Learning

Starting Your Relationship with AI with Mike Pell (S6E3) Transcript

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Chris Congdon: Welcome to work better, Mike.

Mike Pell: Thank you for having me.

Chris Congdon: So, Mike. I don't know if all of our listeners know this, but you've had a very long and a fascinating career.

Chris Congdon: I'm going to be a little vulnerable because I haven't had this before. I've talked to a guest before, but I actually, as I was preparing, I thought to myself, like am I smart enough to talk to this guy like like I kind of had that, that feeling of like, "Wow, you know, there's some really interesting things that you've done," so before we jump into kind of where we are today, I've got to go back a little bit and go like, did you really invent the PDF?

Mike Pell: I really did. It's a true story. Hacked it together in an afternoon.

Chris Congdon: Wow!

Mike Pell: So yeah, it's funny way back when John Warnock was running Adobe. And had the crazy idea to be able to share documents between different types of computer systems which at that time was kind of impossible. And you could send things around, but they never looked right. And so, John, being the visionary and technologist he was, just wanted to put together a really quick example of how this could be done, and asked a very small team of us at Adobe to go off and create a prototype, and so my part was to do a mock-up of the rendering, but also to create this, this 1st demo of a format that could be used to send documents across the Mac and the PC, and then Linux machines back then. So yes, true story.

Chris Congdon: It's so hard to like, even remember what it was like before we had a PDF. It just feels like it's become so ingrained in the ways that we're working today, even though there's so much that's changing. And I want to get to that, too. So you've been at Microsoft for some time and leading Microsoft's Garage. And I want to talk more about that, because, like, when we think about Microsoft, we may not put the word garage, together with Microsoft as much as some, some other things. But I also heard. Another thing about you is that you invented a Time machine and I'm just wondering if your invention of a time machine ties to your work at Microsoft.

Mike Pell: Well. So in the most recent book I wrote called *Visualizing Business*, I go on to describe how AI and data and spatial computing can be combined to create essentially a time machine for business. Being able to rewind through existing data or fast forward using simulation and forecasting to be able to see outcomes of things. So yes, that was a lot of fun to do. And a lot of my work with data visualization is really about helping people to communicate and understand more deeply. So that was a very fun project to do that. And I got to do a TEDx talk recently where I went through this whole scenario of taking people on the Time Machine, so that was a lot of fun.

Chris Congdon: Well, that is very cool. You know, nobody should worry that we're gonna all of a sudden, you know, get transported back to the 1800's or something, but it is really interesting to think about you know how more current developments are allowing us to be able to go back and understand maybe the trajectory of where we're going, based on where we've been.

So let's go back to the garage a little bit. Can you tell us what is Microsoft's garage and what do you do?

Mike Pell: Microsoft Garage is our worldwide innovation program, where employees get to take their ideas and their passion and do something with them. It's kind of a unique program in corporate America in that we literally encourage our employees to take their ideas and figure out how to make them into a working prototype of some sort to share them to see is there something there? We run the world's biggest hackathon every year for the last 10 years we had 74,000 Microsoft employees join us last year where they got to form teams, or, you know, join a team that has some like-minded people to figure out is something possible. And we get projects from across the board. You know every different area, whether it's sustainability, working with health, you know, of course, the technology side. But it's just amazing that the garage program helps to sort of support all of the passion that our employees have for experimenting and being curious. And, by the way, the term garage, as you mentioned, is sort of, you know, a homage to the Silicon Valley garages like where some of the most Innovative companies have come from like HP and Apple.

Chris Congdon:. Yeah, well, it sounds so cool. And I would love to know a little more like, are there any projects that you worked on through the hackathon or through your ongoing work in the garage that you think are really pretty interesting?

Mike Pell: There's lots if you go to microsoft.com whack, garage there's a tab called the Wall of Fame, and the Wall Of Fame shows many of the projects that have come out of hackathons that have actually made it into Microsoft's product and service catalog that have gone on to help people in lots of different areas. There's projects that have gone on to help people in the areas of learning and reading, in the areas of farming, being able to monitor you know what's happening at farm sites, remotely using sensors and drones, projects that have gone on to help to be able to index video so that you can just ask, you know, like, now ask a question, you know, "when did Satya say this, You know this particular phrase?" We have so many different interesting projects across the board that happen every year, but many of them have made it back into Microsoft product and services.

Chris Congdon: So that's pretty cool. I'd like to get into the topic that it seems like everybody is asking about right now, thinking about which, of course, is AI. And I'd really like to hear more what you're seeing and thinking about that in terms of like, how do you think AI is going to transform kind of the landscape of innovation and creativity? I mean it already is, but what are you seeing from your vantage point?

Mike Pell: What we do in the Garage, especially here in New York City, is, I work with our customers to help them imagine how to leap forward. And you know, this is the realm of many innovation programs and this is not unique to Microsoft or what we do in the Garage, but what we're doing is we're using Microsoft Copilot and AI to help accelerate very particular parts of the innovation process. So you know very well, brainstorming, envisioning, coming up with new ideas, you know, researching competitive landscapes, or figuring out how to go to market. Those things took a long time. There were very manually intensive tasks that groups of people had to be scheduled for and get together, and this and that, and it would just take a while. As you know, everybody is being asked to innovate in some way, and the truth is, you cannot innovate on demand. It just doesn't work.

But we found that you can accelerate the process by using copilot, and in our case, in very particular parts to sort of speed up. so we can do the ideation session literally in minutes now, when that used to take hours or days in the past. We can sort through ideas. We can actually ask for rationale as to why something might work or not work. How does this relate to other things that are already in the marketplace? The speed at which you can do this type of I'll call it the "front end" of innovation is astounding. And so that's really where we're seeing the biggest advances are in the realm of, you know when you apply AI to innovation.

it's being applied across the board, of course, within our tool sets and the systems and the processes that we work already, but innovation-wise, It's been a game changer.

Chris Congdon: A few years ago, you know, I didn't really think AI pertained to me so much because I'm like, well, I do creative work, and that's not something that you know I'm going to use AI for. And now here I am, where copilot has become, among other things, one of my favorite research assistants. So it's like I can ask it to help me find things that I'm looking for, and you know, to be able to help sift through academic papers or different bodies of research in like seconds of things that would have taken me hours, days, weeks.

Mike Pell: Who knows how long? Right.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, exactly like I still might be, you know, digging through all of that stuff. So I mean, I think the reality that a lot of us are coming to now is like, this isn't something that's for somebody else. You know, that it's really going to influence all the different ways that we're working. So to tie with that and the work that you're doing there in the garage, I know that you also spend a lot of time working, working with us at Steelcase as partners, thinking about kind of the physical experiences around technology, what those might be like. And I think that's a question that everybody has is like, how, how might our physical experiences need to shift going forward? Or if we squint a little bit, what do you think the future might look like there?

Mike Pell: Well, it's true. I've had a long, incredibly great working relationship with Steelcase figuring out the work environment, you know. So here at the Microsoft Garage there's many pieces of Steelcase, you know, equipment and furniture here because it is for creative people, you know. That's how I use it. That's been incredibly valuable to me to have it here to showcase different ways of approaching things. So here in the physical space the Garage that's here in New York was designed 6 years ago before the pandemic, but it was always intended to be a very open layout, highly flexible and I designed the whole garage around Surface and, believe it or not, Steelcase. We talked very, very early in the process about having something that you used to call louvers, that are, I think, now called pivots. They're pieces of vertical, you know, dividers that are one side, writable whiteboard and the flip side, acoustic, dampening material. That helped me to subdivide the space without putting walls in, super effective.

I work with, of course, Surface Hubs. Steelcase Roam, you know, lets me take the, you know, and move the surface hubs all around the garage, which is super useful, which is an incredible part of the design. We needed things to be more flexible than they could have been in other environments. You know, when you set up an office in a neighborhood, you know, environment where there's sort of fixed desks or hard wall offices, It's a little difficult to get the right feel, But working with, you know, these different pieces that can be mixed and matched and arranged in certain ways, and then changed when needed, unlocked something for us.

What it gave us was the ability to do what we needed to do at that moment and then change it. And that for us has been critically important to moving things forward and not just having people feel like the spaces are set, you know. Because something we did learn coming out of the pandemic is that everything is different. You know the way that people approach their values. The way that the company has to operate, you know, is quite different. And so, having that flexibility of the physical space has been very important to us to be able to feel like we can work at our best.

Chris Congdon: That's so great to hear and so interesting. You know, when I talk to the folks in our team at Steelcase, who are really focused on AI, one of the things that surprised me, I think, is we maybe had this perception that they'd all be sitting at individual desks with big screens and kind of glued to the screen all day. But they said, in fact, actually, they're spending a lot more time collaborating and interacting with each other because, you know, it's yes, you have to be able to visualize the data, but you also have to be able to discuss and understand, and you know, work with other people. Does that feel right to you?

Mike Pell: Absolutely. I mean, I always say, you know, half jokingly, if you want to focus, stay home. Don't come to work to lock yourself in a little phone booth. That's not what being at work is about. It's about collaborating with your teammates. It's about finding opportunities to work in this shared environment in a way that you can't do from home or somewhere else. And so for us, we're always looking for those collaboration moments right like, how can we enable the best possible environment?

You know, I saw recently I was at the Steelcase headquarters here in New York and Columbus Circle. Some of the amazing teams work that you've done with both screens and you know the desks and the arrangement. Brilliant work of putting people in a half circle, looking at the screen, you know, rather than the traditional like layout is just, It's so simple, but once you see it, you say, well, of course, it should be that way which is my definition of a true breakthrough: when something is so obvious that you can't imagine it being done any other way.

The thing that we're getting to very quickly is the notion that's been described in the past as ambient computing, meaning, you know, technology is built into the rooms, the desks, the chairs, everything around us, and pretty quickly we're getting to that point where you can walk in a room, it can recognize you, you can interact, you know, you can join meetings very seamlessly. You can work with people that are not anywhere close to you. But you feel closer because of angles and the audio that's being sort of done spatially.

So we are getting very quickly to this feel that the technology you know, AI-powered, is being deeply embedded into the physical, you know, spaces and the physical objects that surround us to the point where it's enabling things that we haven't been able to do before.

Chris Congdon: I love that you're saying that because it feels like it's something that has been on kind of the "wish list" for a long time, like we've imagined this future where the room could be more of a participant. But yeah, we haven't quite gotten there.

Mike Pell: Can I, can I just comment on that, Chris. So yeah, in the pandemic,I think I told you about the Microsoft global hackathon. It's this amazing event every year. So, we had Steelcase join us several years ago as a participant in the hackathon. The project we worked on, it is exactly what you just said. We made the room be an active participant in the meeting. The room was actually prompting people, you know, sort of privately like, "Hey, Mike, you haven't said anything in this meeting for a while is, you know. Are you paying attention? Are you tracking?" Maybe saying to someone like, "Hey, Chris, you've been talking a lot", you know. "Maybe you could, you should ask Mike to say something."

Chris Congdon: I can envision the room saying just that to me.

Mike Pell: Right, but it's the notion that the room doesn't have to be a lifeless container. It can be an active participant in everything we do.

Chris Congdon: I don't know if this is a slightly different direction, but you have written a number of books. Your most recent one is called *Visualizing Business*. I think this is the one where I got a little nervous because you started talking about this concept of 4D. Visualization. And, you know, coming from a design business like, I understand, 2D and 3D, but I didn't quite get 4D. Like, can you talk about that concept a little bit? What do you mean by that?

Mike Pell: Sure. So we're all familiar with 2D, it's the spreadsheets, and the charts, and the graphs. Like all the business information that we see on our screens are essentially 2D flat, static, lifeless information. You work in 3D because you're a spatial designer. You're a spatial thinker. You can understand the importance of spatialness in your work because you're helping to design environments where humans inhabit these spaces. So 3D, you know, we all understand that 3D Refers to a 3D Object. You know, like I have my my little coffee cup as a 3D object. 4D is simply the addition of time.

So, time has never been used as one of the principal aspects of our work. We all understand, inherently, that time is part of business. You know there are all the things that have come before and all the things that will come in the future, but when you look at a spreadsheet or a chart, or a document of some kind, there's no time slider, you know. Like, if you're watching Netflix or Youtube or some video, there's always a little slider to go. You can scrub backwards, or you can fast forward. That should be part of everything that we do in business, and it's boggled me for the last 20 years that we haven't incorporated time as a fundamental element into what we do with everything about business, whether it's processes, or data, or systems. So, the book really talks about how we're going to build systems with time, you know, the four in 4 D being that addition.

Chris Congdon: That is so fascinating, and I highly recommend it to any of our listeners, you know. Don't be intimidated. I think it really is an interesting concept that Mike is sharing. So, Mike, it feels like from where you're sitting in my words, you have kind of, I would say you have like a front-row seat to kind of the future of work. So if you take that vantage point like, what advice might you offer to some of our listeners about what you see coming, how to prepare for it. You know what are some of the things that we should be thinking about now?

Mike Pell: I love what you said earlier about Co-pilot being essentially a trusted teammate of yours. I think it's like, you know, a researcher that can do things. That is exactly the right attitude that people should have about how to integrate AI into their work lives. Whether you're a highly creative designer, an engineer, working in the medical profession, It doesn't really matter, you know. Name your favorite AI assistant and help you personally to do certain things, and the way that you do that is just by experimenting. Just try it out. I always tell people, many people say, "Well, what course should I take to teach me how to be great at AI?" And I say, don't don't take any class. Just open it up and start talking to it like it's a person, whether it's a friend or a coworker or an expert in some field that you need to know about. Just have a conversation, and that's my best advice for people who are, you know, maybe a little hesitant to try it out or are trying it, but sort of feel like they have to learn how to be the world's greatest prompt engineer. You do not. Literally, just talk to these things. Now that said, the more specific you are, and the more detailed you are in your conversation or asks, the better output you're going to get.

So there is some practice involved, and how you phrase things into the level of detail that you want things to come out. That's great. I always advise companies who come in to talk about different AI projects that they like to do, to not try to spin up some giant project right away.

Think about what you really need to get done, and then companies like Microsoft can certainly help you figure out how to do parts of it quickly, so that you get those immediate wins, you know you see some productivity gains, efficiency, gains or growth in other areas. And so that's the other part of all this is, it's easy to think about AI being a way to streamline and automate and make things more efficient, but the other side of the coin is that it is amazing to open up new possibilities for growth. Whether it's personal growth, like learning, a new skill set or growth in your business, maybe going into completely new areas where you didn't have an offering before or didn't have a service before. So I like to look at both the operational efficiency side of things and the growth side of things as how to think about using AI going forward.

Chris Congdon: I think that's really helpful advice, and I would just build on that and say for anybody who might feel a little bit intimidated, you know, I first started my relationship with Copilot when I needed help writing my Christmas newsletter, and I was tired at night, and I had writer's block, and I thought I was really impressed that it did a pretty good job, but I also was a little impressed with myself because I said 'I thought I could never be a prompt engineer', but yet I was able to tell Copilot that I wanted, you know, to write it in a certain voice, in a certain style and voila, so that really helped me get past kind of my initial anxiety about all of that.

Mike Pell: Yeah. And you know, the fun thing is, it does get better over time, you know, as it learns more about how you like to work, and the way that you like to do things, it will get better and better at helping. And you know, I think people also get better and better at figuring out how to pose a more beautiful question, right? So that you get a better response.

Chris Congdon: Well, Mike, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today, because now I feel a little silly saying that I felt nervous about talking to you, whether I was smart enough, you've been very gracious, and I feel like I've come away from the conversation learning a lot. So, thanks for joining us today.

Mike Pell: This is really fun. Can't wait to come back and talk more about what you're doing with copilot.