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Google is over those ridiculous brainteasers, but some employees didn't get the memo

By Max Nisen • April 7, 2015



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A different kind of brainteaser reigns.

The brain teasers that Google once used in its job interview process—ostensibly to cherry-pick the best and brightest—were notorious as the search giant rose to prominence in the late 90s and early 2000s. A few examples of the form:

- “How many golf balls would fit inside a 747?”
- “Estimate how many gas stations there are in Manhattan.”
- “If I shrank you to the size of a nickel and put you in a blender, how would you escape?”

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Daunting, right? Also, largely useless. Google's current head of human resources, Laszlo Bock, has repeatedly said that these exercises, and their near cousin the dreaded case interview, have proved terrible tools to identify standout potential employees. It turns out, they served mainly to make the questioner feel smart—and even bad candidates can become expert at answering them.

Bock, who spoke with Quartz as part of the launch of his new book *Work Rules!*, has made eliminating the brain teasers from Google's hiring process a personal goal. He has sought to reshape the interview process to look for learning ability and adaptability, and to test for the qualities that actually lead to success at Google.

Still, old habits die hard. From time to time the brain teasers tend to re-emerge, even years after the company began discouraging them. "Our interviewers get trained not to ask those questions. But we're fighting 5, 10, 20, 25 years of professional experience that teach people they should ask these questions," he says. "So once in a while they still get out."

Bock says that even when brain-teasers manage to sneak back into Google interviews, they're completely ignored in the decision-making process and removed from hiring packets well before they get to their final review by CEO Larry Page.

As for the brain-teaser diehards who continue to ask would-be Googlers for absurd ballpark estimates, Bock says, "We send a note back to that person that says 'please stop doing that because you're wasting your time, our time, and the candidate's time. And then usually they stop.'"

Google interviewers get a set of suggested questions that test for

qDroid. Here's an example of the sort of question you can actually expect, from Bock's book:

Tell me about a time when you effectively managed your team to achieve a goal. What did your approach look like? (Follow-ups: What were your targets and how did you meet them as an individual and as a team? How did you adapt your leadership approach to different individuals? What was the key takeaway from this specific situation?)

These behavioral questions are even tougher than brain teasers, in their own way—and they're a lot harder to game, Bock explains. "At the end of the day you can practice all you want, but the quality of your thinking and the quality of your leadership will come through," he says.