Google Dissolves AI Advisory Board Amid Employee Protest



They were protesting the appointment of conservative think tank president Kay Cole James to the advisory council over her alleged ‘anti-trans, anti-LGBTQ’ views.

April 5, 2019 3 min read

This story originally appeared on PCMag

The controversy over Google naming a conservative thinker and alleged “anti-trans, anti-LGBT” supporter to a company advisory board has ended with the whole project scrapped.

On Thursday, the tech giant announced it had dissolved the Advanced Technology External Advisory Council, which was intended to bring outside experts together to help inform Google’s views on developing artificial intelligence.

However, the company decided to end the whole project after a group of Google employees began to protest the appointment of conservative think tank president Kay Cole James to the council. More than 2,300 Google staffers have now signed a letter calling for her removal over claims James is "vocally anti-trans, anti-LGBTQ and anti-immigrant."

"It's become clear that in the current environment, ATEAC (the advisory council) can't function as we wanted," Google told PCMag in an email. "So we're ending the council and going back to the drawing board. We'll continue to be responsible in our work on the important issues that AI raises, and will find different ways of getting outside opinions on these topics."

> *ATEAC is over, and we did this together. So many people (over 2300 Googlers & over 300 supporters from industry, academia and civil society) answered the call to #StandAgainstTransphobia. We thank you for your support & unwillingness to compromise on hate.https://t.co/NHVSFUkqsf*
>
> *— Googlers Against Transphobia (@EthicalGooglers) April 4, 2019*

Google staffers against James' appointment welcomed the news. "We look forward to the outcome of Google 'going back to the drawing board,' as put in their statement, knowing they heard us and know they, too, need to #StandAgainstTransphobia," the group behind the protest letter said in a tweet.

The advisory council was shut down after it was only announced over a week ago. Ironically, the whole undertaking was probably designed to generate some good press for the company's AI development efforts, amid concerns the same technologies will one day disrupt society, take away jobs, and discriminate against certain ethnic groups.

But Google may have had no choice but to kill the project. One of the members named to the board, privacy researcher

Alessandro Acquisti, immediately bailed on the effort. On Wednesday, another board member, philosopher Luciano Floridi, said he hoped James would eventually bow to the pressure and resign on her own.

“I am appalled that someone who is so wrong about so many things concerning human and civil rights may be given even more credibility and influence than she already enjoys, by advising such an important company on such a crucial topic like the ethics of AI,” Floridi wrote in a Facebook post.

So far, James and her think tank, the Heritage Foundation, haven’t responded to the controversy. But the whole incident probably won’t sit well among Republicans at a time when Silicon Valley has been accused of holding anti-conservative views.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/331812