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The Man Behind Android's Rise

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At the core of Google Inc.'s \$12.5 billion Motorola deal is Silicon Valley engineer Andy Rubin, who in six years has reordered the wireless market and positioned the Internet giant as a central player in it.

Mr. Rubin, 48 years old, has changed Google's organizational structure and become one of the most powerful people at the company. Under his leadership, the operating system known as Android has become the most widely used software on smartphones -- surpassing the creations of Apple Inc. and Nokia Corp. -- and powering tablets from many companies.

Mr. Rubin's success has enabled Google's search engine and digital-advertising business to spread rapidly through the mobile world. He has also played a role in recruiting talent to Google, including Andy Hertzfeld, a former Apple programmer who helped develop Google+, the company's new social network.

When Google co-founder Larry Page became CEO in April, Mr. Rubin was promoted to be one of 18 senior vice presidents. His star has continued to rise, culminating in his personal involvement in Monday's deal for Inc., said a person familiar with the matter.

People close to the deal said one of Google's motivations was its desire to design devices, not just the software that powers them, thus giving it the sort of influence that rival Apple enjoys with its iPhone and iPad.

That would play into the strengths of Mr. Rubin, who for years built gadgets for start-ups, one of which was acquired by Microsoft Corp. in 1997 only to lose momentum.

Google declined to make Mr. Rubin available for an interview.

Colleagues call him an inveterate tinkerer who tries to anticipate industry changes but also loves details such as writing software code. They also say he is a demanding boss and can sometimes be difficult to work with, leading to turnover and burnout in Android's ranks. People at other companies in the mobile market privately argue that Mr. Rubin wields too much influence over handset designs by companies using Android software.

But these colleagues also say Mr. Rubin is loyal and generous to his team of several hundred employees. About every six months, he throws a party for employees at his home, which like Google is in Mountain View, Calif. After the first Android phone launched in the fall of 2008, triggering a multimillion payout in Mr. Rubin's contract, he gave a portion of that money to all of his employees as a bonus -- the first of its kind at Google, said a person familiar with the matter. Employees received anywhere from \$10,000 to around \$50,000, the person said.

Steve Perlman, a close friend and frequent colleague of Mr. Rubin's since the 1980s, when both worked at Apple, said making robots is a favorite personal pastime for Mr. Rubin. The Chappaqua, N.Y., native has filled his Silicon Valley house with robots. (The name of the start-up he sold to Google in 2005 -- Android Inc. -- reflects his passion for robots).

A longtime builder of phones, he started Android in 2003 but struggled to get funding. At one point he needed Mr. Perlman's cash to pay office rent.

Android attracted Google's attention in part because Mr. Rubin had previously met Google founders Mr. Page and Sergey Brin, who were fans of a phone called the Sidekick, which Mr. Rubin had helped build

while running an earlier start-up called Danger.

Between 2005 and 2007, Android was largely a secret project within Google. Its mission: create a modern operating system for smartphones that would allow powerful Internet applications and break the stranglehold of wireless carriers, who then dictated which applications could be installed on phones.

Unlike Microsoft, which levied fees on device makers that used its mobile operating system, Google planned to give away Android software, believing it could make back its investment through online-ads served up on the phones. Android's open-source development plan also allowed programmers outside Google to help enhance the software.

By 2007, with about 100 engineers working for him, Mr. Rubin began to negotiate with partners on creating the first Android phone, even as Google was developing mobile applications including Web search and Google Maps for the still-secret Apple iPhone, which didn't launch until that June.

In mid-2007 he faced a setback when LG Electronics Co. backed out of a deal to build the first Android phone, said a person familiar with the matter. Mr. Rubin then turned to little-known HTC Corp. He also secured deal with T-Mobile USA, which provided wireless plans for the phone, and Qualcomm Inc., which provided the phone's microprocessor.

With the launch of the iPhone, Apple became a major competitor but also provided a boost to Android. The iPhone's strong sales spurred handset makers to take up Android.

By November, Samsung Electronics Co., Motorola and LG all signed on to Google's "open handset alliance," a consortium of more than 30 hardware makers, carriers and application companies that said they would help build Android devices.

The first Android phone, the G1, launched in the fall of 2008 to poor reviews but impressed hardware makers and carriers enough for them to begin approaching Mr. Rubin. Android's headquarters at Building 44 on the Google campus in Mountain View became a mecca for mobile CEOs, said a person familiar with the matter.

In 2009, when Android still had around 150 employees, Mr. Rubin decided he wanted a dedicated business team -- an unheard of concept at Google, where engineers and business executives had separate organizations, these people said. With support from then-CEO Eric Schmidt, Mr. Rubin created the first "business unit" inside of Google.

Not all has gone smoothly. Mr. Rubin's effort in early 2010 to sell the Google-branded HTC Nexus One smartphone directly to consumers got bogged down when Google tried to connect its phone site to wireless carrier systems for billing and credit checks, among other problems.

Yet the broader Android strategy was working, as device makers continued to build better Android smartphones.

Mr. Rubin and the rest of the Android team were elated when Apple CEO Steve Jobs took a swipe at them in the fall of 2010, said a person familiar with the matter. Mr. Jobs said during an earnings conference call that Android was problematic because customers and app developers such as TweetDeck had to deal with a "mess" of numerous versions of the software.

In a blog post, TweetDeck CEO Iain Dodsworth came to Android's defense, saying it wasn't difficult to work with.

Nick Wingfield contributed to this article.

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