TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES

Three Areas Where HR Should Exploit Virtual Technologies to Create Organizational Resiliency

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Abstract

While the COVID-19 crisis has brought unprecedented socioeconomic challenges across the globe, it has also opened up new opportunities to positively reshape existing business models and organizational culture. The key differentiators, essential for the success of any business in this era of lockdown, are resiliency, agility and adaptability driven by an anytime, anyplace workforce. Human Resources (HR) plays a key role in this new world by leading the reinvention of organizations with a remote workforce and digitized HR operations that are fast becoming the new normal.

Technologies including Cloud, Desktop-as-a-Service, virtual workspaces, collaboration tools, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), IoT and artificial intelligence (AI) have made a rapid transition to a remote workforce possible when not already in place. The mandates for lockdowns around the world have made traditional business continuity planning (BCP) approaches ineffective, forcing organizations to embrace remote working at a scale previously unimaginable. This massive and sudden paradigm shift has exposed serious challenges from lack of adequate technology infrastructure and controls to create trust in this new way of working. HR leaders can leverage this opportunity to build a business case for technology investment and more progressive policies for effective remote/flexible working to help organizations stay up and running, without missing a beat, in every scenario.

To accomplish this, there are three technology areas HR should exploit: HR Virtual Assistant, Remote Talent Acquisition and Remote Onboarding/Offboarding.

HR Virtual Assistant

Employees expect and demand 24x7 HR support—especially during times of crisis, where people have an avalanche of questions related to wellness, pay, policy, process, supply chain and more. While HR-related webinars and live chats help in broadcasting information, many questions and concerns will emerge as people work in a drastically different post-COVID-19 environment. Addressing each question individually is not efficient or sustainable. The solution to managing this challenge is through AI-powered, easy-to-use, multi-lingual 24/7 virtual assistants (VAs), which are bots that converse with employees—providing real-time responses to questions and pointing them to the information they need.

Virtual assistants predominantly rely on Natural Language Processing (NLP), a subset of AI, to understand the human language. By adding speech-to-text capability, your employees can actually talk to the VAs and get answers to their queries. NLP solutions that rely on Deep Learning like TCS KNADIA are language-agnostic, and you can actually build a VA that can handle multiple local languages. Alternately, you can build your VA in one language (English, for example) and use real-time language translation to make your VA multi-lingual.

HR VAs can improve the employee experience by giving consistent support, information and customized messages while also reducing HR personnel time and effort, freeing them to focus on priority issues like wellness, talent acquisition, training and employee engagement.

For HR VAs to be effective, it is essential that the bots continue to learn, evolve and most important, are kept current. Instead of trying to build a bot capable of addressing all possible questions (which will take forever), the continuous learning paradigm should be wholeheartedly embraced by the HR team.

There are multiple approaches to ensure that the bots continue to learn and adopt, but the most common ones are the use of:

- Conversational analytics to monitor the performance
- Supervised machine learning, where HR persons actually teach the bot to handle specific situations
- A/B testing to measure the user experience
- Direct feedback from users (in some cases)

The HR team should ensure that any unanswered questions by the virtual assistant are addressed in a timely manner so that employees come to prefer it as their first point of contact and depend on it as a reliable channel. HR should also actively look

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for questions and scenarios that need personal one-on-one interaction with individual employees and handle those accordingly.

Another benefit of an HR virtual assistant is that it can also inform HR leaders about trending topics among employees as well as proactively predict and address potential issues through the use of conversational analytics. HR can also engage with employees to crowdsource suggestions on handling new challenges, like those related to lockdown.

Without the traditional physical workspace to bind people together as one company, CHROs need to find new ways of creating a feeling of unity, which is so essential to ensure the mental wellbeing and performance of employees. VAs, with their real-time immediacy of communication and engagement, will play a pivotal role in building cohesiveness and are another invaluable tool in the HR toolkit.

Remote Just-in-Time Talent Acquisition

Travel restrictions, social distancing and contract commitments are forcing HR to rethink and revamp their recruitment process and adopt just-in-time and crowdsourcing approaches. Technology, powered by AI and Cloud, makes it possible for HR to completely digitize the recruitment process. By leveraging AI capabilities in recruiting, HR can reduce cost-per-hire by speeding up time-to-hire without sacrificing quality of hire or candidate fit.

With a wide range of digital technology available—from AI-powered resume assessments, candidate ranking, recruitment bots to pre-screen and schedule interviews, video-based interviews, the use of facial/emotion recognition software to assess personality traits (passion, integrity, confidence) to algorithms that predict how well the candidate will fit with the role/team—HR can do effective recruitment from their own homes. HR should also focus on recruiting self-managing individuals and managers who don't require a command-and-control approach.

It's important to note that AI, especially Deep Learning, is only as good as the data it is trained on. While adopting AI, HR should be aware of the risks – especially algorithmic bias. Amazon had to scrap AI-based recruitment as it was showing bias against women candidates, because the AI relied on past data (with fewer female candidates and hires) to make decisions. While AI-powered resume assessments can find the best fit, they often miss candidates who don't fit the limited description that AI can handle. Emotion recognition – which

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relies on computer vision capabilities and AI to map the expression to specific emotions – has come a long way. While definitely a useful tool for conducting video interviews, HR should take measures to ensure that automation bias based on stereotypes in AI is addressed.

Another trend HR should focus on is the possibility of moving away from traditional, centralized on-premises to multi-site cloud-based contact centers. HR should actively participate in exploring and shaping this transformation to create diverse, multi-cultural customer service units that lay a strong foundation for an organization to survive and thrive in a post-pandemic environment.

Virtual Onboarding & Offboarding

Uncertainty due to the pandemic has created apprehensions about jobs for both employers as well as employees. For certain industries (restaurant chains, healthcare, health care product manufacturing), the ability to quickly ramp up and ramp down their employee workforce across the globe is essential. In today's time of uncertainty, many businesses are going out of their way to honor offers of employment made pre-COVID-19. HR needs to step up and help businesses to onboard these new hires in innovative ways. With the right tools and technologies HR can provide a smooth onboarding experience for new recruits, even if there are no physical offices and teammates to welcome them in person.

Digital welcome packets, short videos for introducing the company, eLearning courses, virtual meeting rooms, real-time communication using chats or instant messages can make onboarding a smooth and engaging experience. To make the process even more engaging, HR can make use of collaboration and meeting technologies like telepresence using Virtual Reality (VR) to place the team in virtual conference meeting rooms or even a cafeteria or some other virtual location. A collaborative telepresence can transform the way employees work and meet, while rendering physical location irrelevant.

HR should definitely augment this kind of technology with human touch – especially in the first few weeks so that new hires can get fully acclimated. Ensuring individual member introductions, facilitating video conferences so that people get to see and know each other, virtual tour of the physical office(s), assigning a manager/mentor who will be the single point of contact for new hires and setting up periodic one-to-one checkpoint conversations are ways to make it happen.

HR virtual assistants can play a major role in onboarding as well. They can act as a "virtual buddy" answering any queries from new employees and guiding them through commons tasks like filling out timesheets, applying for leave or as a "virtual mentor" providing personalized learning track and recommending learning contents.

Capturing feedback–both personal as well as digital (and in some cases, anonymized)–and using the analytics of a virtual buddy, HR can understand the effectiveness of onboarding and continuously improve the process so as to implement it at scale.

COVID-19 is forcing many enterprises to opt for remote working at scale and even causing massive layoffs. As a result, just-in-time recruitment, data security and virtual offboarding becomes a significant area for HR to focus on and refine. HR needs to create a formal virtual offboarding process taking into consideration factor like disabling access (physical as well as digital), retrieval of company assets (laptop, mobile etc.), removing individuals from email/conference lists, letting people know the employee is no longer with the company, and conducting an exit interview over a video call. In these tough times, making offboarding a priority and not an afterthought, HR should show empathy and make it as smooth as possible.

HR Now Drives the Way Forward with Agility

The future has always been about flexible work practices and fluid workforces. But COVID-19 has suddenly made working remotely a top priority for businesses, with little or no time for preparation. As a result, HR should not view this new virtualized scenario as a one-off, temporary approach. Instead, it's an opportunity to evolve and scale faster--using the right combination of technology, process and planning--to make acquiring, assisting and onboarding & offboarding employees the new norm for a more highly agile (and digitized) business model.

> With the right tools and technologies HR can provide a smooth onboarding experience for new recruits, even if there are no physical offices and teammates to welcome them in person. They can also empower the business with agility with the ability to scale its employees as the business environment expands or contract.

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