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Inventing the Future of HR

Marcela Perez de Alonso, executive vice president of human resources for Hewlett-Packard Co., says her company's HR Optimization Model "levels the playing field between business interests and HR ..."

PAUL SCHRAUB

BY PAUL GALLAGHER

If necessity is the mother of invention, then the HR executives and engineers at Hewlett-Packard Co. deserve cigars and candy.

True, they might be more circumspect in celebrating their recently announced arrival of a new workforce-management tool, but they would no doubt admit—if pushed, perhaps—that it was forged out of demanding market pressures and their own sheer will to peer into the future to wield a competitive edge.

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Introducing HR technology solutions to tech-savvy corporate cultures can be challenging and sometimes even distressing, but there are effective ways to handle the experience.



Convincing the Critics

BY TOM STARNER

Choosing and implementing new technology is normally stressful enough for an HR executive. But imagine your company's workforce is a creative, inquisitive, skeptical, tech-savvy group by its very nature. Better yet, what if it's filled with some of the best software engineers or IT brains in the business?

Talk about treading carefully when it comes time to introduce a new talent-management or employee-benefits platform.

That's the type of challenge Michele Golden, vice president of talent management and diversity for Turner Broadcasting System Inc., faced over the recent past when the media giant looked to improve its talent-management program.

And the same goes for Lee Johnson, director of HR solutions delivery at Microsoft, who says there is never a shortage of feedback to HR's technology initiatives in Redmond, Wash.

The idea of facing a particularly tough-to-please crowd—a.k.a., workforce—isn't restricted to large employers, either. Karen Hayward, executive vice president for HR and chief marketing officer at CenterBeam Inc., a San Jose, Calif., IT services company with 200 employees, says she faced a "not-so-fast" scenario when she moved to add Software-as-a-Service technology for performance management and onboarding—and this, from a company that actually operates in a managed services/SaaS solution space!

In all three cases, the HR executives in charge of guiding new technology applications into place faced tougher-than-usual groups, for different reasons. Yet, in the end, when those programs were in place, each had succeeded by proceeding cautiously and with key buy-in and change-management strategies in place.

The basic question is: Do certain cultures require *extra special* handling when HR seeks to roll out technology, because of their "skeptical-by-nature" attributes, which are often encouraged

for the good of the company but could be troublesome when trying to secure buy-in?

According to at least one expert, the answer is a definite yes. In fact, Antoine Gerschel, a managing partner at PeopleNRG Inc., a Princeton, N.J.-based, change-management consulting firm, believes that if you don't use effective change-management strategies, it will almost always doom HR technology projects from the start. And, he adds, that is especially true of situations in which end-users have a built-in harder-to-please mind-set, no matter what their motivation.

Gerschel, a former HR executive for a large pharmaceutical company who, along with partner Lawrence Polsky recently published a book entitled *Perfect Phrases for Communicating Change—Hundreds of Ready-to-Use Phrases for Maintaining Focus and Productivity During Organizational Change*, knows firsthand the challenge of impressing a workforce known for creativity, critical intelligence, skepticism and sophistication.

"I learned it the hard way," he says bluntly.

In the early 1990s, Gerschel joined the HR department at Paris-based pharma giant Aventis (today Sanofi-Aventis) as head of global e-learning and leadership development. He almost immediately became involved in the rollout of a new SAP HR compensation

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module that would allow a small, but important, group of top executives to do annual salary adjustments online.

"What was supposed to be a huge improvement for all executives became a 'Waterloo' for HR and nearly cost the executive vice president of HR his job," he says.

Why? Because with this small, but selective group, HR managed to do just about everything wrong.

For example, when the deadline arrived, an executive client thought she could quickly get into SAP and do what she had to do. But it took much longer than she thought, and she was not prepared for the interface, or for the system's intricacies. To her and many other executives, says Gerschel, introducing this new software meant taking autonomy away.

"Nobody likes to lose autonomy. It triggers negative emotions," he says.

The HR team missed the opportunity to set the appropriate expectations, to run a meaningful pilot and to set up the appropriate support capability. At the end, HR was stuck playing catch-up by entering the data the executives could not enter themselves—and, at the same time, had to deal with a very unhappy customer population.

"And this was a target audience that rarely gives you a second chance," he says. "It was my first experience with a phenomenon I have observed over and over again, particularly with IT rollouts, and even more so with a tough-to-please target group: the lack of creating a tailored, role-based, change-management and change-communication approach.

"Software rollouts require not only functionality training and workflows, but [just] as importantly, you must deal with emotions," not to mention different personalities, Gerschel says.

"A more creative, skeptical group particularly wants to see the big picture, how everything works together," he says.

The Turner Trial

Take Atlanta-based Turner, a Time Warner company that creates and programs branded news and entertainment for television and other platforms. Two years ago, its leaders decided to take a holistic approach to managing, developing and retaining the company's 11,000 employees worldwide.

According to Golden, Turner's mission is to find, grow and keep the best talent, as well as to ensure a pipeline of ready talent to further its position as a global-media and entertainment leader. To support this mission, Turner's talent-management team had to re-evaluate the company's strategies, roles and processes in key areas such as learning, performance and succession.

Equally important, Golden says, was choosing the right technology solution. The technology it chose to



support its talent-management strategy needed to be in line with the company's cutting-edge culture and a true fit with the business—"something fresh and not clunky," Golden says—in order for employees to not just buy into it, but actually use it. After all, what good is an HR technology initiative if employees aren't compelled to use it?

Another factor in choosing the right solution was configurability. Turner's employees work in branded environments within the organization, and the cultures of the individual divisions mirror each brand. Each division's talent-management portal needed to reflect the brand/culture while still mapping to the overall goals of the organization—whether it was CNN or TBS.

Finally, there was the reality that rolling out this new technology across this diverse, smart workforce was going to take a special effort.

"Turner Broadcasting's employees are, by and large, paid to challenge conventional thinking," says Golden, who has been with TBS Inc. for 10 years, leading the talent-management team since 2007. "So that was something we knew when we began to plan the ... project."

To ensure that the new TM platform would be fully aligned with and engage its actual users, Golden demoed five different vendor products before finally choosing Cornerstone OnDemand, a Santa Monica, Calif., provider of learning and talent-management software. During the demos, each system was put in the hands of all the employees who would be using it so Golden and her team could get the most feedback possible.

Doing it that way "was more cumbersome than most HR-tech-selection and rollout processes, but necessary," she says.

Prior to choosing a vendor, Golden and her team initially experienced pushback about proposed landing-page designs from the HR and HR IT folks, some of whom were included in companywide focus groups created

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—MICHELE GOLDEN,
VICE PRESIDENT OF
TALENT MANAGEMENT
AND DIVERSITY FOR
TURNER BROADCASTING

to establish buy-in to the investment going in.

"We also had some HR tech people in early focus groups saying, 'We could build something better' than the performance-management tool we'd been using before we decided to seek out a new provider," Golden says, adding that that early feedback from Turner's HR tech folks influenced the vendor-search criteria and selection process, ensuring everyone would be happy with the final choice.

Understanding that performance management, learning and succession planning are most often used by managers and employees—not HR staff—Golden didn't want to deliver anything too complicated. Her team's goal was to maintain a high-performing workforce, grow and retain top talent, and promote internal mobility within Turner's various networks and businesses.

"It all comes down to this: Does HR—or, more specifically in our case, the talent-management team—really understand the business culture and develop and implement tools and resources aligned to that culture?" Golden says. "Early on, we started to make the business case for change. We met with a lot of employees through focus groups to get their perspective with our current system ... what was working well, what was not working well ... and [get] their suggestions.

"They wanted a smarter, more innovative and creative way," she says, adding that the final three vendors were asked to create a "sandbox environment" so employees could come and play around and try out the various applications.

Turner wanted employees to assess and provide feedback regarding the overall user experience and functionality of the systems, says Golden. Basically, the company wanted to know if the technology was easy to use, she adds, and if it would do what managers and employees wanted it to do.

Turner HR also wanted to ensure it was investing in a tool that would

enable managers and employees to focus on the most important aspect of performance management: facilitating dialogue regarding goals/expectations, performance and developmental needs, rather than focusing on how to use the actual tool itself.

"We had to figure out how to deliver a product as cool and sophisticated as our brands," Golden says. "If we are a leader in content and consumer platforms, then our expectations of HR should be as sophisticated."

Passing Muster

At Microsoft, the challenge was related, but different, according to Lee Johnson. Eighteen months ago, the technology giant faced having to decide whether to buy or build its next online-benefits portal. Naturally, every time Microsoft considers a new piece of HR technology, it has to pass muster with a pretty demanding crowd.

"It's true for whatever we do," Johnson says. "We obviously have a lot of very smart tech people in our workforce, so the bar is set very high by our own IT group. They will let us know if there is a way to better leverage a technology or a user interface. We are constantly getting feedback."

For the benefits portal, called myMicrosoft Benefits, Microsoft HR chose to buy, rather than build, finally selecting Enwisen, the Novato, Calif., SaaS HR service-delivery firm, as its provider.

Johnson says Microsoft's new benefit ports offers employees all tools and information in one online location, available 24/7. It's also personalized, with most actions requiring two mouse clicks or less. With the initial open enrollment in November 2008 (and in 2009 as well), the Enwisen solution offers improved communications and more ease in making plan changes. It also has three times the previous year's access to the old system, a reduction in support calls and greater value to spouses or family members.

Most of all, the new portal has Microsoft's discerning IT staff's stamp of approval.

"The product we selected was the right one because it was accepted by our savvy IT crowd," Johnson says, noting that Microsoft involves its IT staff from the start on projects such as this one. "We've been using it for 18 months and, generally speaking, it is working very well for us."

For small employers, such as CenterBeam, Hayward says the idea of pleasing tough critics "totally resonated" with her when she took over the company's HR function in 2008, as it became immediately apparent that CenterBeam needed automated performance-management and onboarding processes, the latter to facilitate getting new hires producing quickly.

HR Technology

"We had an antiquated paper-based process, and we needed a goal-setting and performance-review process that was paperless, automated and offered embedded workflows," she says.

"For onboarding, we are a customer-care operation, so we needed to get new hires up the learning curve quickly."

After researching the options, Hayward decided on an SaaS performance-management solution by SuccessFactors and an onboarding solution from Silkroad technology called RedCarpet—inexpensive options that could easily integrate into the company's IT environment. At first, the company's chief information officer

believed the company could build the two solutions in-house. After all, it had its own savvy IT staff. Hayward realized she would have to make a strong business case to take it outside, so she created demonstrations of the two paths—insourcing versus outsourcing—and presented her case to the key stakeholders, i.e., the

executive team within the company. Her extra efforts and compelling message—that outsourcing would save money and time—paid off. Her plan got the green light.

"Because our real customers always come first—and that makes perfect sense—HR is often low on the list with our IT folks," she says. "But by outsourcing, we could have this up in 60 days, [which is a real plus] in terms of cost, and we can set it and forget it."

Through this experience, and by marketing SaaS solutions herself in her role as chief marketing officer, Hayward has learned that, in the past, IT people typically defined their value and marketability by building systems and learning new technology. But with SaaS solutions, IT's role shifts from planning, designing, building and running to sourcing, integrating and managing—clearly a completely new focus for IT leadership, and one she brought to the surface at CenterBeam when it came to performance management and onboarding solutions.

"CFOs appreciate the pay-as-you-go model and economics with SaaS solutions, and our CEO was delighted with our time-to-market," she says. "Plus, line managers like the automation and the elimination of the paper chase, and employees like it too."

Theresa Welbourne, a research professor at the Center for Effective Organizations, Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California, and president and CEO of eepulse.com, says she doesn't necessarily believe that technology professionals and/or highly creative people are more cynical or skeptical. "They are just louder," she says.

"Also, many times, they have seen an HR 'system of the year' that comes and eventually just goes away," she says. "They've had 'transformation through technology' and know how much over-budget those projects went. They've had some bad experiences, so people are smarter and more conscious of the potential for failure. As a result, they are tougher to convince."

Welbourne says the way to win the hearts and minds of internal customers—a.k.a., an all-knowing workforce—is through better change management. For example, "Do some pilot work, get some wins, get them on board and show them how this technology can help them in their jobs and be more successful," she says.

"Leading change is a long, emotional, draining process," concludes PeopleNRG's Gerschel. "The research shows that about two-thirds of change efforts fail to meet their goals."

"By keeping your eye on your people *and* your new software at the same time, you will greatly increase your odds of success," he says.

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