Amazon is reportedly way behind on its new Alexa

In the voice assistant arms race, the frontrunner may be about to finish last. On the heels of Apple revealing a new "Apple Intelligence"-powered Siri at its WWDC 2024 conference, a new report from *Fortune* indicates that Amazon's Alexa — arguably the most capable of the current voice assistants — is struggling with its own generative AI makeover:

> *… none of the sources Fortune spoke with believe Alexa is close to accomplishing Amazon's mission of being "the world's best personal assistant," let alone Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' vision of creating a real-life version of the helpful Star Trek computer. Instead, Amazon's Alexa runs the risk of becoming a digital relic with a cautionary tale— that of a potentially game-changing technology that got stuck playing the wrong game.*

The lengthy report (which is paywalled but syndicated in full at Yahoo Finance) draws from interviews with over a dozen former employees, who relayed stories of organizational dysfunction combined with technological challenges that led the company to blow its shot to dominate AI. *Fortune* reports that Amazon responded to these claims saying the details provided by employees were dated and didn't reflect the current state of the Alexa LLM.

However, it seems things aren't going smoothly for the new souped-up Alexa. The more conversational, contextually aware voice assistant the company demoed at its fall hardware event last year still hasn't rolled out beyond a limited preview. And, according to *Fortune's* reporting, while Amazon may

eventually launch a better LLM-based Alexa, it won't be anywhere close to what it could have been.

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Many of the former employees interviewed by *Fortune* said they left in part because they believed the new Alexa would never be ready or would already be overtaken by competitors if and when it did launch. Its biggest weakness, compared to companies like OpenAI and its headline-grabbing ChatGPT, is that it has to "navigate an existing tech stack and defend an existing feature set," according to *Fortune*.

Basically, the old Alexa is getting in the way of the new Alexa. *Fortune*'s sources say Amazon has not yet figured out how to combine what Alexa can do now with the capabilities it touted for the new Alexa last fall – a better, smarter, more conversational assistant. One employee told *Fortune* that the message at the company after the demo event was that "we need to basically burn the bridge with the old Alexa AI model and pivot to only working on the new one."

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According to *Fortune*, Amazon has grappled with getting its Alexa LLM to consistently and effectively make API calls, which is how the current Alexa interacts with your other stuff, such as third-party smart home devices and music services. It's also struggled to train the LLM to understand natural language, as while it has millions of devices in the wild, its customers have trained themselves to speak in "Alexa language" and don't interact conversationally with the device.

Another reported hurdle has been Amazon's decentralized

organizational structure, in which the thousands of people working on Alexa are siloed into several teams, causing friction and frustration. Mihail Eric, a research scientist who left the company in 2021, wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that he blames the company's org chart and insistence research to be tied to a product launch for the failure of his work on Alexa – work he claims that, "if done correctly, could have been the genesis of an Amazon ChatGPT (well before ChatGPT was released)."

For its part, Amazon says it remains committed to its voice assistant's growth. "Our vision for Alexa remains the same—to build the world's best personal assistant," Amazon's Kristy Schmidt told *The Verge* in response to *Fortune's* article. "Generative AI offers a huge opportunity to make Alexa even better for our customers. We have already integrated generative AI into different components of Alexa, and are working hard on implementation at scale – in the over half a billion ambient, Alexa-enabled devices already in homes around the world – to enable even more proactive, personal, and trusted assistance for our customers. We are excited about what we're building and look forward to delivering it for our customers."

Whatever missteps are in its past, it's clear Amazon is racing to catch up. The former head of devices and services, Dave Limp, left shortly after that fall event. His replacement – Panos Panay, the former chief product officer at Microsoft – has been in place for a little over six months. Fall 2024 is right around the corner. Let's see if Amazon can deliver on any of its promises.

https://www.theverge.com/2024/6/13/24177664/amazon-llm-alexa-delayed-fortune