

Welcome to the Digital People Experience

Andi Britt, Vice President, Talent & Engagement Leader for Europe at IBM, discusses how the HR function can be at the forefront of the organisational changes brought about by artificial intelligence. **Robert Leeming** reports

Just how widespread is the AI revolution going to be?

AI is going to transform not just the world of business, but our everyday lives as consumers, as well as all sectors of our society. Whatever your taste for predictions, it is difficult to argue against the statement that the impact and the pervasiveness of machine learning will be similar, if not more widespread, than that of the mobile phone.

Why should HR departments sit up and start to take notice of AI?

The ability of AI to understand and absorb data in any format at lightning speed and to then recommend a course of action based upon an analysis of that data, makes the technology an invaluable tool for HR departments. On top of this, not only are HRDs able to interact with AI via a conversational interface,

but the technology can also learn and adapt and refine the quality of its recommendations.

It will also improve the employee experience. For example, when a candidate is applying for a new role, a machine learning tool can automatically analyse that person's CV and then match it to the positions available in the company. It will then suggest a role based upon what matches the individual's skills. AI can also be used to improve the on-boarding experience or to help a new starter to learn different skills.

Will onboarding still require an element of face-to-face human interaction, no matter how big the role of AI becomes?

Yes. Companies will have to find their own balance. Basic questions like: directions to the canteen or how to

access a document; those are the questions that a virtual assistant can answer. But a question, say around: 'What is the current company policy on maternity leave?' or, 'What type of mentor do I need?' Those are the type of questions, at this stage, that are best answered by human interaction. It will be up to the company to decide which questions are either addressed by a machine or human interaction.

What role can AI play in improving retention levels at a company?

Companies are facing a real battle for top talent today. Giving potential employees the promise of a modern, consumer grade experience when it comes to technology at work will help businesses to compete.

Employee/employer interactions need to be simple and seamless and this is key to building an engaged and productive >



workforce, who want to stick around for the long term. Put simply: why can't learning at work be as simple as binge watching Netflix at home? Why can't asking for coaching be as simple as ordering a ride home on Uber?

If you want to attract and retain talented people who can reinvent themselves within the organisation and adapt their skills as technology advances, then you need workplace technology that is simple, intuitive and fun.

Continuing your point on reinvention, how will the HRD's role change as AI technology becomes a reality?

I think that the HRD is now in the 'digital people experience' business, whether they like it or not. They must design internal digital HR employee experiences that feel as natural, efficient and intuitive as the systems that a company designs for its customers. HRDs must put people experience at the heart of what they do, instead of simply redesigning processes.

Is that a leap that HRDs are currently making, or is this still a work in progress?

I would say that most HRDs are currently educating themselves to get a better understanding of what AI can do; where it can be applied and what the business case is for doing so.

I think we are still in the early days of the adoption of AI in the mainstream. This early evolutionary phase tends to take place during the introduction of any new technologies. For example, it took business some time to figure out the best uses for the mobile phone.

I do think that the evolution of AI will move at a much quicker pace than it did for mobile though, which is why HRDs need to start planning for this now.

What are some of the myths and misconceptions that currently surround AI technology?

There have been a lot of concerns about AI's ability to take people's jobs. What it will in fact do is remove the routine and repetitive element of people's jobs. AI is best used when it is providing support to an employee because it gives them the information they need to make better decisions.

Cognitive systems will not realistically attain consciousness or independent agency. Rather, they will increasingly be embedded in the processes, systems, products and services by which business and society function—all of which will and should remain within human control.

How should an HRD set about planning for this next stage of the digital revolution?

As with all new innovations, there are always going to be varying levels of expectation around the impact that a new piece of technology will have. We have already seen our lives completely transformed by the internet and mobile technology, so it is natural for us to start thinking on a grand scale.

At the same time, we have Science-Fiction as a genre giving us a false perception of what the future could look like. There is long history of film depicting smart technology going

wrong and, because of this, there is an underlying and perhaps healthy fear of AI. Hype and fear and misconceptions are a natural part of the arrival of any new technology.

What I would say to HRDs is that there are tried and tested AI applications already out there, such as Cognitive Candidate Assistants that help candidates match their skills to roles in a company, or Cognitive Onboarding Assistants that answer employee's month one questions.

They need to test how these solutions would affect the employee base and how easy it is to put them in place. HRDs need to move fast and experiment rapidly, because AI technology is moving quickly and won't slow down any time soon. ■



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Andi leads IBM's European Talent & Engagement Practice, providing human capital management, HR and recruitment outsourcing and organisational change management advisory services to clients.

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