

# Big Data at Google

At Google there is little formal learning. Experience is the teacher • BY JAY CROSS



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To see big data at work, look to Google, where number-crunching on a massive scale has changed hiring and management practices.

“All people decisions at Google are based on data and analytics,” according to Kathryn Dekas, a manager in Google’s people analytics team. Google’s conclusions have a bearing on where CLOs should be focusing.

If you interviewed for a job at Google several years ago, you might have been asked to answer questions like:

- You are shrunk to the height of a nickel and thrown into a blender. The blades start moving in 60 seconds. What do you do?
- What’s the next number in this sequence: 10, 9, 60, 90, 70, 66?
- A book has N pages, numbered the usual way, from 1 to N. The total number of digits in the page numbers is 1,095. How many pages does the book have?

Your odds of getting an interview greatly improved if you had a high GPA, astronomical SATs and graduated from an Ivy League college because the founders believed these things were important. No longer. Brainteaser questions have been banned, Google recruiters no longer ask about grades and you don’t have to have a college degree to land a job.

## How much of your organization’s investment in learning centers on developing people rather than teaching skills?

In a New York Times interview published in June 2013, Laszlo Bock, Google’s senior vice president of people operations, said, “On the hiring side, we found that brainteasers are a complete waste of time. They don’t predict anything. They serve primarily to make the interviewer feel smart.”

College didn’t matter either. Statistics found GPAs and SAT scores did not correlate to success on the job, so Google stopped using them. Even college degrees rarely seemed to make a difference in job performance.

Students in school learn to give specific answers. They memorize and parrot back information. In the working world, often there is no pat answer. The chal-

lenge is to formulate the questions as well as the answers. Google seeks people who can solve problems that don’t have a clear answer.

The numbers told Google its most innovative workers have a strong sense of mission about their work and feel they have personal autonomy. Also, Google looks to what people can become as they grow on the job, not where they come from. According to the company’s career site it’s about:

**Leadership:** Recruiters want to know how potential candidates have flexed different muscles in different situations to mobilize a team.

**Role-related knowledge:** Recruiters are looking for diverse candidates with a variety of strengths and passions, not just isolated skill sets. “We also want to make sure that you have the experience and the background that will set you up for success in your role.”

**How you think:** The company is less concerned about grades and more interested in how candidates think. “We’re likely to ask you some role-related questions that provide insight into how you solve problems.”

**“Googleyness”:** “We want to get a feel for what makes you, well, you. We also want to make sure this is a place you’ll thrive, so we’ll be looking for signs around your comfort with ambiguity, your bias to action and your collaborative nature.”

Bock said, “The No. 1 thing we look for is general cognitive ability, and it’s not IQ. It’s learning ability. It’s the ability to process on the fly. It’s the ability to pull together disparate bits of information.”

Google is more interested in who people are than what they know. Experience is the teacher, not the classroom. Your company’s situation may differ. Google is exceptional, an outlier, and it draws on an extraordinary talent pool. But all in all, the company’s findings bring into question training’s traditional focus on knowledge over personal growth.

How much of your organization’s investment in learning and development centers on developing people rather than teaching skills? At Google, self-directed continuous learning is the norm. Job rotation is fluid. There’s little formal training.

If Google doesn’t value college credentials, it makes one wonder about the national drive for STEM education.

I’ve posted answers to the brainteasers at [internet.time.com/google](http://internet.time.com/google). **CLO**