

CASE STUDY:

Google

PERHAPS THE MOST INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED AND MOST FREQUENTLY CITED CASE STUDY FOR THE HAPPY WORKPLACE HAS TO BE INTERNET GIANT, GOOGLE. The company is famous for providing just about everything it can to try and keep its workers happy, including free food, play areas and equipment, flexible working hours and freedom to work on “pet projects”.

CARING STIMULATES COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT

At the company’s East Coast facility in Chelsea, Manhattan, which occupies an entire city block of converted industrial space, “people analytics” manager Dr Peter Welle points out that it’s not a free-for-all approach: every aspect has been studied and engineered for the greatest benefit. For example, in the open kitchen areas, where free food, snacks and beverages are available, the healthier choices are placed in a more prominent, accessible location.

For example, while sugary, caffeinated beverages are available at the back of the fridge, bottled waters and juices are immediately visible. “Our research shows that people consume 40% more water if that’s the first thing they see,” Dr Welle said.

According to spokesperson Julie Taylor of Google’s Jo’burg office, the company takes a holistic view of employee health, including physical, emotional financial and social health. “We solve people problems like our engineers solve computer science problems – with data and a willingness to try new things and think outside the box. Investing in Googlers drives business outcomes that we care about: innovation, retention. And we know that happier

employees are more productive, and more likely to join – and stay at – Google.”

HAPPY PEOPLE STAY AROUND LONGER

When it comes to health, the company subscribes to a philosophy of preventative care. Taylor says: “Employees have different needs at different points in their lifecycle, and we take a holistic, integrated approach.” This has had the added benefit of keeping overall healthcare costs at the company far lower than the industry average. These benefits include a takeout allowance for new parents, financial counselling, cooking classes, smoking cessation programmes, flu clinics and sports leagues.

Local Googler Deshen Naidoo puts it this way: “Google places a large focus on Googler well-being; making Googlers healthier, more resilient, and overall, better people. There are many great benefits and resources in place that give Googlers choice based on whatever their goals, life situation or passions may be.”

Although the company policy does mention “doing the right thing”, the motive isn’t entirely altruistic. “Happy and healthy employees have great by-products, including productivity and innovation,” states Taylor, “And we have the data to prove it.”

Google aims to provide an environment that fosters innovation – spaces are created that encourage spontaneous collaboration, such as the micro kitchens where people inevitably end up chatting and sharing ideas. The culture is based on transparency. At weekly “town hall meetings” any employee can pose any question to senior management, and communication channels are designed to be open and accessible.



The Internet company encourages innovation by fostering the idea of “intra-preneurship” – getting people to “think and act like owners and entrepreneurs... beyond just their core roles”, while still enjoying the company’s support.

HAPPINESS HELPS BOOST PROFITABILITY

How has all this happiness helped Google? The NASDAQ-listed global company with close on 54 000 employees made \$50.18bn in 2012, of which \$10.74bn was profit. It listed assets of \$93.80bn for the same year. Of course Google’s products, services and global reach contributed magnificently to those figures, but all the research shows that it’s the people who work the magic. This is what a company as smart as Google realises and why it makes such an extraordinary investment in helping people to be happy by creating environments that are conducive to well-being and satisfaction. ■

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