Why Google's Theme For Its Big Developers' Conference Could Fall Flat

This week, thousands of visitors will swarm Google's home city of Mountain View, California, for the company's annual I/O developers' conference. The event serves as a state of the union of sorts for Google, allowing it to parade out new products, share milestones for existing ones, and lay out its vision for the future as techies and press from all over the world tune in.

"This year, you'll hear a lot about how we're building a helpful Google for everyone," the company wrote in a press teaser ahead of the show, which starts Tuesday (the bold emphasis is the company's).

But while Google hopes to wow audiences with presentations on artificial intelligence and accessibility, that rosy messaging may fall flat in light of the company's recent controversies.

In the past year, Google has faced an unprecedented level of criticism from experts and its own employees on issues like censorship, workplace misconduct, and AI ethics. One consistent theme of the various accusations has been how Google has not, in fact, been *helpful for everyone.* Google's timeline since its 2018 conference is studded with complaints of exclusionary behavior.

Take, for example, last fall when The Intercept revealed that the company was secretly developing censored search products in China. Lawmakers, human rights activists, and Google employees alike denounced the plans, and in an open letter, workers admonished the company for building technology that would "aid the powerful in oppressing the vulnerable." Google ultimately said it has tabled its plans.

Not long after, employees staged a massive walkout to protest what organizers described as a "workplace culture that's not working for everyone" following a *New York Times* report on how Google shielded executives from misconduct claims. Demonstrators shared stories of inequity and harassment, including for Google's "shadow workforce" of temporary and contract workers, who have less job security and fewer protections than their direct-employee peers. Google has updated a handful of policies and practices since the walkout, but its organizers have continued to push for other changes.

More recently, employees and outsiders called out Google for including Kay Coles James, the president of a conservative think tank, on a new advanced technology advisory council, citing her anti-LGBTQ views. Google eventually disbanded the so-called AI ethics board, saying in a statement that it had "become clear that in the current environment, [the council] can't function as we wanted," but didn't address protestors' arguments about underrepresented groups, like LGBTQ people, being especially at-risk for unintended consequences for AI.

For Google to hang its conference on the theme of being helpful for everyone without acknowledging its slew of exclusion-based issues may make the company's intended theme seem hollow or ironic.

This wouldn't be the first time Google has undermined its own messaging: Last year it sabotaged its [recurring I/O mantra about developing "responsible AI"](#) by launching a product that imitated humans but didn't self-identify as a robot, which raised major ethical red flags.

Gartner research director Werner Goertz, who plans to attend the conference, doubts that any of the many product managers and executives who get up on the main stage will directly address Google's litany of recent controversies. Viewers will hear details about a cheaper Pixel smartphone and the next edition of Android, but no atonement.

"Remember, I/O is a *developers'* conference," he says. "Google will focus on addressing the technical details, and I don't think these other topics will really distract from that message."

Perhaps they should.

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