

Behind the scenes at hip and hard-charging YouTube, Google

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Clearly, this isn't the typical American workplace. Just inside the sleek glass doors of YouTube's corporate headquarters is a rock climbing wall - "for Googlers only." Straight ahead, five guys in T-shirts and jeans cluster around a foosball table, engrossed in a lunch hour game. Nearby, a Russian film crew jabbars away, shooting footage for a documentary on the global company. Over at the reception desk, the candy jar is a big, red, furry head of Sesame Street's Elmo, watched over by the receptionist's tiny, quivering Chihuahua, who's definitely not stuffed.

And that's just the lobby.

From the standard company attire - jeans and T-shirts, mostly - to the indoor putting green, the outdoor Frisbee golf course and the gourmet cafe dishing up free fare all day, YouTube is a work environment that's more akin to summer camp for adults.

YouTube and [Google](#), its parent company in nearby Mountain View, are two of Silicon Valley's hotbeds of hiring. Jobs here are some of the most coveted around.

"Google has an incredible amount of cachet. They offer benefits that blow away the competition," said Dawn Block, a veteran Silicon Valley technology jobs headhunter.

Behind all the perks and quirks, there's a serious business. Google is a \$170 billion global empire spanning more than 40 countries, with offices

from Madrid to Mumbai. Having morphed far beyond its [Internet search engine](#) roots, Google's business brawn has attracted [antitrust scrutiny](#) in this country and abroad.

But the atmosphere inside its smaller YouTube subsidiary more closely resembles that of a young startup.

To find out what it's like to land a job and work at one of the hippest and most hard-charging companies in California, we recently spent an afternoon on YouTube's campus. Our hosts: Christopher Dale and Josh Sassoon, two 30-somethings from Sacramento, Calif., who agree they took "meandering paths" to their Google jobs.

Dale, 36, is a corporate communications manager who toggles his time between the Google and YouTube campuses.

Growing up in Davis, Calif., Dale expected to become a lawyer, but an uninspiring summer job at a New York law firm stamped out that desire. Instead, armed with an English lit degree from Colgate University and a master's from Cambridge, Dale landed in San Francisco at a high-tech PR firm where he merged his two passions: writing and technology.

He arrived in 2000, just in time for the dot-com debacle. His employer went bankrupt; Dale survived by starting his own marketing firm and then joining a tech-focused PR agency. All the while, he kept hearing "all these cool things this company called Google was doing."

In 2007, Dale got an unsolicited email from a Google recruiter on LinkedIn. The interview process was "rigorous" and stretched over several months. Hired to handle global crisis communications and public affairs, Dale has been at Google for three years, and is known for his "anti-uniform" of hipster eyeglasses, white shirt and, yes, a tie.

Sassoon, 30, is a "user-experience designer," which means he works with YouTube's engineering team, helping design new features like Cosmic Panda, where users gather and "curate" favorite videos, channels and play lists.

After graduating from Rio Americano High School in Sacramento, Sassoon majored in art history at the University of California-Los Angeles. He interned at a local architecture firm, where he developed a passion for visual design, and at Intel, where he taught himself technical coding.

By the end of college, he was creating websites for small companies, which eventually led to jobs in New York at MySpace and at Sony Music, where he designed more than 200 websites for performers from J. Lo to American Idol's Adam Lambert. Last year, Sassoon was wooed back to California by Apple, which hired him as a visual designer.

It wasn't a good fit. Despite being a huge fan of Apple's user-friendly technology and sleek product lines, he found its corporate culture too stuffy. "It's a very top-down company with a singular vision. That's just the way it's structured."

He stayed less than a year before "finding my fit" at YouTube. Hired just six months ago, Sassoon is a "NuTuber," the YouTube vernacular for new employees. (At Google, they're called "Nooglers.")

While job growth in Sacramento and elsewhere in California remains anemic, here in the tech-dotted valley, Google, YouTube and others like LinkedIn, Facebook, Salesforce and Zynga are "hiring furiously," their websites littered with job openings, say recruiters.

"They may only be hiring five, 10 or 15 people," said Block, "but in the aggregate it adds up."

All that competition has taken a bit of the luster off Google's workplace dominance, say longtime Silicon Valley recruiters like Block.

"It's waning a bit," says Block, who has had clients pass up Google offers to work instead for smaller startups.

Block said that's partly because Google's global size has erased some of the startup fervor that characterized its early years. Plus, with fewer stock options and more contract hiring, there's less assurance of job stability or the potential to become an "instant millionaire."

Google's work environment is not for wimps, either, said Patti Wilson, a longtime [Silicon Valley](#) executive coach. For instance, she said, employee performance reviews are quarterly and available for your peers to review.

"On one level, that's really egalitarian and shows no favoritism," she said. "On another level, you're held accountable on a very high level for getting your job done. It's not for the faint of heart who don't want to work hard."

Some 3,000 applications a day come into Google. Job candidates typically go through four interviews, with both managers and their would-be peers. The company prides itself on asking tough questions "that test your ability to think on your feet and ... (react) to stuff on the fly," Dale said.

Google does not disclose employee salaries or stock options. There are traditional company benefits: an employer-matching 401(k) plan, health care, child care.

And there are the offbeat perks, like free bicycles or Razr scooters to glide down the sunlit office corridors. Guest speakers are common: A

Buddhist monk spoke last week. Earlier in the year, it was songstresses Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift. There's a thatched "You Tiki" bar where staffers whip up occasional after-work cocktails.

The company's gourmet - and free - cafes are famous. Not surprisingly, said Dale, most employees rarely drift off campus for lunch.

"By keeping employees here and talking about ideas ... a lunch conversation could lead to Gmail or some other Google innovation," Dale said.

Despite making work a place you'd seemingly never want to leave, Dale says there's a big emphasis on "work/life balance." On weekends, his boss believes in turning off the cellphone and emails, unless it's an emergency. "Weekends are for spending with your family," says Dale, a married father of two kids who hops the free Google shuttle van from San Francisco each morning.

"Every single day, I wake up and think I'm so lucky to be working for this company," said Dale. "Whether it's protests in Syria or footage of Japan's earthquake or a dad who's lost his child and reaching out for support ... There's a real sense of connecting with people's lives and changing the world."

Compared to the more straight-laced corporate culture of Apple, Google's YouTube feels "like a startup but with the resources of a far bigger company," says Sassoon, clad in rumpled cords, T-shirt and blue Converse sneakers.

Sitting in a conference room where conceptual ideas are scribbled all over the whiteboards behind him, he says, "Here, every week, every single person at every level can contribute something. That's a very exciting environment."

So enticing, in fact, Sassoon says he and his technical colleagues don't want to miss a day at the office. The feeling is so pervasive there's a Google term for it: "FOMO" or Fear of Missing Out.

Asked if it all doesn't sound a bit cult-like, Dale laughs.

"It would be if we all weren't so disheveled, nerdy and ... Googley. We're all just really passionate about what we're doing."

Ultimately, that's what makes working at Google so irresistible for many.

"The companies with the strongest culture - Google, [YouTube](#) - it's like gravity," said Block. "It holds you in place and makes you feel all-powerful."

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