Paul Maher expands on the Industry Experiences team at Microsoft and his journey to the cloud

Podcast transcript

David: Welcome to the Microsoft industry experiences team podcast. I'm your host David Star, and in this series you will hear from leaders across various industries discussing the impact of digital disruption and innovation. Sharing, how they've used Azure to transform their business. You can find our team online at aka.ms/Indxp, or on twitter at Industry XP.

For a very special set of episodes. We've partnered with Vince Menzione to highlight the thought leadership of our teams, principal program managers, who are doing great things within their specific industries, and now your host for this episode, Vince Menzione.

Vince: In this special series of the podcast, I sit down with leaders from Microsoft that are helping important sectors of industry to transform and thrive through the use of this innovative cloud technology. For this kickoff to the series, I was delighted to have as my guest, Paul Maher, the general manager of the industry experiences team at Microsoft, which is part of growth and ecosystem in the cloud and AI engineering organization under Scott Guthrie.

In this episode, Paul tells us more about this exciting new team, why Microsoft engineering is investing in industries like healthcare, manufacturing, retail banking, capital markets and insurance, his career journey and return to Microsoft to lead this effort, what he's been seeing during this amazing transformation and why customers and partners should invest in Microsoft and Azure. This episode of the podcast is sponsored by Microsoft and the industry experiences team.

Paul, welcome to the podcast.

Paul: Hey Vince. Thanks so much. Great to be here.

Vince: I'm really excited to have you as a guest on this podcast. You were the general manager of the industry experiences team and I'm excited to have our listeners learn more about this new exciting organization at Microsoft, your perspective on the amazing transformation, Microsoft and Azure's compelling value proposition and why it matters to customers and partners. So welcome.

Paul: Hey, great to be here. Thanks.

Vince:	I've had the opportunity to recently spend time with some of your team discussing their industry sectors of focus. Retail, health banking and capital markets, manufacturing and insurance, but I was hoping you might take our listeners through how and why this organization was formed and your mission and objectives of the team.
Paul:	Yeah, happy to Vince. The team is relatively new. We basically started building out the team maybe around six months or so ago. Probably around six or so months ago, we made some some important announcements. The team that we talked about, our approach of having ... really focusing a lot more on the industry and having almost an industry first approach to all that we do at Microsoft, which is great. Especially in the outlet to the cloud, it's really important for us to build that empathy and that understanding of industry as we're having conversations about digital transformation and that movement to the cloud.

I actually returned to Microsoft just over six months ago to build out this new team. Scott Guthrie, who leads all of cloud and AI, she asked me to return. Prior to that, I was working at a large financial services company as the CTO. Prior to that, I'd worked at Microsoft for about nine years. It was a privilege and honor for Scott to asked me to come back, and the timings were great with release of this transformation within Microsoft, really having this industry first approach. Having this team within engineering is great because it really shows our commitment as a company, not only in the external facing roles, but also within our product groups, really making that investment industry.

We really are, within engineering, having advocates for industry who really are focused on ensuring that Azure or Microsoft Cloud platform is really a first class cloud platform for our industry and to serve their digital transformation needs. It's a multi-disciplined team, so the general demographic of the people we're hiring within the team itself are industry elites. Think of that as people who we brought in from industry, that have many years of industry experience, and as you mentioned Vince, coming from industry backgrounds such as manufacturing, financial services, banking and insurance, retail, healthcare and so on as we kind of expand out the team. That's number one.

Then number two, we have cloud architects within the team and similarly we brought in people from industry that have real world experiences of building cloud solutions at scale. The combination of those two sets of resource, really being advocates for industry within engineering, is really a formidable partnership because it's bringing both the wealth of experience and industry knowledge and also the technical capabilities to very critically how the conversation and engage industry as well as product engineering. That's where we really sort of building that muscle and building that empathy, build that cloud platform that will be a fast class platform to fulfill the digital transformation needs that the industry.

We just completed all first round of hiring over the last six months. We've been moving pretty quickly so we can really get this team established within engineering, and we started to make some good movements already as a relatively new team, in terms of whacking internally within Microsoft, within the cloud and AI team and organization. It's really providing industry insights and our perspective so we can evolve the platform, and then externally, we've been very much focused on out within industry and really looking

to build a sympathetic ear, if you will. Building an understanding of what are the current needs of industry and being able to really have an in depth conversation with industry across the industries that we're focused on. Have really deep conversations and understand what are their needs and what are the digital transformation challenges their facing and really come from the opposite way that, perhaps, people have traditionally viewed Microsoft, which has been a technology led company, coming from more of an industry perspective and having that deep understanding of the industry and then being able to talk about our experiences and use our knowledge within the team to talk about how the Microsoft Azure cloud can help industry solve their digital transformation needs and challenges.

Vince: I want to to peel back and differentiate a little bit with you here, because there are other organizations that Microsoft, that caravan industry, right?

Paul: Absolutely.

Vince: You're a team is different. What you're saying here is, it's being driven from the engineering side. The engineering organization caring about an industry and your team is somewhat of a feedback loop, if I understand it correctly, right, from what you've said?

Paul: Absolutely.

Vince: They're taking the information back from industry and saying this is what we need to do in terms of building out capabilities. Is that right?

Paul: That's absolutely correct. I see it as a two way thing. We have ... As I think about the [inaudible 00:07:15] or the team, from an internal facing perspective, absolutely, we are ... represents the industry, as you say, we're that feedback loop that's providing the insights to engineering around. What are the industry use cases? What are the challenges and the opportunities around digital transformation? Really providing that feedback, which then helps as we think about the roadmap planning on building out the Microsoft visual platform. It really is delivering to the needs of industry. We're providing almost in the ... If you think about real value as quickly as possible based on real time insights that the team has been able to gather from industry.

Then the second part of the role is externally facing. How do we come outside of engineering and used our skills and our knowledge to engage industry, to have conversations, to share learnings and share insights to help the Microsoft customers and partners as they're thinking about their movement to the cloud? Whether that be for IT infrastructure, whether that be working with partners who are building solutions that will be used by customers or whatever. Just be decision makers at the early phases of their journey, their thinking about what is that digital strategy? Being able to have an informed conversation with them and help them on that journey as they think about, how do they deliver to that needs of their industry and how can the Microsoft Azure Cloud help.

I think that duality of the role allows us to really transcend the barriers and allow, really, industry to come inside of engineering through our team, and it allows engineering to go out into industry in an incredible way through my team. I think that allows us ... the team to stay current, stay relevant. Really be the eyes and ears of industry and provide those real world insights back inside of engineering. We're really building and shooting for a cloud platform and delivering to the needs of industry. It's really big. We're building a platform that's based on fact, based on knowledge, and based on need.

Vince: You touched on the fact that you recently rejoined Microsoft and Scott Guthrie asked you to rejoin the organization. I'm interested, always, in the career journey and I spotlight that in a lot of my talks and discussions, and I was wondering if you could take our listeners through a little bit more about your career and how you got to this spot in your life.

Paul: Yeah, absolutely. I started out ... At university I actually did a [inaudible 00:09:43] on Scott's math degree. You can tell from, probably, my strange accent, I was born in England. I grew up and went to school there. I actually came out of university with a math degree. Had the ... The obvious career path would be to move into things like accountancy or something around that, but I actually made the decision to move into engineering, into product development. Actually, my first job, I started out as a software developer, actually, for a small actuarial consulting firm in my hometown of Liverpool, and then for minimum onwards, moved from company to company, going from being a software developer to leading product development teams, to ultimately actually joining Microsoft UK in around 2005. That was certainly exciting for me personally. My career, being a software developer and building software development teams, and building product and releasing them across multiple industries, I'd always been working on the Microsoft platform. Being able to join Microsoft UK in 2005 was exciting.

The key point as well, at the time of 2005, was really when cloud was almost a figment of people's imagination. It was in the early days. Back then I actually spent a lot of time, when I joined Microsoft UK, actually talking to analysts about this thing called the Cloud and how it's the future, and convincing them that this thing would become a reality. In parallel, obviously Microsoft was really in the early phases of what ultimately became the Microsoft Azure Cloud.

Even back then Microsoft was starting to transition away from an on premise business with things like Windows and Office and so on, to thinking about the Cloud and being very visionary in that. Then fast forward to 2008. At the end of 2008, I actually moved from Microsoft UK to Microsoft corporate. In both those roles I had the opportunity to work with both customers and partners around the early adoption of technology, and a big part of that was early adoption and thinking about moving to the Cloud, and obviously when I moved to Microsoft corporate in 2008, what was Cloud in its early infancy had become much more mature. In 2008 to 2013, I actually had the opportunity to work with, probably, some of the biggest Microsoft partners worldwide on their move to the cloud. That was great just from an experiential point of view, but also having the opportunity to really understand the different needs and challenges of industry and being able to work on at variety of different solutions.

In 2013 I left Microsoft for a period of four years, and moved to a large financial services company. That was really to have the opportunity to really go back and build out a large scale solution. Was brought in to build out the software development team and bring a very large scale cloud solution to the marketplace for financial modeling and reporting, and that was great because I built that solution with Microsoft Azure Cloud. I continued to partner very close with Microsoft, even being outside of Microsoft in that role, that was able to really take what I'd learned and build it ... Something myself from the ground up.

Over those four years, really built up upon my foundational knowledge of the Cloud and being able to actually go build, probably, in that time period, probably one of the biggest solutions that exists on Microsoft Azure Cloud today, was a great experience. Then that journey really ... I felt like I achieved all I wanted to and I've been working very closely with Scott Guthrie and the Microsoft teams in that journey anyhow. This opportunity came up to return to Microsoft, in about six months ago, and I ... Speaking with Scott and looking at the journey that Microsoft had been on, and with this pivot around really having an industry first approach, and Scott asked me to build this team in engineering, it was one of those moments where of course I want to come back to.

It was a great opportunity for me, an it's great evolution in my own personal career, but also it was a great moment in Microsoft and where I'd been with my career, to see that I could bring all those skills and all those experiences that I have, bring them back to building up this new team and an exciting time in Microsoft. It's great to really be back working with engaging industry, working with those Microsoft customers and partners on their move to the Could, but also having my own personal real world experiences and my own empathy of having spent the last four years building on the Cloud, to bring it that to bear as I'm providing insights back to the Microsoft Azure engineering team, as well as having that empathy as I'm working with Microsoft customers and partners externally.

Vince: I have of a couple of questions based on what you just said. First off, four years building out this massive cloud infrastructure for a finserv organization, what were some of the key learnings from that experience that you're now taking forward and helping customers to be successful with Microsoft?

Paul: Yeah, It was a great experience. I think from the get go, one of the things that I talk a lot about, as you get ... One of the more requests, is for me to talk about my experiences from, not only building out a team and building out an organization, but also building the solution. How'd you set expectations? How do you think about running a project? These are the things I would touch upon is, number one, I think it's really, really important for everyone, as with anything, but in particular with the Cloud, is being clear and crisp on, what is your motivation to move to the cloud?

Of course there's lots of demands today with senior leaders within companies, to have a digital strategy and really being pushed on what's the plan to move to the cloud, but I think it's having ... understanding the motivation and understanding what the Cloud can bring to a business, is really important. If that's not clear, then I think you're on shaky ground, if you will, moving forward. Knowing the motivation, I think, is really important.

Secondly, I would say, is being clear than ... based on the motivation, the benefits that the Cloud can bring. That's things like operational agility, quick time to market, even things like improved security, reliability and of course, reduction around things like IT cost as you;re being able to move away from that capital expenditure cost, that opex cost, and really changing that mindset to pay you to go pricing model. Then, I think the view of the lining is that ... what the cloud can provide is the ability to innovate and deliver capabilities and move more quickly than, perhaps, if you were really building on premise.

That's a good lighting, is that the benefits that the Cloud can bring, in terms of being able to build something, get larger scale than ever before, being able to leverage capabilities to build innovative solutions that perhaps you wouldn't have been able to do before. Then all of this within, really, paying for what you need. I think that's a huge upside in terms of that pay as you go model, but again, going back to understanding the Cloud and knowing your motivations, that move and that business transformation, in terms of moving away from a traditional pricing and licensing model to a pay as you go model, is important to really get your head around what that looks like and that what that means to you as a business and what that looks like. For example, if you're building solutions and selling them to customers, what that looks like in terms of how you will charge for that.

Just like any project, I don't think it's necessarily unique to cloud, but it really is important, is being able to be in control of the development costs, and being able to track progress and set expectations of what will be delivered and when. I'm a big believer in agile software development and continuous delivery, so I'm really thinking about the minimal viable product. Definitely moving away from the traditional waterfall processes of trying to plan up front, trying to do deadlines. That's just just too hard. Being much more agile and continuous delivery and delivering value quickly and fast is super important, and I think that helps stakeholders really engaged and motivated around the project without us having to wait for huge periods of time and not seeing any delivery. I think that's another big thing to keep in mind.

Then there's things like, just the architecting the solution itself. I think it's important to have, really, the right people in place that have experiences, and I would call this out. One of the good things is, I've been living in the Cloud journey since 2005, and I'd been working with some of the largest customers and partners of Microsoft, worldwide, since 2008 and building the Cloud. Actually, this thing called Cloud is actually not new, and the good thing is that there's lots of skillset in the marketplace, and there's lots of projects to learn from. You're bringing the experienced people onto your projects to help set yourself up for success, and learn from those projects that you thinking about architecting a solution. I think that's key. You're not first to market. You're not necessarily that trailblazer anymore. There's certainly a critical mass of solutions now that are being built in the cloud that you can learn from. I have experienced staff, that's experience that can help you really architect and build the solution in the right way.

Then there's the what happens next. How do you make sure that once their ... the cloud solution has been built, how do you support the cloud solution? Going from the development phase and the test phase, to shipping the software, it doesn't end there.

What does it look like once the Cloud solution is released, to actually support it? I think that ... You're thinking about dev ops and thinking about operations and so on. It's super important, especially if you're likely ... either as a consumer consuming a managed service. I think that's important to ... on the sound of that support within the cloud solution if you're a consumer or you're someone who built the solution, Who's releasing it and offering it as a managed service.

As with anything, across the board from the ... your team, it's important to have the right team in place. Whether it be project manager, whether it be the development staff, whether it be the test team, whether it be the operations team, whether it be the sales team. I think having the right team in place end to end, is critical and if you're start in [inaudible 00:20:22], sometimes that's beneficial because you get to pick your team. If you're starting from and existing team, I think it's important to do that evaluation and help go on the journey and up skill people as needed, and as I mentioned earlier on, I think it's important to, especially if it's an existing team, to bring in, that perhaps isn't experienced in the Cloud, to bring in the experience that can can help. That's the key takeaways, I think, from my linings.

Vince: yeah, some really great nuggets for anyone looking to make the journey to the Cloud, and this transformation ... So many people are trying to make the transformation or thinking about the transformation, because either they're being disrupted or they need ... they're recognizing the business need and all the areas you've discussed. I've been seeing this transformation accelerating, in fact, and I'm wondering what is ... what have you seen in the last year that you didn't expect to see happen with the transformation to the Cloud?

Paul: Yeah. You're obviously right there. Yeah, I think it's the ... It's like the snowball effect, that there's more and more momentum getting behind the movement to the Cloud. I think there's a lot of things that have happened. I've been on this journey for quite some time from convincing people about this thing called Cloud to then building solutions, but I think there are a few things that are aligning well together.

I think that the maturity of the Cloud platform is great. I think we're ... with the Microsoft Azure Cloud, been around for a long time. It's proven capabilities, new innovation is being driven, ongoing, which is great. I think we're seeing things like price points and hardware and capabilities, just advancements around both software and hardware is opening up opportunities.

What we're also seeing is that we really ... The adoption of the Cloud is growing more and more and more quickly day over day. There's lots more really referenceable solutions on the Cloud that I think is building confidence in the Cloud, and that it's real and that there are solutions that are built that, I ... for instance, someone [inaudible 00:22:32] them, solving problems that they have, or for people thinking about building solutions in the cloud. It's building that comfort, that this thing is real, people are building on it, and there's innovation and capabilities that, their seeing that they could build and that they want to build. I think there's a lot of things coming together quickly.

Then, of course, changes in industry, so whereby now there's huge demands on delivering more with less. Obviously everyone's thinking about the next generation and what does digital transformation mean to them, and how can I evolve as an industry and in terms of that trying to achieve. If you look at some of the technologies I think that it resonates in to help solve those problems. large compute, big data, at the foundation of everything, but if you think about artificial intelligence, it is a really hot topic at the moment.

Things like blockchain is getting a lot of momentum. I think what you're seeing is, with all these things coming together, you're now seeing the confidence in the Cloud. You're seeing the maturity of the platform. I think you're seeing with, let's say, hardware and software evolving. You're being able to do much more than ever before at a cheaper price point, and you've got, really, the confidence, I think now in industry, that this thing is real and can deliver to needs, and I think you just see, generally, people really starting to innovate and think about how can Cloud and these new technologies help them in that digital transformation.

Vince: In my conversations with the team, there have been some amazing use case and examples around these areas. You mentioned blockchain, AI, IOT. Why do you believe Microsoft and Azure are best positioned in these technology areas to help customers and partners along on the journey?

Paul: Yeah. A few things I would probably touch upon. I think it's our maturity of the platform. We have some exceptional engineers that a working on the Microsoft Azure platform that have been worked on it for many years. You're seeing really experienced engineers building out the platform, and with teams like myself and the learnings and the input that's coming back in, they're building a platform that's born out of real world need, with our strategy around really trying to help that continuous delivery, delivering value quickly, working very closely with customers and partners as well through our early adoption phases.

Yeah, that's been our heritage of course. We are a partnering company so we work very closely with the partners and customers over the years. Of course, as we thought about our roadmap, as we've been running all Beta programs, as we're piloting our new innovation, we've been pulling, certainly, our customers and partners closely in. We run public betas as well. That's been a huge thing for us, is to really build a platform, build a platform quickly, but also have a very big feedback loop through those post beta periods. I would just say that we given ... At our core we are a technology company, so we have man years of experience of building large scale platforms and engineering pedigree, if you will, and then pair that with ... We partner closely with our customers and partners to understand their needs and work closely with them. I think that in itself is really helping us, because we really are partnering with the customers and partners in terms of delivering what they need versus second guessing what we think they need, and I think that's really important.

Then just ... I would say just the ... Personally, I believe we have best breed engineers within Microsoft. With that, I think you're seeing the maturity of the platform, the stability of the platform, but also the innovation is being driven by that experienced

staff of engineers. That's being born out of many years and being born out of us having the opportunity to build and deliver to Marketplace. Many, many, many large scale software products. For me, the journey to the cloud with Microsoft dates back many years. Back to 2005 and beyond. We've been able to really ... This isn't something that's just been built out the last 12, 18 months. This Encore Cloud, actually, has been around for quite a period of time. I think we've had lots of lightings through the early R&D phases to being able to evolve and mature the platform over that period of time.

Again, that feedback loop that feedback cycle, by working closely with partners and customers and embracing our developer ecosystem, looking at things like embracing open source, making some key acquisitions to help us continue to innovate on things like AI and blockchain and so on, I think we very strategically navigated what we needed to do from an engineering perspective, but also from a feedback loop perspective, and really making sure that we deliver high value that's really gonna be well received by industry. I think there's a lot of things that have come together and that should help people feel ... have confidence and feel good about building on the platform.

Also I think at the end of the day, we're able to point to great references of customers and partners who are using Azure, and further get that credibility and confidence. We have some very large scale solutions, some of the biggest solutions on the planet, running on Azure. Again, this Encore Cloud is very mature. It's not immature, but we have lots of referencable solutions running on the cloud, running mission critical solutions on the cloud that should make people feel really, really confident, and we embrace partners. We're a partnering organization. Our pedigrees been working with some of the largest enterprise customers on the planet. We have that relationship there. Then we've always been very much about developers, developers, developers. We embrace developers, so we have a great ecosystem there, as well as engineers who've grown up around Microsoft technologies, have matured on our platform. I think all those things together, it should make people feel good and confident about making that investment in the Microsoft Azure Cloud.

Vince: Yep. I heard you say several things here, engineering prowess, and think about it. The underlying operating system that Microsoft developed, that runs on most most servers and most clouds.

Paul: Yes.

Vince: Closest to the customer, closest to the partner. Enterprise grade, I guess, is the way I would say it. Right?

Paul: yes.

Vince: Those [crosstalk 00:29:10] implementations, some of the largest enterprise customers running Microsoft.

Paul: Absolutely.

Vince: It's exciting times at Microsoft, candidly.

Paul: It is. It really is. I think you see that in terms of the few things just ... The buzz that just generally is around Microsoft, both internally and what you see from people from outside in terms of the PR that we get. I think those ... We're seeing a lot of people, actually, who used to work at Microsoft, coming back to Microsoft. Obviously that's a great indication. Then our ability to attract new talent. There's a lot of things coming together at the same time and surpassingly being here, and I know I probably speak to the thousands and thousands of employees. This is a great place to work and we feel we are really changing. Changing the markets in terms of what we're doing with Cloud and yeah, it's very exciting times.

           So what was the best piece of advice you received when you came back to Microsoft to form this team?

           Yeah. The biggest thing is not to try and do everything yourself. The great thing about Microsoft is, there's multiple teams that want to partner and really looking to leverage all the teams, the scale of a team, to help be successful versus just trying to do all the heavy lifting yourself. I think it was really, really shrewd advice, and I think we benefited that as a new team that's been building out. Leveraging others to be successful is probably the best bit of advice I got. I'm very thankful for all my fellow Microsoft colleagues and the teams that have been so receptive to this new team and so willing to help. That's what's helped us get it really going from ground zero and having nothing and being a brand new team, to in the period of six months, really hiring the right team and actually getting out and driving some momentum quickly. We couldn't have done that without leveraging other teams.

Vince: About to start a new fiscal year, fiscal year 19. This is 19. What does success look like for you and the team in 2019?

Paul: Yeah. The main things I think about going into fiscal year 2019 are the following. We want to build a deep understanding of industry digital transformation needs and use cases. We want to establish a close connection with industry to help them move to the Cloud to solve their digital transformation needs through both impasse and in online engagement, and we'll do that by championing Microsoft Cloud partners who are solving industry problems and also providing guidance. How to build solutions in the cloud to solve industry problems. We'll also be providing ongoing feedback to Azure engineering to ensure we're building a first class Cloud platform to help industry be successful with that digital transformation. Finally, one point I would make, is that we're always happy as a team, to speak at industry events and conferences, so feel free to reach out and have my team or I come and speak and attend the events and we would welcome any and all invitations.

Vince: I referenced the fact that I've spent some time with your team. We're going to be releasing a series of interviews with each of your industry leads for healthcare, for banking, for insurance, retail, manufacturing, the like. I know that's going to be one place where people can go to learn more specifically about your industry solutions and use case examples, and the team and connecting with the team, but if our listeners

	want to learn more in general about your organization, Paul, where would they go to learn that?
Paul:	yeah. I would say a few things. A great place to go is Azure.com. There's a plethora of information to get going on the Cloud. I'd also encourage everyone to go look Azure.com solutions by industry, where we actually have some more industry focused content and referencable material, and of course, a great place to follow me is on LinkedIn and also on Twitter. I think they're great places to really get started and stay connected with with me and my team.
Vince:	Great. And if our listeners want to reach out to you specifically, Paul, what's the best way to do so?
Paul:	The best way to do that is probably through LinkedIn. If people want to follow me on LinkedIn, that's great, and then just send me a message that way.
Vince:	Great. Paul, I want to thank you so much. First of all, for giving us the opportunity to spend time with you and your team. It's been a fascinating experience for me to learn more about these industries and these industry solutions, and the disruption is happening across all of these industries. It's actually been really amazing, and a great experience and I hope our listeners really enjoy this. I want to thank you for making the opportunity and for taking the time for our listeners today.
Paul:	You were very well Vince, and thank you so much for the time. It was great having a conversation.
Vince:	Thank you.
David:	Thank you for joining us for this episode of the Microsoft Industry Experiences Team podcasts. The show that explores how industry experts are transforming businesses with Azure. Visit our team at aka.ms/Indxp, and don't forget to join us for our next episode.