

The making of a Great Place to Work® - the story of Google India

“For me, after working with Google, it has become easier to believe that the concept of a 'dream job' can exist. And I would like more and more people passionate about work to know that a company/professional life that they dream of actually exists.” – Employee comment, Google India

Google is number 3 in our list of Top 25 Best Workplaces in India. In US, it is number 1 in Fortune’s 100 Best Employers study done by Great Place to Work® Institute. With just around 10,000 employees globally Google receives 1300 applications each day in US alone. Google’s success story is well documented. At less than 10 years of age Google is worth more than 125 Billion USD.

When some my colleagues first studied Google, they found it difficult to believe that such an Organisation exists. Keep in mind that they study hundreds of different Organisations every year. So they spent an inordinate amount of time studying Google India’s practices, employee comments and, of course, the anonymous survey feedback. There is no doubt. Google India is a great place to work®.

It is also one of the most successful new age companies, creating more wealth in less time than any other Organisation in the world.

So is Google a Great Place to Work because its stock is \$ 483 or is it one of the most valuable companies of the world because it is a Great Place to Work? I spent one full day at Google in their Hyderabad campus recently to ask a few questions to a cross section of employees.

Stories of Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the cofounders of Google are popular across the business press. (Read David vise’s The Google Story in case you haven’t). So by the time Google started their operations in India, it was already a well known name, especially amongst the internet users. Employee after employee talked about joining the Organisation attracted by the power of the brand and the opportunity to work with really talented people. It was therefore, fascinating for me to discover first hand the Google employer brand, and more importantly how they make it work. Here are some of the things I discovered.

1. Create significant entry barriers at recruitment stage

Considering that some of the best brains choose to apply to Google, the recruitment team should have it easy. Strangely, one of the few gripes in the Organisation is about the time it takes to get the right person. Input control in Google is so strong that even today each employee’s profile and interview comments go to one of the founders before he or she is recruited!

Google's core values start with the statement "We want to work with great people." Back in the early years, when the Organisation was yet to make money, the founders were busy recruiting the best talent when many others were busy letting them go. (Remember the technology companies meltdown in 2000-01). All Google wanted at that time was to make a great product that would enable the entire world's information to be accessible to everyone at any time. They were not sure how it would help them make money. But they were sure they could not do it without the best brains. And if the best brains come together, money will follow. What Google could not offer in money, they made up in stocks and in dreams to change the way the world accesses information. And as the comment of the employee quoted above indicates, some dream jobs do come true.

It is not unusual for each candidate to have from six to even eleven interviews! One of the senior most managers in Hyderabad, Roy Gilbert Director of Online Sales & Operations confesses to spending 50 per cent of his time on meeting candidates. He is not alone. All managers who interview candidates go through Interview workshops. As one employee said, "The managers who interviewed me were genuinely interested in me as a person. They were taking notes. One even made a cup of coffee for me."

Google is reputed for its mathematics conundrums during recruitment screening. For example, how would you solve the cryptic equation $WWWDOT-GOOGLE=DOTCOM$, knowing that values of M & E could be interchanged. Or you may simply be asked what is the most beautiful math equation derived.

No wonder, the Recruitment team in India boasts of working for one of those rare companies that does not hold them accountable for filling vacancies in specific time. And once an employee joins there is a "Buddy" to make him feel right at home. But what makes many employees stay is the next point.

2. Trust, Empowerment and Freedom

Once an employee joins Google she experiences a pleasant change from many a previous employer. There is rarely a boss who continuously looks over her shoulder to figure out what the employee is doing. In fact, officially the employee is told that 20 per cent of her time is free to do what she pleases. Heard of Google Talk, Google News, Google Finance and gmail? They all started as a "20 per cent project"!

Google's philosophy is simple, "Get the brightest people in and create an environment that enables them to perform." Employees seem to reciprocate this trust by being obsessed about innovation building great products and services. All new products are launched internally, so that employees get a chance to give their vote of confidence or lack of it before customers do. Employees keep developing their expertise and consequently roles keep changing to keep pace with the employee's development. Something traditional HR experts with rigid job descriptions will find difficult to adjust to. The beauty of working for a Google is that one rarely gets caught in an endless routine job. None of Google's products remain the same even in the short term. (Unknown to many, Google's search quality keeps improving continuously)

The environment at Google is akin to a successful University. Sergei Brin is quoted as saying, “We run Google a bit like a university. We have lots of projects, about 100 of them, from molecular biology to building hardware, being done by teams of three or so people.” (The Google Story – David A. Wise)

Google realizes that a key to this culture of empowerment is accepting mistakes and failures. No project is rejected by its inability to predict viable cash flows. Indeed, viable cash flows can never be the primary criteria for making a business decision, as advertisers who want to influence Google’s search results have found out.

The relationship of trust that Google has with its employees is also reflected in the relationships it has with its users. Which is why, when Google decided to accept Government censorship laws in China (Google, however, notifies users when results have been censored) it was a major letdown for many people. While most of its competitors were already complying with the law of the land in China, it seems that when it came to Google, people put it on a higher pedestal. We trust Google to give us access to information in an unbiased and transparent manner.

With so much of trust on employees, what happens to the bad eggs? A few who might be tempted to be freeloaders? Surely, there must be some kind of forced ranking to weed out non-performers? The answer I received from senior executives and a cross section of employees was a clear No.

This brings me to the third aspect of the Google’s employer brand.

3. Feedback, feedback & some more feedback

Want to challenge a recent business decision or simply ask a question. TGIF (Thank God it’s Friday) meetings could be the forum for you. If you think there are others interested in your pet topic start an email group. TGIF is done religiously in all locations including in Global HO where the Founders do it themselves whenever they are present. The quarterly targets of any employee are available in the intranet. Google believes in taking stretch targets, and the targets and their achievement are transparent for all to see. When you have recruited some of the best brains, an open objectives and key results could be a powerful motivator. This is also a good antidote to inflated egos which some of the best brains are likely to develop in an environment where they are not surrounded by equally bright or brighter colleagues.

Working with great people can have its pitfalls. Many Organisations have found to their peril that internal unhealthy competition can quickly kill ideas and initiative. Google India seems to have succeeded in avoiding this. One key reason is the personal feedback process. Once in six months all key stakeholders for an employee gives feedback on her performance and the feedback is not an objective five point scale to be ticked. Employees receive pages of written comments detailing strengths and areas of development with concrete examples.

It is this feedback culture which makes any freeloader or “Non-Google” behaviour difficult to sustain, even if the behaviour is of your boss. “One person alone cannot affect your career positively or negatively, even if he is your boss,” I heard many employees saying.

In fact the culture of feedback in Google India is so strong that the structure/ design of the appraisal process become almost secondary. I am tempted to believe that if the six monthly feedback form was a blank sheet of paper, employees would still get rich feedback.

It is this culture that makes Google globally, and in India a winner in the talent market. People are not HR department’s responsibility. There is collective ownership for people and people related issues.

And this brings me to my last point about Google.

4. Google really cares about its people.

Here is a quiz from Fortune magazine on Google. Larry Page, Google’s founder is said to have proclaimed, “No human worker should be more than

- a. 20 feet away
 - b. 150 feet away
 - c. An elevator away
 - d. A hallway away
- from food.”

Regardless of which is the correct option, when you visit Google India you will come back convinced that the quote is correct. Once on campus, Googlers don’t need to worry about finding some excellent Indian and continental breakfast. Throughout the day Googlers have access to snacks of all kinds, fresh fruit; and meals of gourmet Asian, Italian, Indian, Mexican, or American fare.

Needless to say, after all this food, fitness is a key priority for Google, with the Organisation providing Gym, cardio exercises, aerobics and yoga.

Google’s employee care is more a philosophy and not a checklist based approach. For example if employees do not like the coffee, it will be changed rather than being told that the coffee machine is of reputed quality.

As one employee put it, “Much like the Surf Excel Ad “*Dag Ache he*”, when it comes to employee costs we believe, “*Kharche ache he*”

In an age when many Organisations’ HR mantra seems to be cash out of all perquisites, Google’s approach to caring for employees seems to be paying off. Or as one employee put it bluntly, “It is a strategy. Do all it takes for employees, but keeps raising the bar.”

Google deliberately sought to create great products (“We raise the world’s IQ”, said an employee). To create great products it had to attract the best talent. In the process it created one of the most valuable companies.

The author is CEO of The Great Place to Work® Institute, India. He can be reached at pbhattacharya@greatplacetowork.in Views expressed are personal, and are based on information provided by Google India and employees of Google India.