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How to Get a Job at Google

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. — LAST June, in an interview with Adam Bryant of The Times, Laszlo Bock, the senior vice president of people operations for Google — i.e., the guy in charge of hiring for one of the world's most successful companies — noted that Google had determined that "G.P.A.'s are worthless as a criteria for hiring, and test scores are worthless. ... We found that they don't predict anything." He also noted that the "proportion of people without any college education at Google has increased over time" — now as high as 14 percent on some teams. At a time when many people are asking, "How's my kid gonna get a job?" I thought it would be useful to visit Google and hear how Bock would answer.

Don't get him wrong, Bock begins, "Good grades certainly don't hurt." Many jobs at Google require math, computing and coding skills, so if your good grades truly reflect skills in those areas that you can apply, it would be an advantage. But Google has its eyes on much more.

"There are five hiring attributes we have across the company," explained Bock. "If it's a technical role, we assess your coding ability, and half the roles in the company are technical roles. For every job, though, the No. 1 thing we look for is general cognitive ability, and it's not I.Q. It's learning ability. It's the ability to process on the fly. It's the ability to pull together disparate bits of information. We assess that using structured behavioral interviews that we validate to make sure they're predictive."

The second, he added, "is leadership — in particular emergent leadership as opposed to traditional leadership. Traditional leadership is, were you president of the chess club? Were you vice president of sales? How quickly did you get there? We don't care. What we care about is, when faced with a problem and you're a member of a team, do you, at the appropriate time, step in and lead. And just as critically, do you step back and stop leading, do you let someone else? Because what's critical to be an effective leader in this environment is you have to be willing to relinquish power."

What else? Humility and ownership. "It's feeling the sense of responsibility, the sense of ownership, to step in," he said, to try to solve any problem — and the humility to step back and embrace the better ideas of others. "Your end goal," explained Bock, "is what can we do together to problem-solve. I've contributed my piece, and then I step back."

And it is not just humility in creating space for others to contribute, says Bock, it's "intellectual humility. Without humility, you are unable to learn." It is why research shows that many graduates from hotshot business schools plateau. "Successful bright people rarely experience failure, and so they don't learn how to learn from that failure," said Bock.

"They, instead, commit the fundamental attribution error, which is if something good happens, it's because I'm a genius. If something bad happens, it's because someone's an idiot or I didn't get the resources or the market moved. … What we've seen is that the people who are the most successful here, who we want to hire, will have a fierce position. They'll argue like hell. They'll be zealots about their point of view. But then you

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say, 'here's a new fact,' and they'll go, 'Oh, well, that changes things; you're right.' " You need a big ego and small ego in the same person at the same time.

The least important attribute they look for is "expertise." Said Bock: "If you take somebody who has high cognitive ability, is innately curious, willing to learn and has emergent leadership skills, and you hire them as an H.R. person or finance person, and they have no content knowledge, and you compare them with someone who's been doing just one thing and is a world expert, the expert will go: 'I've seen this 100 times before; here's what you do.' " Most of the time the nonexpert will come up with the same answer, added Bock, "because most of the time it's not that hard." Sure, once in a while they will mess it up, he said, but once in a while they'll also come up with an answer that is totally new. And there is huge value in that.

To sum up Bock's approach to hiring: Talent can come in so many different forms and be built in so many nontraditional ways today, hiring officers have to be alive to every one — besides brand-name colleges. Because "when you look at people who don't go to school and make their way in the world, those are exceptional human beings. And we should do everything we can to find those people." Too many colleges, he added, "don't deliver on what they promise. You generate a ton of debt, you don't learn the most useful things for your life. It's [just] an extended adolescence."

Google attracts so much talent it can afford to look beyond traditional metrics, like G.P.A. For most young people, though, going to college and doing well is still the best way to master the tools needed for many careers. But Bock is saying something important to them, too: Beware. Your degree is not a proxy for your ability to do any job. The world only cares about — and pays off on — what you can do with what you know (and it doesn't care how you learned it). And in an age when innovation is increasingly a group endeavor, it also cares about a lot of soft skills — leadership, humility, collaboration, adaptability and loving to learn and re-learn. This

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will be true no matter where you go to work.

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