

Nuance buys Voicebox Technologies, scooping up speech-recognition and natural-language pioneer

A portrait of Dr. David A. Clark, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, smiling warmly. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt under a gray blazer. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Nuance Communications (<http://www.nuance.com/index.htm>) has quietly acquired Voicebox Technologies (<https://www.voicebox.com/>), a Bellevue, Wash.-based company that was an early leader in speech recognition and natural language technologies, GeekWire has learned.

It's the latest indication of the booming market for conversational speech technology and voice assistants, driven by new types of devices and the rise of artificial intelligence. Founded in 2001, Voicebox had amassed a large patent portfolio during its 17-year history (<https://patents.justia.com/assignee/voicebox-technologies-inc>).

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Voicebox supplied behind-the-scenes voice technology used in a variety of applications and devices, but it was competing in a larger market defined and controlled in recent years by tech giants including Amazon, Google and Microsoft.

The surprise deal is the latest in a string of Seattle-area acquisitions by Nuance. The speech and imaging technology giant, headquartered in Burlington, Mass., has a large presence in the region as a result of previous deals. It bought (<https://www.geekwire.com/2011/report-nuance-acquire-swype-100-million>) text-input pioneer Swype for \$102.5 million back in October 2011; it bought (<https://www.geekwire.com/2013/nuance-buys-tweddle-connect/>) in-car speech software startup Tweddle in 2013; and acquired (<https://www.geekwire.com/2013/nuance-buy-varolii-effort-bolster-automated-customer-support-calls/>) automated message developer Varolii later that year. In 2009, it acquired (<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20090714005664/en/Nuance-Acquires-Jott-Expands-Mobile-Portfolio>) Jott, another Seattle startup.

The acquisition of Voicebox “shows that the market for conversational assistants is really heating up — it’s not about mere speech recognition any more,” said Dan Weld (<https://www.cs.washington.edu/people/faculty/weld>), a Madrona Venture Group venture partner and University of Washington professor who was an adviser to the company.

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"The market wants full dialog capabilities with semantic parsing of what the user is saying, the ability to take actions on the user's behalf, and multi-turn, contextual response," Weld said. "Voicebox has been a leader in this technology for many years with an impressive white-label conversational assistant shipping in Toyota cars, Samsung phones and other products."

The voice and speech recognition market is expected to be worth \$6.7 billion by 2025, from \$1.1 billion in 2017, according to a recent report (<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20180417006122/en/Global-Speech-Voice-Recognition-Market-2018-Forecast>) by ResearchandMarkets.com. The market is fueled as companies add new voice technologies, specifically conversational assistants, to a wide variety of devices and services.

Voicebox focused on conversational voice technology for cars, homes, mobile devices, and more. Its customers include Samsung, Toyota, AT&T, TomTom, and Fiat Chrysler. The company was co-founded by brothers Mike Kennewick (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/mike-kennewick-a8949713>) and Rich Kennewick (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/rich-kennewick-2995444/>).

As of earlier this month, the company was #65 on the GeekWire 200 (<https://www.geekwire.com/geekwire-200/>), our index of Get smart with GeekWire technology companies. With the acquisition, the company is no longer on the index.

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The company's Twitter (https://twitter.com/Voicebox_Tech?lang=en) and LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/voicebox-technologies/>) pages have been quiet since the end of March. The last post on its news page (<https://www.voicebox.com/news/>) was March 29. There are no job postings on its careers page (<https://www.voicebox.com/careers/>).

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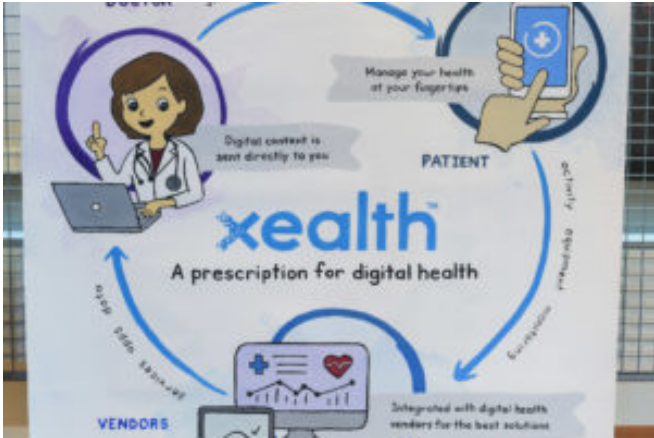
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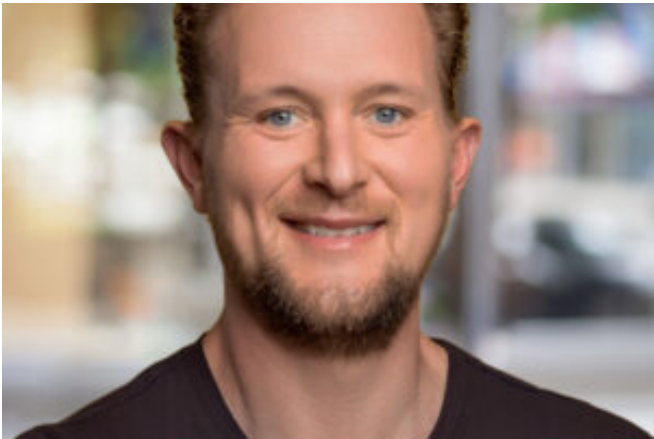
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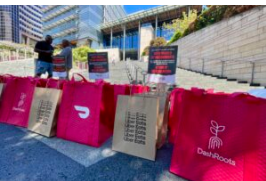
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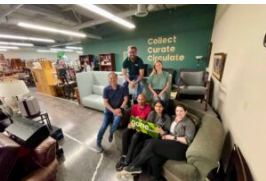
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