An Interview With David Treadwell, Corporate Vice President of Microsoft's Live Platform

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of The Social Media Bible, published by John Wiley& Sons, the most comprehensive book every written on the subject of Social Media.

And today we are here with David Treadwell (how cool is this!), Corporate Vice-President of Microsoft Live Platform, and we're going to be speaking about, of course, Microsoft Live and all things Microsoft and Social Media.

So David, it's great to have you here today, thank you.

DT: Thanks much, Lon. Thanks for having me on.

LS: Yeah, this is totally cool. Let's get started. David, can you please tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what you're doing at Microsoft?

DT: Sure. I run the Platform Services Group up here at Microsoft, and our mission is basically build out the services platform infrastructure. We are big believers at Microsoft on the value and importance of services moving forward and what we find over and over is that as the service-world matures there are a lot of platform opportunities where platform providers can give infrastructure to developers to build applications that make it a lot easier for those developers to connect their users, to get stuff done with mass-scale services. So Social Media plays a huge role in that, because a lot of the key service scenarios that are evolving in the industry, in the ecosystem, really revolve around Social Media.

So, to sum it up, a platform for services with a special emphasis on a lot of social scenarios.

LS: Wow, that's really a mouthful. My God!

DT: It was a mouthful. It took me long enough. I hope I was expected to say it all.

LS: No, that's good, because you really are offering a tremendous amount of services. I mean some of the research and conversations that I've had with colleagues at Microsoft….I mean, we've got Security Center Alert, Up Storage, Context, FeedSync, Live Framework, Messenger, Photogallery photos, Search, Silverlight streaming, Spaces, Virtual Earth, Webgadgets, Windows Live ID and Writer…just to name a few of the services that you're…

DT: …the numeration that we've got a lot cooking on this stuff.

LS: Holy Moley! Can you speak to some of them and what some of the business applications are here?

DT: So one of the things that we are finding more and more here is that one of the values of a services platform in the Social Media scenarios is making it a lot easier for users to connect with other people, to connect with their data, to connect with all the different devices that they own.

So if you look at a lot of what we are doing in Windows Live and Live Mash and some of the related efforts…it's really about building connections across all of these different …currently islands. You know, today if you have two different devices it can be difficult to move date between those devices. If you want to communicate with your friends there are ways to do it, but there are, really, barriers to communication that are very challenging.

So, especially things like the LiveMash projects where what we have is the ability to synchronize data really well across these devices and across people and across applications. And we think that that's going to just result in a real explosion of scenarios…people building applications that today we don't even anticipate.

We can see a lot of these scenarios that are likely, but making it easy to bridge those islands will really enable all kinds of things for developers to provide to users, in terms of experiences, scenarios, functionality, and the rest of it.

LS: Wow. And I was at the recent Entrepreneurship Conference and Dan Willis, our Arizona representative from Microsoft, announced something called Biz Spark. Is that part of this program as well?

DT: Yeah, Biz Spark is intended to basically help give developers support and resources for building on a lot of the services platform infrastructures, so it's more a program than a technology, but we're pretty excited about as a way to facilitate development in a lot of these new platform initiatives.

LS: So basically it's for small business to actually get partnered with Microsoft and use the Microsoft platform for the development of their products.

DT: Yeah, exactly. It's a catalyst for them to get going and hopefully see some of the benefits of what our platform provides, and how they can provide great applications and services and offerings to their customers by leveraging the platform infrastructure that we have.

LS: And that's a pretty good program! For our listeners, please look into Biz Spark because Microsoft's doing a really great job with this.

You had mentioned something called Live Mash. Can you talk about that? What does that mean?

DT: Sure. Mash is a project we started a couple of years ago to lend the best aspects of services and clients [05:01.9]. There's a ton of services doing uniquely well. When you use a web service there's no install step, you don't have to worry about ruining your data. You have high reliability of any data that's stored [05:16.5]. There's a lot of really compelling advantages to using services.

At the same time, we're big believers in (the fact that) the client has a lot of value as well. You know, some simple things like the ability to store data offline, or the ability to have control over your data because it's stored on machines that you own. The ability to provide really rich immersive experiences by doing compilation and storage physically close to the user, and it reduces latency and has all kinds of other benefits.

So what we see is the client also has kind of a special role to play in computing moving forward.

So this is where Mash comes in. What we want to do with Mash is take the best of web services and the best of client computing and blend them in a way that enables developers and users to have the best possible experiences with their applications and their experiences.

It's based a lot on the concept of synchronization. The idea is that you, as a user, can have your data in the Cloud and on all your devices, automatically synchronized [06:20.2] and you don't have to worry about, "Oh, did I have this file on this computer?" The infrastructure handles that automatically. And if for some reason you are on a friend's computer or something like that, you can always use the Cloud-backed storage to get at it.

So by basing on concepts like synchronization, enabling the best of services, and the best of client software, we really think it will be a significant piece of infrastructure. Platform infrastructure and some platform experiences will really help drive the future of computing much more effectively.

LS: And you mentioned something called the Cloud. I do a lot of traveling because I'm a professional speaker, so I'm in almost every one of the 50 states every year. And one of the things that really is annoying is being on the road and having to have access to something that's stored on my desktop that I don't carry on my laptop.

And when I had a previous conversation with Dharmesh, what he was saying, and you had mentioned the Cloud as well…for our listeners can you explain a little bit about how you can put your data on the Cloud and access it anywhere in the world…and what the Cloud it?

DT: Sure. The concept of the Cloud basically means open data centers; and data centers that we at Microsoft run, or other companies run. It's a more generic concept not specific to Microsoft, but the Cloud that Microsoft supports enables storage of data very easy. You can put files or all kinds of other data in the Cloud.

As an analogy that I bet most people will get….when you are using one of the web based mail services, like HotMail, the emails are stored in the Cloud, we say. So they should think of the cloud as the datacenter's that are keeping your data available and making it web-accessible.

On the scenario you described, you are always traveling, you're probably using several different computers at different times….that's the synchronization value of where Mash really comes in very clearly there…because what happens is…and I personally use several different computers, I have a small laptop and I have a big laptop and I have a couple of desktop machines, and not having to worry about whether I have a given piece of data on any specific machine…that's really handy.

I do not need to think, "Oh, gosh, I'm about to go on an airplane, did I get all the files I want? No, because it's synchronized automatically and also available in the Cloud, I know that while any data a really care about, no matter where I am, if I'm on a computing device (either one of mine or even somebody else's') I know I can get at that data.

So that's the classic scenario that we think users will find super-compelling, and it exists today in some scenarios (probably like email). Often email clients synchronize, other clients obviously stores it in the email server. But what we want to do is takes those concepts and make them available to any kind of application scenario. So any sort of application has that same attribute where the data is on all devices, shared [09:09.1] with other people, backed by the Cloud, and therefore always accessible.

LS: See, and that's terrific. Just as you just said, that is really important to me, because I cannot tell you how many time I'll be, at seven o'clock at night, trying to put together a proposal on the road and I have to call my wife and ask her to turn on my desktop and to please email it out…

DT: Especially a device you proliferate. You know, one thing we are really finding is that there's all these new form factors [09:33.7]. Netbooks is a good, relatively recent example. Super-small, super-cheap devices; but we also know that something like a Netbook, while really handy in some scenarios…you probably don't want to use that as your main computer. Keyboards are small, the monitor's real small. So, people, more and more, are using multiple devices simultaneously and it's a real hassle for people to keep their data up-to-date, synchronized, across all these different devices. So we see tons and tons of opportunity in that problem space, by making it just "brain-dead" simple for having data be something that the user owns, not something that the device owns.

LS: I love the way that you just put that. The user owns it and not the device. And again, another practical example is that when I write a book, I usually take my laptop when I go someplace quiet; but I want to be able to synchronize the laptop with my desktop. First of all because I want a backup, which at Cloud is really great….

DT: The Cloud gives you redundant storage that's a real nice part of it.

LS: That's really a good part! As a matter of fact, Dan Willis just had his laptop stolen and he lost a tremendous amount of data.

DT: Ugh! Yeah, those kinds of scenarios are in photos. People today are all taking tons and tons of digital photos and all too often we hear about scenarios from friends and family where the hard drive died or, like you just said, a laptop got lost and they lost all these photo memories.

That's something that irreplaceable usually. So being able to store redundant copies is real important to a lot of people.

LS: That's true. I just backed up 5,000 of my photographs on DVD, and when I went to reload the DVD's they weren't recognizable.

DT: Yeah, sometimes that happens.

LS: So to have this Cloud! I mean, that's absolutely an amazing thing that you are offering.

Now the thing that is also just amazing is how much storage does the average user get and what is the expense associated with that?

DT: Well, today, like with Mash, we have a five-gigabyte default Cloud storage offering. What we also allow is if you have a lot of data…suppose you have a photo directory with tons of gigabytes…what you can do is you can just synchronize across my own devices. Don't put is up in the Cloud.

That has the benefit of just using your own hard drive for storage and also the benefit of your own hard drives probably have good network conductivity to one another. So you can, kind of, move it around quickly. Once

you start getting into multi-gigabyte sizes they're real bandwidth constraints that are problematic in moving ten gigabytes to an internet server takes a couple of days on typical broadband connections.

LS: That's absolutely incredible. What's the cost for all of these services?

DT: Well, there's no cost on Live Mash and we have not figured out if we want to have other offerings and with more Cloud storage. Maybe (it will be for) some monetization, we haven't figured that out. We're looking through the possibilities in doing this.

LS: See, that's terrific. You're offering these services basically for free.

DT: Yep!

LS: You can't beat "free."

DT: What our motive there is oftentimes we are asked for help. "Why are you making this stuff available for free? What's in it for Microsoft?"

Really the answer is quite simple. We know that there is a value to Microsoft by making it easy for people to own lots of computers. So by having this infrastructure, by making PC's more useful we think we can grow the overall market.

If each person wanted two or three computers, there are obvious ways Microsoft stands to benefit there because we hope to sell the operating system, for example, that those users will use on all those devices.

LS: And that's a really good point. I wouldn't mind having an additional laptop if I was able to synchronize all my data more easily.

DT: Yeah, I hear that commonly. "Awe, maybe I would buy a second computer. Laptops are cheap and I can get a laptop for $500 or $600, a notebook for $300 today."

But the constraint is less often the cost, as opposed to the hassle of getting that computer with all the data you want, consistently synchronized, all the applications you want…..that's really hard for people today, and understandable so.

What we are hoping to do with some of this infrastructure is really lower those barriers….just make it such that the user, have a bunch of data, have a bunch of applications…you turn on a new machine, you say, "I'm on! Give me my stuff." And then a little while later the computer is all configured with all your data, constantly up to date, all your applications…with no extra effort from you.

So that's a place we expect to get to reasonably quickly with a lot of the infrastructure.

LS: That's a really big deal! I mean, that is huge. Now also, do you provide storage space and a website for photographs?

DT: Yeah, now you're getting into the Windows Live area. That's something we're super-excited about. Recently we started rolling out what we call Windows Live Wave 3, which is the third major wave of our Windows Live infrastructure. And a lot of the work that we have done in Wave 3 is about making photo storage and sharing super, super easy.

So specifically for photos, for example, is the new way we have connected Sky Drive as our photo offering. We even have 25 gigabytes of storage with that. And we're making it really easy for user to upload their photos with their photo gallery client. We are making it really easy for you to share photos with your friends with a lot of the Social Networking capabilities that we have in Windows Live 3.

So we are pretty excited about the offerings that we have there.

LS: And, of course, that's free as well?

DT: Yes.

LS: Geez, I mean, can you imagine over 25 gigabytes of storage space just a few years ago…what it cost the average user?

DT: I know! One of the trends of the computing industry is the decrease in cost per byte of storage. And it's just an amazing trend. You know, roughly faster than Moore's Law. Moore's Law in the dimension of transistors in PC's [CP's 15:14.7] and the like is continuing on. We are doubling transistors every 18 or so months.

But with storage it's, for now, increasing at an even greater rate. Hard drives are gargantuan; 1.5 terabytes today…people tell me that within a few years we'll have 10 terabyte hard drives. It is just astonishing. And so what that's causing is this lowering of the cost curves, because even though the hard drives get bigger, in general the price is all settled to around $100 or even $80 for any given size. So that's resulting in this tremendous lowering of cost-per-byte of storage which is one of the key drivers that enables companies like Microsoft to supply this much online storage to our customers.

LS: That's absolutely amazing! And yet with all this additional storage, we are storing a lot more data rather than cleaning it out like we use to…which means that management is getting more….

DT: ...yeah and management searching those kinds of features/functionality become increasingly important as you get more and more stuff out there, software has to make it easy for people to manage this.

LS: Yes, that's absolutely true. Now, you also work on Virtual Earth as well?

DT: Yeah, I don't work personally close to Virtual Earth but it is one of our offerings as part of the developer platform. This is one of the developer platforms. And we know that there are many interesting scenarios that connect with things like mapping; and so the ability to do Mash Up's with Virtual Earth and other data types is something that we know there is a lot of developer interest in and it's a big part of the service platform

LS: I'm glad you mentioned that because that's exactly where I was going…is this Mashing up of other types of data. I mean, I just saw a commercial where you can check where your friends are, and who's online, and actually where they are geographically based on their GPS-enabled phones.

You're looking at this Mash Up of all different types of data as well?

DT: Yeah, potentially. There is so much data being stored, the platform philosophy that we have is always very open. Let people do what they think is the most interesting with the application that they build. So we think that tons and tons of different data-types will be considered and used with infrastructure like Virtual Earth.

LS: And I like the way that you are talking. It's kind of almost open-source. Microsoft has taken the attitude that, "Here, we've got all these incredible resources; why don't you come in and let's see what we can do together?"

DT: Yeah. That's always a key part of any good platform. If platform vendors overly constrain what applications are allowed to do on that platform, we see that as a real challenge, basically. It frankly pisses off the [17:50.9] and pisses off users if there is a sort of big brother looking over their shoulder saying, "Nice application; sorry we're not going to let you do that because it competes with something we've got."

We think it's really important that the platform be freely usable; that developers can build whatever they want on top of that platform without some "interested" and potentially "conflictedly" interested party controlling what the developers can do on that platform.

LS: Yeah, and that's true and we've seen that in the computer industry every since it started. I've been a developer with both Apple (I said the "A-word," I'm sorry) as well as Microsoft, since the mid-80's and that was one of Apple's biggest downfalls with the Macintosh. They kept the architecture so closed that developers wouldn't develop for it and there was no software available, or applications. So the product almost failed until they opened it up. And we just saw that recently with the iPhone apps.

So this open architecture, this open-source, I think it's really the way to go.

DT: Yep, totally agree. An open platform….a lot of the success of Windows is, frankly, is that it is so open in writing any application you want on it. You can build any hardware you want on Windows. We don't try and control that ecosystem excessively. And so by being very open it's really a core part of our platform philosophy…let people build their applications that they think make sense and the market will take care of selecting the winners…not Microsoft.

LS: I like that! And I remember even 20 years ago, your operating system had visual basic built right into it.

DT: Sure.

LS: Yeah. Can you give me any specific business success stories, any companies that are using some of these tools and how they might be using them, so that our listeners can get an idea where to start.

DT: One thing about these platform offerings is that they are pretty new. You know, we have a big vision here, but it's early in the evolution of this platform

One success story that we talked about, and again an early one, is the British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC. They had a really cool demo with us at the PDC we had last October, where they showed the use of some of the live framework technologies to enable sharing of videos across devices, across people. It's a pretty cool thing you can do with rating the videos, getting your friends, understanding better what kind of stuff your friends are looking at. Some there's some pretty cool stuff going on with them.

LS: That's pretty neat. So it's about getting all of this data and putting it in a format where people go in and actually access it and use it and benefit from it.

DT: Yep, good way to put it!

LS: Wow! Cool!

Is there any statistics at all on any of the different platforms? I know you're still pretty new, but is there anything that you can tell us about how…what your growth rate is, or how many people are participating?

DT: Well one thing we're looking at closely is the number of users who are using the Live platforms in general, and the usage of this is kind of astonishing when you think of the numbers. We have over 460 million active users of Live services; nearly half a billion people are using it at least monthly. So the usage is there. There is tremendous opportunity, tremendous adoptions by some of these services. And so because of that level of usage, that gives up a lot of optimism about where the platform is headed.

LS: Wow, that's almost the population of the entire continent of North America!

DT: Yeah, that's about right, yeah!

LS: (Laughter) that is absolutely amazing. Look at the services, though. I mean, they are terrific services and…

DT: I'm glad you agree, wow!

LS: If somebody wanted to get involved and look at all the different types of services that Microsoft's making available, what's the best place to take a look?

DT: Good question! Azure.com. A-Z-U-R-E.com. It enumerate all the different services, both at the Live service level which I have been talking about mostly, but also some of the lower level services like Windows Azure. Some of the enterprise services, the database services….azure.com will get you going where you need to be.

LS: Excellent, because the importance of this….I'm going to just say it a little bit slower…Azure.com.

DT: Azure.com.

LS: That's great, that is totally cool! Is there anything else that you think might be important to our listeners to know about what you are currently doing, and maybe what you are planning on doing?

DT: I think that we are covered, Lon.

LS: Okay, that was a lot of very good information.

DT: Yeah, good stuff; good questions.

LS: Well thank you, I appreciate that! Good answers; that's the best part! (Laughter)

DT: Thanks very much.

LS: Okay, I would really like to thank David Treadwell, Corporate Vice-President of Microsoft Live Platform, for being here with us today and talking about Microsoft Live Platform and Social Media.

David, thank you.

DT: Lon, thank you very much for the opportunity.

LS: How cool is this!

This has been Lon Safko, the co-author of The Social Media Bible. Be sure to check out our other valuable Social Media tactics, tools, and strategies that can be found in The Social Media Bible book and its companion website at www.TheSocialMediaBible.com.

For more information about me, Lon Safko, visit my site at www.LonSafko.com. And David, truly thank you for taking the time to be with us here today.

DT: You're quite welcome.