

Microsoft Workers Demand Company End Army Contract

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"As employees and shareholders we do not want to become war profiteers."

Declaring to chief executives that they refuse "to become war profiteers," a group of Microsoft workers on Friday demanded the company cancel a contract with the U.S. Army that they say would "help people kill" and turn warfare into a "video game."

Their open letter is addressed to Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and president and chief legal officer Brad Smith, and, according to the "Microsoft Workers 4 Good" Twitter handle, which posted the document, it got over employee 100 signatures in its first day. [Refer to link below to see letter.]

At issue is Microsoft's \$479 million contract to supply the military's Integrated Visual Augmentation System (IVAS) program with augmented reality headsets. It's for a platform that the government says is intended to "increase lethality by enhancing the ability to detect, decide, and engage before the enemy."

Microsoft would use its HoloLens technology for the contract.

Taking this step, however, would be something Microsoft has never before done: "cross[ing] the line into weapons development," the workers write.

"It will be deployed on the battlefield, and works by turning warfare into a simulated 'video game,' further distancing soldiers from the grim stakes of war and the reality of bloodshed," the letter states. "Intent to harm is not an acceptable use of our technology."

Smith's suggestion that workers who find a project "unethical" find a different project to work on is problematic, the workers explain:

There are many engineers who contributed to HoloLens before this contract even existed, believing it would be used to help architects and engineers build buildings and cars, to help teach people how to perform surgery or play the piano, to push the boundaries of gaming, and to connect with the Mars Rover (RIP). These engineers have now lost their ability to make decisions about what they work on, instead finding themselves implicated as war profiteers.

[...]

Microsoft's mission is to empower every person and organization on the planet to do more. But implicit in that statement, we believe it is also Microsoft's mission to empower every person and organization on the planet to do good. We also need to be mindful of who we're empowering and what we're empowering them to do. Extending this core mission to encompass warfare and disempower Microsoft employees, is disingenuous, as "every person" also means empowering us. As employees and shareholders we do not want to become war profiteers. To that end, we believe that Microsoft must stop in its

activities to empower the U.S. Army's ability to cause harm and violence.

In addition to ending the IVAS contract, the workers demand that Microsoft:

Cease developing any and all weapons technologies, and draft a public-facing acceptable use policy clarifying this commitment; and appoint an independent, external ethics review board with the power to enforce and publicly validate compliance with its acceptable use policy.

Microsoft, for its part, confirmed on Friday its commitment to helping the military.

Technology giant Google faced similar criticism from workers last year for its work on drone and artificial intelligence (AI) technology with the U.S. military. Following the outcry, Google announced it would not renew its contract on the Pentagon program known as Project Maven.

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