

Amazon Is Buying Up All Of Your Medical Data From Axiom and the Feds In Order To Spy On Your Health



- Amazon's Grand Challenge team, led by Google Glass creator Babak Parviz, consists of former Google X engineers and founders of various health start-ups.
- The team's projects include cancer research and last-mile delivery, CNBC has learned.
- Amazon runs an internal competition called Think Big, which helps identify people for Grand Challenge.

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Michael S. Williamson | The Washington Post | Getty Images

Jeff Bezos

Deep inside [Amazon](#), a secretive group called Grand Challenge, led by the creator of Google Glass, is working on a series of bold projects involving cancer research, medical records and last-mile delivery, according to people familiar with the matter.

Similar to [Alphabet's](#) Google X lab, Grand Challenge is a research team set up to explore ambitious new ventures that can eventually expand Amazon's already wide footprint, said the people, who asked not to be named because the work is confidential.

The group, which also operates under the monikers 1492 and Amazon X, has added over 50 people since 2014, when [Babak Parviz](#) left Google X to head up the effort. The makeup of Parviz's team illustrates how far out Amazon is going to pursue innovative projects, beyond its primary businesses of e-commerce, consumer devices and Amazon Web Services, while still using resources from those divisions for some of its initiatives.

Organizationally, Grand Challenge is part of the AWS organization and Parviz reports directly to AWS CEO Andy Jassy, according to an internal chart.

One person with knowledge of Grand Challenge said the group gets to take a longer time horizon than teams that focus on commercial products. An internal job listing for

Grand Challenge quotes astronomer Carl Sagan in the post: "Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known."

Amazon did not respond to a request for comment.

Cancer research to last-mile delivery

Medicine and health is a clear focus area for Grand Challenge, and one particular project is on cancer research. Parviz and his team are working with [Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center](#) in Seattle, attempting to apply machine learning in ways that can help prevent and cure cancers, said a person with knowledge of the venture.

A representative from Fred Hutch told CNBC in an email that the medical center has "several projects underway with a few of our tech neighbors," including [Microsoft](#), Amazon and [Tableau Software](#). "Given the early stages, we don't have any specific Amazon Web Services projects to preview but hopefully later this year," the spokesperson said.

Grand Challenge is also working with AWS on a project, internally dubbed Hera, which involves taking unstructured data from electronic medical records to identify an incorrect code or the misdiagnosis of a patient. The technology captures patient data that a physician may miss, and can help remove the inaccuracies for insurers as they assess a population's risk.

Grand Challenge is starting to pitch Hera, which has been in development for at least three years, to commercial health insurance companies, according to two people familiar with the effort.




Parviz's [LinkedIn page](#) identifies him as an Amazon vice president and doesn't say anything about his role. At a rare public appearance earlier this year, hosted by health marketing firm Klick Health, Parviz [referred vaguely](#) to some work he's doing around elder care.

"Something...we've been building for some period of time and we deeply care about... relates to what happens to older people," said Parviz, who has a PhD in electrical engineering and teaches at the University of Washington, a source for some of Grand Challenge's top talent.

It's a topic that has interested Parviz, an Iranian immigrant, for some time. In 2014, the year Parviz joined Amazon, he and a group of employees went on a cross-country bus tour to learn and get inspired about technologies that might be useful to aging Americans.

But Grand Challenge's work isn't limited to health care. According to internal documents viewed by CNBC, the team is strategically involved with Amazon's last-mile delivery efforts. Those projects are aimed at improving Amazon's package delivery process by exploring new ways to reach consumers. Recent examples include the launch of a service that allows packages to be dropped inside the house and another in the [trunk of a car](#).

 [Amazon is exploring ways to deliver items to your car trunk and the inside of your home](#)

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Think Big contest

At least some members of the Grand Challenge group were chosen through an internal competition called Think Big, according to people familiar with the team. The annual event, open to all full-time employees, is designed to "help find the next big opportunities for Amazon," one person said. ("Think Big" is one of the [14 leadership principles](#) at Amazon.)

The finalists get to present their ideas in front of Amazon's most senior leaders, including CEO [Jeff Bezos](#), and the winners get to join the Grand Challenge team with their own budget for recruiting, another person said.

Think Big is run by a team called Department of Ideas, which is part of Grand Challenge, according to internal documents. H.B. Siegel, the former CTO of IMDb, calls himself the "Prime Minister of Ideas" on his [LinkedIn](#)

[page](#) and mentions that he's part of the Department of Ideas.

Siegel is one of 12 people within Grand Challenge who report directly to Parviz. Two general characteristics of those leaders are a strong background in health care and experience working at Google X.

Here's the full list of Parviz's direct reports:

H.B. Siegel: Director of Engineering.

Adam Siegel: Former Google X researcher and co-founder of Skye Health, a health solution start-up that came out of Stanford University. His [LinkedIn profile](#) says he's, "working on a special project. Super cool stuff."

David Heckerman: [Distinguished scientist](#) at Amazon who's spent 24 years at Microsoft and served as chief data scientist at genomics start-up Human Longevity.

Douglas Weibel: Former Google X researcher, professor at the University of Wisconsin, Chemistry PhD and co-founder of two health-related start-ups.

Erin Smith: Executive Assistant

Hamid Al-Azzawe: Former CTO and head of R&D at Bloomberg and founder of AdaptCore Health, a patient management solution maker. His [LinkedIn profile](#) says, "Director Alexa Personal Data."

Jean Wang: Former hardware engineer at Google X and PhD from the University of Washington, where she studied under Parviz. Her [LinkedIn page](#) says she's "developing new projects."

Kristen Helton: PhD in bioengineering from the University of Washington and co-founder of Profusa, which develops real-time biosensors to help people monitor their health. Her [LinkedIn profile](#) says she's an initiative lead helping build "a small team of passionate people focused on changing the world for the better."

Neal Patel: Former program lead at Google's Advanced Technology and Projects (ATAP) team.

Sailesh Chutani: Executive entrepreneur-in-residence at Amazon and former CEO of ultrasound imaging company Mobisante. According to his [LinkedIn profile](#), his role is to "identify and incubate confidential new businesses for Amazon in a significant industry."

Taha Kass-Hout: FDA's first chief health informatics officer, former chief digital health and intelligence officer at Trinity Health. His [LinkedIn page](#) doesn't mention Amazon.

Wasiq Bokhari: Former CEO of a "special project" at Google and Physics PhD. His [LinkedIn profile](#) says he's been at Amazon since May 2017, but doesn't provide a job title or description.