

The opposite of evil: Google named best place to work in America

January 20 2012, By Mike Swift

Google has a new weapon in the intense war for engineering talent in Silicon Valley: The search giant on Thursday was named by Fortune magazine as the best place to work in America.

Google capped a year when it hired about 7,000 people, the most intense growth spurt in the search giant's 13-year history, with perhaps the pre-eminent human relations title in corporate America, moving up from fourth to first on Fortune's annual pecking order of the 100 Best Companies to Work For.

"Employees rave about their mission, the culture, and the famous perks of the Plex: bocce courts, a bowling alley, eyebrow shaping (for a fee) in the New York office," Fortune wrote.

There's no doubt that there are substantial perks to working at [Google](#) - ranging from the new 40,000 square-foot park that the company built for its employees at its Mountain View, Calif., headquarters last year, to the fleet of electric Chevy Volts and Nissan Leafs that Googlers can check out for free to run errands at lunch time. But the search giant says it won the Best Place to Work title not because it focuses on perks, but because it focuses on people.

"What people often focus on are the flashy, showy things, like the massages and the food, which are important to us," said Laszlo Bock, Google's [senior vice president](#) for people operations. "But they are not the real story about what makes our culture work."

The real story, Bock and other Google executives said in a series of interviews this week about the company's culture, is that Google treats employees as the owners of the company, that it has an ethic of corporate transparency that allows rank and file workers to question and expect honest answers from their superiors - even CEO [Larry Page](#), at the company's weekly "TGIF" all-hands meetings - and that the company tries to empower employees to feel that everyone can have an impact, both internally, and in the larger world.

"All of that stuff is free," Bock said.

Of course, Google does spend extra money on things like its free food, full benefits for the partners of lesbian, gay and transgender workers, and 18-week maternity leaves at 100 percent pay - the company said it was unable to make an estimate for how much it spends on employee quality of life. But Bock said there is also a payoff to Google's willingness to pay what he called an "innovation tax."

For one, the company's data shows that its maternity leave policy, which was extended by six paid weeks in 2007, results in a better retention rate for female workers. Google last year gave a 10 percent across the board pay raise to all its employees, something that had Wall Street fuming about Google's spending habits at the start of 2011. But as the company's global workforce expanded to over 32,000 people by the end of 2011, Google's stock has been on the rise again, climbing more than 20 percent in the second half of the year, following a drop after Page resumed the CEO's post in April.

"My job as a leader is to make sure everybody in the company has great opportunities, and that they feel they're having a meaningful impact and are contributing to the good of society. As a world, we're doing a better job of that. My goal is for Google to lead, not follow that," Page said in an interview with Fortune.

Even the air at Google is better, one result of co-founders Page and Sergey Brin's ambition from the beginning to build a company with an employee environment that was second to none, said Craig Silverstein, Google's first employee, and Stacy Sullivan, Google's chief culture officer.

Page and Brin both have an extremely sensitive sense of smell and alertness to toxins; Page turned thumbs down on a building that would have been Google's first home in Mountain View because it was too close to the freeway, and he didn't want employees exposed to car fumes, Silverstein said.

At the Googleplex, the company filters its air to a much higher level of filtration than is typical for a commercial office building, "to something you might see in a hospital-type setting," said Anthony Ravitz, who heads what Google called the "Green Team" for the company's Real Estate & Workplace Services.

The goal isn't just to avoid employee sick time and make them more productive, although Google is studying its data to see whether it is having that effect.

"We're really thinking about long-term health effects," Ravitz said. "How can we extend the life span of our employees by 30 years?"

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