

Facebook Landing Team transports company culture

April 1 2011, By Mike Swift

AUSTIN, Texas - As Facebook evolves from insular Silicon Valley start-up to a global company with a necklace of offices around the planet, it is relying on a key tool to extend its unique culture - the Landing Team.

A year ago, [Facebook](#) had no one in Austin. Now, Austin is Facebook's biggest U.S. office outside Palo Alto, Calif., with about 110 engineers and [programmers](#) - most hired locally. Recreating Facebook's culture in Austin with a new set of hires was the job of six people, a meticulously screened group chosen from headquarters for their ability to be "culture carriers."

"Maintaining culture is one of the top priorities we have as a company," said Sarah Smith, a Stanford business school graduate who is head of online operations in Austin and led the Landing Team. "We're trying to be really smart and learn about our growth. So we're focused on building a few offices, but making sure they are really tied into the culture."

The Landing Team is a key tool for Facebook, as the social network strives to extend its unique identity and values as it grows explosively and opens offices from Dublin, Ireland to Hyderabad, India. Like the Peace Corps, Landing Team members make a significant commitment, moving to a far-away city for a set period - one year, for the Austin group.

During that time, Facebook's colonists are responsible for opening the office, recruiting and hiring the new workers, and ultimately, for

instructing them in the ways of Facebook - while doing the job they had in Palo Alto.

"It really has been the hardest I've ever worked in my career," said Nicci Ciranna, 26, who had only been at Facebook for one year before being selected for the Austin team.

"You're transitioning your life somewhere new, where you don't know anybody except your landing teammates," she said. "And beyond that, it's pushing you in every single professional direction: Learning how to be an amazing (hiring) interviewer for every single team in operations, not just your own team. Learning how to mentor and empower people. Learning every in and out of Facebook, in the context of the history of Facebook. I think that's the biggest challenge when you have an office of new hires ... how do you get them to understand what it means to be at Facebook?"

Facebook says it needs to open new offices to tap local talent and to build a presence closer to the global audience that uses its products. The social network now has more than 20 offices worldwide, following the opening of the first outside office in New York in November 2007.

The Austin team arrived in April to open an office responsible for technical support for Facebook advertisers and outside software developers, and for a risk team that deals with issues like credit card fraud. Facebook chose Austin because it needed that support office in the middle of the country, more in sync with other U.S. time zones, and the company liked the wealth of local talent, thanks to the University of Texas and Austin's tech history.

For Erik Fortin, a three-year Facebook veteran who grew up in Sunnyvale and had never lived outside the Bay Area, Austin was a chance to turn back the Facebook clock.

"It was an awesome opportunity to kind of see that growth happen all over again, from the beginning," said Fortin, 28. "It was the ability to come out here, start something from scratch, and kind of put your name on that."

Maintaining a coherent culture is critical for companies like Facebook, Zynga or Google, which are growing so rapidly that the closest comparisons might be the Manhattan Project to build the first atomic bomb, said Steve Blank, who teaches entrepreneurship at Stanford.

"This new class of companies is writing the new rule book for hyper-growth," Blank said. If a new office strays from the mission or values of Facebook, he said, it would be costly because that problem could be replicated through that rapid rate of growth.

In Austin, the Landing Team hired their first "class" of recruits about six weeks after they arrived, and promptly used a mainstay of Facebook culture - "Hackathon" - to demonstrate its values, which emphasize collaboration, risk-taking and speed.

Hackathon is a regular Facebook event where the only rule is that for that day, you cannot do your regular job. In Austin, the landing team bought paint and instructed the new hires to mark up the walls, in the tradition of Facebook's headquarters. One new hire showed up wearing a spacesuit - proof, the landing team felt, that the newbies were "getting" the Facebook culture.

"That first Hackathon really made us feel like we're a startup within a startup," Ciranna said.

Since then, the team has hired 11 additional classes of 10 to 15. The pace is so fast that the second-newest hires sometimes instruct the newest in the door.

The Austin office occupies space in a downtown office tower with PricewaterhouseCoopers, a cultural mismatch clear in the lobby as 20-something Facebook workers in jeans pass accountants in suits.

Inside the office, the style of Facebook's Palo Alto office reigns. There are the same long wooden tables lined with computer monitors, the same lack of partitions between each worker, the conference rooms whimsically named for musicians, and the same work atmosphere - a mixture of intense focus and fun.

The Landing Team represents Facebook's home-grown take on a common problem for fast-growing companies. Like Google, which sends experienced Googlers to seed its culture in new offices, Facebook says the Landing Team is critical.

"We think about, 'Be open, Be bold, Move fast, Build trust' - these are things we talk about and demonstrate from the start" to new hires, Smith said.

With their commitment almost up, Austin's team members have faced the same tough decision: They can stay in Austin, with the group they hand-picked and have grown close to. Or they can return to Palo Alto. They have had to make that emotional decision knowing the experience has changed them professionally and personally.

Smith, 33, has decided to stay in Austin for now. She teared up while talking about the connections she's made. "It's an amazing team, and I really love it here," she said. Fortin will stay too. His conviction about becoming a leader at Facebook solidified during the year. "I learned I could stand up in front of a large group of people, and not completely choke," he said.

Ciranna, however, will return to Palo Alto, working on Facebook

internal communications to knit its growing global network of offices.

"I've grown in this role so much," she said. "It's so amazing to have a company of this magnitude and impact have trust in you to go and do this."

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Citation: Facebook Landing Team transports company culture (2011, April 1) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-04-facebook-team-company-culture.html>

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