TRANSCRIPT

Alex Blanton Virtual Events

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, event, session, online, teams, person, community, tools, run, attend, speakers, conference, happening, talks, register, virtual, platform, presenter, audience, thinking

SPEAKERS

Anne Mbugua

Anne Mbugua 00:03
Hey Alex, if you can introduce yourself, what you do the community you work for. And I'd love to know how many years you've been in community.

Alex Blanton 00:13
Firm, nice to be here. My name is Alex Blanton. I'm a program manager in the office of the CTO at Microsoft. So I manage our internal AI and ML artificial intelligence and machine learning community, and also worker, technical leader community. And I have been in community management about a dozen years.

Anne Mbugua 00:38
That's good. It's good to know. Well, welcome. Glad to have you here. I would like to know a little bit more about your experience with virtual events, you know, around tools and also platforms, I would love you to share your story on you know, how that has been for you. You know, what that looks like? And we could start with, you know, what are some of those challenges in the story?

Alex Blanton 01:11
Sure, yeah, I've actually been working with virtual events in some forums since about 2010, almost right when I got into community management, because I was working in a learning and development organization here at Microsoft. And Microsoft, at the time was hiring a lot of engineers who didn't work in Redmond were our campus main campuses. And all of our offerings were in person classes. So we started experimenting with how can we redesign existing classes or design new classes, so that they could be taught by someone in Redmond, but so that people anywhere in the world could attend. That was a very interesting experience, taking existing courses and modifying them, or really, it's not really modifying them was really rebuilding them from scratch, and learning how to use the tools. And then when I started managing the machine learning community in 2014, about half of our membership was

outside of Redmond. So we did about half of our events in person and half virtual, those are just single session targets, which is much different than a large event. So in 2020, we were well into planning for our big machine learning AI and Data Science Conference, which had always been a primarily in person event was streamed the sessions and recorded them, but there's no interaction between the speakers and the audience. And then in March 2020, we started thinking, hey, we might have to go online for this. Yeah. And then two weeks later, we were we thought, well, we're definitely going oh, we really have to make the decision. Now, because the conference is happening in June, it was a very rapid transition. Honestly, I went back recently, because now we're thinking about turning the event into a hybrid event. So I went back to look at our plan from 2020 realized, you know, I went through three iterations of a mitigation plan and about, you know, two and a half weeks is really quick. So, so yeah, so good. We've run that event four times online now. And yeah, I can talk as much as you want challenges and all that kind of stuff.

Anne Mbugua 03:24
Yes, I would love to know what challenges you had, you know, and especially now that we're thinking about, you know, I don't know whether to say we are post COVID. Or were, you know, kind of coming out of it. But, you know, just doing these pandemic times, you know, what that looks like and what that has been for you. So what are the challenges that you faced?

Alex Blanton 03:45
I mean, I think the tool, the tools were the most immediate as one of the biggest challenges, right? Because, you know, with the in person event, we essentially created a PDF of the agenda. And people showed up at the venue, and they walked around and went into rooms, and we didn't really have sure we filmed it and everything, have sort of live interaction or anything like that. And so, when we decided to go online, one of the first things I did was research and do a review of available tools that we might be able to use to put on a multi day multitrack conference where we have concurrent sessions happening at any given time. Right? So I think I reviewed maybe four different tool sets did look at the demos, I think a couple of them, we actually met with the companies. Now I work at Microsoft and and so one thing that became clear in this process was there was some I wouldn't say pressure, but encouragement to use our own toolset right. So that definitely then constraint what we could do, right? But even then, you know, we have to make some decisions like So we decided, okay, we're going to use teams, we're not going to use one of these other products that either is completely outside of our ecosystem or boys teams, we're going to use teams itself. But there's regular teams meetings, which are very similar to the Zoom meeting we're in now, but then there's team live events. That's more of a webinar platform, right? A team's kind of community. Right? Well, so do we use one of those are all of them? And if we do the team's meetings, are they standalone? Are they the team's channel? Do we kicked create channel for every session or every track? There's all these organizational concerns, and it's really difficult to first time especially because you haven't done it. And so just sorting through all that, trying to think through the scenarios, through both from the audience perspective and the speaker person, right. You know, because teams live well, it is more fully functioned as a webinar experience than teams. From the presenter standpoint, it's much more complex, right? We're not really used to using it. A lot of people weren't even even two years ago, we're not super experienced presenting in teams itself. Teams live introduce more functionality, but more complexity. So how do we balance that and try to make sure that when the event happens, it goes off relatively seamlessly. So that was just

challenging kind of thinking through all of that. And then during the event itself, we had tools issues, you know, right in at work, the way we thought, What's the problem? The second event that we held, I think teams did an update, maybe a week before a major update, right? In some of our plans, I won't go into the details. But then for the subsequent events, we introduce this step where we sync with the team's team to understand are there any major rollouts coming within our timeframe, because they caught us unawares, and the first, you know, maybe two or three time slots, we were scrambling to kind of make sure everything works smoothly?

Anne Mbugua 07:06
So I'm guessing with time and with practice, you sort of ironed out what some of those issues were, by the time you were doing the event four times, right.

Alex Blanton 07:16
Yeah, that's right. The first one, to be honest, was quite rocky, and our satisfaction with the event overall dipped fairly significantly. And if you looked at the verbatims, a lot of that was because of, hey, this streams didn't work, you know, people can't see the content. Therefore, we also, we also the way we ended up doing it, we we do licensed a event site that manages the, the navigation that the attendees go through so they can register, you know, and then they register for a certain certain event, and we can communicate to them through the platform. And then that platform integrates with teams, so in the sessions themselves or in teams, but the the plot, the event site platform we used for the first conference was really still in development wasn't a Microsoft product, right? Third party, and they did not have calendar integration. And so yeah, so what happened was people registered, and then they're in the system. And if they go to the event site, it's on their calendar in the system, but it didn't get pushed to them in Outlook, and everyone lives through their calendars. Right, right. And, look, I really underestimated how much people would continue to live in their daily outlook verse for register for the event and go to that online place during the event. I mean, that was a big learning as well, again, attendance patterns. In the in person event people show up at the conference center. A lot of people spend all day there, right? They're flying in from out of town, and they're just there, and they dropped into sessions that they might not even know about ahead of time. But with the online event, you know, they're picking and choosing which sessions they're registering for. They're balancing that with their daily work. So they're fitting it in, and there aren't people who somehow kind of go into the virtual event all day and just hang out there. And so understanding that and scheduling appropriately for that was a big learning, like the first time we ran it, we did the same thing we do in person, which is that the sessions bump up against each other 1010 30 3211. Right. We asked this five minutes early, so there's some turnover. Beginning with the second amount, we scrapped that approach and we did 10 to 10/3. And then there's a 15 minute break when writing is happening. The next session starts at 1045 and goes to 11 1515 minute break started 1130 That would allow people I think, to do email. If a session runs late, they don't miss the beginning of the next one. Right? So in person, they don't really run late because we're in the room. Then the moderator can force people to stop talking but online, they're all in their own unique online meeting room and? And then do we really, if we don't care if they go along, people just hang out, there's no right. Like, we don't need to get them out of there. So there's a lot of subtle differences, I think in the, in the experience that that we run into that we don't really know about until we experience something.

Anne Mbugua 10:27
Yeah. So what would you say about you know, like, hybrid versus in person? And what is what are some of those key takeaways that someone can, that someone should be thinking about? If you have to have an event where you're doing both? You're you're doing hybrid? Yeah,

Alex Blanton 10:45
this is interesting, you know, cuz I mentioned I did a bunch of work back in early 2000 10s, around online events. And at that point, one of my key takeaways was, we should choose if we're doing something in person or online, because the hybrid experience is very difficult, because almost invariably the in person people get a better experience than the online folks. But then when we went all online, it revealed all these interesting things like, hey, we can have people attend, that don't have to fly in it, that's ability of the event. I'm asked actually, you know, I don't know, I'm not sure how we're going to create a great environment for for both, I think we can do it, but it's gonna take a lot of planning and awareness by the speakers and the organizers, potentially new roles, you know, probably someone who's monitoring the online chat and bringing those questions in written to the audience right to the speaker, and prep the speakers to know that maybe they should alternate between questions from people in the room and questions from people online. So sort of different systems there. Also, I'm realizing as we get into it, that I think there's going to be a lot more personal touch with the presenters about is their preference for speaking normally, you know, when it's all in person, you know, Hey, you, you know, it's in person, you show up and you present, it's all online, you show up online and present. But now we have a situation where some people really would prefer to present in person, some people would really prefer to present online, people don't care. We're certainly not going to force people who don't want to present in person to present in person exactly, because of COVID, or whatever. Or it could be in Japan, and they don't want to travel or they can't travel, you know. And so I'm finding that he, in these early stages, I'm reaching out to folks who we know, are running workshops, and everything is saying, hey, how do you want to present and we're going to have to almost, I think, session by session, make these decisions, and then find a way to communicate that effectively to the audience, because I'm really worried about labeling sessions appropriately. Because one of the other things I found out when we went online is that people don't really read the session description when they read. So we have these like lab materials that people could use on their own. And then we scheduled dedicated q&a with the lab creators. And the idea was that you would do the lab on your own. And then for q&a, show up and ask the lab creator questions. This assumed that you had gone through the lab yourself. What we found when we did that was that we didn't title these q&a sessions correctly, are clearly enough. So people were showing up thinking they were going to attend a lab online and very unhappy when they realized that the presenter was just there to answer questions. So I'm thinking when we go hybrid, we're gonna have to even put online or in person, right Virtual Reality event right at the front of the title, so that when people register and see it on their calendar, they understand. So we don't want them showing up at the conference center when the session is online, or sitting in their office and realizing one minute before it starts that the session is actually across campus, we're in a different location. Those are, you know, they sound sort of small details. But I believe that event really needs to reduce the friction for the attendees from understanding what's being presented and where it's being presented. And I think having this hybrid approach is going to naturally increase the friction. And so we have to find good ways of reducing it back down.

Anne Mbugua 14:33

So which brings me back to how does you know the tool and the platform that you're using help you to, you know, have less friction, and so that your attendees can also understand this is where I need to go. Noting that sometimes, right? The attendees may not be very familiar with the tool or the platform. And to that also, are you adding other tools that you're helping to integrate in the process, or are you just using specifically You know, teams live or teams itself?

Alex Blanton 15:04

Yeah, well, we'll use we use a, an event platform where people can register. And then they, when they sign up, they get meeting invites sent to their calendar. From your calendar, they'll log into the actual meeting, which is in teams or teams live, I ended up using teams live for most of the, for the keynotes, and for the technical talks. because it enables a really good facilitated q&a experience. We write teams for more discussion oriented sessions where it's freeform, and you want people to be able to easily interact vocally. Because teams live put some restrictions on who can speak in session, in terms of how we're going to use the tools effectively to reduce that I honestly think we're going to learn from great, I do think that using the Title field, and really prefacing every session with the mode that we're using, right, probably something we're going to do, I mean, that's not really using the tools, that's more of like a content approach. I think we're gonna have to do that. Because clearly a lot of people just register for stuff and then sort of expect it's going to show up where they are. Now, we might end up doing some individual communications out like on a per session basis. If we did do that the last few events, because we hold a few talks in virtual reality, which requires people to create their avatar first. For people who registered for that we did an extra round of communication saying, Hey, you sign up for this talk that's in alt space VR, which is Microsoft's virtual reality platform. Before you attend, you have to do this. And some people do that. And some people don't. I don't know. I mean, I think that we will also, you know, back when we were all in person, when we filmed stuff, we just had a camera crew in the filming. And we put that out later, I think that we're going to be doing the filming, using teams so that the online audience is able to interact with the in person, as I mentioned, will probably one of the roles of the moderator is going to be to kind of watch what's happening online, and also what's happening in the room, which will be more complex for them. And we have to think through how do we give them clear guidance on how to how to run these and sort of host each room that we have. So I think your question is great, I'm think it's too early for me to really answer very well. I hope that we have trust with our audience that we're going to learn as we go with this. We definitely said that in June 2020. And although the SAT numbers were down, what was interesting was like the intention to attend, again, didn't suffer at all. In fact, it improved over the previous session. So I think like people were less happy with the event, but they were just as likely or more likely to attend again. And sure recommend, which I think was was, I hope was part of a result of years of building trust with the community and being as transparent as possible with them about what we're doing. I think we'll do the same thing this spring. We're I mean, we've already said that in the messaging. We are, we are learning as we go with this new model, and we want your input and feedback. Because we're a community driven event. It's it's mostly staffed by volunteers. So that makes it easier, I think, for us to kind of appeal to the audience to help us make it better rather than he were some sort of events team that knows it all. And we're just putting on the event for you. And it's going to be perfect. We know imperfect, right?

Anne Mbugua 18:54

Which leads me to think in terms of now looking back and having you know, had those events, you know, going through it four times, what would you do differently?

Alex Blanton 19:09
I think this is something I knew I had to do. But I would probably do it even better if I could, which is like you run an event you have an idea of what you're doing. And especially when you do it multiple times, you start to lose a little bit of attention on what are your objectives for the event, he kind of more focused on how you deliver it. And I think going all virtual forced us to go back to what are the actual objectives? And then how do we deliver on those objectives, even using different technology and I think I did a fairly good job of it, but I think I would have done I think I would have even been more rigorous if I had to do it again. For example, we have these sessions called interactive discussions with academics or leaders. which generally work quite well in person, you know, you have a small room, you have a leader. So you have an actual draw, you have a limited set of attendees get in a room around a table and do a little preface. And then people ask them questions. So I great, it's access to execs. It's awesome. And so we're like, why don't we just run those again, online, you know, we can get into teams, meaning limit the attendance and everything. So a couple things happen. One, the no show rate is a lot higher with free online events. So and it's super embarrassing. If you schedule an exact, they think they're going to be 40 people there and Yes, show up. For whatever reason, people seem less likely to show up to an online event. The other thing is, this is more subtle, I think, for us, you know, people might not know the executives, they might not know the other people in the room. And that has the effect of inhibiting the discussion online, even if you turn your cameras on, right was in the room, I don't know these names, it feels different than when you're all in the same room together. So when we iterated on those, we had to start asking, you know, sending out a survey ahead of time asking people what do you want to talk about giving that survey to the leaders having the leaders do a little bit more preface, but I wish I had realized that we really need to rethink every type of session from the from the start. I mean, there's some other things as well, like, I think being all online meant that the fact that we are Redmond, or US West Coast centric, right, from a time perspective was highlighted way more because, you know, anyone can win it in person, you know, you kind of have to be there to get the best exactly. You accept that you're just watching a stream or recording. But if it's online, you know, everyone has the same experience. Why is it hotwire all the sessions in Redmond time. So we, we did some experiments with timing stuff for Europe, and then Australia. And then we're doing that for India this time. But But I really should have anticipated that from the start that we would have way more attendees from outside of our timezone, which would mean, they would want to attend sessions that are, you know, at 10 o'clock in the morning for them instead of 10 o'clock at night. I think we also underestimated how much tech rehearsal time we need to put our speakers through. Things went off smoothly. So I'd probably do that differently. And then the first time especially a bunch of the processes caught us by surprise. I don't think we even contemplated when we accepted sessions the first time that some people would say, Hey, can we pre record our session so we don't have to live because you know, I'm in Israel, and it's going to be 11 o'clock at night, you know, when I'm supposed to present? I can sign in and answer questions, but I'd rather not have to present live the whole thing. So we have to kind of invent a process for who would manage the pre recordings? Would they be done by the presenters? And they would submit those video files? Or would we have our event producers run those or give people the choice. And I really wish we had anticipated that some people would want to do that at our last conference, which was in November, a third of our sessions were pre recorded. And not all

by people in other timezone. Some of them were in Redmond, you know, and they are just found it more convenient to pre record and then sign on to answer questions live, make it easier that way. And so we've really going forward, gotta be prepared for I think continuing to do those pre records and make it more of an option. But that's just short of an example of something that if you plan for that it's a lot easier to plan for three months ahead then.

Anne Mbugua 23:48
Right. Exactly, because it is pre recorded. Absolutely. Well, that is it sounds like it's a really complex, you know, trying to have these virtual meetings, but at the same time, too. I mean, they they there's both advantages and disadvantages, whether you have in virtual or in person,

Alex Blanton 24:07
right. Yeah. I mean, some of the one I think I mentioned, you know, you get, we can draw on a wider set of speakers and audience members. It's kind of cool that there's different kinds of content you can use in these online events. You know, like we ran a we run a data visualization track every spring, and it's usually a headline speaker and talks and sometimes labs and tutorials. And then last spring, I talked to our area chair who runs out and I said, Is there anything we can do that's kind of like some of these sites on the Internet that show really cool visualizations and and he took that and ran with it and collaborated with a group here at Microsoft called the garage which focused on innovation. And what they came up with was I thought amazing when we did a set of talks, but then we also have this immersive 3d environment where You could log in sign in, you have to sign in, you just click and go in. And you're in this sort of virtual museum with virtual. And then their data is pieces up on the walls like art pieces, and you can move around, click on them, some of them themselves were interactive, so you could even go further into them. Then they had videos, one minute videos from the creators, and so you on your own time could sort of wander around, and that we had about a dozen of these pieces, which was a kind of content that I don't think we ever would have dreamed of, for an in person conference. Exactly. We've done that. And we did do that. And that's actually a evergreen piece of content. We did that last spring, we promoted it. In the fall, we've probably had about 1500 people Gallery, which is way more than attend the talks in total, right. So that's just one example of, I guess, the challenges of going virtual, but that kind of force you to think about new new ways of delivering the kind of content you want to give to your audience. So

Anne Mbugua 26:08
it sounds like thinking a lot outside the box, which is fantastic that you're able to do that. So what would be your advice to, you know, a community manager or community managers, we're thinking about virtual events, and thinking about, you know, trying to piece together whether, you know, this is a good tool to use or, you know, good platform, what would be let's round it off to, you know, like three pro tips that you could give them when they're thinking about virtual events, particularly around maybe their tools and their platforms? Well, I

Alex Blanton 26:39
think you want to make the platform really easy to use. I think that bells and whistles, and cool features are great, but not if they prevent people from just easily getting into the session, experiencing what they want. Reliability is really important. If your tool goes down in the middle of the conference, I mean, it's

so much worse than things happening in person, you know, like, in the in person conference, once the lights went out in a room and was weird, but someone turn the lights back on. And when this session fails, online session goes dark. People don't know what's going on. So you're, you know, as simple the liability and what would be my third one, I think? I don't know, let me try to those are definitely the first two, I guess costs, you know, you know, cuz it's, my budget got reallocated when I went online, I didn't have food and beverage budget. But I needed to think about other things like that platform. I mean, I guess one other thing that I would think about, from my own experiences integration into the existing toolset. So getting back to that place, Outlook integration. And that was a big fail the first time not having that. And so what tools are your people using now? And is the new tool? How well does it integrate into that? You know, sometimes that may be like, we're an internal event, and people are going as interspersing with their jobs. So it really makes sense to integrate, I have attended external, completely third party online events, is a totally different tool, right. And actually, that was fine, because I was making the time to go to that all day. So I guess it's not necessarily that you have to integrate with your existing toolset. But think about your audience. And whether you're making it easy for them to attend means integrating into what they're using every day and are going to be using other parts of the day. Or perhaps it's going to be easier for them to have a completely different experience, and immerse themselves there for a certain period of time. That's something that I think the community manager is going to have to think through an answer on an event event basis. So it's not something I think there's some sort of magical answer to

Anne Mbugua 29:20
Yeah, thank you for sharing that. Because you know, those, those are important tips. You know, we definitely have to think also about, you know, cost budget, you know, what does that look like? Absolutely, that is something you know, that we want to be able to justify why we need this new tool to use for this particular virtual event. Well, thank you so much for sharing Alex and I usually like ending on this note, what inspires you about your community?

Alex Blanton 29:50
Oh, I think the biggest thing about Mike so I managed the machine learning and AI community,

Anne Mbugua 29:55
right, and

29:59
look, this is An emerging area people are learning every day as members of this community are so great about sharing what they know, and helping each other learn. And realizing that, you know, this is not something this is a domain you can't go to school with and master through a degree program. I mean, you can get started that way, but out into the world, and it's moving so quickly. There's innovation happening everywhere. And I just love it that we put out a call for content and get 300 submissions from all over the company, people willing to take their time to share what they know. And then we have people volunteering to review those proposals and post session so for the willingness of people to step forward and take a little bit of their time to help something big happen, that that's what inspires me. I love it. You know, it's, it's, you know, when I see these people who have all this deep technical expertise, willing to help one another be better. That's

Anne Mbugua 31:02

fantastic. Well, thank you for you know, coming today and sharing.