Inside the search giant’s effort to get more diverse—and to change the way we all see the world.
Google is our eye into the world. The search giant has earned an intimate role in the lives of billions of people through its astounding ability to find, sort, and deliver information instantaneously. Google handles trillions of queries per year—or 80% of all Internet searches on the planet.

It’s the portal through which we channel our collective curiosity. Should I worry about that weird rash on my leg? What’s Brexit? Who was the winning pitcher for the Kansas City Royals in game seven of the 1985 World Series?

Google brings the world to us. Would you like a bird’s-eye view of the vacation house your cousin is renting in Panama? Google it. Want to see what the Lascaux cave paintings in France look like? Google Image them. Wish you could go back and see Prince’s performance of “Purple Rain” at the American Music Awards in 1985? Search Google’s YouTube and you can experience it.

The company’s hegemony in search has laid the foundation for an incredible business built on ad sales. Alphabet, the parent of Google, last year ranked No. 36 on the Fortune 500, with some $75 billion in sales—up from No. 92 and $29 billion just five years earlier. According to estimates from S&P Global, Alphabet will report more than $19 billion in profit for 2016 on $89 billion in revenue.

Google has vanquished all challengers in search over the years—sorry, Yahoo and Bing—through the consistent refinement of its algorithmic wizardry. As the world around the Googleplex shifts, so must its products adjust to keep its otherworldly ability to serve up the correct information.

Recently, however, the company has identified a lingering problem that needs fixing: For a company built on delivering the rich diversity of human experience, the tech titan is not itself a diverse place to work—and it’s moving to change that. Google has decided to search its soul.

Why now? There is perhaps a dollop of public relations in the effort and certainly an element of doing the right thing. (Might the company’s oft-mocked motto of “Don’t be evil” apply?) Silicon Valley in general has been harshly criticized in recent years for being overwhelmingly male and largely devoid of non-Asian people of color.

But there is another potent factor in play too: A growing realization inside the company’s Mountain View, Calif., headquarters that not embracing diversity might impede Google’s ability to keep growing. How can it learn to better serve the billions of people on the planet for whom its search has not thus far been optimized?

In that sense, Google is playing catch-up. Over the past few years, the corporate world has had a powerful awakening on the subject of race, diversity, and inclusion. Last September, for example, Thomson Reuters created the first ever Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Index, an analysis of the practices of over 5,000 companies, crunched down to 100 standouts who have been building on the growing body of research that shows that diverse companies create more innovative products, happier customers, and better financial returns. “We have found that companies who have proactively built and consistently fostered a diverse workforce often financially outperform their peers,” reported
Thomson Reuters. Companies such as Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, Microsoft, and Cisco all made the top 25. Google didn’t make the cut.

That was hardly a surprise. In 2014, after years of resistance, the company began voluntarily publishing its annual diversity employment numbers. Although not shocking by Valley standards, they showed a clear disconnect between the increasingly heterogeneous markets and customers the company needs to reach and the people making the products to reach them.

Those results haven’t changed much—yet. According to the 2016 numbers, some 71% of the company’s roughly 46,000 U.S. employees are male, 57% of the company’s U.S. employees are white, and the vast majority of technology jobs and leadership positions are held by men. While Asian Googlers are one-third of the workforce, everyone else barely registers. Just over 5% of employees identified as Latino, 2.4% as black, 1.8% as mixed race, and fewer than 1% as “other.”

The mere act of releasing the information had a profound ripple effect, though: Other technology companies, such as Apple, Yahoo, and Salesforce, quickly ponied up their own numbers—with similar ratios to those at Google—and began making their own diversity commitments (see the box “Facebook: Iterating Diversity”). As is often the case in tech, where Google goes, others attempt to follow.

While cautioning patience, Google executives are confident that the organization’s embrace of diversity will begin to show up in its workforce soon. The company recently offered Fortune an inside look at its efforts—including interviews with employees in different parts of the company, both techies and non-techies, and at various levels of seniority. Everyone I spoke with agreed that progress is slow but real.

One glaring observation about the campaign: It’s not your standard, top-down, CEO-driven initiative. Google has focused on pushing resources into four areas—hiring, inclusion, education, and communities—where it believes it can have impact. But there is no overarching mandate from the C-suite, like linking compensation to diversity goals, that would indicate to outsiders that diversity is an urgent priority. CEO and cofounder Larry Page didn’t issue a memo. Rather, it’s more of a crowdsourced effort inside Google, with a host of different Googlers leading in various ways.

That leaves an opening for skeptics who wonder about the seriousness of the effort. “There’s nothing like a ‘moonshot,’” says Freda Kapor Klein, a cofounder of Project Include, referring to the long-term, wildly ambitious and well-funded projects that Alphabet takes on, like Google Glass and self-driving cars. “If these initiatives are not given the resources to make it a priority, then tweaking how they recruit, releasing numbers, and giving money to a bunch of nonprofits is not going to get them the results that they want.”

David Drummond welcomes that type of critique, even if he rejects the premise. Alphabet’s senior vice president of corporate development and chief legal officer, Drummond, who is African-American, is the de facto leader of the diversity movement inside the company. He believes real progress is being made, but he’s happy to have outside pressure. Drummond, 53, says it’s more powerful than a moonshot declaration in some ways, because the world is watching the company struggle in real time. “You’re not going to make any progress on a problem if you’re not honest about what a problem is,” he
RUMMOND REMEMBERS well the day that race consciousness finally came crashing into the Googleplex. He helped lead the parade.

It was a Thursday in July 2014, the week that a jury found Florida neighborhood-watch volunteer George Zimmerman not guilty of murder and manslaughter in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed, hoodie-wearing teenager. The case inspired a heated national debate on racial profiling and criminal justice—as well as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter—and the decision left plenty of Googlers of color deeply unsettled, Drummond among them.

There was a spontaneous “hoodie march” around campus, and Drummond joined in. Wearing a Google hoodie, he addressed the crowd of about 100 through a bullhorn before leading them along Mountain View’s Charleston Road and into Google’s weekly all-hands meeting, at which top executives publicly field questions from employees with no topic off limits. Cofounders Page and Sergey Brin were onstage when the group arrived, and Drummond, still holding a bullhorn, asked his two bosses to stand down while he spoke. “It was sort of in an old-school civil rights way,” says Drummond, who has been with the company since 2002. “We felt we needed to come together as a company, and we did.”

Drummond sits on the executive steering committee on diversity, and diversity in human resources was in his direct area of responsibility as a senior executive for the past 15 years. “I’ve always felt very strongly about it and have pushed us to do more,” he says.

He is also deeply involved with the various non-search businesses that since 2015 have been separated from Google under the umbrella of the Alphabet holding company. They include wagers on, for instance, smart homes (Nest), technology to enhance health (Verily), faster Internet access to homes (Google Fiber), and self-driving cars (part of X). “It’s really a collection of startups, so there’s an opportunity to look at diversity and inclusion from the beginning,” he says. In his role at Alphabet, he asks the questions early on. “We take a lot of the lessons we’ve learned about diversity inclusion from other organizations and encourage them to get on these things earlier.”

Google’s diversity measures are a hybrid. They cut across all lines of business, giving people a new language for speaking about diversity—not unlike a design language. Some 30,000 Googlers have already taken part in antibias training and hiring, and promoting practices, say many employees, have been transformed. Increasingly, recruiters are willing to look beyond a sliver of particular majors at a handful of elite colleges when identifying job candidates.

Bonita Stewart is a perfect example of why new markets need fresh faces. Ten and a half years ago, she was recruited by Google out of Detroit—where she ran communications for Daimler Chrysler—to help lure automotive advertisers into
the Digital Age from Google’s New York office. Today, as vice president of global partnerships, she makes sure that publishers are figuring out how to make money across the growing array of Google assets. But back in the day, she was a trailblazer. “In many ways I feel like the diversity revolution started with me, honestly.”

As a leader, she has been focusing on casting a wide net for open positions and is committed to sponsoring other women of color with leadership potential. “I don’t want to be the sole sister in this chair,” she says. She now presses white allies into service sponsoring talent of color. Says Stewart: “You have to ask them. They’re not used to being asked.”

There are a multitude of vibrant employee groups, large and small, working to make inclusive practices a new normal inside the company. Taken together—there are groups for black, Latinx (the gender inclusive form of “Latino”), Asian, and disabled employees, and older “Greyglers,” to name a few—they represent a formidable movement. “Google is in this for the long haul,” says Anna Patterson, one of Google’s engineers on the search product and co-chair of Women at Google, a growing 9,000-person organization. “Diversity makes all tech better, and our products better. We need to become even more thoughtful about how we understand each other, including our user base.”

For his part, Drummond says that some of the best, most innovative ideas are probably outside Alphabet—a radical notion on its own. And he bristles at criticism that supporting community projects, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs in Harlem or Oakland, is just checking boxes. “We do it because it’s a good thing to do, but we also want to learn from what other people are doing,” Drummond says.

He expects that Googlers who spend more time understanding underserved communities will naturally understand the power of diversity. “This is about being ‘proximate,’” he says, citing his friend Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of Just Mercy, about racism in the criminal justice system. “This is about understanding what’s happening on the ground, being next to the problems, and building on what’s working to get more and different people into tech.”
T’S ONE THING to talk about diversity. It is quite another to be confronted by the fact that your core product, which was designed to be based on “the collective intelligence of the web,” has dredged up the web’s collective bigotry instead.

That’s exactly what happened to the company in a pair of recent incidents. In 2015 a new Google photo-search application began tagging images of black people as gorillas, causing public outrage and internal embarrassment. And just this past December, a writer for The Guardian discovered while searching for information about the Holocaust that Google’s algorithm returned white supremacist Holocaust-denial propaganda in its top spot. To make matters worse, the writer fixed the issue by buying ads to promote the correct information.

Events like these, say some skeptics, make it easy to look askance at Google’s lack of progress with its workforce numbers. But defenders say that the traumatic episodes are part of a learning process. “The intentions are good,” says Anil Dash, a writer, an activist, an inclusion advocate, and the CEO of Fog Creek Software, based in New York. “The people doing the work are very smart and thoughtful.” Dash was a panelist recently at Decoding Race, the fourth installation of Google’s new Race@ series. The program is supposed to provide honest dialogue around race and racial justice both within the company and in the world.

Bradley Horowitz, who led Google Photos at the time of the gorilla incident, told the company at the Race@ event that if the team had been more diverse, it would have noticed the problems earlier in the process. “To the degree that the data is sexist or racist, you’re going to have the algorithm imitating those behaviors,” Horowitz said, as reported by TechCrunch. It’s the world we all live in, but it’s Google’s job to put its finger on the scale to make it level. “What data should we be feeding it, how should we be correcting that.”

ALK TO ENOUGH Googlers, and you start to accumulate examples of how outside perspectives are enriching the company’s business.

Exhibit A is Adriana Jara, 33, who started at the company in 2013. Jara grew up in Costa Rica surrounded by coffee plantations; one of her first jobs was fetching the morning milk from a neighbor’s cow. But she eventually found her way into engineering school in Costa Rica’s forward-thinking educa-
tion system, then into a series of good jobs in her country’s growing tech industry.

When she got to Google, “it was culture shock in every way imaginable,” she says. Her first assignment didn’t take. “My team was very homogenous, and they were all about the same, and I was the weird person, so I ended up switching.” Having a native Spanish speaker as a mentor, a manager, or an HR contact, she says, would have helped.

Now Jara works on Google’s shopping product, on a core team of six, where nearly everyone has a different background, including engineers from China and Korea. “Everyone is different from each other, which is much easier,” she says.

There are two important areas where Jara has been able to influence the company, and she’s got a third in her sights. First, the shopping product itself. Turns out, shoppers focus on different things in Latin American economies, hers included. “In the U.S., how fast you can get it is super important,” she says. “But in places like Costa Rica, you have such bad infrastructure that we’re used to waiting for things.” She made the case that price comparisons are more important than shipping options in certain markets, a search tweak that was welcomed by her team.

But she is also proud of her work as an ambassador inside and outside Google, a role that is encouraged and acknowledged by her manager. She was tapped when a Google recruiter visited her university in Costa Rica—a trip she has now made several times herself looking for candidates and helping future interns survive the ultra-challenging marathon interviews. She has visited a camp for girls in Peru and has made lasting relationships with people in the international development community, all on Google’s dime.

With success under her belt, Jara sees a third act for herself, citing Google’s long-standing deficit in social media and research that shows the Latino market’s rapid adoption of both social and mobile technologies in the U.S. and around the world.

“People have always said that Google is not good at social stuff—and one of my dreams is to figure out how Google can be good at that,” she says. “Latinas are touchy-feely, and we hang together in bunches, and blah, blah, but actually, real social components are very important to me.”

Like Google, Facebook gets scrutinized and criticized for the hue and gender of its workers. The social network is applying the same spirit of experimentation to its employment imbalances that it does to its products, says Maxine Williams, Facebook’s global director of diversity. The company tracks the results of a series of pilot programs, revises accordingly, and then either expands or kills the program.

“Because we’re so data driven,” she says, “doing pilots makes a huge difference.”

The fate of one initiative shows how tricky the obstacles can be. In recent months, the Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg have reported on a Facebook system in which its recruiters receive twice as many points for hiring a black, Hispanic, or female engineer as for whites, males, or Asians. Bloomberg’s article reported that hiring managers some-times rebuff diverse candidates offered by the recruiters. During interviews, according to Bloomberg, the managers often inquired where the applicant went to college, the sort of “old boys” question the program seeks to avoid. Williams declines to comment on the points system or even confirm that it exists. Either way, though, change has been slow at Facebook. As of July, 1% of the social network’s U.S. tech team is black and 3% Hispanic, numbers that have stayed flat since 2015. Globally, 17% of its tech employees are women, an increase of one percentage point over the previous year.

Still, Williams says some Facebook programs, such as the three below, are showing promise:

- **The Diverse Slate Approach:** Based on the NFL’s Rooney rule, it requires that
  hiring managers interview at least one member of an under-represented group for each open role.

- **Facebook University:** The company has been running a summer training program for under-grads from underrepresented groups. The hope is that these trainees will join the company after graduation as engineers and business and data analysts some already have. The program has expanded from 30 engineering students in 2013 to a class of 170 engineers and analysts-to-be.

- **Managing Unconscious Bias:** In 2015, Facebook publicly launched an online training course to help its employees identify and address unconscious biases. The course is a series of videos in which Facebook executives explain commonly held stereotypes. The clip on performance bias, for example, explains why some people are perceived as naturally talented, while others as having “gotten lucky.”
  —Valentina Zarya

Another nontraditional Googler who has become a passionate advocate for the company is Michael Gardner, who is based in Ann Arbor. The 26-year-old works as an account manager for nonprofits and religious organizations, an area he loves because he spends his time amplifying the impact of their work. “The culture is why I fell in love,” says Gardner.
Gardner came to Google through the BOLD program, which recruits nontechnical interns of color, in the summer of 2011, and felt so welcome that he snapped up an offer the following year. He's proud of the work he has done, including modifications he recommended to an automated lead-generation system for salespeople targeting small-business owners. But he is just as proud of the ways he has contributed to improving relationships among 400 employees in the Michigan office. In the fall he spearheaded something he called Inclusion Week, which happened to coincide with the presidential election. It's his own personal moonshot. “There are a lot of people who are well-intentioned about inclusion but don’t know exactly how to get involved,” he says. There were presentations and focused conversations leading to a series of lightbulb moments that Gardner hopes will help the Michiganders think more deeply about creating an inclusive workplace and sharing those learnings across the company.

Jack Chen, 42, is yet another Googler who has made an impact. The computer scientist turned patent lawyer has been instrumental in transforming the way Google thinks about employees with disabilities. He frames it in a very Google way: “We decided to create an employee group around the goal of making Google the best place to work for people with disabilities,” he says. Chen, who has been blind since he was a teenager, had to take the lead when he joined the New York office in 2010, modifying both his office and his personal technology to make it work for him. Since then, he has worked closely with other Googlers with disabilities to create a clear set of aspirational goals for a community that is diverse in its needs and challenges. He ticks through a list: blindness, autism, stuttering, people who need wheelchairs, the hearing impaired. “There are vast differences in experiences as well as the solutions that help those people,” he says. “The common thread is empathy.”

The real truth is that for a long time now Google’s meritocracy in a bubble has worked splendidly—vastly enriching Googlers and shareholders alike. The search product is an astonishing achievement enabled by constant refinement and a technical skill that routinely reaches the level of magic. And if it was built and maintained by a homogenous collection of Stanford engineers, well, it’s hard to argue with success. But narrow inclusion has had its opportunity costs as well. Drummond, as do others at the company, gets this from both a product and talent perspective. “There’s a long list of people who were turned away from Google who went on to do great things—I don’t need to name names,” he says, laughing.

But I will. One famous example is Kevin Systrom, a Google employee who was turned away from the company’s associate product manager program because he had the wrong degree from Stanford—management science, not computer science. So he wandered off to found Instagram, which he sold to Facebook for $1 billion in 2012. The photo-sharing social media platform is now worth multiples of that purchase price.

A lesser known but perhaps even more impressive technologist, Laura Mather, might have helped transform Google in other ways. Mather was an early cybersecurity expert, a rare breed who started at the NSA and then migrated to Silicon Valley, where she became an integral part of eBay’s first antifraud team in 2003. She applied for and won a position at Google in 2006. But then, says Mather, her recruiter shared a message from Larry Page: that he was offering her the job, but he didn’t think she was going to be successful because her school wasn’t good enough. She had gotten her Ph.D. 12 years earlier from the University of Colorado. “It broke my heart; it was so irrelevant,” she says. (Page declined to comment.) She was equally put off by the interviews: “All they wanted to do was prove they were smarter than me.” She says she decided she didn’t want to work for a company that wanted to tear her down. Mather went on to cofound the antifraud startup Silver Tail Systems, which uses pattern-recognition algorithms to identify online fraud in real time. It was bought by EMC/RSA for $250 million in 2012. She then founded a software platform called Unitive, that helps companies eliminate bias in recruiting by helping hiring teams identify candidates based on skills and values rather than on what school they went to. Or, as she says with a laugh, “whether or not they played water polo.” Who knows? Maybe Google will make her an offer.
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