HR Technology:
Not Just for HR Administrators Anymore

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I f you asked your HR technology provider who its end user was 5 to 10 years ago, it would have likely said, "Well, HR staff of course."

Ask today and hopefully its response will be "everyone in the organization."

Traditionally, HR technology has been focused on addressing the functional needs of HR leaders, payroll, benefits, compensation and talent professionals. These products helped automate processes and streamline transactions, but have done little to engage employees and may negatively impact adoption among the broader workforce.

In the last decade or so, primarily due to the rise of mobile technologies, people's expectations of technology have changed dramatically, including in the workplace. They want experiences that are simple, effective, and enjoyable like consumer technologies. For today's employee, as well as today's HR and payroll teams, the quality of the product is as much about usability as it is about functionality.

Providing a great user experience (UX) for employees has become a smart business initiative and the new imperative for HR technology providers – and one that delivers optimal results:

When their technology is more social, mobile, and accessible, users become more engaged, productive and fulfilled, which results in a positive impact on the bottom line.

In fact, according to a Hewitt Research study, in companies where 60 to 70 percent of employees were engaged, average total shareholders' return (TSR) stood at 24.2 percent and in companies with only 49 to 60 percent of their employees engaged, TSR fell to 9.1 percent. Companies with engagement below 25 percent actually suffered negative TSR.[1]

A good user experience is much more than just a clean user interface (UI). Far from simply "looking good," a great user experience comes from a mix of making a person's work meaningful, focusing on what is most important to employees based on their role, as well as usability engineering factors that include form, function and aesthetics. This requires a paradigm shift in the approach by focusing on the person first and then building out solutions from the person's perspective versus focusing solely on the processes. Designers of this new breed of HR technology consider the habits, experiences, and expectations of people in real-world scenarios and then tailor the products to simplify their personal and work lives. The ultimate goal is to deliver experiences that are engaging and meaningful, or so transparent and natural that end-users don't even notice the technology.

Typically, you expect to see user experience at its best in consumer-level products, software and websites. Social media sites, mobile apps, and digital music services are additional examples of areas where user experience is increasingly emphasized today. With the dramatic evolution in the workforce in recent years, HR technology has demanded this kind of person-centered design.

Today's employees expect the systems they use at work to mirror their personal experiences with technology. In other words, they expect their HR solution to "just work," and software that gets in the users' way when they're trying to complete a range of tasks is considered obsolete.

To better support your employees and your overall business, here are five critical UX features to consider when searching for a human capital management (HCM) solution that is truly designed for your entire workforce:

• Ensuring context;

• Task simplicity;

• Real, responsive design;

• Thoughtfully consistent experiences; and,

• Leveraging game mechanics.

Ensuring Context

How many times have you stumbled around in an application, clicking blindly and thought "there must be a simpler way to accomplish this?" If this sounds familiar, you've experienced what UX professionals call a "loss of context." People experience a loss of context when they are forced to stop and wonder how to complete a task. Human Resources solution providers should focus on what is most important to the user, from his or her perspective, and remove stumbling blocks.

Our brains have the ability to process a remarkable amount of information, but when taken out of context, we can struggle to find a path through even the most basic applications. If a business tool is unpredictable, the loss of context can lead to negative consequences for a business, including lowered employee productivity and performance. While the solution to loss of context is frequently framed as aiming for "fewer clicks" – ideally, an engaging HR solution UX aims for no clicks – the information users need is right there in front of them, with no need to dig for it.

A role-based dashboard screen is a perfect example of a well-designed user experience with rich context. The information you use most frequently is brought to the forefront for instant access. Rich dashboards empower users to efficiently complete many tasks with no clicks, and supporting information is immediately available when needed.

Task Simplicity

People love simplicity. It's evident everywhere, from the kinds of coffee makers we buy, to the mobile applications we use. Complex products or interfaces that confuse, frustrate, and burden people often suffer from poor market penetration and high rates of user abandonment.

In an effort to obtain user feedback and make improvements, research has been conducted to analyze the real-world usage of applications. Usability testing (in which users are observed completing real-world tasks) combined with eye-tracking research has shown that offering only the most important, frequently accessed functions at once is valued over having several options available.

An HR solution that provides an at-a-glance display, or dashboard, of your employee's most frequent and critical activities is the one you want to look for. The best offerings employ a grid or card-based layout, offering common tasks in a visual format that's easy to distinguish and select. These layouts also employ simple, clear iconography in place of standard text. With simple interfaces, you can save time and reduce frustration for your employees, while increasing satisfaction and productivity.

Real, Responsive Design

It likely comes as no surprise that the largest generation in history – the Millennials, also known as Gen Y – are fond of their smartphones. In fact, 83 percent of Millennials own a smartphone, and more than 50 percent use it for activities other than talking and texting. This trend translates directly from home life to the workplace. Today's employees expect to be able to perform work-related functions just as easily on their phones as they would when sitting at a computer.

Best-in-class HR solutions will adopt a person-centered user experience, whether the technology is designed for a laptop computer or a mobile device. The expectation is that when you use any mobile device (phone, tablet, etc.) to access your HR solution, the experience is compelling, responds appropriately, and uses gesture-based interactions like touch. This is called "responsive design."

Well-crafted responsive experiences take into account the limitations and unique capabilities of each device, as well as the context of how these devices are used in the real world. A person using a smartphone walking down the street has been described as interacting with his or her device with "one thumb/one eyeball." He or she has one eye on the destination, one eye on the phone, and

often just one thumb poised over the phone to take action. In this context, HR solutions must remove or minimize unimportant information and empower the user to complete his or her task with the least overhead possible. If a solution is loading large, time-consuming images on your phone, or displaying small, difficult-to-target controls, then the design is missing the mark.

Thoughtfully Consistent Experiences

Consistency within a product's user experience has long been linked to usability. But, when considering the right HR solution for your workforce, there is more to judging consistency than whether all the screens look the same.

The standardization of user experiences can aid users in areas such as system navigation. Once the user becomes accustomed to the approach, navigation should become second nature from that point on. A best-in-class approach to consistency is one that standardizes patterns of the user experience that are designed specifically for HCM business cases, validated with testing. This approach results in design solutions built for real business cases and explores whether these can be used across the entire product. Clearly, putting the person at the center of the experience and building outward from their perspective gives the solution a familiarity and relevance that supports productivity and engagement.

Leveraging Game Mechanics

Gamification is an aspect of design that should not be ignored. According to Gartner, "By 2015, 40 percent of Global 1000 organizations will use gamification as the primary mechanism to transform business operations." And, as mentioned earlier, the workforce is becoming more tech-savvy, and expects interactions in the workplace to mirror what they see in their personal life, social media, and even their games.

Gartner also predicted that "By 2014, 80 percent of current gamified applications will fail to meet business objectives, primarily due to poor design."

Clearly, gamification is not easy. And, all too often developers try to apply gamification to business applications as a way to address the problem they are really trying to solve: user engagement.

After all, engaged employees are more productive. Companies with engaged workforces have better margins, better shareholder returns, and better performance-to-cost ratios. Here are some well-tested methods that can promote engagement and increase user adoption through gamification:

- *Providing Guidance* – Visual cues or even virtual tour guides can prevent people from giving up should they become confused. In this context, users that solve a problem, even with assistance, feel empowered, leading to longevity and sustained attention.

- *Social Mechanics* – These are community-building features such as chat, sending thank you notes, and other messaging systems. Additionally, voting can create a clear signal that something is important and the whole community of users can see it.

- *Motivating Repeated Interaction* – Creating a level of engagement keeps users "in the game" longer and keeps them coming back. Game mechanics that drive this kind of repeat engagement are advanced user paths, unlocking content as a reward, time pressure, scarcity and achievement badges.

Gamification is not a goal or end-state. It is a method that should be incorporated at the design foundation and in the service of your true vision: an engaged workforce. These concepts work very well to encourage behavior with an existing audience, making it ideal for certain areas like onboarding and recruiting, performance management, and employee recognition and referral programs.

Conclusion

It's time to put the person first when designing HR technology before it's too late. Invest in a solution now that your employees will be delighted to use, or pay the price in employee engagement and lost productivity later. A poor user experience isn't a mere inconvenience or frustration – it has a tangible negative impact on your talent and, eventually, your bottom line.

If you seek out a solution with the features identified above for your organization, you'll reap a multitude of benefits, from shortened time to complete tasks, fewer support calls for standard processes, simplified access to the information your people need most, and a happier and truly engaged workforce.

Endnotes

1 Source: Employee engagement at double-digit growth companies, Hewitt Research Brief, http://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2012/09/04/why-employee-engagement/2/.

About the Author

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