The Google Assistant is getting a big reboot around generative AI

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Axios has more details about Google's plan to reboot the Google Assistant into something based around generative AI. As was previously reported, the Google Assistant team is getting reorganized around Google's new LLM (large language model) ChatGPT-clone, Google Bard. Axios was given a copy of an email to employees explaining their new marching orders and says that "dozens" of people are being laid off out of the "thousands" that work on the Google Assistant.

The email, written by Google VP Peeyush Ranjan and Director of Product Duke Dukellis, tells the team to "explore what a supercharged Assistant, powered by the latest LLM technology, would look like." The two execs say they've "heard people's strong desire for assistive, conversational technology that can improve their lives."

It's hard to make heads or tails of Google's jargon-filled internal communications, but it sounds like a lot of changes are happening. Whatever the "Services and Surface teams" are in the Google Assistant are being merged, while the mobile team will now "operate separately" from that group (it sounds like this is all client app work?). The "NLP" (we're assuming that's "Natural Language Processing") team is getting new leadership, while a "Speech" team "will continue supporting

Assistant and other products.”

For now, the email says: “We remain deeply committed to Assistant and we are optimistic about its bright future ahead.” “Deeply committed” is usually not where you want to be in Google doublespeak land. Google Stadia VP Phil Harrison said Google was “deeply committed to gaming” after shutting down Stadia and then he left the company a few months later. Google AI lead Jeff Deen said the company was “deeply committed” to AI Ethics after firing researcher Timnit Gebru, and today members of the ethics team say they were shut out of high-priority launches like Google Bard. Google PR just recently said the company was “deeply committed to Waze’s unique brand” on the same day it stripped the division of independent company status and merged it with Google Maps.

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Google Assistant’s version of “deeply committed” has so far involved stopping all hardware releases, with the last Assistant device launching 2.5 years ago in March 2021. The Pixel Tablet sure looks like it started life as a Google Assistant smart display, thanks to it looking identical to a Nest Hub, but never actually made it to market as a new device in that lineup. The Fuchsia OS team had been taking over Google Assistant smart display software, but 9to5Google reports that work on doing the same for speakers has stopped. Google also reportedly told employees it will “invest less” in the Google Assistant on third-party devices, including cars. Whatever the Google Assistant pivot ends up being, it looks like a big pivot.

What does the “Google Assistant” mean to you?

It’s unclear exactly how a language model would help a voice assistant. A language model is for generating large blocks of text, while a voice assistant is about listening to voice

commands, understanding them, and then performing some kind of action. The primary complaint about the Google Assistant is that voice recognition seemingly gets worse with every passing day, with replies taking longer and exhibiting more bugs, as core features like voice authentication and multi-user support quietly disappear. A language model is about text, and mixing up ChatGPT and a voice assistant wouldn't help one bit with the core voice-to-text input. The Assistant is actually fine when it comes to processing correctly recognized voice commands; it's just a question of getting the voice part right.

I'm sure everyone uses a voice assistant differently, but I generally ask it to *do* something, and I want that task done quickly and quietly—turn off the lights, set a timer, remind me to do something, add a thing to my shipping list, that sort of thing. In the rare case I ask it an open-ended "Google Search" question, the short infobox responses are great. The idea of a voice assistant that replies by reading paragraphs and paragraphs of generated text in the usual stilted robot voice sounds annoying. The idea of this being a long, "conversational" interaction is definitely not how I've used the Assistant in the past. Theoretically, a language model could help with parsing the intent of strangely worded commands, but today that's not a real problem with most voice assistants. If you plainly say what you want, they can understand and perform the task pretty well.

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I think the core problem here is that Google Assistant doesn't make any money, so something has to change. The hardware is sold at cost, and with no ads or subscriptions, the Assistant generates no revenue, while the cloud processing costs just keep piling up. Google and Amazon's Alexa started this voice assistant war and are now in the same boat: products that were loss leaders years ago never discovered a revenue path and have run out of runway. Seven-ish years ago, both products

were created when voice assistants were the hot new thing, and now that AI language models are the hot new thing, pivoting buys them more time as loss leaders to hope to someday find a revenue stream.

That’s actually still the billion-dollar question: How will a voice assistant make money? How does adding a language model help it make money? It might help that one of the authors of the letter, Dukellis, only joined the Assistant team in November 2022 and, before that, spent six years as the director of product management for Google’s publisher-facing ad products.

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