Project: Future of Infrastructure podcast

Episode 20

Jeremy Goldberg [guest]

Mohamed Abuagla [guest]

Running time: 36:30

[Music.]

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the future of infrastructure, a part of Microsoft’s Public Sector Future series. I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft, and I’m on a journey to learn more about how infrastructure is being built around the world, by talking with public servants, philanthropists, artists and place-makers who have spent their lives working in the public interest. This is a series to help us build things and plan for the future, while putting people first.

So today, I’m here at the Microsoft Garage once again in SoHo in New York City, and I’m joined by Mohamed Abuagla, the Chief Executive for Hayya, which is under the Supreme Council for Delivery and Legacy in the State of Qatar, a committee that was established in preparation to drive and lead the successful FIFA 2022 World Cup.

Mohamed, it is absolutely great to be with you here in person in New York City.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Thank you, Jeremy. Likewise.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So for those of us that listen and observe the work that’s been done, incredibly prolific from a technology standpoint, no doubt, and we’re going to get to that throughout our discussion, but before we do, I wanted to start off by having you introduce yourself to our audience, share a bit about the work that you do, what excites you, and of course, kind of pave the way for us and tell us a bit about your career trajectory.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Great, thank you, Jeremy. It’s a pleasure to be here.

Before I start introducing myself, I wanted to, you know, thank the people that helped me actually get here, get here as far as my parents are concerned. That part of the team, my family that also supported, you know, every inch of my progress, as well as the, you know, the teams of partners, and specifically the Microsoft partnerships that, you know, we’ve used. I’ve spent a lot of years with them, both in Qatar, in the region, and globally. So I want to, you know, make sure that they hear me appreciating the work that they have done throughout the years with me.

I graduated with a degree in systems engineering from the University of George Mason, in Northern Virginia. After that I started, you know, basically in healthcare financing. That was a Y2K kind of role, just to help organizations in the government sector to transition seamlessly into, I guess, the year 2000 without issues.

Following on to that, somehow I jumped into telecom, again with a startup that was trying to basically provide solutions to augment billing systems and rating systems for telecom carriers.

Following that, I moved into – back into healthcare services, again as part of government sector and the government sector in D.C., did that for a few years, and then decided that it was time to get out of the – kind of like the natural networking and systems administration and project management roles and move a little bit more into cybersecurity. That was in mid 2000s.

So I spent quite a few years in that, and I’ve been doing that ever since, I guess. And akin to everything else that I’m doing, I got an opportunity in mid-2013 to move to the Middle East and go into media and broadcasting. So I came in as a consultant for Al Jazeera Media Network, spent five years there as the CIO and CTO of that organization, moved back to the States before Corona, and then got a call to come back and help with the World Cup back in Qatar.

So I went back in 2021 and assumed some consulting and advisory roles for – for the SC, the Supreme Committee. And then after that I got charged with – with running this Hayya, which was called the fan ID project at the time, ran that through the World Cup, and here it is, now we continue.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** We know the career-wise, sometimes the things you start off working in, they may not directly connect to the next one. But overall, looking at these themes, looking at these kind of common characteristics of the role that you’ve had around healthcare and telecom, and of course, the work that you’re doing now is really about customer delivery, service delivery, right, and meeting the needs of both the customer that receives those services, but also the organization that you work for, and helping them to improve the way that they deliver quality services.

I’m curious to go back to what you opened up with, with your family, thanking your family, and I think that’s something I should do every time as I open up in our intros as well, is there something that, you know, in your earlier days growing up, that you were encouraged by through family or otherwise to explore a career, careers in the technical kind of systems, IT side of this work? Was there – is there a moment that you would reflect on?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** My dad was a librarian. So the amount of books that were around us was astounding. So, you know, that time, TV was, you know, not the first option for entertainment; a book was. And therefore, you ended up just doing, you know, massive amount of readings.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Anything you remember reading in particular?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** It’s just like any book that I could get my hands on, you know, as a young child and growing. I think one of my most vivid memories, as probably like a seven or an eight-year-old was, we were in Egypt. We lived in Egypt at that time. And then we were moving back to Sudan, where I was originally from. And due to weight limits, we could not actually ship all my books. And I remember crying because I had to get rid of –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** How do you choose?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** My dad basically told me, it was like, pick the top 10 that you want out of probably a thousand. So you know, books and magazines and things like that, and it just felt painful. And so, you know, I picked 12, and I gave probably, like, five of them on the airplane to people to read that they have never returned them.

So yeah, it was always an interesting thing. So my grandpa from my mom’s side also owned a bookstore. So it’s just kind of like, you grew up around, you know, information.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It is that superpower, absolutely. It’s very clear to me, based on what you’ve just shared around the connection to books into reading and words and the way that something is captured. In this case, you know, as it ties to your work, as you’ve moved along in your career, let’s look at some of the earlier career, the work that you’ve done.

How did you manage the knowledge and leave that behind, right, with those that continued to carry on the work, either in the healthcare work or the telecom work, as someone who cares deeply, it’s clear, around knowledge transfer?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** I’m very intentful in sharing. It’s something that I believe in. I do not hold information. I consume a lot of information, but I try to filter it and then distill it and hand it over to, you know, my surroundings, you know, my colleagues, you know, my kids, you know, the community. Whatever it is that I get my hands on, I try to make sure that I push, you know, filter the information through that makes sense to them.

And I think just being able to, you know, come from a background where you had to consume a lot of information – I forgot to say one thing, which is, you know, my dad always asked me to summarize what I read, whenever I read a book, that he wanted me to, like, come and tell them in 10 minutes what it was all about.

And I think that kind of like helped me, you know, as far as understanding how do you do executive reports from a young age. You really had to learn how to read things, you know, in a way and filter out the noise, and then just, you know, capture the themes or the more strong points that you actually want to convey.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So on the information sharing side of things, to bring this conversation to a project that you really helped to drive, Hayya, tell our audience a bit more first about Qatar.

And in a way, for many people across the globe, the FIFA World Cup was the first time they were introduced to the country. So tell us a little bit about Qatar, and then walk us through Hayya, what it is, what it’s about, and we’ll dive deeper into some of the work that was accomplished throughout the World Cup and perhaps what’s next.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Qatar is a small state with huge aspirations and very big ambitions and an extreme sense of drive to realize those ambitions.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** About 3 million people or so, roughly?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Roughly right. So about 2.8 –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Okay.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** –2-point – you know, 2.9.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And in terms of size of the country, is it about the – I think I read somewhere it’s about maybe 10 times the size of New York City. Is that about – is that accurate?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Yeah, it’s – you know, you can go probably, like drive end to end in about 45 minutes to an hour.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Okay, okay. That’s helpful.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Right? So it’s not a very huge – you know, it’s not a big country. It’s a small country, actually, by all means. But also that kind of like, gives you a concentration of things that you have to work with.

I was fortunate enough to kind of like get to work with the – maybe the two biggest brands in the country. One of them is Al Jazeera, and the other one is obviously the World Cup, right?

So the World Cup was this moment in history, where, you know, Qatar has worked very, very valiantly and hard for over 12 years, just so they can realize the dream of this small country with a lot of, you know, challenges being able to host such a global event that has, you know, one mission, which is to deliver amazing.

And we wanted to make sure that we, you know, we deliver amazing, and amazing was basically in providing amazing infrastructure, amazing support, amazing, you know, accommodation, amazing transportation, amazing, you know, experiences around the country, and so on. And I think that was delivered in a way that actually, you know, hit the mark, and exceeded expectations in some regards.

As far as Hayya is concerned, first, let’s define what it is. So Hayya in Arabic basically means “Let’s go.” Right? And it was basically a rallying phrase to get people to get excited, to get people to connect, and to get people to, you know, jump into action, and, you know, taking the moment and seize the opportunities and so on.

Previously, it was tried in the Russian World Cup, you know, the World Cup that was held in 2018. And it was known as the Fan ID system, which was basically an identification for fans, so they can basically be able to enter, you know, different facilities, or what have you. The same thing we wanted to implement for the World Cup in 2022, but we wanted to add a bit more experience around it.

So the vision behind it was basically a scheme to , you know, from the top was basically to create a system or an app or an experience, you know, a platform that brings everything in one place.

So what you want it to do is you want it to make sure that everyone has access to everything that they need from before they came into the country, during the time they spend in the country, and after they leave the country, in one place. But that was extremely challenging because of several factors.

So you know, mission statements for us, Hayya did everything for me. That’s basically how we started. And then you just go and sit down with your team and try to figure out, you know, when someone says, I want everything, then you have to basically go and do the homework.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So here’s the scenario, as I imagine it. Phone rings, Mohamed picks up, this is what’s communicated to you, let’s go, Hayya, right? This is what you need to build. So you show up on day one.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Yeah, so it was something like that. It was actually a bit tougher than that, because it was more like there was an instance before that did not meet that expectation. So you had to go and, you know, clear out that misconception and just take on a project that was not going into really the right direction and try to turn it around and make sure that it goes in the right direction. And not only meet the expectations, but you wanted to exceed the expectations.

But, you know, when the expectation is everything, you know, then you really can’t quantify that. So there is no scope, right? So you just had to work on managing this, you know, the leadership expectations of what the scope would look like, and also looking realistically at the team and the contracts and the companies that will work with you, or, you know, the partners and what have you, to see how you can bring some of those things aligned together.

The most difficult part was the fact that from the day I actually took on the project until the first time or the first release had to go live, we had six weeks. So trying to understand what’s going on behind the scenes trying to bring all the partners together, trying to build and rebuild some of those relationships took a lot of effort. So you know, it’s just countless hours really is what you have to end up doing.

And then ultimately, we ended up building a smart solution that allowed people to get an entry permit or a visa into the country, because the country was basically, you know, they optimize the country because of the size. Again, that’s one of the challenges to make sure that only the people that had tickets, you know, or related to the World Cup from an organizing perspective would be allowed to enter. Otherwise, you would have people, you know, that were roaming the streets and not finding places to sleep and so on.

So to control that, we put in place Hayya, and that would basically be your first interaction. So we had set up a solution that basically validates your ticket situation, you know, that you actually own legitimate ticket, and then we’ll allow you – we’ll take your information, we’ll apply for a visa for you. And we wanted to do that super quick, so the same experience, you know, like, it’s not a painful experience. So we ended up, you know, building something that – I think that was very savvy, that ultimately allowed people to apply for an entry for a visa into a country in less than three minutes. And then you will get your, you know, your approval.

And once you got that, then that’s kind of like your ticket to, you know, to avail the rest of the services. That allowed you to access to transportation for free, so you can get on the metro, you can get on the buses, all free, for the duration, as long as you have a Hayya. Without it, you could not go into, you know, certain facilities or fan zones and what have you. It is required for you to enter the stadiums. It would avail you to discounts. You get a SIM card, or an e-sim, you know, when you fly in, with free data and free minutes. It ended up actually providing this holistic experience for everyone, all the fans that came in through.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So six weeks. It means you must have assembled quite a prolific team of people. And at the top, you also acknowledged the people that helped to deliver on many things that you’ve done over your career.

Tell us a bit about the team that was a part of this in the earliest of stages, the types of qualifications, the types of job, the type of role, the type of people that helped to deliver it. And maybe as well, how did you hold each other accountable to that timeframe, right? Because you were under the gun, right, a lot of pressure to deliver this.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Yeah, absolutely. So the first thing that I started with was basically pick up the phone and call everyone that had worked on the project before, or was already a part of, you know, the previous team, and pretty much like go through, you know, a convincing selling, you know, recruiting, positioning the new future and how things are going to look like. Some, you know, it took some challenge, and it took some, you know, some work to actually try to convince people that, you know, I know it was challenging. I know it was difficult, I know it didn’t really, you know, deliver what was expected of it before. But here’s my new plan, here’s how we can do things differently, and what have you.

I started with the same team that was there. I sat with each one of them, and I tried to understand what was the challenge in them not being able to deliver before. I thought they were really, you know, smart and committed and hardworking, but they did have environmental challenges and political challenges.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Yeah, what did you hear? What’s an example?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** You know, people were not picking up the phone for them. X government organization was not really answering our calls, they’re not showing up to the meetings. Stakeholders are not really committing to timelines. Management was not really approving things for us to go, you know, quickly, and so on. You know, so you know, a whole host of issues.

So I was like, you know, let’s sit together and focus on what we have to deliver, and let me handle all the politics and – and the rest of the, you know, the organization on that stakeholder alignments. And then you just go around drinking coffee with as many people as you can, top, down, left ways, up, night, whatever it takes, right?

And then you sit with them, and you try to refocus everyone on the vision, not on the project. So yes, we understand that there are challenges in the project, but let’s just make sure that by the end of 2022, we will all smile. We want to deliver a successful World Cup. We still want to deliver Hayaa. So if you agree with me that we need to deliver amazing, now let’s evaluate if we have – what we have both been doing so far has been amazing.

Because amazing is a continuum. It’s the sum of all pieces, right? And if there was a piece that’s not amazing, you know, we are as strong as the weakest, amazing link.

And therefore, you know, it took a lot of time and effort to just get people back into confidence mode, that yes, we are committed, we’re going to do 100%. There were some gaps from our side as well, of course. You know, there was some miscommunications, there were some misalignment, there were some things that were dropped, tasks that did not get done, you know, emails that were not shared on time, requests that did not make it on – you know, on the deadlines lines and what have you.

But basically, bringing everyone on a committee group, again a subcommittee, and I made them all accountable. All the stakeholders are accountable. This is your project. If it fails, it felt – it fails, because of all of us. It doesn’t fail because of one of us that didn’t do what they’re supposed to do. And you are all a part of the success.

And I made sure, just as I made sure in the beginning of this conversation to thank the people, I made sure to give credit to the people that have actually have helped and have helped previously, and also give credit to the people that were hesitant in helping, you know, if they were help, and I made it very clear.

But I did also, at the same time, go aggressively in holding them accountable, made sure that they show up to their meetings, made sure that they deliver. If they had a problem with delivery, I didn’t try to point fingers and blame them, but I actually went over there and sat with them, try to figure out what the issue was.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I mean, the takeaway for me in just listening to what you’ve articulated, it’s inherent in that is you took responsibility, you took ownership, you said that you would also be there by establishing the state of play, by engaging the stakeholders, and you were accountable, right? And that’s what it sounds like was also from a reputational perspective really important for people to hear, that might have not been totally convinced, and that cup of coffee might have helped a little bit.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Absolutely. And there were some tough conversations. There were very, very, very tough conversations with very senior leadership members in the country level. And you just had to defend your turf, and you had to defend your position, and basically say, like, listen, this is what it takes, from my professional opinion, for things to be successful. And if we’re not able to do these things, then you know, here’s the outcome that’s going to happen.

It did help significantly that the top of the pyramid believed heavily in the project and believed heavily in – in the vision of turning this around and getting it to – to do what it needs to do. And he moved mountains for us. He helped us basically pull the right resources. He helped us in getting the right agreements, the right, you know, consensus from government organizations, when we needed to.

Give you a simple example. We wanted to make sure that there is a free transportation setup. That requires us to agree with, you know, a company or the group that operates the metro and the company or the group that operates the bussing system, you know, others. And we also wanted a fast track lane. And we wanted to make sure that you can use, you know, the e-gate or a global entry type for everyone without even registering, just by registering through Hayya. So you have 1.4 million people that came from overseas that we wanted them to, you know, just tap in their passport and keep walking.

Government agencies and companies and organizations are not ready for that, and they’re not ready to bend these rules just to give you what you want. But if you always brought things around, but this is the experience that we want to give the fans, this is the experience that we wanted to give the visitors.

But more importantly, it’s not about making sure that they enjoyed this experience. The vision was we wanted them to love it, so they can come back. So we had to dig deeper and ask those tough questions, like but why not? Because our system requires an upgrade. Let’s sit down with the company and talk about the upgrade that you need. But the upgrade is risky. Well, let’s just figure out how we can get a lab together so we can get the upgrade de-risked. And so on. So a lot of these things happen, and – but the push from the top really helped us like holding them accountable and holding us accountable as well.

And I’m just relentless, right? So you know, you can tell me yes now, you can tell me yes later. So let’s save time and tell me yes now. We – we move forward this way.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Okay. So the world’s paying attention, right? It’s the largest sports event on the planet. So the games began? How did you feel in terms of where things were in the lead-up? And then how did you feel throughout? Talk us through a bit of, if you could recall, the experience of it in real time, what you had built.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** What we had done as far as the Hayya project, as well as in integration with the rest of the projects, because, you know, Hayya was supposed to deliver this, you know, unified experience for people. So you had to make sure that all the parties that actually own that experience were part of this mix.

Daily meetings, multiple meetings per day, get-togethers. You know, we had what we call the main operating center, where basically people were there for about 40 days, you know, from a few days before the event until the very last day at the event, where all the different agencies and government, you know, representatives and private sector representatives and different, you know, functional areas and what have you, were all represented in one place. So we made sure that everybody was there, so if you had a question, you just got up and talked to somebody and you came back. So you don’t have to send emails. That was extremely helpful.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It must have been a really intense environment.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** It was extremely intense, it was extremely challenging, because you know, when – when there is an incident, and incidents are supposed to happen, and they will happen, you just have to have your plans and be prepared for them, we wanted to make sure that, you know, it wasn’t about finger pointing, but about receiving consensus on a solution quickly so we can, you know, deescalate and resolve something.

We had the pleasure and the unenviable task of being the intake, the interaction point with fans. So from a higher perspective, we actually built three touchpoints where you interact with fans or visitors in the country.

The first touchpoint is the app. So we had a digital touchpoint, and through that you got all the information that you needed and you were able to transact information and – and bookings and what have you that you needed to do.

The second one was a virtual touchpoint, which you could send us emails, WhatsApp messages, or phone calls, and we had, you know, a 24/7, 700-agent contact center that spoke eight languages, you know, just to make sure that everybody was getting the support and the help that they needed 24/7.

And then the third touchpoint was the physical touchpoints. So we had service centers. I had people, you know, that were working at borders, you know, at the airports, at the land borders, at – every stadium had support centers and service centers. We had two major service centers in the middle of the city. You know, we had additional ones at, you know, hotels and what have you.

I felt personally responsible for the experience of the fans. Once they got into the stadium, then I handed it over to somebody. But until they get into the stadium, from the minute they left their hotel until, you know, they got to their seat on the stadium, it was my job to make sure that they were having fun the entire time, and nothing was stopping them from getting there.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Was there feedback that you recall coming from fans, that you then said, okay, we need to now change, modify, improve something now, so that that same feedback doesn’t come again, that we fixed something?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Oh, absolutely. So, you know, having all these different touchpoints gives you a lot of inputs, right? So it’s almost like having sensors. The team started with six people. During the event, we ended up with 2,600 people. And each one of them was a sensor out there that would give you some piece of information.

So we just needed again, you know, you take in a lot of information. You need to filter it to make sure the ones that I needed to act upon and the ones that needed to be escalated, and the ones that can be delegated to other people to handle.

The fans, depending on backgrounds, you know, had different problems. And we had done our homework. We understood, you know, the fans that are coming on the – you know, through the border from Saudi Arabia are going to have certain problems versus the fans are going to be flying in from Morocco are going to have separate problems, versus the fans that are going to be doing their fan walks, you know, from Argentina are going to have their own problems. And we tried to segregate those problems and understand also psychologically, what would that mean and how we would solve those.

So what – what – what we had to do is basically reorient our team. So who speaks Spanish? You guys go work on that side. Who speaks Arabic? You guys work on this other side. Who grew up in this neighborhood? You go work on that side. And then try to delegate the responsibilities, like fix the problem without calling me. You know, so don’t escalate if you have to. Like, if you don’t really need something, and you think you can do it by yourself, then don’t escalate.

I’ll give you an example of things that we had to change almost immediately. Everyone that needed to come into the country needed to make sure that they have a ticket, as well as they have a place to stay. These were the two rules, right, you need to have accommodation, and you need to have a ticket to come into the country.

Some people had a ticket, but they had accommodation that they said they’re going to book but they never booked. So they actually had a pending status. Right. At some point, you also have to look holistically at the problem of do I want to over, I guess, aggressively enforce the rules, or do I want to, you know, leniently try to work some scenarios, and see if we can get people to come into the stadiums and have fun and what have you, and just to kind of, like, lower the risk there?

So you know, there was a decision where we basically said, okay, we’re going to let people that have pending accommodations, but they also have a match, for the next 48 hours to come in. Right? So then, you know, you were allowed to come in, even if you didn’t have your accommodation, and then some, you know, in times, you’re going to sort it out.

So again, we had to communicate with all airports, with all airlines, and telling them, it was like, let them through, we’ll fix it while they’re in the air. When they land, we’ll let them go. A lot of these challenges. So yeah, it was such a sleepless nights, but we delivered amazing.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So a month, right?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Correct.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** The World Cup lasts a month. But that can’t be it. There’s more. Things wrap up. Talk a bit about the impact, some of the big data points, the things that you and your team are most proud of, based on the experience and sort of what’s next with the work that you’re doing.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** The proudest moment for us actually came before the start, and it was kind of like this, you know, vote of confidence for us. So right before the start of the World Cup, there was the – here in New York, actually, the UN assembly.

So the UN General Assembly, you know, brings in the world leaders from different places. So for that we had the emir, you know, the head of the country give a speech on the floor of the UN. And in that speech, he mentions Hayya as, you know, a system that allows for people to come in.

But it was also one of the benefits of Hayya, or one of the interesting things that happened was that it was also considered that like, if you got a Hayya, which is an entry permit, a visa to Qatar, the Saudi government announced that they would accept it as an entry point permit to their country. And then UAE would accept Hayya as an entry permit.

And at the end of it, the biggest testament for the success of the project was the fact that it was the first project to be considered a legacy project. So you know, it’s actually activated as a legacy project.

So, you know, the name of the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy was to deliver the project and create legacy. So we were fortunate to be the first project that moved to legacy mode. And we were the first ones at the end of January to announce the continuation of Hayya as a gateway into the country.

And this is what we’re working through right now. We have announced it as an official entry visa system to the country. So you know, everybody that wants to go to the State of Qatar, now they need to apply, they go apply for Hayya, and that’s a continuing process. So we’ve moved from an event mode into a permanent setup, as well as we have a huge mandate to continue to build around those experiences. Qatar is hosting a whole bunch of events. The country hosts over 200 events per year.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** There’s some upcoming events, right?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Correct. There are some major ones that are coming. We have the Expo coming at the end of the year. I think it’s October. Then we have the Asian Cup, which is going to be coming in January. Then we have the Formula One that will also take place. Two days ago, we had the Economic Forum, which for which everyone entered with a Hayya as well.

So everything around the country turned into a Hayya related activity, and that gives us a lot of sense of pride, as well as a huge momentum to go forward.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** At the start, we talked about reading and books, among other things. I think you said 1,000 books that were –

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Discarded

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** – discarded. Countries and nations will continue to host the Olympics and the World Cup in North America.

There are a few books that you could write about your experience. What would some of the chapters be for you to share your insight and knowledge with those that are hosting these global events?

What are the things that you would want them to know as they’re thinking about a platform like this, or just overall some of the best practices, as they host these large scale events that the world is attending and paying attention to?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** So interesting that you asked that question. About three weeks ago, I was actually here in the states in Miami, and we were doing a knowledge transfer conference between the host country, Qatar for 2022, and the U.S., Mexico and Canada for 2026. And we basically were trying to share some of the lessons learned and things that we’d have to go through.

Initially, it didn’t seem obvious to everyone that Hayya would be something that might be required for or needed even for this next World Cup that would be coming here.

And the reason is, the bigger ticket items, the things that actually take the time and take the effort, you know, are the things that have to do with stadium readiness, with city readiness, with transportation readiness, with security arrangements, with hotels, you know, blocking areas, and you know, working the logistics and the rules and the regulations and the city codes and all this stuff. Those are truly the things that make the event.

But those are not the things that make the experience, right, and you need to make sure that the part that I tried to infuse was basically, you need to have a group that thinks about the fans, and how the fans are going to come and have fun, and how am I going to remove all the obstacles for the fans, so they can basically come and enjoy their time here.

As an example, a U.S. visa does not get you into Mexico. A Mexican passport does not necessarily fly you into, you know, Canada the next day. But you have games that are going to be played across three countries and, you know, 16 cities. And people, you know, if I’m following a team or, you know, let’s say that, you know, my wife follows Germany and I follow, you know, Brazil, and I want to go and attend the Brazil game in LA, and then tomorrow, I want to attend Germany in, I don’t know, Calgary. Does she need a visa? Does she need to pre-apply for a visa? Is there some sort of a synergy that has to happen in between? Do you, you know, do you need to create regulations that actually put that into place and allow for this possibilities?

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** How do you deliver amazing for all fans? That’s it.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** How do you deliver amazing for the fans, right? It’s an experience.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s right.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** It’s a feeling, right? And you want people to continue to be excited about that. So you really need to step back and think about how do I use technology and services and integration and, you know, laws and regulations to build amazing intentfully for the fans.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So that’s chapter one, great, yes. And it’s 2023. So these are extremely insightful. And you know, the World Cup for North America is right around the corner. And the scenario and forecasting and planning and personas, it’s great to have someone who cares deeply about the knowledge management side of this work that’s lived through it, and that’s continuing to build on the legacy of Hayya and what this might look like for other large scale global events.

So I’d like to believe, maybe, though I’m still going to endorse and support the United States in the next World Cup, you’ve mentioned Brazil and Germany perhaps playing. So if you’re going to look into your crystal ball, or your – the future here of the work that you’re doing, what are the future expectations of Hayya and the work that you’ll be doing?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** I’m going to link this to – to the previous question as far as books as well. So the last book that I was reading, and I went back into reading, was a book that I needed to read again, just because I needed to transfer that knowledge again to my team, which is, *What Got You Here is Not Going to Get You There*.

So we wanted to make sure that this was a system that was built for an event, and we want to go for something that is permanent. And when you build things for events, you do a lot of shortcuts. But when you build something permanent, you have to rethink how you actually – or you have to think deeply about your building things.

As far as what we’re planning on doing going forward, we have been given the mandate to continue as a legacy system. And – and by the word legacy, it’s legacy for the country. So it’s not really legacy tech. It’s just that something that will be continuing going forward.

We want to transfer the knowledge and the experience from an event-based solution to a tour – a digital tourism platform. Because that’s really the – the reason for hosting such events is you want to showcase the country in its best way. You want to show that you can host such things.

And that’s really the path that we’re trying to push forward for, to make sure that there is a single, unified experience platform that allows for an aggregation of all the different services and events and activities that you would need as a visitor to the country, end-to-end, without fail.

That also helps you in communicating. You can share that information with your friends. You know, you can connect it through social media activities, and so on.

So that’s the drive. That’s the vision. That’s what we’re going for next.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** 2.0.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** 2.0.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** What is one thing you’ve read, watched, or you’ve listened to lately, that had an impact on the way you’re thinking about technology and infrastructure, and this moment in the world that we’re living in and working in?

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** The topic that I’m mostly intrigued about now, and I think I’ve been listening to podcasts and reading articles on is the ethics of AI. I’m not a conspiracy theorist. So I’m not thinking that there’s something sinister that’s going to happen, and hopefully that AI is not going to take over our lives.

But how do we make use of it in a way that is ethical? Because just like as there are, you know, amazing things that you can do with, you know, ChatGPT or others, there are also some really bad things that you can also do with it.

So, you know, where are the boundaries? Who’s going to be, you know, regulating that? Who’s going to be helping us make the best use out of it, and not, you know, really misuse it?

But I think that’s just kind of like where I am right now. That’s something that I’m, you know, spending a lot of time trying to read and learn myself and educate myself on, you know, the ethics of AI and how that’s going to play in the future.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thank you for that. I know a lot of people are feeling similar and reviewing and thinking about these issues deeply, too, some from a technical perspective, and also, those of us that are living our lives here as we see this transformative change happening with tech.

Mohamed, thank you so much for spending time with us here at the Garage in New York City. We look forward to all the exciting work that’s to be realized and to come through the work that you’re doing. Thank you for being here today.

**MOHAMED ABUAGLA:** Thank you for having me.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thanks for listening to this episode and being a part of the Future of Infrastructure, and for joining me on this journey to meet and learn from the people improving life in their communities.

If you liked today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please take a moment to share, rate and review the show.

To learn more, visit us at wwps.microsoft.com, or find me on LinkedIn and Twitter at Jeremy M. Goldberg.

END