

Jean-Philippe Courtois at Microsoft Global Sales, Marketing and Operations: Empowering digital success

As Jean-Philippe Courtois settled into his seat on the flight taking him home to Paris from Australia in September 2018, he reflected on the transformation of the Microsoft sales organisation he had launched 15 months previously.

The overhaul was a proactive bid to make the most of a massive business opportunity: the migration of computing to the cloud. But even though the changes had so far been accompanied by investor applause – the stock price had continued rising even after hitting levels not seen since its 1990s heyday – Courtois was well aware of the scale of the task and how much he still had to do.

The change effort was the biggest ever for the Microsoft sales organisation, and probably the company itself. It involved more than 40,000 people; 26,000 of whom worked directly under Courtois. The first stage had been a restructuring project. On a vast scale, the project involved hiring new talent, retraining and reallocating existing staff, and letting some employees go – all to give Microsoft's sales teams the right skills to accompany corporate customers as they moved to the cloud.

The second stage of the transformation was now well underway. This involved moving Microsoft's sales organisation away from its historic command-and-control approach: the goal was to replace it with a culture of learning and coaching, rather than inspection. The organisation deployed digital tools and dashboards to generate insights into how employees worked and to enable coaching conversations that would help staff spend more time with customers and less time on internal meetings.

On his trip to Australia, Courtois had come across further evidence of how challenging it would be to create a lasting change in the working practices that had evolved during Microsoft's long domination of the personal computer era. He recalled an encounter with a senior Microsoft Australia manager. When he had quizzed her on how she was allocating her time, it emerged that she was still setting aside significant hours for sales forecasting – even though forecasting had been largely automated by predictive analytics in order to free up time for customers.

This case study was written by Professor Herminia Ibarra and Adam Jones based on public sources and interviews with the people named in the case study.

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