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# Missions That Matter

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From Haiti to Hyderabad, Googlers are  
innovating with good reason.

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*Above: Anti-government protesters charge their cell phones for free outside an electronics store on Tahrir Square on February 8th, 2011 in Cairo, Egypt.*

Maybe you're looking for the Holy Grail, maybe just a parking space. Either way, your search is important to you. But some searches matter more, like searching for loved ones. Consider this number: 90 minutes. That's how long it took for Google's Person Finder – a searchable missing persons database – to go live after the earthquake in Japan on March 11th. In the first 48 hours, there were 36 million page views. Queries-per-second peaked at 1,600. It was translated into 40 languages, and now Google is tracking over 600,000 records.

This wasn't the first time Person Finder had been activated. It launched 72 hours after an earthquake devastated the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, in 2010. Following the Chilean earthquake in February of the same year, the response time was six hours. Twelve months later, after the Christchurch quake, it was 60 minutes. Google, it seems, is as intent on innovating crisis response as any monetizable product. But how? And why?

The simplest answer may be the right one: Googlers themselves. Other companies screen for intelligence and experience in potential recruits. But Google also looks for 'Googliness' – a mashup of passion and drive that's hard to define but easy to spot. Of the over 26,000 employees worldwide, a surprising percentage have it. While part of a huge organization, they think – and, crucially, act – like entrepreneurs. Such 'intrapreneurs' exist in many corporations, of course. But conditions at Google – where creatively benevolent impulses can be backed up by engineering resources and managerial support – seem to produce an unusually large crop of them.

Some had an entrepreneurial bent all along. Back in January, venture capitalists and hackers, execs and engineers – all accustomed to their

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share of 'revolutions' out in Silicon Valley – watched in amazement as Egyptians took to the streets. It was a real revolution, in real time. But one Googler did more than watch. In a single weekend, Ujjwal Singh, co-founder of SayNow, a voice communications company Google recently bought, plus a small team of scrappy Googlers, partnered with Twitter to develop and launch a service that allowed Egyptians to communicate even when their government had blacked out most communication systems, including the internet.

The team got the call on Saturday, and by Sunday morning at 5.30am had a working model for Speak2Tweet. It relied on the last remaining outlet – telephone – to post messages to Twitter. Egyptians dialled an international phone number to leave a voicemail, which was then translated and tweeted for them instantly. All this before Singh even had his official first day.

Many more intrapreneurs spring up from inside the company. They do good in their core job and, often, way beyond it. To make change – and make change more efficient – they begin by dedicating their '20 percent time,' a chunk that can be taken out of the regular work week for worthy

projects. Others work full- or part-time for Google.org (DotOrg), Google's technologically driven philanthropic organization. One of its program managers, Jennifer Haroon, works on Health Speaks, translating basic health information into Arabic, Hindi and Swahili (there are 266 articles so far). It's a collaboration between DotOrg and the Translate team. "The point of DotOrg," she says, "is to leverage every part of Google." And perhaps the point of Google is to leverage every part of Googlers.

Prem Ramaswami was working as a product manager on network infrastructure when he joined The Internet Bus Project. "The thing looks like the Winnebago from *Spaceballs*," he says. It was designed to tour second- and third-tier cities in India (with populations from 150,000 to three million) to "get people online, on the internet. I truly mean the internet and not Google," says Ramaswami. "They didn't realize the web was for the average Indian, not just for the English-speaking, not just for Americans, and not just for porn." The bus became a roving educator for Indians – over a million people have been on it so far, and the program is expanding to five buses. ►

Ramaswami's intrapreneurial spirit has since led him to DotOrg's Crisis Response team, which works to make critical information accessible around natural and humanitarian disasters, from Queensland to Sudan, Brazil to Japan. After the Haiti earthquake, the team helped create a landing page within 24 hours, then flew to the ravaged region to understand how technology could help in the aftermath of natural disasters. "We are data-driven – we really want to make sure that when we respond, our response is useful," Ramaswami says.

Technological coordination, for instance, is an issue in any crisis. Some computer protocols, such as KML and CAP, work well with maps and are very useful for public alerts. Some aren't. The key is machine-readable formats. "We need to do a better job communicating with all these governments," observes Ramaswami. "Stop creating PDFs, start creating something that's more usable."

In Japan, the importance of consistent and open standards became clear. "We had to take all these government lists and put them online manually," says Ramaswami. "But working with Honda and Toyota, their cars had GPS tags in them, so we could deduce, for instance, what roads were open. These companies, more than governments, understand how to share geo-based information. And the population wants it, needs it. It greatly improves the ability to get information out there."

Alice Bonhomme-Biais, a software engineer, is involved in Crisis Response as well. She first worked on Google Maps infrastructure and had visited Haiti for years (her husband is Haitian) making most of her contributions independently, but also calling on co-workers for help. "I asked for a few OLPC [One Laptop Per Child] laptops from Googlers to send to a school there, and I received an OLPC from Vint Cerf [Google's Chief Internet Evangelist]. These kids don't realize it

Quantify: Innovation

*Twitter users helped find a child in Saudi Arabia just three hours after his father tweeted he was missing.<sup>2</sup>*

but they're using computers from the father of the internet." Bonhomme-Biais gives time to Google Women Engineers too, championing women engineers inside the company and out. "Now I see computer science is amazing because it's not an end; it's a tool to do things," she says.

'Things' like Random Hacks of Kindness (RHoK), a series of hackathons held concurrently around the world, with participants from Google and other tech companies. The aim? To create software solutions for disaster risk and response. Last December, RHoK included 21 cities and over 1,400 people (the next is June 2011). Features launched there were put to use in Japan, three months later. One hack built out the ability to auto translate Person Finder messages online. This is cloud computing at its best.

Some Googlers create technology, others leverage it. After an old boyfriend was killed in action in Afghanistan in 2007, Learning and Development manager Carrie Laurenou founded Google Veterans Network (VetNet), an internal group that works to make the company veteran-friendly (300 Googlers showed up to a recent screening she arranged of *Restrepo*, the brutally clear-eyed documentary about Afghanistan, followed by a discussion with vets and the filmmakers). Laurenou's current job grew out of the work she's done with VetNet: experimenting with ways to help specific communities of users by introducing them to the products and features that could help them most – starting with veterans.

Google is now donating Cr-48 Chrome Notebooks to wounded troops convalescing in US military hospitals, so that they can keep in touch with loved ones while they're on the mend. And whole sections of the company are trying to figure out how technology can take care not only of tasks but of people – wherever they are. ➡



Residents look through messages posted on the missing persons boards at Kesennuma City Hall on March 17th, 2011 in Kesennuma, Japan, after the 9.0 magnitude earthquake.

YouTube is working on crisis response annotation – alerts to pop up in videos when a disaster strikes. Ramya Raghavan, a YouTube News and Politics manager, is also focused on new ways of promoting YouTube for Nonprofits, giving them premium perks like custom brand channels. So far there are 10,000 partners in the program. Recently, \$35,000 was raised in one weekend by the video *World Hunger – A Billion for a Billion*.

GoogleServe began as an idea to help Google employees connect to their local communities and each other through community service. In year one, it launched a pilot in 45 offices; in the three years since, it has grown to become an annual tradition involving more than 30 percent of the company across more than 60 offices.

It was founded by Seth Marbin as a side project while he was working on

the Search Quality team. He now works on the Social Responsibility team that focuses on encouraging and enabling Googlers to use their skills, talents and resources to have an extraordinary impact on the world. How do they do that? “The concept is, ‘follow the bright spots,’” he says. “A lot of people are already giving back, and with a little bit of structure they can channel their passions more effectively – that’s what our team does.”

“I was compassionate about people but I had never taken any action,” admits Rohit Setia, an engineer in Hyderabad, India, who coordinates GOAL: Google Outreach Action & Leadership, “then I joined Google. Here I found a group of people who spent time in orphanages, helping. And here, besides my full-time work, I have complete resources, which I know if I use properly I can reach more people.

You don’t have to do a lot of processing. You can just start, and start giving.” He believes the youth of India are, like those in Egypt, driven by a desire to change and improve their country. “How can Google help? By giving them easy tools to help them connect to the world. By giving them information, or access to it.”

Well-meaning ideas don’t work every time, of course. As Prem Ramaswami says, like a true intrapreneur: “It’s a Darwinian method for projects here. You have to evangelize, and sometimes people aren’t interested, which is a natural way to convince yourself that this might not be worth working on.” Some projects do fail. But the good ones, somehow, succeed ☺

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