

## *Technology*

### **Wary HR Professionals Wonder if Technology Might Make Some of Their Jobs Obsolete**

**H**uman resources professionals have always had an uneasy relationship with technology, as the systems that make HR run more efficiently also can render some jobs obsolete. Regardless, the technological advances continue to come at a fast and furious pace.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks for HR departments in the current landscape is a fear of being displaced by technology, Jonna Contacos-Sawyer, president of HR Consultants Inc. in Johnstown, Pa., told Bloomberg BNA April 25.

“That fear, unfortunately, is precluding HR departments from growing in a more strategic direction, so that they can become a true consultant and strategic partner that aligns the talent within the organization to the strategic plans and objectives,” Contacos-Sawyer said.

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HR departments need to migrate to a more strategic, analytic function for the organization, and still maintain their “human touch” when it comes to employee relations, she said.

“If we want to move towards best-in-class talent acquisition and talent management practices, information technology must become an ally and business partner of the human resources department,” Contacos-Sawyer said.

Contactos-Sawyer recommended that HR use its technology platforms to assess workflow inside the department and find the places of duplication, where the errors are occurring, what consumes the most administra-

tive time and what kind of data department directors need to make better decisions. In some cases, she said, technology can take a two-week time lapse for documentation to two minutes.

This kind of streamlining, however, could affect HR employment levels. Automating the input of employee information into the relevant databases will eliminate jobs, Contacos-Sawyer allowed, but also will create savings within the HR function.

“Rather than be fearful of that job elimination, let’s look at those individuals and see what their strengths are and allocate them into roles that are opportunities as a result of the automation,” Contacos-Sawyer said.

**‘Not a Vehicle for the Annihilation of HR.’** Mobile devices, social media, big data and cloud technology are all reshaping the HR function. “This technology increases the value of people with the right skills and is not a vehicle for the annihilation of HR departments, but allows for more innovation,” Erik Brynjolfsson, director of the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy, professor at the MIT Sloan School and co-author of “The Second Machine Age,” told Bloomberg BNA April 28.

“There is a huge opportunity here—it won’t be an elimination but an augmentation, a synergy between what machines and people can do and a much bigger application of big data,” Brynjolfsson said.

Currently companies are doing a bad job of matching people with the right jobs and can do a lot better, he said. “We can improve that by matching people with certain skills to the right job, and the reason is the technology,” Brynjolfsson said.

“Once we couldn’t do the kind of analysis we can do now, but because of the power of big data there is greater opportunity for organizations to access information,” he said.

The technology is great, Brynjolfsson said, but the real revelation is in management. “Companies are using technology to help them get the answers, while 20 years ago they had to rely on instinct or a smart HR manager,” he said.

The real value going forward is knowing the right questions to ask, Brynjolfsson said, so organizations can set up their HR systems and “let the data speak.”

**Human Skills Still Crucial.** “All machines and analytics are doing right now is identifying a set of desired skills and attributes,” Brynjolfsson said. “The softer skills, like coaching, encouraging and motivating, are things

people can do more effectively. Most people don't find a machine good at motivating and caring."

"Humans still have an edge in developing those kinds of plans and visions for mentoring and training employees," Brynjolfsson added. "I don't see that any time soon there will be a real automation or elimination of these skills."

"I see it as bringing power tools to a construction site," he said. "Those advances allowed humans to take on more critical tasks, so HR automation doesn't strike me as accurate—augmentation is a better word."

**A Strategic Advantage.** In light of the advances in technology, HR is becoming an increasingly strategic function, Thomas Northrop, partner and president of Human Capital Consulting & Publishing LLC in Rockville, Md., told Bloomberg BNA April 17.

"Technologies do not replace the relationship aspect—and the necessity of that—but they augment and allow HR professionals to spend more time in the area of employee relations," Northrop said.

According to Northrop, while technology will play a large role where it is germane and appropriate, HR will always ultimately be crucial to employers due to the human component. That is the essence of the HR department, he said.

Northrop recommended that employers make sure to do their due diligence when they are looking to buy and implement technology systems. Additionally, employers should be careful not to invest in technology to fix problems that are based in human nature, he said.

**Tech Provider Looks to Increase Speed, Quality.** PeopleFluent is a human capital management technology company headquartered in Waltham, Mass., that develops cloud-based solutions for various HR functions, including recruiting, candidate sourcing, analytics, compensation, succession planning, onboarding and compliance.

"There is a theme that has infected business and that is, that doing more with less will somehow eliminate jobs," Charles S. Jones, chairman of PeopleFluent, told Bloomberg BNA April 30. "You need people on the end to assess the content," he said. "These tools will help HR and managers increase the span of control and the quality of their work because they'll have access to information faster, but they won't eliminate the role of HR."

The recruiting processes is where the company saw the greatest opportunity for improvement in HR, Jones said. "With recruiting, it can be a very repetitious task," he said. "That means a recruiter may have to describe the company, the job and the company's strategy several times." If you use a video or a single platform, Jones said, then the information can be passed through the organization faster and can be sent to peers and candidates for review. "Video is utterly transforming the way recruiting can take place," he said. "We're reducing cost while delivering results and increasing speed and effectiveness."

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