

Sam Altman 'was working on new venture' before sacking from OpenAI

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Sam Altman, the recently sacked boss of OpenAI, the company behind the ChatGPT bot, was telling investors he planned to launch a new company before his shock departure, it was claimed. The former OpenAI president, Greg Brockman, is also expected to join Altman after he quit the artificial intelligence firm along with other key senior executives following Altman's abrupt departure. The new company was described as still "in development" on Saturday and many more employees could exit OpenAI to join the new venture. To add to the confusion over the future of one of the world's most potentially valuable technology firms, a report by the Verge on Saturday night claimed that the OpenAI board was in discussions with Sam Altman to return as CEO, just a day after he was ousted. The crisis at OpenAI deepened this weekend when the company said Altman's ousting was for allegedly misleading the board. In a statement, it said it had lost confidence in its 38-year-old co-founder after "a deliberative review process" concluded he had not been "consistently candid in his communications", without specifying how. OpenAI staff were later told by the chief operating officer, Brad Lightcap, in an internal company memo his sacking was over a "breakdown in communication between Sam and the board", and not "malfeasance or anything related to our financial, business, safety, or security/privacy practices". Shortly after Altman's dismissal Brockman announced that he had resigned. "Sam and I are shocked and saddened by what the board did today ... We too are still trying to figure out exactly what happened," he wrote on X. The departures stunned the tech world and have sent rumours swirling, with some speculating that internal divisions over AI safety could be to blame. The Information, a US tech publication, reported that Jakub Pachocki, OpenAI's director of research, Aleksander Madry, head of a team evaluating potential risks from AI, and Szymon Sidor, a researcher, had told associates they had resigned. None of the three could be contacted for comment on Saturday. OpenAI, which is now being led by interim chief executive Mira Murati, also did not respond to requests for comment. Based in San Francisco, OpenAI was founded in 2015 by Altman, Brockman, Elon Musk and others as a not-for-profit group. It restructured in 2019 and has been backed heavily by Microsoft. Last year, it launched ChatGPT, a text-based AI-powered tool that allows users to enter prompts and receive human-like responses and is now used by millions. After ChatGPT's launch, Altman was propelled to star status in Silicon Valley and beyond, and is seen as a pioneer in the world of AI. Earlier in November, he was one of 100 delegates who travelled to Bletchley Park for the UK's AI summit, where he met Rishi Sunak. Altman is yet to comment on the details of his departure, other than to say his time at the company was "transformative" and that he would "have more to say about what's next later". More recently, OpenAI was reportedly in talks to sell shares to investors at a price valuing the company at more than \$86bn

(£69bn). The planned share sale now hangs in the balance after Altman's sudden firing. The tender offer, led by Thrive Capital, has not yet closed but has been in its final stages and was expected to be completed as soon as next month. Thrive Capital has not yet responded to questions. The firm said its board members did not have shares and their governance responsibility was to "advance OpenAI's mission and preserve the principles of its charter". Staff reportedly asked OpenAI's chief scientist, Ilya Sutskever, a co-founder and board member at OpenAI who leads an AI safety team, whether it amounted to a "coup" or "hostile takeover" by others on the board. "You can call it this way," Sutskever responded. "And I can understand why you chose this word, but I disagree with this. This was the board doing its duty to the mission of the non-profit, which is to make sure that OpenAI builds AGI [artificial general intelligence] that benefits all of humanity," he said, according to The Information. The changes at OpenAI have shocked the wider sector, with one investment advisory firm describing them as an "earthquake", a "soap opera" and a "Netflix documentary in the making". Microsoft, a major investor in OpenAI, said it remained committed to the partnership and the new interim chief executive. Wedbush, a wealth management firm, said the disruption represented an opportunity. "This is the time for Microsoft to now essentially take this over, strategically speaking," it told its clients. Tech bosses paid tribute to Altman, with Google's ex-CEO Eric Schmidt saying he was a "hero" of his. "He built a company from nothing to \$90bn [£72bn] in value, and changed our collective world forever. I can't wait to see what he does next. I, and billions of people, will benefit from his future work – it's going to be simply incredible," he wrote on X. Meanwhile, the French government appeared to sense an opportunity. The country's digital minister, Jean-Noel Barrot, said Altman, "his team and their talents" would be "welcome in France if they want to".