

How a Singaporean got a job at Google without a degree

In this first of a four-part series on building a sustainable and resilient future for Singaporeans, Sandra Davie talks to Google's Tom Dewaele on what the leading technology company looks for when hiring for the new economy, including the green economy

THE STRAITS TIMES EDUCATION FORUM 2023

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SMU SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

ST Education Forum

WHAT

The Straits Times Education Forum 2023, in partnership with Singapore Management University.

TOPIC

Higher education's role in building a sustainable and resilient future

WHEN

Saturday, March 11, 10am-12pm

WHERE

Yong Pung How School of Law, Basement 1 SMU Hall, Singapore Management University

TO REGISTER

Go to str.sg/wtRe
The event is free and registration closes on March 8 at 6pm or when all places are taken.



His 'growth mindset' is among key qualities the tech giant looks out for in its employees

Singaporean Edwin Toh, 36, has an interesting story to tell about how he ended up working for one of the world's leading technology companies.

Mr Toh works as a user experience engineer for Google in New York. And no, he does not have a first-class honours degree from a top university. In fact, he does not have a degree at all.

Instead, realising that he learns best through work, he decided not to head to university after completing his diploma studies at Nanyang Polytechnic. He joined an advertising agency in Singapore and, after a few years, applied for a job in New York City.

Even though the firm would hire him only as an intern, he took up the position as it enabled him to get his foot in the door and notch up valuable experience building websites for big brand names. Within five months, he was offered a permanent job.

In 2019, after having gained several years of experience, he applied for a job at Google and landed a position as a user experience engineer. He takes pains to explain that it is a hybrid role combining what a user experience designer and a front-end engineer does, and it involves translating concepts into prototypes to deliver a good experience for Google product users.

He is thriving in his work and has been rotated among four different teams at Google – Search, Research, X: the Moonshot Factory, where audacious breakthrough ideas are worked on, and Labs, where he is currently.

He says one of the things he loves about his job at Google is that he gets to work on new projects and is constantly learning. Another big plus: He is surrounded by peers who are smart, curious and passionate about their work.

"Sure, everyone is impressed by the perks we have at Google – the amazing cafes and restaurants, the haircuts, the laundry service. It is nice to have these perks – it makes my life a lot easier. But for me, one of the best things about working in Google is that you get to work with some really smart and creative people."

Mr Tom Dewaele, Google's global head of people experience, says Mr Toh is exactly the kind of person the tech firm is on the lookout for.

"He has what I call the growth mindset, and that is one of the most valuable qualities that we look for in our employees," he said in the exclusive interview with The Straits Times in December 2022.

He goes on to explain why the tech titan prizes "growth mindset" and other attributes such as teamwork skills in its hires for diverse roles, including sustainability jobs.

Q Google receives millions of applicants a year. What do you look for to pick the right people for Google?

A Google continues to win many best employer awards around the world, including the one by The Straits Times and global data firm

Statista, which we won for the second year running last year. It means a lot to us.

We are always asking ourselves: What would make Google an amazing place to work in? Because if we are able to provide that, then we will get the best work from our employees.

We get millions of applications every year, so we look for a mix of skill sets, values and attributes to find the right fit.

One of the most important is the "growth mindset".

This is something we have backed up with research. A growth mindset is a common characteristic among our best staff, and the ability to continually learn, especially from mistakes. It is one of the biggest drivers of good performance and results.

It is about curiosity. And it is the biggest driver of innovation. If you look at how Google has evolved into the great company that it is today, that is something that we look for in our people – that they continue to be curious and continue to learn.

And we encourage them to remain curious and keep learning by getting our people to move on to new roles and join new teams.

We also allow them to spend 20 per cent of their time on something else, outside of their main area of work. This is where Googlers can dedicate 20 per cent of their time to work on a different project or team, which allows them to set aside time to explore ideas that interest them and, in the process, learn new skills.

And if Googlers want to go deeper on a particular project or role, we also offer short-term assignments called "Bungees", where they are able to take on a new role for six to nine months to experience a different role.

Roles at Google are constantly evolving and changing, and we believe that for employees to stay agile, we have to create the right environment where they are given the resources, opportunities for growth and autonomy to drive change.

Q I hear a sizeable number of your employees, like Mr Toh do not have a degree. Does that matter?

A At Google, a four-year degree is not required for almost any role at the company – and a computer science degree isn't required for most software engineering or product manager positions.

Our focus is on demonstrated skills and experience, and this can come through degrees or it can come through relevant experience.

So to answer your question, we do look at education qualifications, but it does not have to be a formal university degree. We also look at micro-credentials, certificates including Google Career Certificates, which show evidence of having gained skills in fields such as data analytics, digital marketing and e-commerce and UX design.

We are continuing to add the Google Career Certificates as a



Mr Edwin Toh works as a user experience engineer for Google in New York. He says one of the things he loves about his job is that he gets to work on new projects and is constantly learning. Another big plus: He is surrounded by peers who are smart, curious and passionate about their work. PHOTO: GOOGLE

About Tom Dewaele

Mr Tom Dewaele is global head of people experience at Google, a role he started in April 2022. In this role, he oversees all human resources teams, including those responsible for recruitment and employee experience.

Before Google, Mr Dewaele was with Unilever for over 11 years, where he sat on both the HR and operations leadership teams, and was global head of employee experience, leading a team in delivering services that impacted the everyday experiences of Unilever employees.

ReWork magazine, which covers work trends, named him its employee experience leader of the year in 2021, and he has been featured in international HR case studies, podcasts, articles and panels.

He is based in London and enjoys running, cycling, spending time with his family and watching all kinds of sports.



Mr Tom Dewaele says Google looks for a mix of skill sets, values and attributes to find the right fit when hiring employees. PHOTO: GOOGLE

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MR TOM DEWAELE, Google's global head of people experience, on how Mr Edwin Toh is exactly the kind of person the tech company wants.

qualification for more roles at Google. This means access to jobs for people who may not have a degree but do have relevant experience and skills.

Q What about character traits and attributes such as the growth mindset and the ability to work well in teams. How does Google ascertain that someone has these skills and mindsets?

A Teamwork skills such as active listening, supporting teammates and working for the good of the group as a whole, are essential for Googlers. Innovation happens when teams of people from diverse communities, cultures and disciplines come together, challenging one another to spark even better ideas.

So, how do we look for these skills and traits? We ask our potential hires hypothetical and behavioural questions during the interview process, to help understand how they might solve complex problems, anticipate issues, or explain their collaboration skills.

But we are looking not just for skills, but also for an applicant's passion, motivations and unique experiences.

Q Google has multi-pronged sustainability efforts – from decarbonising its operations to using its technology to enable businesses to calculate their carbon footprints and help consumers make sustainable choices. Are there specific "green-collar jobs" within Google? What skills do they require?

A We do have global teams looking after sustainability specifically who work cross-functionally to bring our initiatives together with experts from all over the world, including in the Asia-Pacific. However, we don't consider these the only sustainability jobs.

At Google, sustainability is part of everything we do, and as such, sustainability is built into existing product areas and roles to ensure it is everyone's job.

For example, a marketing lead could be working on various campaigns, including sustainability, while our engineering teams can also be looking at ways to incorporate eco-friendly features, in addition to other helpful features, into our products.

Q Does Google think that upholding its core value of sustainability is the responsibility of all its staff at Google?

A We know that many Googlers, in Singapore and across the region, are passionate about sustainability, and are looking and finding ways to get more involved in projects and initiatives that can help build a more sustainable planet for everyone.

We have seen many of our Googlers stretching themselves and taking on new challenges on top of their current responsibilities, to take on a 20 per cent project in sustainability-related projects. They could be starting a grassroots community to volunteer with non-profits and start-ups invested in this space in the region, or even developing internal resources and materials to help other Googlers build greater awareness of sustainability.

If you give people freedom, they will amaze you, so we want to empower our Googlers to shape our culture. It is not just some top-down agenda. It is the interconnectedness of passion, people and programmes that allows Google's culture to flourish.

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