

Closure of TRL

Telstra research cuts to hit VoIP, gaming

By Judy Skatssoon for ABC Science Online

Telstra has confirmed plans to pull the plug on its research partnerships and streamline its own research and development operations.

One of its key research partners, the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Smart Internet Technology, says the move will slow the development of new audio technology designed for online gaming rooms and conferences.

The CRC's chief executive, Professor Darrell Williamson, says he is disappointed its core commercial partner has decided to pull out of the partnership three years before the end of its contract.

He says it will affect the CRC's development of the new type of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP), which aims to mimic the way conversations take place in a real room, but it will press on with commercialising the technology. "We were looking at doing strong commercialisation with Telstra, probably about a month ago," Professor Williamson said.

"Then we got communication saying 'no we don't want to proceed on this at all'.

"The fact that Telstra is pulling out may make it a bit more difficult to engage in the next layer of games trials."

A Telstra spokeswoman says the company has decided to "retire from the contract because it hasn't had the outcomes [Telstra] hoped for as part of its investment collaboration".

She says Telstra is also pulling out of the Australian Photonics CRC but will continue its relationship with the Enterprise Distributed Systems Technology CRC, which ends next year.

New direction

The spokeswoman says commercial partners will play a bigger role in Telstra's future research, with the emphasis on becoming "more customer-focused [and] further developing R&D into tangible products and services". "[Telstra's R&D] will change and it will include a stronger collaboration with some of our suppliers," she said.

But Professor Williamson says the development marks the end of Telstra's commitment to long-term research. "It'll go on to a very commercial focus, where anything they need for their services they'll do on a short consultant-contracting basis and they probably will not get involved in future in any long term R&D," he said.

Lab shake-up

The spokeswoman says Telstra Research Laboratories is also being restructured as part of a company-wide review of operations, announced earlier this year.

She says the laboratory will be absorbed into a new network and technology organisation, which will employ 1,600 people, and its 300 staff members can apply for positions in the new body.

The laboratory's achievements include a rat-proof covering for copper cables that can also withstand high temperatures, and developments in radio, cable, microwave and ADSL communications.

Though the spokeswoman says the laboratory is not being abolished, a laboratory source, who has spoken to ABC Science Online on the condition of anonymity, says it is a matter of semantics. "With the new structure, there is no organisation called [Telstra Research Laboratories] and the majority of staff will be going," he said.

He says Telstra's decision is another blow to telecommunications R&D in Australia after Motorola and Ericsson shut down their research facilities earlier. "Basically R&D in IT and telecommunications is just dying in this country," he said.