

HP Rethinks Research, Aims To Speed Ideas To Market

Restructuring aimed at speeding ideas to commercial uses

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Mercury News Article Launched: 03/07/2008 01:35:36 AM PST Positioning itself to capitalize on the new era of "cloud computing," Hewlett-Packard on Thursday announced a dramatic restructuring of its research efforts, refocusing from 150 projects into 20 to 30 larger projects that reflect a new vision for an "everything as a service" Web.

Showcasing several ongoing projects with names like CloudPrint and Mediascape, HP executives emphasized that the revamp would not entail a reduction of investment in research, or an abandonment of "blue sky" exploratory research. But the strategic shift, they said, is to gear HP Labs for accelerating innovation to commercial uses.

HP Labs, encompassing more than 600 researchers in seven locations around the world, has its headquarters on Page Mill Road in Palo Alto, a short distance from HP's corporate headquarters.

"It's one place where there is still R left in R&D," said HP Chief Executive Mark Hurd, suggesting that other technology companies are focused more on development than research. "So this is a big deal for us."

The reorganization has been led by Prith Banerjee, an entrepreneur and academic who was hired by Hurd six months ago to lead HP Labs.

Banerjee said the approach HP took in the past was "appropriate" for the time but that advances of the Internet have made HP Labs' past approach of many small projects out of date.

HP Labs' global research troops, Banerjee said, are being reorganized into 23 non-physical "labs" of 20 to 30. Their work will focus on five areas, which Banerjee described as "information explosion," "dynamic cloud services," "content transformation," "intelligent infrastructure" and "sustainability."

In an interview with the Mercury News, HP Executive Vice President Shane Robison said the initiative initially caused "angst" among researchers. But he said friction was minimized by empowering the researchers to orchestrate the priorities themselves.

Many ongoing projects will be shelved. "We're going to pick the gems that fit with the themes and make sure they're staffed for success," Robison said. The effort will "increase the probability of success and shorten the time frame."

A video highlighted how HP was examining how, in data centers, energy could be saved by replacing copper wires with light beams to transfer data. Another demonstration showed how devices with geographic sensors could be used to turn the surrounding physical world into a digital game - and how a laptop empowered by such location technologies and connected to a more intelligent network could effectively "look inside" a buildings' wall.

Hurd said HP Labs would be more "transparent" than in the past. A Web site called HP IdeaLab, at www.hp.com, offers peeks at ongoing projects, inviting feedback from consumers and outside researchers.

However, Robison said HP remains committed to doing proprietary rather than open-source research.

"We want our researchers to publish, but we want them to file patents," he said.

HP Labs, which first opened in 1966, is part of the legacy of company founders Bill Hewlett and David Packard, who first tinkered with vacuum tubes in a garage about a mile away. The sprawling lab facility is on the short list of Silicon Valley's leading corporate research centers, along with SRI, Xerox PARC and IBM's Almaden Research Center.

Competition and the accelerating pace of innovation has created more pressure for such centers to concentrate on projects that can be commercialized, as opposed to advancing science for its own sake.

While Hurd has emphasized cost cutting and finding new efficiencies to enhance the bottom line, HP Labs continues to conduct far-reaching research into the possibilities of such fields as nanotechnology and quantum science. But those projects also are expected to have a clear road map toward commercialization.

In recent years, HP Labs has been involved in developing computer chip circuitry at the atomic scale and software to automate data centers. On one recent tour, for example, researchers discussed how they envision enhanced video-conferencing technologies such as HP's Halo or Cisco System's TelePresence to evolve into three-dimensional holograms.

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