

Google's Ruth Porat on the Employee Habit That Drives Her Nuts

The president and chief investment officer of Alphabet and Google shares her foolproof B.S. detector and why big tech can be like playing with fire.



By [Holly Peterson](#)

Nov. 6, 2025 12:00 pm ET

Success, they say, is inspiration plus perspiration. But what of sheer universe-vibration? We ask the most successful people we know to tell us what role luck plays in one's career.

When Ruth Porat was 6 years old, her physicist father would come home from his job at the Stanford Accelerator Laboratory and the two would tinker for hours in the garage, soldering radios and adding machines. Perhaps he had a hunch that putting his daughter at ease around gadgets would one day set her up for a good job.

How about a massive job? Today, as the chief investment officer and president of Alphabet and its subsidiary Google, Porat oversees global corporate investments as well as Alphabet's "other bets," including Waymo self-driving cars and the drone-delivery startup Wing. During her

decadelong tenure, the company's market capitalization has soared from \$384 billion to nearly \$3 trillion.

Porat is known for the clarity of her vision and intent, despite her leadership role at a company that includes a dizzying array of products, such as Google Search and Cloud, YouTube, Android and Chrome. To maximize her team's output, she pushes her teams to stop focusing on the branches—"Look at the whole tree."

Before arriving in Silicon Valley, Porat hacked her way through the jungles of Wall Street. Starting in the mergers and acquisitions department at Morgan Stanley months before the crash of 1987, she went on to co-head tech investment banking during the early, heady days of the internet. These smart risks opened new doors and eventually led to her running the financial institutions group (a position, she says, that she had initially assumed would be "so boring").

How does Porat explain her rise? "My record of making things work and delivering so people wanted to take a risk on me." It's just one of the reasons leaders in the private and public sector have placed her in central roles—and often in the hottest of hot seats.

When you started at Google in 2015, having just left Morgan Stanley, how confusing was the lingo, given your background in finance?

I was in a meeting with Larry Page, Sergey Brin, Sundar Pichai and about 20 others. I was sitting next to Larry; we were debating something new to me. And so I'm googling the terms. Larry tells the room, "She's googling what we're talking about!" I said, "Yeah, I have to learn it. I'm busted by the founder of Google for googling?"



Ruth Porat in front of a photo of her with her father, Dan Porat, who died in 2019 at 96. In 2015 she brought him to the Google offices on family day. Google

Are you a rule breaker?

Am I rule breaking by having been one of the few women in finance and pushing through all the stereotypes? No, that's setting new norms.

Is innovation breaking rules?

Yes, in a sense. The art of the possible does need to be redefined constantly. And if you're not applying data, analytics and thinking into teams to push the edge of what is possible, you're missing something.

How did you earn your credibility in finance and public policy?

Some people had an issue with a woman in the room. There weren't very many of us, but you can't argue with data. I'm very clear about laying out data in a way that forces a conversation. Defining the core underlying assumptions. Then we can have a discussion about where to invest, how to invest and what the implications are.

How did you rise so high so fast?

I always said, "What is my highest and best use?" People come into their careers with a preordained notion of what work they're going to do. Given that the world is dynamic, not static, they miss seeing things that otherwise might be extraordinary. My calculated risk was worth taking: I was asked to run financial institutions, and my immediate instinct was, No, that is so boring. I did it before the 2008 crash, which opened doors I didn't even know existed.

What's something an employee does that drives you nuts?

I don't want people who process. I want people who think. Step back and put yourself in my shoes; if I'm having a conversation with a head of state somewhere, think, "Is this material rich, deep, insightful—does it take the conversation to another level?"

When you get into the deep weeds of a project, get your hands dirty, is it because you can't help yourself, or your team didn't do it the way you want?

You only have instincts about data because you've gotten tactile and granular about building models. You have a feel for it, and you can then go to the core issues. Sometimes I feel like a Morgan Stanley trainee. And I often find that the best way to bring up a team is actually to get in the trenches with them. So I do think this notion of being a player-coach is a really important part of it.

What makes a star employee?

A star is someone who is in my face, because I want them to challenge me in different ways.

Are you stubborn?

I'm stubborn in the demand for thinking things through and being crisp and clear and articulate. *What is it that we're doing? Why are we doing it? What are we solving?*



Porat as a child with her siblings and mother. Ruth Porat

A good leader focuses the team. A savvy leader has a fine-tuned B.S. detector. Do you?

My father, who was a physicist, said if someone can't define a quark in less than 30 seconds, they don't know what they're talking about. Throughout my career, I have used the quark test. If you think something adds value, at Alphabet, or at Morgan Stanley, and you can't tell me why in a compelling way in less than 30 seconds, then you don't know what you're talking about.

With such a vast empire, can you pass the quark test with your own job description?

Work with public and private sector leaders to unlock the upside from AI, with a focus on investments in energy, infrastructure and skills training.

Did your father get to see most of your accomplishments?

He died at 96 in 2019. At Google, in 2015, everyone was so young, they didn't have kids yet, so we had Bring Your Parents to Work Day. I brought my dad. He said, "Where can this company be in years to come? With this extraordinary technology, amazing talents and tenacity, there's really no limit, but it's about applying all of those together."

When do you feel defeated at work?

When you're working with really bright people, you can keep analyzing and litigating things, and that gets frustrating. Don't let perfect be the enemy of the good.

When you worked with Hank Paulson at Treasury on Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and AIG during the 2008 financial crisis, what was your most profound takeaway?

The lessons from the financial crisis are relevant for every industry, for every leader in good markets and bad. Identify your greatest source of vulnerability early. In 2008, everybody's greatest source of vulnerability was liquidity. And if you didn't have durable liquidity, you failed. Nobody at the time was doing the stress analytics to know if they had that. I learned during the AIG crisis that you can't drive a car—or run a business or country—with mud on the windshield.



'The lessons from the financial crisis are relevant for every industry, for every leader in good markets and bad,' said Porat, pictured here with Henry Paulson, Timothy Geithner and Ben Bernanke. Don Pollard (c) Council on Foreign Relations

What lessons from the financial crisis apply to running Google?

At Google, you have to be at the forefront of innovation. That becomes the greatest source of upside and the greatest vulnerability. If you try and catch it late, with something moving this quickly, you're destined to be a follower. It's 2025, and we are now not in an "Oh, AI is here!" moment. If it was, we couldn't be delivering the volume of innovation and TPU chips that were years in the making.

What does it mean to be prepared, whether it's with deep-sea cables, data centers or the electricity to support AI? A major success indicator for you is not being wrong in what you prepare for.

You must have analytics that help you assess the dimensions of how much is needed. What's the cost and downside relative to undershooting? It all comes back to frame it out. Get that sensitivity analysis. In 20 years, we don't want to be the people sitting around a table saying, "Why didn't you make the investments?"

You've worked in three environments, finance, government and tech. How does the culture at Google stand out?

It's very different. "Why not?" is very much the ethos. How do we create an experience to be more profound?

Do you own a hoodie?

Yeah, a lot of them.

Do you wear them to work?

Yep. I'm in jeans right now.

How has luck affected you?

I think if bad luck comes out of the blue, good luck must as well. You increase the probability you will have good luck by taking calculated risk, smart risk. It's not just telling people to jump into a lagoon.



Porat with her children. 'I wanted to make sure I could see them graduate from high school,' she said of her cancer diagnosis. Ruth Porat

Bad luck would, of course, be your cancer diagnosis, which you've been open about.

Being diagnosed with cancer when my kids were 5, 7 and 9 was terrifying. I wanted to make sure I could see them graduate from high school. That was the main thing that I was focused on. With the advent of AI, survival rates are increasing, breakthroughs are coming. It's increasingly manageable. Not for everybody, and I'm always careful to say that, because people are still dying from cancer. We lost a colleague just last month.

Were you able to remain optimistic?

The second time I was diagnosed with cancer, and the odds of survival were very low, a friend who had been through cancer multiple times told me that when you're enjoying life, a bird will show up on your shoulder and say, "Why are you happy? You have cancer." The image empowered me when the bird showed up. I told it, "Get lost. You are not taking away the joy that I am having." Even though I didn't believe it in the moment.

Does anything ever scare you about AI?

With any technology this profound, you have to be focused on mitigating downside risk. Sundar Pichai pointed out that with all technologies, there's upside and downside, even going back to the earliest days with fire: It can heat your home, it can sterilize your water, but left unmanaged, it can also burn down your home. You have to be bold and responsible. That gives you the right to execute to the upside, because you're mindful and putting in guardrails to the downside.

I've seen you be the first one out on the dance floor. You'll rush out of a midweek dinner to go dancing. In fact, it's hard to get you off the floor.

Oh, my God, it's so fun. You're just free and it's fun and music is uplifting. It boosts your serotonin.

As CFO, you played songs before earnings calls. Which ones?

Diana Ross, "Ain't No Mountain High Enough." Queen, "Don't Stop Me Now" is a good one. And I love "We Are Family."

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.