

Apple car chief's departure puts its next big thing in doubt

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The abrupt departure of Apple Inc.'s top automotive executive imperils its efforts to develop a self-driving car, a project that's been seen as one of the tech giant's biggest bets.

Doug Field, a Tesla Inc. veteran who joined Apple in 2018 to head up its car project, left Tuesday to become Ford Motor Co.'s chief advanced technology officer. The announcement, which came after Bloomberg first reported the news, made only passing reference to Field's work at Apple.

Field's exit calls into question the progress Apple has made toward developing the technology and experience needed to compete in the auto industry. It's just the latest upheaval for the division: Field is the fourth executive leading the Apple car project to step away in its seven-year history.

Not that developing self-driving cars has been easy for anyone else. Tesla, the market leader in [electric vehicles](#), is still probably years away from offering fully autonomous cars. Alphabet Inc.'s Waymo has suffered a rash of departures in its efforts to develop the technology. And Uber Technologies Inc. agreed to sell off its autonomous-driving division last year.

Apple's car efforts have always been a bit of a paradox—it's a hotly anticipated product that the company says almost nothing about. Field's official title at Apple was vice president of special projects, belying the significance of his role. But he was entrusted with developing one of the company's "next big things," a product that could keep sales growing the way the iPhone, iPad and Apple Watch did in the past decade.

Apple first kicked off plans to develop a self-driving electric car around 2014, entering a race with the likes of Tesla. By 2016, the project was struggling with confusing messaging from leadership, a lack of vision and problems surrounding autonomous-driving technology. Apple also found it hired too many people and laid off hundreds of engineers from the project in 2016 and 2019.

Around the time of the first layoffs, former chief Apple hardware engineer Bob Mansfield began overseeing the effort—known as Project Titan—and sought to refocus on the underlying capabilities. Apple seemed to zero in on the technology that runs self-driving cars, rather than trying to build a whole car itself.

But then Field arrived in Cupertino in 2018. He had previously worked for Apple before leading Tesla's engineering efforts for the popular Model 3, and his return was seen as a sign that the company was back to building an actual vehicle. Field reshaped the car group, bringing in Tesla's former executives in charge of self-driving software, car interior and exterior designs, and drivetrains.

After Mansfield retired last year, oversight of Field's project shifted to John Giannandrea, Apple's top executive in charge of artificial intelligence. By late 2020, Apple appeared to be making progress and attempted to negotiate deals with a bevy of carmakers for components, manufacturing and other partnerships.

But by early 2021, it was still hard to gauge the company's progress. Despite reports that an Apple car would go into production in three years, people familiar with the situation said development work was still at an early stage. Then the departures began anew. Benjamin Lyon, Dave Scott and Jaime Waydo—three of the top Apple car managers—all left in the first half of this year.

Filings with the California Department of Motor Vehicles indicated that its testing on public roads in 2020 lagged the year prior and that the reliability of its technology is still not approaching competitors like General Motors Co.'s Cruise and Waymo.

Kevin Lynch, who has run Apple's smartwatch and health software efforts, took over some software aspects of the car project. That move

raised its own questions inside the company given that Lynch didn't come from the car industry.

There were other changes, with senior engineers from products like the iPhone joining the endeavor. Apple also hired Ulrich Kranz, who oversaw planned vehicles from BMW's electric car division and had failed stints as a top leader of Faraday Future and Canoo.

It's unclear who will ultimately replace Field and if existing managers or Giannandrea will take a larger role. Apple said it wishes Field well, but it wouldn't comment on how he would be replaced. Field's departure could also indicate that he believed he had a better shot shipping electric cars at a legacy company rather than Apple—despite it being the most valuable technology company in the world with nearly limitless resources.

After launching the Apple Watch in 2015, Apple has been seeking breakthrough new product categories to continue expand its territory and gain new customers.

Its other forays, such as its Apple TV+ streaming service, haven't had much of an impact. Apple is working on a headset that would mix virtual and augmented reality, and it could be announced as early as next year. And it's working on lightweight AR glasses that could be released later this decade. But that product category is still nascent, and companies like Google have failed to find a successful formula.

That's why so many eyes were on Apple's car potential. If successful, it could have added billions of dollars to the company's bottom line. With Field out, the road to that happening is less immediately clear.

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