

It's good to talk: app aims to spur voice renaissance

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Thomas Gayno (R) and Jeff Baxter, two former Google employees, develop their mobile voice messaging app, Cord, at their office in New York on September 24, 2014

Two former Google employees are hoping an innovative new phone application will trigger a renaissance in an increasingly unfashionable method of human communication: talking.

The brainchild of Google veterans Thomas Gayno and Jeff Baxter, Cord

aims to usher smartphone users back towards the core function of their devices—communication by voice.

The application, available on Apple's app store since September, and soon to be rolled out for Android, allows users to record and transmit brief [voice messages](#) lasting no more than 12 seconds.

Voice messages can be sent to one or several people at the same time, with just a single tap.

No text or number is required to transmit. Users simply tap on the face of a visible contact placed in a circle, pressing once to listen to a message or to respond.

"Over the past decade, people are speaking to each other less and less," Gayno told AFP.

"Increasingly they communicate by text—either by SMS, email or instant messaging. We want to tackle that and get people speaking to each other again."

By June, the Cord Project had raised \$1.8 million in funding, with some of their heavy-hitting investors including Google Ventures, Kenneth Lerer, a co-founder of the Huffington Post, and former Google veteran David Hirsch.

Baxter said audio capabilities on existing [instant messaging](#) platforms were often ill-served, because they are difficult to browse.



Jeff Baxter, a former employee of Google, works on a mobile voice messaging app, Cord, at his office in New York on September 24, 2014

Audio renaissance

"We're getting more and more used to talking to our devices to make them do things," he said. "There seems to be a huge opportunity here to talk to our devices to actually just talk to each other.

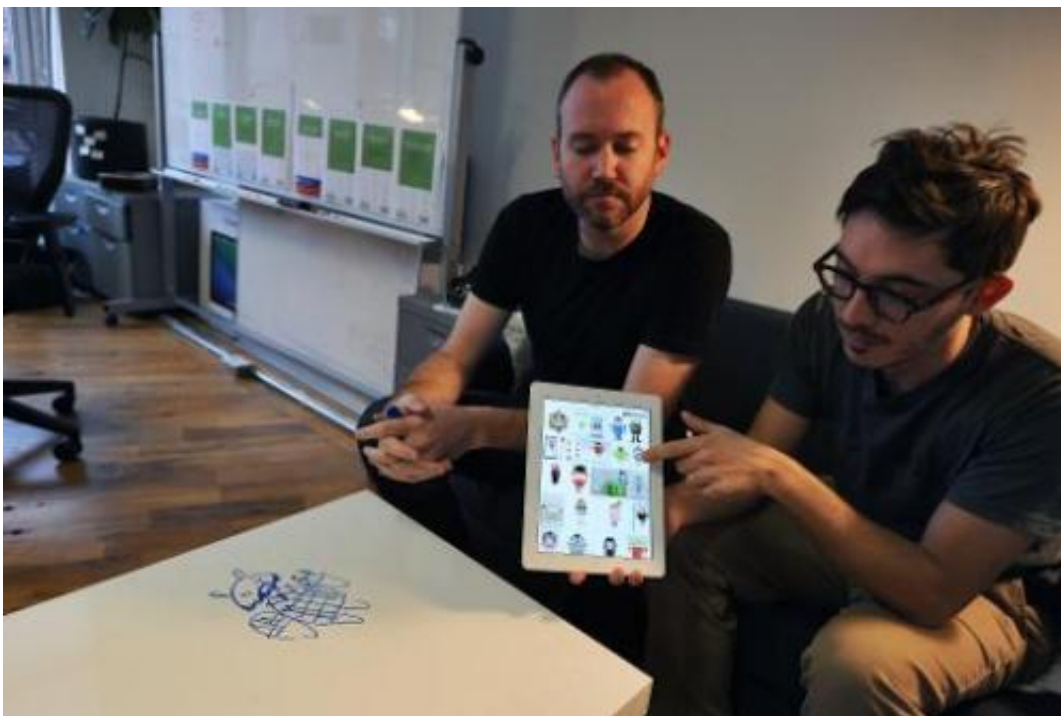
"What's the simplest way, if we're both wearing watches and we're not carrying our phones around with their big keyboards? The easiest way for us to communicate is actually audio, so we have an eye toward that future as well."

The audio renaissance is reflected by a growing number of similar start-ups including Voxer, ChitChat and Sobo. Silicon Valley's big guns are also paying attention.

"More often than not, a simple 10-15 second voice message can get the point, tone and emotion across faster and more efficiently than any other communications method," Rich Miner, Google Ventures general partner and Cord investor, told AFP via email.

"I believe voice has been one of the most neglected features on smartphones—they are phones, after all.

"Consumers like using their voice on phones. And, just like there is email for heavyweight text communications, people still like texting and chat for lightweight text messages. I believe the same is true for voice."



Thomas Gayno (R) and Jeff Baxter, two former Google employees, explain their mobile voice messaging app, Cord, at their office in New York on September 24, 2014

Asia growth

A recent study by The Wireless Association (CTIA), a trade group of US mobile operators, reported that call volumes increased by nearly 14 percent in 2013, although the rise is partly explained by the gradual phasing out of traditional landlines.

Gayno believes the trend towards voice messaging will take off in Asia, where characters make phone keyboard use difficult. "Voice messages are going to grow very quickly," Gayno said.

Cord investor David Hirsch believes voice will increasingly supplant keyboards as the main method of communication.

"As more devices come online, most won't have a keyboard for communication and rather voice will need to act as the operating system," Hirsch said.

"Many that are already coming online (like Nest, smartwatches, Glass and cars like Tesla) don't have easy-to-use keyboards and rather voice can act as an operating system."

Whether or not Cord will be able to thrive in a marketplace which also includes Apple's iMessage (IOS 8) voice option or similar services on WhatsApp and Facebook, is an open question, according to analysts.

"Voice is certainly not dead and will play a key role in controlling new devices, from smartphones to wearables and other connected objects," said Thomas Husson, an analyst with Forrester Research.

"However, I doubt that a service based on the promise of [voice](#)-services alone can scale—it will have to be embedded among other features in an open way to control new devices."

Roger Kay of Endpoint Technologies Associates believes there is always scope for a niche product done well.

"If you do something really well, and people find it useful, then there is room for it," Kay said.

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