



Ashley Llorens

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Explore deeply, then move when it feels right

Engineering was supposed to be the day job for Ashley Llorens. After grad school, the plan was for an engineering gig to finance his aspiring career as a hip-hop artist until he established his own record label. At heart, Llorens is still a creative soul who likes to live life on his own terms with a hefty dose of autonomy.

But science and technology provided enough fascination to finish the degree and, much to his surprise, Llorens discovered

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that he liked the day job quite a lot. He entered the workforce at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory (APL), a nonprofit professional science and engineering organization. “APL is an amazing, mission-focused institution,” he says. Llorens “immediately fell in love with” artificial intelligence research and the application of machine learning to real-world systems

Every day, Llorens brought his “full self” to work, and his career took off. Over time, he took on technology management roles. He became the founding chief of the Intelligent Systems Center, a 100-person lab that focuses on artificial intelligence

(AI), robotics, and neuroscience. Then, he led the development and execution of the first AI strategy for the organization. “I became fascinated not only with the technologies that we were developing but also with the idea of technical thought leadership—creating shared identity and purpose as a way of driving technology strategy across a large, decentralized research organization,” says Llorens. “During my time with Johns Hopkins APL, I had an incredible breadth of experiences. I’ve tried to take calculated risks along the way, to follow directions where I can have the greatest impact, and in turn, to grow personally and professionally.”

As he approached his 20th anniversary in late 2020, an executive recruiter contacted Llorens about an opportunity at Microsoft Research. At first, he was skeptical. But as he learned more about the role, he realized that it offered a unique opportunity to explore technology management in a different kind of organization. “It struck me as a fascinating opportunity to have an impact and to again be in a position to drive shared identity and strategy in a large, decentralized research organization,” he says. “What motivated my move was the opportunity to take the skill set I had developed and use it in a different way while having an exciting new experience.”

Llorens began his tenure at Microsoft Research during a pandemic, but onboarding and meeting his team has in some ways been less difficult because everyone is working remotely and sharing the same challenges. He is still fairly new on the job, but says that although Microsoft is a for-profit company, it is a mission-driven organization. “The mission of Microsoft is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more. I’m the kind of person that cares deeply

about the mission of the company I work for and whether it aligns with my personal values, mission, and goals. And there’s a strong alignment there.”

Of course, research must provide a value proposition for the company. “But I also think there is a strong desire and an intent that the company positions itself so that adding value for the company is aligned with adding value for people and for society,” he says. “That was an exciting proposition to me. That’s what made me feel comfortable taking this leap.”

Llorens is vice president within Microsoft Research and managing director for outreach, an organization responsible for research engagement with outside partners. “I’m excited to bring technical depth and my particular brand of technical leadership to this role. Perhaps even more exciting is the opportunity to empower other technical leaders in our organization to carry the mission forward.”

Llorens did not spend much time entertaining concerns about his move to Microsoft. “The more conversations I had with folks about it, from trusted contacts to the hiring supervisor for this role, it began to feel right. And I trusted that. You know, obviously, you’re thinking deeply about it. But after a while, it just felt like the right move.”

He says job security feels similar at Microsoft as it did at APL. While his previous role benefitted from the stability of the aerospace and defense sector, the role of the outreach organization at Microsoft Research is well established, and Microsoft is certainly a well-established company.

Llorens’ advice for those considering their own career path:

- **Have personal and professional goals and a mission statement of your own.** This serves as a lens through which to evaluate professional opportunities.
- **Trust your instincts,** especially if you are a mid-career professional who has done significant self-introspection and has substantial experience. Take calculated risks to align with pathways towards personal and professional growth.
- **Avoid making decisions based purely on financial advancement.** The ideal choice is the opportunity to increase your impact in a way that’s unique to your background and skill set; financial success will follow.

“The opportunity to experience a new organization with a different culture, a different set of folks, and to be challenged in a new way after taking a leap of faith—that’s been extremely satisfying. And to discover that on the other side of that—as hard as it was to leave all the great colleagues that I had at my previous organization—there are amazing people in this organization who I’m meeting and getting an opportunity to have an impact with.”

Llorens never left his music career behind. He created Wandering Soul Records in 2003 and has produced records of his own and helped other artists build their careers. Llorens’s music is featured in film and TV. He has performed all over the

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world and is a voting member for the Grammys. He notes a connection between his work at APL and Microsoft and the enduring passion for music. “There are many points of interconnection, (such as) the ability to communicate clearly and to articulate a vision. That’s just as important in science and technology as it is in a creative field like music.”



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