

[me] *jump To the end.*

[dad] *...to the what?*

[me] *To the END.*

[dad] *hmm... what does that mean?*

[me] *I'm not really sure but everyone nodded their heads so it's a thing here.*

[dad] *Maybe they wanted you to skip to the end of your presentation?*

[me] *Nope. Did that. Definitely wasn't it. They kept asking to see the thing everyone else in the world would end up seeing*

[dad] *As in the ad campaign? Well what's the idea?*

[me] *There's no idea. I think we just have to start making something and we apparently somehow work it out as we do*

[dad] *OK. But making what though?*

[me] *Honestly... I'm not sure. They said something about posters.*

[dad] *Got it. Posters. So when you say posters...*

I'd been trying to explain to my dad what I did at Google for the 8 years prior to that moment, but week two at Google's Creative Lab was likely the moment he started questioning whether I even worked there at all or had just found an elaborate pretense to escape to NYC and add another chapter to the complex [identity mosaic](#) I'd been cultivating over the years.

The acute irony of this was that the "simplify it until you can explain it to your dad and then simplify it again so he can explain it to his mechanic" is one of the mantras relentlessly beaten into every one of us on our journey through the Creative Lab.

Hovering somewhere above my desk in a cramped office in an old elevator shaft on the top floor of Google's NYC office was a neon sign brightly pulsing "Weapons of mass understanding" for anyone who looked up. A little further down the hall a gargantuan poster reads "Know the user. Know the magic. Connect the two."

So Dad - over a decade into my journey at Google feels like the right time to try and “connect the two” again and put to rest any lingering doubts that I do in fact have a real job here. Both for you and for your mechanic.

The “WTF is Creative Lab” presentation given to all new joiners starts with “we’re here to remind the world what it is they love about Google”. It ends with “make epic shit”. In between those bookends is a rapid fire array of past projects that help bring this to life. From scrappy app prototypes, to new product ideas all the way through to polished Superbowl spots.

What I realised very quickly is that there is rarely any type of real brief. Everyone was expected to invent before they were asked. I’d paid lip service to the “fly the plane as we build it” approach in the past but this was the first time I’d truly seen it play out in practice. Full speed, no clear direction. Sometimes it flies, sometimes it crashes, many times it doesn’t really get off the ground.

You might remember from your couple of visits over the years that the physical space is a living testament to that ethos (the plane flying). The fastest way to create a prototype or portray a future that doesn’t exist yet is to sketch it out quickly with words, images or something that moves. So that’s what we do. Posters are king. They are on every wall. Every size and format you could imagine mocked up to communicate the idea at a glance on a single piece of paper. If it doesn’t pass that test. It’s rarely worth going any further.

[PHOTO OF BIG POSTER WALL]

A job description for any Creative Lab role might start with something like: “We are a small team of designers, writers, programmers, filmmakers and business thinkers who spend 99.9% of our time making. Our job is to make Google’s magic more magical, help invent Google’s future, and communicate Google’s innovations, intent and ideals.” So here’s what that really means and what it can end up looking like:

1. **We help build things.** Many of our projects are collaborations with product, research and engineering teams. Sometimes we begin conspiring with them months or years into the development process but often we explore ideas that jump past what exists to try and provide inspiration for which direction to head. Sometimes this can lead to the creation of a product like [Timelapse in Google Earth](#) that compiles millions of satellite photos over 37 years to show the impact of humanity on Earth over time. Other times it could lead to creation of experiments to help

people with speech impairments to [communicate better](#).

2. **We help explain things.** Google does A LOT of different things and sometimes the point of deep diving into a subject is to find a way to explain it to everyone else. (How does Search actually work? What is it like to work on AI at DeepMind? What is quantum computing? How do the best hackers in the world think?) We end up making stuff like [Trillions of Questions, No Easy Answers](#), a home movie about how Google Search works or a quick explainer on [project Debug](#) to show how a group of scientists at the company are developing tech to eliminate dangerous mosquitos. Yes, you read that right.
3. **We help people know things exist:** Occasionally, we set out to take the best Google stuff and make sure people outside of Google know about it. We make things like [Loretta](#), a Super Bowl spot to let people know about how the Google Assistant works or a short film on [Plus Codes](#) to broadcast this feature to millions of people around the world without formal addresses.

So that's what I do, Dad. Build things. Explain things. Help people know they exist. It could be diving into robotics one month, thinking through the role photos play in our lives the next month, and creating a music video for YouTube the month after that. More often than not it's trying to get together a few misfits to get an idea from 0 to 1 and then convincing a much bigger group of Google's finest to take it from 1 to the moon.

So here's what you can tell Paolo (wait, is he still your mechanic?) next time he asks:

"Julian makes stuff to convince smarter people at Google to do things that make a difference to people. You might have seen some of his stuff on TV or used some of the tools he's built doing your job every day. Things like how to find a new job on Search or routes that use less fuel when you drive in Maps. In fact, I think his team also made a film about some [rockstar mechanics](#) too. You should check it out"

And if that doesn't land, just go with - "he works in a place that makes a lot of posters".

Graveyard:

Potential future Part 2: Lessons and “how”

- 1) Humans > Technology: So much of the Lab's work is so potent because it elevates the role of the human within technology. From Parisian Love to the Photos spots, the storytelling put people at the center. Anyone could watch those clips and project themselves into the frame. Y'all always made it clear that the technology is in service of humans and not the other way around.
 - 2) You need less than you think: The best Lab spots were assembled using UI screenshots and / or photographs sourced from people's phones. Those spots almost always outperformed more slick, high production work created using fancy cameras and lighting. It was amazing to see how much emotional mileage you can get from such simple sources.
 - 3) Quality comes from quantity: This is quote straight from Tristan. People at the Lab were constantly generating ideas in bulk, and exploring hundreds of creative avenues in low fidelity before settling on a direction. By exhausting all possible options in a cheap and quick way, the resources could be concentrated towards the most fruitful path forward.
 - 4) We're a small team so it's all hands on deck every time we jump into something new. Designers write. Filmmakers strategize. Technologists design.
 - 5) Ideas come first but they live or die by presentation. Be clear and quick. Every pixel count
 - 6) simple first. Then add everything else
-) Impact / Effort

Some words I cut:

clarifying that there were indeed people who worked at the company but that we weren't manually writing each search result all the way to discussing in detail the merits of a blind dutch auction to rank results.

That's what the job description said. Ok cool. But how? Well we make stuff. Like what? Well like new products, hacks or ads. Anything the helps tell the story

[picture of top floor from we are CL deck]

[picture of everyone running around doing dif jobs]

Sketches of potential product prototypes, UX mocks, new product designs, branding ideas, advertising campaigns

Another way we do this is by creating experiences that incorporate Google's products or tech - often with collaborators like NASA, Billie Eilish, The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth etc.

Yet there I was, 3 months into the job and back home for the holidays struggling to explain what this team was and where I sat within it. I could still intimately dissect the workings of a double blind ad auction and how the search page rank algorithms worked but didn't know how to talk about a lab of entrepreneurial misfits that was trying to invent things that often no one at the company was asking for or knew they needed.

Working at Google for over a decade I've had to answer many different versions of the question "So what do you actually do there?". The sophistication of the answer varied wildly based on the person asking the questions and the moment in time but up until that day I felt like I had a relatively well worn script that did the job. Not anymore.

After working across Sales and Marketing in both London and New York I felt like I had a pretty good grasp of the type of data led strategic thinking that was required to make things happen at the company. It was my first team meeting and I shared some initial thoughts I'd quickly scrambled together as to why Google Photos was a hidden gem (it really is) the company should be spending more time and effort talking about (we did). Tight 12 slide powerpoint for the win again right? Nope. Not this time. Now I needed...posters?

Potential projects to link to:

Sometimes these explorations lead to the creation of a product, feature, or technology like [Timelapse in Google Earth](#) that compiles millions of satellite photos over the past 37 years to show the impact of humanity on Earth over time.

That can lead to things like [Trillions of Questions, No Easy Answers](#), a movie about how Google Search works

That can lead to things like [Loretta](#), a Super Bowl spot to let people know about how Google Assistant works.

Camera Switches: An Android accessibility feature for people with speech and motor impairments that helps them navigate their phones using eye movements and facial gestures

Margaret by Moonlight

AlphaGo

Recorder