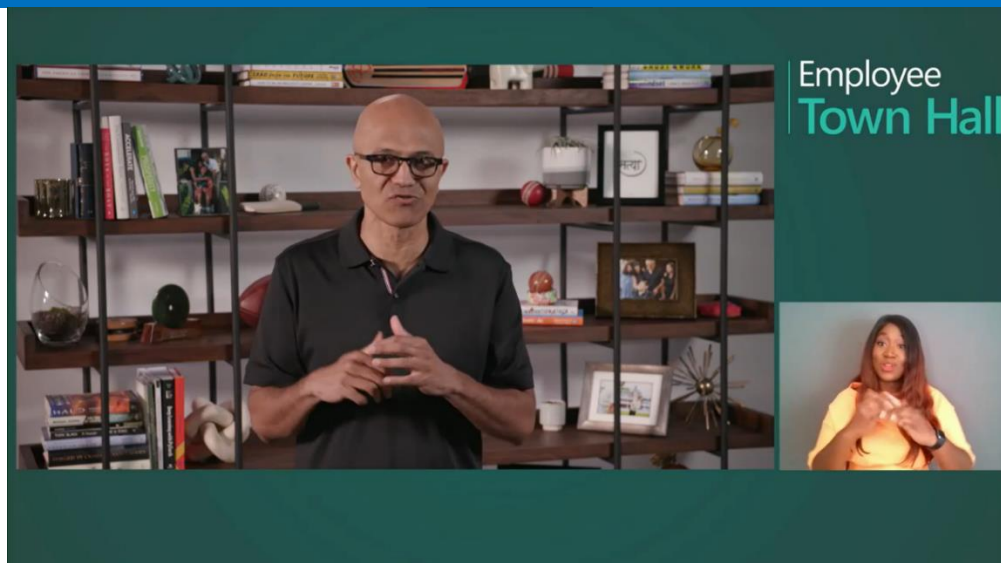# Microsoft's Virtual Employee Town Hall Playbook

Microsoft's Employee Town Hall and Q&A Program

Since Satya Nadella stepped into the role of CEO in 2014, he knew that engaging with employees in an ongoing dialogue would be a key priority of his. Starting with his first month in office back in February 2014, Satya launched his monthly Employee Town Hall program designed to focus a conversation with employees around our strategy, culture and leadership. Since that time, he has held his town hall every month for the past seven years.

The program began back in 2014 as a hybrid event model, optimized for virtual, but filmed in a live in-person format. In 2020, after the COVID-19 pandemic pushed our global workforce to work from home, the monthly program evolved into a fully virtual, two-way communication channel between our employees and senior leadership team. The event continues its focus on allowing our senior leaders to share what is top of mind for them, but also to take the most pressing questions from our global employee base. This playbook will walk you through our planning process in running a virtual town hall event, while giving you insight into opportunities for your leaders to engage with their employees across organizations of all types, scopes and scales.

Topics covered include:

1.   Our town hall strategy and its purpose and role in employee communications
2.   How we manage format and content, employee questions
3.   Production logistics and best practices
4.   Creating a dialogue—learning and listening to your employees
5.   Making events accessible
6.   Marketing the event

Strategy

Microsoft has over 175,000 employees worldwide and identifying meaningful ways for the CEO to engage with them was at the top of our list. The Employee Town Hall and Q&A 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 town hall 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.
- **Address strategic and relevant business updates.**
  - The town hall provides an opportunity for employees to learn and seek clarity on relevant strategic and business updates including corporate and product news.
- **Provide opportunity to discuss timely or societal moments in time.**
  - In addition to Satya addressing timely events and moments in time in opening remarks, employees have an opportunity to raise questions in the Q&A segment. For example, pandemic response, D&I progress, global days/months of recognition, etc.
- **Employees value authenticity from their leaders.**
  - 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 and other leaders. This gives leaders a chance to answer questions candidly and avoids having leaders seem too tied to a script, while also showing the diversity and depth of expertise across leaders at the SLT and executive staff level.

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

- **Making the Employee Town Hall mandatory/opt-out for the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) members versus opt-in.**
  - SLT members are expected to attend at least 6 out of the 10 town halls 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 takes some of the accountability off 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.**
  - Leaders should meet employees where they are 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 Employee Town Hall 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.
- **Ensuring diverse representation throughout the entirety of the show.**
  - The show should have diverse and global representation throughout including: our featured Yambassador, the country selected for our Postcards in the Field segment, leaders speaking in our proactive segment as well as in the Q&A segment of the show.

Format/Content

Employee Town Halls are held monthly, currently in an all virtual format. Events last for 45 minutes and are typically about 50% prepared content and 50% Q&A. We ask the entire Senior Leadership Team to attend - which can be a max of 14 people depending on availability. This allows us to showcase a unified leadership team and to address a wider variety of questions. On average we get around 25k employees watching live in-person, with another 10k watching on-demand.

Proactive content is selected by looking at the news agenda for the past month to determine what if any, key moments we want to highlight. In addition, the CEO team will evaluate Satya's opening remarks to determine what he can cover and then what we want to place in the Q&A. The result is about 7-10 minutes of opening top of mind remarks for Satya and then 1-2 proactive segments from various leaders on key moments or hot topics. Finally, we run a standard 5 minute segment in every show called- *Postcards from the Field* – where we interview a leader from one country – highlighting our impact and work in that region.

Questions are sourced in the month leading up to the event through a mix of Yammer, Daily Pulse and an anonymous survey. Questions are compiled and the best ones are selected and then pitched to the CEO and SLT comms leads for possible inclusion. We monitor Yammer during the live show as well, and pending time, will sometimes take 1-2 live questions during the show.

Over the years, the importance of the virtual experience has become greater. That's how our viewing audience consumes these events. It's important to optimize for the virtual, making your events engaging online and accessible for all. For the Employee Town Hall program, we rely heavily on Yammer to make the event engaging through moderated Q&A, online polls and employee conversation.
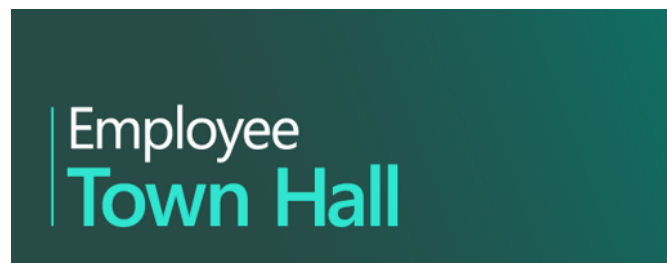
💬 Got a question?   ▶ Watch the live webcast

Employee Town Hall

Please join Satya and the leadership team for our virtual Employee Town Hall on Wednesday, June 9, from 10:00 AM to 10:45 AM Pacific daylight time (5:00 PM to 5:45 PM UTC).

Satya and the leadership team will talk about recent company news and answer your questions. Also, we'll visit Microsoft Taiwan to learn more about their business and opportunities to empower people and organizations to achieve more.

This will be a virtual event only, so we invite you to watch the live webcast at aka.ms/EmployeeEvent in the new Yammer.

We'd also love to take your questions. Post them now on the Yammer event page at aka.ms/QAEventYammerPage or use our anonymous online form at aka.ms/AnonymousQs.

Pre-event:
- **1 Month Out:** The CEO team begins prepping the Employee Town Hall 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, working with SLT comms leads, solidifies topics to be covered and connects 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 20-25 minutes for programmed content and 20-25 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 town hall 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 MSW (our employee intranet portal), the Employee Town Hall site, and the CEO Connection site with a link to stream the VOD. We present employee sentiment during the Employee Town Hall 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 (see more on this report in "Employee Listening and Sentiment").

Employee Town Hall

Satya and leaders on recent company announcements including: Build, updates on our Racial Equity Initiative, customer obsession, hybrid work, Postcards from Taiwan and more. Please share your feedback with us in this brief anonymous survey: aka.ms/townhallsurvey.

Click on time codes to jump to specific points in the video:

0:09 - Satya on community support and product momentum
5:30 - Scott Hanselman on Build
9:34 - Anita Mehra on our Racial Equity Initiative
13:47 - Ken Sun and Tiernan Madorno on Taiwan's "Postcards from the Field"
20:10 - Alysa Taylor and Satya on customer obsession
23:53 - Judson on democratizing technology
29:57 - Kathleen on stock compensation
32:09 - Rajesh on service reliability
35:26 - Kurt on hybrid work
38:30 - Jeff Teper and Satya on developer support for Teams and Office 365

Check out this month's media highlights which provide the best of media and influencer coverage about our company, our culture, and our customers.

See the latest from Satya on CEO Connection MSW.

Production

To pivot to a virtual format, the production team uses Teams in order to bring live guests into the show from all over the world. Each executive and guest speaker are brought into a Teams call and the production team can patch those sources into high quality production gear available at Microsoft Production Studios in order to produce at a broadcast level.

Pre-production begins about three weeks out for a broadcast in this format, which follows a similar show flow from month to month. The production team supports Senior Leaders by providing camera kits and production guidance for their home remote setups. We facilitate a full day of setup, testing, and rehearsals one day prior to live show day. This typically includes testing of audio, video and Teams routing, transmission and captioning, rehearsing content and show flow with stand ins, Yambassador and ASL interpreters.
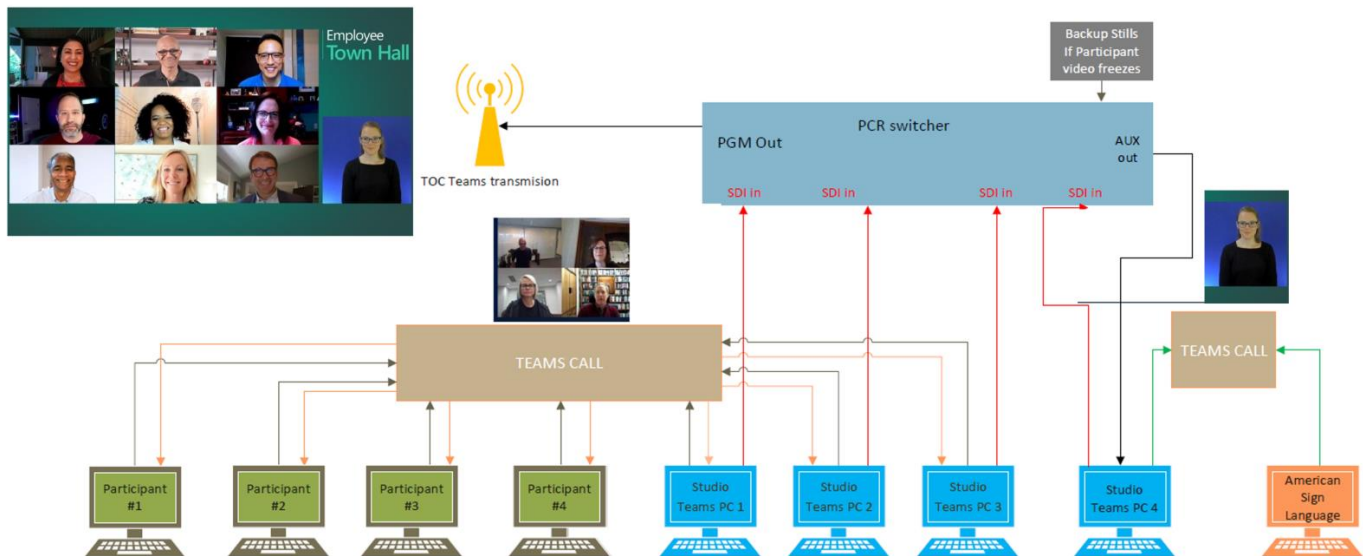
Employee Town Hall show day is generally a half day. On the day of, we do another round of rehearsals and testing to ensure minimal risk. Executives join a prep call in advance of the show and producers facilitate a quick round of technical checks. We also provide key production guidance and review the general show flow once more before it's show time! Throughout the show, we closely monitor the viewing experience alongside the CEO and webcasting teams and troubleshoot where necessary.

After the show concludes, we package the VOD (video on demand) to make it ready to be viewed online and distributed to the entire employee base through email. The VOD experience includes the Employee Town Hall in its entirety, as well as links to specific timecodes to highlight key Microsoft initiatives or other important content topics using Microsoft Stream, our enterprise video technology. Lastly, we debrief as a team and elicit feedback from each department to ensure we incorporate learning lessons into future shows.
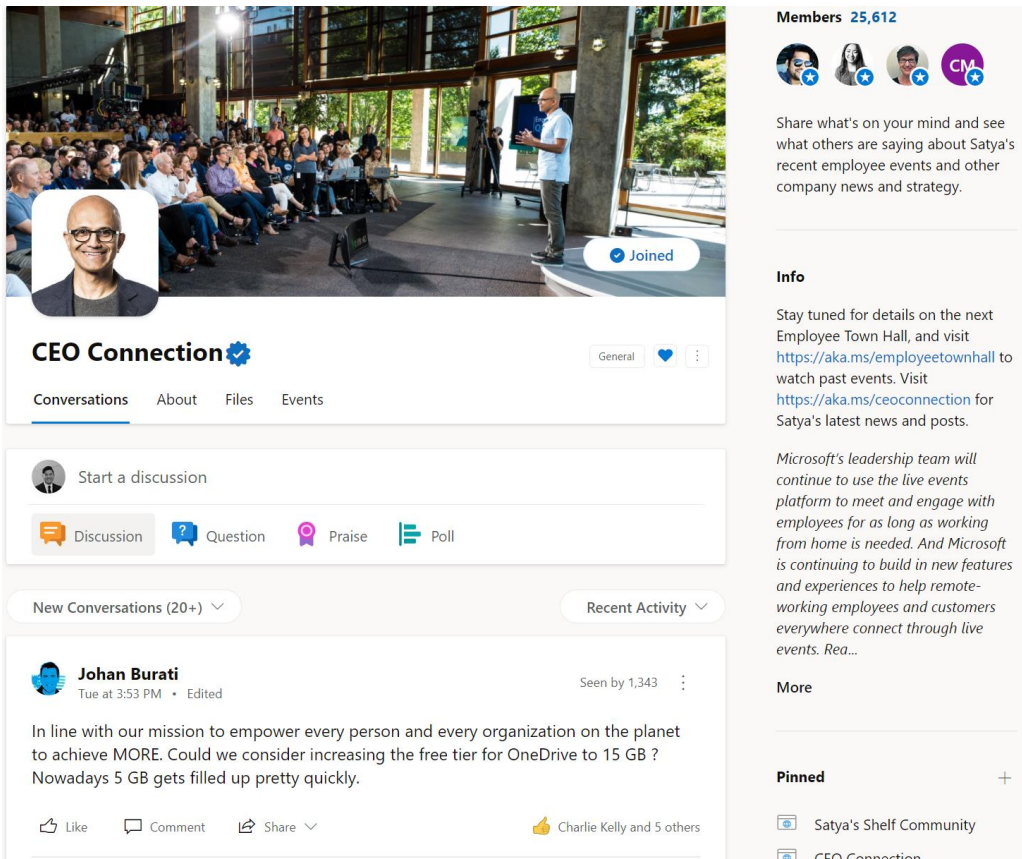
Below is a list of must have roles on the production team for Employee Town Hall:

- Microsoft FTE Executive Producer (Or some other FTE oversight)
- Producer
- Segment Producer
- Associate Producer
- Director
- Technical Director
- Video Engineer
- Teleconference Operator
- Digital Tape Operator
- Graphics Operator
- A1 (audio lead)
- Webcasting lead

Employee Listening and Sentiment

Employee listening and sentiment monitoring both play a huge role in the Employee Town Hall 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, including social sites like Yammer where we can hear directly from employees, from our anonymous Town Hall question form and post-event feedback survey, and from employees surveys like Daily Pulse 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, Daily Pulse, and our anonymous Town Hall question form. Questions are sourced in the month leading up to the event, and the best ones are selected and then pitched to the CEO and SLT comms leads for possible inclusion.

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

Theme	Question	Status	Engagement	Count	Seen by
Product Strategy	Chris on Yammer asks - What is being done to improve Teams performance when sharing video? I have what is considered a high performance device (surface book 2 i-7 16GB RAM) running a few productivity apps and my device has a consistent severe lag during Teams calls. I've asked other colleagues and everyone I've asked is experiencing the same. Many of the external customers I interact with express the same experience and can be embarrassing when trying to be a Teams advocate. Is the Teams PG aware and if so, what's being done to fix this problem?	Not Responded	Moderate	36	1599
Product Strategy	Kirk on Yammer asks - Recent outages have rattled our partners and customers in the public sector, especially those in the critical life safety sector, what are we doing minimize these impacts across our markets going forward?	Not Responded	Moderate	25	1318
Product Strategy	Monica on Yammer asks - How are we addressing the supply chain issues for Surface Laptops?	Not Responded	Low	18	1354
Product Strategy	Juan on Yammer asks - How do you self identify as someone with a disability in our systems?	Completed	Low	14	1502
Product Strategy	Hector on Yammer asks - with the actual industry transformation shifting to ARM as platform how is this affecting Microsoft ? will licensing for Windows on ARM come any time soon?	Not Responded	Low	12	1278

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

During the event, we record all questions asked, closely monitor conversations on Yammer and watch for any general sentiment trends or conversation themes. Pending time, we will sometimes take 1-2 live questions during the show. Shortly after the event, we send the CEO team a post-event report on employee engagement throughout the event and a summary of employee sentiment toward trending conversation topics (see screenshots below).

Top conversations on Yammer

1) I just want to say as a new employee at Microsoft and the son of two deaf parents I am so happy to see ASL interpreting!
2) Apple's next Mac chip is on the way, promising to be much better than predecessor M1 chip. It feels like we are generations behind on our Surface Devices relying on AMD/ Intel.
3) What, if any, are the valuable lessons learned from the Surface Duo product planning, release and subsequent consumer reception?
4) When will XBox X be available in the Company Store?
5) Could you please caption the speakers with their names and titles so we have a better idea of who they are?
6) It's about time our admins are eligible for stock rewards! They work just as hard, if not harder, than most people on a team and deserve the rewards and recognition!!!

610

reactions to posts

Top conversations on Yammer

Positive

Leadership Kudos: Employees shared their appreciation for Satya and the leadership team, including Scott Hanselman's presentation skills and Jeff Teper's background.
Total engagement: 136
Seen by (total of all posts): 6,959

Yambassador Kudos: Employees were overjoyed when Tiernan made another appearance as the Yambassador, citing her joyous energy.
Total engagement: 160
Seen by (total of all posts): 6,132

Postcards – Taiwan: Employees celebrated Postcards from the Field feature on Taiwan, with many expressing support for the country's LGTBQ+ initiatives.
Total engagement: 146
Seen by (total of all posts): 4,339

Stock eligibility: Employees were excited about and supportive of recently expanded stock eligibility.
Total engagement: 71
Seen by (total of all posts): 2,567

We also share out an anonymous post-event survey using Dynamics 365 Customer Voice to capture additional employee sentiment from both live and VOD viewers. The survey also collects questions for future Town Halls and verbatim feedback around Town Hall format (see sample below).

June 2021 Town Hall Feedback Form
Your feedback will be anonymous.

* Required

1. How did you find this month's Town Hall? *

☹ 🙁 🙂 😊

2. We're glad you enjoyed this month's Town Hall. Which segments contributed to your positive experience?

☐ Satya's Top of Mind

☐ Build recap

☐ Racial Equity Update

☐ Postcards from the Field

☐ Open Q&A

3. Employee Town Halls are designed to provide you with the Leadership Team's top of mind and for them to answer the questions that matter to you. How are we doing? *
Select all that apply. Include any additional feedback in the "Other" option.

☐ Town Halls are great, I find them valuable

☐ I want more time for Q&A

☐ Town Halls don't cover the topics I care about

☐ I don't normally watch Town Halls

☐ This is my first Town Hall

☐ Other

4. What question would you like to hear Satya and leadership address in future Town Halls?
If you have feedback around the Town Hall format, please share in the question above in the "Other" option.

Enter your answer

Submit

Accessibility

We want the Employee Town Hall to be as inclusive and welcoming experience as possible for everyone, and that starts with making sure there are no barriers to participation for those of us who have disabilities.

Below are Microsoft's recommendations and best practices for planning and executing an inclusive Employee Town Hall event. Not all of them will be applicable in every case, nor is it a comprehensive list. Instead, they represent valuable lessons learned over years of event management experiences across Microsoft.

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.

Event communications
Ensure all communications are accessible. Run Office 365 accessibility checker to find and fix any accessibility problems before you send
When sending information on the Employee Town Hall event, include accessibility information for on-site event as well as how to have accessible online experience, such as captions, etc
Invite requests for accommodation from attendees. ****Best timeline: 1 month in advance**
Use inclusive language in your communications

Presentation and content
Make sure that all presentation content (PowerPoint, etc) is accessible and brief speakers/presenters on accessible presentation skills
Media: • Media subtitles on all video content • Captioning: 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**

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.

Recommended accessibility planning timeline

1 month in advance

- **Reserve sign language interpretation services**. Reach out to your company's ASL interpreter or Accessibility coordinator to put in a formal request
- **Reserve Communication Access Real-Time Translation (CART) services.** Work with Production team to ensure the full hook-up of CART service for the correct day and time frame (real-time captioners)
- **Work with Production team on accessible layout plan**

Day before the event

- Production team will do full-day set up, which includes the location set up, transmission testing and rehearsal with stand-ins. They 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.
- Content, production and accessibility team rehearse show ideally with both the ASL interpreter and CART components fully integrated.
- Ensure event staff are briefed on accessibility plan (guide dogs welcome, access to quiet room, use of inclusive language, etc)
- 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.
- 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.

Day of

- The teams hold rehearsal the morning of the event, including a dry run with CART captioners to ensure that they don't inaccurately transcribe audio.

Post-production

- 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 more help with event accessibility and disability-inclusion, visit:

Microsoft Accessible events guide (external)

Event Playbook (internal)
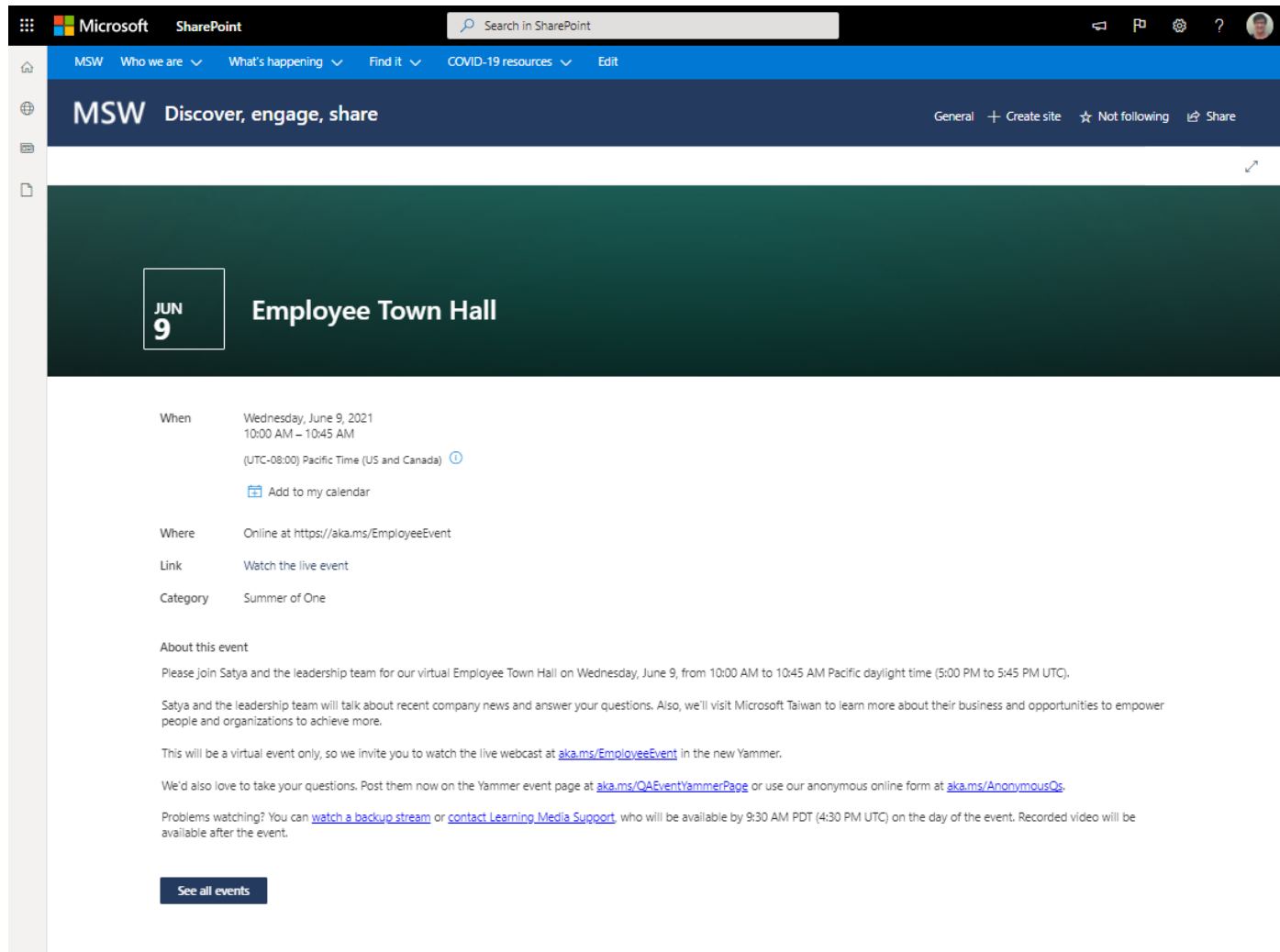
Microsoft.com/accessibility (external)

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

Marketing and Promotion

To encourage employee participation in the Employee Town Hall and to ensure that all employees worldwide have access to the content, we promote the event before, during, and after both in email and on MSW, Microsoft's employee intranet portal.
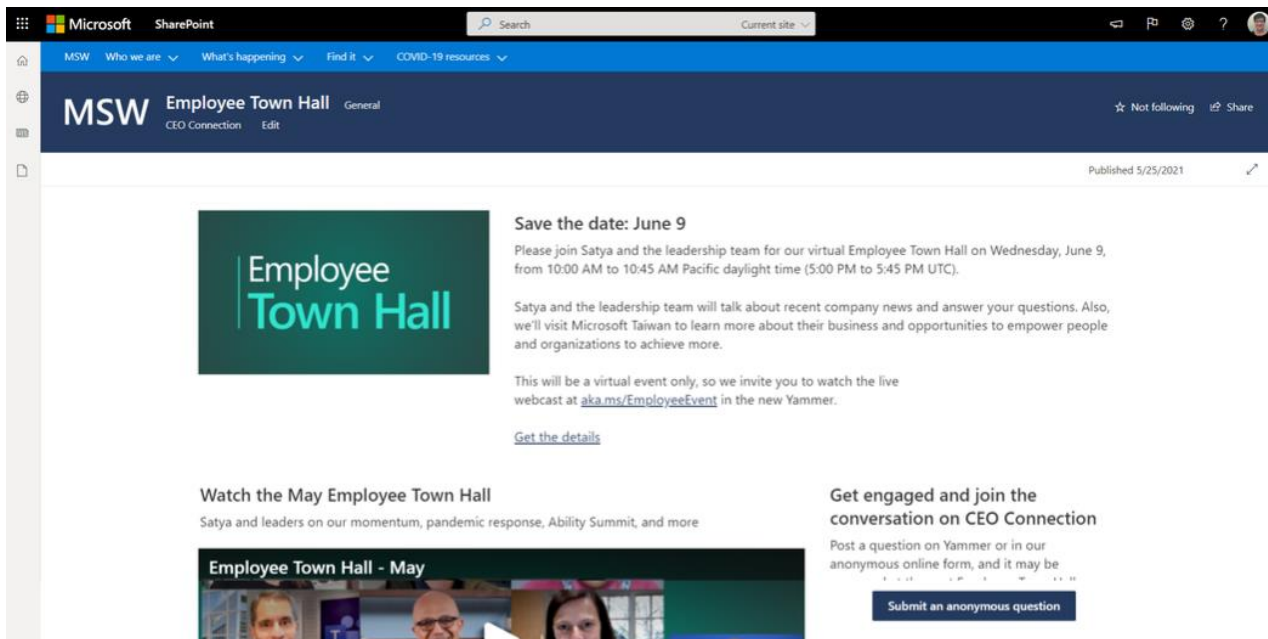
Before the event

We create a page in the MSW Events Calendar to include all the details of the event.

We add the following promotion for the event on the Employee Town Hall MSW site two weeks before the event.

On the MSW home page, we add the following promotions for the event:

- Two weeks before the event, we ask employees to save the date:

MSW NEWS
Save the date: June 9
Plan to watch the live virtual Employee Town Hall—add it to your calendar, and get more information.

- One week before the event, we ask employees to submit their questions for the Q&A portion:

MSW NEWS
Submit questions for our leaders
See topics other employees are already asking for the Employee Town Hall on June 9, and add your own question now.

- One day before the event, we ask employees to watch the live event:

On the event day

On the MSW home page, we add the following promotions for the event:

- At 7:00 AM PT, we ask employees to watch the live event:

- As soon as the event ends, we tell employees who missed the live event that on-demand video will be available soon:

After the event

As soon as the on-demand video of the event is available, we publish the following promotions for the video:

- On the MSW home page, we encourage employees who missed the live event to watch the on-demand video:
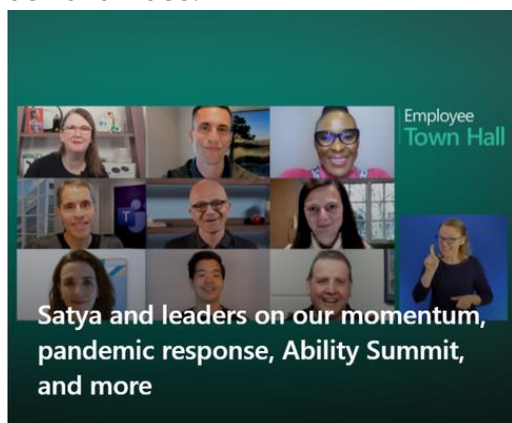
and

MSW NEWS

Watch a postcard from South Africa

Lillian Barnard introduces the country and our operations, including ways we're bringing our mission to life in this diverse nation.

- On the Employee Town Hall MSW site, we embed the on-demand video and encourage employees who missed the live event to watch it:

- On the CEO Connection MSW site, we embed the on-demand video and encourage employees who missed the live event to watch it:

Conclusion

Building a connection between senior leadership and all employees is critical to cultivating an engaged employee workforce, especially given the state of the world due to COVID-19. We are still on a journey to incorporate all of our learnings this past year moving forward, 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 town hall events, and we hope it's a helpful guide as you begin to think through your own plans.