

Google Inspires Tinkerers With 'Garage' Workshops

Michael Liedtke, AP Technology Writer

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. (AP) — Amid all the free food and other goodies that come with a job at Google Inc., there's one benefit a lot of employees don't even know about: a cluster of high-tech workshops that have become a tinkerer's paradise.

Workers escape from their computer screens and office chairs to weld, drill and saw on expensive machinery they won't find at Home Depot.

Besides building contraptions with a clear business purpose, Google employees use the shops for fun: They create elaborate holiday decorations, build cabinets for their homes and sometimes dream big like the engineers working on a pedal-powered airplane with a 100-foot wingspan.

The "Google Workshops" are the handiwork of Larry Page, who co-founded Google with Sergey Brin in a rented garage. Page authorized the workshops' opening in 2007 to try to reconnect the company with its roots.

Google, which has kept the workshops under wraps until Tuesday, gave The Associated Press an exclusive tour shortly after Page reclaimed his original job as CEO on April 4.

The workshops offer a peek into ways Page may try to make the Internet giant work with the verve and creativity of a garage-bound entrepreneur. Page believes the 13-year-old company needs to return to thinking and acting like a feisty startup as it faces competition from younger Internet stars such as Facebook, Twitter and Groupon.

"There is a feeling here at Google that all good things start in a garage," said Greg Butterfield, an engineering lab manager who oversees the workshops. "Larry wanted to create the same kind of environment he and Sergey had when they started Google — a sort of a playground or sandbox for pursuing their ideas."

Originally known as the "Pi" Shop, the geeky getaway is open only to a privileged few among Google's 26,300 employees. To gain entry, workers must pass a test that includes such questions as "When you are using a band saw, what speed would you use to cut through aluminum?"

There are four separate rooms — for metal, wood, welding and electronics — tucked into an isolated corner of Google's 4.3-million-square-foot headquarters in Mountain View.

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Besides heavy-duty equipment that includes an oscilloscope, plasma cutter and miter saw, there's also some children's toys. One piece of gadgetry currently under construction in the shops partially consists of Legos — the same material that Page once used to build an inkjet printer, years before creating Google.

The projects that have emerged from the workshops include a giant tricycle that was designed to haul around 250 pounds of high-tech photo equipment. The trikes are used to supply the company's online mapping service with pictures of streets and other areas inaccessible by cars.

Engineers also have used the shops to work on early prototypes of smartphones that run on Google's Android software as well as other products still under development that the company declined to discuss.

Most Google employees, though, use the shops for personal purposes. The ideas percolating in the workshops are so unpredictable that employees are encouraged to drop off scrap metal or other detritus just in case the junk might suit someone's project. During the AP's recent visit, a couple of old wheel axles and the rusted tailgate from a truck were sitting in the welding shop.

"You never know what you are going to find in here," Butterfield said.

Google isn't the only place in Silicon Valley where computer-coding engineers can show off their industrial might. A venture called TechShops sells memberships starting at about \$100 per month to use heavy machinery for wood, metal, plastics and textiles. Besides the San Francisco Bay Area, TechShops also operates in Raleigh, N.C.

Google's workshops are free to all employees, like virtually all the company's perquisites. But the workshops are much more exclusive than Google's other benefits.

All employees must be certified to run the machinery before they are issued a badge to enter. The screening usually falls to Rodney Broome, 63, a veteran machinist who teaches the craft at nearby San Jose City College when he isn't busy as the foreman of Google's workshops.

"I feel like I am running my own company within the company here," Broome said.

Just as they do when they are trying to get hired at Google, employees have to pass a test. About 300 Google workers have been certified so far. Most of them are engineers, although badges have been given to a few who work in ad sales.

Broome said there have been no injuries in the workshops so far.

The screening standards are so strict that a college degree in mechanical engineering wasn't enough for Google software engineer Ihab Awad.

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He attended a local high school's wood shop class for a semester before earning Broome's clearance. Awad also won Broome's approval to use the welding equipment.

His biggest accomplishment so far: a rocket-shaped bar equipped with a keg to pour beer at the end of long days in the office.

"The workshops are my No. 1 perk at Google," Awad said during a break from a welding project. "They're the main reason I will be a Googler for life."

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