

Ballmer: Microsoft is a "Two-and-a-Half Trick Pony"

Written by Marco Attard
06 March 2014

Former CEO Steve Ballmer describes Microsoft as a "two-and-half trick pony" to describe its success despite missing on the mobile trend during a talk at the Oxford Saïd Business School.



"Most tech companies fail," Ballmer says. "They are zero-trick ponies. They never do anything well and they go away. You are a genius in the industry if you are a one-trick pony. You get some innovation right and then spin it. I am very proud of the fact that [Microsoft] has done at least two tricks. Tricks are worth billions and billions and billions of dollars."

What are the "tricks" Ballmer speaks of? The first is the modern Windows-and-Office PC. The second is "bringing microprocessor technology into the data centre," while the Xbox counts as half a trick.

Speaking to a full house, Ballmer admits Microsoft "got a bit behind" when it comes to mobile. "We would have a stronger position in the phone market today if I could re-do the last 10 years," the ex-CEO says before claiming Microsoft still got to pick itself up by building important assets such as Windows Phone, the Surface and Nokia.

Ballmer tells he will remain a presence at Microsoft despite his recent retirement. "I own 4% of Microsoft," he says. "I care a lot about my child, and my investment, and therefore the investment of the other owners of our company."

Asked on the toughest decisions he had to do, Ballmer says he had to hire (and firing) the right people, a task successor Satya Nadella has already taken to heart with the executive departures of ex-Skype CEO Tony Bates and former Marketing Group boss Tami Reller.

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Ballmer fails to comment directly on the leadership changes, instead saying Nadella has “great team who will speak on behalf of the company.”

The hour-long Q&A session concludes with some light moments, including an admission of the infamously boisterous CEO being a "quite shy kid"-- something fixed following a stint as Harvard football team manager-- and a telling of what the best perk of being immensely wealthy and powerful is.

“I can play just about any golf course I want,” the answer goes. "You thought it would be something bigger and more cosmic, but noooooo!"

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