This Time It Isn't Personal: Why I Threw Alexa Away In Fifteen Minutes.

It seems recently that barely a week goes by without one of the global tech behemoths announcing a smart speaker development or product. Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft and now Apple, they are all at it. This is a bandwagon everyone is jumping onto, placing significant bets on getting this technology right and claiming the market. Even to the most casual observer of the tech industry smart speakers look like the next big thing that tech giants will fight over. The age of the personal digital assistant, in our homes and every part of our lives on at nearly all times is here.

Or is it?

To date, all the discussion has been about whether Alexa or Home is better, on what Microsoft and Apple need to do to break into this market and beat the existing offer from Amazon and Alphabet. But when did we decide that smart speakers were the future? Billed as "digital personal assistants", smart speakers are neither personal nor assistants.

Full disclosure, I bought an Amazon Alexa and a Google Home device. As with all new technology I wanted to try it out, establish the use-case and work out how it fits into, and augments my life (it's a professional curiosity of mine).

Alexa lasted fifteen minutes, Home a bit longer but only because I opened it up in the evening and couldn't be bothered to throw it away until morning. Always listening devices, that will respond to anyone in the room so long as they say "OK Google" or 'Hey Alexa' are hardly a personal device. This is a topic explored in depth by Menny Barzilay, CTO of the Interdisciplinary Cyber Research Center at Tel Aviv University and CEO of FortyTwo over on Techcrunch in an article definitely worth a read
- https://techcrunch.com/2017/05/23/alexa-dont-talk-to-strangers/.

But beyond this *ever so slight flaw* in the concept there is a bigger problem with smart speakers. What exactly are you going to use them for?

Most of the adverts show happy people making cakes, or getting directions or finding out fun facts. Some show smart speakers capable of controlling lights or music. Sounds great right? Well, is it really easier to say, "Alexa turn off the light" than, just, turning off the light? I think not.

Equally, the information held on the internet that these smart speakers can help you access is designed in such a way that it is more effective to consume through reading. Directions, recipes and the like just do not work as spoken instructions.

Another use-case pushed by the major tech firms for smart speakers is the ability for these AI driven devices to automate much of the mundane in your personal life, to be true assistants that makes everyday tasks easier.

If only.

The simple truth is, these devices are not helpful as assistants. Their inherent reactive nature, i.e. wait to be asked then answer, makes them next to useless in the actual tasks you would want an assistant to do. For the past two years I have commuted every day into Waterloo station. Any problem on the line, I have to ask to find out. Even the most stupid of assistants would work out that this is information I need in the morning, before I ask, and leave home. Alexa is incapable of getting her head round this.

Once again, significant amounts of time and money are being invested into a technology that does not solve problems, that answers a question no one really asked and does not make our lives better or easier. Or, to put it another way, everyone has turned up to a party with no idea why they are there.

So, where do we go from here? To me, there are two possibilities. Either the big four tech giants are going to have to just accept they have spent millions making what effectively amounts to voice controlled speakers (not very innovative), or they change paths and make something actually useful.

As with all innovation, this should start with asking the question of what do we actually need the technology for? Tech must serve a purpose, not just be shiny and new for the sake of it.

The use-case for a digital personal assistant that can be controlled by voice is not in our homes but in our working lives. What would really be helpful is an automated PA, not an automated butler.

For this to work, however, would require the development of a work-focused ecosystem that uses artificial intelligence and voice control to link together all your work functions. Think the AI in the film *Her*, but focused not on your personal, but working, life (being voiced by Scarlett Johansson would probably not be necessary).
Enter the one company that could pull this off, with the open approach that will lead third party developers to create within the ecosystem. A company that has a track record of delivering improvements to our working lives through technology. I speak of course of Microsoft.

There is a chance to utilise existing technology to create a proactive working assistant, one that knows your calendar, work streams, emails, and the lot. One that can bring this all together into a single system controlled by your voice and can actually provide real benefits, working in a proactive manner.

In the race to create something interesting out of smart speakers, personal was lost, assistance was lost and all that remained was digital. The unrivalled king of our working lives, Microsoft, now has a clear opportunity to really utilise this technology for our benefit and further cement itself as the tech company for work by once again providing real business benefits from technology. Not just creating a 'fun' toy for 'interesting' facts.

Over to you Satya Nadella.

Original article can be found here:

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dmitry-bagrov/this-time-it-isnt-persona_b_16876512.html