

The Future of Cloud Reimagined - Part 2

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BRADLEY HOWARD (BH): Welcome back to the Tech Reimagined podcast on cloud, with James Rosenthal from Google Cloud and Radu Vunvulea from Endava. In this half, we'll get to know each of our guests a little better and look back over their careers to understand how they got to where they are today. Let's start with James. Can you describe a little bit about your background?

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JAMES ROSENTHAL (JR): Sure, thanks, Bradley. Like many kids of the '80s and '90s, I was told the most important thing was to find a profession, and so I decided that, since I wasn't brilliant at maths and I wasn't really into medicine, I would end up being a lawyer, and it, kind of, seemed fun from watching 'LA Law' and reading 'To Kill a Mockingbird'. So, that's what I did. I did law at University – I went to Sussex – and then I went to a college of law, did a legal practice course and started working for a relatively small, niche intellectual property law firm called Reuter Zucker. And, fairly quickly, I realised that my, I don't know, my thoughts of what being a lawyer would be were not actually the reality, and it ended up, you know, not badly, but not right for me, like being just lots of contracts, and that kind of stuff.

And I think I realised that, probably, I needed to do something else to remain interested, and I recognised that if you're interested and excited about what you're doing, you'll tend to be reasonably good at it. So, I figured I needed to find something that engaged me more. And, at that point, having done my two years' training contract, or 'articles', as it was called, and then two further years, so after four years, I decided that rather than entirely jettisoning what I knew about law, I would try and find a job that would be, that would put me as an inhouse lawyer where I'd be able to get more experience of business and then have a better idea of what I wanted to do. And I was fortunate that one of my clients at the time was a start-up that specialised in smart card technology, and they were looking for an inhouse lawyer, so I joined them and was able to, sort of, cover most of the legal stuff maybe two, one, two days a week and then get more involved in business development.

That was a lot of fun. We ended up coming up with a product that was pretty cool, which was stadium access particularly for football stadiums, so we worked with Arsenal, West Ham, Liverpool, Man City. That went pretty well. I figured I learned a lot, adapted, recognised that I had other skills over and above being a lawyer, and then after a few years, I was approached by Google to come on board to launch Google Checkout, which was like a PayPal competitor, and I've been there for 13 years. I think, looking back at when I applied to Google, I really felt entirely unqualified to do it, I felt massive imposter syndrome, as I suspect many or most people do. The people that I was going up against for the role had MBAs from Harvard, or whatever it might be. An incredible experience, and I didn't ... And so I think it's important that during this process, one believes in oneself and recognises the things that one's good at and emphasises those.

And in the 13 years that I've been at Google, I have worked, initially, on the Checkout side, and then working with global ad agencies, in particular WPP, who were my client for a long time, and have worked in the travel sector, I have worked on Google social efforts, and now I am working on the cloud side, and I love it. I'm very fortunate to work for a company that allows you to move around and get experience all over the place, and continue to develop. So, that's why I've been there for so long.

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BH: And do you still use some of the techniques and learnings from your legal training?

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JR: I think I've had to retrain my mind, because, as a lawyer, and for those lawyers listing, or for anyone who's had a legal background, I think you're predominantly told to think about risk and how you mitigate risk, and protect your client from risk. And the reality is that when you're working in a business, there is everything, every decision has a risk – an upside and a downside – and you just have to become OK with that. So, I think it taught me that risk is fine as long as you manage it OK, and not to be so afraid of it, as I would be, not afraid, but wary of it on a client's behalf for fear of getting sued. And I think it's, some of the editing, you know, word, editing text that one picks up as a lawyer, and whether it's being able to read through a contract or just draft stuff in a succinct and understandable way, is very useful. Like, I've still got my red pen. Well, the suggestions in Docs or in Word, and go through documents and cut out words, which was probably the most useful thing I got.

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BH: Thanks for sharing that with us, James. Radu, how about your career?

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RADU VUNVULEA (RV): I was born and grew up in the middle of Transylvania, Romania, in a city called Cluj, Cluj-Napoca, and during the high school period, I started to think about what I would enjoy to do. One of the things that I like, and still like, is history because it's giving you the ability to connect the dots, like in a puzzle. But, also, I really loved the technology, so I decided to study computers, computer science. During the first year of the university, it was pretty amazing and I had a lot of fun. After the first year of university, I decided that I should also work, so I started to be a teacher for student from high school for math and, also, computer science. And after that, it is pretty interesting that I started to work in Photoshop for around one year as a designer for a US-based company. And during the summer, I decided to quit and to go and to do an internship that was more focused on the development side, and, during that times, I started to be closer and closer to the development and to the thing that I'm doing now.

Also, after I finish the university, I felt that I'd not found enough information and activity that I'd seen in the city during that times from the community point of view – it was not enough. So, I started to be more and more involved in the community activities from the IT point of view, and I think that has the biggest impact on me, because it forced me to speak in different environments with different people in that role. And I'm still doing this, ensuring that I'm giving back to the community, to the IT community the lessons learnt and the experience that I, that I gain in the last years.

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BH: And, James, have you had any mentors along the way, or any outstanding pieces of advice you'd like to share?

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JR: Yeah, unfortunately, I have lots of mentors, and I think the most important thing that helped me find mentors, and what have you, is recognise that actually asking for help is a strength, as opposed to a weakness. I think we're, or certainly when I was growing up and coming into the workplace, this idea of asking for help was seen as a weakness, and you should just be able to grit your teeth and get on with everything and solve it yourself.

And I think what I've learnt over the last 10, or so, years is how important it is to have mentors, to have people who you can just go to and ask, "What would you do in this situation? How would you think about it? What am I missing?" So, I use a ... Again, I'm very lucky to have a bunch of people both at the office in Google and other people who I just speak to generally where I bounce, you know, bounce questions off of, bounce ideas off of. It is impossible for any of us to be able to process all of the information that's coming at us at any time, and to be able to then, on the basis of that, make good career decisions or make good life decisions. So, I think the idea of having mentors is critical.

And for those of you listening who, you know, you're not sure, "Well, who do I ask?" or are embarrassed to ask, most people, in my experience, are happy to help. As Radu said, he's doing his work where he's offering his advice, his guidance, his mentorship back to his community, the IT community locally, and I do the same when people ask if I've got time just to run through things with them, it's my pleasure. So, I think don't be afraid to ask people whom you know or whom you get connected to for half an hour of their time once a month.

I think, as a mentee, it's important if you're being mentored to have specific questions you want answered or things to work through, to be coached through. If you just think about mentorship as turning up once a month and saying, "Hey, well, these are all the different things that are on my mind," I think it's a bit weak. I think you owe it to your mentor to come with specific challenges and the suggestions or the solutions you've already thought of, because I think that the sessions much more useful.

And I also think it's important to, if possible, get mentors who are unconnected with your work at present insofar as there's no conflict of interest. I don't mean from a legal point of view, I just mean, generally, to them it doesn't matter which course you take in terms of it won't enrich or harm them regardless of what decision you make, because then you're going to be almost guaranteed you're going to get good advice.

Bradley, in terms of the piece of advice that I was given, it wasn't specifically given to me, it was Google's CFO, Ruth Porat, who's a absolutely amazing businessperson – she came from Morgan Stanley, where she was CFO during the credit crunch. And she talked about her career, and how she made choices, and what have you, and she gave the example of always going to her managers, her leaders and asking for things where they think it would really stretch her. And so when I now look at opportunities, I think about, "Well, will this enlarge me? Will it force me to learn new stuff and develop?" and, on that basis, I try and take roles that will, and avoid roles that won't. And I used to think, "Well, will this make me happy, taking this role or doing this thing?" and, actually, that's quite like I found to be quite an ephemeral thing. I think enlarging oneself is a better north star than 'will it make me happy?' So, that's the advice I got, for what it's worth.

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BH: That's a fantastic piece of advice. And, Radu, how about yourself?

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RV: I had a few of mentors in the past, and I still have. I think the one, the best advice that I received eight or 10 years ago was talk less and listen more, because many times when you already know what the customer or the other persons are talking about is what, is, or the other persons who are, you are talking with is trying to say, you just want to give the response or to enter the discussion. So, just waiting for the other to finish, and so will give, will give, will provide confidence to the other person.

And another advice that I would give to people from the mentoring point of view is try all the time to have, if you can, at least two different mentors. As James said, one that is not connected to your job. It might be from another company or from any other industry. And another one, try to find somebody from the company that you are working in, or part of the organisation, that knows very well the organisation and can provide you insights and provide you support in a way how he would approach different things inside the organisation, because each company is different and is working in a different way.

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JR: If I could just jump in there, I couldn't agree more with Radu. I think, firstly, it's beholden on all of us to listen more than we speak, not least because we already know what we know and we don't know what other people know, so the more we listen, probably the better decisions or the better we can be of service to them. And that idea of having mentors both in, like, inhouse in your company where you work or in the organisation you're with and outside is really useful, because it allows you just to get that balance. And, particularly, there are often things or aspirations one has that you might not want to share with people in your company, because the fact is you might, in a year's time, want to go and build a start-up, or you might want to go and leave the country and work somewhere else. And those may not be things you'd be comfortable sharing with someone within Endava or, in my case, Google, but you would like to have someone who's able to give you feedback on those points.

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BH: Definitely. One of the most amazing relationships that I have is that I was a mentor for someone within Endava who left our company, and I've continued being the mentor with him external, and it's amazing how it gives you much more of an objective approach and helps just completely free any constraints from any advice that anyone's giving. Completely agree.

Do either of you read business books or listen to any podcasts? I guess, at this point, I should announce that this Tech Reimagined podcast is released every Thursday. But, except for this podcast, James, do you read any books or podcasts?

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JR: I used to read a lot of business books, and I end up getting a bit frustrated with them, not ... This is no reflection on the authors, or anything. I think I just found that they, generally, tended to contain one or two real nuggets, but then those nuggets were stretched over 200 pages, and I just thought, "Oh, man, I'll just read a synopsis online." So, I probably cheat and just read summaries of business books that are useful. The most, the thing that stuck with me most, business-book-wise, is the idea of servant leadership, and it's a book by Robert Greenleaf, and it just talks about the idea of a leader, you know, his or her responsibility is to be of service to the people around him or her.

The idea of servant leadership and the leader, rather than being the person who's doing everything from the front, and dictating, and being autocratic, it's more about how that person can be of service to the people around herself or himself. And I recommend, folks, looking into it, because I think it's, certainly for me, it's really changed the way I think about showing up at the office, and seems to have aligned with projects going fairly well.

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BH: And, Radu, any business books that you can recommend, or podcasts?

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RV: I used to read a lot of business books in the past, or, let's say, more technical books until one year ago once my second child came, the time started to be very, very limited. But one of the books that really helped me to understand why some companies are struggling to grow is 'No Man's Land' and I really recommend this book that is written by Doug Tatum. Try to not watch the movie, because it's a different story, it doesn't have any connection with the book, 'No Man's Land'.

So, I really highly recommend for people to read his book if they are trying to understand why a company that is around 50-60 people is struggling to grow and to reinvent themselves, or, for example, the same things is usually happening for a company that they are around 400 or 500 people. So, it is a book that's changed the way, how I see and I'm thinking about business growing, it's a different organisation point of view.

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BH: And, James, any key opportunities or standout moments that occurred in your career that you'd like to share?

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JR: Lots. I think I've been unbelievably lucky. I was lucky that I had a friend at Google who suggested, you know, the recruiter suggested they get in touch with me. I'm lucky that, to Radu's point, family, and all those kind of things, have really worked out for me and I didn't take any of those things for granted. In terms of opportunities, it goes back to that idea about taking decisions that enlarge you.

Often, things come, land in your inbox or on your desk, or someone has a word with you, and you think to yourself, "I don't know," imposter syndrome, "Am I actually able to do that? That's way outside my comfort zone." Well, in my experience, do it. It will take you in all kinds of directions that you never expected. I mean, in my case, being on a podcast now, talking about cloud computing, which I wouldn't have expected a year ago. But you know what I mean? If you think it's going to give you the opportunity to grow, take it.

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BH: And Radu?

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RV: That's a very hard question. First one be the moment when I decided to quit from my designer job and decided to do a three months internship for another IT company. The second one would be the moment in time in 2012 when I became a Microsoft Azure MVP because it opened a door and I understood better how a big organisation works, especially from the way how features are planned, why some of them, even if for one customer, sounds very important. At another level, they're not so important as you might think.

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BH: And, James, what do you think has changed between you starting your career and today's graduates coming into our profession?

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JR: Well, and this just makes me feel very old, but I remember when I started work, which was in '96/97, we didn't all have our own computers. Email was hardly a thing. I know, I sound like a grandpa now. But I think what has changed now is the level of informality, which is a really positive thing. I don't mean in terms of not having to wear a suit, I just mean that sense that good ideas

can come from anywhere in a business, and, particularly, my experience at Google has been if you have a good idea or a way of looking at things that's supported by data, you know, there is some evidence to what you are saying, there's a better-than-average chance that you'll be able to develop that idea. And I think that's really important and really empowering for graduates who come in now.

I think it's increasingly difficult for graduates now, and this was before COVID, to figure out which industries have best prospects, areas where machine learning, areas where automation might come in and render them less preferable. So, I think it's hard to know. And I think one thing that's helped me is the idea that zig-zag careers, I guess as mine has been in some respects, is not a bad thing. Like, I don't think there is that very clear, "Well, I start a grad scheme at Unilever when I'm 23, and that takes me through until I retire." I just don't think that seems to be the way things are going.

So, the idea that you can pick up skills as you go along, and that those make you better. So, the idea of becoming, I mean, unless there's a particular area where you want to be hyper-focused, the idea of becoming a generalist is probably useful. And recognising that the skills you pick up, where they're able to be adapted and where they're going to put you in good stead. And I also think not to expect or ... You know, there is a, I think it's a misconception about millennials expecting everything to be handed to them on a plate – I know that's not the case. But I think that idea that one does have to work hard and that your first one-to-ones when you get a new job shouldn't be about, well, how long will it take you to get promoted, it should really be about where you can be of service, and be useful, and generate good outputs.

I have had experiences where I'm talking to new hires, and the first thing they tell me is they think they got hired at a lower level than they should be at, and what do they need to do to get promoted. And I'm like, "Whoa, whoa." Just think about where you need to be able to add value, prove yourself, and demonstrate those things, and everything else will fall into place. So, be more focused on doing a good job and sometimes less impatient when it comes to getting promoted.

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BH: Really interesting, there. And, Radu, what's it like from your perspective in Romania?

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RV: Well, I just want to, what James said, I would say that one of the biggest different, differences is, one of the biggest differences is the roles are now more clear for the people. So, I remember 12-15 years ago, the job descriptions were available on the market was very general and it you would find only two or three different types. But now you have a lot of roles, like automation, full stack developer, cloud architect, full-stack architect, and so on. So, I think from their university years, it is more easy for them to understand what is the market is looking for, what might they enjoy more or less to be able to identify, maybe, some area that they will like to develop for a few years. And, also, the material that are available on the market now. Now, there is, you can find a lot of free materials available that can be used if you want to learn or if you want to decide to follow a specific platform.

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JR: So, Radu, that is really good, and it just chimes with one of the things we look for when we're hiring, and a lot of people ask me, you know, "How do you get a job at Google?" and what have you. I think that to the extent that, regardless of at what point you're in in your career, the more that you can demonstrate that you've actually taken risks in terms of leading things. So, if you were to say, "Oh, well, I've always wanted to write a book," or, "I've always wanted to publish a

blog or do a vlog,” and if you’ve done it, regardless of how successful it is, it’s much more impressive than folks who just follow that pretty well-laid path of, hopefully, going to a good school, doing alright in their exams, going to university, then going to work for a consultancy or going to work for an accountants’, or going to work for a lawyers’, and not really having to make any difficult decisions or take any risks along the path.

So, I think we’re really ... The fact is so much information is available on the web about everything, and if you do have passions or there are things you’re into, I would recommend, to the extent that you have the time and the ability, to pursue them, not so they become your day job, but so that you have something interesting to bring that’s out of the ordinary and shows that you are able to be a self-starter and, sort of, build something out of nothing. Again, regardless of whether you do it with a group of people or by yourself, I just think it’s really, it’s really compelling. I would always go for someone who’s got some of that kind of experience over someone who might have slightly better exam results than that other person, because I think they’ve demonstrated an ability to just do something, which is, unfortunately, rare.

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BH: I completely agree with you, James, and I think that this whole COVID period is going to be such a differentiator between people. I can imagine in a few years’ time, one of the most popular interview questions is going to be, “What was your career like? What did you do during COVID?” and people will want to hear the challenges you faced and then how you overcame them right across the board, rather than people who just coasted through this period.

And, finally, what’s both of your daily routine look like? Any tips that you can share with us? James, you’re still working from home all the time, and I think Google has announced that you’re going to be working from home for the foreseeable future, so can you share anything with your daily routine?

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JR: At the moment, we are working on the premise that we will be working from home until July 2021, so, yeah, I’ve needed to think about my work environment, and how I get stuff done, and how I get quiet. Like Radu, I’ve got kids, a dog, who you may have heard in the background. I try and still get up early. I mean, initially, the temptation under COVID was just lay in bed. That’s not good for me, because I think I’m more of a morning person. So, obviously, recognising when you’re at your most productive. And try ...

What I found is that I really miss those kind of chats that I would have in the office just walking to get a coffee or wandering around from desk to desk, or whatever it might be. And so just trying to keep in touch with people who aren’t in my direct team, necessarily, but just pinging them once in a while so that those connections and relationships continue, and just see how people are doing. I think that’s really helped me because, otherwise, you just feel a bit, a bit at sea.

And I try, to a limited extent, do exercise, which is just walking the dog, but, otherwise, I feel I’m very sedentary, and I think there’s a tendency just to be stuck at a desk all day long, whereas in the past, you would’ve been, I don’t know, getting on the tube to meetings, or travelling, flying places, whatever. So, making sure that I’m not just stuck.

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BH: And how do you block out some of your time, because I’ve tried doing something very similar where I try to go for some really short walks through the day just so I can get out of my home

office? But how do you block that out during the day and make sure that no-one will book meetings during those times?

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JR: We have, I guess like you, well, you probably use Outlook, we all use Google Calendar, it's an excellent product. I just put things in, like I put blocks in my calendar. My calendar's shared, so anyone can look at it in the company, and I just have blocks, and so I block time out. And if people try and overbook it, I'll decide where I want to join them or not. I think there is a lot of power in saying 'no'. If you always say 'yes' to people, then people don't really appreciate you're making an effort to help them with stuff and they just assume you've got nothing better to do.

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BH: And, Radu, what does your daily routine look like? Now, you are actually on holiday this week, so thank you very much for joining us, but, usually, what does your daily routine look like?

[00:27:15]

RV: Usually, waking up at around 6:00, 6:30. I have the obsession just to be in the front of the computer at 9:00am, so it's something that I do day by day during the working days. Then I open my laptop and checking my emails. Another routine is that, all the time, I'm keeping my inbox clear, that I don't know if you really enjoy, but I'm not a big fan of it. I really try every two or three days to go running, and not in the morning, as I used to do in the past, but in the middle of the day, so around 1:00 or 2:00pm, I go for a short run of half an hour or one hour in the forest.

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BH: Well, thank you, both to James and Radu, for spending some time with us to reimagine cloud technology. I hope you'll join us next time for another interesting discussion on the Tech Reimagined podcast. Please remember to like this podcast and hit the 'subscribe' button.