

GOOGLE EXPOSED AS A SPY OPERATION AND CULT BY EMPLOYEE LAWSUIT

'Don't send an e-mail that says I think we broke the law': Lawsuit describes how Google allegedly enforces its culture of extreme secrecy



- [Rob Price](#)
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They're watching you Alan Crowhurst/Getty Images

The Silicon Valley tech giants are notorious for their secrecy — and thanks to a new lawsuit, we've got a new window into exactly how that secrecy is enforced.

Google is being sued by an unnamed San Francisco employee who works as a product manager for the company, who claims he has been falsely blamed for leaking information to the press.

The case alleges that Google violates Californian labor laws on a number of grounds, [and was first reported on by The Information](#), which estimates that the search giant could be fined up to \$3.8 billion if all the allegations were upheld as affecting all 65,000 employees.

You can read the full legal filing by "John Doe's" lawyers below, but we've also broken out some of the most fascinating tidbits, from Google encouraging its employees to snitch on one another to [restrictions on novel-writing](#).

In a statement, a Google spokesperson said: "We will defend this suit vigorously because it's baseless. We're very committed to an open internal culture, which means we frequently share with employees details of product launches and confidential business information. Transparency is a huge part of our culture. Our employee confidentiality requirements are designed to protect proprietary business information, while not preventing employees from disclosing information about terms and conditions of employment, or workplace concerns."

Googlers allegedly can't talk about *anything*

Much of the case centres around a confidentiality agreement that new Google employees — "Googlers" — have to sign. "It informs Googlers that they cannot disclose 'confidential information' to anyone," the lawsuit alleges, "even to an attorney or the government."



Google's offices in Mountain View, California. [Luis Villa del Campo/Flickr \(CC\)](#)

But what is "confidential information"? Just about everything, apparently. The agreement defines it as "without limitation, any information in any form that relates to Google or Google's business that is not generally known," including "employee data."

That's everything from what the Googler worked on to their team members and their salary. Employees who disclose "confidential information" may be terminated, held personally liable, or subject to prosecution," according to documents quoted by the lawsuit.

According to the suit, another "confidential" code of conduct policy warns employees that "it's also a bad idea to post your opinions or information about Google on the Internet, even if not confidential, unless you're authorized to do so as part of your job. . . . And never discuss the company with the press unless you've been explicitly authorized to do so by Corporate Communications."

Google employees also cannot talk to members of the press "without prior clearance from Google's communications team."

Google employees are allegedly told not to talk about potential wrongdoing or illegality at the company

One startling allegation in the case is that Google instructs its employees not to talk about potential wrongdoing or illegality about the company, even to other Google employees and lawyers. Here's a quote from the court document, emphasis ours:

"Google restricts what Googlers say internally in order to conceal potentially illegal conduct. **It instructs employees in its training programs to do the following: 'Don't send an e-mail that says 'I think we broke the law' or 'I think we violated this contract.'**" The training program also advises employees that they should not be candid when speaking with Google's attorneys about dangerous products or violations of the law. The program advises Googlers that some jurisdictions do not recognize the attorney-client privilege, and 'Inside the U.S., government agencies often pressure companies to waive the privilege.' **Google advises Googlers that they 'should write e-mails with the assumption that somebody outside of Google, who may not be friendly to us, will get to read it.'**"

Similarly, a training program called "You Said What?" allegedly "instructs Googlers to suppress information about dangerous products. Google also specifically advises Googlers to delete paragraphs from emails that suggest there are serious flaws in Google technology, that Google may be sued, or that there may be product liability damages."

Google employees need to get approval to write some fictional novels

The rules about what Google employees can and can't say are so strict that they are allegedly even barred from writing fictional novels about tech companies in Silicon Valley without the approval of Google, and without letting Google sign-off on the final draft. This is from the suit:

"Google not only prohibits employees from speaking about Google, it also prohibits employees from writing creative fiction. Among other things, Google's Employee Communication Policy prohibits employees from writing "a novel about someone working at a tech company in Silicon Valley" unless Google gives prior approval to both the book idea and the final draft."

The company allegedly has a "spying unit" and encourages employees to snitch on each other



Not a real Google employee. United Artists

The lawsuit also discusses how leaks and whistleblowing at Google is monitored and investigated by a "Global Investigations Team," headed up by Brian Katz, [a former special agent at the US State Department](#).

This team "conducts 'interviews with the subjects of investigations, as well as the victims and witnesses,'" the lawsuit says. "It 'provides recommendations regarding discipline for these infractions when requested.' The Global Investigations Team also relies on 'volunteers' to report other employees who might have disclosed any information about Google."

In other words, it tracks down leaks, and encourages employees to snitch if they suspect each other of leaking.

Google wants employees to report "suspicious activity"

Someone asking probing questions about Google? Report it.

"Google also asks Googlers to file 'suspicious activity reports,' which Google states can include 'strange things you observe or strange things that happen to you — like someone asking you really detailed questions about your project or job,'" the court document says.

Employees who "inadvertently" leak information are encouraged to confess

An employee program called "Stopleaks" aims to track down and prevent future leaks, according to the documents — and anyone who "inadvertently" leaks information is apparently encouraged to confess. Here's a Google memo quoted by the court documents:

"Non-malicious leaks happen when an employee shares information with an external person they trusted, and other times internal and confidential information is accidentally marked public. If you know you were inadvertently responsible for a leak, let us know quickly by emailing stopleaks@. We understand that mistakes happen!"

Another interesting tidbit: Google employees allegedly have access to a special Stopleaks Chrome browser extension they can use to report potential leaks. And this isn't voluntary — they are apparently "required under Google policies to report 'leaks' to Stopleaks."

Google argues that leaks go against its "community" ethos



Larry Page, a Google cofounder. Getty Images/Justin Sullivan

Google allegedly argues that leaks aren't just bad for the business — they're bad for the kind of community it wants to nurture. Brian Katz, the head of the Global Investigations Team, allegedly emailed this message to employees:

"If you're considering sharing 'confidential information' to a reporter — or to anyone externally — for the love of all that's Googley, please reconsider! Not only could it cost you your job, but it also betrays the values that makes us a community."

On other occasions, an (unnamed) Google cofounder told Google employees at all-hands meetings that anyone caught leaking would be fired.

Here's the full court filing:

