

Case Title: “Facebook”

Article 1: “How Facebook Keeps Scaling Its Culture”

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BY HARRY MCCRACKEN

The most interesting thing about Facebook’s new headquarters in Menlo Park, California—humbly known as “Building 20,” and connected to the nearby, ex-Sun Microsystems campus the company has occupied since 2012 by Disneyland-style trams—isn’t that it was designed by Frank Gehry. It isn’t even that it’s one sprawling, 434,000-square-foot room, topped off with a (windy) roof park.

What’s striking about Building 20 is how hard Facebook has worked to preserve the stripped-down, collaborative atmosphere of the workplaces that preceded it. The floors are still bare cement; girders and vents remain exposed. Staffers, as before, are encouraged to write on walls. Everyone—CEO Mark Zuckerberg and COO Sheryl Sandberg included—works at tables in open spaces.

In short, any specific nook or cranny resembles the vastly smaller premises that Facebook called home five or 10 years ago. That’s very much by design, and it reflects the company’s obsessive desire to scale up the fabulously successful working environment that Zuckerberg devised in the early years, which is a big part of preserving its culture.

From the outside, it can be difficult to appreciate how fast Facebook’s staff has grown. In September 2010, the company—which certainly didn’t feel like a tiny outfit at the time—had 1,700 staffers. A half-decade later, that figure had surged to 11,996. And with Facebook itself, Instagram, WhatsApp, Oculus, and other efforts all expanding, it’s still recruiting new employees in droves: As I write, there are [more than 500 open positions in Menlo Park alone](#).

Facebook is huge. It's a publicly held company; it's an incumbent rather than an upstart. All of which means that if it isn't careful, it could join the many other tech companies that started out with a powerful culture, lost their way, and ended up big, bloated, and bureaucratic.

"It's been a process over time of building a culture where people think about the mission in the same way that I do," Zuckerberg says.

If you ask the CEO himself how Facebook has managed to keep on being Facebook—as I did when we chatted for my [cover story on the company's future](#)—he turns, as he frequently does when you ask him about nearly any topic, to the company's mission of making the world more connected.

"I think it's been a process over time of building a culture where people think about the mission in the same way that I do," Zuckerberg told me. "That's allowed us to take on more and more products and things that we can try to solve for the world."

CULTURE, DISTRIBUTED

The mission was already firmly in place eight years ago, when Lori Goler, a marketing director at eBay, heard Zuckerberg talking about it on the radio as she drove to work. "The person who was interviewing him was going down a very specific path, and he kept taking it back up to the mission of the company," she remembers. "'We're here to make the world more open and connected.' I thought, That is such an amazing social mission. I love it."

When Sheryl Sandberg joined Facebook as chief operating officer a few months later, Goler approached her about joining the company in any role that might be useful. She was surprised when Sandberg asked if she was interested in running the recruiting team, but took the job. Today, she's VP of people, in charge of both human resources and hiring.



Lori Goler

Goler does not see her position as making her uniquely responsible for preserving Facebook's sense of itself. "When people from startups call and say, 'We're exploding. We've got to scale. How do we scale our culture?', one of the things I always say is that I think largely the reason that the Facebook culture scaled is that no single person owns it," she says. "It's distributed across the entire organization. If we have 10,000 people who work at Facebook, you would have 10,000 people tell you that they own the culture. We hire people who are like that. We express it to them during the hiring process and the recruiting process. We talk about it on their first day and their first week."

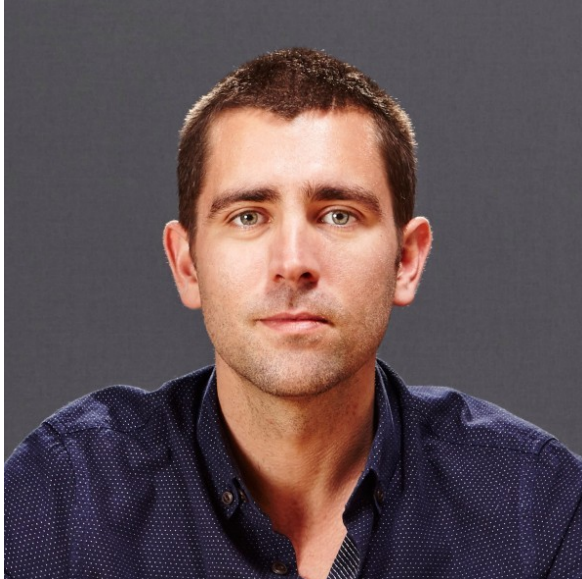
Maybe the most tangible sign of Facebook's culture—at least to visiting outsiders—is the inspirational signage on its walls, most of which involves slogans encouraging staffers to regard their work as important to the world, experiment early and often, and empathize with the needs of Facebook users. Even those posters are evidence of the company's distributed culture, Goler says: "Actually, all of these signs came from people in the organization. There's no central sign- or motto-producing team."



Inspirational signs at Facebook

PHOTO: TWITTER USER [ITIA4U](#)

Goler's predecessor as head of HR, Chris Cox, originally joined the company as an engineer in 2005; between their two tenures, Facebook has grown enormous without having someone with a traditional background running HR. Cox is now chief product officer, but still plays a key role as a keeper of the culture, meeting with all new employees as part of their onboarding process.



Chris Cox

That's not the only unusual, culture-centric thing about how Facebook welcomes new arrivals. "A new engineer gets to decide which team they get to work on, which is pretty unique," Cox explains. "The instructions are, go find the place that you're going to make the most impact, and think very, very carefully about what that means for you and for the world. Think about where you're going to have that impact, and go do it. People say all the time when they're starting here, 'That's a really serious set of instructions to receive on my first day.' But it's reflected in the culture of the company. We're here to try and help bring people closer together, and that's what we do."

"It's not obvious to the outside world that we're intentionally trying to mold roles around people rather than people around roles," Goler adds. "That puts people in a place where they can do their very best work."

Facebook, which was famously founded by college students, still doesn't want to be a place where people are defined by what's already on their résumé. It has "a culture that inherently believes that you don't have to have a huge amount of experience to be able to do big things," Zuckerberg told me. "I think it would be pretty backwards, given my own experience, if we didn't believe that. That's been helpful in terms of being able to give really talented folks who haven't run big things before big roles in the company, and giving them a chance to either show that they can do it, or not."

FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM AND OCULUS AND WHATSAPP

One reason Facebook has managed to keep on attracting top engineering talent is that it isn't just the same company it was a decade ago, only larger. The company has

discrete teams working on [Instagram](#), [Oculus VR](#), [Messenger](#), [WhatsApp](#), and other projects.

“Smart people generally want to work with other smart people on hard problems,” says Instagram cofounder and CEO Kevin Systrom, who became responsible for integrating his tiny startup into the greater Facebook culture when Instagram was acquired in 2012. “When you start to get a critical mass of smart, driven people in an area, they want to work together. When you think of the best universities in the world, they work this way, too. You get some of the best thinkers in political science or physics or whatever. There’s a positive feedback loop once you build to a certain size. I feel like I’ve seen that develop over the last few years here. And that doesn’t happen at many companies.”

At Facebook’s current size, keeping the quality of incoming recruits high is “hard, but like with all of these networks, the seed really, really, really matters,” Cox says. “The first 100 people, the first 500 people, the first 1,000 people. If you’re able to get that right, it’s much easier to scale, because you have people that really get it, that care about bringing other people in, making sure it fits together. We’ve invested a lot in that.”

“Our employee referral program is really strong,” says Goler. “People send their best former colleagues to us, or the people who were in their class that they always thought were really impressive, or, ‘Hey, I met this person on Saturday night who seems really great.’”



Building 20's giant roof park, as seen from above, with the existing campus in the background

Between Building 20's 400,000-plus-square feet and the million square feet at the existing former Sun campus, Facebook's headquarters is no longer automatically conducive to the sort of intimate, collaborative atmosphere that startups get for free. The company understands that. It puts related teams together, sometimes in spaces with their own look and feel. Instagram, for instance, is all in one place, in an area with Instagram photos on the walls and conferences named after popular Instagram hashtags.

"One of the things that we built very intentionally are spaces where people will have serendipitous encounters with other people, little neighborhoods and groups of seats," Goler says. "Even the people mover [tram] is a place where you might bump into someone walking back and forth in the tunnel. It's really amazing, actually. I'm sure a lot of people do this, but I keep in my head my running list of, 'There are 12 people I have to see . . . It's not worth a meeting, but when I bump into them, I'm going to talk to them about this.' If I just walk around for a little bit during the day, I usually bump into all of them."

Of course, you aren't going to bump into colleagues who aren't at headquarters—and Facebook is an increasingly far-flung operation. “I think it's 70 offices in 30 countries,” Goler says. “A lot of those are smaller sales offices. We try, again, to intentionally be sure that everyone is tied together.”

Much of that tying together is done within Facebook itself, which the company has long used as its own workgroup productivity tool. (A commercial version aimed at businesses, Facebook at Work, is [due for release soon](#).) “It's one of the things that makes Facebook so different,” Goler says. “You truly have an integrated relationship with all of the people that you come across. I know what happened to people over the weekend, what's happening in their lives, what's happening at work, what's happening in all of these different areas.”

“Mark and Sheryl obviously use Facebook a lot. That gives them a lot more reach within the organization, too, and voice and a way for people to connect with them. I think it's amazing how connected people feel, particularly to Mark and Sheryl, but also to a lot of the leadership team, even if they don't have an opportunity to be alone in a room with them.”

MOVE FAST, BUT DON'T BREAK THINGS

Facebook's culture may be distributed among thousands of people who take it seriously. But has the company managed to make it permanently self-sustaining? I asked Zuckerberg that during one of our meetings, and he stressed that maintaining the same values doesn't mean that an enormous company can behave the same way it did when it was tiny or medium-sized.

“It doesn't get easier as you grow,” he told me. “But I don't think the point is to keep the culture exactly the same. We have certain values that map to how we think we should act to serve our community best. But how we do things changes over time.”

You can't pretend to be a different company than you are.

“Earlier on,” he continued, “I was more in the camp of ‘We can tolerate mistakes.’ ‘Move fast and break things’ was our mantra. We officially retired that, because we were getting to a point where, at the scale we were at, we were making so many mistakes that actually having to go back and fix the mistakes afterward was slowing us down more than it was helping us speed up. So we switched the strategy to ‘Move fast with stable infrastructure.’”

“I think that’s important. You can’t pretend to be a different company than you are. At each scale, you have to do the things that are uniquely suited to the environment you’re in and your position in the world.”



Zuckerberg may see culture as something that’s subject to evolution, but mission is another matter. In comments he sent me as I was wrapping up my feature on Facebook’s future, he suggested that the company’s overarching goals will allow it to keep being Facebook, no matter how big it gets in the years to come.

“Facebook’s mission is to give everyone in the world the power to share, and to make the world more open and connected,” he wrote. “Connecting the world is one of the fundamental challenges of our generation, so this is a long-term effort. As long as we stay focused on that mission, we’re going to keep attracting talented people who share the same goal and want to make it a reality.”

Article 2: “Inside Facebook’s Menlo Park Headquarters”

<https://www.gensler.com/projects/facebook-headquarters>

After quickly outgrowing two company headquarters and approaching nearly one billion users, Facebook has finally found and created a campus worthy of calling home. Located at the old Sun Microsystems campus in Menlo Park, the company has transformed this aging office park dinosaur into something that fits the company’s ideals of being social, mobile, culturally-relevant, personally sustaining, and promoting self-expression.

Gensler was chosen to complete the conversion and opted to have their younger designers work on the project in an effort to bring a fresh approach to the young company’s campus. Ringing in at nearly 1 million-square-feet and filled with mostly private offices, this would prove to be no small task.

Urban Design + Increased Density = Spontaneous Collaboration

Facebook’s first offices were spread throughout Downtown Palo Alto, which has many small restaurants and shops. Beyond the everyday pedestrian traffic, other local employees are out and about creating a lively energy and buzz. And while their new campus is anything but a downtown, urban environment – it has been transformed in many ways to mimic one.

Numerous food choices are available – two main cafes, a pizza window, burrito bar, sweet shop, a sit-down Mexican restaurant, and the various microkitchens – which provide choices that are reminiscent of the diverse offerings available in an urban context. Philz Coffee, a bay area staple, is also available for employees needing a caffeine fix.

Though the food is a great perk of working at Facebook, giving employees a number of options to enjoy keeps them full and creates opportunities for them to collaborate with one another while not officially at their desk engaging in “work”.

Another urban design strategy was to increase the density of employees by tearing out all of the old private office infrastructure and replacing it with an open environment. Increasing density gives way to additional opportunities for unplanned collaborations, and were something we learned Steve Jobs was fanatic about having at Pixar’s headquarters.

The design team also worked to create a well-balanced work environment filled with opportunities for staff to be focused as well as collaborative. Gensler’s

Randy Howder explains in Insight (pdf) that “One challenge is to find the right balance between open-plan, collaborative settings, which predominate, and places where people can hide away.”

Another Gensler document points out that, “Individuals have the time and space to imagine, muse, write, reflect, create, and just be alone with their thoughts. They also have easy access to their teams to meet, critique, refine, brainstorm, iterate, and develop.”

An Atmosphere of Self-Expression

One aspect of the campus I was struck by was the degree to which self-expression was built into company culture. Facebook has an artist in residency program that gives an outlet for new artists to contribute pieces.

Employees are also encouraged to create their own art, and have also been provided numerous walls which allow them to scrawl messages to one another. Some of my favorite art on campus are the designs by David Choe who created the fantastic art in Facebook’s original offices.

Why go to all of these lengths to create an environment that allows for self-expression?

Great workplace branding reflects core values, and is also not a gimmick. Because self-expression is at the heart of the the user experience of Facebook – posting status updates, photos, opinions – the workplace connects employees to that core value.

But beyond simply connecting with those values, this design strives for something more. By creating a workplace where even the look and feel can move forward and adapt, Facebook aims to imprint this ethos into their company culture permanently. The slogans placed around the campus give a revealing look at this atmosphere of change and innovation, “Fortune Favors the Bold”, “Move Fast, Break Things”, and “Hack Often”.

Everyday Life

While we’ve talked a lot about the grand ideas behind the campus, it is always important to get a glimpse at life at the desk.

All employee workstations are equipped with manually height-adjustable desks by default, and mechanically adjustable ones upon request. Herman Miller’s classic Aeron chairs provide the majority of seating. Even Mark Zuckerberg, the company’s CEO, is located at one of the open plan workstations provided for all

employees. He does, however, get the added benefit of a personal conference room.

Treadmill workstations are also spread throughout the campus providing opportunities to either stay active during the day or provide assistance to the more kinesthetic-oriented workers.

For those seeking natural light on their workstations, fear not. The layout provides ample lighting from a mixture of windows and skylights.

And lastly, in an effort to limit the number of car rides into Menlo Park taken by the company's growing workforce, Facebook encourages commuting employees to either rideshare using company-provided shuttles, ride Caltrain, or use the Vanpool program. A Zipcar location is also present on campus. And of course, bike storage, showers, lockers and changing room facilities are available to those that prefer to cycle to work.

Design: Gensler

Furniture: InsideSource

Photography: Jasper Sanidad

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