‘What’s an ads guy doing running Google search?’



Prabhakar Raghavan, Google’s new head of Search and Assistant.
A number of SEOs on Twitter reacted to yesterday’s news that Prabhakar Raghavan was taking over Search and Assistant from Ben Gomes with uncertainty or confusion. This may reflect respect for Gomes and unfamiliarity with Raghavan’s background.

Gomes’ move is voluntary, and the company says he will remain involved as a technical advisor to search in addition to his new role leading Google Education initiatives.

Unfamiliar with Raghavan’s history. Many people probably saw short pieces like this announcing the fact of the changes without going into much depth about Raghavan’s long history and deep knowledge of search. He’s described simply as the executive “who led advertising product since 2018.”

Yet given Raghavan’s history, running Search is more consistent with his career and background than Ads and

Commerce, although Ads will still report in to him. As Google CEO Sundar Pichai pointed out in his internal email to Google employees:

> *For Prabhakar, this new role brings his experience with search full circle. He's spent more than two decades obsessing over algorithms and ranking, and his association with Google Search predates … Google. He published a foundational text on search and then went on to lead search teams at IBM and Yahoo. He joined Google in 2012, and – prior to his current role – worked with teams in Research, Geo, and Google Apps. A member of the National Academy of Engineering, Prabhakar is one of the most respected engineering minds in our field. His experience working across so many of our product areas gives him the perfect lens to spot the seams between them.*

35 years of technical publications. Starting in roughly 1986, Raghavan has produced a vast 35-year archive of technical papers on search and related topics. He's also the author of at least two significant search-related texts: Randomized Algorithms (1995) and Introduction to Information Retrieval (2008). The former is one of the seminal texts in the field, to which Pichai referred in his note to Google employees.

I've met Raghavan in person several times during the almost 20 years I've been writing about internet and search marketing. While my knowledge of search is mostly non-technical, I've always been impressed by his capacity to think and talk strategically about search as a social tool and daily consumer utility and not just "geek out" on the under-the-hood technology.

Few as qualified. He also impressed me as someone who fully understood the connection between the internet and the physical world, and was trying to bring the two closer together at Yahoo Research Labs. This is of course something

we all take for granted today: local search/near-me search.

I can’t speak to his skill as a manager of people, but there’s no question that when it comes to a deep understanding of search there are few people in the world that match Raghavan’s knowledge and qualifications.

Why we care. Raghavan is a person of humility who takes over this key function at Google — he’s arguably the second most important executive after CEO Sundar Pichai — at a time when Google is prospering but facing a host of serious challenges, from activist employees and European tax collectors to American state attorneys general who want to break the company up.

About The Author



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