

Google's AI panic forces merger of rival divisions, DeepMind and Brain

Enlarge / Google DeepMind will presumably be getting a rainbow logo, but for now here's the old DeepMind logo.

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Google's 'Code Red' panic over the rise of ChatGPT and its failure to excite the world with its AI products is resulting in a big merger. Alphabet's two big AI teams, the independent Alphabet company DeepMind and the "Google Brain" AI division, are merging to form "Google DeepMind." Google and DeepMind have both released blog posts. Google CEO Sundar Pichai says merging the two units will "help us build more capable systems more safely and responsibly."

DeepMind was a UK AI research lab that Google acquired in 2014. Since then it has lived as an independent Alphabet company, separate from Google, with CEO Demis Hassabis. DeepMind most famously captured the world's attention around 2017 when it built AlphaGo, a computer taught to play the ancient Chinese game of *Go*. This was previously thought to be an impossible task for computers due to the incredible number (10^{360}) of moves required to play the game. Since then, the company has tackled protein folding, video games like *Starcraft II*, the Wavenet voice synthesis system,

and matrix multiplication.

The Google Brain division was run by Jeff Dean. This group has kept a much lower profile by only doing research and making incremental improvements to existing Google products. The Brain team invented and open-sourced the “Transformer” neural network architecture that led to chatbots like ChatGPT. (The “GPT” in “ChatGPT” stands for “Generative Pre-trained Transformer”.)

DeepMind’s leader, Hassabis, will now be CEO of the new Google DeepMind, and Dean, the leader of Google’s AI division, will get the title of “chief scientist” at Google DeepMind, and while that might sound like he works under the Google DeepMind CEO, a CNBC report, which has Google’s internal memo on the change, says Dean will report to Pichai.

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If that dual-leadership arrangement sounds politically fraught, it is! A March report from The Information detailed that, in the wake of the ChatGPT “code red,” the Google Brain team and DeepMind were forced to “pause grudges” built up from “years of intense rivalry” and work together. The report says the two groups “have seldom collaborated or shared computer code with one another” but now would be jointly building “Gemini,” a recently started project that represents a second swing at a ChatGPT competitor, after Google Bard. The Information described that single project as a “forced marriage,” and now, a month later, the two groups are fully merging.

A big concern of Google’s Code Red panic is the company’s perceived lack of impact in the AI space. OpenAI’s ChatGPT and its Bing partnership both put AI front and center as the primary product, and that gives the impression that Google’s AI technology has been left in the dust. That’s a big problem for the stock market, which these days seems to be Google’s primary focus. DeepMind has been great at generating publicity

with research projects like AlphaGo, which generated a ton of tech news headlines and a glitzy livestreamed “Humanity versus computers” Go series.

DeepMind doesn’t sell any products, though, and only bills Google for internal work. All of Google’s AI productization work at DeepMind and Google Brain has treated AI as a background helper that does things like making searches slightly better or bringing small improvements to translation. The Google Assistant, which has been deprioritized, has probably been the only exception. In the DeepMind blog post, Hassabis seems to indicate that this will change, saying the new Google DeepMind wants to “create the next generation of AI breakthroughs and products across Google and Alphabet, and to do this in a bold and responsible way.”

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