

Gates working on Personal Agent project with Microsoft

January 30 2015, by Nancy Owano



"Hi, Reddit. I'm Bill Gates..." Like Elon Musk, like Larry Ellison, like Larry Page, certain names draw immense numbers wanting to know what's on their mind, from barbecue-sauce tastes to actual work. A five-line comment earlier this week from Bill Gates about what he is doing sparked a pile of technology sites attempting to connect dots. "One project I am [working on with Microsoft is the Personal Agent](#) which will remember everything and help you go back and find things and help you pick what things to pay attention to," he said on the Ask Me Anything in Reddit. "The idea that you have to find applications and pick them and they each are trying to tell you what is new is just not the efficient model - the agent will help solve this. It will work across all your devices," he said. Sites posted stories promptly, wondering how the project might be

related to present-day Cortana, which is the voice-controlled virtual assistant that runs on the Windows Phone platform and will arrive on the desktop [with](#) Windows 10 (now appearing in a technical preview version).

"Cortana already integrates with a user's email, calendar, reminders and knows what someone is interested in," said Blair Hanley Frank, *Geek Wire's* Bay Area correspondent. "Connecting all of that information with a system that could intelligently [direct](#) people's attention to what they need to know would be a significant boost for Cortana's capabilities." Mark Hachman, senior editor, *PCWorld*, reminded readers that it is not yet clear whether Gates was referring to Cortana, an enhanced version, or something [new](#).

Interestingly, Reddit comments responding to Gates' revelation showed that people like Cortana. "Side by side, Cortana makes Siri sound like my computer's text-to-speech program. She isn't perfect, but she does sound a little more human," said one comment. Even more interesting is that Gates is interested in artificial intelligence, in light of his comments also posted on Reddit about his concern over the future of AI. He had been asked how much of an existential threat did he think machine superintelligence will be, in an "ask me anything" question and answer exchange. Gates wrote: "I am in the camp that is concerned about super intelligence. First the machines will do a lot of jobs for us and not be [super](#) intelligent. That should be positive if we manage it well. A few decades after that though the intelligence is strong enough to be a concern. I agree with Elon Musk and some others on this and don't understand why some people are not concerned."

One might wonder why someone concerned about AI getting out of control is so interested in a project that involves a personal agent. Despite such reservations, noted the BBC, Gates also wrote on Reddit that, had Microsoft not worked out, he would probably be a researcher

on [AI](#).

Eric Horvitz, a notable with contributions to the field of AI, is the managing director of Microsoft Research's Redmond Lab. His division helped introduce Cortana. Horvitz said that now is the exciting time for AI research. "Innovations include advances in core computational 'fabrics' such as representations of knowledge, inferential methods for drawing conclusions from that knowledge, and machine learning for acquiring new knowledge and abilities from data and perceptions. We've built key 'competencies' on top of these fabrics, including machine vision, [natural language understanding](#), speech recognition, and human-computer interaction."

While the real-world deployment of AI research was exciting, Horvitz said that with that success come responsibilities for understanding the benefits, risks, and effects of the technologies. He said that we will need to remain vigilant about assessing and continuing to address potential risks and rough [edges](#).

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