Microsoft's Employee Q&A Program Playbook

Microsoft's Employee Q&A Program

Satya Nadella stepping into the role of CEO in 2014 signaled a monumental moment for Microsoft. One of the first opportunities for Satya to engage with employees as CEO was through a Q&A. The monthly program has since evolved into an effective two-way communication channel between our employees and senior leadership team, with many employees perceiving the Q&A as a way to have their most pressing questions recognized and answered by Microsoft leaders in a closed, authentic environment. This playbook will walk you through our planning process in running a Q&A program, while giving your team more insight into opportunities for your leaders to engage with their employees. Topics covered include:

1. Our Q&A strategy and its purpose and role in employee communications
2. How we manage format and content
3. Production logistics and best practices
4. Creating a dialogue - learning and listening your employees
5. Making events accessible

Strategy

Microsoft has over 130,000 employees worldwide, and identifying meaningful ways for the CEO to engage with them was at the top of our list. The Employee Q&A with Satya program was one of the first programs put into place as the CEO team thought about how Satya would engage with the global Microsoft employee base.

The vision for the Q&A was shaped by several principles our comms team was driving forward:

- **Highlight the company's cultural transformation under Satya's leadership.**
  - It was important to ensure the Q&A reflected Microsoft's ongoing cultural transformation and encouraged transparency within the company. This involved creating space for two-way dialogue between employees and leadership, as well as including more listening elements as opposed to top down communications, to ensure employees felt heard
- **Practice what we preach when it comes to company culture.**
  - The show has been a platform for Microsoft to truly lead by example, whether it's by having leaders be transparent, exhibiting growth mindset in their answers or being meticulous in all the details of making an enjoyable, accessible viewing experience for both in-person and online audience members.

- **Employees value authenticity from their leaders.**
  - o While we have several prepared topics to talk about, we allow plenty of time for employees to ask questions in-person or real-time to Satya. This gives leaders a chance to answer questions candidly and avoids having leaders seem too tied to a script.

We've been on this journey for the last five years, and while we're continuously optimizing and improving our strategy, we have some good learnings, including:

- **Making the Employee Q&A mandatory/opt-out for the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) members versus opt-in.**
  - o SLT members are expected to attend at least 6 out of the 10 Q&As held in a calendar year. We really want to be intentional in making two-way communication a standard part of Microsoft culture, starting with our top leaders. Having them in the audience reinforces our listening culture and also takes some of the accountability off of Satya to answer every question.
- **Communications from Satya, followed closely by communications from senior leadership, were voted as the most influential sources that shape employee opinions.**
  - o Leaders should meet employees where they're at - internal communication channels have become the most important news sources for employees, as compared to external news sources just a few years ago. We are intentional in having each Q&A serve as a platform for employees to hear from leadership on the most important news and information, whether it's an internal company issue or an external news event.

Format/Content

Satya's Q&As are held monthly, typically in building cafes or lobbies across our Puget Sound campus. These events are held on a monthly basis for multiple reasons: we want our leaders to address pressing topics in a timely manner and to allow employees more opportunities for their questions to be answered. On average we get between 300-500 employees attending live in-person, with thousands watching virtually both live and on-demand.

Over the years, the importance of the virtual experience has become greater. That's how 95% of our viewing audience consumes these events. It's important to optimize for the virtual, making your events engaging online and accessible for all. For Satya's Q&A program, we rely heavily on Microsoft's Live Events technologies like Microsoft Stream, Yammer and Teams to make our events come alive for our 130,000 employees worldwide.

Pre-event:

- **1 Month Out:** The CEO team begins prepping the Q&A agenda, giving leaders ample time to coordinate any necessary speakers, identify hot/trending topics, and plan for any demos or special occasions. We always designate a "Yambassador", a Microsoft employee who moderates the open Q&A portion by selecting questions from the CEO Connection Yammer page. The Yambassador is not a member of our comms team, as we try and invite a wide variety of employees to participate in choosing questions to cover. We look for Yambassadors who can represent the topic, theme or building behind that particular Q&A, or someone who is a leading example of Microsoft's culture.

- **10 Days Out:** The CEO team and employee sentiment team closely monitor Yammer and Daily Pulse to source potential questions for leaders to address.
- **5-7 Days Out:** The CEO team solidifies topics to be covered and connect with our production team to ensure that all production components are good to go.
- **1 Day Out:** Set up for event. Rehearse run of show with production and accessibility team.

During:'

A typical event allows about 15-20 minutes for programmed content and 25-30 minutes for Q&A. During the show, the CEO team is vetting online question submissions and forwarding them to the designated Yambassador to ask live. The CEO team also starts a Teams chat with production teams during the show to ensure a smooth live viewing experience, making sure live captioning works and video quality is sufficient.

Post-event:

Once the Q+A ends, the production team immediately begins working on making the VOD (video on demand) available online. The Employee Events team sends out a company-wide email containing links to the most important clips. The team also updates our CEO Connection page (homepage with dedicated Satya content) with a link to stream the VOD. We present employee sentiment during the Q+A in a post event report to Satya and his comms team so they have visibility into how employees feel about his answers to hot topics.
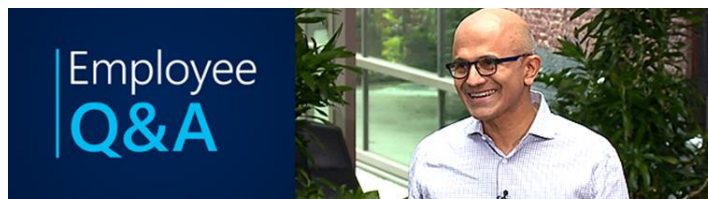
February 7th highlight clips

Amy talks Q2 earnings and H2 opportunities

Satya on our investment in quantum

Harry on TechFest

Phil on our mobile experience strategy

Production

At Microsoft, the production team does Q&As for many executives with many different budget levels. The graphic below is for one of our recent Employee Q&As with Satya.
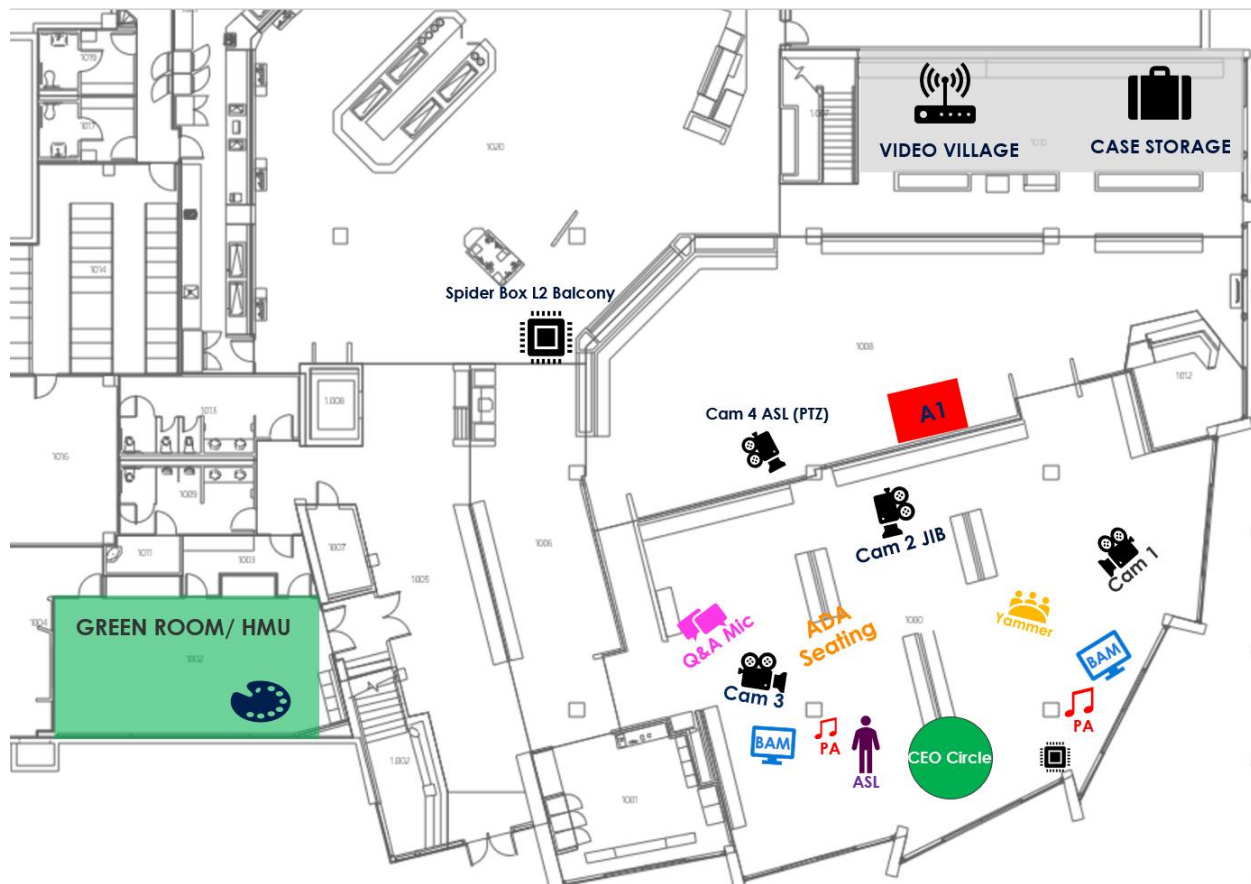
It is a four-camera, live-switched shoot that is webcast to all employees. Three cameras are dedicated to capturing the CEO and audience, while the forth camera is locked down for the American Sign Language interpreter.

The production team can expect a full day set-up on the day before the event, which includes the location set up, transmission testing and rehearsal with stand-ins. We also do an ADA walk-through of the set in case we need to adjust the flow, placement of the ASL interpreter, camera angles, location of the ADA section and/or pathways.

Q+A day is generally a half day. On the day of, we do another round of rehearsals and transmission testing, full production and strike. We have our ASL interpreter on set a few hours ahead so they can practice with the cameras as well. Throughout the event, we also closely monitor the viewing experience, which includes ensuring live captioning is working.

After the event concludes, we package the VOD to make it ready to be watched online and distributed to the entire employee base through email. We also check in with our accessibility team for feedback to incorporate into future shows.

Below is the list for Employee Q&A with Satya includes:

Must-have roles	Nice-to-have roles
• Microsoft FTE Executive Producer (Or some other FTE oversight) • Producer • Associate Producer (sometimes the producer/AP can be the same person) • Director • Technical Director (sometimes the Director/TD can be the same person) • Lighting Director (doubles as camera op) • Cam Op • Hair and Make Up • A1 (audio lead) • Video Engineer • Intercom Engineer • Location Manager • Security Lead • Studios Webcasting	• Jib/Cam Op • 2X Gaffer • Utility/Tape Op (when needed) • 2X Production Assistant • Floor Manager

There are various factors you can adjust for budget and resource:

Each of our productions are unique, from the budget to the execution. The Employee Q&A with Satya is relatively high end, but there are ways to vary the approach with the number of cameras, the type of equipment and the location of the event.

Employee Q&As can be viewed in several ways – live in person, live via webcast using Microsoft Stream, as well as on demand.

The VOD experience includes the Q&A in its entirety, as well as links to specific timecodes to highlight key Microsoft initiatives or other important content using Microsoft Stream, our enterprise video technology.

Employee Listening and Sentiment

Employee listening and sentiment monitoring both play a huge role in Satya's Q&A program. The goal is to listen and learn from employees by creating a dialogue between senior leaders and employees. We do this through multiple sources, on social sites like Yammer where we can hear directly from employees, through all-hands meetings that happen across the organization, and from employees surveys that our HR organization manages to capture real time employee feedback and sentiment. Prior to the event, we have a team collect questions from Yammer's CEO Connection.

We send this weekly report to executive communications leads to ensure our leaders are always staying engaged, and then track the most engaged questions in a Word document that we post to a Teams site. Questions are organized by broad category and engagement* numbers are tallied and updated. The date range for the questions we include in our reports starts with the day immediately following the last Q&A and ends with the day of the upcoming Q&A (typically 1 month).

*Engagement for our purposes indicates the number of likes, shares, and comments per original Yammer post.

Based on the reports we receive, we then decide which topics to cover during the Q+A. During the event, we record all questions asked, closely monitor conversations on Yammer and watch for any general sentiment trends. Shortly after the event, we send the CEO team a report on employee sentiment toward the Q+A topics with screenshots of text responses.

Below is a sample Q&A Prep Document we refer to when planning the show's agenda:

Product Strategy

Theme	Question	Suggested Leader	Status	Engagement	Count
Product Strategy	Kaushik on Yammer asks - These days, after learning lessons the hard way, social media firms are busily trying to remove fake accounts. Is there any plan for LinkedIn to verify its users' accounts and claims, in light of the recent events around Special Counsel Robert Mueller? [https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/31/media/gateway-pundit-robert-mueller-false-allegations/index.html] <Post> 60 engagements	Jeff Weiner	Not Responded	High	60
Product Strategy	Claire on Yammer asks - Last November, the London Metals Exchange (the world's largest metals exchange, btw) launched an investigation into allegations that cobalt sourced from the Congo is being mined by child slave laborers as young as four years old. Since 2016, numerous media and press outlets have validated this is an ongoing crisis. https://www.ft.com/content/930846c2-d047-11e7-b781-794ce08b24dc As of May 2018, the Congo produces SIGNIFICANTLY more cobalt than any other part of the world. https://www.americanexperiment.org/2018/05/congo-uses-child-labor-cobalt-mines-lets-mine-cobalt-minnesota-instead/ Cobalt is one of the metals used in lithium battery technology. What steps is Microsoft taking, particularly with our Chinese supply chains, to ensure we are not using any cobalt coming from a region known to be trafficking in child slavery, for batteries integrated into our devices? <Post> 26 engagements	Rajesh Jha	Completed	Low	26
Product Strategy	Gopal on Yammer asks - Many companies are venturing into Space Programs, does MS has such plans? <Post> 22 engagements	Judson Althoff	Not Responded	Low	22

Accessibility

Focusing on accessibility is empowering people with a disability to reach their full potential. The workplace of the future is to be inclusive, allowing us all to lower the unemployment rate of people with disabilities worldwide.

Executing this event with accessibility is critical to reinforcing Microsoft values. As Satya has made accessibility, diversity and inclusion part of Microsoft's key cultural attributes, we believe it is important to ensure that the Satya Q&A goes beyond the minimum bar of accessibility to provide an excellent accessible experience to all employees.

The goal of our Q&A's accessibility work is to encourage every business to think about what more they can do to make their internal and external programming fully inclusive. In order to provide the best possible experience, it is necessary to weave accessibility considerations into the entirety of the planning process and maintain a growth mindset by soliciting feedback from employees with disabilities and implementing them for future Employee Q&As.

There are many logistical things to note in terms of production from physical environment to online delivery. As the disability community is diverse, think through each groups of disabilities rather than approaching the issue as "one size fits all". Below is a list of best practices developed from ongoing learnings please consider that this is not final as we are ongoing in improving the overall experience. Everything should be coordinated with the Production team.

Physical Environment Accessibility:

Work with the Studios team to get building and space layout information ahead of time (best timeline: 4-3 weeks in advance) and flag any key considerations. Consider what accessibility features are available to people who have different disabilities and do not "stop" with this list. Remember there are no "one size fits all" solutions for accessibility. Be prepared to reach out and accept feedback.
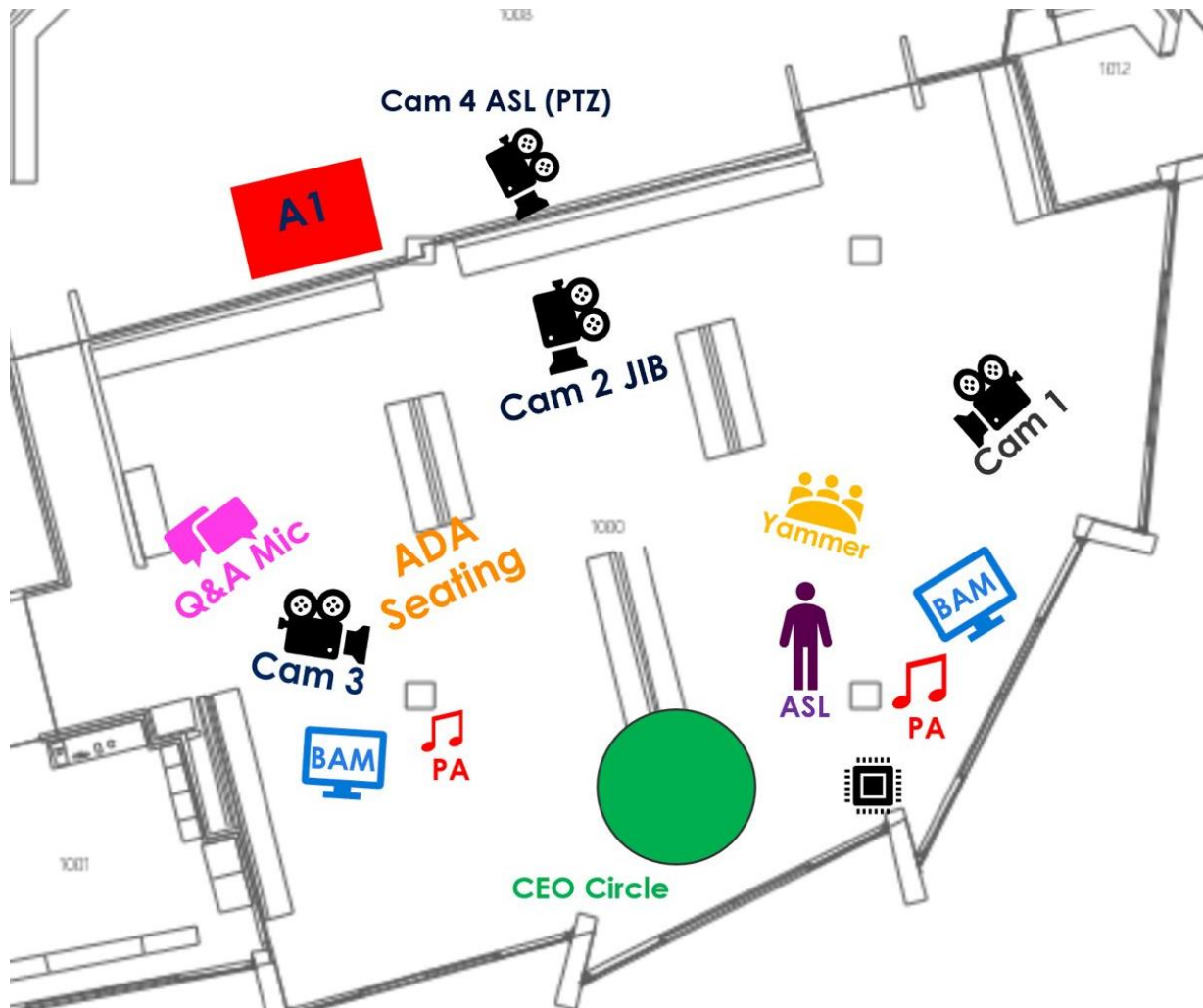
Note: It is a legal requirement to be compliant with the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) for events held within the US and incorporated grounds, including territories, military and diplomatic bases. Beyond the boundaries of the United States, tips below are also recommended as best practices for event accessibility worldwide.

General

- Identify best placement of "ADA section" in advance with team.
- Post additional signs and pointers to bathrooms and other important locations, ensuring they're clearly identifiable.
- Put up clear, visual markers to indicate reserved seating for ADA Section.
  - This should be near the front section, with clear line-of-sight to the sign language interpreter area and having an area set aside for wheelchairs/guide dogs to comfortably park.

- In general, wide walkways and aisles are recommended.

Mobility

- Consider the flow of the pathways around the room - ease of entry and getting around.
- Situate the ADA section near accessible entrance.
- Identify barriers – ensure that line-of-sight are not blocked by people standing in front of area.
- Ramps to the stage
- Ramps for access to the room
- Elevators
- Access to Accessible Bathrooms
- Access to Accessible Exits

Visual Disabilities

- Be mindful of which pathways have tripping hazards for wheels/guide dogs/canes.
- Inform the staff that guide dogs are welcome.
- Ensure enough space around the chair placement to allow for cane/guide dogs to rest.
- Minimize blockages or complication in pathways and routes around the room, including for the path to mic and to the stage.
- Ensure acoustics are clear in the room by checking speaker system, etc.

Deaf/Hard of Hearing

- Reach out to your company's ASL interpreter or Accessibility coordinator to put in a formal request to reserve sign language interpreters.
  - Best timeline: 1 month in advance
  - Work with Production team to ensure the full hook-up of CART service for the correct day and time frame (real-time captioners) Best timeline: 3+ weeks in advance.
- Rehearse with both the ASL interpreter and CART components fully integrated in production run of show.
- Provide Interpreters for large events such as All Hands where everyone is broadly invited.
- With the Production team, designate a place for the interpreter to stand, preferably on stage next to the speaker on stage.
- Ensure lighting falls on both the speaker and the interpreter.
- Ensure clear line of sight to both the stage and the interpreters.
- Consider positioning of light upon eye strain.
  - Shadow play is better than diffused light, which creates less strain.
  - Minimize the bright lights shining directly into eyes of viewers as much as possible while also balancing the stage lighting necessities.
- Dim lights in audience when you're ready to begin stage event.

Additional Disabilities

- Have a nearby empty room, accessible yet quiet.
- Brief staff at event to allow employees with disabilities to have access to the empty room if needed for a sensory break/reboot.

- Avoid distracting and chemical smells.
- Avoid sensory overload by not using strobe lights or flashing lights or over-the-top effects in video/audio.

And each time I go, one of the things that sort of I draw my energy
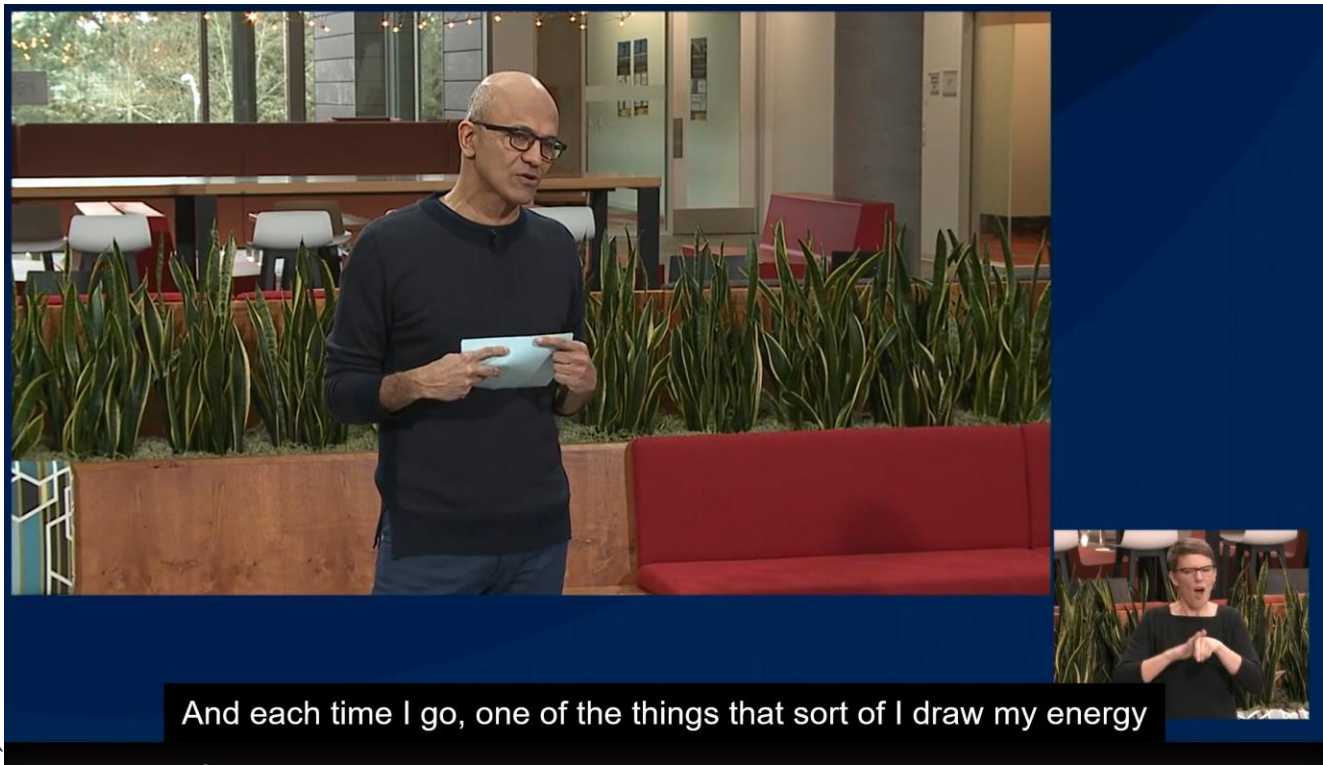
Online Delivery Accessibility:

- When sending information on Employee Q&A event, either beforehand or afterward, include accessibility information for on-site event as well as how to have accessible online experience, such as captions, etc.
- The day before Employee Q&A, send a copy of the briefing to Sign Language Interpreters and CART vendors for their preparation so they can deliver a better service on the spot.
- The morning of the event, do a dry run with CART captioners to ensure that they don't inaccurately transcribe audio.
- Either the day before or the morning of event, provide information to the captioners, such as script or briefings, beforehand (everything will be confidential) for best possible transcription services and reduce human error.
- Ensure that the captions are cleaned up for the livestream and post-production release to global audiences of internal employees.
- Consider the box placement of "in screen interpreters" placement for the video online and coordinate with Production Team to determine best.

For additional resources, Microsoft has made these following sites available around Disability and Inclusion:

Microsoft.com/accessibility (external)

[Microsoft Disability Inclusion Journey (external)](external)

Conclusion

Building a connection between senior leadership and all employees is critical to cultivating an engaged employee workforce. We are still on a journey, and as a company with a culture that values a growth mindset, we work every day to learn, research and grow. We are committed to understanding and reflecting the human impact of our work, which requires more listening on our end and making our events as inclusive as possible.

We hope that you have found the information in this document helpful in terms of better understanding how we think about the role and format of our CEO's monthly Q&A events, and we hope it's a helpful guide as you begin to think through your own plans.