

TECH

Google execs tell employees in testy all-hands meeting that Bard A.I. isn't just about search

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KEY POINTS

- After rolling out Bard as an AI service largely for search, Google executives appear to be pivoting away from that focus without providing specific use cases.
- In an all-hands meeting Thursday, execs tried to draw distinctions between Bard's capabilities and search.
- "I just want to be very clear: Bard is not search," said Jack Krawczyk, the product lead for Bard, in response to an employee's written question.

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Sundar Pichai, chief executive officer of Google Inc., speaks during the Google I/O Developers Conference in Mountain View, California, U.S., on Tuesday, May 8, 2018.

David Paul Morris / Bloomberg / Getty Images

[Google](#) executives are continuing to deal with the fallout from last month's [fumbled](#) announcement of the company's artificial intelligence engine called Bard, but their efforts to clean up the mess are causing further confusion among the workforce.

In an all-hands meeting on Thursday, executives answered questions from Dory, the company's internal forum, with most of the top-rated issues related to the priorities around Bard, according to audio obtained by CNBC. It's the first companywide meeting since [Google](#) employees criticized leadership, most notably CEO [Sundar Pichai](#), for the way it handled the announcement of [Bard](#), Google's ChatGPT competitor.

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Wall Street has punished Google parent Alphabet for the Bard rollout, pushing the stock lower on concern that the company's core search engine is at risk of getting displaced as consumers eventually turn to AI-powered responses that allow for more conversational and creative answers. Staffers called Google's initial public presentation "rushed," "botched" and "un-Googley."

Jack Krawczyk, the product lead for Bard, made his all-hands debut on Thursday, and answered the following question from Dory, which was viewed by CNBC.

"Bard and ChatGPT are large language models, not knowledge models. They are great at generating human-sounding text, they are not good at ensuring their text is fact-based. Why do we think the big first application should be Search, which at its heart is about finding true information?"

Krawczyk responded by immediately saying, "I just want to be very clear: Bard is not search."

"It's an experiment that's a collaborative AI service that we talked about," Krawczyk said. "The magic that we're finding in using the product is really around being this creative companion to helping you be the sparkplug for imagination, explore your curiosity, etc."

But Krawczyk was quick to follow up by saying, "we can't stop users from trying to use it like search."

He said Google is still catering to people who want to use it for search, indicating that the company has built a new feature for internal use called "Search It."

"We're going to be trying to get better at generating the queries associated there, as well as relaying to users our confidence," Krawczyk said. He added that users will see a tab that says "view other drafts," which would point people away from search-like results.

"But as you want to get into more of the search-oriented journeys, we already have a product for that — it's called search," he said.

The attempt to separate Bard from search appeared to signify a pivot in the initial strategy, based on what employees told CNBC and on internal memes that circulated in recent weeks. In the lead up to the Bard announcement, Google executives repeatedly said the technology it was developing internally could integrate with search.

Several Google employees, who asked not to be named because they weren't authorized to speak on the matter, told CNBC that the inconsistent answers from executives has led to greater confusion.

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Elizabeth Reid, vice president of engineering for search, echoed Krawczyk's comments on Thursday, focusing on the company's extensive use of large language models (LLMs).

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“As Jack said, Bard is really separate from search,” Reid said. “We do have a pretty long history of bringing LLMs into search,” she said, citing models named Bert and Mum.

But while the company experiments with LLMs, it wants to “keep the heart of what search is,” Reid said.

In Google’s announcement last month, it mentioned search several times.

“We’re working to bring these latest AI advancements into our products, starting with Search,” the company said in [a blog post](#).

That same week, at a search event in Paris, Google search boss Prabhakar Raghavan [unveiled](#) some fresh examples of how Bard could be used. And following the announcement, company leaders [urged](#) all employees to help by spending a few hours testing Bard and [rewriting](#) wrong answers, citing a “great responsibility to get it right.”

CNBC also previously [reported](#) the company was testing various Bard-integrated home search page designs.

Another top-rated question Thursday asked Pichai for different use cases for Bard, since Google employees were asked to help on search and “to rewrite queries with factual information.”

“It’s important to acknowledge that it’s experimental,” Pichai said in his response. “It’s super important to acknowledge the limitations of these products as well.” Those limits are something he’s addressed in the past.

Pichai said that with Bard, “you are exposing the ability for users to converse with LLMs,” which will improve over time. “And obviously we are product engineering on top of it,” he said.

“Products like this get better the more the people who use them,” Pichai said. “It’s a virtuous cycle.”

‘It’s an intense time’

Following Google’s launch of Bard in February, [Alphabet’s stock price dropped almost 9%](#), suggesting that investors were hoping for more in light of growing competition from Microsoft, which is a large investor in ChatGPT creator OpenAI.

Employees are well aware of how the introduction was received.

“The first public demo was demoralizing, sent our stock into a nosedive, and invited massive media coverage,” read an employee comment from Dory that was read aloud. Then came the question, “What really happened?” and the request to “please share your candid thoughts on what went wrong at the Bard launch.”

Pichai referred the answer Krawczyk, who danced around the subject without giving a direct answer.

“Questions like this can be fair and we want to reiterate the fact that Bard has not launched,” Krawczyk said. “We acknowledged to the world that this is something that we’re experimenting with — we’re testing it. But there’s a lot of excitement in the industry right now.”

Krawczyk also referenced an event held at [Microsoft’s](#) [headquarters that week](#), in which the company showed off how OpenAI’s technology can power Bing search results and other products.

“You see the stories of ChatGPT coincides with an event that we’re having that was actually focused on search,” Krawczyk said. “There can be challenges around the external perception but, as you heard today, we continue to focus on Bard’s testing.”

Krawczyk added that Google is excited to get the technology in “users’ hands to capture their creativity.”

Pichai chimed in to say, “It’s an intense time.”

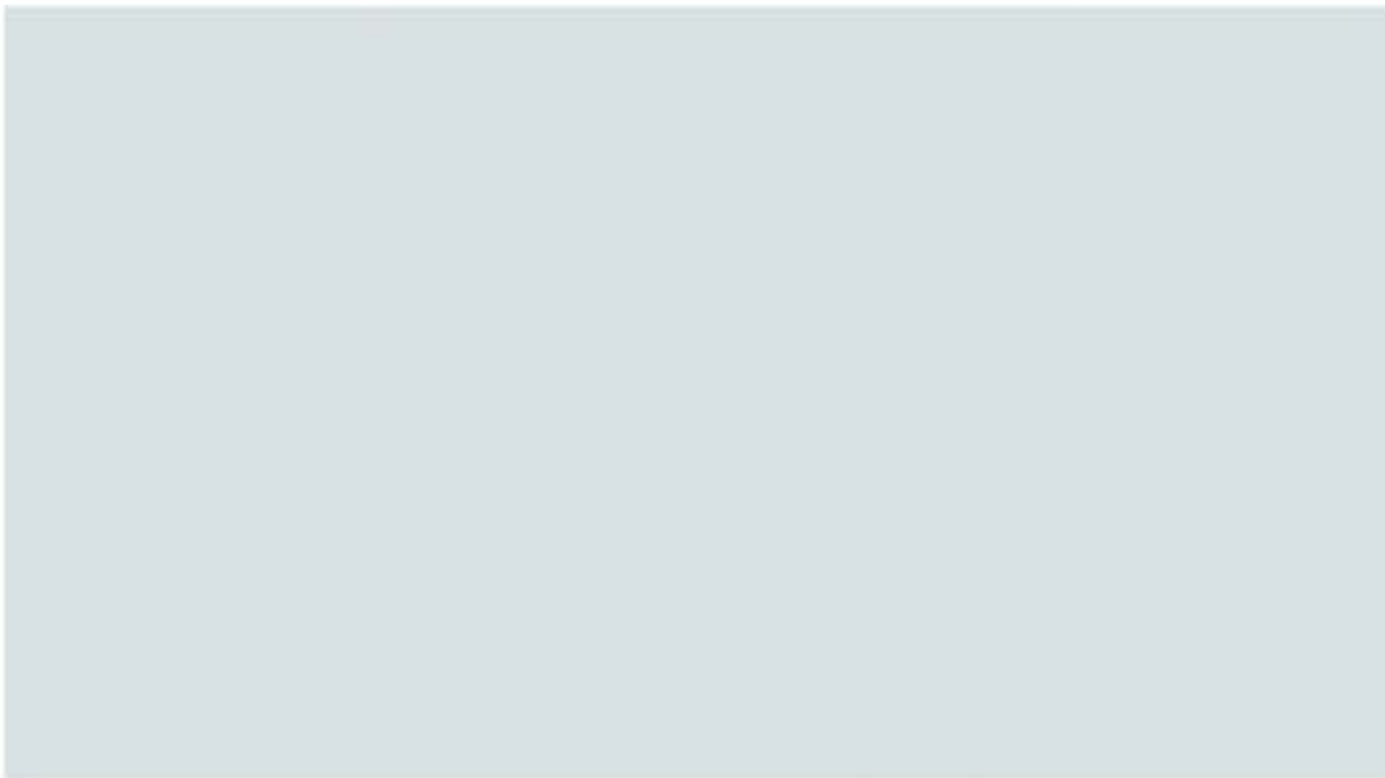
“The purpose of the blog post was once we decided we were going to external trusted testers, things could leak and it was important we positioned it,” Pichai said. “We haven’t launched the product yet. And obviously when we launch, we’ll make clear it’s an experimental product.”

Pichai said that the company hopes to provide more details after Google IO, the annual developer conference. Google has yet to announce dates for the event.

Another top-rated employee comment from Dory said, “Launching AI seems like a knee-jerk reaction without a strategy.”

Pichai began his response by noting that Google spends more money on AI research and development than any other company.

“I disagree with the premise of this question” he said, letting out a laugh. “We are deeply working on AI for a long time. You are right in the sense that, we have to stay focused on users and make sure we are building things which are impactful.” He said, “user input is going to be an important part of the process so it’s important to get it right.”



Jeff Dean, head of artificial intelligence at Google LLC, speaks during a Google AI event in San Francisco, California, U.S., on Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2020.

David Paul Morris | Bloomberg | Getty Images

Jeff Dean, Google’s AI chief, was called upon by Pichai at the all-hands meeting to answer a question regarding the company’s loss of top talent. Specifically, the question asked why Google lost so many key people who were listed on a paper about prominent architecture used for AI.

“I think it’s important to realize this is a super-competitive field,” Dean said. “People with these kinds of skills are in high demand.”

Dean said Google has “two of the best AI research teams in the world” and “people working side by side on pushing forward the state of art in AI.”

Despite the competition in the market, “we have the ability to get things out in papers here but also work on products that touch on millions of users every day,” Dean said.

Pichai added that, “Just over the last couple of weeks, we are talking to some people who want to join Google who are literally some of the best ML researchers and engineers on the planet.”

A Google spokesperson didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

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