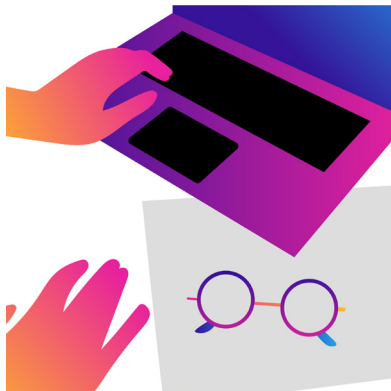


Technology

What's happening with HR portal technology?

Enhancing the HR
function by treating
employees as consumers

BUCK



Expectations for workforce technology have changed, both in terms of what an employer can afford to deliver as well as what an employee may expect based on other applications and tools commonly used in daily life. Often employees want to bring their familiarity with mobile devices, social media, new content generation, and self-identification as consumers into the workplace. They want the same communication style and flexibility of choices to make decisions based on personal needs and financial goals, and employers are wise to consider meeting this expectation.

In this white paper, technology specialist Scot Marcotte looks at what's making this approach possible in the Human Resources function of businesses everywhere, and how business can improve the effectiveness of HR's programs and its processes. In the end, by adopting this "employee as consumer" thinking and using the latest in data analytics and portal technology, HR can move away from its transactional role and better serve the business strategy.

Rethinking how HR delivers the goods

A bland, blah HR portal just won't cut it anymore. So-called "link farms" that point people to wordy content and archaic self-service applications defeat HR's noble purpose of helping employees achieve healthier, more financially secure and professionally rewarding lives. They don't motivate people to take positive action. They don't make them aware of lost opportunity. They don't drive ideal health, wealth and career outcomes that also mean great returns for the organization.

Simply put, they don't treat employees as consumers.

If we rethink our employees as consumers, the online user experience takes on a whole different perspective. And it's not just limited to employees, of course; our consumers are also spouses, candidates, retirees and other alums. Instead of requiring HR consumers to figure out our HR organizational structures, why not position everything in their terms? If it's all about their health, their wealth and their careers, why not recast content and tools in a manner that means something—and everything—to the user?

Rethinking the online experience from the user's perspective is the first step to HR nirvana. The next step is to make the experience personally relevant. The more we can make it hit home, the more valuable it's going to be for the user and for the organization.



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In HR, we have a crazy amount of personal data in our control. We have compensation, savings, career history and benefit plan selection data. In some organizations, we even have biometrics and claims data. If we were marketers, we’d be salivating. Of course, as HR practitioners, we have to be trusted stewards. We have to use that data for the good of the individual. If we can help the individual make smarter health care decisions, reduce financial stress by being better prepared for today and tomorrow, and achieve their career potential, they win and we win.

So using that data effectively and prudently becomes critical. We can tell from the data whether people are missing out on the value of certain programs—savings plan matches, premium reductions by taking a health risk assessment etc.—so why not remind them? Take it a step further and anticipate their needs based on what’s happening in their lives. Make it contextual. If the data tells us they got married, for example, provide them targeted action items that step them through the HR aspects and benefit options they now have available. People have come to expect that technology will make life easier for them. We in HR can make that real for every HR consumer.

Once we’ve recast the experience and made it personally relevant, we need to make sure we’re tracking activities and outcomes. For the short term, tracking activities like enrolling in a smoking cessation course can tell us if our promotional efforts are encouraging immediate behaviors. Of course, we really want those good behaviors to turn into habits. We also need to track whether that user actually stopped smoking and, over the long haul, stayed smoke free. If we can measure these types of activities and longitudinal outcomes across our HR programs—from professional development to wellness to financial health and beyond—we can assure we’re getting return for the money we spend. It can’t be a one-and-done analysis either. Measurement needs to occur on an ongoing basis to provide operational insight into the tactics used to encourage behaviors and to view the outcomes that result.

User-centric design, personal relevance and operational insight are the basic elements necessary to move from a passive approach to HR communication to a marketing-based HR consumerism model.

The technology is there. The data is there. The need is certainly there.

The technology landscape

Fortunately, cloud-based HR applications are helping with day-to-day talent management self-service needs. Benefits administration is becoming more standardized, especially globally, and wellness service providers are bringing improved incentive design to users.

Since no one administration provider handles everything across the HR spectrum—talent management, benefits administration, equity services, wellness administration, etc.—HR needs to find a way to consolidate all these disparate systems for the HR consumer.

Data—Pinpointing opportunities

Thankfully, the same level of communication accessibility that employees—as consumers—enjoy also provides employers with the ability to mine data from employee interactions with their HR portal or intranet content to identify workforce trends and other useful data. Consider absenteeism, which may provide insight into health care or absence management needs or talent planning input on who is leaving your company, when and where.

Data also tells you which incentives that support your wealth program are more frequently accessed and used, allowing you to adjust the program or tailor your communication to increase savings behaviors, leading to greater employee financial health and, thus, productivity.

Content—Staying current

With content management systems, technology also allows HR to keep an online experience dynamic and fresh. Editorial calendars can be preset to display known content at opportune times through the year. Scheduled messaging on bonus payouts, open enrollment, heart healthy month and any other scheduled event can assure the experience stays relevant and current through the course of the year without a lot of direct system hand-holding.

Feeds—“Sticking” with It

Along with scheduled content displays, end users can further tailor their experience through syndicated feeds. RSS feeds of weather, stock data, traffic reports, health news, recipes, all serve to create a sticky site that encourages ongoing use. Social media tools such as selfposted testimonials and HR communities keep it alive.

Education—Simplifying learning and development

Just-in-time education through video snippets helps visual learners better process new concepts and guide individuals to better plan selection. Web-based wizards step users through processes to make the complex simple.

These tools allow employers—and the users themselves—to more effectively personalize information without extensive efforts by HR to rewrite and revise from scratch. Reducing the burden of customization also allows your HR staff to work hand-in-hand with business leadership to create coordinated, dynamic content across all your health, wealth and career programs.



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Business opportunities for HR technology

Just as employees' use of technology in their own lives has changed, business drivers for technology have changed. Employers want to identify possible applications of data that deliver greater workforce intelligence, which in turn drive better returns on investments. Accurate information accessible in a timely fashion creates the opportunity to effectively measure progress against stated goals, as well as to pinpoint discrepancies, to best align your workforce with business initiatives.

New HR technology offers an alternative or supplement to static employee surveys done annually on pre-set topics, allowing dynamic information gathering that prompts your employees to provide feedback on issues as they arise. A comprehensive HR portal that continually gathers data provides ongoing insight into the programs your employees actually use and value, giving more immediate feedback for a communication campaign's success, from corporate news to benefit changes.

And if your business goal is to move towards a culture of shared responsibility, involving your employees in making effective decisions for their health, wealth and career—rather than relying on a paternalistic model that's no longer valuable to employee or employer—you will find that more and easier access to data gives you the information essential to understanding your employees' choices and helping them assume increased responsibility.

Better understanding of workforce dynamics

Data analytics also creates a new opportunity for insight into your geographic and cultural needs. Understanding the multitude of voices in a diverse or distributed workforce allows you to tailor your message and HR offerings to meet real needs and improve employee engagement throughout your organization. For instance, finding out there is poor utilization in healthcare screenings in a particular demographic lets you design responsive and more effective wellness campaigns. Or if you have geographic cost or access issues, those can be identified and addressed using available data, which HR technology both provides and interprets.

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You can examine your HR data to identify different motivating factors among the various employee age groups, from Baby Boomers nearing retirement to the currently emerging Generation Z. Understanding each group's preference and needs also allows you to “push” or “pull” information through directed and interactive messaging. By tracking what is viewed and used via your portal, you can both identify and anticipate, through predictive analytics, what is working and what business or societal demands you might face in the near future. Data provides information to appropriately tailor messaging to address specific employee issues, such as chronic illness, tobacco cessation, weight loss, financial education or career planning.

Coordination with personal data tracking tools to augment the “quantified self” is also something employers can consider. Those who use wearable sensors are increasingly expecting this data to coordinate with other health information that the organization provides. Of course, integrating it requires a high degree of reassurance that the information is only used for individual benefit—not organizational.

Reduced effort to keep employees informed

Advanced, consumer-focused HR portals help make information accessible across varied platforms, with data available via mobile or Web-based solutions. Today's “employee as consumer” expects increasingly personalized communications, including the ability to ask questions or create customized information based on selections made.

This willingness to engage technology is also a positive for HR programs that share educational information about wealth, health or career choices. What is useful at work can be applied at home as well, to enable employees and their families to track, manage and achieve their personal goals related to health, wealth or career targets. For example, you can create pre-scheduled, automated messages accompanied by relevant syndicated content, tailored to identified topics or areas of interest. Technology facilitates the design and implementation of on-demand or “just-in-time” decision support tools and educational materials that help your employees make choices that meet specific preferences.

Redesigned and simplified HR processes

An effective portal provides the data to allow your HR staff to respond strategically rather than reactively or transactionally. Enabling greater self-service by employees reduces the need for interaction with HR staff, and that opens the door to process review and improvements.

Delivering the experience

Data analytics, mobile and cloud technology, predictive analyses, self-service portals—the sometimes bewildering developments in HR technology have a real impact on employee satisfaction, HR cost reductions, and improved business outcomes.

Our consumers are expecting a richer, more tailored HR experience. We can all benefit by delivering it to them.

Scot Marcotte is our Chief Technology Officer.

