Source: Alastair Otter, MyBroadband.co.za

There are a couple of moments in Microsoft's long history that will be remembered as when the company changed forever. One of those is, naturally, when Bill Gates handed over the reins. The other will be the day that Ray Ozzie, Microsoft's chief software architect, leaves the building.

Ozzie was widely regarded as a potential successor to Steve Ballmer as CEO, a position held by only one other person: Bill Gates. But earlier this week, in a distinctly low-key announcement, Ballmer said that Ozzie was moving on . No specific reasons were given for Ozzie's move, nor details on what he will do next.

In many ways Ozzie's departure is a key moment for Microsoft, not just because of his potential as the next chief executive, but also because of the role he played in shaping Microsoft's current cloud strategy.

It was Ozzie that pushed Microsoft forward into the cloud, at a time when they most needed it. Microsoft Azure and corporate services hosted in Microsoft's datacentres were the work of Ozzie. It was, and still is, the right direction for a company that, until recently, relied primarily on desktop software sales for much of its revenue.

In retrospect, however, Ozzie may well be judged badly for not having pushed the company forward fast enough to make the transition required.

Innovator

Ozzie (55) is widely respected in the software community, not just for his role at Microsoft but for his pre-Microsoft work as well. He counts among his credits a creator role in the development of the original Lotus Notes. The company he founded, Iris Associates, which

created the product that was to be known as Lotus Notes, was acquired first by Lotus and then later by IBM.

Ozzie worked at IBM for a few years before moving on to form Groove Networks, which was acquired by Microsoft in 2005, and is now known as Microsoft Sharepoint Workspaces. Ozzie came with the company and became one of Microsoft's three chief technical officers.

It was early on in his career at Microsoft that Ozzie began to advocate the move into the cloud , saying that the Internet was going to be hugely disruptive and that Microsoft had to move sooner rather than later.

He succeeded Bill Gates as chief software architect in June 2006.

Under Ozzie's leadership Microsoft has built its Azure product, a major step in the cloud direction for the company. But Azure has taken many years to reach reality and there is a sense that there was resistance within Microsoft to this new direction. Now that Ozzie is leaving could there be a rapid slowdown in development?

Ozzie leaving Microsoft is a big blow for the company. But even more telling is that in Ballmer's memo
he says that he won't be looking for a replacement for Ozzie as the chief software architect. At a time when Microsoft is battling more competitors than ever this could well turn out to be a significant decision.