

Microsoft Cloud at Ignite 2021: Metaverse, AI and hyperconnectivity in a hybrid world

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The last 18 months have resulted in a sea change throughout every industry – from the adoption of telehealth in healthcare to digital wallets in financial services to curbside pickup and contactless shopping in retail – and digital technology has been at the forefront of this seismic shift.

My own habits have changed as well, to the point I can't imagine going back to a world lacking technological flexibility and digital dexterity. In other words, thank goodness I can get away with sometimes forgetting my wallet at home. Digital technology is now more necessary than ever, for every organization in every sector, as we move into an era in which people expect their digital data to be available anywhere, at any time and on any device.

Microsoft and the Microsoft Cloud are at the cutting edge of helping organizations and their employees and customers navigate the major trends of this new time. The Microsoft Cloud is used by organizations large and small – from new startups to the Fortune 500. It powers an organization's digital capability, while providing the safeguards necessary to keep data confidential and secure.

Microsoft Ignite is an opportunity for us to show the results of our efforts across a wide spectrum of products in several key trends:

- How to optimize for the [new world of hybrid work](#)
- How to help customers [build a hyperconnected business](#)
- How every business [can become a digital business](#)
- How to protect everything with [end-to-end security](#)

At Ignite, we are introducing more than 90 new services and updates. At the core of these new announcements is a commitment to addressing the trends and exploring breakthrough ways of connecting people, organizations and ideas. There are three major areas of news we are highlighting during Ignite:

Powering the metaverse

Let's start by defining the term, and no, it is not the metaverse first imagined by Neal Stephenson in 1992's *Snow Crash*. Instead, it is a persistent, digital world that is connected to many aspects of the physical world, including people, places and things. The metaverse [enables shared experiences](#) across both the physical and digital worlds. As enterprises accelerate their digital transformation, the metaverse can help people meet up in a digital environment, make meetings more comfortable with the use of avatars and facilitate creative collaboration from all around the world.

The Microsoft Cloud provides a comprehensive set of resources designed to power metaverses – there will be more than one! – IoT capabilities that enable customers to create “digital twins” of physical objects in the cloud; utilizing Microsoft Mesh to build a shared sense of presence on devices; and using AI-powered resources to create natural interactions through speech and vision machine learning models.

As we discuss the metaverse, we are thinking about both a new medium and an app type, like the way we talked about the web and websites a long, long time ago, aka the 1990s. At Ignite, we are making two important announcements that continue the evolution of the metaverse:

- **Dynamics 365 Connected Spaces:** Now in preview, this product [provides a new perspective](#) on the way people move and interact with nearly any space, from the retail store to the factory floor, and how they manage health and safety in a hybrid work environment.
- **Mesh for Microsoft Teams:** This [bridging of communication methods](#) makes human presence the ultimate connection. Now, everyone in a meeting can be present without being physically present using personalized avatars and immersive spaces that can be accessed from any device, with no special equipment needed.

Translating AI breakthroughs for customers

Large scale artificial intelligence models are now becoming platforms, creating ambient intelligence – digital environments that are responsive and aware of a user’s needs. These AI breakthroughs can be used by organizations in a variety of ways, from deploying intelligent agents to aid in customer service to extracting information from volumes of unstructured data.

Microsoft is continuing to expand the possibilities of what this technology can do. Just five years ago, we announced the first hyperscale AI computer. Now, we have the most powerful AI supercomputer in the world, with customers using the infrastructure to address major issues. AMD, for instance, used it to design next-gen processors. Researchers in the Netherlands utilized it to simulate how COVID-19 can be spread by aerosol particles in highly populated areas.

In Azure, we have built the fundamental capabilities to create and train large-scale models. Our partner OpenAI has used the supercomputer to [train GPT-3 models](#), a breakthrough in natural language understanding and generation.

At Ignite, we are announcing the **Azure OpenAI Service**, which initially will be available by invitation only. This will give customers access to OpenAI’s powerful models in addition to the security, reliability, compliance, data privacy and other enterprise-grade capabilities built into Microsoft Azure.

Microsoft also is offering Azure OpenAI Service customers tools to ensure outputs the models provide are business-appropriate and we are monitoring how people are employing the technology to assure it is being used correctly.

Learn more about AI breakthroughs and Azure products [here](#).

Building a trust fabric

As we continue to explore hybrid work, hyperconnected business, multi-cloud/multi-edge computing and zero trust security, there’s one key element that connects them: the ability to have a digital ecosystem where trust between parties can be established in real time.

Microsoft is building the identity system of the future, one that connects and enables people, organizations, apps and even smart devices to make real-time access decisions safely and securely. It

begins with Azure Active Directory (AD), which extends beyond securing and managing access to now assisting customer processes across external collaboration methods.

Microsoft Teams Connect runs on this trust fabric – every user and every access request is secured through our identity platform. And now, secure and trusted collaboration across boundaries can be established in a matter of minutes.

At Ignite, we are excited to announce two updates to Teams Connect that help remove even more barriers and create a boundaryless ecosystem.

- **Teams Shared Channels** allows users to invite an external team to join a channel, schedule a shared channel meeting and collaborate on files.
- **Chat with Teams** allows users to chat seamlessly with people outside of a work network. Teams users at work can chat with any Teams user with a Microsoft personal email address or phone number and remain within the security and compliance protocols of their organization.

This means employees across multiple companies can collaborate as one extended team, and only receive the correct access necessary to do their best work.

Continuing the story

The major areas of focus we just reviewed are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the new products and updates we are revealing at Ignite. Other news of note includes:

- **Microsoft Loop**, a new app that [moves freely across applications](#), enabling teams to think, plan and create together. You can organize everything you need for your project – files, links and data from other apps – into a single workspace. It is easy to use portable components to complete work in chat, meetings or documents, knowing that the content always stays in sync.
- The **Microsoft Customer Experience Platform**, a marketing solution that puts [organizations in control of their customer data](#) to personalize, automate and orchestrate customer journeys.
- **Context IQ**, [a set of capabilities](#) that will further integrate collaboration, sharing and communication in the flow of work across Dynamics 365, Office 365 and Teams.
- Several **major updates across Azure**, including how we are helping customers manage data and applications across hybrid and multicloud environments with Azure Arc.
- New, [best-of-breed security solutions](#) for small businesses with **Defender for Business**.

There's a lot to absorb, but we are excited to share it all with you. You can watch Satya Nadella's Ignite [keynote on demand](#), check out all the news and announcements on the [Book of News](#) page, explore product specific blogs and read about several customer stories on our [news page](#) to learn more about this technology in action.

Related:

How we're empowering everyone for a new world of hybrid work: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/blog/?p=240873>

Your hybrid, multicloud and edge strategy just got better with Azure: <https://aka.ms/igniteNov21/InnovateAnywhereBlog>

Build a hyperconnected business on a foundation of data, AI and collaboration:

<https://aka.ms/TaylorIgnite21>

Protect everything with the most comprehensive approach to security:

<https://www.microsoft.com/security/blog/?p=98445>