office yet, the apps group, we started doing it and that's where the daily build came out of that. The buzzword was zero defects programming. And so we tried to instill that in the culture of all the teams and it definitely made a difference and until the challenges got even harder and then it all fell apart again. So the other important part to this whole thing is I think your software methodology always needs a regular period of renewal, whether that's these days, I think actual multi-year contained projects, that doesn't happen anymore, that doesn't meet the market, but you have to have some period of rethinking and renewing how you do things.

Mario Juarez: And that means being able to walk away from things too.

Jon DeVaan: Absolutely.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. I mean you were breaking all kinds of conventions.

Jon DeVaan: It was interesting to me that after I went on to do other things outside of Office and there'd be discussion about engineering practices and things that, some of the things that we just, they were just simply the pragmatic decisions we made at that time to solve that set of problems come back to me from other people as almost religion, we do this. I went like, yeah, that's not what that means. If that's not solving the problem anymore, we do not have to do that.

Mario Juarez: Wow. Wow. I could continue talking, but I want to be mindful of time so we have some more time here. We've talked so much and this is so exciting. I could just,

Jon DeVaan: It's fun.

Mario Juarez: Endlessly interesting. We've been talking about code technology, the company, the internal driving against that core change, the world mission, computer on every desktop and in every home. Where else. Let's talk a little bit, expand the scope a little bit about what Microsoft did to change the world even beyond that, and I know you've always had the intellectual part of you and then there's the part of your broader interests and your heart that you bring into this. Tell me a little bit about that aspect of your work experience and how that manifested.

Jon DeVaan: I had like to relate a little bit about the Giving Campaign and the Microsoft PAC. So immediately when I joined, I joined in September, and that October was the Giving Campaign and it was happening already then. It had happened before I arrived, but it was an important ritual to get everybody to start thinking about we're really lucky here and we need to give back to the community. It was very United Way focused at the time because of Bill's mom's being on the United Way board and Bill's work there and Bill's father's work there also. So that was a good habit that that was developed and I think it developed that habit in a lot of people at Microsoft, and I was glad that even when I left in 2013, we were still paying

attention to the Giving Campaign. The reach of the Giving Campaign then was wildly different.

It wasn't just the United Way anymore, it was what anybody wanted to give to, and I think that has an effect on everybody and trying to organize the support for the campaigns, we'd send executive emails out and talk about, well, this is why I give, and I would get back emails from people in the team that were these heartbreaking stories, like you deal with people professionally and we're in this culture, we're in this environment, you don't think about people being molested when they were little or having to live in their car. Just all these stories from Microsoft colleagues that come back really, really meaningful and speaks to the importance of always supporting your community.

And I think Microsoft in all the places where Microsoft has offices, that's happening and I think that's really terrific. It's powerful. Really distinguishing value for Microsoft, isn't it? Yeah. Then on the political side, you might remember there was this giant antitrust case that happened to Microsoft right around the turn of the century, and an amazing thing happened during that time. A guy named Orrin Hatch, senator from Utah, on the record on the floor of the Senate said, "Microsoft, if you'd have been giving your campaign contributions, you probably wouldn't be in trouble now." The most fantastically corrupt statement I could have imagined at the time, and at Microsoft, we prided ourselves on not being dummies. So we started giving our campaign contributions, the Microsoft PAC was formed. So that was a very troubling thing for me, and it gave me really as an executive, because a PAC actually can't give that much political money. The PAC itself can't, but the PAC can organize dinner parties where everyone's expected to write a check. And so that gave me a front row seat to the ridiculous and corrupt nature of money and politics. And so when I left at the end of 2013, I started working on fixing that, that is a direct Microsoft experience that still drives what I'm doing right to this very day.

Mario Juarez: Wow. Wow. I remember Orrin Hatch saying that, and I remember when I was doing the micro news, and I remember sitting in Bill Neukom's office and, this was '95, '96, and they were so proud that we had no presence in D.C. This was a point of pride. We don't need that. And boy, the price we paid as the price of the company paid for that was very illuminating. So you gained a political consciousness of sorts through your experience in the company. How do you regard the Microsoft PAC? Do you think that that is a responsible manifestation of an American corporation engaging with the realities of the political process? Do you view it as an outlier? Do you think that it's in any way special?

Jon DeVaan: The Microsoft PAC is a necessity. I think every company realizes that it has to go claim its seat at the table. We can have an excellent conversation about, well, companies have all this money, regular people don't. That table is mighty lopsided towards people that can legitimately be there, but their voice is way too loud. But that's just the system as it is sadly today. And Microsoft protecting its interests that way I think is fine. What Microsoft doesn't yet do, and I really wish it did, is see the inherent corruption of the system as it is and work with people to fix it.

Right now, the system is so entrenched in, you kind of have to balance giving money to both sides. You never know who's going to be in power, and we have to break that loop. We have to have companies stand up with a real opinion about this is how government should be working. We shouldn't be, because this money thing goes both ways. It can be both an influence, but it can also be an extortion. And Microsoft saw that after the insurrection where Microsoft was extorted to give money to people that it said it wasn't going to give money to. So that has to change and Microsoft should be working to change that.

Mario Juarez: Relative to what was there in those early days. The company has a pretty robust architecture machine around corporate responsibility.

There's I think some very interesting work around responsible AI. Things that CELA has put into place as an apparatus feels fairly distinctive in the industry. And my point of view is I'm not seeing the other big tech leaders taking the role, and I wonder if there's a kind of maturity that the company has relative to all those great titans, because one says, who are the leaders? They're all companies that were founded in our wake. Do you view Microsoft, let's talk a little bit about legacy. What is Microsoft's standing in the industry today as a corporate, full corporate citizen contributor and innovator? What does Microsoft stand in that landscape?

Jon DeVaan: So it's difficult for me to answer a question about Microsoft's current standing not having any inside perspective for 10 years. I've been watching and I've been actually proud of many things that Microsoft has done. Microsoft's been involved in housing affordability and the unionization issues where unions by and large in the tech industry are anathema, but Microsoft has been open to it and working with people. Those are two examples where I think Microsoft has had a really positive influence. I think there is, we get to watch the Metas and the Googles see the antitrust scrutiny on them and struggle just like we struggled. So from that standpoint, I think there's probably a learning curve that Microsoft is much farther down the road on.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. How do you think of Microsoft's legacy? What is Microsoft's legacy?

Jon DeVaan: So Microsoft's legacy, I think one big component of it is I don't think there's been another company that has created so much wealth, that is a big component of it. I am a beneficiary of that component and I'm glad I am. And the technological for all the complaints about how Microsoft has pursued the technology and version 3.0 joke and all that stuff, Microsoft has had a huge impact. The internet as you know it today, wouldn't be that way without the PC revolution. Microsoft didn't do the PC revolution alone. Intel's

clearly there. Many, many players over time contributed to that. But the notion that everyone has a computing device, we used to say in every home and on every desk, now it's in every pocket. That wouldn't be true without what Microsoft did. So that is a giant historical contribution.

Mario Juarez: What is your legacy? What do you like? You're such a humble person. This is a hard question. What would you like people to...

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, I've been denying that question.

Mario Juarez: And that's fine, that's fine. What did you stand for? What did you stand for that you want to see people continue to stand for? What did you fight for?

Jon DeVaan: So I was talking before, I think my biggest contribution to Microsoft is that people are paying as much attention to the how is the what. That I think is a really important contribution that allows any organization to grow and adapt and meet the challenges that are in front of them. I think that's really important. Another aspect of that is that you can do that without domination and mean spiritedness. You can do it cooperatively, and in my opinion, that works much better than the other way.

Mario Juarez: That's a humanist statement, not a technical statement. That's interesting.

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, it's true. Yeah.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. Great.

Jon DeVaan: I wish I had the patent on that amazing world unifying algorithm, but I never came up with it.

Mario Juarez: You did some good work on it.

Jon DeVaan: We tried. I should have said one thing. Every product I worked on, every team I worked with, all my peers, we were always trying to do the right thing for the customer, and I think that's also a really important thing.

Mario Juarez: How did you gauge that?

Jon DeVaan: Did we talk about what customers need? Did we talk about how customers would be able to handle this? Did we have the benchmarks for things like compatibility and performance and discoverability that were part of our engineering process? These are customer focused metrics, not just did we add this feature or what.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, my observation was that those were nice words when I first arrived. By the time I left, which was in 2017, they were actually pretty hardcore guiding factors in the way the company did. Was there a pivotal moment in that or was it just an evolution?

Jon DeVaan: I think it was an evolution, and there are a few different pivotal moments that I remember about it. One was when we started doing usability testing and the people would come in with their very proud interfaces and put people in front of them, and the first time is "we just got a dumb user." And then the second one is "another dumb user," and then the third one is just, "okay, maybe I didn't get it right." And so there was an education curve through that.

Mario Juarez: When was that put integrally into the process?

Jon DeVaan: When did we start doing that? I think we started doing that around 1987, 1988.

Mario Juarez: And it just seems like it just got more entrenched as time went by. How are you feeling about the future of the company?

Jon DeVaan: I feel good about the future of the company. I think the company right now, I have a lot of concerns about artificial intelligence, but it is an emerging technology that can make a big difference. And

Microsoft is there early, and so I think those are good dynamics. I wish artificial intelligence was trained on reliable information instead of the general internet, but I wish artificial intelligence could tell me why it got that answer. But it's a really good editor.

Mario Juarez: It is. It's good things about it. There's good things about it. Okay. My last question and then I'll ask you if there's any questions that we haven't, anything we haven't touched on. So 1984, kid walks into the building next to the Burgermaster lost on his way to the Merchant Marine and steps into another world and a set of experiences they could not have imagined. And I have to believe that this week there's some kid who's same age wandering into Microsoft building for the first time. If you could go back and talk to that Minnesota kid by way of Oregon and impart wisdom, that would be wisdom that is as valuable to that person walking in to Microsoft today, what would you say?

Jon DeVaan: I would say you belong here. I would say don't be afraid to make mistakes, but be certain to learn from your mistakes. I would say understand what it is, not just what you're working on, but why people are working on that thing and what the punchline of that thing is to understand why you're doing what you're doing and use that to make your decisions every day.

Mario Juarez: Nice. Okay. Is there anything that we didn't talk about? Anything you wanted to get that you wanted to make sure we

Jon DeVaan: Covered? Yeah, we didn't get too far down the timeline of things.

Mario Juarez: Yes, but we can continue on.

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, I don't know how much time we have, but...

Mario Juarez: As much time as you have.

Jon DeVaan: So we kind of stopped. We sort of stopped just as it was getting, as getting good, didn't it? Turning Office into Office and non-trivial

achievement. It was a lot of work and it drove both the how, but also what, there were some interesting lessons in there and we iterated to get back to that theme also. So the first version of Office, we tried to use shared specifications and then all the programming teams went off and did their own implementations.

Mario Juarez: I remember that.

Jon DeVaan: And that did not work.

Mario Juarez: I remember that.

Jon DeVaan: Because everybody had their points of view and even the shared specification created these ridiculous fights. We literally had a big fight where the executives had to make the decision, should toolbar buttons be 14 pixels high or 13 pixels high? So important that decision, remember that decision, but it wasn't important at all, that decision. What was important is we had to figure out how to, I did talk about this a little bit earlier, how to assign the responsibility so that people could make those decisions and not have it be a big food fight among a bunch of different people. So our next iteration was to start having, well, we're going to have toolbars. I guess there's one toolbar team for everybody. There's one menu team for everybody. And that's how the office product unit came into being. And that unleashed just an enormous amount of engineering complexity getting back, because every app had its daily build, every app had its test suites to ensure that things weren't broken by everybody.

And now you had these poor people that they had to run five daily builds, five nightly tests. And so we had to figure out how to streamline because it, it was literally insane making that requirement. But at the same time, it was an important requirement and there was an interesting lesson there in that if you're doing anything that's really shared and leveraged, that work has to be really, really high quality. It can't be average. It has to be better

because of the downstream effects are so big. And so that was really interesting. And ultimately, we were pretty successful. And the Office '97 timeframe, we had a ton of shared technology between all the apps. We were actually able to make new apps based on the shared technology. My favorite, this was a Japan-specific app in Japan, there's a tradition of sending New Year's cards. And so the Japanese subsidiary was sad that Microsoft didn't have a Hagaki app. So we were able to make a Hagaki app using the shared technology. It's parts of PowerPoint, parts of Excel, all the shared user interface stuff, and it was able to come together really fast.

Mario Juarez: That is a great story. I've never heard that story.

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, that's a good one.

Mario Juarez: That's so great. Yeah, Office, it looks inevitable in the rear view mirror, but it wasn't. There was so many things that had to be done.

Jon DeVaan: We had a meeting one time when we were kind of at the peak of the insane making and have a meeting talk with all the other development managers and test managers and try to explain the problem, saying please help us out. And the answer was back basically like, you have a hard job. We're so sorry your job is so hard. So that meeting was not successful, but...

Mario Juarez: Oh, that's great.

Jon DeVaan: But we kept at it.

Mario Juarez: We could go down the line on things that you did because you moved on from that and into some of the most flagship things the company did on operating systems.

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, I'm really proud of the work that I contributed to on Windows. And again, it was, we talked about the Longhorn failure before, and to me that failure was a failure of the management structure. There were many, many outstanding engineers, but no one knew what

they were doing together. There were a lot of agendas, and agendas are an outcome of management structure. And so being able to, it's back to that same thing. If you want X to happen, then you should have people on X. If you don't want Y to happen, then don't have people on Y. It's simple. It's difficult to do because the people that work on Y care a lot about Y and they should care a lot about Y. Another important part of that time is de-emphasizing general management and emphasizing discipline management and discipline expertise.

There is a reason to have a lot of general managers when things really are separate and the agendas can be legitimately separate, and you have someone who's a leader that can focus on those areas. But when those areas aren't the product, then it just creates conflict. And it has another thing, which is it pushes the technical expertise to a lower level. Because in order to rise in the organization, you have to discard your technical expertise and become a general manager. So we had to create opportunities for people to continue to build their technical expertise so that they actually had the chops to tackle the really hard problems that the product had.

Mario Juarez: As you're talking, I'm going through my mind and the various iterations, the highs and lows of the Windows operating system. And I'm wondering, when you apply those lessons that you just articulated, what was the highest form or the greatest manifestation of a version of Windows or some aspect of that time there that really demonstrated that working correct? Like, you think that was the best managed version of Windows that you did, and what was it and why?

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, and I'm really proud of Windows 7.0. I'm more proud of Windows 8.0, actually. Even though we made a bad user interface mistake, the reality is this Windows 8.0, the most work shipped in Windows 8.0 of any Windows version ever. Maybe with the

exception of the original NT where it started from zero, but it was an enormous amount of new code shipped on time for Windows specifically. It probably wasn't literally exactly the day, but for Windows on time. And I wish we wouldn't have made that user interface mistake, but a lot of good, besides that, a lot of really good things happened performance wise, the way that, I don't know if you remember the Windows XP laptop experience, but it was really bad. But laptops work great now and that all happened during that time.

Mario Juarez: Windows 8.0 was the version where you did the most improvement to the least visibility, but you've sort of permanently changed the quality of the foundation and the core thing that is Windows. Is that a fair statement?

Jon DeVaan: Yeah, I think there were a lot of things going on because there was this weird dichotomy. So we had phones, which we never really got to execute on in a unified manner, sadly, and desktops and servers. And you had this weird, on the phone, you want the code to be small, and we also provided, actually the woman who brought me in here today talked about working on automotive. In there, you needed the system to be really small and efficient, and then on the desktop you want all the features, so the codes much, much bigger. But then as this is still early on in Microsoft really understanding data centers, it predates Azure even, but on the server for data center efficiency, you want the code to be really small again. And so that drove a way of architecturally thinking. There was a guy, Rich, who drove the architectural thinking about how you take Windows that was really a bunch of entangled string, but make it so it could meet this challenge and do it really well and have the side effect of great performance, faster laptop booting, and all these other great customer benefits.

We also had the vision on Windows 8.0 that the user experience should be the same across all these devices, or at least key concepts

of it. And to this day, I still think that's right. The computing world continues to move that direction, if not actually go all the way. But we also have to fess up to the market feedback of the time, which it was too much.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, I did love my Windows phone. I was one of the last, I gave it up when it stopped actually working, but the vision was right. I thought.

Jon DeVaan: I think it was great, and being able to have it be so consistent across all these things, because the reality is your phone is easily a thousand times more powerful than the computers we made Excel for originally, easily. There's no reason you need to even have a laptop or a desktop. You could just set your phone there and have all the computing be done on your phone. It's just how big is the display? Okay, it's like this, do you have a mouse? Okay, it's like this. And it could all be a great reduction of things that the user has to remember to understand. That was another part of the vision is people will have more than one device because they do. And they shouldn't have to have cognitive dissonance between them. But perhaps an idea before it's time.

Mario Juarez: Well, nothing like. There's always a role for vision, right?

Jon DeVaan: Yes. Yes indeed.

Mario Juarez: Anything else? Anything else about your career highlights?

Jon DeVaan: I think we've caught, yeah, Microsoft TV. I would like to forget Microsoft TV, not because it wasn't fun and that there were great people working on it, but I had to deal with the cable TV industry. Let me explain those dynamics to you. The cable TV industry did not want Microsoft within a billion miles of them. So here I am coming, "Hey, I'm from Microsoft. I want to talk to you about Microsoft TV," and the first thing you would get back is, "I demand to talk to Bill Gates." Well, Bill's not going to come. So how about

me? And then this is a very interesting story. My first meeting with a cable TV executive, we're in this conference room, it's a massive conference room table. It's like six feet wide. And I'm sitting on one side, the guy's sitting on the other side and he gets up and leans on the table and puts his finger right here in my face and he says, my customers don't get anything unless I say so. You got it? Nothing! Nothing unless I say so. And that was my introduction to the cable TV industry.

Mario Juarez: And it was all downhill from there.

Jon DeVaan: It was rough. It was rough.

Mario Juarez: That's an awesome story.

Jon DeVaan: And then actually, there was an executive staff meeting where John Malone came and talked. He's the godfather of the cable industry. And we were actually, this was during the time Microsoft's getting sued for antitrust and he proudly tells us all how he's avoided antitrust scrutiny by developing this set of shell companies and A stock, B stock, C stocks that he can secretly have control of the entire thing without it being obvious to the regulators. And that was another fun experience.

Mario Juarez: That's an interesting moment.

Jon DeVaan: We all left going, 'We're the ones getting sued for antitrust?' It was eye opening.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. That whole time was rather astonishing. I was a communications director for a guy named Bob.

Jon DeVaan: I remember Bob, yeah.

Mario Juarez: And I was with him once in Europe and he told me that he went to the Minnesota State Attorney General because they were all suing. And so he flies into Minnesota and the guy's like, oh, you're so

good. We're so happy that you're here. And they're shaking his hand. We love Michael, we just love you guys. And Bob says, well, I thought you were suing us. I thought that this was like you guys were coming after us. He says, oh, that. He said, 'Well, we lost out on the cigarette thing. We can't afford to lose out on this one. But it's nothing personal. We love you guys.'

Jon DeVaan: Yes, the world works in mysterious ways.

Mario Juarez: The world works in mysterious ways, and I think all of us at Microsoft at one time or another said, 'What a crazy world.'

Jon DeVaan: Indeed.

Mario Juarez: Alright, anything else?

Jon DeVaan: I don't think so.

Mario Juarez: This has been awesome.

Jon DeVaan: It's been very fun.

Mario Juarez: A joy to talk to you. Thank you so much. This is great.