



EMPLOYMENT ENTERPRISES INC
HR INSIGHTS
Magazine *from the eyes of industry leaders*

IT'S TIME TO

Revolutionize

WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION!



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The Value of a Devil's Advocate in HR

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

NOW THAT SPRING IS OFFICIALLY HERE, we can look forward to the relentlessly eager students entering the workforce. We as employers often associate a good candidate as someone with a four-year degree, without putting into consideration the vital skills needed for the job.

In this new challenging environment of finding talent to fill job openings, we, as employers, need to embrace a broader mindset when hiring recent students. Degrees and academic qualifications are important and should continue to be considered, but a lack of a specific degree should no longer be a barrier to evaluate a person's application or interview selection.

Recent college grads are more particular in what they are looking for in their first job and 61% of recent college grads said that "drive" and "passion" in their careers are the top factors when deciding on an employer.

A National Association of Colleges and Employers Job Outlook 2017 survey suggested that there are many significant soft skills that employers are seeking from new hires. Employers are looking for the ability to work as part of a team, critical thinking, positive attitude, flexibility, a willingness to learn, problem solving skills, leadership, communication, etc. Hiring managers also evaluate resumes for evidence of a strong work ethic, and analytical and technical skills.

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"Everybody's got a different way of telling a story – and has different stories to tell."

—Keith Richards

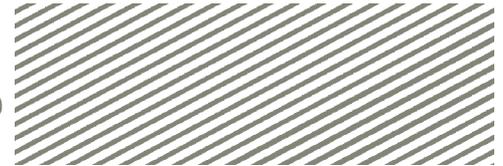
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lovey Hammel".

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HR INSIGHTS

from the eyes of industry leaders

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IT'S TIME TO *Revolutionize* WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION!

BY MARK SAWYIER



Although instant messaging, file sharing, and other digital communication applications have become essential for productivity, they aren't helping businesses as much as they could. In particular, companies keep trying to fit square pegs into round holes by encouraging the use of productivity tools as relationship-building tools. For example, when companies assume that everyone reads the entire newsletter or everything posted on the intranet, they risk making major decisions without the full awareness of all parties involved, even though such decisions were "announced."



Rather than put all their eggs into one basket (or even two baskets), a modern company that wants to convey important information needs a multifaceted approach that includes a newsletter, in-person communication, short videos, and real-time communication via mobile-centric applications. To give employees a greater sense of ownership in the process, this approach should also include employee participation. Here's how to implement a workplace communication system that both informs and engages employees.

FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT.

Informing employees is important, but top-down communication isn't enough. Once a company has its employees' attention, it might as well do as much as it can with it. By using new tools with interactive, real-time, and multidimensional functionality, organizations can present their internal communication and engagement initiatives in ways that improve employees' responses and increase their participation.

USE HRBI TO MEASURE WHAT WORKS.

The semiannual survey is a relic. Most companies say that their employees are their most valuable assets, so they should be trying to learn as much from them as possible by asking for their feedback frequently—not just twice a year. One of the newest approaches in HR, the use of HR business intelligence (HRBI) data, can enable companies to analyze sentiment based on syntax and topics of conversation and identify the various personas in an organization. By quantifying participation levels around individual engagement initiatives and investments, this data can help organizations optimize those strategies and then indicate their correlations to bottom-line impacts on employee retention and performance, revenue, and profitability.

BUILD RELATEDNESS.

A sense of "relatedness" is paramount to human relationships, and researchers have demonstrated a strong connection "between the need to belong and cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavioral responses, and health and well-being."¹ Helping employees discover commonalities (interests, passions, values, experiences, humor, philanthropic endeavors, etc.) is one way companies can help them become more familiar with each other, develop a shared identity, and build trust with others in the organization.

LEVERAGE VIDEO.

The kind of content that helps build relatedness—and, with it, the trust that lies at the heart of a highly engaged workforce—should be accessible everywhere (mobile-centric) and immediately familiar and welcoming. Video meets all of those criteria and is one of the most preferred communication forms today.² Consider the differences between dial-in phone meetings and video chats: seeing each other makes it possible for participants to pick up on all kinds of nonverbal cues and mannerisms that not only make communication easier but also humanize the other people in the conversation. Video should be a crucial component of today's engagement initiatives.

Workplace communication is behind the times. Even though it's not the most efficient communication tool and takes up far more of our work days than it should, e-mail continues to dominate the business world. Newsletters and company intranets are ignored because they're not engaging, and instant messaging focuses too much on productivity and isn't fun to use. It's clear that organizations need to revamp how they communicate with their employees. They need to implement solutions that communicate important information to their employees *and* engage them at the same time. ■

Mark Sawyer is the CEO and cofounder of Bonfyre. A passionate entrepreneur, he believes that people are the most valuable factor of any successful company. Maintaining a culture that benefits the employees has become his calling, for both the sake of the employee and the continued growth of the organization.

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How AI Is Making HR More Human

BY ADAM ROGERS



Artificial intelligence (AI) technology has been around for decades, but its capabilities—as well as interest and funding in this area—have skyrocketed in recent years. Machine-learning functionalities (such as self-driving cars and facial recognition) are disrupting nearly every industry as well as people’s everyday lives. With funding for AI startups increasing to \$5 billion in 2016 and the exponential acceleration of AI technology showing no signs of stopping, further disruption is almost guaranteed.¹

This rapid progression is driven by advanced machine learning, systems that continuously consume and apply knowledge to improve accuracy and analysis. AI has already proven its potential for expediency and efficiency, completely redefining how we live, work, and relate to each other. The prospect of AI actually *improving* human-to-human interaction, especially within the business environment, is particularly intriguing.

Human innovation paired with technological development is a powerful force. In human capital management, for example, technology has evolved from simply performing basic HR processes to predicting future outcomes and then to fundamentally restructuring how employers manage their people. Smart technologies powered by machine learning, natural language processing (NLP), and distributed data-collection interfaces are poised to completely transform the workplace for HR leaders.

BIG DATA FOSTERS UNDERSTANDING

Running a business requires a substantial amount of data—so much, in fact, that companies now often deal with “big data,” defined as “an accumulation of data that is too large and complex for processing by traditional database management tools.”² New technologies can digest these data mines with superhuman capacity and speed by applying advanced mathematical algorithms to find patterns, trends, and outliers, yielding insights that can transform how managers approach everything from turnover to overtime and enable leaders to better understand their teams and how to strengthen them.

Automation plays an important role in the data consumption process and is responsible for unparalleled advancements in convenience and productivity. Complex administrative functions have often plagued employers, particularly in HR, and these solutions alleviate the potential for human error while dramatically increasing completion speed. What used to take dozens (if not hundreds) of hours of human analysis is now achieved almost instantaneously.

This shift laid the groundwork for the game-changing power of prediction. Today’s leading human capital management (HCM) solutions leverage big data to forecast everything from performance success to flight risk, and these self-taught systems are incredibly accurate, extremely adaptive, and constantly learning. Rather than simply reporting on past trends, they predict future ones, thus empowering leaders to drive continuous improvement within their organizations.

Consider retention, for example. Because turnover can contribute to increased business errors, negatively affect culture, and cost the organization up to twice an employee’s annual salary, it is a top priority for today’s leaders.³ By automatically processing and analyzing a wealth of HCM data, predictive AI tools can identify the employees most at risk of leaving and alert their managers to address the situation before it’s too late.

The next frontier for disruption is prescriptive analytics. Building on past innovations, prescriptive systems pull from predictive functions to suggest specific, personalized actions at key decision points. These AI-based recommendations can make managers better leaders by applying unbiased data to difficult decisions. By drawing on what’s worked well in similar situations, the prescriptive functions can inform not only *whom* to talk to and *why* to talk to them but also *how* to talk to them. (The managers of the above-mentioned high-risk employees, for example, might be encouraged to take them out to lunch as thanks for their continued contributions and initiate a conversation about their career goals and aspirations.) The additional support helps leaders coach and engage their people, which leads to improved business outcomes. At the same time, though, the process also relies on the innate human traits of intuition, empathy, and kindness. The result is a symbiotic, people-first AI.

LEVERAGING THE VOICE OF THE EMPLOYEE

One of the best ways for leaders to improve retention is to listen to and address employee concerns. This observation seems basic, but it’s actually quite difficult to scale listening to the voice of the employee. Organizations have traditionally relied on annual performance reviews to accomplish this goal, but once-a-year discussions don’t always suffice (especially when tied to salary negotiations). Employee satisfaction surveys are another alternative, but poorly designed (or

poorly executed) surveys won’t deliver impactful results. The most effective surveys offer a mix of qualitative and quantitative prompts, but these take significant work to analyze. Fortunately, recent AI developments are resolving this dilemma and improving employee-manager relations in the process.

SPEAKING OUR LANGUAGE

Despite the remarkable advancements AI has made in learning and prediction, users are often frustrated by its failure to understand the true meaning of words. Google Translate can instantly convert text from one language to another, and even basic Web-based chatbots can provide reasonable responses to basic queries. But until recently these systems produced only literal translations and interpretations. Human language is incredibly complicated and brims with context and subtleties that make it challenging for machines to decipher.

Enter natural language processing (NLP). This rapidly improving technology is producing solutions that are learning to think and speak like humans. The result is the difference between a native Parisian and a French 101 student: the AI is actually speaking human language, not translating it. Machines can now discern emotion and are capable of recognizing sadness, anger, and even sarcasm.

The many potential opportunities to leverage NLP in the workplace include advanced customer service bots and e-mail summarization software, among others. But employee surveys are one obvious place to start. By applying NLP and machine learning algorithms to open-ended, text-based surveys, leaders receive feedback on what their employees are *saying* as well as on how they’re actually *feeling*. Managers can monitor their teams’ health and use these metrics to arrange one-on-one conversations, evaluate opportunities to increase satisfaction, and drive organizational change.

IMPROVING HUMAN CONNECTION

Truly understanding how people are doing their jobs, what they care about, and what inspires them can enable organizations to improve nearly every aspect of the employee experience. Developments in automation, analytics, and NLP are making these insights possible and fostering authentic connection and understanding between managers and their employees. In this way, AI has accomplished perhaps the last thing anyone expected: it’s making HR more human. ■

Adam Rogers is the chief technology officer at Ultimate Software, where he oversees the company’s product strategy, development, and delivery via the Cloud. Ultimate’s award-winning UltiPro® delivers HR, payroll, talent, and time- and labor-management solutions that connect people with the information they need to work more effectively.

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LONELINESS: The New Workplace Crisis

BY DAWN BURKE

Most people who leave regular positions in the corporate world to work as telecommuting consultants in the gig economy will say that the biggest adjustment they have to make is getting used to being alone. The shift can be quite jarring, particularly to someone who is energized by people, loves leading teams, and enjoys dissecting the latest episode of *Black Mirror* with coworkers at the water cooler. In general, being physically alone isn't actually a problem; after all, different people prefer (and need) different amounts of social interaction. But when people feel socially and emotionally disconnected from others, true loneliness can result.

The loneliness of telecommuters has been well documented. But as it turns out, loneliness isn't just a work-from-home issue: it's also a workplace epidemic. Because workplace loneliness can have particularly widespread ramifications, HR needs to address it—even when employees don't mention their loneliness and manage to get all of their work done. Here are a few reasons why:

- So far 2018 is experiencing better-than-expected job growth, with the unemployment rate (4.1%) at its lowest point the last 18 years.¹ These numbers mean that employees who are unhappy at their current workplaces (perhaps because of loneliness there) can easily find greener pastures.
- Workplace exhaustion can lead to burnout and loneliness. The resulting disengagement can have serious business consequences, including “almost 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents, 16% lower profitability, and a 65% lower share price over time.”² A disengaged employee is never good for business.
- Loneliness has a huge negative impact on human health. One former U.S. Surgeon General explains, “Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity. . . . Loneliness is also associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety.”³

It's time for HR to put down the policy book and focus on its most important work: building connections, inspiring trust-based practices, and creating positive employee experiences. Here are some things HR can do to mitigate loneliness in the workplace:

olace



- **Hire managers with high emotional intelligence.** Modern leaders must have the ability to read emotions, show empathy, build trust, and make connections. A leader who lacks empathy won't be attuned to an employee's signs of loneliness.
- **Ensure that leaders prioritize one-on-one time with their team members.** A leader who builds trust with employee is more likely to know if they are disconnected, unengaged, or lonely. The only way for a leader to build that trust is to spend time *talking* with them.
- **Allow employees to be their true selves.** The loneliest place to be is a place where people have to pretend to be something that they aren't. When a team's members look and act exactly like their leader, that isn't a coincidence but is instead a sign that the leader doesn't let people be themselves. Get rid of those leaders.
- **Create networking groups within the organization.** Skill-specific guilds, volunteer groups, "lunch and learn" groups, and in-house professional development groups provide "shared experiences" spaces where people with common interests can meet each other. (And because connection isn't achieved by throwing together people who don't know how to talk to one another, offer actual "networking" classes to employees as well.)
- **Do "personal history" exercises with team members.** The best way to build trust is through sharing and allowing safe spaces in which team members can be vulnerable. Patrick Lencioni's "personal history" exercise is one effective way to strengthen connections.⁴

- **Use tools to measure engagement, assess one-on-one time, and recognize employees.** Leaders often point to "lack of time" as a reason for their failure to connect with employees. With so many technological solutions to make this part of a leader's job more efficient, that excuse is no longer valid.
- **Check on the CEO.** One of the loneliest jobs in the world is being a CEO. Don't forget them.

Even as technology makes it possible for people to connect in more ways than ever, many people at work struggle to make connections that are genuine, deep, and nurturing. The solution is to emphasize the human aspect of those connections. And with the word *human* in its name, HR is better situated than any other department to identify, prevent, and mitigate loneliness in the workplace. ■

Over nearly two decades in corporate HR, Dawn Burke was responsible for finding great talent, developing team members, and preserving company culture. Recognized as a top HR innovator, advisor, and speaker, she writes on HR issues for numerous blogs, including *Fistful of Talent*. She can be reached at dburke@dawnburkehr.com.

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Leadership carries not just authority but responsibility as well. Commanding officers in the military, for example, can be responsible for upwards of hundreds of soldiers. The consequences of failure are staggering: lives are literally on the line. That's why good commanding officers make sure that those under their command have the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to succeed. Unfortunately, in the civilian world many companies don't place a high value on being responsible for the development of employees both as individuals and as team members

Talent development is one of today's hot buzzwords. But who is responsible for developing employees: the learning and development department (L&D), HR, or the manager of the team or department? Of these, the manager is the best candidate for this role. After all, the leader is closest to the team, has a thorough understanding of each team member's capability, and always has skin in the game. To maximize the effectiveness of talent development, managers should follow this five-step approach to the process.

1. PROVIDE CONTEXT.

Team leaders know which skills are crucial to the success of the team and can use that knowledge when creating a process for talent development. (For example, a team focused on receiving and classifying new inventory must prioritize accuracy and efficiency, and because the team's tasks require key organizational skills, its managers should make sure that talent development emphasizes them.) Within this context, a team leader can motivate his or her employees to learn and can help them connect the dots between a newly learned skill and the increased success of the team. Employees who gain such contextual insight will be more attentive during the learning experience and better able to relate the new content to their jobs.

HOW MANAGERS Can Guide THE *Talent Development Process*

BY CAROL ANDERSON



2. PREPARE THE LEARNER.

To prepare an employee for a learning experience (whether formal or informal), the team leader should describe what to expect and pique his or her interest by explaining how the new knowledge or skill will benefit both the team and the individual employee. By generating curiosity, the manager conveys a key message: “This is important—and here’s why you should pay attention and learn.”

3. MONITOR THE LEARNING.

As the learner embarks on a journey to gain new knowledge, managers should track progress with a learning management system and check in with the employee regularly to ensure that the process is working.

4. FOLLOW UP.

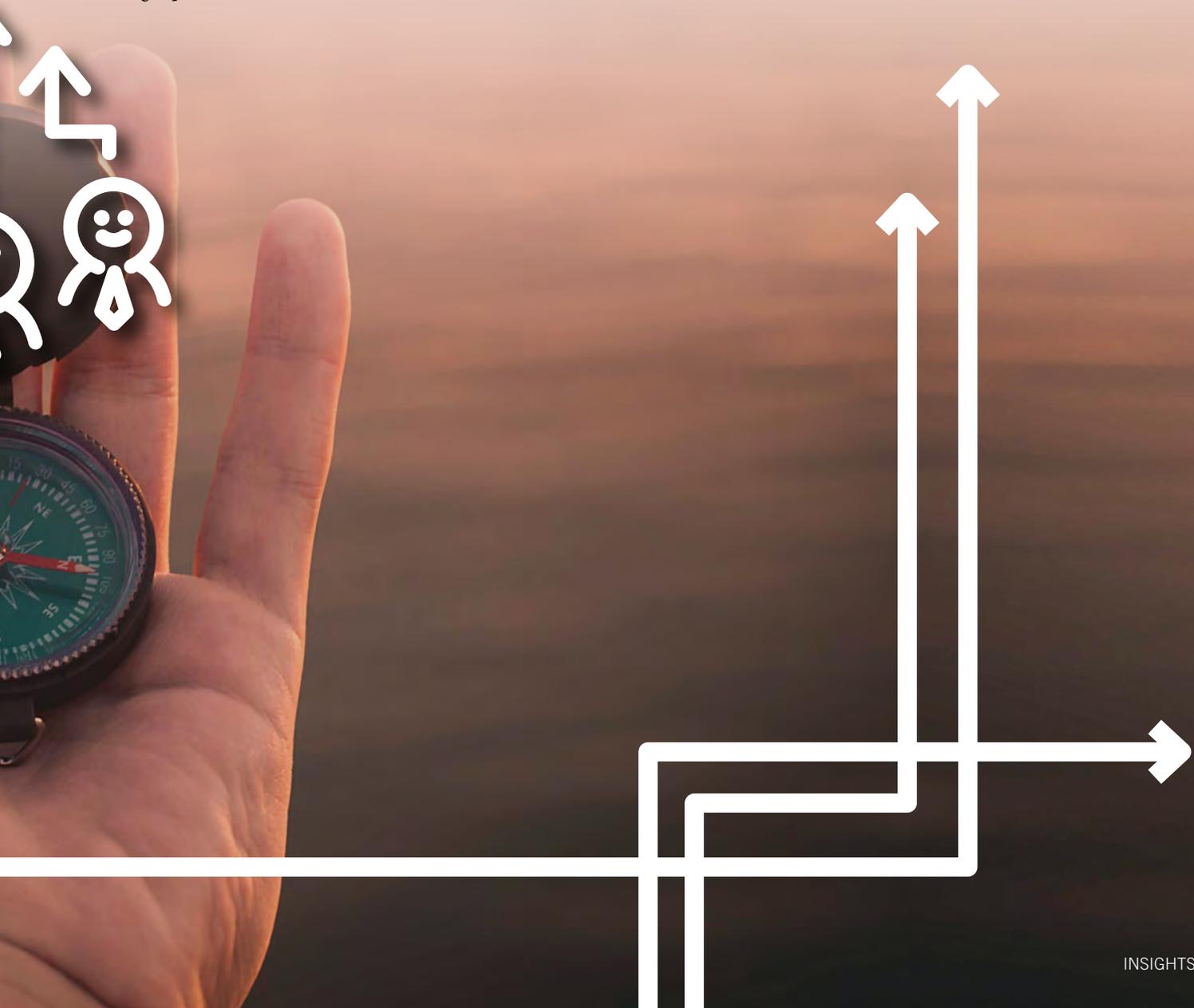
After a learning experience, managers should ask the employee one simple question to emphasize the relevance and importance of the new knowledge: “What did you learn, and how will it help you to do your job better?” If a strong connection to the employee’s work isn’t apparent, it may be time to question the need for that particular learning experience.

5. EVALUATE PROGRESS.

Everyone needs practice to improve and perfect a skill, and feedback is an important part of that process. More than just a critique, feedback includes identifying ways to increase the employee’s confidence level and coming up with scenarios to challenge the employee in the future.

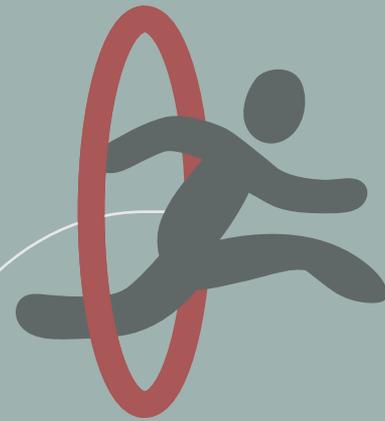
Talent development is critical both to an employee’s career and to an organization’s well being. As leaders, managers have the responsibility of giving employees opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge they need to do their jobs well. By providing and overseeing such talent development, leaders can play a pivotal role in ensuring the company’s success. ■

Carol Anderson is the founder and principal of Anderson Performance Partners LLC, a business consultancy focused on bringing together all aspects of the business (CEO, CFO, HR) to build, implement, and evaluate a workforce alignment strategy. The author of *Repurposing HR: Moving from Cost Center to Business Accelerator*, she can be reached at carol@andersonperformancepartners.com.



HOW COMPANIES SABOTAGE THEIR

BY ALLIE KELLY



Jump Through Those Hoops!

Employers have ideas about what the recruitment experience is like for candidates. At the same time, candidates hold their own opinions on that process. Those two perspectives don't always align, though, and big differences between them can lead companies to make three common mistakes that sabotage their best efforts to recruit sought-after candidates.

FORCING CANDIDATES TO JUMP THROUGH HOOPS

Worldwide, only 30% of the workforce is actively looking for another job.¹ This means that a large number of people aren't rushing to send applications out into the world and have the breathing room to take their time when considering job offers. Candidates from this pool aren't hyper-motivated to find new jobs—which means they aren't going to tolerate having to jump through hoops and sacrifice lots of time in order to apply for a new position. Quick, streamlined application processes are favored by all types of job seekers—but they may be even more appealing to less active candidates.

NOT SHARING INFORMATION ABOUT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Modern workers want growth opportunities. For example, Gallup researchers found that “87% of Millennials rate ‘professional or career growth and development opportunities’ as important to them in a job.”² But younger employees aren't the only ones who desire the chance to grow and learn new skills over time in their jobs. Thirty-three percent of respondents to one recent Korn Ferry survey cited “I'm bored, need new challenge” as their top reason for looking for new jobs.³ When top talent explores open positions at a company, they're going to wonder if it's a place where they can thrive, learn, and grow—or if they'll stagnate there. Organizations that don't promote professional development opportunities in their job postings and throughout the recruitment process are missing a big chance to draw top talent.

HAVING A STRESSFUL WORKPLACE

With a greater societal emphasis on personal wellness and the rise in popularity of remote working arrangements, many job seekers place a high priority on companies with great culture and respect for work-life balance. Younger workers especially seek that balance: the 2016 Deloitte Millennial Survey found that a good work-life balance was Millennials' top consideration “when evaluating job opportunities.”⁴ With “the destructive link between high levels of stress and reduced productivity” evident among workers of all ages, though, companies would be wise to make their workplaces as stress-free as possible.⁵

CHANCES WITH TOP TALENT

Here Comes the
Workplace Stress!

Hidden Professional Development
Opportunities! SHHH!

Every step of the recruitment process gives the company a chance to showcase its strengths. The language used in job postings (is it welcoming, informative, and inspiring?), the time it takes to respond to applicants (do replies go out quickly?), how interviews are conducted (do they give a good sense of what the workplace is like?)—all of those factors shape the impression organizations make on their applicants. Companies that don't pay attention to the details risk alienating top talent without even realizing it. ■

Allie Kelly is the vice president of marketing at JazzHR (www.jazzhr.com), where they're on a mission to make recruiting and hiring easy, effective, and scalable no matter what growth looks like at your company. The Jazz Performer Platform doesn't just help your company grow, it can help your recruiting process grow up, putting you on the path to hiring "Performers Only."

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Focus on
**FINANCIAL
WELLNESS**
to Boost Productivity

BY NICHOLE KELTGEN

Professional life and personal life are two separate domains, but what happens in one can strongly affect the other. For example, stress in someone's personal life can have a negative influence on his or her work life. This is especially true for financial-related stress: one study found that "employees who are stressed about their finances are nearly five times more likely to be distracted by their finances at work, twice as likely to spend three hours or more at work dealing with financial matters, and three times more likely to spend five hours or more."¹

Because debt is one of the major stressors in people's lives today, many organizations are recognizing the impact of personal debt on their employees' professional lives—and, in turn, the companies' bottom lines—and establishing financial wellness programs for their workers. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, more and more employers are offering some type of financial advice or resources to their employees. In 2016, for example, "24% of organizations offered employees online financial/investment advice, 27% offered one-on-one advice, [and] 22% offered group or classroom financial advice."²

Increasingly, today's employees *want* these opportunities. In one recent survey about employee benefits, 40% of respondents said they were "looking to their employer[s] for financial security."³ The key, then, is for organizations to develop and implement effective programs that meet their employees' needs.

Aside from wages, employers have historically most influenced their employees' finances through retirement plan benefits and occasionally through employee assistance programs (which are often underutilized). This approach has not been very effective, though, especially for individuals carrying a great deal of debt. Retirement is not even a consideration for many of them, given their current circumstances.



PRODUCTIVITY

DEBT

Companies that want to help their employees improve their finances need to start by recognizing that, just as individuals can find it challenging to make changes to their physical and emotional well-being, they can also find daunting the prospect of taking action to address their financial well-being. Medical professionals have found that education alone on health issues and “shoulds” do not result in changes to behavior. After all, most people already know that they “should” exercise more or eat healthier but still don’t do it. The same is true for financial wellness: most people know that they “should” pay off their debts and save for retirement but find that accomplishing those tasks is easier said than done.

As with health-related wellness, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to financial wellness. People have different financial priorities at different stages of their lives, for example. Generational differences, too, can shape people’s financial needs and expectations.⁴ Employees are at different places on the financial wellness spectrum and have varying preferences for accessing services they may need.

To be effective, a financial wellness program should include both education and tools. The educational component should cover the various aspects of an employee’s financial life, such as debt management, college education funding, mortgages, credit management, retirement planning, and budgeting (to name just a few). The tools should encourage and enable people to take action based on what they’ve learned. These resources can include financial wellness assessments (similar to health risk assessments) that outline the bigger

picture of an individual’s financial situation, as well as access to financial consultants or financial planners.

A successful financial wellness program may not only help boost productivity but can also help recruit and retain top talent. Educating employees about their personal financial health can help them increase their participation in retirement plans and make more confident investment decisions while they build strong financial futures with the company. As they experience less stress about their finances, they are able to focus more on work and improve both their own productivity and the overall well-being of the organization.

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5 Reasons Why Employees Should Use Their Vacation Days

BY THE STAFF AT RISE PEOPLE

A large, bright pink inflatable flamingo is floating in clear, turquoise water. The flamingo is positioned in the center-right of the frame, facing right. The water has a slight ripple, and the background shows a clear blue sky and distant land with green trees. The overall scene is bright and summery.

Employees are often reluctant to take time away from the office for a number of reasons, such as fear of missing out on a promotion, fear of falling behind at work, or simply a desire to save vacation days for another time. But employees who opt not to use their vacation time could be doing great harm to themselves as well as to their companies. Not only does a vacation bring a wealth of physical and mental health benefits, but it can also boost someone's workplace productivity and engagement, which contribute to the success of his or her organization.

TEAM MEMBERS WHO TAKE TIME OFF RETURN MORE RELAXED, PRODUCTIVE, AND SATISFIED.

Vacations help people recharge and are extremely important for helping them learn to relax, a skill that makes it easier to handle stress.¹ Taking time off also helps employees become more productive in the long run. One extensive survey of HR managers found a strong positive connection between vacation time and productivity, with 75% of managers seeing better performance from team members who took more vacation days than from those who took less time off. Furthermore, HR managers from companies in which employees took more vacation time reported high job-satisfaction rates among team members, which can help companies retain talent and keep turnover costs down.²

VACATIONS IMPROVE TEAMS.

The old saying “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” holds true in the workplace when vacations are involved. When people take time away from work, their colleagues (and supervisors) might more easily see how important their contributions are. Also, having to rely more on others and plan for covering an absent employee’s duties can facilitate team building and strengthen bonds among coworkers.

VACATIONS ARE GOOD FOR PEOPLE’S HEALTH.

Beyond simply helping people recharge and feel less stressed, taking a vacation also plays a key role in improving overall health and wellness. Research over several decades has revealed that annual vacations can dramatically reduce deaths due to coronary heart disease, decrease rates of depression and stress, and lower blood pressure.³ Healthier people take fewer sick days—which means greater productivity (and more savings in time and money) for the organization.

NOT TAKING VACATION DAYS IS COSTLY FOR BOTH EMPLOYEES AND COMPANIES.

In organizations with “use it or lose it” policies for paid time off, employees who don’t use all of their vacation time can suffer financially. With only 45% of Americans using up all of their allotted vacation days, the workforce collectively loses as much as \$65 billion in income each year.⁴ And for companies that allow employees to roll over vacation time, unused paid time off can leave a huge liability on company balance sheets.

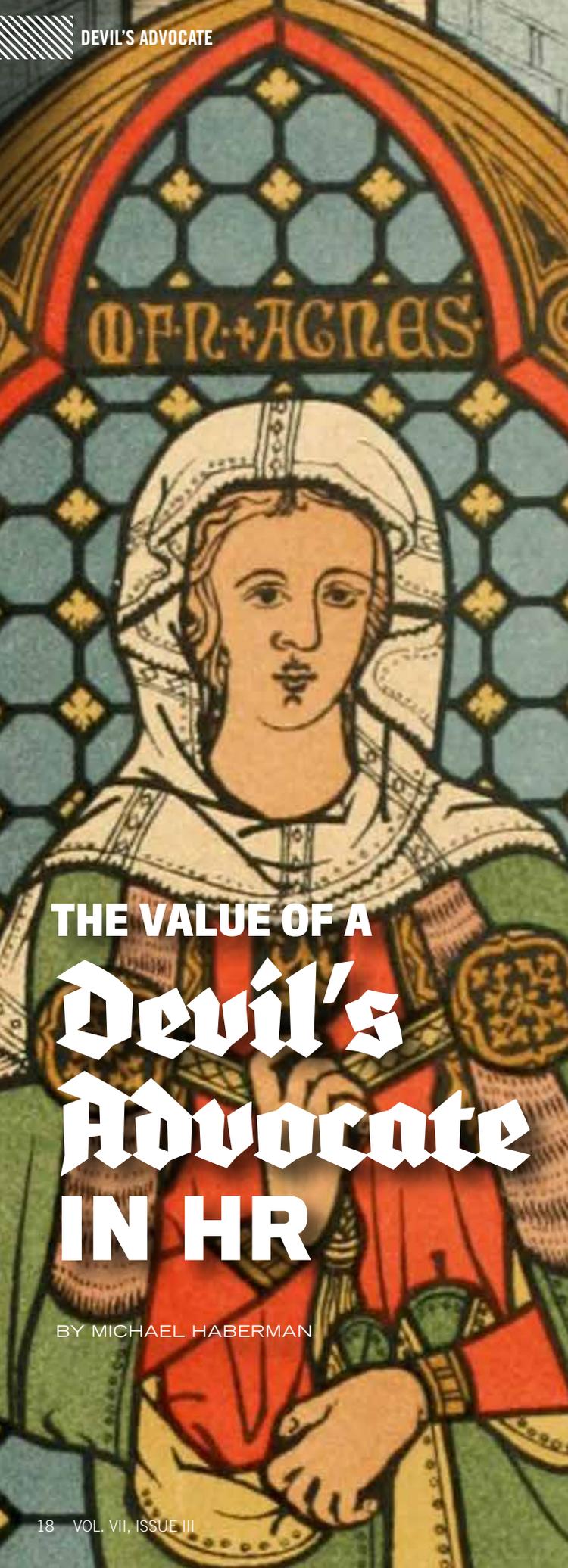
TIME OFF CAN STIMULATE CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION.

Getting away from the office can help get employees’ creative juices flowing and may even help them come up with the organization’s next “big idea.” Bill Gates famously takes a “think week” out of the office several times a year to spend time reflecting on his company and technology; his 1995 “think week” yielded his famous memo “The Internet Tidal Wave,” which outlined his plan to shift Microsoft’s focus online.⁵ Not everyone will come up with groundbreaking, multimillion-dollar ideas while on vacation. But at the very least the change of pace (and scenery) has the potential to spark some new thinking.

Although employees might find it difficult to step away from the office, having a clear company policy that encourages team members to take vacation days is beneficial both for their health and for the health of the business. Such a policy can take many forms: a “traditional” arrangement with an allotment of vacation days that can be used over the course of a year, for example; “unlimited” vacation time; or even a company-wide planned shutdown for part of every year. Whatever vacation policy an organization chooses to implement, it must fit the company’s goals and culture and effectively communicate to employees the value of taking time off. ■

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THE VALUE OF A Devil's Advocate IN HR

BY MICHAEL HABERMAN

In 1587 the Catholic Church established a position called the promoter of the faith. The person who held that position had the job of thoroughly examining—with plenty of skepticism—the history and qualifications of every candidate for canonization and to look for reasons why he or she should not be a saint. Because the promoter of the faith was charged with arguing against the church, he was also called the *advocatus diaboli*—the devil's advocate.

Today the term *devil's advocate* is used generally to describe “a person who champions the less accepted cause for the sake of argument.”¹ Having someone fill that role when an important issue is being decided can help ensure that the pros and cons of every decision are thoroughly examined. Taking a close look at opposing viewpoints can also help reduce confirmation bias, the human tendency to look for evidence that confirms what we already believe. As the prominent psychologists Thomas Gilovich and Lee Ross point out, “The more you want a proposition to be true, the more inclined you are to look for evidence that supports it.”²

Fortunately, confirmation bias can be countered by the knowledge that it exists. In his training sessions on behavioral interviewing in the 1980s, Paul Green described how someone who happens to like (or dislike) something about a candidate will often look for evidence that confirms that initial impression. In order to be effective and counteract this tendency, Green advised, interviewers must look for “disconfirming” evidence—that is, they have to be their own devil's advocates. Asking themselves “Why do I like this person so much?” pushes them to have a more balanced view of candidates.

With its own devil's advocate, an HR department may be able to make consequential decisions with more confidence. Rather than look for evidence to support why a decision *should* be made, this person would focus on why a decision *should not* be made (such as why someone should not be hired, for example, or why someone else should not be fired). By forcing a careful consideration of all the relevant arguments, the devil's advocate can bring to HR a more diligent approach that helps avoid bad (and costly) hiring decisions. ■

Michael Haberman is cofounder and senior HR consultant of Omega HR Solutions Inc. His company offers HR solutions that include compliance reviews, wage and hour guidance, supervisory and managerial training, strategic guidance, executive advisement, and more. He can be reached at mhaberman@omegahr.com.

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How to Improve the Employee Experience

BY STACEY KERVIN

Employers are increasingly turning to employee experience as a way to differentiate themselves from their competitors. In this context, HR has the exciting (and challenging!) task of creating meaningful employee experiences for large numbers of people who each have unique needs and expectations. Though they require a lot of work, such efforts can yield tremendously beneficial results: a well-crafted employee experience can help with recruitment, drive retention, and foster employee engagement.

Companies spend a lot of time and money at the top developing a vision for the company culture that forms the core of the employee experience. Often overlooked in these processes, however, are the middle managers who can bring that vision to life. These individuals are critical to the success of any organization—after all, as the saying goes, “Employees join companies but leave managers.” Therefore organizations that want to move the needle on their employee experience must figure out how to get managers to embrace the company’s vision and actively make positive contributions to the employee experience.

To accomplish this, organizations need to make sure their managers understand what tools they have at their fingertips to better manage in the moment and to have meaningful conversations with their employees. As a department that is sitting on a great deal of valuable data about the employees and the organization, HR can assist managers in these efforts. Here are a few ways that managers can use that data to improve the employee experience.

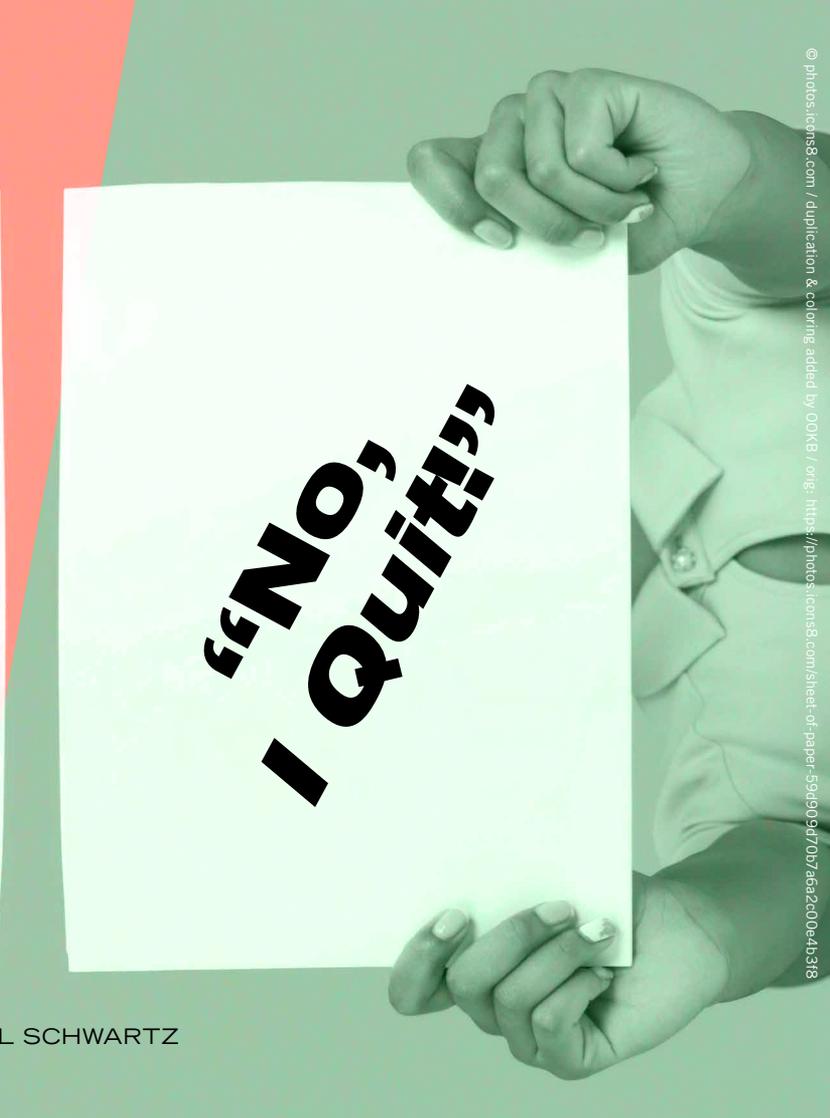
- **Time and attendance data.** Managers need coaching on how to have nonthreatening conversations with employees who are frequently late or absent. By using factual data points as conversation starters, the manager may discover that he or she needs to shift an employee’s hours to account for traffic patterns or childcare hours, for example.
- **Payroll and compensation data.** Knowing how to use this data is especially relevant to managers dealing with nonexempt workers. If there is a trend of employees working overtime and it’s throwing costs over budget, managers can use that information to have a conversation with employees about why they consistently need extra hours to get their work done. Is there a training issue? A bandwidth issue? An efficiency issue? Sometimes employees truly try to game the system—but sometimes there is a completely different (and much more benign) explanation for their behavior. By using payroll and compensation data as the framework for conversations with their employees, managers can gain a better understanding of what’s going on behind the scenes.
- **Performance data.** Employees and managers alike often perceive performance data analysis solely as a compliance exercise forced on everyone by HR. But managers who understand how this data drives accountability and engagement—and therefore productivity—with their teams will embrace it.

For manager–employee conversations to be as effective as possible, they must be genuine. Managers need to consider the employee’s perspective and should aim for a situation that leaves the employee thinking, “My manager cared enough to have a conversation with me to understand my perspective and come up with a mutually agreeable solution.” As companies think about the kinds of employment experience they want to foster, it’s important that they do more than just define it. Critical to the success of this process is helping middle managers use tools and data to develop connections with their employees, nurture top talent, and execute the organization’s vision on the front lines. ■

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"I Fire You"



"NO, I QUIT"

BY DANIEL SCHWARTZ

Imagine this scenario: an employee who was hired over a year ago isn't working out. She is kind, conscientious, and punctual but just doesn't have the skills needed for her particular position. After long deliberation, her manager has decided to schedule a meeting to fire her. But the employee stops the manager part way through the meeting to say that she, too, has been thinking that the job hasn't been a good fit and asks if she can resign instead. Can the manager still accept the employee's resignation?

The answer is "yes." An employer can allow an employee to resign even when the original plan was to fire him or her. No law requires employers to stick with a decision about which they are having second thoughts. An employer can withdraw a termination or (if the employee is in agreement) can change the termination to a resignation.

But here's a related question: can an employee still collect unemployment benefits if he or she "resigns"? The answer is "sometimes." In Connecticut, for example, the "general rule is that a person who voluntarily leaves suitable work without good cause attributable to the employer is not eligible for benefits," but an employer that indicates intent to fire an employee and "allows" the employee to resign is probably establishing the "good cause to be attributable to the employer" because it relates to the wages, hours, or working conditions of the job.¹ In Pennsylvania, on the other hand, someone who quits a job may be eligible for unemployment compensation only if he or she

can demonstrate "cause of a necessitous and compelling nature."²

Regulations vary from state to state, of course. And it almost goes without saying that there are exceptions to every rule. But in general employers who contest unemployment of an employee that they "allowed" to resign in lieu of termination should really be thinking long and hard about such a decision. ■

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DO WE NEED AN EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK?

BY STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCES INC.

QUESTION:

Do we really need an employee handbook? We operate in an at-will state, so why would my company lock itself in with restrictive policies? We have always been told that the less we have in writing, the better.

ANSWER:

An employee handbook is an effective tool for communicating policy to employees. For new employees, it serves as an introduction to the company's values and mission statement. For all employees, it serves as a quick reference for frequently asked questions such as "When am I eligible for vacation?" or "How do I call in sick?"

When constructed properly, an employee handbook also serves as:

- a legal statement of policy on behalf of the employer;
- a declaration of certain policies and positions (e.g., an "at-will" statement, a workplace harassment policy, rules about hours worked and overtime); and
- a defense should the company ever find itself in litigation or fighting an unemployment claim.

Even though you operate in an at-will state, it is still important that an employer is consistent in the application of its policies. Having those policies in writing and available to all employees helps to ensure they are adhered to and applied consistently.

At the same time, though, an employee handbook can be used against the employer. An employee handbook is significant for what it includes as well as for what it does *not* include. As stated above, it's important to be sure that the handbook is "constructed properly."

- Be careful that the wording of policies and statements cannot be construed as creating an implied contract of employment.

- Avoid statements such as "permanent employees" or promises of "hiring from within." Use "may" rather than "will."
- Provide enough policy direction to support your actions without being so inflexible as to paint yourself into a corner.
- A well-constructed handbook will actually include the statement "This handbook is not a contract" and a statement saying that the organization reserves the right to make changes.
- Do not include in the handbook things that you are *not* doing. (For example, don't say you will review employee performance every year if you haven't reviewed anyone in five years.) If you do, attorneys will be quick to point out that the company is following only some of the policies in the handbook—thus using your own policies to potentially win a case against you.

Finally, as with any HR resource, review your employee handbook every year to ensure that it is up to date and accurate. (For example, even if you expect to grow to over 50 employees within the next three years, don't include a policy that applies only to companies with over 50 employees until you *actually have* those 50 employees.) And of course, always have *your* attorney review your handbook to ensure that he or she will be comfortable defending you if an employee makes a legal challenge to a handbook-related issue. ■

Strategic Human Resources Inc. is a national full-service HR management firm based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Its president and founder, Robin Throckmorton, can be reached at Robin@strategichrinc.com.

TODAY'S DIGITAL NATIVES WILL SHAPE TOMORROW'S COMMUNICATION

BY MIKE MCKERNS

I RECENTLY DROVE my 12-year-old daughter and two of her friends to a Sixers game about an hour away from where we live. As we made our way toward Philadelphia, we all chatted about the girls' sports activities, favorite classes, and spring break fun. About 20 minutes into the drive, however, the conversation dwindled and (with the exception of some Bruno Mars and Drake playing on the radio) silence settled over the car. It didn't take me long to notice that all three girls were focused on their phones.

The occasional giggle assured me that whatever had their attention must be entertaining. After a few minutes I realized that the girls were glancing at each other as they giggled, and then it hit me: they were communicating with each other on their phones *while they were sitting next to each other*. Once I pointed out the absurdity of the situation, we all had a good laugh, and they agreed to put away their phones and just *talk* to each other.

This experience reminded me of the article I wrote for the previous issue of *HR Insights*. In "A Radical Proposition: Phone-Free Conference Rooms" I proposed the idea of asking employees to ditch their cell phones before walking into corporate meetings. Not having their phones to distract them, I reasoned, would facilitate more (and better) personal communication.

As I sat in the car with my daughter and her friends, though, I was struck by the realization that they are digital natives. No matter how much we want our youth to focus on real, in-person, face-to-face communication, the fact remains that they have been holding iPads since the first time their parents took them out to dinner and wanted a break from entertaining them so they could actually finish their own meals. And whether we like it or not, the generation that's grown up being "connected" since birth will be tomorrow's workforce—and we'd all be much better off if the business world adapted to their needs and preferences and didn't try to force them to follow today's (or even yesterday's) expectations about how work "should" be done.

Adapting to this change won't necessarily be easy. But it *is* possible. Sometimes it's hard to let go of the old (just think of how many people still include fax numbers in their e-mail signatures!), but humans have been developing new communication styles for millennia. So there's no reason to think we can't continue to adapt! ■

Mike McKerns is the editor in chief of *HR Insights* and cofounder of Mamu Media LLC. He can be reached at editor@mamumediallc.com.

A ONE-DISH MEAL TO WELCOME SPRING

Spring has sprung! It's time to put away the casseroles, stews, and other hearty comfort foods of winter and make room for lighter fare that highlights the bounty of spring gardens. A splash of green and a bit of tangy cheese combine with whimsical butterfly-shaped pasta to create a fun-to-eat meal that comes together in a flash and (thanks to the one-pot cooking technique) cleans up even faster!

Nutrition Facts

Amount per Serving

Calories: 378cal

Fat: 10g

Dietary fiber: 8.8g

Sugars: 7.9g

Protein: 21g

FARFALLE WITH SPRING VEGETABLES AND GOAT CHEESE

YIELD: 4 servings

TIME: 25 minutes

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- 1 lb dried farfalle pasta
- 1 lb asparagus,
trimmed and cut into 2" pieces
- 2 c frozen peas
- 6 oz soft goat cheese
- salt

DIRECTIONS

1. Bring 6 quarts of water to a boil in a large stockpot, salt the water to taste, and add the farfalle.
2. Cook the pasta for the recommended cooking time minus 8 minutes (for very thick asparagus), 4 minutes (for medium-thickness asparagus), or 1 minute (for very thin asparagus), then add the asparagus to the pot.
3. Add the frozen peas to the pot during the last minute of cooking.
4. Drain the pasta and vegetables, reserving 1 cup of the cooking water.
5. Return the pasta, vegetables, and goat cheese to the now-empty pot and stir in the reserved cooking water in ¼-cup increments until the cheese is thoroughly melted and well distributed.

NOTE: Farfalle is ideal and can be found in most grocery stores these days. But if you have trouble tracking it down, penne also works well here! ■





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The background is a solid blue color with several large, overlapping, curved shapes in a lighter shade of blue. These shapes create a sense of movement and depth, resembling stylized waves or abstract architectural elements. The overall composition is clean and modern.

STRENGTHEN YOUR WORKFORCE