**At Google, It Takes a Village To Hire an Employee**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **7/14/2008** | Aliah D. Wright |       ORLANDO, FLA.—Want to work for Google? Be prepared to handle the crowd.  The $167 billion company with more than 19,000 employees uses “crowd sourcing” when it comes to making hiring decisions. So said Google’s Manager of HR Technology and Operations Melissa Karp during the recent International Human Resource Information Management systems conference.  The company’s web site states: “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 our hiring process is fair while maintaining high standards as we grow.”  Released in June 2008, a *Universum IDEAL Employer Survey* found that nearly one in five undergraduate students (17 percent) chose the web’s leading search engine as their ideal employer.  And why not?  According to its job site, not only does Google provide excellent benefits, it also pays for lunch, dinner and snacks, offers on-site oil changes, car washes, dry cleaning, massage therapy, a gym, a hair stylist, fitness classes and bike repairs, and it even offers new parents a “take-out benefit” through which they can expense up to $500 for take-out meals during the first four weeks that they’re home with their newborn. Tack on back-up child care, tuition reimbursement, movie day, holiday parties, a ski trip—there’s actually too many perks to mention.  So with a work culture unlike any other—it stands to reason its hiring processes are unique, too.  **Wisdom of the Crowds**  Google’s hiring premise is based on James Surowiecki’s *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations* (2004), which, in short, states that any given group of people is always smarter than any given expert. Google also uses the basic premise behind the creation of Wikipedia that “people are willing to contribute to the collective knowledge, especially if they receive information in return.”  Google’s not the only one using crowd sourcing to get things done. According to *Wired.com*, Lego encourages customers to design robot operating systems and Lego sets; Zazzle.com allows users to place their designs on mugs, shirts, posters and the like and gives the designers a cut if people buy them. Even the Beastie Boys’ latest concert movie, whose name we can’t divulge, was shot by 50 fans using Hi8 cameras.  Still, Google believes that it has them beat hands down.  According to Karp, Google uses technology to create “wise, collaborative crowds that include a diversity of opinion, independence of members from one another, decentralization, a good method for aggregating opinions and return for contributors’ investment.”  What that translates to is this: At Google it takes a village to hire an employee.  Here’s what happens:  A prospective employee applies for a job at Google. The company uses its applicant tracking system (ATS) to ask its workers to weigh in on applicants who have submitted their resumes online.  Information collected about where they went to school or worked previously is parsed and stored in the ATS, which matches that information to data about their existing employees—say, an applicant who graduated from Temple University is matched to an employee who might have graduated from there.  When a match is found, an e-mail is sent automatically to employees asking them for an internal reference. Employees can respond back via e-mail, and the ATS is updated.  Karp says this system allows them to tap into the employees who best understand the demands of the jobs and the nature of their culture in assessing the fit of potential hires. It allows current employees to build the community—even if they are not part of the formal interview process.  “Google people love this stuff,” Karp said. “It goes back to our culture, and culturally people like the fact that we’re asking their opinion.”  **Evaluations With a ‘Twist’**  Up for an evaluation? Google says it puts a “twist on 360-degree feedback by providing functionality for managers and employees to nominate ‘peer reviewers’ from anywhere across the organization.”  “People are fairly candid in their feedback,” Karp noted.  But 360-degree feedback, which involves collecting perceptions about an individual's job performance and the impact of that behavior in the workplace from peers, supervisors, direct reports, internal and external customers, and suppliers can have its drawbacks.  According to the International Personnel Management Association, more than 90 percent of *Fortune* 1000 companies have used “multi-source assessments” (or 360-degree feedback).  Yet participants might feel threatened by the feedback and less amenable to the criticisms contained in it. Then, too, respondents might not be as honest knowing that the information they’re providing is going back up the chain of command. In addition, there might be a fear that such feedback might affect working relationships directly—not to mention compensation.  And according to Watson Wyatt’s *2001 Human Capital Index (HCI)*, a study of the linkages between specific HR practices and shareholder value at 750 large, publicly traded companies, 360-degree feedback programs were associated with a 10.6 percent decrease in shareholder value.  So what happens at Google when people write “unconstructive comments?”  Karp said managers are encouraged to use that as a “coachable moment” to talk to the person who wrote something unconstructive. However, at Google “this hasn’t been too much of a problem.”  **What’s Next?**  Professional development is another HR priority at Google. Its engineers are encouraged to spend 20 percent of their time developing products or service offerings. But their newest application, which is in development, would allow employees to self-direct their career development activities. They would build their own professional networks, develop their skills, understand potential career paths and pursue internal opportunities, Karp said.  “The idea here is that employees can build their own professional network.”  The company also takes full advantage of its own products that focus on collaboration, such as:   * Google Sites, which allows people to create web sites to share information. * Google Docs, which allows people to share documents, spreadsheets and presentations. * Google Calendar, which lets users arrange meetings, set schedules and publish event information. * Google Talk, an instant messenger program that allows pc-to-pc voice calls for free. * Start Page, which lets users preview their calendars and documents, add gadgets and search the web from one place.   “We look at all of this as a collaborative and productivity enhancer,” Karp said.  Although Karp encouraged those at the symposium to “let go of the notion that a single individual knows best and that the crowd won’t actively contribute in a candid and useful manner,” not everyone thought leveraging the wisdom of crowds is wise.  Sri Sankaran, a global process excellence manager for Corning, said, “I think it is viable for a company like Google” whose culture encourages it. “But to translate that to a large company like Corning, which has 26,000 employees [rolling] out HR systems in eight to 10 languages … well, we can’t afford to build a custom application like Google that has such a broad scope.”  “What I found really fascinating about this application, however, is how they’ve taken complex software and made it easy for their employees,” she said.  “When you think of Google, you think cool, high-tech, young. And looking at their applications—it speaks to their internal corporate culture.”  *Aliah D. Wright is an online editor/manager for SHRM.* |