Google is combining its Android and hardware teams — and it's all about AI

AI is taking over at Google, and the company is changing in big ways to try to make it happen even faster. Google CEO Sundar Pichai announced substantial internal reorganizations on Thursday, including the creation of a new team called "Platforms and Devices" that will oversee all of Google's Pixel products, all of Android, Chrome, ChromeOS, Photos, and more. The team will be run by Rick Osterloh, who was previously the SVP of devices and services, overseeing all of Google's hardware efforts. Hiroshi Lockheimer, the longtime head of Android, Chrome, and ChromeOS, will be taking on other projects inside of Google and Alphabet.

This is a huge change for Google, and it likely won't be the last one. There's only one reason for all of it, Osterloh says: AI. "This is not a secret, right?" he says. Consolidating teams "helps us to be able to do full-stack innovation when that's necessary," Osterloh says. He uses the example of the Pixel camera: "You had to have deep knowledge of the hardware systems, from the sensors to the ISPs, to all layers of the software stack. And, at the time, all the early HDR and ML models that were doing camera processing… and I think that hardware / software / AI integration really showed how AI could totally transform a user experience. That was important. And it's even more true today."

Osterloh offers GPUs as another example: Google has poured resources into its Tensor products to keep up with Nvidia and others, and keeping hardware and software close together and

aware of each other’s work makes it easier to improve quickly. This is the sort of thing you can try to do with two teams, he says, but when it’s a single team with a single leader and a single goal, everything can just be faster.

As we talk, Osterloh and Lockheimer are seated in Lockheimer’s office, talking to me on Google Meet. The two men have been friends and colleagues for decades and swear up and down that this change is not the result of some internal power struggle. (Even when I bring it up as a joke, they both loudly and quickly shoot me down.) They’ve been talking with Pichai about making this shift for more than two years, Lockheimer says, and now finally felt like the right time.

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By combining teams, Osterloh says, Google can now move much faster to integrate AI across all of its products. “We have a really quick way to get the latest research, the latest models, from DeepMind,” he says, noting also that Jay Yagnik, a longtime researcher and engineer in Google’s AI team, is now coming over to Osterloh’s team, in part to facilitate that interaction. One way to look at these changes is to simplify the pipeline: there’s now a team that does AI research and a team that does AI products. “A lot of times,” Osterloh continues, “that will mean figuring out how we build a new application based on the output of our latest model, and being able to move people around quickly to do that.” Google, which in many ways was caught flat-footed by the AI revolution, knows it needs to do everything possible to move as fast as possible.

For years, Google has said it studiously separates its own hardware efforts from its work with the broader Android ecosystem in order to not privilege its own devices or

complicate relationships with companies like Samsung. Over the last couple of years, though, that relationship has shifted: Google's hardware team has sought to both build great devices and show the rest of the Android world where things can go.

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Osterloh bristles when I suggest that this reorg might signal the end of the firewall between Pixel and Android, though. "We have always kept distinct teams between Android and our ecosystem partners, and our first-party hardware efforts," he says. Sameer Samat, who has until now helped run Android under Lockheimer, will now be the president of the Android ecosystem. Samat has all those ecosystem relationships, Lockheimer says, and that will all be fine. And Cristiano Amon, the CEO of Qualcomm and one of the first people briefed on this change, said in a statement that "I look forward to working with Rick to deliver leading Android experiences powered by Snapdragon not only in mobile but across Auto, XR and Compute."

At the same time, it's clear that Google is pressing harder into its role as the tip of the spear for Android — especially as AI takes over the operating system. Google is already adding its Gemini model and chatbot everywhere it can think of, has been adding AI features to the Pixel's camera for the last two years, and clearly has big plans for how AI can change the way you use your phone — and for that matter, your devices running Android Auto, Wear OS, ChromeOS, and everything else.

Changes like this seem to be part of an ongoing cycle at Google, a company that famously allows for a sprawling, largely autonomous working environment — which is how you get Gmail but also a thousand messaging apps and under-integrated products — and then occasionally makes an effort to

consolidate around bigger initiatives and improving profits. “More wood behind fewer arrows,” co-founder Larry Page called it in 2011, when the big initiative of the day was Google Plus. Google will surely be hoping its all in push on AI will turn out better.

In a way, it seems like this has been Osterloh’s path since he first joined Google in 2016. Back then, Google Assistant was all the rage, and Pichai was telling anyone who would listen that he was betting the company on the idea of “ambient computing” and a virtual assistant that would create “a personal Google” and help you get more done in your life. Osterloh’s job was to build the homes for Google Assistant: phones, speakers, VR headsets, laptops, smartwatches, and more. Osterloh says he’s known since his first days that he was ultimately working on AI and that hardware would be much more important to an AI-first Google than a search-first one. “And the technology has evolved so much, to the point where it’s actually really ready.”

Going forward, Osterloh says his priorities haven’t changed, though his day-to-day meeting cadence certainly will. In general, he says, the plan is just to make everything *faster.* To update Google’s devices more often as AI models improve. To nimbly launch new products, rather than mire everything in process and bureaucracy. “We can’t airdrop a new SOC into existing products,” Osterloh says. “But we can design for longevity, and then update our software frequently.”

Google is in the middle of attempting to totally reinvent itself around AI, a technology Pichai himself has said could be as important as fire. Every app Google owns and every platform it administers is going to be changed by Gemini. For that to work, Google itself — the company, its structure, its very culture — is going to change. It’s not always going to be easy, but there’s clearly no time to waste.

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