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Talent and analytics: new approaches, higher ROI

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More and more, the leaders of business functions are turning for competitive insights to the massive data they can now capture. The goal is no longer mere efficiency, as welcome as that is. Instead, executives and teams in charge of marketing, finance, information technology, supply chain management and customer relationship management are recognizing how data-driven insights can be used to generate impressive business results (Davenport and Harris, 2007).

In that roster, human resources departments have lagged. Sure, they collect a good deal of data – on employee turnover, cost-per-hire and even the return on investment of their programs. But while HR departments can become more efficient by tracking such numbers, they have a much harder time relating that data to better business performance.

As two commentators explain the problem, “marketing, finance, and most other functions have well-developed methodologies for generating the information managers need to make strategic decisions. HR, however, often focuses principally on its own performance . . . It’s time for HR to shift its focus from what it does to the quality of the talent decisions it supports” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005). Indeed, academics and consultants in the human resources field have been wrestling with this problem and trying to reorient HR departments toward measurements that are more meaningful to the business (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007; Huselid *et al.*, 2005; Becker *et al.*, 2001; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Fitz-Enz, 2000).

The urgent need for HR to absorb this message, and to begin to apply it, is clear. HR executives must do more than use data to report on past performance, generate compliance reports and process administrative tasks. They need to start using data to ask (and answer) some hard questions that are at the heart of how employees contribute to business performance.

Help is at hand, fortunately, in the form of a new generation of human capital analytics. A variety of analytical approaches can help HR executives to link investments in human capital to a company’s returns on financial capital. More important, they can help HR leaders actively shape their organization’s future – managing talent and directing programs toward the long-term needs of the business.

Better data, please

As HR’s primary task has evolved from that of “personnel control” to “people developer” and now to “talent multiplier,” it has become increasingly important for HR to show that its investments improve the bottom line (Cheese *et al.*, 2007).

The strategic value of many commonly tracked HR metrics is limited, however. HR administration costs, for example, typically come to no more than three percent of a business’s selling, general and administrative costs, so no amount of savings wrung from HR

administration will have a significant impact on business performance (Cheese *et al.*, 2007). Savings from making HR processes more efficient will also be relatively small. And efficiency measures fail to reflect the effectiveness or strategic impact of HR activities. For example, an efficient first-quartile cost-benchmarked recruitment process that does not bring in the right people yields no value to the company.

Too often, organizations focus on inputs (such as hours of training completed) rather than outputs and results (such as improvements in workforce performance as a result of training). For example, nearly 40 percent of companies surveyed in Accenture's 2006 High-Performance Workforce study said they have no formal measures of HR impact on workforce performance, while another 39 percent have such measures, but only for some HR initiatives (Balaguer *et al.*, 2006).

Moreover, it is common for companies to link HR initiatives to customer satisfaction, employee attraction and retention, and employee productivity, yet these metrics do not necessarily translate into business results. Few companies use the most relevant metrics to measure the business impact of HR and training efforts. Only 15 percent of respondents said they use margin/profitability and just 14 percent said they use revenue/sales pipeline as their most important measure of HR's effectiveness. Around half of all companies do not use these business-focused metrics to gauge the impact of HR at all.

Successful companies are more likely to use analytics to link HR to business performance. The same Accenture research found that 78 percent of companies that are leaders on human performance criteria are able to demonstrate with quantitative measures the impact of the performance of the top three workforces on the organization's overall financial performance; only 49 percent of laggard companies can do so (Balaguer *et al.* 2006). Similarly, 35 percent of the leaders (but only 19 percent of laggards) have formal, business-focused metrics to gauge the impact of all of their HR activities on workforce performance.

Such findings highlight an important message for HR executives: some companies are, in fact, connecting talent-management performance to business performance. By collecting the right data and using analytics to monitor performance, gauge the effects of human capital investments, and predict needs and opportunities ahead, laggards can become leaders.

Six analytical tools for HR

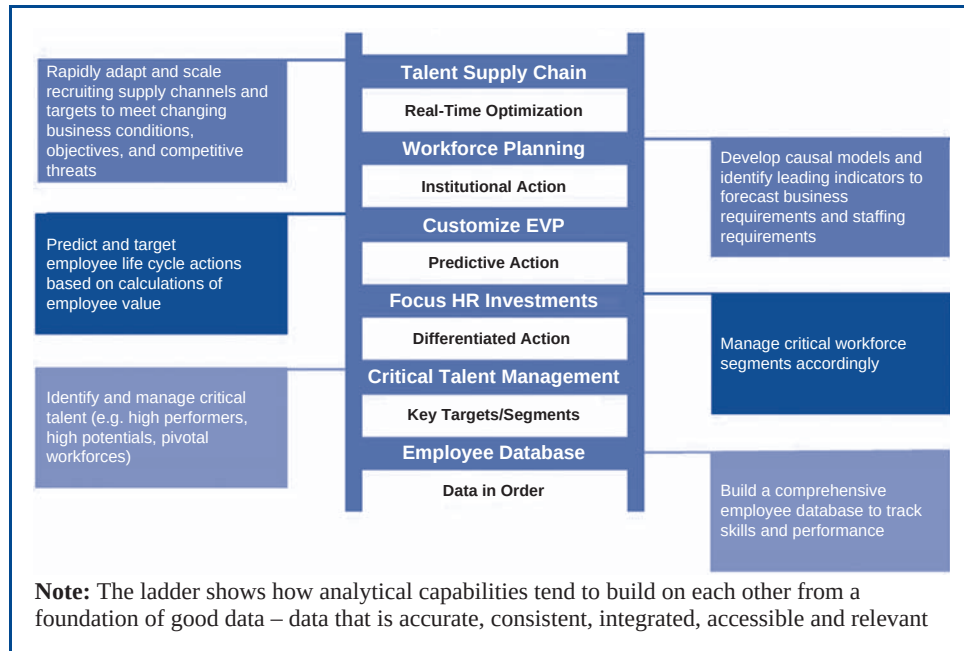
Professional sports teams, banks, food-service companies, and energy companies are among those that are showing how HR can use analytics to contribute to business results. Some approaches have more impact than others, and can be envisioned as a ladder of analytical sophistication. (See Figure 1, "The ladder of HR analytical applications.")

Data in order: employee database

The first rung of the ladder is accurate, consistent, integrated, accessible and relevant employee data. When stored in a single comprehensive database that provides "one

"A variety of analytical approaches can help HR executives to link investments in human capital to a company's returns on financial capital. More important, they can help HR leaders actively shape their organization's future – managing talent and directing programs toward the long-term needs of the business."

Figure 1 The ladder of analytical HR applications



truth” for HR information, such data allows companies to track the skills and competencies they have as a whole as well as the knowledge, skills, abilities and performance of individuals. Companies at the forefront of HR analytics are analyzing this information to identify characteristics of successful employees and then evaluate new job applications in this light.

Google is well known for its tough screening process of new job candidates. But as the company grows, it has become increasingly difficult to find enough people who are likely to perform well at Google. A few years ago, as it waded through some 100,000 applications per month, Google was not sure it was identifying the best candidates with traditional techniques such as grade point average to screen for attractive candidates. The company found that it needed a more effective way to manage the task of identifying those people who would be successful employees.

To develop a more sophisticated approach, it started with a comprehensive database that captures employees’ attitudes, behaviors, and personality and biographical information, as well as job performance. Google collects the same information from applicants. The data for individual job seekers are matched against a list of the best predictors of performance generated from the current employees’ data. Google then applies an algorithm that calculates a score to predict the likelihood that applicants will succeed at the company (Hansell, 2007).

This analytical approach has helped Google manage the rapid growth of its workforce. In the third quarter of 2007, for example, the company hired 2,130 people, a 38 percent increase from the second quarter. Just as important, this approach ensures that the company does not overlook potential employees who may not have made it through the previous process. The company’s initial analysis of two million data points from the survey confirmed that Google’s reliance on GPA as a simple screening metric had indeed caused them to overlook great candidates in the past. The early indications demonstrated that a more analytical approach to understanding the attributes of high performers and screening applicants for them will help Google find and hire the talent it needs.

“The talent supply chain enables Valero to forecast demand for talent three years out, at the division level and the job-title level.”

Key segments: critical talent management

On the second rung, companies can use analytics to identify key segments of employees. Statistical analysis of good data yields useful segmentation – of employees, workforces, talent pools, or key skills. For example, analytics can be used to systematically and rigorously identify critical talent (such as key recruiting targets, high-potential employees and top performers). Companies make a whole range of investments aimed at finding, keeping, engaging and training the people who work for them. An analytical approach to these investments can help organizations discover which ones generate the biggest performance payoffs – and to use that knowledge to focus their talent investments.

Consider how A.C. Milan, an elite Italian soccer team, has used data to optimize its investments in high-priced talent. Like all professional sports teams, A.C. Milan is vulnerable to the loss of key players to injury. After spending 30 million euros to acquire superstar Fernando Redondo only to have him suffer injuries that kept him from playing for the team for years, management decided that a talent for the game was not the only important factor to be considered when identifying and managing critical talent. Durability was also critical. It began focusing not just on acquiring the best players, but on the best players who also were also the healthiest and more likely to stay that way.

The team thus created its own lab to understand soccer players from every possible angle. For example, by studying how a player jumps, the lab can predict with 70 percent accuracy the likelihood that he will get injured. The lab now gathers 60,000 data points on each player, examining not only physical characteristics but also psychological traits. Extensive analysis of the voluminous data helps the team decide which players are best equipped to consistently perform at high levels, as well as those more likely to break down from injury.

A.C. Milan also tests players periodically to check for the development of habits that might lead to injury, a process that they naturally appreciate. This approach helped the team reduce injuries by over 90 percent over a five-year period. Older stars like David Beckham want to play out their last years with the club because they know the labs will give them insights they need to help keep them healthy and playing (Kuper, 2008).

By regularly measuring key attributes of players, the team can make sure that its critical talent is supported properly to sustain their ability to perform. As Jeanne-Pierre Meersseman, director of the lab, explains: “We are trying to make a system that may say: ‘Now you will run 100 meters. You will rest 43 seconds, then run 80 metres, stop for one minute two seconds, and then run 61 meters.’ We are trying to do this with predictive algorithms” (Kuper, 2008). The team maximize players’ longevity by customizing training regimens based on a fact-based assessment of each individual’s strengths and development needs.

Their analytical approach to managing talent has also paid off for the team, which won the 2006-2007 UEFA Champions League title. Plus they are once again a contender, even with one of the oldest teams in Europe.

Differentiated action: focus HR investments

Segmentation is not just a categorization scheme, but should be the basis for treating groups of employees differently and targeting the most valuable ones. On the third rung, sophisticated segmentation enables differentiated action. At this level, HR investments can

be disproportionately made in the employee groups or workforce segments that create the most value for the firm.

One leader in this area is SYSCO Corporation, the \$37 billion global food-service marketer and distributor. The company's customers include restaurants, nursing homes, hospitals, hotels, motels, schools, colleges, cruise ships, sports parks and summer camps – any setting outside the home in which it is necessary to provide meals. The key to SYSCO's success? Strong relationships between SYSCO delivery people and the customers they serve. Thus HR's ability to retain skilled, satisfied employees for the delivery function is critical to the company's business results.

This is no easy task in an organization made up of more than 170 autonomous operating units and 50,000 full-time employees serving 400,000 customers. At SYSCO, the process starts with the tracking of HR metrics for each operating company. Three metrics are at the forefront: work climate and employee satisfaction, productivity (measured as employees per 100,000 cases of food sold) and retention. After it spent several years measuring and analyzing these key metrics, SYSCO was able to link effective talent management practices to business results (Cascio, 2005).

The company's analysis reveals that operating companies with highly satisfied employees have higher revenues and lower costs, and superior customer loyalty and employee retention. To maintain high levels of employee satisfaction, SYSCO measures and manages seven dimensions of the work environment: leadership support of employees, the effectiveness of front-line supervisors, rewards for performance, quality of life, employee engagement, diversity and customer focus. Under-performing units are identified and helped to improve. The operating companies can also help themselves by drawing on a best-practices database developed by SYSCO.

Improvements in employee satisfaction increase revenues by enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty, but they also significantly reduce the costs that come with high levels of employee turnover. By measuring and managing the link between HR processes and business results, SYSCO improved the retention rate for delivery associates from 65 percent to 85 percent in six years. With hiring and training costs of \$35,000 per associate, SYSCO saved nearly \$50 million in the process (Cascio, 2006).

Predictive action: customizing the employee-value proposition

Why do employees choose to stay with a company? One way to answer that question is by using analytics to calculate what employees value most, and by using that data to create a model that will boost retention rates. This application of analytics leads to predictive action, a rung on the ladder in which companies anticipate employees' preferences and future behaviors and tailor HR practices to help them hold on to their valuable talent.

This was the approach taken by Convergys, a company that manages billing, payroll, benefits and pensions for businesses in 40 countries. After the company's initial public offering in 1999, the Convergys workforce doubled to 35,000, but turnover was a major headache – the company had to recruit 50,000 new people in 1999 to maintain that level of staffing. To reduce attrition, Convergys turned to a consumer marketing technique, conjoint analysis. When used with products, such analysis helps companies determine how people value different combinations of features. When used with employees, it helps companies figure out the mix of benefits most likely to encourage people to stay with the organization.

“Segmentation is not just a categorization scheme, but should be the basis for treating groups of employees differently and targeting the most valuable ones.”

“Companies can use analytics to identify key segments of employees.”

Using this tool, Convergys learned, for example, that employees were more likely to stay with the company if they got half their annual pay raises every six months instead of the entire amount only once per year. Instituting that change was a low-cost way to keep people longer. In addition, the company found it needed to offer a customized mix of benefits to different locations. It established Employee Engagement Teams at each of its 57 customer contact centers to work out the right mix for each location, with items such as flexible scheduling, tuition aid and employee recognition on the table for negotiation. While this analytical effort required real investments of time, it paid off: The company estimates that attrition over a four-year period was reduced by nearly 58,000 employees, with savings in recruiting and training estimated at \$57 million (Mullich, 2005).

Institutional action: workforce planning

Predicting future needs for people can be like predicting the weather. Look too far ahead and the number of parameters and possible outcomes can reduce the forecast to informed guesswork. Yet detailed forecasts of what skills will be needed several years out, under different business scenarios, are critical for companies today.

This demands institutional action, the next rung on the HR analytical ladder, in which a sophisticated workforce-planning process is integrated with a company's strategy, finance and other planning processes.

In 2007, as part of a plan to reduce operating costs by \$700 million (out of \$6.6 billion), Capital One's CEO, Richard Fairbank, announced that he wanted to reduce headcount by 2,000 (out of 27,000) over the next two years. The key to making those adjustments: workforce-planning simulations.

An analytics group of 20 works with hundreds of executives, managers and analysts from business units and corporate functions to create the simulations. Teams of HR staff, metrics group and business leaders create models for each line of business and for the workforce as a whole. They look at a range of possible scenarios about business conditions and then calculate the labor needed to match them. Total headcount is not the only issue on the docket. The workforce planners also determine the ideal staffing mix (internal and external people), as well as the skills mix.

The responsibility for workforce planning at Capital One resides in human resources, but the hard work takes place inside the business units, where the blended teams operate. This grounding in the business units keeps workforce planning focused on corporate goals.

The time frames for workforce planning at Capital One vary by unit and function. The legal function, for example, is very stable and can easily plan out two to four years. The credit card division, however, is rapidly evolving, so its forecasts stretch out two to four years but are reviewed every quarter.

Capital One's sophisticated approach to workforce planning allows business leaders to anticipate the talent requirements for each business option and the human resources and labor-cost consequences of the choices they make.

Real-time optimization: talent supply chains

The top rung of the human capital analytics ladder is the domain of real-time optimization, where processes adjust on the fly to enable a company to maintain the best possible mix of skills and supply of talent.

“Convergys learned, for example, that employees were more likely to stay with the company if they got half their annual pay raises every six months instead of the entire amount only once per year.”

As talent needs become more pressing and talent sources more diverse, some companies are creating supply chains for their human capital requirements. Texas-based oil refiner Valero Energy is a case in point. The company's process shows the highest rung of the ladder, real-time optimization, at work.

In 2000, Valero had 2,000 employees and revenues of \$118 million. Six years later, it was a global giant with 22,000 employees and revenues of \$75 billion. How it got there, in part, is a story about the analytical transformation of talent sourcing.

In 2002, Valero began to build a world-class staffing capability that would meet the talent needs of a rapidly growing and increasingly international company (Frauenheim, 2006). The challenge was huge: at the time, for example, the company's recruiting operations were entirely paper-based. In addition, the start-up of a new refining complex might involve hiring project managers in the United States, outsourced engineers in Canada, programmers in India and manufacturing workers in China.

How does the talent supply chain work? First, future needs for talent are projected by analyzing data capturing past experience and planned capital projects (Sullivan and Burnett, 2006). Talent needs are automatically communicated to the best sources, according to suppliers' record of efficiency (cost, time) and effectiveness (quality of hire, reliability). These decisions are optimized using real-time, system-wide performance data for the entire supply chain. For example, the company continuously monitors ads placed on Internet job boards (one source of talent) to assess the cost, speed, quality and dependability of the supplier.

By analyzing the aggregate data it collects on the quality of talent from different sources – such as data on job performance, how well employees fit with the organization and its culture, and retention – Valero can determine which suppliers of talent are the best. Dashboard scorecards show green when a supplier's performance is good; yellow or red when problems have been identified. If a supplier is yielding low-quality hires, Valero automatically shifts sourcing requests to better-performing suppliers.

The benefits of building this capability have been enormous: according to one executive, “In 2002, it took 41 pieces of paper to hire someone and more than 120 days to fill an open position. Each hire cost about \$12,000. With the labor supply chain in place, little paper is needed to bring someone aboard, the time-to-fill figure is below 40 days and cost per hire dropped to \$2,300 last year” (Frauenheim, 2006).

The most significant results, however, have been strategic. The talent supply chain enables Valero to forecast demand for talent three years out, at the division level and the job-title level. These projections, together with talent supply and supplier data, allow Valero to make strategic decisions about whether to hire new employees, enlist contractors or outsource the work. According to Dan Hilbert, the former Valero executive who developed the company's supply chain approach, the precision of workforce planning activities has increased dramatically: “For the first time, talent pipelines can now be developed years in advance to meet specific future talent needs. It's pretty revolutionary stuff” (Schneider, 2006).

How to make it work

These examples show how a more analytical HR can help improve business results. Given the potential benefits, companies should focus on building a human-capital analytical capability. Accenture uses a five-step model called DELTA (data, enterprise, leadership, targets and analysts) to summarize the essential elements of a successful use of analytics (Davenport *et al.*, 2010).

Building a human capital analytical capability will require:

- *Data: accessible and high-quality.* Since many HR functions still work with fragmented systems, processes, and capabilities, it can be challenging simply to get consistent and reliable data from across the organization. Too often, HR is strapped by many systems that generate incomparable metrics based on idiosyncratic calculations. Metrics must be consistent across units and over time so that companies can compare internal groups, benchmark externally, and track causal relationships between human capital investments and performance outcomes.

In order to manage talent strategically, organizations need to use human capital metrics that can guide strategic decisions and actions, and not rely solely on backward-looking measures that simply report the past. With the right data, HR can model and predict the performance consequences of specific strategic, workforce and labor-market changes. For example, instead of simply tracking training hours per employee, companies can forecast changes in skill requirements. It can then improve investments in talent management processes and human capital capabilities.

- *Enterprise: strategic perspective.* To take advantage of analytics, you need the integration of data, analyses and processes throughout the enterprise. Too often, HR analytics are localized and one-off operations. A disciplined and methodical approach to analyzing, forecasting, predicting and optimizing global HR processes, capabilities and outcomes will improve the impact of talent, and of the HR function, on the business.
- *Leadership: advocates for analytics.* For a human capital analytics program to be successful, it must be led by the right people with the right analytical skills. Such leaders must also be able to manage the changes in culture, process, behavior and capabilities caused by an analytics initiative. Ideally, senior executives who are passionate about analytics and fact-based decision-making should lead the charge.
- *Targeting: the right analytics opportunities.* You cannot chase after every possible analytical opportunity – you have to pick your spots according to the likelihood for the greatest payoff. Targets are essential for focusing any company's analytical efforts, but they are particularly critical for HR's forays into human capital analytics – largely because there simply is not enough analytical talent in HR to allow it to be equally analytical with all their activities.
- *Analysts: deep analytical skills.* Having disciplined and methodical approaches to measuring and tracking global HR processes, capabilities and outcomes is only half the battle. The other half is building and using analytical skills throughout HR so that the organization can extract the most value from the data and metrics. Your success with human capital analytics will depend, in large part, on HR's ability to find and nurture analytical talent – the people who produce the data, the quantitative analysis, and statistical models you need to make better decisions and achieve better results. Connecting these specialists with the business will ensure that they understand how human capital analytics can drive value for the business.

“To take advantage of analytics, you need the integration of data, analyses and processes throughout the enterprise.”

The road to insight

Other functions that have used analytics to improve their ability to contribute strategically have followed a standard progression from reporting to analytics. In each function, managers have rejected the use of historical, static reporting (drawing on data that is convenient to collect) in favor of outcome-based predictive measures.

Companies seeking to use human capital analytics for business advantage will follow the same path to analytical maturity: First, reporting what happened. Organizations need an accurate assessment of the way things really are, one not skewed by emotion or limited to anecdotal evidence. Second, explaining why it happened. They must diagnose the causes of whatever problems exist and create plans to address the underlying causes. Third, predicting what might or should happen. Companies want to develop forecasting and optimizing capabilities to help them see bumps in the road before they encounter them, or to seize opportunities that others cannot see.

HR departments are now beginning to look beyond historical data that is a byproduct of transaction and compliance reporting systems. They are asking important questions about what really matters: Do our recruiting processes create an adequate leadership pipeline? Do we currently have the right skills mix to achieve our goals? What skills will we need in five years? Which people and what positions create the most value for our organization?

For companies looking to maximize the value of every investment, human capital analytics can help direct resources toward the people and programs most essential to high performance.

The ladder in Figure 1 shows how analytical capabilities tend to build on each other from a foundation of good data – data that is accurate, consistent, integrated, accessible and relevant.

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Decision making,
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