
Powering the Google engine: innovation is key



By Karen Cho

It's a \$20 billion company with a formidable staff strength of 20,000, but the spirit of innovation (and enterprise) is alive and well at Google Inc, 11 years after the company was founded by then-students Larry Page and Sergey Brin.

“One of the things I think is special to innovation at Google ... is that, as much as you can do a lot with Google today, it is just as appealing to the novice, as it is was on day one, and that is something that is difficult for most technology businesses to accomplish,” says Dave Girouard, President, Enterprise of Google, who took part in Global Entrepolis@Singapore, in conjunction with the APEC SME Summit 2009.

Fostering the innovative streak at Google that has led to its phenomenal success today was, however, done rather unconventionally -- with employees given an usually high level of autonomy. That, says Girouard, is because while Google is no start-up, it still wants to maintain an environment that feels like a start-up.

“(So) we are about saying yes. This is not a top-down culture; it’s not a place

where you have to go seek approval to do something. There is an incredible amount of freedom to doing what you think is right and to spend your time how you think your time ought to be spent. It's a challenging model for most companies to think about that, and it has to start with the type of people you hire and the type of culture you build. But it is fundamental to Google's success that people feel the freedom to act and take action, and do things on their own."

"Larry and Sergey fundamentally believe that people working on what they choose to work on, what they're passionate about, have an order of magnitude more in terms of productivity than someone's who's just directed and told what to do. It is a very central tenet of innovation at Google," he adds.

With that in mind, Girouard explains that Google has devised what he calls "a notion of 20 per cent time." This means anybody at Google can use 20 per cent of their time -- one day a week, a week every five weeks -- however they choose to define it, for them to work on what they want to work on. It also means their manager doesn't tell them what to do. "It's a very unique thing and it's given birth to a few things you might have heard of, Google News and Gmail."

For example, Google News, he told INSEAD Knowledge, was invented by a single engineer who wanted to be able to scan headlines from multiple websites quickly and compare stories which had been created by different sources. "It was a simple idea and frankly, today, it's still a very simple idea, but that's what makes it special."

Girouard concedes that not every idea may bear fruit, but says there is internally a "formula" to assess new ideas. "We have a 70/20/10 model which Sergey Brin came up with several years ago, which is 70 per cent of our efforts are to be focused on our core business, 20 per cent should be focused on related but new areas that we're developing off of that, and 10 per cent we should reserve for 'crazy' ideas, some of which may turn into great advancements and many of which may not pan out at all," he adds.

To keep powering the (search) engine that is Google, Girouard says its research and development takes place in "a couple of dozen cities around the world", including Tokyo, Sydney and Beijing.

“We want to hire the best and brightest computer science talent in the world and we certainly know we can’t do all that in Silicon Valley. So we’ve put a lot of energy toward building a competence in doing distributed development of products.”

“Our goal is great ideas are going to come from everywhere and great computer scientists are in all parts of the world.”

Girouard, however, is less certain when it comes to predicting the company’s future. “I think Google is designed to not know where we'll be in 10 years. The way we think about technology in our businesses, we have some very bold initiatives and some ideas that we think are very important.”

Universal access to information, he adds, is at the centre of it. “We have a lot of seeds we've planted: machine translation of content between any language in the world, everybody having broadband access all the time, mobile devices as good or better than a PC desktop. So we have some fundamental ideas but beyond that, frankly we don't know more than anybody else does. We just have a vision for the way it ought to be and we provide energy towards building that world.”

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