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Fired by Google, a Republican Engineer Hits Back: 'There's Been a Lot of Bullying'

Search giant's culture wars flame anew; a senior executive contacts law enforcement over leaks

By Rob Copeland

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif.—Kevin Cernekee was still a “Noogler”—Google’s term for a new employee—when his conservative take on political and social issues raised hackles within the search giant.

After several posts on the company’s freewheeling internal message boards in early 2015 rankled some colleagues, he was given an official warning from human resources about conduct deemed disrespectful and insubordinate. Around that time, a senior manager wrote on the boards that he added Mr. Cernekee to a “written blacklist” of employees he wouldn’t work with.

Mr. Cernekee, 41 years old, spent much of the next three years battling Google over his perceived violations, and pressing his contention that right-leaning employees were being treated unfairly, according to interviews, documents and copies of posts on Google’s internal message boards. In one example from 2017 that he reported to human resources, a manager publicly asked on a board about employees holding views like Mr. Cernekee’s: “Can’t we just fire the poisonous assholes already?”

In June 2018, Mr. Cernekee was fired.

Google told Mr. Cernekee in a termination letter that he was let go for multiple violations of company policies, including improperly downloading company information and misuse of the remote-access software system. Mr. Cernekee, who hasn’t spoken publicly before about his status at Google, denies that. He says he was fired for being an outspoken conservative in famously liberal Silicon Valley.

“Historically, there’s been a lot of bullying at Google,” Mr. Cernekee says. “There’s a big political angle, and they treat the two sides very differently.”

A Google spokeswoman, Jenn Kaiser, declined to comment on the specific incidents described in this article involving Mr. Cernekee and other employees. “We enforce our workplace policies without regard to political viewpoint,” Ms. Kaiser said in a statement.

Political bias in the technology world is a headline topic in Washington, D.C., where Republicans on Capitol Hill and the Trump administration are increasingly ramping up heat on Alphabet Inc.’s Google and other tech platforms over perceived bias against conservatives. Google’s global policy chief testified in July to Congress that political leanings don’t factor into the company’s decision making.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.) on Thursday afternoon called the allegations of political bias troubling. In a statement after The Wall Street Journal detailed Mr. Cernekee’s claims, Mr. McCarthy said Google Chief Executive Sundar Pichai had earlier assured him that all

viewpoints were welcome, but “time and again, we see actions that contradict free and open expression.”

Mr. Cernekee’s allegations also highlight Google’s mounting struggle to rein in its fractious workplace, which has long been a place of debate over free expression. The company historically has tolerated, and even encouraged, argument on hot-button issues. Employees globally walked out last year to protest multimillion-dollar exit packages for executives accused of sexual misconduct, and Google subsequently changed some of its conduct policies.

Google has long promoted an open corporate culture, including message boards in which employees across the world share opinions on both business and personal topics.



Kent Walker, Google’s chief legal officer. PHOTO: AARON BERNSTEIN/REUTERS

Recently, though, it has taken steps to put limits around certain employee behavior. Chief Legal Officer Kent Walker has threatened to fire workers poking around inside the company for information on contentious topics like Google’s cloud-computing relationship with the U.S. Defense Department, people familiar with the matter say. Mr. Walker wrote to staff in May, “more than ever, we need to take good care

of the information we hold.”

In a mid-July memo widely distributed to staff, Google said it had contacted law enforcement about an employee who released unspecified confidential information externally. The email reminded staffers to flag suspected behavior to its “Stop Leaks” team.

“Lively debate is a hallmark of Google’s workplace culture,” Ms. Kaiser said.

Google employees across the political spectrum say rancor has risen since the 2016 election. Conservative staff started an affinity group where workers must apply to be let in. Liberal sympathizers of Google’s employee walkout separately founded their own group, dubbed “transparency and ethics.” A group called “free speech” is little used, employees say, as the term becomes more charged.

In July, a white YouTube employee, Christopher Cukor, was filmed calling the police on a black man he suspected of breaking into his San Francisco apartment building. Mr. Cukor later apologized after it turned out the man was visiting a friend. Google owns YouTube.

In the aftermath, some Google and YouTube employees wrote on internal message boards that Mr. Cukor’s presence made them feel unsafe, and that they would refuse to work with him, several people familiar with the matter said. Mr. Cukor wrote in a blog post that his father had been murdered by a trespasser outside his home.

Last week, a senior Google engineer, Gregory Coppola, gave interviews to a pair of conservative media outlets and suggested the company was politically biased toward the left. Hours later, he received a call from human resources putting him on administrative leave and disabling his access to internal systems, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The walkout organizers, who lean left, also have complaints. They say the company retaliated against them because of their activism. Former YouTube marketing manager Claire Stapleton says she was “branded with a scarlet letter” and demoted because of her outspokenness. Google says it investigated her claims and found them false. Ms. Stapleton quit in June with a

severance package, she says.

Mr. Cernekee didn't receive a payout. A Chicago-area native, he is in some ways the prototypical Silicon Valley engineer. He repairs old computer equipment in his spare time and bikes on the weekends.



Mr. Cernekee, recently standing outside the Googleplex in Mountain View, Calif., describes himself as a mainstream Republican who supports President Trump. PHOTO: JASON HENRY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

His political stances, however, are outliers. Some 95% of Google employee donations to candidates in the 2018 midterm elections went to Democrats, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, citing public disclosures.

Before moving to the Bay Area in 2015 to work on Google's laptop lines, Mr. Cernekee says, the region's dominant liberalism struck him as "just like something to occasionally read online and laugh at. At Google, I jumped right into the middle of it, where, holy crap, these people actually exist."

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Early on, he stood up for a colleague who publicly suggested that Google not consider race or gender in hiring decisions. "A bunch of people jumped on him and started cussing him out and calling him names," Mr. Cernekee says. "And then his manager showed up in the thread and denounced him in public. I was very disturbed by that."

In other posts from 2015, some of which were later cited by the company in a warning letter, he criticized a self-described feminist colleague on an internal message board, suggesting she should be more resilient to criticism. In another thread, he suggested the company add a clear statement of banned opinions to the employee handbook so conservative employees would know where the lines were drawn.

In July 2017, Google software engineer James Damore posted an internal memo suggesting that men were biologically better suited for tech jobs than women. Mr. Cernekee, who says he doesn't share that view, offered to buy Mr. Damore lunch out of curiosity.

The two were splitting a thin-crust supreme pizza when Mr. Cernekee's phone buzzed with a news alert that Mr. Damore's memo had been leaked publicly. Within a week, Mr. Damore was fired. Mr. Damore is currently in arbitration with Google over his termination.

At the time, Mr. Pichai, Google's CEO, publicly denounced Mr. Damore's views. To suggest that "colleagues have traits that make them less biologically suited to that work is offensive and not OK," Mr. Pichai said in an email to employees.

Mr. Cernekee also crossed with Republicans internally. One fellow engineer active in the company's conservative circles, Michael Wacker, internally circulated a dossier describing Mr. Cernekee as "the face of the alt-right" at Google. Mr. Cernekee rejects the label. He says he disagrees with alt-right philosophy, which promotes white nationalism, and considers himself a mainstream Republican who supports President Trump. Mr. Wacker was separately fired this spring; he says Google human resources warned him his behavior was "rude and dishonest."

Conservative employees say they've tried to raise concerns about unfair treatment to top Google executives at the company's weekly all-hands meetings, but their queries haven't made it through because questions must be voted up by a large number of employees to be heard.

Mr. Cernekee calls himself a whistleblower and has filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board. Several were denied; the original is pending. He's submitted materials including a human resources warning letter that says he violated the "Respect Each Other" section of the company's code of conduct.

Among the posts cited was one in which he wrote that "many Googlers strongly disagree with Social Justice theory and even more Googlers are concerned about the 'internet mob' shaming and intimidation tactics employed in support of this agenda." A human resources executive wrote: "Many Googlers were offended by your comments." Human resources flagged one such comment in which Mr. Cernekee described himself as a second-class citizen, saying Google's conduct policy bans "unbusinesslike behavior."

The NLRB declined to comment.

Mr. Cernekee says he has spent more than \$100,000 on legal fees. He now works for another technology company.

"I very much regret joining Google," he says. "I figured it would be a good place to see intelligent arguments through. It didn't really turn out how I expected."

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