Heathers? Mean Girls? Coming soon to an HR Department near you?

The advent of social media has had profound impacts on individuals, institutions, industries and business organizations throughout the world, but perhaps none quite as interesting – or potentially controversial – as the Human Resources department in the average American private sector business. As a result, more and more HR professionals are asking themselves, “How much involvement in social media is appropriate for our organization?” And, while some HR solution providers appear to be investing, or gearing up to invest significantly in “social HR” technology innovations to be leveraged by those HR departments, the jury is still out on whether HR professionals will take them up on it.

Social media has had differing impacts on different areas of the HR department’s focus. From recruiting to compensation, performance management, and even specialty applications dedicated just to evaluating “social influence” with a view toward using it to a positive effect in HR decision-making. The questions are: how well are these social HR applications working, are HR professionals adopting them, if so why, and if not why not?

Arguably, the recruiting function within HR has been the most aggressive adopter of social media integration, and also the most successful. The professional biography and networking site, LinkedIn, has achieved ubiquity, with 347 million members worldwide. And, as a result, it’s tough to find a recruiter brave (or silly) enough to say that LinkedIn isn’t useful to their business. But, as has been pointed out by others in this issue, there are large swaths of the available candidate market, representing some experienced and talented individuals that are simply not accessible by LinkedIn or most other social media tools. Additionally, everyone in the hiring process (from direct supervisors on up through HR heads) should be on guard for subtle, or even outright, bias toward those candidates who more successfully use social media in their candidacy process, unless, of course, the nature of the position requires familiarity with that technology as a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ).

LinkedIn has been the most successful social HR tool leveraged by recruiters for some very good reasons, prime among them that they have kept their product laser-focused on professional networking. This has kept LinkedIn from becoming the corporate equivalent of a Match.com or eHarmony.com. When HR professionals are asked about the extent to which they use other, far more popular social sites for finding the best candidates (sites like Facebook, Twitter, etc.), few are willing to invest (time, effort, hard dollars) in them at anywhere near the same level as LinkedIn. These sites are certainly appropriate for establishing and improving employment brand. But, the extent to which these sites are largely unmoderated for content presents some serious risks to HR managers – risks that many are unwilling to take.

Take this quote, for example: “We suck at dealing with abuse and trolls on (our) platform and we’ve sucked at it for years.” That criticism of Twitter wasn’t leveled by any HR professional – it was a recently publicized admission by Dick Costolo, Twitter’s own CEO. The quote was leaked from an internal email Costolo wrote in response to a situation in which Anita Sarkeesian, feminist author and videographer, documented more than 150 hate-filled tweets directed at her in a single week, some threatening rape or even death. Knowing this, what HR vice president would want to risk attempting to leverage Twitter as a social platform within the politically correct and litigation-prone world of employee relations?

The utility of Glassdoor.com for, say, compensation planning, provides a similar cautionary tale. Again, any HR professional will want to monitor the profile and user contributions related to their employer to ensure a clean and positive employment brand. But Glassdoor also tries to promote itself as the social HR alternative to formal salary surveys. And, for individuals (current employees and/or candidates) who can’t subscribe to those surveys, it is probably a serviceable alternative. But again, given that the compensation information collected on Glassdoor.com is entirely employee self-reported and anecdotal, and not validated, certified or normalized, what responsible HR professional would base their compensation policy on it? Have you ever known an employee to exaggerate their compensation when talking to friends or in 

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an anonymous, e.g., Internet-based setting?

But, perhaps the most concerning move in the current trend to integrate social media into daily HR operations emanates from those human capital management vendors seeking to develop a tool for measuring and ranking employees’ “influence,” and then using that influencer rating in performance management (reward the influencers and make them managers, train the non-influencers to become influencers, etc.). The inherent problem with this idea is the lack of any proven correlation between influence and leadership. “Pure” influence is a measure of a person’s passion to share ideas, to see their own ideas as very important (indeed, to “never have an unexpressed thought,” in some baby boomers’ eyes). It can be addictive and self-perpetuating, both for the influencer and their followers. It also has the potential, if one is not careful, of stratifying the organization into cliques. In high school, it was “the cool kids” versus “the outsiders;” does any HR professional miss those days and seek to reintroduce these popularity stratifications into their organizations?

But, more importantly, nowhere in the personality profile of a great influencer is there a guarantee of either sharable expertise in issues that matter to an employer, nor of pure leadership potential. To put it more bluntly, Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton and Kelly Osbourne have some of the highest social media profiles in the world, and millions of people hang on their every post, tweet and selfie. But, I wouldn’t want them leading me over the hill in battle to face the enemy – or even leading my next HRMS implementation project! Influence does not equate to leadership.

The traditional approach to talent management has always sought to find and promote those employees within an organization with the most highly developed competencies, knowledge and skills, and to cross-pollinate those attributes through training or formal mentorship programs. The migration toward social HR appears to be moving to simply finding those who have the most influence over others in the organization, and to leverage that influence, without necessarily correlating it to specific, relevant attributes that will move the organization forward toward its overall goals. With these “social HR IQ scores,” the potential is there, but the path to utility (or someday, perhaps, even indispensability) for these ranking applications is unclear at this point.

In summary, social HR is an idea that will inevitably come to fruition. However, for now, to the extent that social HR is defined as leveraging the social media websites and tools available in non-business settings, and to the extent that dedicated social HR apps are being developed to focus primarily, or solely, on an employee’s ability to influence others, and not to lead, mentor or train, HR professionals should take a slow and cautious approach.

About the Author
Bob Greene is a member of the Editorial Committee of the IHRIM Workforce Solutions Review, and guest editor of this issue. He is currently Channel Partners manager with Ascentis. With 35 years in the HRMS industry and having worked for such industry leaders as Towers Perrin, SAP, Oracle and SumTotal, he is proud to be a certified member of the baby boomer generation. And, while he has made peace with his laptop, his tablets (all three of them) and even his smart phone, he’s also happy to admit that he has no Facebook account, no Twitter handle, has never been on Pinterest or Instagram, and has never taken a “selfie.” But, he has absolutely no problem with people who do! He can be reached at bob.greene@ascentis.com.