Google's Car People Diaspora

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By Amir Efrati Dec. 13, 2016 9:53 AM PST · Mentions Google , Alphabet and 16 others Share full article

At least a dozen senior members of the Google autonomous car team have departed in the past year, most of them to Uber and to a self-driving car startup that's right next door to Google's campus in Mountain View. (Scroll down for the list.) The unit, which Alphabet said on Tuesday would become its own division called "Waymo," is racing to develop a robo taxi service after scaling back its vision for self-driving car hardware, as we reported on Monday .

The changes reflect how for a long time, Google's Chauffeur car team was the only game in town when it came to developing fully self-driving cars. That changed in recent years as traditional car companies, Tesla Motors and Uber joined the fray, with many billions of dollars to throw at the colossal engineering problem and plenty more for acquisitions of nascent startups in the field.

The self-driving startup sucking up talent from Google and elsewhere is called Nuro. It's unclear who is funding the company, which already has 30 or so employees, including at least six former Chauffeur engineers and managers. The startup's product goal is unclear. Meanwhile, Uber is becoming an even bigger worry for Chauffeur, given that it's directly competitive, has an easier path to making money from the tech, and employs Anthony Levandowski, a founding member of Chauffeur. One of Uber's most recent poaches from Chauffeur: Cynthia Kwon, who worked on partnerships with automotive companies.

There's plenty of talent left at Chauffeur/Waymo. The team has around 500 employees, with eight-year project veteran Dmitri Dolgov remaining in charge of autonomous car software development following the departure this summer of longtime colleague Chris Urmson . Mr. Urmson, who is expected to launch his own self-driving startup, led the entire team before former Hyundai executive John Krafcik became CEO. On the hardware side is Rob Ellis, who had reported to Brian Salesky before Mr. Salesky left sometime in the past couple of months. Here's the list:

Chris Urmson, former chief/CTO

Departed in mid-2016. Expected to start new company.

Brian Salesky, former hardware chief

Departed in fall 2016. Future plans unclear.

Dave Ferguson, software engineering manager

Departed in mid-2016. Co-founded Nuro.

Jiajun Zhu, Chauffeur founding team member, computer vision engineering manager

Departed in mid-2016. Co-founded Nuro.

Russell Smith, radar designer

Departed in mid-2016. Hardware at Nuro.

Nick Vines, mechanical engineer for sensors

Departed in fall 2016. Now at Nuro.

Cynthia Kwon, strategic partnerships

Departed in fall 2016. Now at Uber.

Anthony Levandowski, software engineering management and partnerships

Departed in early 2016. Co-founded Otto, sold to Uber.

Don Burnette, "onboard" software engineer

Departed in early 2016. Co-founded Otto, sold to Uber.

Jur van den Berg, software developer

Departed in mid-2015. Founding employee at Otto, now Uber.

Matt Williams, operations manager (vehicle management)

Departed in early 2016. Autonomous vehicle operations at Uber.

Brian Torcellini, driver training and safety

Departed in 2016. Similar role at Uber.

Brian Cullinane, user experience research

Departed in 2016. Now at Uber.

David Lu, product manager

Departed in fall 2016. Executive in residence at Google Ventures (GV)

Chris Stoffel, hardware engineering manager

Departed in mid-2016. Now at self-driving startup Zoox.