

Job searchers

Anne Fawcett takes a look inside Google to see if it really is the best place in the world to work.

People go to extraordinary lengths to work for Google. Late last year, German network administrator Sebastian Klein held a series of Google-related domain names to ransom. He demanded one thing in return: the opportunity to work for Google. He was unsuccessful.

Another aspiring Googler set up a high-profile blog, www.cangooglehearme.com. Google heard the enterprising geek and even invited him into its famed "Googleplex" but the blogger is still self-employed.

Google spokesmen won't be drawn on either report, fearful of encouraging extreme or unconventional applications, but they admit winning an interview with the company isn't easy.

According to some reports, Google USA receives about 3000 job applications a day. Google Australia won't confirm the number of applications it receives but there is no shortage of eager candidates. In January, *Fortune* magazine voted Google the best company to work for in the US - for the second year running.

So what is Google's secret? According to 25-year-old software engineer Adam Schuck, it's the opportunity to work with

some of the biggest brains in the business. "I'm blown away by the people I get to work with on a daily basis," he says. "I sit directly opposite one of the creators of Google Maps, which was developed here in Australia. Right next to him is the creator of Google Calendar. And one of the guys who interviewed me for the job wrote one of my university textbooks."

In common with all the company's software engineers, Schuck is encouraged to spend 20 per cent of his working hours on a project of his choosing - whether or not this benefits Google directly.

One of Schuck's recent projects involved integrating Google Maps with Google's photo-sharing website, so people could link their holiday snaps with locations.

Schuck has taken advantage of working in a global company and done stints in New York and Tokyo.

Michael Fox, relationship manager for the company's Sydney AdWords team, took to Google's ethical approach.

"I wanted to work for a company that is doing something good," the 26-year-old says. "One of Google's corporate mottos is, 'Don't be evil'. And you really see people making decisions on that. If

we have the option to add a feature that will lose trust in users but crank up dollars, we don't do it."

Employees get virtually unlimited sick leave, medical insurance, up to \$6000 tuition reimbursement a year, flexible working hours and a \$2000 cash bonus for referring a friend who accepts a job offer with the company. For the socially conscious, Google matches an employee's charitable contributions of up to \$3000 per year. Employee turnover, Google claims, is "virtually zero".

Cynics claim the perks are to poach-proof employees in the competitive world of IT. But Professor Chris Jackson from the Australian School of Business argues this isn't a bad thing.

"If you can retain people by giving them a free lunch, that is pretty cheap considering the cost of recruiting and training new staff," he says.

On-site perks may increase employees' engagement and sense of being valued - both of which can increase productivity and reduce turnover. Google's informal culture is one of its big strengths. Employees are encouraged to be independent - micromanagement is frowned upon.

"A lot of well-educated, democratic people want a working



Googlers ... employees Karina Wells, Michael Fox and Adam Schuck. Photo: Jennifer Soo

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Michael Fox, Google

environment in which they feel they are engaging with society in a responsible way, seeing the outcomes they create and working more in a team than under a boss who is feared," Jackson says.

But creating a workplace culture such as Google's takes clued recruiting. Jackson says some employees may take advantage of a lack of supervision and slack off.

"Some people might not feel very comfortable in an informal, relaxed working environment because they want structure," he says.

Google screens its employees thoroughly, putting them through an interview process that can take anywhere from two to six months.

Fox attended 13 interviews over six months before being hired. He estimates he is two to three more times productive at Google than in any of his former workplaces.

According to a survey of Australian and New Zealand

companies by Hewitt Associates for the 2006-07 financial year, the best employers had high numbers of employees who consistently spoke positively about their organisations, couldn't imagine working anywhere else and would willingly put in extra effort for the company.

Those companies included the Cancer Council of NSW, Microsoft, American Express, Salesforce and Vodafone.

Caroline Vickers-Willis, marketing director for recruiter Ross Human Directions Limited, says that above all, employees value opportunities for learning and development.

"We never have difficulty filling roles with organisations that are global, technology- or systems-oriented," Vickers-Willis says. "There is a sense that larger organisations offer greater flexibility in career development. That isn't available to the same extent with niche employers."

Inside the googleplex

One of the things that draws people to Google is the opportunity to work with some of the world's best minds.

Google's culture is one of openness and collaboration. Employees are encouraged to spend 20 per cent of their working hours on projects of their own choosing. This has led to many of Google's most successful products, including Gmail and Google Maps.

Google Australia's headquarters, though much smaller, provides its 200 employees with a range of amenities including a gym, tennis courts, a cafe, and a massage service.

AdWords' regional manager, Karina Wells, says that one of the reasons she joined Google is the company's commitment to social responsibility. "It's not just about the money," she says. "It's about the opportunity to work with people who are passionate about making a difference in the world."