

Slaves of Some Dead Sociologist

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Imagine you were suddenly put in charge of Google. What would you spend your time doing? Branding? The Google brand is pretty important, but it's not really something you can control directly; it's more of a side-effect of the other decisions you make. (If your legal team decides to give up the names of Chinese dissidents to the secret police, that's going to hurt your brand.) Product design? Clearly this is also important, but at a company the size of Google it's too big a job for one person — most of Google's innovative new products are designed by rank-and-file engineers. Strategy? This is a good one, and probably what Google's current rulers spend most of their time on, but I'm skeptical as to how good anyone can really be at long-term strategy with such a huge company. Hiring? Obviously hiring is pretty important, but even the greatest group of people aren't going to save your company if they waste their time once their inside.

No, I think the most important thing a person in charge of a large company can work on is sociology — designing the social structure of the company. It's the sociology that determines who gets hired, what their life is like, how much freedom they have, what sorts of things they work on, etc. Clearly these structures determine an enormous amount about the corporation. And yet, strikingly, I've never heard of a single corporation that has a high-level group devoted to studying and improving them.

“Practical men,” Keynes famously wrote at [the end of his *General Theory*](#), “who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.” And sociology seems to have worked out much the same way. [Chandler claims](#) that the modern command-and-control corporation was worked out just about identically by several different people around the same time and its military methods have been with us ever since.

Despite enormous changes in the kinds of things big companies do as well as in the way that they do them, the actual structure of the large corporation (with very few exceptions) has hardly changed at all. It's gotten to the point where even tinkering with the cubicle seems radical.

Since such questions are so alien, let me give a sense of the questions I mean. For example, how do you hire? Right now, it appears that at Google each team gets to hire people for its projects and then once you're inside Google you get to switch to another project if you like. Why not have a team dedicated to hiring which tries to find the best way to pick the best people as well as making sure they match a particular company culture?

Also, how do projects get picked? Do you have a command-and-control structure deciding what things need to get worked on from the top? Do you let everybody work on what they like? Do you let the company vote on what its priorities should be?

What do you do with people who don't work out? Do you have performance reviews? Bonus pay? Three-strikes firing offenses? Or do all these systems just make working more frightening and problematic?

It seems to me any reasonable company ought to have a whole department dedicated to working on these issues, studying the systems that are in place, studying the kinds of things that others have tried, and doing their own experiments to see if they can do things better. And yet, to my knowledge, no one does. Even the handful of companies that do something innovative with their corporate structure did it as a one-off — they have no team dedicated to coming up with and trying new such innovations.

Now normally when you discover that everyone else is doing something wrong, there's an opportunity for you to get ahead by doing it right. But that's much more difficult here, because these questions only really make sense for large organizations and very few of us find ourselves in charge of large organizations. For example, it's arguable that [Fog Creek](#) has done some things along these lines, but it's pretty difficult to tell since they've never had more than a couple dozen people.

Instead, the real innovation hasn't come from companies, but the online peer-production projects, like GNU/Linux, that take contributions from a distributed set of volunteer contributors. But such groups solve the problem largely through eliminating it — they don't have to worry about who to hire and how to treat them because they don't hire anyone.

Instead, most of the people who work on GNU/Linux are hired by other companies where they must contend with the antiquated social structures that those companies provide. And since those are the brutal facts that most humans must contend with, it would be nice if more people were thinking about alternatives.