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How Google Searches for Success

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By Desda Moss

CHICAGO—When Laszlo Bock got an offer more than two years ago to head human resources at Google, he was surprised to learn that his title would be vice president, people operations.

“I thought, it’s human resources, why do they call it ‘people operations’? Someone told me that it would fool the engineers into thinking [the position] was technical,” he told an audience in a June 23 “Senior Practitioner Spotlight” presentation at the SHRM Annual Conference.

Bock quickly learned that job titles weren’t the only things Google did differently. The company, which prides itself on innovation and experimentation, takes the same approach to managing people.

“We really want to do the best for our employees because we believe that if we trust them and give them the freedom and tools to do their jobs, they will amaze and delight us,” Bock said.

While everyone knows about Google’s reputation for the generous benefits and perks it lavishes on its staff, Bock said that’s not the whole story.

“Yes, we do have 18 cafes and car washes and day care and dogs on campus and free laundry service. But that’s not *who* we are.”

Instead, Bock said the company’s 19,000 employees—called Googlers—are some of the best and brightest technical minds in the world who enjoy solving complex problems and care deeply about contributing to the organization’s mission of making information accessible and useful to all. The company has such an appealing employer brand that it receives more than 7,000 applications a day. In 2007, Google hired 5,000 new employees.

“We start from the assumption that people are good. And if you believe that, you don’t micromanage, you listen to everyone and you make people feel comfortable enough to make suggestions that may be a little off-the-wall.”

Bock, a member of Google’s Executive Management Group who joined the company in 2006 after working at General Electric and McKinsey, outlined his company’s strategy for attracting, retaining and developing its global workforce.

His advice on how to build a stellar workforce:

- Hire learners. “Hire people who want to learn, who are curious and inquisitive. When a learner encounters a problem, they’ll keep working until they solve it.”
- Trust them. “Give them freedom, information and tools to do their jobs.”
- Small projects, small teams. “Having a team of four to six people is about the right scale to have a meaningful conversation. Any more, and it changes the group dynamic,” Bock said. “When you have a big problem, carve it into smaller pieces.”
- Create a flat structure. “You need information to flow upwards as well as downward, and having fewer layers makes that easier to do.”



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