

Technology

Microsoft Azure IoT Q+A: Powering Smart Buildings

The power of the collaboration between Steelcase and Microsoft is in security, scalability and growth.



Today, organizations need to think years, if not decades ahead, yet are able to remain agile enough to make changes at any moment. It's not an easy way to operate. We need to prepare for the future we can't yet anticipate. The Internet of Things, advanced computing, virtual reality and artificial intelligence are all technology trends that are creating change in the workplace and live our daily lives. As Steelcase and Microsoft collaborate to build the Smart + Connected Workplace, Microsoft director of Azure IoT, Sam George, spoke to 360 about how the two companies leverage each other's strengths to create a secure network ready to adapt to the changing ways in which people are working.

360: What is the benefit for Steelcase to develop a connected workplace solution on the Microsoft Azure cloud platform?

Sam: Microsoft and Steelcase have similar goals — to empower people and organizations everywhere to achieve more. Both companies cover different but synergistic aspects of the modern workplace. As the physical and digital worlds fuse into one, blending our respective strengths results in more differentiated and rapid innovation than what each party can achieve in isolation. By working with Steelcase, we're able to connect our global expertise in technology with more than 105 years of experience from Steelcase researching work, workers and the workplace.

By combining forces, we can create results that are much greater than the sum of each company's individual parts. Recently, our companies have worked together to tackle creativity in the workplace by bringing together people, place and technology in a purposeful way. Microsoft Azure is powering the next evolution of the places we all go to work everyday.

Steelcase has introduced Steelcase Workplace Advisor and Steelcase Personal Assistant — built on the Microsoft Azure IoT platform. The idea here is to add sensors into the work environment to collect anonymous data and then make sense of that data to help people make better decisions for themselves or their organizations. This is just the beginning of creating the smart workplace.

360: Both public and private data security are large concerns in this domain. How did Azure work with Steelcase to ensure a secure data collection system?

Sam: Microsoft understands that to realize the benefits of the cloud, you must be able to trust the cloud. Microsoft has been leading the industry in establishing clear security and privacy requirements and then consistently meeting these requirements. Azure meets a broad set of international and industry-specific compliance standards. Microsoft has leveraged its decades-long experience building enterprise software and running some of the world's largest online services to create industry-leading security technologies and practices. Our time-tested approach to privacy and data protection is grounded in our commitment to organizations' ownership of and control over the collection, use, and distribution of their information.

Azure IoT is the global-scale and trusted IoT solution for enterprises providing advanced cloud services to deploy, manage, monitor and visualize data in IoT solutions from billions of devices at scale. The Azure IoT team works closely with its partners to help them navigate the security journey and achieve the highest trust and confidence in securing their IoT solutions.

360: Can you provide us with some perspective on how big the IoT impact is on business today?

Sam: Azure IoT enables companies across all industries — from manufacturing to agriculture, transportation, healthcare, energy, retail, smart cities and more to drive digital transformation by addressing business problems in new ways, gain new insights through connected solutions and create greater efficiencies in business processes. We've enabled customers across all these sectors to get started quickly with IoT through pre-configured solutions and time-to-results accelerators for remote monitoring, connected factories, predictive maintenance, and connected field service. The collaboration with Steelcase is an example of pioneering work to enable organizations to create smarter buildings and workplaces.

360: What do you see as the advantages of integrating space and technology in the workplace?

Sam: In the past, IT professionals and CTOs or CIOs would come to us and talk about the best technology solutions for their people. Separately, facility managers would work with Steelcase to identify the best physical work environment. These were two distinct, and often isolated, conversations. Through our ongoing deep investment in IoT we're now connecting our intelligent edge and cloud to new signals from the physical environment. That allows us to unlock entirely new ways to better assist people, improve communication, boost productivity in general.

We're bringing space and technology together in a way that helps people save time, energy and have more freedom to do great work. It may mean having the right space to make use of their Surface Hub or their mobile app tells them how to connect with a colleague in just the right room for what they need to accomplish.

360: What do you see as the future of IoT in the workplace?

Sam: Ambient intelligence, powered through the continued convergence of IoT and Artificial Intelligence, will enable the physical environment to be responsive to the human activity and will revolutionize the way buildings and spaces interact with the people in them to increase their comfort, security, safety and productivity.

In the workplace of the future the environment becomes an active participant in the experience, and we'll be able to create artificial intelligence solutions that are truly remarkable. But ultimately, it's about people and relationships. This partnership increases our ability to walk into a space and help a team perform better.



Sam George is the director of the Azure IoT, responsible for Microsoft IoT Central, Azure IoT Suite, Azure IoT Edge, Azure IoT Hub, Azure IoT Device Provisioning Service, Microsoft's IoT Device SDK, the Microsoft Connected Vehicle Platform and more. He's been with Microsoft since 1997 working in all three engineering disciplines; development, test and program management.

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