



As HR professionals, we know that success comes from treating each employee as a person, not a database entry. But there's the rub: While human resources relies on technology to support the entire workforce, there is a fear that the more automated and digital HR operations get, the less personal they'll be — that human insights will be replaced with digital IQ.

As technology changes the nature of work, there's a danger that managers will be held in thrall by it: "Just deploy the tech" will become the mantra to solve our problems. Shiny new technology solutions alone won't tackle real, specific, individual problems. Cutting-edge platforms, mobile technologies, data analytics and a buffet of digital HR offerings might actually be skewing our ability to see the *people* behind the picture.

The challenge ahead is to determine how to deploy technology, successfully and at scale, without losing the individual, personal touch in the process.

THE FORCES ALIGN

The forces driving HR to innovate will continue to gather momentum beyond the new year:

- There were nearly 7 million open and unfilled jobs in the United States ("Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey") in 2018, a number that continues to grow as the U.S. economy boosts employment to levels not seen in ages (nearly 60% of the population was employed in 2018). That means the skill sets employers need from workers aren't being met.

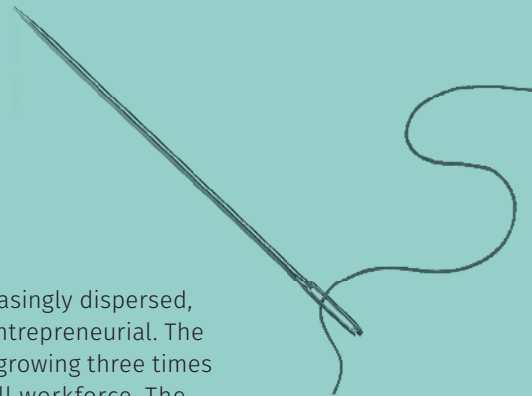
- The workforce is increasingly dispersed, diverse, remote and entrepreneurial. The freelance economy is growing three times faster than the overall workforce. The number of Americans in this economy is expected to grow by more than 40% by 2020.

HR and total rewards managers are starting to focus attention on the employee in ways they perhaps haven't considered. Strategically, they want their HR programs to create real options for employees. Those programs need to be designed with employees at the center and delivered efficiently. Finally, program design and execution need to be based on data that may currently be in a mess.

STRATEGY: REAL OPTIONS FOR PEOPLE

HR has come out of the transactional closet and is now tasked with a far more strategic role. HR managers still will have to figure out the best ways to utilize people within the organization, from determining talent needs, planning effective recruitment and retention programs, discovering effective management tactics and improving internal processes. Now more than ever, HR professionals need to deploy and motivate talent in line with business objectives.

Companies are now reviewing their people-and-rewards strategies to make sure they create real options and help managers anticipate the unexpected. They're digging deeper into questions about the talent they currently



have, how much that costs, whether it is enough to support the business objectives, and what key skills they need to retain and develop. They're asking:

- What will it take to get, develop and keep the people we need?
- How can we stand out from the competition in this battle for talent?
- What is our internal brand, and does it effectively relate to the new ways people work?
- Is there a connection — and fulfillment — between our values and the personal values of our employees?
- How can we measure and improve our “return on labor” with the right rewards program?

The organization's ability to adapt to, and plan for, the evolution in dynamics in the workplace demands new strategies to truly differentiate the business for potential recruits. That same ability is needed in setting the enterprise's rewards strategy.

DESIGN: EMPLOYEES AT THE CENTER

HR leaders are looking for new ways to align their programs with the needs and values of employees while still boosting the balance sheet. They continue to improve internal processes, create succession ladders, develop professional training and enhance the corporate culture. In doing so, programs focused on enhancing people's careers, health and well-being are critical.

But these programs need to be something special for employees, enhancing their work and speaking to how company values and personal satisfaction come together. In doing this, managers are looking at the growing opportunities provided by human-centered design thinking. By putting employees and their needs at the center of the design process, employers are better able to: create flexible rewards programs that align with the varying needs within their employee populations; build awareness of the workplace culture; encourage greater personal responsibility; and enable employees to be more accountable for those actions.

Technology plays its role, of course, but employers are looking at deploying it differently. For example, technology can force employees to enroll online,

leaving them trying to get answers to very personal and unique questions, often not to their satisfaction. On the other hand, technology that's designed with people at the center can help anticipate the right mix of plan participation for an individual and guide that user to the right selections. This can help employees avoid being over- or under-insured, help them meet both short-term and long-term financial goals and remind them of opportunities to best use the programs they selected through the course of the year.

Employers recognize that it's time to take a hard look at their current programs and whether they support the ideal state of the workforce — people's financial, physical, and mental well-being. Businesses need to ask where the best bets are going to be focused as program design and digital technologies intersect.

SERVICE DELIVERY: PROMPT AND PERSONAL

HR's administration job is getting even more onerous, and includes handling new and changing regulatory compliance tasks, and tracking and paying contract workers.

Administrative solutions abound for recruiting, benefits, compensation, wellness and talent management, but are predominantly best practice, software as a service (SaaS)-based productized solutions. Organizations are forced to fit their HR objectives and processes into often oversimplified models. Differentiation takes a back seat to efficiency. In an ever-increasingly challenging labor market, employers have been losing their ability to create rewards and development programs that reflect their distinct employee value propositions (EVP).

Alternatives are emerging. Businesses need the ability to share their own story with candidates and employees in ways that resonate with their audiences. Human-centered design comes into play again, with user experiences that make an employer's EVP come to life. Instead of offering each HR program through the distinct lens of the plan, new experiences are available to view them through the lens of the individual. HR professionals are taking a hard look at how they deliver services and information to employees. Are they meeting the changing



HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN COMES INTO PLAY WITH USER EXPERIENCES THAT MAKE AN EMPLOYER'S EVP COME TO LIFE.



needs of today's workforce? They already know that workers are ever-more accustomed to streamlined, user-friendly and extremely prompt responses to their needs delivered through consumer technology. Employees expect their employers to be able to do the same when it comes to decision-making support on the job and in their personal lives — which intersect more and more.

Disparate systems feed data, content and even transactional services into a single engine so that the entire rewards picture is presented to individuals in their terms. Questions that normally would need to be parsed to myriad applications are addressed through a single interface. Users can turn to the source most convenient for them — the HR portal, their handheld device, Alexa or even a real person — to get personalized, comprehensive and empathetic answers to what are often very personal HR questions.

Even with technological advances and the freeing up of HR resources to work with people instead of processes, process is not going away. Employers implementing new solutions, launching new programs, and communicating the corporate vision know they will continue to face change management challenges. The difference today, though, is that those processes don't have to be clunky and dispassionate.

The best use of robotic process automation (RPA) today looks at the multiple systems that make up a process and rethink it from the user's perspective. Onboarding is a great example that often touches HR, IT, finance, procurement and many other

aspects of the business. Too often users have to figure out the path themselves, visiting each system independently and hoping data get passed from one platform to the next. It doesn't have to be that way. RPA offers the ability to simplify data flows and the user experience, handling the dirty work behind the scenes so that administrative tasks are avoided, and valuable learning takes its place.

Administration needs — developing and maintaining platforms, managing vendors, establishing meaningful metrics, staying in compliance with new global regulations — continue to rank high on the list of responsibilities. Taking a human-centered approach, though, can assure these chores are completed while the user gets the best possible experience.

PEOPLE ANALYTICS: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

The question HR is expected to answer — How do you know if your programs are successful? — hasn't changed, but the answers can now be analyzed and even predicted in real time.

HR analytics efforts in the recent past have tended to address department-specific questions with basic reporting. Talent objectives such as the effectiveness of recruiting are looked at against attraction and retention data. Health-care challenges such as mitigating medical cost rate increases are addressed through plan participation and population health data. Financial questions such as pension risk are dealt with through actuarial analysis.

HR IS FINDING THAT AUTOMATED TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS WITHOUT HUMAN INSIGHTS CAN LEAD TO DISASTROUS RESULTS.



The trend, though, is to look across this spectrum of career, health and wealth data and inject engagement data. Interaction analytics is a hot HR topic because it adds the personal dimension to programs that are ultimately designed to attract and motivate people. With interaction analytics, organizations can measure the impact of any program change, the effectiveness of a communications campaign and even market forces in play outside of the organization. Organizations are now applying this machine learning to help make sense of the treasure trove of data that HR owns.

Relatively new in the HR toolbox is the application of AI to many HR problems. It has the potential to handle routine administration tasks, produce reports, store data and perform a host of other repetitive tasks, leaving HR more time to focus on its strategic functions of providing talent.

But AI is still in its early stages, and while many organizations are looking into how it might meet their needs, the companies that have tried it for human resources have run across difficult roadblocks. In at least one case, an AI process mistakenly fired an employee and the “fix” was so complex that the employee not only lost pay while off work, but eventually left the company with some rancor. In another, a large technology business using AI for recruiting found gender biases that were so entrenched that it’s been discontinued.

AI uses mountains of existing HR data. That data will need to be reviewed carefully and the system deployed cautiously. Human resources is finding that automated technology systems without human insights can lead to disastrous results.

As AI advances and machine learning supports it, data across the people-analytics spectrum can be assessed on an ongoing basis, outcomes can be predicted prior to adjusting any levers and then design can be tweaked as necessary to achieve ultimate objectives. Machine learning in conjunction with AI can assure that people analytics are used to solve the needs of both the organization and the individual, and continually adjust to help both achieve their goals.

DIGITAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE ULTIMATE HR CUSTOMER

At its current pace of advancement, technology will simplify processes, get us answers quickly and replace many of the administrative burdens we currently face. But unchecked, this increasing digital intelligence can eliminate the personal advocacy and trust we’ve worked so hard to cultivate in HR.

To get the most benefit out of high-tech solutions, we can’t forget the high touch. Technology can be programmed to factor in the human element — and should be to assure that we are meeting the needs of HR’s ultimate customer — our people. **WS**

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