

CASE STUDY: GOOGLE

Google is a very successful information technology/web search company with more than 21,000 employees working in 77 offices located in 43 countries. It was founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin. According to the Google website, Google has grown by leaps and bounds since then. From offering search in a single language the company now offer dozens of products and services—including various forms of advertising and web applications for all kinds of tasks—in scores of languages. In 2010, Google's revenue exceeded \$29 billion. Probably one of the more interesting statistics associated with Google is that it receives well over one million job applications each year and hires only about .05 percent of them. This tells us two very important things about Google: lots of people want to work there and Google is *very particular about who it hires*. Google has made the *Fortune* list of 100 Best Companies to Work For every year since 2007.

Let's take a look at how the leadership practices at Google match up with *The Engagement Formula*.

THE ENGAGEMENT FORMULA AT GOOGLE

Step One: Create a Full-Engagement Culture that Defines the Organization and Drives Performance

A full-engagement culture has the following four elements:

Minimal Distractions—So Employees Can Focus on Performing Their Jobs

Employees' physiological and safety needs are very well satisfied at Google. According to the Google web site, "We provide individually-tailored compensation packages that can be comprised of competitive salary, bonus, and equity components, along with the opportunity to earn further financial bonuses and rewards."¹ *CNNMoney* recently quoted a Google spokesperson who said, "...we do believe that competitive compensation plans are important to the future of the company,"² In addition, the benefit package at Google is intentionally designed to remove as many day to day distractions as possible for Google employees so they can focus on doing their best work. According to Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt, "The goal is to strip away everything that gets in our employees' way. We provide a standard package of fringe benefits, but on top of that are first-class dining facilities, gyms, laundry rooms, massage rooms, haircuts, carwashes, dry cleaning, commuting buses – just about anything a hardworking employee might want. Let's face it: programmers want to program, they don't want to do their laundry. So we make it easy for them to do both."³

Google has the following benefits philosophy: "We strive to be innovative and unique in all services we provide both to customers and employees, including our benefits and perks offerings. We realize and celebrate that our employees have diverse needs, and that this diversity requires flexible and individually directed support. Our priority is to offer a customizable program that can be tailored to the specific needs of each individual, whether they enjoy ice climbing in Alaska, want to retire by age 40, or plan to adopt 3 children."⁴

According to the company web site, the benefits at Google include:⁵

- **Health and wellness:** This includes medical insurance, dental insurance, vision insurance, life and AD & D insurance, short and long term disability insurance and business travel and accident insurance.
- **Retirement and savings:** This includes the Google 401(K) plan. According to the Google web site, “Employees may contribute up to 60% and receive a Google match of up to the greater of (a) 100% of your contribution up to \$3,000 or (b) 50% of your contribution up to \$8,250 per year with no vesting schedule! We offer a variety of investment options to choose from through Vanguard, our 401(k) Plan Administrator. To help you with those tough investment decisions, employees can access Financial Engines to receive personalized investment advice” and a college savings plan.
- **Time away:** Vacation (this includes 15 days vacation the first year at Google and 25 days the 6th year), holidays (12 paid holidays with sick days taken as necessary), maternity benefits (Up to 12 weeks off at approximately 100% pay, eligible for an additional 6 weeks if employed at Google for more than 1 year) and take-out benefit (To help make things easier, new moms and dads are able to expense up to \$500 for take-out meals during the first 3 months that they are home with their new baby).

- **Benefits ... beyond the basics:** This includes things like tuition reimbursement, bonuses for referring someone who accepts a job at Google, back-up child care, gift matching and adoption assistance.
- **Benefits ... way beyond the basics:** These benefits include food (free lunch and dinner cooked by gourmet chefs as snacks between meals), financial planning classes and on-site services at the Mountain View headquarters such as oil change and car wash services, dry cleaning, massage therapy, gym, hair stylist and fitness classes.

Although I could find no hard data, I feel that it's safe to assume that the jobs at Google are very secure for several reasons. First, Google's lifeblood is technology innovation—this is what the company must do to be successful. For this reason, Google invests a lot of time and energy in the hiring process because it wants to make sure that it hires only the smartest and most ambitious people who are nice to work with—people who are motivated by taking on big challenges and problems. These people are passionate and want to throw themselves completely into their jobs. Consequently, they're not going to hire on with a company where they don't think they have a bright future. In addition, Google receives well over one million job applications per year. This wouldn't happen if unless the applicants felt that the jobs at Google were very secure. In addition, Google wouldn't have made the *Fortune* list of 100 Best Companies To Work For every year since 2007 if the jobs there weren't secure.

Google also provides its employees with a very pleasant work environment that is conducive to sharing ideas

and opinions. The Google web site describes the offices at Google this way: "Our corporate headquarters, fondly nicknamed the Googleplex, is located in Mountain View, California. Today it's one of our many offices around the globe. While our offices are not identical, they tend to share some essential elements. Here are a few things you might see in a Google workspace:

- Local expressions of each location, from a mural in Buenos Aires to ski gondolas in Zurich, showcasing each office's region and personality.
- Bicycles or scooters for efficient travel between meetings; dogs; lava lamps; massage chairs; large inflatable balls.
- Googlers sharing cubes, yurts and huddle rooms – and very few solo offices.
- Laptops everywhere – standard issue for mobile coding, email on the go and note-taking.
- Foosball, pool tables, volleyball courts, assorted video games, pianos, ping pong tables, and gyms that offer yoga and dance classes.
- Grassroots employee groups for all interests, like meditation, film, wine tasting and salsa dancing.
- Healthy lunches and dinners for all staff at a variety of cafés.
- Break rooms packed with a variety of snacks and drinks to keep Googlers going."⁶

The web site goes on to say, “Though Google has grown a lot since it opened in 1998, we still maintain a small company feel. At lunchtime, almost everyone eats in the office café, sitting at whatever table has an opening and enjoying conversations with Googlers from different teams. Our commitment to innovation depends on everyone being comfortable sharing ideas and opinions.”⁷

As the above discussion points out, employees at Google encounter few, if any, distractions that would keep them from giving their full energy and attention to performing their jobs.

Single Status—Everyone is Treated as an Equal

Google Executive Chairman, Eric Schmidt, once said in an interview with Steven Pearlstein, financial writer for the *Washington Post*, “No particular person has a strong say....At Google, everyone is the same.”⁸ In other words, everyone working at Google has the same status. As one Google employee put it, “You have an equal seat at the table, and it’s based on the power of your idea, not how long you’ve been here, tenure, title or anything. In my first week here, I was shocked that for the product I was working on, the product manager was straight out of college. She was making decisions about delaying the product. In every other company I have worked in, it had to go up to three levels of VPs before you could say that you were pushing out the schedule.”⁹

It should be noted that at Google, equal status among employees is a necessity not a nicety. The reason is that in order to maintain its innovative edge Google has to hire the smartest and most ambitious people it can find. These are the creative types; the innovators—the people who get off on

figuring out how to do the impossible. Furthermore, these are also the kind of people prefer doing things their way, which means they strongly resent being ordered around. According a commentary by Nicholas Carlson on the Pearlstein/Schmidt interview, "...Googlers are a special people to be bossed by no one, only a collective will for good."¹⁰ According to a comment made by Steven Pearlstein in his interview with Eric Schmidt, there is a consensus among Google employees that the managers at Google work for them and not vice versa. Managers then are perceived as leaders whose job it is to provide encouragement and support for the rest of the employees.¹¹ This is why Google is a network based, flat organization that is very non-hierarchical. It provides employees with the freedom to work on their own terms and do their jobs as they see fit.

Google also prides itself as a consensus culture where everyone committed to finding the *best* idea. The company firmly believes that the *best* idea can only be found if people are willing to openly share their ideas and opinions which often conflict with each other. For this reason, Google encourages lively dissent and debate where employees openly question and challenges each other's ideas. The company has learned that this often very spirited process is what produces the *best* idea. This kind of discussion can only take place in an environment where everyone is treated as an equal and no one has the power to veto which is why Google is committed to its culture of openness, flatness and transparency. As stated on the Google web site, "Because we believe that each Googler is an equally important part of our success, no one hesitates to pose questions directly to Larry or Sergey (the Google founders) in our weekly all-hands ("TGIF") meetings...."¹²

As you can see from the above discussion, the culture at Google is very definitely single-status.

Mission—This is What We Do

According to the Google web site, the mission of the company is to “Google’s mission is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”¹³ Also from the web site, “‘The perfect search engine,’ says co-founder Larry Page, ‘would understand exactly what you mean and give back exactly what you want.’ When Google began, you would have been pleasantly surprised to enter a search query and immediately find the right answer. Google became successful precisely because we were better and faster at finding the right answer than other search engines at the time.

But technology has come a long way since then, and the face of the web has changed. Recognizing that search is a problem that will never be solved, we continue to push the limits of existing technology to provide a fast, accurate and easy-to-use service that anyone seeking information can access, whether they’re at a desk in Boston or on a phone in Bangkok. We’ve also taken the lessons we’ve learned from search to tackle even more challenges.”¹⁴ This once again tells us that Google is all about moving forward through technology rather than being content with its past successes.

Core Values—This is How We Do It

Google has a philosophy which is made up of a set of ten core principles that guide the behavior of its employees. Within the context of these principles, Google employees are free to do their jobs as they see fit.

Google Philosophy—Ten Core Principles

As stated on the Google web site, “As we keep looking towards the future, these core principles guide our actions.” The following information regarding Google’s ten core principles has been excerpted from the Google web site:¹⁵

- **Focus on the user and all else will follow.**
Since the beginning, we’ve focused on providing the best user experience possible.
- **It’s best to do one thing really, really well.**
We do search. With one of the world’s largest research groups focused exclusively on solving search problems, we know what we do well, and how we could do it better.
- **Fast is better than slow.**
We know your time is valuable, so when you’re seeking an answer on the web you want it right away—and we aim to please. We may be the only people in the world who can say our goal is to have people leave our website as quickly as possible.
- **Democracy on the web works.**
Google search works because it relies on the millions of individuals posting links on websites to help determine which other sites offer content of value.
- **You don’t need to be at your desk to need an answer.**
The world is increasingly mobile: people want access to information wherever they are, whenever they need it.

- **You can make money without doing evil.**

Google is a business. The revenue we generate is derived from offering search technology to companies and from the sale of advertising displayed on our site and on other sites across the web.

 - We don't allow ads to be displayed on our results pages unless they are relevant where they are shown.
 - We believe that advertising can be effective without being flashy. We don't accept pop-up advertising, which interferes with your ability to see the content you've requested.
 - Advertising on Google is always clearly identified as a "Sponsored Link," so it does not compromise the integrity of our search results.
- **There's always more information out there.**

Once we'd indexed more of the HTML pages on the Internet than any other search service, our engineers turned their attention to information that was not as readily accessible.
- **The need for information crosses all borders.**

Our company was founded in California, but our mission is to facilitate access to information for the entire world, and in every language.
- **You can be serious without a suit.**

Our founders built Google around the idea that work should be challenging, and the challenge should be fun.
- **Great just isn't good enough.**

We see being great at something as a starting point, not an endpoint. We set ourselves goals we

know we can't reach yet, because we know that by stretching to meet them we can get further than we expected.

As was the case with W. L. Gore & Associates, the culture at Google contains all four elements of a *full-engagement* culture. This means that it provides its employees with the opportunity to experience the satisfaction of all five need levels of the Maslow need hierarchy. This explains why Google enjoys such a high level of employee engagement and why it receives well over one million job applications each year.

Step Two: Hire Only Qualified People Who Mesh With the Culture

Google is obsessed with the quality of its employees as well as how they fit into its culture. According to *Corporate Culture Pros*, Google Executive Chairman, Eric Schmidt made the following comment about the hiring philosophy at Google: "Building a company you have the chance to shape the culture. Nothing is more important in doing that than hiring."¹⁶ (Please note that all parenthetical words and phrases throughout the rest of this section on Google are those of the author.) He went on to make the following points about hiring and culture at Google: "It makes an enormous difference who you hire at every level. Most companies pay lip service to this generically but don't manage that well. You need to get very specific about who is going to succeed in your company....Google spends a lot of time on evaluating technical qualifications, as well as passion and commitment (cultural fit).... Google gives the impression of not managing the company, because they don't. They put all attention on hiring right people....Once you get started with the right seeding of people; you will see a building

of 'self-initiative' behavior....Make sure you have a recruiting team so managers don't just hire their friends."¹⁷

Steven Levy, author of the best selling *In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works and Shapes Our Lives* had this to say about the hiring philosophy at Google in an interview with *FINS*: "Everyone has to be really smart and really ambitious. The first thing they do is ask people for their SAT scores and [college] GPAs, which they do no matter how old they are. They think SAT scores are an intelligence quotient and your GPA shows how hard you work. They're looking for someone who's very smart and very ambitious and someone who can survive in the Google atmosphere (culture), where people disagree all the time. The winners are the ones who can produce the most interesting data. There's also the "Googliness" screen, to see if you can fit into the culture. Google has this culture where quirkiness is encouraged but they don't like bad actors, the people who are creepy."¹⁸

When asked about the role Google's hiring philosophy played in the company's success, Mr. Levy had this to say: "To have a really high bar for intelligence and ambition creates a certain workforce. Lots of people tell me, when they describe what it was like to work at Google, they said when they first got there they were struck by how universally smart all their co-workers are. That's a distinguishing feature of Google—they don't want anyone who's not really smart. The hiring process is made so people won't compromise. For instance, the people who do the hiring aren't hiring for people who are going to work in their groups, that way they're not tempted to say we need someone to fill this position right now and he'll do. They don't want that to happen. Except for a few exceptions, you're not hiring the person who's going to work for you."¹⁹

The bottom line is that Google is looking for bright people who can think outside the box and work within the Google culture. They want very smart people who are creative, but at the same time who are nice to work with. They don't want any overly arrogant people because they're too hard to work with. According to Eric Schmidt, "It's much easier to have an employee base where everyone is doing exactly what they want every day. They're much easier to manage because they never have any problems. They're always excited, and they're always working on whatever they care about (this means they're able to satisfy their need for meaning through their work). So you're much better off if you select people to work for your firm who really want to change the world—they're doing their life's passion."²⁰ It should be noted here that when people are doing their life's passion, they're engaged with their work.

As author Steven Levy put it, "Landing a job at Google will put you through a process that makes a Harvard application look easy."²¹ According to the Google web site²² the hiring process begins with an online search for a job opening that interests you by job department, location, or even by key word. Once you find a job opening that interests you, you then apply online. Your qualifications and experience will then be reviewed by one of our recruiters to determine if you are a fit. If you are a possible match for the position, a recruiter will contact you to learn more about your background and answer questions about our hiring process and what it's like to work at Google. If your skills fit the job, a phone interview will be conducted to assess your technical skills and proficiency, to the level of determining whether you should be brought in for in-person interviews. Typically phone interviews are conducted by someone in a similar role and last about 30-40 minutes.

If you are selected of an onsite interview, the interview process for technical positions will evaluate your core software engineering skills including: coding, algorithm development, data structures, design patterns, analytical thinking skills. During your interview, you'll meet with several engineers across different teams who will give a cross-section view of Google Engineering. Interviewers will ask you questions related to your area of interest and ask you to solve them in real time. The interview process for business and general positions evaluate your problem solving and behavioral abilities. As far as Google is concerned, it's not a question of getting the answer right or wrong, but the process in which you use to solve it. Creativity is important.

Virtually every person who interviews at Google talks to at least four interviewers, drawn from both management and potential colleagues. Everyone's opinion counts, ensuring the hiring process is fair while maintaining high standards as we grow. According to *The Great Workplace*, "While ability and appropriateness to the role are evaluated, so is the candidate's ability to work within the Google culture. Candidates are assessed on their ability to work in a flat organization and on small teams, and the ability to respond to a fast-paced, rapidly changing environment. Successful candidates are passionate, they are willing to attack problems with a flair and creativity, and they have enthusiasm for the challenge of making the world a better place instead of doing evil. A Googley person is ethical and communicates openly, and can be successful without a suit."²³

Following your interviews, the interviewing team will decide if you are suitable (suitable includes professional competence as well as cultural fit) for the job opening. Google takes hiring very seriously and likes to make consensus-based

decisions. To that end, it can take up to two weeks for them to make a definitive decision as to whether they would like to have you join the team.²⁴

The Google web site also has advice on how to prepare your resume, prepare for the interview and provides the opportunity to look at the profiles of some Googlers. In addition, in the interest of encouraging qualified people to apply for jobs at Google, the web site provides the following list of The Top Ten Reasons to Work at Google:²⁵

1. **Lend a helping hand.** With millions of visitors every month, Google has become an essential part of everyday life – like a good friend – connecting people with the information they need to live great lives.
2. **Life is beautiful.** Being a part of something that matters and working on products in which you can believe is remarkably fulfilling.
3. **Appreciation** is the best motivation, so we've created a fun and inspiring workspace you'll be glad to be a part of, including on-site doctor; massage and yoga; professional development opportunities; shoreline running trails; and plenty of snacks to get you through the day.
4. **Work and play are not mutually exclusive.** It is possible to code and pass the puck at the same time.
5. **We love our employees, and we want them to know it.** Google offers a variety of benefits, including a choice of medical programs, company-matched 401(k), stock options, maternity and paternity leave, and much more.

6. **Innovation is our bloodline.** Even the best technology can be improved. We see endless opportunity to create even more relevant, more useful, and faster products for our users. Google is the technology leader in organizing the world's information.
7. **Good company everywhere you look.** Googlers range from former neurosurgeons, CEOs, and U.S. puzzle champions to alligator wrestlers and Marines. No matter what their backgrounds, Googlers make for interesting cube mates.
8. **Uniting the world, one user at a time.** People in every country and every language use our products. As such we think, act, and work globally – just our little contribution to making the world a better place.
9. **Boldly go where no one has gone before.** There are hundreds of challenges yet to solve. Your creative ideas matter here and are worth exploring. You'll have the opportunity to develop innovative new products that millions of people will find useful.
10. **There is such a thing as a free lunch after all.** In fact we have them every day: healthy, yummy, and made with love.

The Hiring Process Must be Supported with a Relevant Training and/or Sponsorship Program that Teaches and Reinforces the Culture

According to an article by Amy Lyman of the Great Place to Work Institute, “Leaders and managers at Google seek to ensure that each new hire feels special from the moment they join Google. New hires, called Nooglers, begin their time at Google with an all-day orientation. Speakers come from different departments to talk to the Nooglers, a special tour of the campus is provided, as are folders with benefit information and a coupon for a free massage and discounts for a car wash. At the end of the day, Nooglers are picked up by their mentors and receive a special escort to their work areas where they are greeted with welcome balloons and a bag of chocolates. The Google Buddy (technical person) stops by during the week to ensure each new employee is set up with computers and to assist with any technical questions or concerns. Mentors play a big role in helping Nooglers adjust to the new work environment (this includes the job as well as the Google culture). They stay with their Noogler until they feel completely comfortable and continue as a direct resource for any future needs. To round out the first week, Nooglers are recognized at weekly TGIF events, with their names and what group they work in shown on a large screen. They also get their first chance to feel part of Google as they sit in the front rows as Google founders Larry and Sergey talk shop. A few employee comments confirm the success of Google’s welcoming activities: ‘I was really impressed with the openness and amount of information given to Nooglers during orientation and throughout the first week.’ ‘I couldn’t believe all the speakers that take time to come and speak to Nooglers during the first day orientation.’ ‘My group had a special

orientation where I was introduced to my group. It really made me feel special.”²⁶ What all this means is that Google does a pretty thorough job of orienting its new employees to their jobs as well as on how to navigate the Google culture.

Step Three: Leaders Must Lead, Not Give Orders

As former CEO Eric Schmidt put it, “Google is run by its culture, not by me.”²⁷ The company is organized from the bottom up which means the role of managers and executives is to provide encouragement and support to the people who are doing the work. He goes on to say, “People are doing what they think best and they tolerate having us (managers and executives) around....Part of the job of being the CEO in a company like Google is to have an environment where people are constantly throwing you their best ideas as opposed to being afraid to talk to you.”²⁸

An article by Roslyn Frenz which appeared on *eHow.com* states that “...Google has always operated on the motto, ‘Don’t be evil.’ This moral code helps to guide employees because Google only holds them accountable to management to a degree. To keep the spirit of innovation the company was founded on; Google employees are mostly accountable to themselves. They have the freedom to spend 70 percent of their time on current assignments, 20 percent on related projects of their choosing, and 10 percent on new projects in any area they desire.... Google executives encourage employees and managers to work directly with each other, instead of through more formal channels.... Instead of setting goals for them, Google’s management helps their employees meet the objectives that the employees set for themselves. The company sees its managers as leaders who facilitate inspiration and empower employees....Although Google’s

management makes suggestions, employees use metrics that they choose themselves to measure their progress toward their goals. Supervisors act as managers to ensure that the employees meet their own goals, but employees see them as leaders because the employees themselves set the benchmarks....The company's leadership allows employees to change the parameters of their jobs when needed. Employees are encouraged to be their own leaders, evaluate their jobs and then propose better ways to do their jobs. Google's leaders want their employees to 'think out loud,' and have open discussions about their goals and plans for achievement. The structure promotes corporate transparency because employees are able to witness and contribute to the leadership function. As a result, almost every employee has access to almost any managerial meeting. Google's management realizes that every employee has a stake in the company and employees in turn feel a responsibility for the outcome of the company's projects.... Google's methods attract top talent because their management focuses on controlling through shared vision. Where many companies have bureaucratic and linear controls, Google allows employees to set and maintain their own standards. These open policies translate into a distinctive corporate structure that inspires good nature and guidance. Employees love to work at Google, but not just because of perks such as flexible work time and bonuses, they also love the work that comes from the cross-functional leadership structure."²⁹ The bottom line at Google then is that leaders truly function as leaders, they don't give orders.

CONCLUSION

It's very clear that the culture and leadership practices at Google fully embrace all three steps of *The Engagement*

Formula. This has not only made Google an extremely successful company, but a very desirable place to work as well.

CASE STUDIES: GOOGLE

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