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NEWS

'Smart' talent management software worth pain of deployment

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Dan Lombardo, CEO of charitable organization Volunteers of America, was experiencing a talent management problem. The organization's turnover rate was 96%, and the existing recruitment and performance management procedures were not bolstering retention. "We had a routine hiring package and an annual performance evaluation that supervisors hated and employees hated," he said.

Then he met Dr. Carl Aylen, a former Cambridge University professor who was planning his foray into [talent management software](#). Aylen's "evidence-based" approach to recruitment intrigued Lombardo. Aylen proposed that Volunteers of America act as a trial group in the development of his software, Talent Chaser; Lombardo accepted.

Since implementing the software in 2001, Volunteers of America's turnover has drastically decreased, an improvement Lombardo attributes entirely to Talent Chaser.

"Turnover has dropped to 37%, and of that figure only 11% were removed for poor performance," he said.

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The vendor, Chicago-based The Cambridge Don, claims Talent Chaser is the first product of its kind to use artificial learning techniques, including neural networks designed to mimic the human brain, to reduce turnover and enhance employee performance. It was released in July.

Aylen, president and CEO of The Cambridge Don, credits Talent Chaser's effectiveness to the interaction between the recruitment and appraisal tools. Each time someone logs a performance review into the program, the data feeds back into the hiring tool. As data is amassed over a number of

years, the neural networks "learn" how to recognize which candidates are a fit for specific positions, and to what degree.

While the software has had a significant positive impact on Volunteers of America's workforce management, the benefits weren't reaped overnight. Lombardo cautioned that Talent Chaser is not a quick fix and required major procedural changes that resulted in a lengthy implementation.

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Talent Chaser's adaptive recruitment

In the past, the organization's recruiting strategy used a common approach: advertising open positions in specialty publications, sifting through the submitted resumes and selecting candidates based on an interview and background check. "It was a crap shoot more than anything else," Lombardo recalled. "We were making an investment training people that maybe or maybe didn't have the skill or motivation to perform well."

With Talent Chaser, a screening test is administered as part of the application process. Drawing upon its fund of data, the talent management software tries to weed out applicants who demonstrate low potential for success. Candidates who pass through this filter and make it to the interview stage are of noticeably higher quality, Lombardo said. Hiring the right people from the start has also increased the organization's rate of promoting from within and led to an overall stronger workforce.

Talent management software implementation requires patience, teamwork

"Talent Chaser took around two years to be fully implemented," Lombardo said. "It's not an activity for the faint of heart. But if you are willing to put in the effort, the outcomes will make you smile every day."

Since the software requires performance metrics for its recruitment tool to function properly, the first step in the implementation process was to gather information. Lombardo had managers sit down with employees across the organization to determine the measures of success and failure for each role, a time-consuming exercise, he said.

Employees also had to adjust to more frequent performance reviews -- from once a year to once a quarter -- and not surprisingly, there was pushback in the early months. Once employees became accustomed to the new procedure, Lombardo found that they actually liked being reviewed more frequently. Because they had had input into the metrics used to assess their work, measures of accountability increased and performance soared, he said.

Lombardo asserts that taking it slow was a major factor in the successful implementation. The talent management software was initially deployed at the main office in Virginia and gradually phased in at all 44 branches. "We took it in deliberate and manageable bites."

HR's role evolved into that of a technical support team providing Talent Chaser training and support and helping to determine criteria for newly created positions.

Further perks of talent management software

Over the years developing the software, other advantages emerged that even surprised Aylen.

Because Talent Chaser calculates proficiency during the screening process and then focuses solely on skills, the potential for discrimination is all but eliminated, Aylen claims. "Clients say it's absolutely fair and culture-free. That was a side benefit that we didn't really predict."

Lombardo said the detailed performance documentation saved in Talent Chaser's data repository has been invaluable in combatting wrongful dismissal claims, a major problem Volunteers of America faced before buying Talent Chaser. "We've saved 5 to 7% of our total budget in legal fees alone."

Most importantly, the tie between hiring and assessment puts the verdict on Talent Chaser's efficacy in the hands of its users. As Aylen explained, "When users rate employees that were hired using the system, they have indirectly told us what works and what doesn't work."

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