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Ideas & Trends

DATA MANAGEMENT

Expert encourages HR to start using Big Data

Big Data has become a critical tool for many businesses and now HR departments are starting to realize the potential this data holds for them. Big Data, used correctly, can play a major role in smooth off-boarding, preventing sexual harassment, and identify employee dissatisfaction before it results in voluntary turnover. Kon Leong, CEO of ZL Technologies (www.zlti.com) discussed with Wolters Kluwer Law & Business what he refers to as "the valuable data most HR departments have yet to tap into."

BIG DATA

Big data interview

Question: What is Big Data and how does it pertain to the workplace?

Answer: Big Data is whatever HR wants it to be. To me, it's the information created every day by our activities, movements, behaviors, and digital footprint. For employers, it is the data that is owned by the business, created in the course of business, by business people. It is data within the enterprise. The value of this Big Data — particularly of "unstructured" data found in emails, documents, IMs, and other human communication — is almost limitless in its value to the human resources field.

The last several years have presented a bit of a frenzy to quantify everything in business, from transactions to customer behavior, to preferences and beyond. However, in this quantitative haze we've often forgotten that the process of getting business done generates mountains of other types of information that is a bit fuzzier, a bit more human. The emails, files, instant messages, documents, and other information that employees generate in the process of getting business done is not only already owned by the enterprise, but also provides a direct pulse to the human heart of the company. They say that "getting there is half the journey," and the content that we create on a daily basis in the course of achieving the ends of business is essentially that half of "getting there." It can offer a wealth of insight into the process of how we work as individuals and as an organization at large, and to ignore it by focusing on only the final outcomes is to ignore half of the story.

from workers, and a poor "match" in terms of skills is amplified since individuals have less time to learn. That's why we think the analysis of Big Data has huge potential for examining work styles and individual strengths so that the right people can be assigned to the right tasks and the right work. HR should be about maximizing the potential of individual workers, and Big Data is that additional perspective that could help businesses find the right fit and projects for the people they have hired.

Big Data is also valuable for its historical insights on events, people, and issues. In short, it contains the entire corporate memory of things, past and present. The power and value of this memory cannot be understated. Imagine these possible use cases:

- *Internal investigations:* Peer into the past to see how a particular event, say, sexual harassment, began, and who knew what and when, all of which can be compiled in a matter of seconds.
- *Expert network:* Identify who are the experts in any domain or matter within seconds. There is no need to set cumbersome directories which have to be updated by end-users. Simply scan for the subject matter and find out who are the "go-to" people, which is often more accurate than self-proclaimed experts.
- *Employee sentiments and top trending topics:* Big Data Analytics can analyze and assess employee sentiment buried in Big Data coursing through the wires each day. Top management would love to know how the employees are feeling about, say, a recent layoff. Should they be in damage control or has the dust settled? What are the top trending topics we should be concerned about? Is it the cutbacks in the cafeteria menu that's engendering far more negative feelings

Answer: Big data is valuable for HR because it can provide insight to the way people work and the way the business works. Everything from employee morale to department workflows and individual efficiency can be found beneath the unstructured data if you have the right tools for sifting through it. These insights are more valuable than ever in today's dynamic hiring and employment environment where individuals no longer expect lifelong commitments to one company or well-defined trajectories of employment. What we often see in the workplace today is a style recently dubbed by the *Harvard Business Review* as a "tour of duty" where employees engage in high-impact but relatively short-length stints in order to gain experience and advance in their careers. It's mutually beneficial if it's done correctly; the business is perpetually infused with talented new thinkers and perspectives, while the employees gain diverse experience and spread the company's brand when they move elsewhere and make connections. But this accelerated style of business means that the company itself has less time to benefit

sentiments versus historical trends? How is morale today versus a year ago or five years ago?

Question: In what other ways is Big Data valuable to HR?

Answer: Big Data, at the end of the day, should serve to improve the experience of employees, the working environment, and ultimately, the business itself. Below are some common use scenarios that would be possible, given the analysis of enterprise unstructured data:

- *Employee turnover and knowledge retention.* Don't lose employee expertise when experts move on or retire. Identify subject experts, locate individuals' most-accessed information and documents, collate work still in progress, pinpoint key contacts, and locate individual roles in workflows.
- *Workflow visualization and productivity management.* Map and analyze work flows and employee roles. View workflow patterns for entire departments, groups, or specific tasks, and reveal areas of bottlenecks

BIG DATA

or surplus bandwidth. Allocate new project roles and tasks based on individual strengths and capacity.

- *De-duplication of project overlap.* Businesses often have a vast overlap in spending and projects, much of which could be eliminated via coordination. Analysis of vast quantities of data within and across key groups could help quickly identify areas of duplicate effort, even in early stages of planning.
- *Sentiment analysis.* Identify underlying morale and opinions to various situations. Pinpoint areas of employee frustration, anger, or even satisfaction. Gauge overall morale of the workforce. Analysis of tone via natural language processing can take the emotional "pulse" of a business or specific group.
- *Talent and leadership mapping.* Visualize the communicative network of individuals while identifying strengths and weaknesses. Find social hubs, "connectors," and potential leaders within the organization, while identifying less active groups that may need assistance. Identify key players with broad influence.
- *Trend emergence.* Find emerging topics, trends, keywords, and advanced concepts both within the business itself and at the business/public communication interface. Identify trending problems or recurring complaints so they can be addressed before becoming widespread. See if employees are unhappy or worried about current policies or changes.

Question: Does the use of Big Data cost HR anything and if so, how can HR justify the expense?

Answer: Big Data shouldn't be thought of as an HR cost, since it is leveraging information that already has to be kept and managed for other purposes. HR use of unstructured data is mainly piggybacking off of compliance, records management, email archiving, and legal practices that are already established.

surprised how much you share in common regarding your goals with the use of unstructured data. More importantly, you need to have your voice heard. When it comes to selecting new technology or forging new strategies for data, all potential players need to have role so that the decision-making process can benefit the highest amount of people. And, most importantly, think in terms of long-term benefit. What may seem like a revolutionary product or "solution" today may effectively be a useless gadget tomorrow. It may not seem glamorous, but before you get much use out of data, you usually have to have the proper infrastructure to support it. This is one of the reasons communication with IT and other departments is so essential.

Question: Are there any legal traps or situations that HR must be aware of when gathering or utilizing Big Data?

Answer: To be clear, this isn't about tapping into personal emails or private social media accounts. The information that the corporation collects in the everyday course of business is understood to be the property of the business. With that said, caution still must be exercised. Some of the main laws that must be considered do regard worker privacy, and this must be especially considered when working in the multinational arena. The EU, for example, is well known for their "safe harbor" policies for data, and any business with employees or even customers there must ensure that their unstructured data systems can comply with the required levels of encryption and protection.

That being said, Big Data also has massive potential for protecting employees and their personally-sensitive data that must be managed by HR. Things like filtering emails for patterns – think social security numbers and private addresses – are well within the reach of current technology, and can even be blocked and escalated for senior approval before being allowed to leave the company firewall. The key, again, is having centralization of unstructured data systems so that nothing slips through the cracks.

these groups equally and allow equal access of information. Unfortunately, most data practices in the past have focused on stand-alone data "silos" that are only used to house one type of information, such as emails. But today's market is moving in the direction of more holistic management of unstructured data, where all information is housed and searchable in one place, for all purposes. It's only this aggregation of information that will allow the searchability and analytics which can offer a new perspective of work patterns and insights to HR.

Question: How can HR utilize the Big Data they already have in a more effective manner?

Answer: Don't operate in a bubble. Get to know your IT staff, your records managers, and your legal team. You'd be

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kon Leong said data is the new frontier of maximizing employee and business benefit from a job, and the HR department has the opportunity to help drive the process. "As Google famously admitted recently, there is still little we really know about hiring efficacy and the correlation of employee performance over time with "standard" candidate metrics such as GPA, brain teasers, and the like," he explained. "So maybe we should look within, and focus on helping people find their perfect fit once they are hired. For that, we need to see how they work and interact on the job. For that, we need unstructured Big Data." ∎