

Why Would Anyone Leave Google?

By Deb Perelman

It's hard to believe that workers would leave Google, yet many have in recent months. What gives?

You would have to be living on a desert island not to have heard by now about Google's workplaces, which have been awarded top honors by nearly every available yardstick of corporate culture.

And what's not to love? The perks, from free gourmet lunches to swimming spas and childcare, are unmatched by Google's competitors; they frequently host educational panels with people like Barack Obama, as well as tech training sessions. Employees are encouraged to allocate 20 percent of their time to personal creative endeavors.

Yet not only do employees leave their jobs at Google, they've been doing so more often in recent months. Vice-president of global communications and public affairs Elliot Schrage went to Facebook last week, two months after Sheryl Sandberg left to become the number two executive over there, and CIO Dough Merrill skitted over to EMI in April.

While Google insists each time that it is not facing a brain drain—which is correct, given that more people want to work at Google than don't—the visibility of many of the recent departures have observers doubting this claim.

So what gives?

Some argue that "fun" isn't the be-all, end-all in a workplace. In fact, when fun is pushed too hard in employees faces things like kindergarten color schemes, foosball tables and impromptu dodge ball games, could make employees feel like the company is trying too hard.

"What makes [some tech workspaces] so bad? Some offend with exposed fluorescent lights, gray cubicles and a dystopian corporate environment. But others, with their pseudo-hip graffiti, kindergarten toys and plastic decorations—all in a desperate attempt to seem 'Internet-y'—come off even worse," wrote the tech gossip blog Valleywag about overly enthusiastic workplaces.

Others note that Google had always been good at retaining employees by treating them like children—doing their laundry, giving them free food and letting them sit on bouncy-ball chairs. But that eventually, all children want to grow up.

"Google hires programmers straight out of college and tempts them with all the benefits of college life. Indeed, as the hiring brochures stress, the place was explicitly modeled upon college... But as the gleam wears off the Google, I can see why it's no place anyone would want to hang around for that long," blogger Aaron Schwartz argued on Raw Thought.

Many point to Google's recent stock troubles, and the vastly different riches of pre- and post-IPO employees. Five months after hitting an all-time high in November, the search giant's stock hit a low in March. Though it has made a bit of a rebound on the heels of excellent Q1 earnings, it likely makes little different to Google employees that joined after their 2004 IPO.

But more often than not, analysts and pundits point to the fact that even at the most fun company on earth, just like at all of the other companies in the world, employees are not actually changing the world each day from their cubicles, but instead making the smallest adjustments to the largest product.

“A lot changes as a company becomes really successful and goes from being entrepreneurial to institutional. Sometimes the most fun part of a company like that is not working there when it is already a success, but growing it from the beginning. When a company reaches that point, some people will naturally transition out,” Chuck Pappalardo, principal and managing director at Trilogy Search, an executive recruiting firm, told eWEEK.

Sarcastic pundit Fake Steve Jobs argued that Google’s employees departures, are its own doing, creating a culture that is so much fun that the actual day-to-day tasks of trying to sell online ads more efficiently is a crushing disappointment to its Stamford and MIT-graduate recruits.

“[Google] makes a big deal of only hiring these super-high-IQ kiddies and the fact is that most of them truly are smart, but then you put them into this horribly dull and easy drone work on AdWords and AdSense and they’re all bored to tears and totally disappointed because they really really really thought they were going to do something meaningful with their lives and now they’re just worker bees--pampered worker bees, sure, but still,” writes Fake Steve Jobs.

It would also be difficult to overlook where many employees are departing to. The same promise of excitement and innovation that drew many of these tech minds to Google in the first place is sure to have a similar appeal as younger, fresher players come to the field.

According to Wired.com, which keeps an ongoing tally of departing Google employees, three early employees left to start the popular microblogging platform Twitter, three others founded Ooyala, a video delivery platform and as noted earlier, even more have left for Facebook.

A few former employees, their pockets lined with the benefits of being working at Google before and after their IPO, joined venture capitalist firms or became angel investors.

“A lot of people made a lot of money working there, and took some level of stock and there’s a lot of cool, interesting stuff to do with this. Silicon Valley is probably the best place in the world for inventors with ideas, so it’s not about leaving Google because you’re unhappy, but because you’re ready for the next big thing,” said Pappalardo.

Phillip Lessen at Google Blogscoped, a news blog, notes that the path of ex-employees may well come full circle if their ventures are successful or interesting enough that their former employer wants to buy them, but warns that even this could have its pitfalls.

“Any such acquisition may be enough of a demoralizing factor to those who work at Google that it could be risky for Google’s management to consider; it may almost equal telling their employees that the best way to achieve something at Google is to quit Google.”



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