The Present of HR

It's not the future, it's now. It may not have arrived in your office, but it's at your competitors' offices. The hardest thing to grasp these days is what is already possible. We changed from an analog society to a digital world in under a decade. Overnight, amazing improvements in HR technology moved from the labs and into the offices of companies that chose to invest.

No one reading this article will be unfamiliar with the dread that accompanies the email inbox. Information is shoveled in our direction with such intensity that we lose track of what's happening. Busyness and our increasing focus on the next transaction on our to-do lists creates a paradox. We are firmly in the present moment while losing sight of what's possible right now.

It's not that we are overwhelmed by data as some would suggest. We all solve the so-called overload problem every day. We ignore, filter, and procrastinate the things that matter least until they disappear into sludge at the bottom of our lists.

Rather, our deepening focus on the immediate present prevents us from seeing the broad expanse of right now. Urgency and relentless choice conspire to keep us from noticing how much better things have gotten, how much more capability we have.

On the *HRExaminer*, I've noted that there are between 70 and 120 discrete silos of HR software. They are the component subsets of the 10 or 12 major areas of expertise. Each is available as a subscription service. Each arrives with the paucity of support that makes Software-as-a-Service currently so profitable.

No single HR department will ever implement all of these options. And still, they are necessary for some.

They stand as evidence of the fact that there are no standard practices in HR or HR technology. Rather, HR is always a snowflake. It looks like other snowflakes but is driven by the business and its needs, not by some overarching HR reality. As we get more and more comfortable with HR as a set of good practices that are tailored, we will become more adept at under-standing how a department might best organize and execute.

Human resources departments depend on good, not best practices. Great HR is always local and always an optimization of a recipe. Following a recipe precisely is, in itself, a recipe for disaster. In other words, each HR department is its own set of adjustments. It is the way that HR works here at our company.

Every HR professional reading this article spends his or her time covering the gap between standard HR practice and what is needed in the company. Sometimes the fit is strong and sometimes, it's loose. That's what keeps us, as a profession, so busy.

Meanwhile, the HR technology industry continues to develop amazing new tools and techniques. In the past several years, new ideas blossomed as the direct result of massive investment in new companies. Here are a few of the capabilities you might not have noticed emerging while you were busy.

1. **Integrated Recruitment Marketing Systems** – There are really two aspects of recruiting, internal and external. Integrated recruitment marketing systems offer a suite of tools designed to handle the outbound components from employment branding to job distribution, from job ad distribution to drip marketing campaigns to candidate pipelines. Both Smashfly and CareerBuilder cover this terrain.

2. **Résumé Handling and Parsing** – Most applicant tracking systems license software that moves unstructured text from résumés into structured databases. The process, an artifact of the days of paper résumés, is outmoded. New natural language tools are emerging that do things very differently.

3. **Analytics Performance Guarantees** – If vendors can predict performance using algorithms, modeling and AI, shouldn't they begin to guarantee the results? That's the premise at SMD, an assessment firm

that combines employee surveys, structured equation modeling and service guarantees. They call it performance-based pricing.

4. **On-Demand Benefits** – With four (or five, depending on how you count) generations in the workplace, there is no such thing as a standard benefits package. What matters to a single grandmother may not be very interesting to a 25-year-old man. The most advanced providers are delivering benefits as they become relevant to the employee across the life cycle.

5. **Embedded Coaching Tools** – Both Ceridian and Ultimate Software include embedded coaching tools based on personality assessments. Similar tools are emerging online as guides for communication in email and meetings. "You're a 'xyz' and he's an 'lmnop.' Therefore, you should take the following steps to be sure you are understood."

6. **Varieties of Performance Management** – What began as a broad recognition of the fact that performance reviews were crushing morale and sowing confusion is evolving into a cornucopia of tools. Ranging from traditional reviews to daily "check-ins," the industry now offers a nut for every bolt. There's a lot of experimentation involved in figuring out what works for your bolt.

7. **Survey Onslaught** – Related to the explosion of performance tools is the overwhelming variety of employee surveys. One asks, "How is the work going?" The other wonders, "How do you like management?" Driven by the craze over engagement, the employee desktop is becoming a maze of questionnaires. The next perk may well be "survey free" periods for excellent performers.

8. **The Prediction of Everything** – Without much in the way of actual testing (you know, the kind that let's you know if a tool actually works), we are being exposed to predictions for cultural fit, future performance, retention risk, attendance, communications success, and project completion likelihood, among others. It's a messy period and many mistakes will be made. Still, learning how to make decisions with the aid of machine intelligence is happening at your competitor's office.

9. **Real-Time Data Integration** – Theoretically, the biggest hurdle in the way of solid evidence-based HR is the complete lack of underlying data models. Well-intentioned practitioners make ad hoc decisions regarding data structure to solve this moment's problem. There are currently a few companies like OneModel and CloudMills that are trying to bring order to the chaos.

10. **Chatbots** – Artificial Intelligence is racing into the HR department. Chatbots are being used in settings ranging from job candidate concierge services to help desk problem-solving. Artificial intelligence frees HR pros to handle unique, high-value problems while delivering higher-quality service.

On some levels, the present of HR is unrecognizable. If your experience with HR is that it's the same old, same old, you're missing what's happening. It's not the future. It's the right now. It's the present of HR.

About the Author

John Sumser is the principal analyst and editor-in-chief of the *HRExaminer*. He is an independent analyst covering the entirety of the HR technology ecosystem from payroll and benefits to recruiting. He has a particular focus on ethics and practices in predictive analytics. Sumser routinely advises Human Resources and Recruiting departments and talent management vendor teams with product analysis, market segmentation, positioning, strategy and branding guidance. He's been published and quoted in every imaginable outlet from *The New York Times* to the HR industry trade magazines. He is currently experimenting with the use of Facebook as a forum for industry dialog. Follow him there. You can also reach him at ***john@hrexaminer.com***.