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The Future of Workforce Analytics is Hidden in Your Communications

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(ImageFlow/Shutterstock)

If you want to know how your workforce is doing, you need only to ask. Instead of relying on removed metrics and outdated models, organizations should get their information straight from the horse's mouth. Better yet, follow the footprints that show where they have been and where they are going.

Every day employees produce mountains of unstructured data, information created by humans for humans, as they communicate over email, collaboration platforms, file shares, and IMs. Hidden in these communications and work product is a trail of metadata and content that when analyzed uncover the human element of an organization. By peering into the organizational black box, decision-makers can address fundamental HR challenges that have eluded past generations: how to identify top talent, assess employee sentiment, and improve employee retention.

Promote the Best, Not the Loudest

By harnessing this employee-created data, managers can begin systematically identifying top performers. Historically, leaders have relied on passive means of measuring performance, such as visibility and anecdotal evidence. While these metrics were never effective in the first place, they are no longer an option in today's complex work environments where many employees' productivity hides behind the computer's veil.

Forgoing these strategies altogether, modern HR technologies can isolate top performers through robust analysis of communication patterns. Simple analytics into employee networks—who talks with whom—can reliably identify top performers. Notably, high achievers are found near the center of informal networks, and subject matter experts can be identified by assessing who is asked the most questions by their peers. HR departments can use these insights to recognize, reward, and promote their best talent—who may have gone otherwise unnoticed—moving one step closer to a more equitable workplace.

Find Out What Employees Really Think

Going beyond metadata, analysis into content can reveal insight into the workforce's psyche. More so than any other metric, words reveal our inner perceptions, opinions, and feelings.

For example, does someone describe their work as fast-paced, stressful, or demanding? Each can apply to the same environment but differ in connotation—in sentiment. Admittedly, looking at a sole employee's mood is rather invasive and uninteresting from a business intelligence standpoint. However, understanding employee sentiment companywide or within specific departments is priceless to HR leaders.

Employee sentiment digs deeper than the descriptive who, what, where, and when ascertained by traditional workforce assessments, instead answering the ever-important why. Understanding the root of an issue lends itself far better to identifying the source and devising a remedy than simply reacting to its ebbs and flows.

Take productivity, for example. There are a plethora of reasons why a particular year, quarter, or month differs from the norm. However, understanding why is integral to long-term success. It could be that employee morale is down due to a policy change, that a lynchpin group of employees are feeling burned out, or that middle management folk are over-extended and unable to attend to their employees. Even if employee sentiment is normal, ruling out psychological states is helpful too as it can pinpoint difficulties adjusting to new workflows or technologies. However, without knowing the cause of the fluctuation, organizations cannot remedy it.

Outside of productivity, there are a host of other use cases that benefit from systematically tracking workforce sentiment: placing benchmarks on corporate culture initiatives, assessing job satisfaction, or improving employee retention.

Curb Employee Turnover

Employee retention and turnover is a very compelling example as it blends elements of both metadata and content analysis. Just as no one ends up in the middle of the beach without leaving a trail of footsteps, no employee resigns without hinting at their departure. By looking at employee sentiment and communication patterns, organizations can identify employee turnover before they ever hand in their resignation letter.

First and foremost, we know that high turnover is strongly linked to low corporate sentiment. Therefore, by measuring employee happiness, we can identify groups, positions, and departments that are prone to resigning.

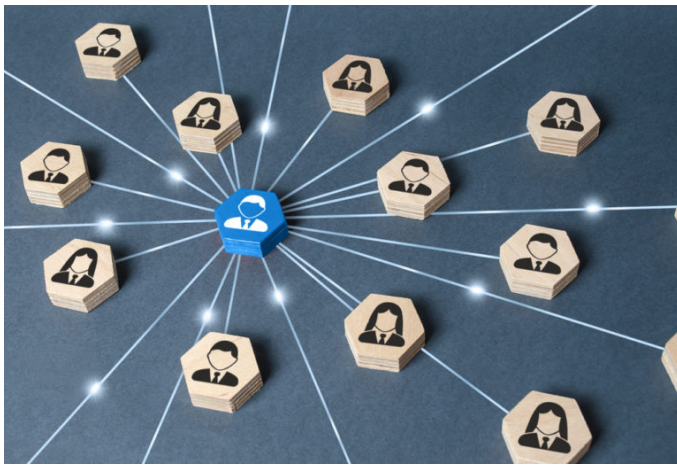
On a more intimate level, network analysis reveals that departing employees (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563217300900#!>), in their last five months tend to have more emotionally charged conversations, require more “nudges” per response, and their network sizes become polar—either increasing for good reference or decreasing out of emotion resignation. With this data, HR departments can either attempt to curb turnover with incentives or preemptively increase hiring in departments with predicted departures.

Mitigate Privacy Concerns



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The loudest employee is often not the best (momo sama/Shutterstock)



(https://2s7gjr373w3x22jf92z99mgm5w-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Worker_graph_shutterstock_Andrii-Yalanskyi.jpg)

High achievers are found near the center of informal networks, the author writes (Andrii-Yalanskyi/Shutterstock)

masses. Namely, organizations can target specific demographics (race, age, gender, etc.) or positions (experience level, company tenure, department, office, etc.) to reveal larger organizational trends. By pairing these precautions with other security measures (<https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2021/05/20/user-insight-personal-privacy/>), organizations can learn more about their workforce and how to champion them while respecting each individual's anonymity.

Take Your Organization To New Heights

Employees are indisputably an organization's most valuable resource; however, they are also the most unpredictable. Unstructured analytics pave a way to comprehend the intricacies of human performance. Accordingly, the trajectory of HR analytics is only set to expand as organizations begin to realize the innate potential in leveraging employee-created content to better understand and support their people. Your workforce is overflowing with talent that if fostered can ascend your enterprise to new heights—you need only to listen. (<https://2s7gjr373w3x22jf92z99mgm5w-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ryan-splain.png>).

About the author: Ryan Splain is the director of customer success at ZL Technologies (<https://www.zlti.com/>). Having consulted enterprise leaders for just short of a decade, Splain serves on the front lines assisting Fortune 500 companies as they begin and continue their governance journeys—leveraging unstructured, human-created data for workforce analytics, compliance, and legal needs.

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Now that we understand the power and value of these HR analytics, it is time to address the elephant in the room: individual privacy. There is a fine ethical line that organizations have to navigate when analyzing employee-created content. No one wants to—or should—feel like they are working at an Orwellian office where their every move and message is monitored. That does not mean, however, that organizations cannot analyze employee-created data, as there are ways to glean insights while respecting privacy.

Ironically, while technology created the privacy problem, it is also the solution. To rid the analytics process of privacy risks, organizations must dial up their control to be capable of isolating, and later removing, sensitive information. In fact, data preparation—curating and scrubbing information—dominates the time (<https://www.datanami.com/2020/07/06/data-prep-still-dominates-data-scientists-time-survey-finds/>), spent in an analytics project. However, strengthening technology's governance over data allows it to better decipher between the mundane and the sensitive, streamlining the preparation work required to glean insights.

It is further best practice to filter by larger groupings so that individual sentiment and productivity are disguised among the