

Where in the World Is Larry Page?

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(Bloomberg Businessweek) -- Larry Page was a no-show. The co-founder and de facto leader of Google is famous for his wild bets on airborne taxis and space elevators, but he apparently couldn't make the flight to Washington, D.C. Page had been called to testify on Capitol Hill, alongside Twitter Chief Executive Officer Jack Dorsey and Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg, about the ways state-sponsored actors have exploited their platforms. Page [spurned the request](#). When the hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee began on Sept. 5, a black leather chair reserved for him sat empty next to Dorsey and Sandberg. A place card marked "Google," in front of a blank notepad and muted microphone, served as a blunt reminder of his absence. As senator after senator tore into the company for skipping the hearing, they often directed their ire to the void where Page would have sat, with Florida's Marco Rubio labeling the snub "arrogant" and fellow Republican Susan Collins of Maine calling it an "outrage." News cameras panned to the unoccupied seat.

Two decades after Page co-founded Google, his company is entering arguably its most perilous phase. Yes, its [revenue continues to boom](#). And yes, that means self-driving car unit [Waymo](#) and all the “other bets”—the eclectic mix of subsidiaries reorganized a few years ago under a new parent, Alphabet Inc.—have all the resources they need to hunt for blockbuster breakthroughs. It’s the unceasing growth of

Google's flagship properties that's become its greatest liability. Detractors around the globe are demanding a breakup of its market-ruling search ad business. The European Union [fined the company \\$5.1 billion](#) this summer in an antitrust case over the dominance of Google's Android mobile operating system. And U.S. lawmakers, given [Russian-backed manipulation](#) of Google's platforms in the 2016 presidential election, are exploring avenues to [regulate YouTube](#). With so many challenges clouding Alphabet's future, it was more than a little surprising that Page and company left the chair empty at the high-profile hearing. Sundar Pichai, who became head of Google after Page removed himself to run Alphabet, also declined to fill the spot. "I don't get it," Senator Mark Warner, a Democrat from Virginia who's called on Page to answer for Google's harmful effects, said in an [interview with Bloomberg TV](#). "It's going to hurt their reputation, not just with the policymakers but with a whole lot of Google users. What do they have to hide?"

It's not just Washington. Even in Silicon Valley, people have started wondering: Where's Larry? Page has long been reclusive, a computer scientist who pondered technical problems away from the public eye, preferring to chase moonshots over magazine covers. Unlike founder-CEO peers (Mark Zuckerberg comes to mind), he hasn't presented at product launches or on earnings calls since 2013, and he hasn't done press since 2015. He leaves [day-to-day decisions](#) to Pichai and a handful of advisers. But a slew of interviews in recent months with

colleagues and confidants, most of whom spoke on condition of anonymity because they were worried about retribution from Alphabet, describe Page as an executive who's more withdrawn than ever, bordering on emeritus, invisible to wide swaths of the company. Supporters contend he's still engaged, but his immersion in the technology solutions of tomorrow has distracted him from the problems Google faces today. "What I didn't see in the last year was a strong central voice about how [Google's] going to operate on these issues that are societal and less technical," says a longtime executive who recently left the company.

Until the Senate hearing, Google had ducked much of the [scorn](#) heaped on the social media behemoths, especially Facebook Inc. Yet Google, more than any other tech company, set us on this path to unprecedented data mining and a world in which corporations track us online and off. The search engine emerged from the dot-com bust with the smartest game plan, creating a business model where every interaction with its software fed its computing brain and bottom line. Page didn't start Google for this reason—he saw revenue generation as a means to work on advances such as artificial intelligence—yet his success paved the way for a system where every user's interests and location can be targeted with alarming precision. "Google has been incredibly lucky to date that Facebook's failures have been so much more in focus, but they're every bit as bad," says Roger McNamee, an early Google and Facebook

investor turned [vocal critic](#) of both. “By not showing up, it did Facebook a huge favor. If you’re a shareholder, you should be furious. They guaranteed the intensity will go way up.”

Alphabet said in a statement that it had offered its head of global affairs for the hearing and that “enabling Larry to focus on the other bets and long-term technical problems is exactly what Alphabet was set up for.” The company referred questions to Dan Doctoroff, head of its urban infrastructure unit, Sidewalk Labs, and former CEO of Bloomberg LP, *Bloomberg Businessweek’s* parent. Doctoroff declined to comment on whether Page has a responsibility to speak publicly about Google’s more pressing challenges and says they haven’t spoken about the issues stemming from the Senate hearings.

In the past, Page’s quiet approach earned him plaudits and a beneficent image as Alphabet’s chief visionary, but his distance of late raises doubts over who exactly will steer Google through this existential crisis. Twitter Inc.’s Dorsey and Facebook’s Zuckerberg, who’d previously testified before Congress, have apologized repeatedly for the unintended consequences of their networks and sworn that fixing them is their top priority. Page, meanwhile, hasn’t offered a statement of contrition nor publicly indicated his plans to address the threats facing his company. The question now is whether he has a responsibility—to shareholders, staff, society—to get back on stage.

What's occupying Page's time today? People who know him say he's disappearing more frequently to his private, white-sand Caribbean island. That's not to imply that, at 45, he's already living the daiquiri lifestyle. He still oversees each Alphabet subsidiary, though the extent of his involvement is vague. Along with Google co-founder Sergey Brin, who's now Alphabet's president, Page even occasionally holds court at the company's weekly all-hands "TGIF" meetings at its Mountain View, Calif., headquarters. He sometimes fields questions from employees, though he mostly defers to Pichai and other corporate leaders, according to current Googlers. Page has reached a point where he takes on only rare projects that deeply fascinate him, like the sci-fi pursuits at X, Alphabet's [secretive research lab](#).

When Page, Google's first CEO, reclaimed the top job from Eric Schmidt in 2011, he approached it as if it were an engineering puzzle. He worked 80-hour weeks, devoured business leadership books, and studied his managerial idols, such as Bill Campbell and Warren Buffett. Yet he grew tired of the tedium of overseeing operations, his mind geared more for R&D than P&L. According to the recently departed executive, Page's eyes would "glaze over" in meetings when discussions turned away from core technologies to the humdrum of business. "What you do is boring," this person recalls Page saying when a conversation strayed too far from a topic that interested him. He was also averse to the internal politics common to running a 60,000-employee conglomerate. A former senior director at Google

remembers a heated debate among the “L Team,” as Googlers used to call Page’s circle of executive *consiglieri*, that escalated to a point where it required his mediation. “Can’t you sort this out on your own?” he told his deputies.

While Page’s tenure was marked by prescient investments in AI and massive facilities to store Google’s growing data hoard, the pace of the job also weighed on his health, say two former Google VPs. In the 1990s he was diagnosed with vocal cord paralysis, a nerve condition that eventually has made it difficult for him to speak above a hoarse whisper. “Sergey says I’m probably a better CEO because I choose my words more carefully,” Page wrote in a Google+ [post](#) in 2013, the same year he stopped joining earnings calls. A person who formerly reported to him even recalls being scolded for once making a mistake that led the CEO to yell, as if Page had only so many words left to speak.

The company’s abrupt reorganization in 2015 elevated Pichai to CEO of Google and Page to chief of its umbrella company, Alphabet. It was perhaps the cleverest retirement plan ever devised: He was able to retain control of his creation while passing off most of the responsibilities, leaving him more freedom to focus on what he has called “crazy” and “speculative” bets on the future. Page has personally funded three companies aiming to pioneer autonomous flying vehicles and obsessed over Alphabet’s various robotics groups. For several months he maintained a weekly meeting with leaders at [Google Fiber](#), a

project to develop ultrahigh-speed internet access, to brainstorm technical solutions for implementing the service, such as newfangled ways to drill fiber-optic cables into sidewalks, says a former manager there.

Another skunkworks project that consumed Page, started in 2015 and previously unreported, was a Disney-esque idea to reimagine transportation, code-named Heliox. According to three people familiar with the effort, a team operating out of a former NASA hangar in the Bay Area built a tube of plastic the width of a subway car, snaked around a circular track, designed to propel bicyclists at rapid speeds through a swirl of oxygen and helium pumped into the tunnel at their backs. Heliox was pure Page, a space-age concept both preposterously imaginative and mechanically marvelous: The vision was to stretch this tube system, arced hundreds of feet in the air, from a ground-level entry point on Google's Mountain View campus to an exit 35 miles north, in San Francisco, so Google's rainbow-colored beach cruisers might one day be seen flying over U.S. Highway 101. Yes, it sounds like a Hyperloop for bikes.

Many of these projects, including Heliox, have since fizzled or died. As Alphabet's CEO, Page had to placate investors anxious about his investments beyond Google's core business. Now almost all of Alphabet's spending goes to Google. Several people familiar with the dynamic say Page's involvement with Alphabet's subsidiaries has become more sporadic in recent years as the L Team has shrunk to a smaller coterie known as "AlphaFun," and

it's difficult to pinpoint a fresh project inside the company with his clear imprint. One former manager who worked at X says the rare office check-in from Page is akin to a royal visit, replete with assistants, hangers-on, and advance fretting. Doctoroff, the Sidewalk Labs CEO, disputes this characterization and says Page is "intensely involved," citing their weekly video chats and a surprise Page visit to Sidewalk's Toronto project in July. Although Page hasn't visited Sidewalk's New York headquarters in months, Doctoroff says he's constantly discussing ideas as varied as "dynamic pavement" and "cross-laminated timber."

These days, there's a sense within Google that futurism has taken a back seat to more pressing concerns. The company long had a public face in Schmidt, who happily defended it against Congress and critics until he stepped down as executive chairman in January. During key moments over the past two years, such as the protests of President Trump's 2017 immigration ban and this spring's internal upheaval over Google's jockeying for AI contracts with the Pentagon, it was Pichai and Brin, not Page, who spoke to employees.

It's a weird moment for founder-CEOs, and compared with Elon Musk smoking a [blunt](#) on a live video podcast, Page's invisibility might seem preferable. According to one Larry loyalist, Page's privacy, besides being a personal preference, is also a carefully considered company strategy. When Google ballooned in the late 2000s, pushing into every new business it could think of as its share of the U.S. search market rocketed toward 70 percent,

some inside the company deemed it shrewd to temper Page's outward persona. They were conscious of the way Bill Gates had become a media caricature during Microsoft Corp.'s three-year antitrust lawsuit and didn't want Page to become a similar corporate mascot-slash-punching bag.

At this point, though, such a public-relations strategy feels dated. On balance, the celebrity of even the most caricatured CEO (Zuckerberg) appears to be a net positive for his company. Page's counterparts may not own the narrative around their companies right now, but speaking up is helping them shape it.

In Page's absence at the Senate hearing, louder voices filled the void, from senators criticizing Google for its [dealings with China](#) to pundits decrying Page as unpatriotic. McNamee, the early investor who's since advocated for the company's breakup, says Page and Pichai shirked their civic duty by skipping the hearing. "This is Corporate Governance 101," he says. "You've been invited to speak in front of a Senate hearing to protect our democracy, and your response is, 'We're too important to go'? The whole world is looking at them: 'What the hell is wrong with you people? Who are you?'"

It's strange how such denunciations can distort Page's image as a friendly futurist. Even his semiretirement, perhaps colored by his health issues, conjures visions of a frail and aging luminary, so much so that it's easy to forget that he's younger than his successor, Pichai. At one of his last public appearances, in