

Facebook's rite of passage into 'the Hacker Way'

April 23 2012, By Mike Swift

Congratulations, recruit! It's time to learn the ropes of your Facebook engineering job.

Take a seat at one of Facebook's long, white desks and look at the piece of paper taped on your monitor: "Welcome to Facebook!"

Underneath, printed in big, bold, red letters, are slogans like: "We Hack Therefore We Are," or "Move Fast and Break Things." Within days, your [software code](#) will be in front of our more than 845 million users.

And so begins the six-week journey of a new employee class in Facebook's "Bootcamp," an experience shared by every engineering hire, whether they are a grizzled [Silicon Valley](#) veteran or a fresh-faced computer science grad. Since 2008, hundreds of Facebook's engineers have passed through Bootcamp, which may lack the physical tests of military basic training but does provide the same kind of shared experience and cultural indoctrination into the world's largest social network.

Bootcamp is one part employee orientation, one part software training program and one part fraternity/sorority rush. When new engineering recruits are hired at Facebook, they typically do not know what job they will do. They choose their job assignment and product team at the culmination of Bootcamp, a program that exemplifies Facebook's adherence to founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's "Hacker Way," an [organizational culture](#) that is supposed to be egalitarian, risk-taking, self-

starting, irreverent, collaborative and creative.

Each new recruit needs to take a deep breath. Within a few days, all are expected to be pushing live software updates out to the better part of a billion users. If a Bootcamper crashes part of Facebook doing that, well, it won't be the first time.

"I would describe it as a way for us to educate our engineers not only on how we code and how we do our systems, but also how to culturally think about how to attack challenges and how to meet people," said Joel Seligstein, the head of the Bootcamp program, who might be described as Facebook's answer to Yoda. "We like to teach what's important very early on, on Day 1. I would say it's even more of a cultural program than it is a teaching program."

From "the HP Way" at Hewlett-Packard to Google's sense of what's "Googley," company culture is a mainstay of Silicon Valley life. With workplace perks like free gourmet food and other amenities, life at Facebook doesn't look much different on the surface from Google, Zynga, Twitter or many other young, fast-growing Internet companies.

But Facebook takes its zeal for culture one step further. It plasters the walls of its offices with slogans like "Code Wins Arguments" and "Move Fast and Break Things," Facebook's version of Chairman Mao's Little Red Book of quotations. Rather than top-down commandments, however, employees are encouraged to tweak those messages or add their own opinions in chalk or paint, a ritual called "Hacking the Space."

Within the company, it is an article of faith that the culture of constant change embodied by those sayings differentiates Facebook from its competitors, and will allow the company to remain nimble even as it goes through a landmark initial public offering of stock this year.

"It's a quasi-religious iconoclasm," said David Kirkpatrick, author of "The Facebook Effect," a 2010 book about the rise of the social network. "Facebook takes its culture deadly seriously. They know the pace at which they arose and became dominant in their field was even faster than [Mark Zuckerberg](#) expected. They also know that things on the Internet are constantly changing at an extremely rapid rate, and the only way any organization can stay alive is to be unbelievably dynamic."

Nothing encapsulates that culture better than Bootcamp, a program started in 2008 by Andrew "Boz" Bosworth, a burly and gregarious Saratoga, Calif., native with a map of California tattooed on his forearm who was one of Zuckerberg's teaching assistants at Harvard. One of the keepers of Facebook culture, Bosworth started Bootcamp when Facebook's engineering organization passed 150 people, a threshold known as "Dunbar's number," the maximum number of people with whom humans are believed to be able to maintain stable social relationships.

Almost immediately after reporting for Bootcamp, new hires get assigned by Seligstein to work independently on a few real software bugs and problems, between lectures and other Bootcamp activities. The expectation is that some of their code should be ready to go live within days - one way Bootcamp tries to unlearn habits that don't fit with Facebook's urgent, ship-it-now culture.

The program is so important that Zuckerberg included an explanation in his "Hacker Way" letter on Facebook's philosophy that accompanied the company's IPO filing in February.

"There are a lot of folks in the industry who manage engineers and don't want to code themselves, but the type of hands-on people we're looking for are willing and able to go through Bootcamp," Zuckerberg wrote.

Now that Facebook is growing so fast - about one-third of the company's roughly 3,200 employees have been hired since the start of 2011 - Bootcamp has become a critical way to expose new hires to the company's values and culture.

Beyond all else, Facebook executives say, employees have not just the freedom, but the obligation, to try new things and fail, because "shipping code" - adding new software that runs the website - as quickly as possible is crucial to the company's success.

What other Silicon Valley companies "don't do is let their employees take risks, and have failure be OK," said Jocelyn Goldfein, a Facebook director of engineering. "I think that is part of the secret sauce at Facebook. I didn't understand this one until after I got here - that the tolerance for failure, that 'Move Fast and Break Things,' is actually what keeps us open to continue to innovate."

"Can you think of another site that routinely pisses off such a large percentage of their customers?" she asked, referring to the user outrage that greets every Facebook change. "But you can think of lots that had plenty of happy users, and eventually dwindled into irrelevance."

Even though she was a longtime manager at VMware and high-profile hire in 2010, Goldfein went through Bootcamp like everybody else. By her first week, she said, she had shipped more software code at Facebook than she did in her seven years at VMware.

And, as has happened before, a fellow Bootcamper, working on one of the software bugs that new recruits are typically assigned to fix, made a mistake that crashed part of Facebook.

"That was a really scary experience for him," Goldfein said. "But no one said, 'You idiot; you don't belong here.' They said, 'Hey, you tried, and

here's what we're going to do to try to fix it, and this is what you've learned.' That experience of having people rally around you is really tremendous, and what it teaches you to do to is rally around other people."

A Bootcamp class, which can range from three to 40 new engineers, doesn't look much different during the program from any other group of Facebook engineers. There are lectures and talks from top executives like Vice President of Engineering Mike Schroepfer, and Bootcampers learn about the various product groups in preparation for deciding where they want to work. But for the most part, they work independently mastering Facebook's software code base, the long tables that support their large monitors cluttered with cans of Red Bull and Starbucks iced coffee.

One current Bootcamp attendee, Ali-Reza Adl-Tabatabai, was most recently the director of the programming systems lab and senior principal engineer at Intel Labs.

"You have people coming into the company - they are engineers, but within the week, you are allowing them to change a part of the product that then becomes visible to millions of users," said Adl-Tabatabai. "One thing that really surprised me was how open the culture is. It seems there are no secrets inside."

An early lesson in Bootcamp is that it's fine for any employee to walk up to Zuckerberg or Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg to talk about an engineering problem or a company issue.

"That is actually very hard to teach people," Seligstein said.

But it is a significant lesson.

"What makes (Facebook) flat is that Zuck is very hands-on with the product," Goldfein said. "When he wants to find out what's going on in his organization, he doesn't go talk to the VP, who talks to the director, who talks to the manager, who talks to the engineer. Zuck goes and talks directly to the engineer."

THE "HACKER WAY":

CEO Mark Zuckerberg and others at Facebook believe the company's culture is an important element of its success. A look at some of Facebook's key internal values:

-Egalitarian: Facebook lacks hierarchical titles like "principal engineer" or "senior engineer."

-Flat: At no time should there be more than three layers of management between an engineer working on a product and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. Even for a major product like Facebook's new Timeline feature, engineering teams begin as a dozen people or fewer.

-Just Do It: Engineers are expected to tackle problems on their own accord, to build a prototype that fixes a problem, rather than debating how to do something, or spending too much time trying to get it perfect.

-"Hackathons" and "Hack-a-months": Every few months, Facebook engineers pull an all-nighter called Hackathon, trying out software ideas that sometimes turn into real products. Employees are encouraged to do temporary tours with other product teams, something called "Hack-a-month."

FACEBOOK SLOGANS

Starting with Bootcamp, Facebook recruits are exposed to a series of slogans that are intended to encapsulate the company's values. Among the sayings posted on red-letter posters around any [Facebook](#) office are:

- Move Fast and Break Things
- What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?
- The Foolish Wait
- Our Work Is Never Over
- We Hack Therefore We Are
- Are You Fearless?
- Done Is Better Than Perfect
- Code Wins Arguments

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