

Life Skills 101 Podcast – Ep. 4 with Ben O’Bright

Becca Weston – BW

Ben O’Bright – BB

BW – 0:00

Hey, I’m Rebecca Weston and you’re listening to the Life Skills 101 podcast from the Student Experience Office.

We will be joined by Googler and Carleton Alum, Ben O’Bright. During his time at Carleton, Ben studied Political Science and was heavily involved in the community as an Orientation Week leader. He now works as a Policy Lead on hardware and devices with Trust and Safety at Google’s European headquarters in Dublin, Ireland.

BB – 0:40

I learned through Orientation Week that it’s okay to sort of embrace the things that I like and who I am.

BW – 0:46

Today, Ben tells us about working at Google and how Carleton helped him get there.

Hi Ben, it’s so nice to see you today.

BB – 0:53

It’s good to see you too. Thanks for having me.

BW – 0:56

Thank you for being here. To start off, I’m going to ask you a question that I know everyone is thinking. What is it like working at Google?

BB – 1:06

That’s a great question. It’s really neat for, I think a couple of different reasons. One, I think Google is really well known for having really interesting office spaces, and the people in the offices and the sort of environment they create is really neat. It’s exciting, it makes you want to go to work, which is kind of a fun thing.

But I think it's also exciting because companies like Google are kind of on the frontline for all of the prospective challenges we're facing in and around the internet, especially from a trust and safety perspective. Like, how do we make better experiences for our users who are using our products and services, and likewise, other companies are trying to think of the same thing, but I think getting the sort of sheer size of the company and sort of the amount of impact that it has on the world, quite often what happens if you're working at Google, you're dealing with emerging issues that nobody else has had to deal with yet simply by virtue of internet equals Google type conversations.

And so, I think it makes it so that every day is... Gosh, people say this all the time, but every day is kind of unique. It really is different every single day because, for better or for worse, the internet is incredibly innovative and by finding ways to keep us employed in sort of a trust and safety department, there's always got a new trick up its sleeve, right? And so, I think as a consequence, we are trying to deal with that sort of evolving context and that evolving internet situation every day.

I really enjoy it. I also love being in Europe. I work for the Google office here in Dublin and that's really fun as well because it's such an incredibly multicultural and multinational codger of people who work here from all over the world. And so, you get so many interesting perspectives and unique perspectives on a problem that might seem incredibly simple for you to solve. You know, it should be *this* way... But you get to learn from all of your colleagues who have vastly different perspectives than you and hopefully for the better.

BW – 3:01

That's really interesting. When you first got the call that you got a job or like an email that you got the job at Google, were you kind of like "Woah. WOAHH. That's crazy."

BB – 3:12

Oh yeah. I completely thought it was fake. I was standing on a street corner in Toronto, where I was living at the time, and I'd been going through interviews. But always in the back of my mind, it was like "I'm never going to make it to the next round. There's no way they have an interest in me." Why would they be talking to some Canadian from Dublin, having him potentially come over? That's a lot of money. Who would spend money on me to do that?

And then I got that call from the crew that's like "Great news. We're going to send you an offer for the job." And I was with my wife at the time, and I was like "Okay, that's really nice. Thank you. Thank you so much." Completely deer in headlights. And then I got off and it's like "I think someone's prank calling me, they're saying I have a job with Google." And she's like "Yeah, there's no way that's happening." And then lo and behold, later that day, I got the letter in my email, and it's like "Ah! It still feels totally fake. Like, I could have put this together in Microsoft Word, but now let's just go with it and see what happens." If I show up in Dublin and there's no job, well at least I got a trip out of it.

So, couldn't really complain too much. But yeah it was fully a deer in headlights, this is 100% not real. And I think that sort of happens with quite a few people who are just starting moving, especially from government or non-profit where I was at the time, to another sector completely.

Nobody cares about me, why would I get that. But in actual fact, you sort of realize that once you get in that you're precisely the kind of person that they care about, because you bring a sort of social science, a political science, an arts and science background to a sector that desperately needs it now. People that sort of think through really challenging intractable problems, right? That don't necessarily have a technological solution or sort of a technology solution, but have a policy solution potentially, or a philosophical solution in some cases. And so, more and more, they need that sort of dynamism of thought. And it's only once you get in, you're like "Oh, okay. I actually do fit in here without my computer science degree."

This like, weird Canadian political science wonk who spent time in non-profits and is now working for Google. Okay, but it's also fun. You sort of get your, they call it Nooglers: New Googlers. And I got my Noogler hat with the spinny thing on top and stuff. I got a great picture of it. I actually still have it somewhere in my house that I periodically bump out for like a Halloween costume or something. Yeah, but totally a bizarre, surreal experience.

BW – 5:36

It sounds like a once in a lifetime thing and it's really cool to hear about. I'm going to circle back a little bit on your LinkedIn. I saw that you were an Orientation Week leader for many years. How did that role help you in the career that you are in today?

BB – 5:55

Such a good question. I loved my O Week experience. I was so into this.

So, I grew up in Ottawa, and so I never got the residence experience at Carleton. I went to high school in Ottawa, I had my friend groups in Ottawa, and I remember most of my friends didn't really have an interest in doing Orientation Week. They're sort of, "Well, why don't I just go home and do something else?" I signed up almost right away because I thought this was really neat and I wanted to be involved, and it fundamentally framed me as a human being going forward at Carleton. The sort of integration with community spirit, the desire to be involved in as many things as possible. Because that very first exposure I had to Carleton life was through Orientation Week.

And I'm sure you probably did O Week as well. The people there are... they're excited, they're outgoing, they're super thrilled that you're there, they are teaching you about the school and all these things. Like, if you've never entered into a university before, never had sort of the university experience before, that is the exact way you should be starting. Because you will have terrible classes, you will have hard experiences down the line. But if that is your grounding, as your sort of first entry point into Carleton, where everyone is so excited that you're a part of this community, that sort of defines what it looks like for the rest of your time there and it did for me; where I did Orientation Week as a student and then as a leader, basically throughout the end and then I led my own group in my last year.

And every year you sort of learn something new that you take with you as you grow, as you evolve, as you get comfortable with who you are. I learned through our Orientation Week that it's okay to sort of embrace the things that I like and who I am, which is kind of cheesy to say, but I think going into university, I was still trying to figure out my own identity.

And I was sort of nervous about things. Like, I am a gigantic science fiction nerd. For realsies. The most gigantic science fiction nerd. But at the time, I hadn't really embraced that. I was actually kind of nervous to talk to people about "Oh, I really like this particular part of creative culture." And it was through Orientation Week that I sort of found my own identity and was confident or gained the confidence to express that and share that with other people. And I think that idea of being comfortable with who you are enough that you can express your ideas and your thoughts and your opinions and your knowledge to others is invaluable as you go through your professional career, right?

Because, especially in sort of a trust and safety space, where I work in, right? A lot of my job is convincing people that a certain solution works for our users, or a certain policy is the right decision for a given context, and I have to be confident that I've done my due diligence. I've spoken with the people that need to be spoken to or with, and I've done my homework, and I need to be confident that whatever I'm presenting to people is my best effort at showcasing a valuable and evidence-supported opinion.

I think also when you're thrust into Orientation Week, either as a leader or as a participant, you are immediately bombarded with a vast array of cultures, backgrounds of social contexts, of ideas of people, right? And understanding, especially as a leader, all of those and finding and building a consensus-based accepting environment for the people who are participating in O Week, Orientation Week is invaluable. Because if they are accepting of one another, then they can focus less on the differences amongst themselves and more on enjoying their time entering into a university setting.

And I think that idea is, likewise, really important in my professional career anyways, because a lot of what I have to do is find consensus amongst a whole bunch of different teams, all of whom have competing interests, competing ideas, competing priorities, and finding a middle ground amongst this disparate group of people is part and parcel what we do on my team.

So, I learned a lot actually and it's fun to reflect on how, what feels like a sort of carnival-like atmosphere in a lot of ways with Orientation Week, can actually translate to... I call them upgrades. Tangible upgrades to who I was and who I was becoming. And all of those have since solidified and matured and formed into the kind of core of what I am and who I am now. It's kind of neat.

BW – 10:50

Yeah, it definitely sounds like it. Why is being a part of a community important to you, other than how it's built you up a little?

BB – 11:12

Yeah, that's a really good question. I actually think about this a lot as an expat living in Ireland in particular. The hardest part of moving abroad and living in another country is quite often finding a community or building a community, because I think community helps in so many ways, right? It helps with transition. It gives you a comfortable space to ask really stupid questions, which I do all the time. It gives you an environment where you are almost encouraged to learn, to explore, to be adventurous, to fail, without a sort of fear that doing so will lessen you in the eyes of somebody else, right?

Which, I think we all sort of think about in a professional environment. How do I come across other people? And being a part of community that values that connection amongst the members of that community is incredibly important.

So, I think community underpins our ability to succeed in a lot of ways because they are going to... It feels like a line from a movie, but community holds you up. And I think that's really important. It is the base, the sort of foundation that you build from in order to grow your own professional career and achieve your own objectives as a human being. But you need that value of community, and that composite of community, and I wholly credit the community at Carleton to giving me a lot of lessons that I think I've applied to try and build community elsewhere. Whether that's as an expat in Ireland or at my own work, it's this unifying fabric that we can use to underpin everything that we do. So, even if we disagree, that's totally fine because we're unified by something at the bottom.

BW – 13:08

Did you learn any skills while being a volunteer that you still use at your job at Google?

BB – 13:15

Everything from how to organize a half decent event to project management skills... It depends on sort of the volunteer role, right? But I think volunteering more than anything else is really important, even at a cultural level in Google, right?

As an example, everyone at Google is encouraged to participate, either in the Google community or outside the Google community. Even some of the benefits are, you get a day off a year where you can go and volunteer for an organization, and it's a paid volunteer day. Maybe more than that, I don't know. And that is really part of the identity of a company like Google. And I think that is also really important for a company to embrace, where these big companies exist in society and there's a really important aspect of existing in society, which is the participation they're in. Where, you need to lead by example and encourage employees to participate in the world around them. Especially for people who are new to a place, like I am with Ireland, right?

I think all of the opportunities that Google has afforded for me to volunteer in my community in Ireland has enabled me to grow my friend group, my experiences, my understanding of Ireland. It also links me here more than anything else, where I'm not just transient anymore. I'm not sort of here for a couple of years and then go. I'm here to stay.

And in a company like mine, or really any company, right? Carleton, everywhere else. Curiosity can be an unbelievably valuable tool in your toolbox for exploring new ways to solve problems or investigating new interests, defining your degree, whatever it is. You need to be curious. And volunteering is an incredible opportunity to do that, right?

Because you can try out so many different things and you can do in a very hands on way, where you're enabling an organization or solving a problem or whatever it is. It gives you that experience and it allows you to be curious, and curiosity can drive you forward. It can help you, not only invent or innovate on interesting ways to solve really challenging problems like we do at work, but also figure out where and how your own career starts to progress and track, right? And so, I think, if nothing else, what volunteering does is it encourages you to be curious and curiosity is a cornerstone to finding a job or finding a company or finding a sector that you really, really, really like.

BW – 16:04

I think last year, you presented at the SOAR Leadership Conference. And I'm just curious... There's the curiosity. I'm just curious what you talked about in your presentation, what you taught students?

BB – 16:20

Yeah, I don't know if I taught them anything. I tend to just be the embodiment of a conscious stream of thought, so who knows? But, I think my one message that I was trying to get across at the Leadership Conference was to think laterally about what you can do with what you want to study, what you're interested in.

I grew up in Ottawa to a family of public servants, studying political science. The obvious place I'm going is government and that's probably what I'm going to end up doing. And I did that for a little bit of time, but I also got opportunities to do other things. And I think what I tried to get across with the conference is that, especially for folks who are in the social sciences areas who have never really considered big tech before or sectors that are not specifically a direct shot from whatever it is they're studying... So, a psychology student going to become a psychologist or political science student going into politics, that sort of thing. The world that we live in now, especially in technology, is becoming so dynamic that if there's any job that you can possibly think of that exists in the world, it's very likely that companies like Google have hired for it in the past.

So, I think what I was trying to say to folks at the conference or the students who were very graciously listening in, was that you should be thinking "study what you enjoy". Because you're entering into an environment where big companies are looking for people who are not just computer scientists anymore. Or computer engineers, or whomever... They are really looking for people with social science backgrounds, in particular, to help solve problems that can't be solved through technology. That have to be solved through, I think I said this earlier, policy or philosophy or sort of a lateral approach to something that has kind of driven a company crazy for ages. I don't know what that could be.

Don't feel like the first choice you're making has to be the right choice. It doesn't necessarily have to be. Study things that you really enjoy because there will be opportunities to apply that in ways you've never even considered before, especially today.

BW – 18:39

Thank you for that, I think that's a great transition into my last question.

What is something you think students should be doing to increase their chances of getting hired once they graduate. Especially now in an age where everything's kind of at home and nobody really knows what's going to happen the next day.

BB – 19:01

There're a few things you can do I think. And this is my opinion, I have no idea whether this is going to be accurate or not, but it kind of depends where you're pointing yourself first.

So, if you're interested in the more social sciences side of the technology space, for example, there is no single path to entering into Google. People have gone in through all sorts of interesting and different backgrounds. There are a few that maybe... Some folks did some geopolitical risk work, some people were art historians. So, it really is the whole spectrum.

I think the hardest part, and there's a solution to this, but the hardest part is figuring out where to point your energy. Because Google gets like millions of applications every year, which is bonkers. And you could be applying to a sort of black hole email inbox for any job without any success, but I think part of that comes from not knowing the specifics, but sort of the broad strokes of what is the ask for a particular job description.

So, you look at any job description in the world. Could be Google or anybody else, and it's quite often fairly generic. You don't really know what it means. It's got the word policy in it, I've got a political science degree, I know what policy is. Maybe I can do that. I think instead, what you should be doing is chatting with people who are sort of adjacent in that space, and whether that's through cold emailing people on LinkedIn, it actually works.

I never feel weird sort of cold emailing somebody. Now that I know this, I've been in the sector and people are really good. And so, I would absolutely encourage everybody to LinkedIn message me. That feels like it's a really strong statement and also a very scary one. I think it's just trying to direct your energies because I think also, even going through the application process is exhausting. It's a lot of interviews, if you get to the interview stage. And if you don't get plucked from that first hat and you don't get through the first step or you get through all the interviews and you still don't get the job, that can be really demoralizing.

And I think maybe the other part to this is that, well maybe there are two things. One, don't give up. Because teams are desperate for candidates and there are lots and lots of open roles that are always coming up that I think... It's sometimes just about trying again. The amount of interviews I did before getting into Google was way too many.

But I think the other aspect to this is that it might not happen right away, maybe unless you're a computer science major. Quite often the people who are coming into technology policy have a little bit of experience under their belt, whether that's in government or whether that's in the non-profit sector, or think tank or a consultancy firm... They typically come with just a couple years under their belt because, quite often, you're leveraging that experience to solve problems that are kind of adjacent or a proxy to what you were doing in the past.

So, it's also okay to get experience elsewhere and start with that experience elsewhere, and then sort of build that up a little bit and then jump into tech policy. It's not going anywhere. In fact, by the time people are ready to apply, there will probably even more jobs available because it's constantly growing, right? So, I think it's okay to sort of do something else first, gain some experience, but keeping in your mind's eye that objective of jumping into tech eventually is what you ultimately want to do.

So, yes, there's a few pieces of advice there, but I hope it's helpful.

BW – 22:54

Thank you so much, Ben. I think that's all of my questions for today. Once again, thank you for coming on the podcast, it was a pleasure talking with you.

BB – 23:03

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

BW – 23:15

And that's all for today.

I'm Rebecca Weston, and this podcast comes from the Student Experience Office. Thank you to Ben for joining us today and thank you to the listener for tuning in, and talk soon.