Microsoft’s new era of AI PCs will need a Copilot key, says Intel

Intel, Microsoft, Qualcomm, and AMD have all been pushing the idea of an “AI PC” for months now as we head toward more AI-powered features in Windows. While we’re still waiting to hear the finer details from Microsoft on its big plans for AI in Windows, Intel has started sharing Microsoft’s requirements for OEMs to build an AI PC — and one of the main ones is that an AI PC must have Microsoft’s Copilot key.

Microsoft wants its OEM partners to provide a combination of hardware and software for its idea of an AI PC. That includes a system that comes with a Neural Processing Unit (NPU), the latest CPUs and GPUs, and access to Copilot. It will also need to have the new Copilot key that Microsoft announced earlier this year.

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This requirement means that some laptops, like Asus’ new ROG Zephyrus, have already shipped with Intel’s new Core Ultra chips and aren’t technically AI PCs in the eyes of Microsoft’s strict requirements because they don’t have a Copilot key. But they’re still AI PCs in Intel’s eyes.

“Our joint aligned definition, Intel and Microsoft, we’ve aligned on Core Ultra, Copilot, and Copilot key,” explains Todd Lewellen, head of the PC ecosystem at Intel, in a press briefing with *The Verge*. “From an Intel perspective our AI PC

has Core Ultra and it has an integrated NPU because it is unlocking all kinds of new capabilities and functions in the AI space. We have great alignment with Microsoft, but there are going to be some systems out there that may not have the physical key on it but it does have our integrated NPU.”

I’m sure both Intel and Microsoft are hoping OEMs will simply adhere to Microsoft’s requirements and add the Copilot key over time, and it’s possible that Asus’ machines simply shipped before Microsoft was ready with its new requirements. Dell literally put a Copilot sticker on its keyboards at CES earlier this year, which suggests Microsoft’s Copilot key could have been a late addition to its CES plans.

It’s still not clear what OEMs will get in return for adhering to Microsoft’s own AI PC definition, though. I reached out to Microsoft to comment on its requirements, but the company isn’t discussing its AI PC plans yet. Microsoft did put the AI PC branding on its latest Surface Pro 10 and Surface Laptop 6 devices for businesses earlier this month, but whether there will be stickers for laptops or additional marketing budgets for OEMs isn’t clear yet.

Beyond the AI PC requirements, Intel is also expanding its AI PC acceleration program that it launched in October. It’s designed to get software developers interested in AI-powered features for their apps, and it’s now being expanded to reach smaller developers through an AI PC developer program.

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Intel will host events throughout the year with hands-on time to help developers get used to utilizing AI models and tools, and there’s even an AI PC hardware development kit that’s essentially an ASUS NUC Pro 14 loaded up with preinstalled software, drivers, and dev tools.

Hopefully this focus on developers will translate into many more apps utilizing this new NPU hardware. At the moment, there aren’t many apps that do, with Microsoft’s Windows Studio Effects to blur out backgrounds on video calls and maintain eye contact the main use of the NPU inside Windows today.

Intel is also targeting hardware vendors with this AI PC acceleration program, trying to get them to optimize and enable their hardware for Intel’s AI PCs. It’s essentially a race for Intel to get as many software and hardware developers on its side to optimize apps and hardware as these AI PCs roll out. The race is against Qualcomm this year, which is about to launch a round of Snapdragon X Elite laptops that could offer a big performance leap for Windows on Arm.

Google is even releasing an optimized version of its Chrome browser for Windows on Arm this week, in a significant change of heart that will greatly improve the experience for Chrome users on Qualcomm-powered Windows laptops. Microsoft is also rumored to be moving solely to Arm for its consumer versions of the Surface Pro 10 and Surface Laptop 6. Microsoft will be holding an AI and Surface event on May 20th, where CEO Satya Nadella will outline the company’s vision for AI hardware and software.

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