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As HR transforms its service to employees, social media can improve HR efficiency, quality, and value. An HR organization that uses blogs, wikis, and other collaborative technologies can help to attract and retain talent, improve the efficiency of HR service delivery, empower managers to manage teams effectively, and facilitate leadership that drives innovation and organizational agility. However, delivering on social media's promised value involves many challenges. First among these is HR's awareness of the opportunity to lead a cultural revolution in the organization. Technology gives us tools to send information back and forth — but social media is a discipline that leaders can use to connect an organization through collaboration, innovation, and learning.

Social media and the HR delivery model

Social media has the power to revolutionize HR service delivery. Many traditional HR portals let employees view payslips and update personal information. Managers can review employee profiles, pay history, and open recruiting requisitions. More mature first-generation portals let

employees enroll in benefits programs, review open positions, and manage training requirements. Managers can conduct yearly performance reviews and approve year-end compensation. Although some managers and employees are using first-generation portals to conduct HR self-service, adoption remains a challenge. Forrester predicts that mobile technology will "...reinvent the notion of employee self-service."¹ However, increasing the effectiveness of employer-to-employee service will take time due to investment costs and an uncertain ROI.

There is an opportunity to solve this dilemma. Social media goes beyond one-way communication — beyond the static information a traditional HR portal uses to supercharge an HR service delivery model. The flexibility to personalize information, the ease of ordering online, and the ability to connect with friends and family should be considered integral parts of an HR service delivery strategy as associates from executive leadership through entry level have come to expect — and demand — this type of interaction.

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Social media, wikis, widgets, blogs, tagging, rich media, and mashups are commonly associated with personal use, but can be applied to the workplace. They all encourage collaboration and increase productivity, process, and innovation by unleashing creativity across the organization. These tools can help HR deliver consistent, timely, and personalized service, driven by online chat and wiki-based FAQs that can support queries across the globe. Social media helps establish an employee brand and culture that attracts Gen Y and multigenerational talent -- an environment where user experience is based on commercial user experience and media rich personalization. Generation Y employees (those born between 1982 and 2000) use these tools every day to communicate, socialize, and work. As evidenced by the explosion of social media, the younger workforce tends to be more accustomed to collaborative social technologies. They view them as a workplace necessity, not a luxury. Because these new workforce members bring tech-savvy skills, global and flexible orientations, and the ability to think in innovative ways, attracting and retaining them will create significant competitive advantage in the coming years.

Social media encourages employees to create communities of practice and drive innovation. Delivered through an HR portal, social media can deliver company communications and HR policies-- ideally harmonized across divisions-- and provide consistency across the organization. Online FAQs support the HR service center by reducing inquiries and staffing needs, which contributes to the HR ROI. In short, social media has the power to bring together the collective talents, knowledge, and experiences of employees, around the world, fueling innovation and organizational transformation.

Delivering HR value

Talent, HR, managers, and leadership can use social media to drive innovation and transformation throughout the organization. A hyper HR portal with personalized interfaces, company networking, and collaborative spaces is a driver that can attract and retain multigenerational talent. Tools such as online FAQs, HR helpdesk chats, and advanced manager self-service improve and increase the value of HR and its delivery of innovative services and knowledge. The result is likely more time for HR to function as a true business driver that helps managers get the most from their teams. A hyper HR portal encourages managers to rely upon accurate information to enhance decision making and facilitate global team development. Finally, as leaders embrace the evolution of the HR portal, they can transform their organizations into participatory and self-sustaining cultures.

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To realize the full potential of social media to deliver a hyper HR experience, the organization must first create a rich user experience, available on mobile devices, for sustained use. The enterprise portal is shedding its divisional focus — Procurement, Business Units, HR, Corporate Communications etc — and becoming the “one stop shop” for all employee needs. The rich user experiences of interactive desktop applications, mashups, and enterprise widgets create an innovative, intuitive, and personalized employee and manager dashboard, pushing key information to foster quicker analysis and decision making. RSS, blogs, and podcasts deliver direct management communications. Personal branding through blogs helps leadership engage large, yet focused groups, around areas of interest and receive real-time feedback.

A rich user experiences delivered “whenever and wherever” can bring employees deeper into organizational discussions and processes by providing answers to business critical questions and encouraging active participation in communities of practice. The aggregate solution of online content sources within and outside the enterprise creates new, richer HR services adapted to users’ situational needs.

An HR organization must be able to improve and expand HR value, and social media tools can significantly improve critical aspects of the employee lifecycle. Podcasts, RSS, and live chat can communicate benefits information with employee-defined recommendations. Podcasts and RSS feeds can communicate retirement planning advice and benefit updates. Flash benefits alerts provide interactive, guided presentations on annual benefits enrolment.

Complex, global companies across industries have realized significant value through deploying social media strategies and tools. For example:

- A large financial services company uses social media tools to keep employees who are on leave actively engaged with the company. Additionally, through the same access to Web-based employee-submitted information, HR can nonintrusively understand and address employee concerns and issues.
- A leading technology products and services company actively addresses hot-button employee issues by monitoring social bookmarks and “tag clouds” on the company’s social sites. Live chat with HR services addresses employee inquiries with immediate service. An HR/help desk supervisor can update FAQ content in real time to help reduce transactions and inquires via email, phone, and other off-line channels.
- Topics posted on one global energy conglomerate’s global community knowledge forums usually receive two to four responses within 24 hours of the initial posting. Streamlined processes contribute to improving satisfaction, reducing overhead costs, and improving HR’s ability to work with leadership to create value.

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Going beyond the hype — implementation challenges

Integrating social media into HR service delivery has risks and challenges. It takes significant change management actions to realize the potential these tools offer. Companies that deploy these tools effectively achieve results by making them available throughout their organizations. They successfully manage the potential to lose control of top-down messaging, as well as the flow of information. However, in most of the cases where social media tools are deployed, organizations fail to achieve the primary goals because they lack two things: a business strategy approach to the deployment of these tools, and a focus on the risks.

Organizations need clear policies and processes to assess and manage risk and legal concerns, such as industry Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and safe harbor. Executives often express concern about giving employees the ability to create and manage content, and many information technology departments block employee access to popular social tools. Some employees may lack the basic skills or computer access, or may even feel uncomfortable engaging in online dialogues with their superiors, senior management, or unfamiliar faces within their company. Access may even provide dissatisfied employees and customers a platform to air their grievances.

To manage this expanded measure of freedom, companies should educate management about the social media paradigm shift and the business value it produces. It pays to promote a culture of openness and free dialogue - the criticality of collaborating with others in the organization will solve such issues. Use the portal to your advantage, take feedback as an opportunity to directly address and diffuse concerns, and above all, be honest and transparent. Do not be afraid to admit mistakes or wrongdoings or attempt to deceive your audience.

A few specific actions can help an organization in its efforts to implement social media and minimize the risks it brings:

- Since the long-term costs to support and scale social media are difficult to predict, start with small, business-driven projects that generate quick wins to achieve early business results.
- Promote social media as a community-driven initiative, not a top-down directive, with specific business benefits.
- Create compelling site features that focus on usability and community-building (e.g., “my colleagues’ updates”) and accelerate the network effect. Complement the networks with blogs, wikis, and content from key influencers.
- Engage a cross-representation of “champions” from business units, HR, IT, legal, marketing, and public affairs to garner interest and organizational enthusiasm.
- Establish a social media center of excellence to align offerings to specific business needs.
- Provide users a first line of support for usage questions, technical support, reporting violations, and/or feature requests.
- Continue to recruit advocates in the business to keep content fresh and sustain ongoing usage of the tools.
- Encourage top-level management to model desired behaviors as active, passionate contributors and not spectators.

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A worthwhile trip

With an insightful implementation approach, organizations can overcome the challenges and realize the potential of social media to attract talent, improve the delivery of HR services and knowledge, help managers to manage teams effectively, and transform organizations into participatory and self-sustaining cultures.

When HR professionals move forward with insight into how human capital adds value to an organization, they can be forefront of this revolution. However, the organizational and technical hurdles come first. Once those are cleared, HR leaders can realize their essential role — connecting organizations so they can collaborate, innovate, and learn.

Endnotes

¹ Trends 2011: HRM Processes And Applications Move Ahead Despite Mixed Employment Outlook by Paul D. Hamerman, with Connie Moore, Claire Schooley, and Andrew Magarie. Forrester Research, Inc. January 14, 2011

