

A Successful Integrated Talent Management Strategy Requires Both Tech and Touch

By Charles Coy



Little doubt should remain about the value of an integrated talent management strategy. For example, 2011 research from the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) found that high-performing organizations tend to integrate talent management components more than low-performing organizations.

While the concept of an integrated strategy isn't new, lately there has been a decided market shift toward organizations wanting to invest in a single technology solution that seamlessly, easily and cost-effectively integrates every talent management nuance and facet. Whether it's for recruiting or performance management, learning or succession planning, an effective integration must be achievable with minimal fuss, cost overruns and time wasted.

Recent research from industry analyst firm Bersin & Associates highlights integration among the most growing, and significant, trends in HR technology. Bersin compares this shift to the seismic change that occurred when functional solutions such as financial applications, production applications, HR applications and supply chain management melded into enterprise-wide solution suites. For talent management, however, past deployments too often have been "siloed" across the enterprise. Inconsistency, redundancy, excessive software management costs and the inability to collect enterprise-wide performance data resulted.

With more organizations looking to buy an integrated solution from a single provider versus cobbling together a solution using "best-of-breed" vendor offerings, there is an opportunity to break down the silos and gain more strategic value from their systems – ensuring employees are in the right roles at the right time, and that they have the right skills and competencies to tackle the business challenges of today and tomorrow.

Naturally, choosing the right technology partner is critical, especially given all of the M&A activity in this space – activity that raises many legitimate buyer questions. For example, it is important to find the right delivery model that is flexible and scalable enough to keep pace with constantly shifting business needs.

There also are questions as to what constitutes a truly integrated platform, with buyers having to choose between solutions that have been developed organically or those built through acquisitions. What are the benefits of an "organic" option? Well, features such as a unified data model, a single support organization, a single reporting environment and a consistent user interface would be some of the best ones.

Even with all that, technology is no silver bullet; it won't magically solve every problem. Before choosing and implementing a solution, organizations should have a clear and unified understanding of what they're trying to achieve. They also need to recognize what the technology can or cannot do for them. But most important, a successful integrated approach requires genuine, open collaboration not only among disparate learning and HR teams but also among internal stakeholders.

Here are some other proven best practices and guidelines any organization can follow to get on the right path.

- **Revise and simplify learning and talent processes.** Investing in an integrated technology solution presents an opportunity to revise and simplify various learning and HR processes. Is there an easier means to an end for what the organization is trying to achieve? Or does the existing process still make sense, requiring some updates to address integration needs and technology support? The technology shouldn't drive each process. Rather, processes should be more people-focused, which in turn creates more opportunities for employee engagement.
- **Align with the priorities of the business.** Make sure the integrated talent management strategy is supporting where the company wants to be today *and* where it wants to be five to ten years from now. This is critical for ensuring the company has the right bench strength and skills to drive business objectives.
- **Create realistic timelines.** As eager as people may be to reap the rewards of an integrated system, there needs to be a staggered rollout of the technology and updated processes to ensure things are done right the first time. Some tools and processes will be easier to implement than others, of course. Also, the order should also be based on business priorities.
- **Have a change management philosophy and matching methodology.** By nature, employees are resistant to change, largely comfortable with the status quo. Technology and corresponding processes tend to be ready before people are, so marketing the benefits of these tools in a way that is in line with the organization's culture can help to increase engagement and usage.
- **Establish a working partnership with your technology vendor.** The more that learning and HR leaders invest in having a true, collaborative partnership with their technology vendor, the more benefits they'll reap from their efforts. This is especially true with SaaS vendors, which can have up to four software upgrades a year – providing ongoing opportunities to influence new software features and enhancements that can further support an organization's integrated talent management needs.

In the end, the advantages of an integrated talent management suite are undeniable. But always remember that even the shiniest new technology won't solve a thing without breaking down any process or organizational silos that prevent true integration.

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