

Report: Halo's final survival attempts made even Amazon's workers concerned

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Amazon is discontinuing its Halo project, including the Band and View fitness trackers and the Rise bedside sleep tracker, making the devices useless on August 1. Amid the company's largest-ever wave of layoffs and reports that even the popular Alexa voice assistant has failed to bring in money, this wasn't surprising. It's still sad, though, to realize that countless devices will become obsolete and at huge risk of becoming e-waste (despite Amazon telling customers to recycle devices through its recycling programs, all costs covered).

But perhaps it's just as well, because a report from The Verge today claims to peer into Halo's last attempts at survival. And the Halo that Amazon reportedly tried to realize is one we're happy not to encounter.

Halo reportedly creeped out its own creators

Reported plans for Halo could have pushed products to gather more data on how users exercise in order to provide virtual rewards, to offer recommendations, and to track performance. However, the features Amazon is said to have explored sound potentially invasive, collecting uniquely personal data.

According to The Verge, Amazon was working on updating the Halo app to use a smartphone's camera and computer vision to track user workouts and progress.

"Trainers will lead these workouts, but unlike traditional Halo Fitness workouts, check-ins are computer vision-enabled and add form tracking, rep counting, and detailed performance metrics in the post-workout summary," an internal document said.

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The Verge reported that "even Amazon's own employees expressed pause over having a camera analyzing them and sharing data with Amazon during workout routines."

Besides companies with similar concepts, like ArtiFit and Alfa AI, which The Verge noted, Peloton is a well-known example of a company selling fitness gadgets that use computer vision. But trusting a conglomerate like Amazon with that sort of power might not sit right with many. Customers are increasingly wary of how tech giants like Amazon use their personal data. Even though Amazon says it doesn't sell customer data to third parties, it uses information from its products, like Alexa, for targeted advertising. Its Halo Rise, View, and Band have all been criticized for more data privacy concerns than have a Peloton Bike or Tread, for example.

Meanwhile, Amazon reportedly tried hard to use Halo user data to further the brand. The Verge quoted an unnamed source as saying:

The amount of data Amazon collected on [Halo] customers is incredible. While we never looked at individual user data, we could see the percent of folks who used each aspect of the product and created cohorts to target based on usage. We also closely tracked competitor sales on Amazon to make product decisions.

Also, Amazon tried using Alexa to identify people interested in fitness and hit them with Halo ads. Your Alexa request didn't need to be Halo-specific; a general query like "what's a good yoga mat?" could land you in Halo's ad crosshairs, The Verge said.

Amazon hoped to use this tech to partner with company health care plans.

"We are exploring Halo as an employee benefit for Amazon, we will engage employers to deliver Donna [the reported codename for the Halo AI Trainer] as a 'perk' they can offer to employees. As we build evidence of Donna's impact, we will begin collaboration discussions with health plans and self-insured employers to offer Donna as a covered benefit going into 2024 plan years," an internal document said, according to The Verge.

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