The science behind Google's workplace culture

by Rachel Ranosa
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Google's workplace culture rates highly on Glassdoor and the tech giant was recently voted the best employer in a survey by job site Comparably – the latest in a long list of accolades.

The internet company has long been famous for giving above-industry-standard pay and benefit packages, along with everyday perks, to its engineers, researchers, creatives, and top thinkers.

The people team at Google knows, however, there's more to employee happiness than just handing out rewards and subsidies. Every step HR takes to promote a positive office culture is scientific.

Google's winning HR strategy didn't just happen overnight.

Experts suggest the perks and bonuses simply reflect a core element of its management strategy: understanding the workforce through people analytics.

Qualitative and quantitative

As a data-driven company, Google crunches the numbers and identifies the trends that most employers tend to miss without a people analytics strategy in place.

The team relies on predictive analytics and experimental research to help them "uncover new insights, solve people problems, and direct HR actions," Google revealed on its re:Work website.

Laszlo Bock, former senior vice president of Google's people operations, called this data-driven approach "moving from hunches to science".

Google's HR department analyzes taken-for-granted aspects of the workplace to tap into what really makes workers happy. Insights into everyday concerns are always backed by hard data as well as feedback from employees.

For example, people analytics showed Googlers were satisfied spending three to four minutes in the lunch line since it gave them ample time to socialize. Going beyond that, however, made them feel they were wasting time.

Another example is how the people team examined Googlers' view of authority. While employees might 'feel' reluctant to follow management decrees, the people team went down a scientific route to determine whether (and why) management was effective or ineffective.

The company's people operations gathered feedback from employee surveys and managers' performance ratings, analyzed these against productivity metrics, and discovered that great managers were a driving force behind great teams.

Digging deeper into people analytics, Google pinpointed the traits of effective team leaders. HR reviewed survey comments, management nominations, and performance evaluations, and held double-blind interviews with those deemed the strongest and weakest performers.

Google's secret to people analytics

Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods "not only replaces anecdotal and untested strategies with processes backed up by data," said Paul Burrin, vice president at HR technology group Sage People, "it also helps to engage employees who know that their feedback has a direct impact on human resources across the company."

Can smaller companies follow Google's brand of HR leadership?

Anybody can, said Ji-A Min, head data scientist at AI-powered software group Ideal.com.

"Even without Google's deep pockets and brand recognition, you can still use the lessons of Google's people analytics team and start optimizing your HR practices today."

The secret is to collect relevant data, use evidence-based HR methods, and never forget the 'human' in human resources, she said.

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