

The Goog Life: how Google keeps employees by treating them like kids

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I was talking with a friend the other day about that perennial subject of conversation in the Valley, Google. And finally she gave me the clue that made the whole place make sense. “It’s about infantilizing people,” she explained. “Give them free food, do their laundry, let them sit on bouncy brightly-colored balls. Do everything so that they never have to grow up and learn how to live life on their own.”

And when you look at it that way, everything Google does makes a sick sort of sense.

Not a whole lot has changed since the last time I visited Google. The campus is bigger — the buildings across the street, instead of being reserved for lawyers and other lowlifes, are now being used by the engineering staff as well, to keep up with Google’s nonstop growth. And the employees seem a little less excited about things than the last time I was there. Nobody says “We’re on a mission to change the world!” anymore. Now they say, “Yeah, I’m just going to stick around here another six months until my options vest.” and “I kind of want to transfer out of my group but I worry that all the other groups are worse.”

But the two blatant changes to the campus are a large, terribly fake-looking replica of SpaceShipOne hanging in the middle of the main building and a replica dinosaur skeleton standing outside. “It’s as if this place is being decorated by seven-year-olds,” a friend comments. It also reminds me of Robert Reich’s comment about Newt Gingrich: “His office is adorned with figurines of dinosaurs, as you might find in the bedrooms of little boys who dream of one day being huge and powerful.”

The dinosaurs and spaceships certainly fit in with the infantilizing theme, as does the hot tub-sized ball pit that Googlers can jump into and throw ball fights. Everyone I know who works there either acts childish (the army of programmers), enthusiastically adolescent (their managers and overseers), or else is deeply cynical (the hot-shot programmers). But as much as they may want to leave Google, the infantilizing tactics have worked: they’re afraid they wouldn’t be able to survive anywhere else.

Google hires programmers straight out of college and tempts them with all the benefits of college life. Indeed, as the hiring brochures stress, the place was explicitly modeled upon college. At one point, I wondered why Google didn’t just go all the way and build their own dormitories. After all, weren’t the late-night dorm-room conversations with others who were smart like you one of the best parts of college life? But as the gleam wears off the Google, I can see why it’s no place anyone would want to hang around for that long. Even the suburban desert of Mountain View is better.

Google's famed secrecy doesn't really do a very good job of keeping information from competitors. Those who are truly curious can pick up enough leaks and read enough articles to figure out how mostly everything works. But what it does do is create an aura of impossibility around the place. People read the airbrushed versions of Google technologies in talks and academic papers and think that Google has some amazingly large computer lab with amazingly powerful technology. But hang around a Googler long enough and you'll hear them complain about the unreliability of GFS and how they don't really have enough computers to keep up with the load.

"It's always frightening when you see how the sausage actually gets made," explains a product manager. And that's exactly what the secrecy is supposed to prevent. The rest of the world sees Google as this impenetrable edifice with all the mysteries of the world inside ("I hear once you've worked there for 256 days they teach you the secret levitation," [explains xkcd](#)) while the select few inside the walls know the truth — there is no there there — and are bound together by this burden.

Such a strategy may have worked in the early days, when Googlers were a select and special few, but as the company grows larger and employee's identification with it grows thinner, Google has to step up their efforts to acculturate. And that's where the life-size dinosaur replicas come in. Enjoy being huge and powerful while you can. Because, like the dinosaurs, this too will pass.