From mantis shrimp to career development
Zach Xu's amazing podcast journey

“I have no idea what I’m doing.”

It’s a panicky in-over-my-head feeling that many of us have had, especially when starting out in our careers. Upwards—a podcast by and for members of Microsoft’s Aspire program—aims at alleviating it and setting people on the right path toward success.

“It’s all about boosting early-in-career individuals and giving them additional resources to draw upon to grow in their personal and professional lives,” says MCS Business Program Manager Zach Xu, one of the podcast’s four hosts. Podcasting is a huge passion of Zach’s. He launched his first one, Xupedia, in May 2020, 10 days after graduating from the University of Florida.

“I’d take random topics like school lunches, bananas, and my favorite animal, the mantis shrimp, and talk about them for a half hour or so,” he says. “I mainly used it to learn the intricacies of podcasting and to see if it was something I wanted to do.” The answer was a resounding “yes!”

“I’ve always loved interacting with people and hearing their stories” Zach says. “I think one of the most valuable things you can get as a human being is another person’s perspective. It’s the best way to learn.” After he arrived at Microsoft nine months ago, a friend told Zach about a Teams post from an Aspire senior leader saying they were looking for podcast hosts.

“I had no idea they were even being done here,” says Zach. He landed the job, along with Jay Li, Alex Kessel, and Jake Hughson. He says finding people to interview hasn’t been a problem.

“There are all these incredible individuals at Microsoft who have something they excel at, so we interview anyone who we think has a good perspective to share. The podcasts let our Aspire audience build upon the perspectives and experiences of our incredible guests.”

The team just finished their first 10-episode season covering topics such as networking, time management, career development, and making friends at Microsoft.
UPWARDS is available on your preferred podcast platform. Check it out on Apple, Spotify, Amazon Music, and more.

“It’s funny that Jay, Alex, Jake, and I have never actually met in person” Zach says. “We’re currently located in different parts of the country – Seattle, Colorado, Missouri, and Virginia – and I recorded most of my bits in a remote part of Mexico while I was on an extended vacation there. In fact, if you listen to the first episode closely you can hear a donkey braying in the background, that’s how off the map we were.”

He says his ultimate dream is to podcast full-time at Microsoft. “That would be the coolest thing ever.” As for now, Zach is very happy with Upwards and an external podcast that he’s currently working on which highlights individuals pursuing their passions.

“I love seeing the spark in another person’s eyes and hearing their voice elevate when they’re talking about something they’re really passionate about,” he says. “Sharing that passion with others through podcasts so they can draw inspiration from gives me a lot of energy and pleasure.”