

# 2018 MICROSOFT PRODUCT ROADMAP

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Our annual guide to what major  
Microsoft releases are coming down the  
pipeline, and when.

**By Gladys Rama**

# 2018 MICROSOFT PRODUCT ROADMAP



It's promising to be a busy year for Microsoft watchers, with major version releases on tap for some of the company's most venerable product lines. Here are the biggest milestones to watch out for.

## Windows 10

**"Redstone 4" in March or April, and "Redstone 5" in fall**

Microsoft's semiannual release schedule for Windows 10 is less of a novelty now than it was back in 2015, when Microsoft ushered in the OS under a new "as-a-service" model. Three years and five version updates later, Microsoft is expected to stick to an update model it nailed down last year, with one major update release coming in the first half of the year (usually spring) and another in the second (usually fall).

The first major update, code-named "Redstone 4," has been in the works since August 2017, when the first preview build was made available to Windows Insider testers. Based on each subsequent build's release notes, Redstone 4 looks to be focused largely on feature refinements and usability improvements. There's more support for fonts and languages. The touch keyboard and handwriting features are constantly getting improvements, along with the Edge browser and the Windows Shell. New connectivity and power management enhancements are in the works. And with each build, Microsoft is activating more fluent design components.

There are a couple of brand-new additions, too. In the works for

Redstone 4 is a new "Near Share" feature that lets Windows 10 users exchange files with PC users in their vicinity via Bluetooth. Microsoft is also reinstating the "Timeline" feature, which had originally been slated to appear in last October's Fall Creators Update. Timeline essentially lets Windows 10 users keep a record of their recent activities in any given app, making it easier to resume a task when they pull up that app again. And in a

more recent build, Microsoft debuted a privacy app called "Windows Diagnostic Data Viewer" that gives users and administrators a better handle on the kinds of telemetry data that Microsoft collects from Windows 10 devices.

Redstone 4 will be followed by another release code-named "Redstone 5" in the later part of 2018. This early in the year, it might be too early to forecast exactly what Microsoft has planned for this second release, though there's at least one feature that Microsoft has already bumped from Redstone 4 and into Redstone 5. "Sets," which first cropped up last November in a Redstone 4 build, is a workspace-management interface that revolves around tabs. Microsoft described Sets as a way "to make sure that everything related to your task: relevant webpages, research documents, necessary files and applications, is connected and available to you in one click." Earlier this year, Microsoft announced that it was pulling Sets from future

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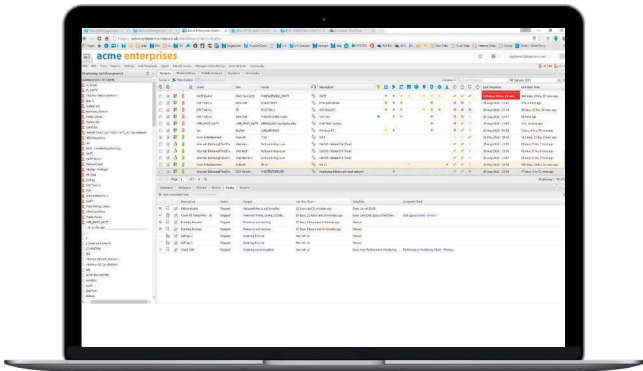
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Redstone 4 builds, though it will restore the feature in a “post-RS4 flight.” Presumably, that means Redstone 5.

For those waiting for future Windows Mobile/Windows Phone developments, however, don’t hold your breath. Microsoft’s mobile efforts have been stagnating for some time now, but a Tweet earlier this year from Senior Program Manager Brandon LeBlanc put another nail in the coffin: “No mobile builds are coming.”

# Teams and Skype for Business

**Teams updates throughout 2018, with Skype for Business Server 2019 coming in the second half of the year**

Barely a year old, Teams is already being positioned by Microsoft as an integral piece of its enterprise collaboration portfolio. The Office 365 chat service launched last March as Microsoft’s answer to the popular collaboration startup, Slack. Since then, Microsoft has taken significant steps to bolster Teams’ enterprise bona fides through regular updates, providing IT management tools, mobile app support, integration with popular third-party apps like Dropbox and Google Drive, and a “guest access” feature that lets users collaborate with members of outside organizations. Microsoft has also been stumping for Teams in the academic space, offering it to schools through the no-cost Office 365 for Education plan, and rolling out UI features designed specifically for students and teachers.

Now, Microsoft plans to advance Teams even further by making it the company’s primary unified communications (UC) offering, effectively replacing Skype for Business. Microsoft first announced the planned transition last September at the Ignite conference, calling the move part of its “new vision for intelligent communications.” That vision entails Teams inheriting Skype’s voice calling and meeting capabilities, as well as AI and machine learning capabilities via the Microsoft Graph, while running on Skype’s infrastructure for the back-end.

Those Skype calling capabilities became available in Teams last December. By the end of Q2 2018, Microsoft also expects to add screen-sharing, third-party video support, voicemail capabilities and transcription/recording services. Other features, including “location-based routing,” “group call pickup,” “call park” and “shared line appearance,” are due by year’s end, according to Microsoft.

Despite its seeming demotion, Skype for Business isn’t going away anytime soon. For one, the Teams-to-Skype transition could take upward of three years, industry watchers estimate. For another, Microsoft has promised to continue supporting Skype for Business Online and Skype for Business Server, with a new server release expected in the second half of 2018. Microsoft is also expected to enable Skype for Business-certified devices to work on Teams sometime in Q2.



## What’s Happening with the Surface Phone?

**Microsoft seems to be laying the foundation for a debut of its long-rumored mobile device sometime this year.**

**Microsoft’s first-party hardware efforts have been historically hit-or-miss. On one hand, Microsoft essentially pioneered the detachable tablet PC category back in 2012 when it launched the original Surface tablet. Major PC manufacturers have since followed suit with their own similarly designed offerings, and now sales of these Surface clones comprise one of the few bright spots in an otherwise stagnant PC market.**

**On the other hand, Microsoft’s forays into smaller form factors haven’t been so successful. The Zune player came and went. The Courier tablet never made it past the spec stage. And as for smartphones, Microsoft and its hardware partners have all but shuttered production on the Lumia device line, while platform development on Windows Phone/Windows Mobile has essentially ground to a halt.**

**Spotty history notwithstanding, Microsoft has shown signs that it’s not done making mobile device hardware yet. The company is widely believed to be working on a Surface Phone -- though whether or not that’s the product’s final name isn’t yet known. What we do know is that Microsoft submitted three patent applications in 2017 (in January, July and December) for a mobile computing device with dual screens and a hinged body—basically, a foldable touchscreen phone. The device is rumored to run a new Windows SKU code-named “Andromeda” that’s based on OneCore, Microsoft’s earlier effort to develop a common Windows code that can run across all form factors. It’s also presumed that the Surface Phone will take advantage of Microsoft’s late-2016 agreement with Qualcomm that enables Microsoft and its hardware partners to run Windows 10 on ARM-based processors.**

**Of course, the Surface Phone is still in the speculation stage. The device was a no-show at January’s Consumer Electronics Show, the annual showcase of new and cutting-edge devices from many PC and device manufacturers. There’s a small chance that Microsoft could shed light on the project in the Mobile World Congress event, which kicks off in late February and is another marquee event for mobile device makers—but then again, it might not. Realistically, many industry watchers don’t expect Microsoft to come forward with its first official announcements of a Surface Phone/Andromeda project until at least late 2018, or even early 2019. When it does, it’ll be interesting to see whether the new device will go the way of the Surface tablet or Windows Phone.**

—G.R.

## Office 2019

**Preview in Q2 2018, with general availability in the second half of the year**

Cloud may be king at Microsoft nowadays, with the Office 365 productivity suite taking much more of a leading role in Microsoft’s product development efforts compared to its on-premises or retail “boxed” counterpart, but Microsoft hasn’t thrown in the towel on its old-school Office software yet. At its Ignite conference, Microsoft announced that it was readying the next version of the on-premises Office product, dubbed “Office 2019,” for public release sometime in the second half of 2018.

In a blog post announcing Office 2019, Microsoft Office General Manager Jared Spataro characterized the upcoming release as an olive branch to organizations that are still wary of making the move to the cloud. “Cloud-powered innovation is a major theme at Ignite this week. But we recognize that moving to the cloud is a journey with many considerations along the way. Office 2019 will be a valuable upgrade for customers who feel that they need to keep some or all of their apps and servers on-premises,” he wrote.

Microsoft expects to roll out a preview of Office 2019 sometime in the second quarter, with general availability in the second half of 2018. New features coming down the pipeline, according to Spataro, include enhancements to the inking feature, improved data analysis capabilities in Excel, expanded PowerPoint animation features and better security. One notable limitation that Microsoft announced early

this year: Office 2019 will not be supported on Windows versions older than Windows 10 (which means the still-popular Windows 7 is out of the running).

## SharePoint Server 2019

**Preview in Q2 2018, with general availability in the second half of the year**

Microsoft also said at Ignite last year that it plans to release the next major version of the on-premises SharePoint Server in the later part of 2018, in tandem with Office 2019. The company hasn’t been too descriptive about what changes and improvements are coming to SharePoint Server 2019, but it did share the following “big bets” in a blog post in October:

- \* “Next-Gen Sync Client support
- \* “Modern UX throughout the product
- \* “Flow/PowerApps integration
- \* “Other SharePoint Online innovations”

Another anticipated—but as-yet unconfirmed—component of SharePoint Server 2019 could be the potential for continued support for InfoPath, Microsoft’s now-deprecated electronic forms software, even though Microsoft is grooming PowerApps and Microsoft Flow to be InfoPath’s successor.

Most of Microsoft’s improvements come first to the SharePoint Online product, with some (but not all) filtering down to the server product via Feature Pack releases. Microsoft’s SharePoint Online roadmap, unveiled in May, promised things like a new SharePoint Admin Center, OneDrive Files on Demand and improved search, but exactly which features SharePoint Server 2019 will get is unclear. Microsoft also launched the SharePoint Framework in 2017 to support client-side customizations using open source tools for SharePoint Online, but also promised to deliver SharePoint Framework support for the server product, too.

## Exchange Server 2019

**Preview in Q2 2018, with general availability in the second half of the year**

Microsoft has been more reticent in describing details about the upcoming Exchange Server release compared to the other 2019-branded server releases that are on tap this year. The company has confirmed that the timing of the Exchange Server 2019 preview and release milestones will mirror those of SharePoint Server 2019, Office 2019 and Skype for Business Server 2019, but beyond those details, Microsoft has been mostly mum. Microsoft

did indicate in a Tweet at September’s Ignite event that the next version release of Exchange will focus on security, compliance, usability and manageability.

## Dynamics 365

**Updates throughout 2018, with a model revamp being implemented in spring**

The last 12 months have proved to be a mixed bag for Dynamics 365, Microsoft’s repackaged CRM and ERP cloud suite that first debuted in late 2016. Last spring, the company began integrating Dynamics 365 with LinkedIn, giving sales teams new ways to tap the vast well of information from the professional social network’s 500 million registered users. Microsoft also launched the first of the “Dynamics 365 AI Solutions“ at Ignite. Dynamics 365 AI Solutions is an initiative that links Dynamics 365 with Microsoft’s various AI, machine learning and enterprise search offerings to solve what Steve Guggenheimer, head of Microsoft’s Developer Platform & Evangelism unit, called “high-value, complex enterprise scenarios.” New Dynamics 365 application components also debuted throughout 2017, including Dynamics 365 for Retail and Dynamics 365 for Talent.

There have been some off notes, too. For instance, the long-promised integration between Dynamics 365 and Cortana, Microsoft’s digital assistant, still hasn’t come to fruition—at least, not in the way that Microsoft had initially planned. In early January 2018, Microsoft announced in a short blog post that it would be “discontinuing the current Cortana integration preview feature that was made available for Dynamics 365,” and instead “focusing on building a new long term intelligent solution experience, which will include Cortana digital assistant integration.”

Microsoft also caused some consternation among partners last fall when it proposed a white-labeling model for Dynamics 365 under the code name “Tenerife.” Microsoft course-corrected a bit after that announcement was met with a general outcry. Instead, the company is now promising a more streamlined Dynamics 365 model that’s slated to take effect in the spring of 2018. The company broadly sketched out its plans in a September blog post: *Microsoft will offer a single collection of Dynamics 365 applications for customers of all sizes and complexity to digitally transform their organizations across all lines of business—Marketing, Sales, Service, Finance, Operations, and Talent—at their own pace. Instead of offering separate editions (e.g. “Business edition” and “Enterprise edition”), we will focus on enabling any organization to choose from different price points for each line of business application, based on the level of capabilities and capacity they need to meet their specific needs.*

As part of the revamp, Microsoft also plans to release two new NAV-optimized Dynamics 365 offerings for partners in the first half of 2018. One of these offerings will be a Dynamics 365 cloud app sold through Cloud Solution Provider (CSP) partners, while the other will be an application development platform for ISVs that qualify for Microsoft’s ISV Cloud Embed program.

## Windows Server and “Project Honolulu”

**Windows Server “semiannual channel” releases in spring and fall, with Project Honolulu also becoming production-ready this year**

Most of the excitement around Windows Server last year—from a roadmap perspective, at least—was generated from Microsoft’s move to transition the product to the same biannual servicing model that Windows 10 and Office ProPlus now use. Under this so-called “semiannual channel” release cadence, Windows Server receives two major feature updates each year—one in the spring and one in the fall. Users enrolled in the Windows Insider program can get early access to each semiannual channel release for testing purposes before it becomes generally available. The first Windows Server (and current) semiannual channel release was “version

1709,” which hit general availability last October. The next semi-annual channel release, dubbed “version 1803,” is currently in the testing phase and should become available in March or April. Microsoft is offering this biannually updated product alongside its more traditional Windows Server 2016 product, where feature updates aren’t as frequent.

An obvious advantage of jumping on the semiannual channel train with Windows Server is the opportunity to get new and major feature changes, but organizations have some restrictions. They can only use the Server Core installation option for production workloads with Windows Server version 1709, or they can use Nano Server, but just for hosting containers. Management of Windows Server version 1709 comes via a remote tool called “Project Honolulu,” a browser-based solution that replaces the earlier Server Management Tools product. Now in technical preview, Project Honolulu is expected to become generally available “sometime in 2018,” according to a Microsoft infographic from Ignite.

In contrast to this new semiannual channel model, Windows Server 2016 continues to follow the more traditional update model. Microsoft has taken to calling this the “long-term servicing channel,” where major updates are available every two to three years (akin to the old “service pack” approach). Given that Windows Server 2016 was commercially released in the fall of 2016, there’s a chance that the first early test builds of Windows Server “v.Next” could see daylight in late 2018.

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## Roadmap Snapshots: Azure and Office 365

Microsoft updates both of these cloud staples at such a quick rate—and at such a granular level—that it’s hard to keep track of all of the changes without getting overwhelmed. To make it easier, we pored through Microsoft’s posted roadmap plans for each product and pulled out a few highlights that are expected to roll out by the end of 2018.

### Azure

*Azure Migrate:* Moves virtual machine applications, including VMware workloads, to Azure datacenter infrastructure.

*Location-Based Services:*

Will let developers and partners create apps that incorporate mapping, geocoding, routing and other geospatial-oriented features.

*Availability Zones:* Physically discrete locations within each Azure region with their own networking and power resources.

*DDoS Protection:* Provides constant monitoring of Azure resources to protect against distributed denial-of-service attacks.

*Container Instances:* Lets users deploy Azure container images as-needed without the need to manage virtual machines.

Check out Microsoft’s complete Azure roadmap.

### Office 365

*Dictation:* Will enable voice-activated transcription for Word, PowerPoint, Outlook and OneNote.

*Stream:* A new tool for recording, uploading and sharing videos.

*Guest Access for Microsoft Planner:* Will allow members of outside organizations to collaborate with users in the Planner app.

*Live Broadcasting for Yammer:* Will let users broadcast townhall-style events on Yammer feeds.

*Usage Analytics:* Gives administrators graphics-based data on how their organization uses Office 365.

Check out Microsoft’s complete Office 365 roadmap.

—G.R.

# BETWEEN THE LINES OF MICROSOFT'S WINDOWS 10 LINGO

What's the difference between "semiannual channel" and "full availability," anyway?

## Microsoft recently left a lot of people scratching their heads

when it announced that Windows 10 update 1709, also known as the "Fall Creators Update," was now in the "full availability" stage. That's not a term that Microsoft has typically used, usually opting to describe Windows 10 update milestones as "semiannual channel" releases instead. "Semiannual channel" is Microsoft's lingo for an OS update that's deemed tested and ready for deployment by organizations.

According to Michael Niehaus, director of product marketing for Microsoft's Windows Commercial group, Microsoft has been trying to arrive at a more uniform messaging, both for consumers and IT pros. In a brief Q&A last month, Niehaus explained that "full availability" is just an attempt to raise awareness. The full availability release is the same thing as the semiannual channel release; Microsoft was just giving advance notice. Niehaus also described Microsoft's approach in trying to get its customers aligned to Windows-as-a-Service cycles with Windows 10. The following are excerpts from his Q&A:

The problem that we've run into is a lot of customers look at that "ready for broad deployment" declaration as their starting point, not as their "take out the shackles" point.

**Q** IS THE FULL AVAILABILITY RELEASE DIFFERENT FROM THE SEMIANNUAL CHANNEL RELEASE OF WINDOWS 10?

**A** They're all kind of interrelated. If you think about how we are updating Windows 10 on consumer noncommercial devices, we go through basically acting as IT for the world at large, starting out slowly, starting out with newer machines, and then over time broadening up to a point where we basically say, "All right, full speed ahead." At this point, let's remove all of the brakes and keep deploying as quickly as we can to get the newest Windows 10 release out to all of the machines that are talking to Windows Update. ... Now, there probably are some exceptions to that where we have specific blocks in place for specific issues, but as far as the broad population goes, we are full speed ahead.

What we've been working toward is aligning that point in time with the commercial point in time—that "ready for broad deployment" declaration—so that when we are confident enough to say we are ready for broad deployment for the consumer audience, we're also making a statement for the commercial audience.

**Q** WHAT'S MICROSOFT TRYING TO SIGNAL?

**A** I think what you're seeing is kind of a ... I wouldn't say a change in messaging, but more of a tweak in the messaging to put more of the focus on the process that we want our commercial customers to go through. We want them to go through a validation process with each new release, starting with targeted pilot deployments, where they validate their apps, infrastructure, devices—just to make sure that everything works well with the new release. And as soon as they finish that validation, then begin deploying broadly. Some customers will finish that process in a couple of months; some customers might take six.

So, to have this kind of arbitrary point where we make this declaration, where we say we think it's ready for broad deployment, who's really going to listen to us, anyway? We really want them to be comfortable themselves with when it's time to begin that broad deployment, and if you're ready before we make that declaration, by all means, go for it. If it takes a little longer after, fine. But we want to make sure that you're going through that motion of doing those targeted pilot deployments to get the validation in place. The problem that we've run into is a lot of customers look at that "ready for broad deployment" declaration as their starting point, not as their "take out the shackles" point. It's not advantageous to them if they just sit back and do nothing until that declaration arrives because we are actively trying to get feedback from these customers so that we can address any issues that we run into before we shift focus to the next release.

—K.M.



# Mark Your Calendars

There are three events in 2018 where you can expect a slew of product announcements from Microsoft.

Microsoft regularly uses each of its annual mega-conferences to reveal key roadmap details. Even if you can't attend in person, it's worth it to bookmark the conference Web sites; Microsoft typically streams all of its marquee keynote talks, as well as releases on-demand videos of many conference sessions.



## //build/

*May 7-9*  
**Seattle, Wash.**  
Build's timing makes it the ideal stage for Microsoft to debut the "Redstone 4" release of Windows 10, the first of two major Windows 10 updates expected this year. Windows Server is also expected to reach a semiannual channel milestone around the same time as Redstone 4, so look for that product to be in the Build spotlight, too.



## Microsoft Inspire

*July 15-19*  
**Las Vegas, Nev.**  
Microsoft may have rebranded its Worldwide Partner Conference (WPC) to Inspire but the focus is still very partner-centric; any programmatic changes to Microsoft's various partner efforts will definitely be in the spotlight at keynotes. In addition, look for announcements related to Office 365, Dynamics 365 and Azure—products that Microsoft is increasingly urging its partners to sell around. Inspire is also the most fitting event for Microsoft to announce organizational changes, given its timing (toward the end of its fiscal year).



## Microsoft Ignite

*Sept. 24-28*  
**Orlando, Fla.**  
The developer- and IT-focused conference was the site of several major product announcements last year, and the same should hold true for the 2018 installment. Typically the last big Microsoft conference of the calendar year, Ignite marks a good opportunity for Microsoft to announce follow-ups to product news from earlier conferences, as well as to set the tone for the 2019 roadmap. Azure, SQL Server and Windows Server are likely to take center stage at most of the keynotes and sessions.

—G.R.

# Roadmap Timeline

Q1

Q2

Redstone 4

Windows Server  
semiannual release

Dynamics 365 revamp

SharePoint Server 2019  
preview

Exchange Server 2019  
preview

Teams-to-Skype update

Q3

Q4

Exchange Server 2019

Redstone 4

Windows Server  
semiannual release

Skype for Business  
Server 2019

Office 2019

SharePoint Server 2019

Teams-to-Skype update