Technology and talent

Creating an effective combination

C hange is a constant factor in today's business world. Technology continues to play an important role in driving change and in helping organizations operate successfully in the wake of ever-intensifying competition.

A virtual boost for mentoring

The demand for talent has naturally soared as a result, making it imperative to identify, nurture and manage top-performing employees more effectively. In many firms, the response has been to increase the emphasis on mentoring. Leaders are increasingly utilizing this strategy in their quest to achieve knowledge transfer, leadership development and succession planning objectives.
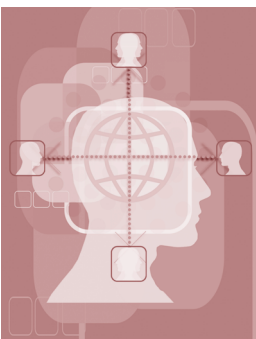
Of course, it's rarely that simple. Setting up any mentoring program involves the often arduous job of finding suitable applicants then matching them with the right mentors. Program content must be appropriate. Ditto its goals. Then there's the necessary evaluation to ascertain the program's effectiveness. And all this must be customized to fit the requirement of the company in question. Sure sounds a pretty daunting challenge.

But that's where technology might help. Using an online platform can greatly enhance the implementation and efficiency of any mentoring program. Take for instance, mentor-mentee pairing. Now this already tough task intensifies greatly when a high volume of participants need to be matched. Without an online platform, allowing individuals to make their own arrangements obviously becomes an attractive proposition. A wrong one though. In these situations, the norm is to base choice on favorable personality comparisons rather than objective criteria.

On the other hand, data generated by technology offers a methodical approach that ensures pairings are determined by need, expertise and business purposes. Throw in the flexibility to match single pairs or large numbers simultaneously and the value of such tools is enhanced even further.

It can be equally difficult to communicate information about the program, especially if many people need to be reached. Technology is useful here too. The secret? Publish program content on a central platform for participants to access. This can stimulate those already involved while also raising awareness and interest among others. Rather than using a generic company platform, one dedicated to mentoring better serves the purpose and focuses attention on the program.

Mentoring is a marathon rather than a sprint so organizations need to sustain participant interest for as long as the program lasts. In this respect, content is important. Publishing information, advice and other relevant material helps motivate and engage both mentors

and mentees alike. As with any instruction method though, catering for a diversity of preferred learning styles is imperative if the content is to achieve the intended effect.

Training at the outset is likewise a must. Teaching participants how to use the technology helps them to:

- recognize its potential to enrich the mentoring program;
- become more aware of their responsibilities during the program; and
- understand the program's vision and goals more clearly.

Many firms believe that technology will prove a panacea for all their challenges. That is clearly a dangerous assumption to make. Implementing new technologies is invariably complex and requires considerable investment. Leaders must therefore exercise due diligence in order to ascertain feasibility and ensure that the right decisions are made. Anything else could have damaging repercussions. Putting technology in place before demand is measured invites similar problems. The recommendation is to conduct surveys and interviews to ascertain interest levels and build a pool of prospective participants.

Defining objectives at the outset is essential and also serves as a benchmark for the program's success. Managers need to monitor performance on an ongoing basis and tools offered by the technology platform can simplify this task. Through measuring the success of different pairings, use of platform resources and goal achievement, those responsible can help the program to grow and improve.

The clear benefits of cloud

Managing talent effectively places considerable demands on any organization. The sheer scope of the task means that a successful strategy becomes much likelier when technology is utilized. For each talent management function, most companies have traditionally used various standalone applications. Storing these applications and the data generated on each user's personal computer or network servers at the firm is normal practice in these circumstances.

However, such arrangements often pose huge logistical problems. Frequent software updates are required in order for the content to stay relevant to company needs. This can prove a nightmare for clients and developers alike. Why? Because hardware used by customers will invariably differ in its capabilities. Firms will therefore have to pay for customized upgrades or invest to keep pace with hardware developments. Throw in the need for IT support and costs spiral even higher. Hardly welcome news anytime, let alone in the aftermath of a global economic downturn.

The costs and complexities ensure that executing a traditional system is a non-starter for many organizations. But talent management is critical to the firm's well-being and an integrated solution can positively impact on performance, employee loyalty and business strength.

Fortunately, the advent of cloud computing has provided companies with a feasible alternative. Many of the headaches associated with the conventional approach can be eliminated using a solution that offers:

- *Cost effectiveness*. There is no requirement for a company to regularly invest in hardware, software and in-house IT support services. Corporate servers are removed from the equation as applications and data are hosted by the provider's own network.

- *Flexibility*. The dynamic nature of the technology provides real-time access, upgrades when required and the capacity to swiftly adapt the application's configuration and processes as user needs evolve.

- *Integration*. It becomes simpler to merge the various talent management processes currently handled in different parts of the firm. Better integration with other HR functions is likewise attainable.

- *Wider application of training and development programs*. The problems associated with conventional technology systems invariably meant that talent management activities were confined to high performers. Because cloud computing allows all employees appropriate levels of access to the system, scope exists for an organization to maximize the potential of its entire workforce.

Despite these advantages, some remain skeptical towards cloud computing. Perceived security issues are the cause. Companies fear that relinquishing control increases the risk of sensitive information getting into the wrong hands. Such anxieties are easily allayed though. For a start, ownership of the data remains with the organization; therefore nothing is actually relinquished. And keeping it secure? System providers have this responsibility and it would be folly on their part to perform the duty to anything below the highest standards if they hope to attract and retain clients. Of course, firms should do their homework beforehand when seeking a provider and limit consideration to those certified as working to the latest security standards. Ensuring that user access is properly managed at their end is mandatory too.

With an effective talent management strategy in place, organizations can offer more career development opportunities to its workforce. It becomes easier to motivate and retain gifted employees, thus increasing the firm's competitiveness while lowering the need for external recruitment.

How to define and identify talent

Where many companies are concerned, the greater challenge is finding talented workers in the first place. Now this task could become more daunting still in the years ahead. In Australia, for instance, reports suggest talent shortages will hit most industries. Clearly, then, no company can afford to rest on its laurels.

Talent arguably comes in three different guises:

1. at the individual level, where high performers need to be identified;

2. particular skills and capabilities vital to the operations and strategy of the firm; and

3. certain roles and functions the company deems important to its strategic success.

Determining what is regarded as talent in each of these categories should direct the talent identification process.

One suggestion gaining credibility is that the process must be consistent and based on clearly identified talent metrics. Advocates believe that formalizing the approach to talent management is best achieved by using technology. A range of tools are available to help

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identify talent, build a talent database and measure existing and future supply and demand. Knowledge about its human capital can enhance decision making and efficiency in the organization.

Technology enables HR managers to measure both people-based and financial-performance metrics. Such objective criteria allow for consistency of evaluation and the opportunity to create and access detailed electronic records.

Is this method of identifying talent universally approved? Apparently not. Critics question its objectivity, pointing out that some data needs to be interpreted. Others believe that technology reduces the task to something of a cloning exercise where diversity counts for nothing. On the contrary, this school of thought places considerable value on the intuition of experienced managers and their ability to recognize talented individuals through observation of relevant behaviors. Since seeing is believing, it's hard to argue with that philosophy. Subjective evaluation also encourages discussion among leaders with the likelihood being that a more comprehensive definition of the talent construct will emerge. Another benefit of healthy debate is the ability to constantly renegotiate this meaning as the firm's competitive environment evolves.

Perhaps some form of compromise offers the best solution. Efforts to identify talent can exploit human knowledge, experience and judgment, while using appropriate technology to bring a necessary degree of formality and structure to the process.

Comment

The review is based upon: ''Tech-infused mentoring'' by Judy Corner, ''Managing talent in the cloud'' by Jason Corsello, and ''Do you see what I see? The role of technology in talent identification'' by Sharna Wiblen, Kristine Dery and David Grant. In her engaging piece, Corner argues that use of an online platform can help firms overcome recognized problems associated with mentoring. She presents a strong case to suggest that the support provided by technology can help participants and ensure program success. Cloud computing is explored by Corsello who similarly addresses barriers which make building an integrated talent management system difficult for many companies. This detailed account points out several advantages of a cloud-based solution and the argument for its use is compelling. Wiblen *et al.* focus on how technology can be utilized to make the identification of talent a more objective process. They examine the practice within a large professional services firm in Australia and report how managers rely mostly on experience and intuition to define and identify talent. This balanced and interesting account concludes that the potential offered by technology is not being fully exploited by this firm.

References

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