Google Adjusts Hiring Process As Needs Grow.

GOOGLE INC.'S RECRUITING process is legendary in Silicon Valley. Tales abound of job candidates who suffered through a dozen or more in-person interviews, and applicants with years of work experience who were spurned after disclosing they had so-so college grades.

Now Google is attempting to fine tune its approach toward hiring staff. In addition to making the experience less grueling for would-be employees, it hopes to do a better job of offering the right jobs to the right people as it continues its rapid expansion.

Google has long attributed much of its success to its ability to attract bright minds and to build a culture where those hires can excel. But in February 2005, Google co-founder Sergey Brin acknowledged to analysts that the company's high bar for hiring was holding back its expansion.

This past March, the Mountain View, Calif., company brought in a new head of human resources, former General Electric Co. executive Laszlo Bock, who also worked at the consulting firm McKinsey & Co. Under Mr. Bock, Google launched a large-scale survey of current employees, seeking to identify the factors that correlate with success at the company. "Everything works if you're trying to hire 500 people a year or 1,000," says Mr. Bock, 33 years old. But "we're hiring much larger numbers than that, and so it forces us to go back and say . . . what do we need to change in the way we interface with our candidates?"

One initiative Google has already undertaken is reducing the number of interviews. Mr. Bock says each candidate offered a job by Google went through 5.1 in-person interviews on average in June, down from 6.2 at the beginning of the year. (A veteran tech recruiter says five to eight interviews is probably about average for Silicon Valley.) Google is also considering requiring staff members who interview candidates to submit their assessments within a week of the interview; right now, there's no strict deadline.

The recruiting fine-tuning is a further sign that Google's in-house processes are in transition from those of a start-up to those of a big business. The eight-year-old company had 9,378 employees at the end of the third quarter, and analysts project that its revenue will top $10 billion this year. During the quarter, the company brought in an average of 16 new employees daily, up from 13 the quarter before. Its breakneck hiring has boosted staff from 1,628 at the end of 2003 to 3,021 a year later and 5,680 at the end of 2005.

In Google's early years, Mr. Brin or co-founder Larry Page interviewed nearly all job candidates before they were officially hired. A former Google executive recounts how, on occasion, Mr. Brin would show up for candidates' job interviews in unconventional dress, from roller blades to a cow costume complete with rubber udders around Halloween. Even today, at least one of the co-founders reviews every job offer recommended by an internal hiring committee on a weekly basis, sometimes pushing back with questions about an individual's qualifications.

People close to the company say it has traditionally focused a lot on candidates' academic performance and favored those who went to elite schools. Mr. Bock says that college grade-point average is a factor, and that most hires have done well academically. But he says there's no formal GPA requirement, and he points to new staff members who don't have college degrees but do have solid professional track records.

Recent candidates say the process can still drag on. "The process from a candidate's perspective is glacial," says one who was interviewed for a senior nonengineering position this year. After each of two in-person interviews, the candidate went more than a month without hearing from Google and finally accepted a job offer from another company.

Daniel Bernstein, 24 years old, recently interviewed for a corporate communications job at Google. After initial contact in May and two phone interviews, he was invited to headquarters, where he had separate interviews with about half-a-dozen people, was treated to lunch in the cafeteria and was handed a goodie bag with a Google T- shirt, notebook and pen. He also turned in several "homework" assignments, including a personal statement and a marketing plan for a future Google product.

In August, Google called Mr. Bernstein back for a second round, which he says would have entailed four or five more interviews. In the meantime, though, he had decided he wanted to work at a start-up, and he had already accepted a job offer at Meebo Inc., a Web-based instant-messaging provider.

Mr. Bock declines to comment on specific cases, but he says Google tries "to strike the right balance between letting candidates get to know Google, letting us get to know them, and moving quickly." He adds that the average time it takes Google to make an offer has dropped significantly over the last few months and that the "ideal would be that for at least some roles, we can make offers the same day people interview."

In the survey Google conducted in June, current employees were questioned on about 300 variables, including their performance on standardized tests, the age at which they first used a computer, how many foreign languages they spoke, how many patents they had and whether they had ever been published. Mr. Bock's team mapped the answers against 30 or 40 job-performance factors for each survey- taker, identifying clusters of variables that Google might focus on more during the hiring process.

The approach isn't without risk. "To do that carefully is really hard, and you could wind up with measures that are spurious" or make hiring worse, says Peter Cappelli, a management professor and director of the Center for Human Resources at the University of Pennsylvania' s Wharton School.

So far, Google is experimenting with changes, such as additional short questionnaires for applicants and different interview formats. The company is also considering trying out an abbreviated hiring process, which would allow it to make an offer to some candidates after just two interviews.

Google is also moving from a format in which interviewers provided candidate feedback using free-form text and could give only one overall score to a format in which they offer targeted feedback grouped around four attributes (Google declines to name them) and multiple scores rating a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities.

For the short questionnaires, Google has identified useful queries about a candidate's past, personality variables and workstyle preferences. Examples include: Have you ever turned a profit at your own nontech side business (dog walker, catering, tutoring, etc.)? How strongly would you describe yourself as someone with an assertive personality? At work would you prefer to manage others or do the work yourself?

But there's bad news for some job candidates, too. In July, Google Chief Executive Eric Schmidt told analysts the company was "able to now in fact increase the standards by which we select and hire new people." While Mr. Bock says it's hard to say specifically how Google has raised the bar, he adds that his own team is looking for people for human-resources jobs who "can be promoted four, five, six times" and that other departments also hire people who are overqualified for the specific position they're recruited for. Mr. Bock says that the company's brisk growth means that the scope of any position generally expands rapidly