Introduction

The new, next-generation workforce has arrived. And it’s changing the way we work and collaborate—with both humans and bots alike.

Some HR organizations may view innovations in automation and cognitive technologies as daunting, but in reality, they’re intended to make our working lives easier. The objective is simple: to enable technology to carry out much of an employee’s day-to-day administrative tasks, allowing them to focus on more strategic, value-added work.

In Deloitte’s “HR bots: the new super power for the workforce,” we described how robotic process automation (RPA), which automates manual, rules-based, and repetitive activities, is a good first step for HR organizations. Yet a growing number of HR organizations have expressed enthusiasm about cognitive technologies, including chatbots—which can use human language for interactions—and more intelligent bots, or virtual assistants—which can also perform certain tasks on behalf of people.

Our latest Bersin research on high-impact HR organizations found that 25% are using chatbots, while 20% are using virtual assistants. Still another 20% said they plan to implement virtual assistants within the next two years. Those numbers reflect significant potential for growth in this sector, and the results indicate that there is much more to come.

Meet your highly capable—albeit chatty—new workmate: A chatbot

“Hello. Welcome to ABC Organization!”

I need help with my new-hire to-do list.

“I can help you complete your onboarding checklist. Which task would you like to complete now?”

What’s left on my checklist?

It looks like you still have a few items remaining on your onboarding checklist. Let’s tackle one at a time. Which task would you like to complete right now?

Verify personal information Background check interview Direct deposit

Benefit enrollment Laptop order Complete later

Chat with our Virtual Assistant by typing in the text box.

Type your message here...
Introducing HR’s new, not so human, resource
| Who is this new workmate?

**Who is this new workmate?**

Chatbots vary by level of sophistication, with two primary types in the market today: simple chatbots and intelligent chatbots. Simple bots provide quick answers to common questions by “looking” for key words or phrases and providing static responses and related resources. For example, a bank customer may ask a scripted bot for small business loan options. The bot would then generate a list of those options with links to relevant content. An intelligent bot, on the other hand, has access to more data and can provide dynamic responses and perform any rules-based or standard activities, such as opening a request ticket.

Chatbots are ever-evolving, and the latest to emerge is a virtual assistant. These “assistants” have access to knowledge and can function as a self-service, first-call resolution. They utilize machine learning, which is similar to humans’ ability to learn, and more advanced natural language processing tools, which help them understand as humans could. They are also trained on an organization’s business processes—often complex ones—so that they can help humans take action. Essentially, the more evolved the bot, the more sophisticated the tasks that can be automated.

As consumers, we’ve grown increasingly familiar with—even attached to—voice-enabled technologies like the ones many of us have in our homes. They answer questions for us about things like the weather or how to open a pomegranate, and perform tasks like playing a song we request or reminding us to go to the dry cleaners. And now the trend is moving toward additional integration and expansion of the functionality. For example, home temperature can be controlled through voice command by joining a WiFi-connected thermostat with a smart speaker/virtual assistant—virtually eliminating the need for thermostat consoles.

What if we applied that thinking to the workplace? That’s the emerging trend: Employees will likely expect the same technologies in the workplace that they enjoy in their personal lives.

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Why “hire” chatbots?

Organizations across sectors are increasingly looking to this type of technology to automate tasks and offer an improved customer experience. Some retail companies are increasingly relying on chatbots to deflect customers’ frequently asked questions, thereby reducing the amount of manual support required.

For HR organizations, the potential benefits are plenty. Chatbots can improve efficiency and productivity—for both customers and employees. Intelligent chatbots can quickly address issues for an organization’s stakeholders; for customers, this can foster satisfaction and loyalty. And for employees, especially those who had previously spent time doing tasks that chatbots now can perform, it frees them to do other, often more strategic and innovative, tasks. This, in turn, can improve morale and drive what Deloitte calls the Simply Irresistible Organization™, a model that focuses on five key strategies to improve employee engagement: meaningful work, supportive management, a positive work environment, growth opportunities, and trust in leadership.

When coupled with an intuitive self-service gateway for employees, like Deloitte’s ConnectMe™—a digital workplace product that can help the workforce access what they need, when and where they need it—chatbots and virtual assistants can have a meaningful, positive impact on the employee experience. Not only would your workforce have access to all of their HR resources through ConnectMe’s personalized dashboard, they could also rely on an intelligent bot to help them complete requests and transactions.

In addition, utilizing chatbots successfully could lead to competitive advantage. While they’re becoming more common for consumers, they’re still emerging for enterprises. As such, they can help an organization establish itself as innovative—with customers and employees alike. Today’s employees are tech-savvy, demanding, and often willing to leave employers if their needs are not being met. By adopting chatbot technology early on, HR organizations can create a workplace where people want to work, thereby potentially attracting and better retaining talent.

The rise in interest in chatbots is also coinciding with a few trends in the marketplace:

Employees as consumers:
Today’s employees are digital consumers that are used to having technology and information at their fingertips. As a result, employees’ expectations are high: The convenience employees experience at home should also be present at work. If employees are not satisfied, this may increase the talent challenges for HR.

App fatigue:
Many consumers are overwhelmed and tired of the sheer volume of mobile apps available today. And for organizations, there may be a resistance to developing apps, which can be expensive and labor-intensive to create. They can also create a fragmented landscape that employees may have difficulty navigating when performing simple tasks. Virtual assistants can streamline and consolidate these disparate sources of information and data, reducing or eliminating the need for multiple apps. They also have the potential to seamlessly integrate timekeeping, expenses, and transactional HR systems that may present a fragmented experience today.

Streamlined communications:
Instant messaging tools and social platforms have become common modes of communication in the workplace. Virtual assistants allow individuals to access information—including details on HR resources and initiatives—the same way they commonly interact with each other, via instant communication.

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“Onboarding” chatbots in HR

Leveraging chatbot technology can help solidify HR’s position as leaders in the organization, something that historically has not been possible due to the task-based nature of traditional HR work. Chatbots can reduce the time spent answering questions and can streamline the interview process by recommending candidates or scheduling interviews. Another potential use of an intelligent virtual assistant is recommending a candidate for a position based on screening results compared with previous hires.

For an employee, chatbot technologies can consolidate and simplify a variety of HR tasks, such as open enrollment, PTO management, scheduling, time entry, and feedback processes. For recruits and new hires, chatbots can address organizational questions, automate interview and background-check processes, and make onboarding easy to understand and access. These automated, immediate workflows do not require human intervention, allowing HR representatives to refocus their efforts on strategic and relationship-building initiatives like coaching, leadership development, and HR transformation projects.

Several HR organizations are beginning to see the potential of this new way of working. Overstock.com deployed a chatbot to interact with the company’s approximately 450 call center employees, who can use it to check schedules, pick shifts, arrange for time off, and inform managers about unplanned leave or sick days. And the US Army has implemented an externally facing chatbot to save costs on recruiting.

It’s important to note that before leveraging chatbot technology for HR, organizations need to have a well-structured knowledge base in place. That is, organizational and employee data must be aggregated, consolidated, and easily accessible for the bot to have content from which to pull. And for those organizations utilizing virtual assistants, this requires scripting and programming, in addition to ensuring access to relevant enterprise applications. As such, the process of adopting cognitive technologies requires thoughtful preparation.

Ultimately, chatbot technologies can be good for the bottom line. They can help reduce labor and training costs and create capacity for organizations to refocus and reskill valuable resources to areas of the business that are more impactful to growth. Bots can also be deployed to add real, tangible value to the enterprise—enhancing employee service through 24/7 support, screening and communicating with new talent, and scaling HR services, for example.

HR has the opportunity to lead this new collaborative future workplace.

Today’s rapidly changing workplace is bringing both challenges and opportunities. HR’s role is essential in helping to define the organization of the future, from the work that people will do, to the shape of the workforce. Given this, HR can play a key role in redefining HR delivery through chatbots and other cognitive technologies.

So HR, let’s help everyone get to know—and welcome with open arms—our newest workmates.

Chatbots can be an important step toward creating a digital HR platform. To learn more about creating a digital HR experience, visit www.deloitte.com/ConnectMe.

CASE STUDY

Deloitte helps a global bank bring on a new workmate — an HR chatbot

The challenge

A multinational bank relied on a large number of service desk agents to support HR management processes—both onshore and offshore—who required significant training. In addition, the bank’s existing automation tools were not effective, so it wanted to explore cognitive technologies.

The solution

Deloitte helped the client onboard an HR chatbot. The team customized the tool to meet the bank’s needs, and it became the first point of contact to handle common queries to the HR help desk. It was also configured to observe and learn how human agents handled escalations. Only if the bot was not able to answer a query would it be escalated to a human advisor.

The results

- Potential for up to 50 percent reduction in time to answer queries
- Expected savings realization from increased accuracy, process standardization, and reduced exceptions
- Minimized the complexity of managing an onsite-offshore operating model
- Maintained 24/7 coverage
Endnotes

4. Ibid.

Contributors

Rajesh Attra
Managing Director
Deloitte Consulting LLP
rattra@deloitte.com

Alex Halper
Manager
Deloitte Consulting LLP
ahalper@deloitte.com

Michael Gretczko
Principal
General Manager of ConnectMe
Deloitte Consulting LLP
Human Capital
mgretczko@deloitte.com

Greg Vert
Senior Manager
Deloitte Consulting LLP
gvert@deloitte.com

ConnectMe™

www.deloitte.com/connectme

Deloitte.

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