HR

DIRECTIONS

The Data Connection:

How Keeping Current with Your Impact Players Drives Your Competitive Edge

By: Sanjay Sathe
         Founder and CEO
         Risesmart, Inc.
         (a Randstad Company)

FOR INFORMATION EMAIL **INFO@HRCSUITE.COM**

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Consider for a moment this question: Who knows more about your most essential talent and their capabilities than you do? (Setting aside, of course, their spouses, other key family members, and friends.)

The most likely answer would be: LinkedIn. It hardly seems possible, does it? A remote information portal where the relationships are virtual and participation is voluntary? There is no centralized governing process to ensure consistency, accuracy, and completion. It's just a variety of dashboards and dials to *influence* and *attract* a voluntary ongoing, incoming stream of updated information. It's not even human. And, unless your business is based in Silicon Valley, the chances are excellent that the humans who work at LinkedIn don't actually know any of your people. And yet LinkedIn is one of the biggest threats to your secure position as your most-valuable employees' employer.

So how can LinkedIn be better than you are at staying absolutely current with your own people? When you think about the storyline of your relationship with your talent, it makes sense very quickly. Here's how it goes:

You have an opening that requires a certain, defined set of skills and experiences. About the same time you begin your search process, a wonderful candidate updates his LinkedIn profile to include his most recent career experience and educational credentials. In that fortuitous intersection where need (yours) meets availability (his), the selection, interview,

offer, onboarding process begins. Your need is filled. He has a new job. And the interests of your business strategy, as it currently stands, are served.

Excellent. But the story isn't over.

This is where two pathways (yours and the employee's) begin to diverge again. You have opened a file for your new hire: His skills, background, educational credentials. And you now focus on putting them to work to help him be successful in helping your company be successful. This is what you do, and, as far as you're concerned, this is what he does. No more, and, hopefully, no less.

But that file is merely a snapshot in time, already out of date after the employee's first day at his new job. Your new employee's professional development lives on, as does his continually updated LinkedIn profile. While he is focusing on doing a stellar job for your company, exactly according to your mutual agreement about what the expectations are, he's continuing to build his credentials: Adding experiences, developing within the role, going back to school for additional degrees and certifications. In less than a year's time, maybe a little longer, the employee's qualifications have completely blown past the defined scope of abilities he came to you with.

And now he's looking for new ways to put these abilities into action — to benefit both himself and whichever company is lucky enough to see his offerings on, you guessed it, Linked In.

Did *you* know about his expanded scope of abilities? Very likely not. He has been measured for the work he had been hired to do. And he's been doing it well, perhaps even surpassing all expectations. Maybe his boss is loath to let him capitalize on his professional development because that would result in possibly losing him to a better opportunity within the company. Whatever the reason, your valuable employee sees no avenue through which to inform your company how he's been developing himself in his off-hours. And, likewise, there is no tool for you to capture that data in a way that will be easily accessible later with just the entry of a few keywords.

The employee decides that he has outgrown the potential offered by your organization. He sees no other opportunities internally. He has lost faith in his boss's ability to help him move his career to the next level. And so he starts to accept calls from recruiters who have found him on, of course, LinkedIn, using keywords that match his updated skill set. He eventually tells you he's moving on. Even if you do happen to see that his profile includes all those new skills and credentials that you're looking for in your own updated business strategy, you might be tempted to tell your recruiters to pass on him. There is still that belief in circulation that once someone decides to leave your company, there's no point in trying to hang onto him. You'd be just postponing the inevitable. He's already resigned in his heart (you assume), so any better deal you could offer will only keep him for a short while longer. So you're convinced that it's best to let him go. Better to start fresh. With new talent.

A clean slate. This scenario is not about how LinkedIn is your worst enemy when it comes to your efforts to retain your best talent. The point here is that there are new data tools at your disposal right now that can help you attract — and keep and redeploy — your most valuable people at a time when mission-critical "impact players" are essential to develop, retain, and maybe even re-recruit.

LinkedIn is an example of the approach to data collection (even data *attraction*) that can be used to thoroughly serve your strategies — not only the strategies of today but well into

the future. What's the difference between LinkedIn's approach to data and what might be yours at the moment? Think of LinkedIn's data flow as an ever-moving river, always changing, always updating itself as conditions change, always filling new wells of information with new ways of organizing that information.

In contrast, if your data collection system is consistent with the vast majority of HR departments out there, your system is more like a stop-action camera. Each moment in time is frozen with a single click to lock in the data. Once that data is locked in, it's already outdated. All the while LinkedIn's information river keeps rolling along, its current powered by an engaged membership that voluntarily contributes updated data.

Your company needs and deserves that same level of engagement. Its destiny rides on the back of your talent and how dedicated they are, which increasingly depends on how confident they are that your company is a good investment in their own professional development journey. This confidence, in turn, is tracked and measured by the information you are able to acquire and organize at a moment's notice. A shift in your approach to not only how you *collect* data on your employee population but also how you *use* it will accelerate your company's ability to keep up with its changing strategies and implement them using the best talent available to you. This chapter will help you retool your data management systems to make the most of your people, even your alumni, and their own thirst for professional development and growth.

The rest of this chapter is based on four organizing principles:

Data is most efficacious when it's fluid. As demonstrated in the opening LinkedIn example of this chapter, circumstances change so rapidly today that we need to install data collection and analysis processes in such a way that we can understand our talent population in real time, at a moment's notice. This way we see who we have right now and what they're capable of doing now (or soon). We can also reasonably forecast who might be beneficial to our companies' changing business strategies further down the proverbial stream.

True employee engagement is in constant motion. It wasn't that long ago that reports on engagement surveys could be reasonably expected twelve to eighteen months after the survey was administered. Pulse surveys filled in the gaps, but their scope was typically extremely limited to one or two questions. Today, especially with the influence of Millennials and their unique sets of workplace expectations, change is the new constant. And immediacy is the new standard. Today's talent demands ongoing feedback. They need to trust that they have the best possible mentors. They need to know that there is always a next step inside the organization — or they will go elsewhere. They need to know this *all the time*.

Employee engagement drives — and is driven by — career empowerment. Top talent needs to know that they are constantly building their skill sets and laying down the path to their next development milestone and beyond. While the need to be constantly mentored and developed is most definitely a Millennial trademark, it affects the anticipations and expectations of all your employees, older and even younger. No one expects any job to be secure or predictable anymore (your own LinkedIn profile is up-to-date, right?). And the aggressive energy that the Millennials invest in making sure that they are always on the move adds pressure to their colleagues to be competitive as well. Therefore, you, as the HR leader, are on the spot to build your engagement factor by

demonstrating your organization's commitment to the professional development of all your employees.

When employees see a linkage between what they do for their company and what they're doing for their careers by way of tapping into developmental opportunities you present to them, you as the employer are most likely to enjoy the business interest benefits of employee engagement.

And career empowerment drives business empowerment. Anxiety-ridden employees are not going to be equipped to provide their best work contributions to your organization. They're distracted at best. Resentful at worst. And it's a small step from being passively not engaged in the company's mission-critical priorities to actually being actively disengaged where the employees retaliate against a company by exposing intellectual property, sabotaging the company's reputation on sites like Glassdoor, even destroying physical property in extreme circumstances. There was once a time when employers could assume that employees were focused on their work so much they didn't notice the signs on the horizon that foretold almost certain layoffs (if you haven't been blind-sided yourself by the unexpected conversation that concluded with you handing over your card key, you surely know someone who has).

But those days are gone. Even the most sublimely contented employee has one eye on the open door. Single-minded loyalty to the current job has its limitations. Employees know that. And you know it too. Engagement isn't about keeping all employees; it's about sustaining a mutually advantageous relationship where trust and commitment benefit both employee and employer. And a very valuable component of that relationship is the employee's relative confidence that the employer is actively engaged itself in responding to all employees' drives for professional development and expansion of career potentiality. Even if that next step might be external to the immediate company.

This simple adjustment in the employer's philosophy about employees' professional development results in easily obvious benefits:

One of the top three reasons people leave an organization is the lack of challenging and meaningful developmental opportunities. According to Aon Hewitt, 74 percent of employees are actively searching for new jobs at any given time, and 69 percent report that searching for new opportunities is part of their regular routine. Employee turnover costs U.S. businesses an estimated $11 billion annually.

According to Gallup, actively disengaged employees represent $450 billion to $550 billion in lost productivity every year. This figure does not take into account the direct cost to the company in terms of harm done, such as equipment damage or compromised intellectual property.

An Accenture study reports that while 55 percent of employees report being under pressure to develop additional skills, only 21 percent report that companies provide the training for those skills. Additionally, a SuccessFactors survey reveals that 83 percent of employees don't feel that their current skills and experience are being fully utilized. And Accenture further showed that 34 percent report that it was easy to move to another job within their own companies and 49 percent said that their employers provided adequate information regarding what additional skills and knowledge would help employees progress to the next level.

Clearly, companies that take the simple, additional steps of creating a tightly woven matrix against which employees can confidently plot their entire array of skills

development and deployment stand to benefit where their more detached competitors just won't.

In short: High-value employees — the so-called "impact players" who make the most significant difference in your company, the ones you want to keep for as long as possible — are most likely to stay with your enterprise when they can see a valuable connection to their future prospects.

Data is no longer for merely capturing employee information. It's to equip companies to stay current with their impact players — even the ones who have entered the ranks of alumni. Use data to keep engagement alive, to build bench strength for both the immediate and long-term future, and to build a healthy employer brand beyond your immediate circles of influence. This will position you well for attracting key talent in upcoming years to fulfill business strategy that you haven't even developed yet.

There are two ways to break down your approach to using data as a talent management enrichment/career empowerment tool: To retain key employees and to sustain a living relationship with them even after they have left your company.

Retention

When you lose a key employee, what do you suppose the cause may be? It may be natural to assume that that employee left for a better job or better paycheck. But increasingly employers are discovering that their best people are leaving because they are dissatisfied with their prospects for development. Maybe your training opportunities aren't as robust as they need to be, or there is a lack of mobility. Maybe your people are craving a broader array of developmental opportunities across the various departments so that their own bucket of capabilities is more comprehensive. Or perhaps they have lost faith that their immediate supervisor has anything new to teach them.

In any of these scenarios, your best people no longer see that your company is invested in their future.

On your side of the talent ledger, you believe the developmental opportunities that you can extend your people are limited. You see that your current business strategy (the one for which all your people are geared up) has an extremely limited shelf life. And you worry that all these people on your staff will need to be replaced — either gradually or abruptly — as your company's new strategy shifts directions. True, you will probably lose some talent eventually — talent that was once mission critical but will become mission obsolete. But you recognized that there are extremely valuable employees who are worth the investment of developing, maybe even retooling. Your job is to figure out who they are and what they'll need to meet your company's future strategic needs.

A re-engineered data collection strategy will help your organization fully understand the psyche of the employees in terms of where they are, where they want to go, what are the skills they have, and where they want to grow. With that data, you can make informed decisions on how to empower employees so that you can stop whatever stagnation and disengagement there may be. You can also play an essential role in helping the organization realign its strategies using the talent that is already onboard, reducing the expenses associated with reductions in force, and ultimately sourcing and onboarding new talent.

If you must prepare yourself to onboard new talent anyway, use that energy and those resources to help your current talent onboard themselves in the form of career development. Employees who are satisfied with their career development are significantly more likely to stay for at least three to five years. Those are three to five years that you can leverage to keep them engaged partners in the company's future.

Data-enabled tracking and programming technology places critical tools at your disposal to extend multiple developmental opportunities to your essential talent to help your company develop itself from within, rather than depend on the constant, expensive, risky churn of sourcing and recruiting new employees:

Short-term developmental opportunities: These projects — increasingly referred to as *gigs*, give your key talent the opportunities to expand their scope of experiences while helping your company fill short-term needs. Maybe someone on family leave — or who has been assigned to another project — creates an opening for a short-term fill-in to help bring a project to completion in the resulting absence. Or a special project brings members from a variety of internal teams together to collaborate on a limited, defined objective. These opportunities give your people the chance to "test drive" career options they had not yet had the opportunity to fully explore, or investigate other departments or business units that might represent longer-term opportunities down the road. This can fundamentally increase their breadth and depth of experience.

Short-term developmental opportunities — especially those with specific, defined outcomes, also give employees the extremely valuable opportunity to tell a story about a project from start to finish. As many workplaces are increasingly based on the so-called *gig economy,* where you are only as good as your last completed project, an employer who is able to continuously offer its people an array of gigs to choose from is the employer most likely to keep those ambitious, high-talent impact players.

A culture of data-driven internal gigs benefit your organization beyond redeploying tried and true talent into short-term needs. They also prepare the next generation of managers and leaders within the organization. They allow you to give these people developmental exposure, driving the richness of their experience, therefore giving them the chance to grow. Ultimately, with every opportunity to lead — even for a short-term project — you are helping them develop the skills to become future leaders, qualifying them for their next full-time opportunity because they have proven themselves within the context of your company.

Cross-team collaboration also works very well in this gig approach to talent redeployment. When you create teams from across the company to address some specific needs where they can learn from each other, know each other better, and just increase the collaboration within the organization, you're creating a unified fabric of relationships and bringing together fresh ideas from unexpected sources. This is probably one of the most critical ways to fundamentally impact the growth of an organization and its impact in the marketplace. Very good communication and very good collaboration go hand in hand.

Long-term opportunities: Even today, with the benefits of the internal applicant tracking systems, the most sophisticated Fortune 500 companies still don't have a clear, well-defined internal mobility strategy. Quite often, the job openings inside one business unit within a large corporation may not be shared with another business unit, or, if they are, the path to transition isn't clear. It's not uncommon for a company to be laying off a group representing a certain skill set in one unit, only to be hiring the same talent in another

business unit. The missed opportunities to hire from within during a layoff can be extremely costly, from outright talent acquisition and onboarding costs, to employer brand perception, reputation, and future referrals and rehire opportunities.

And even in those instances where the skill sets of the outgoing talent don't quite match up with the skill sets required of the new ramp-up, companies would do well to give all employees advance notice as to what skills they will be looking for in the foreseeable future. What are the attributes that will be needed as the organization grows in its new strategic direction? Are those skills within reach of current employees, given the time to complete their development toward those goals? You have a cadre of talent who fit the culture, who have institutional knowledge. Wouldn't it be wiser for you to give them the chance to develop themselves to meet your new required profile of capabilities?

This leads us to…

Forecasting: These needs don't simply jump out at organizations overnight. While some business units may appear to go live inside a very short time-frame from the public's point of view, the behind-the-scenes runway necessary to create the enterprise is a long and gradual one. No one should be caught by surprise that a certain set of abilities are in demand. Letting people know in advance that a certain demand is around the corner gives them the time necessary to volunteer for taking on that skill sets and start accumulating the necessary knowledge, experience, and credentials.

Maybe your existing workforce already has those skills. A robust, data-based internal mobility solution equips you to know which skills already exist within your company, who has those skills, who can teach them to others, who would be an excellent mentor, and which skills need to be introduced into the organization from an external provider — either in the form of training or an entirely new population of talent.

Transition

Even with the best of developmental programs, companies still lose their most valued talent. But the relationship on pause doesn't have to be permanently broken. You can continue to re-engage talent at different points over the course of their careers by leveraging the data that you have kept on each employee, as well as tracking their progress as they develop their careers apart from your company.

Using data, you can always have access to valued talent — even the talent who is transitioning out through layoffs, voluntary terminations, and retirement. Your prospects for successful ongoing relationships with you alumni are driven by 1) how well you helped them land their next position quickly and 2) your ability to keep up with their ongoing career development story, which would include the ongoing acquisition of new skills and experiences that may come in handy for you at a future date.

It is at this time when it's especially important for your organization to treat your departing employees well. To begin with, you're protecting the employer brand. (With the proliferation of social media, careers and corporations can be brought down. Your company isn't immune to the damaging effects of negative word of mouth.) Organizations need to reinvent their thinking about their relationship with employees and ex-employees. Their relationship should not end, even if the tenure of the employee ends.

This puts you in an excellent position to have a well of talent to recruit from later, from gig assignments to full-time work. If you are looking at your alumni as talent that you can

bring back again, build a database of these people and their associated skills. This is a living database, capturing the skills they had coming into the organization, the skills they acquired along the way, and the skills they have been accumulating since leaving the organization. As your needs evolve over time, requiring you to reach beyond the walls of your current employee population to source talent, this is the database you come to first.

Employees have a lifetime value to organizations, and you should make a point of building and nurturing an alumni network. Today there are a variety of tools that can be leveraged to keep your network alive and well-nourished, providing rich and current data on talent that can be re-activated at will.

Remember that your goal here is business empowerment through the career empowerment of all your employees. You're empowering alumni to succeed in their careers whether they are going to return as rehires in the future or not. You are demonstrating that, as an organization, you're open and supportive of all your people, whether they are current employees or they are departing talent. Whatever their status, you are wise to keep your relationship with them healthy and mutually supportive. Alumni could eventually be your customers, your vendors, and your partners in the future. They could be the parents of a child you hire later. They will remember how you treated them.

Look at your transition strategies in terms of career empowerment, and consider elements of your separation process more holistically — from a long-term perspective, rather than just making a list, laying people off, and moving on thinking that everything is okay, just because you're saving money right now through a reduction in force.

Focus your efforts on helping your employees get their next job quickly (don't simply rely on the traditional outplacement firms' approach of merely training them how to be job seekers). As much as organizations have invested on the front-end of an employee's tenure with the company, they should invest on the back-end as well. The effort that you invest in helping your departing employees land quickly will come back to you financially, as well as in your reputation among both employees and customers.

Leverage the relationships that you have with other companies. There are tremendous opportunities, for instance, for employers of all companies across a given community, a geographic region, or a professional or industrial sector, to share resources and help employees transition from one company or another. All employers benefit from having this shared sense of responsibility to the extent that it's appropriate build a community of talent.

Don't overlook the benefits of virtual career fairs. Enable organizations to present themselves online so that potential employers can meet directly with these people in transition. This is a win-win arrangement for everyone because the organization that is letting them go wants to land them fast. The organization that is hiring is able to fill the positions fast. And you are able to sustain a relationship of goodwill with your talent that is transitioning out.

Conclusion

There was once a time — and unfortunately in many circumstances, it's still the case — when, for many companies, talent management was treated as little more than a speed bump in the fast traffic of market competition. The fortunate companies had the benefit of

an energetic and creative HR professional who relished the challenges of making the best matches between immediate company need for a specific set of skills and the immediate availability of candidates with the skill sets that approximated that wish list. But more commonly, companies clumsily cycled through waves of employees, bringing them in as needed, washing them out when their skills apparently no longer matched the business strategy. I say *apparently* because, as we have seen in this chapter, employers commonly don't keep records of their employees' growing collection of abilities. And so they risk jettisoning the very talent via the left hand that they are spending vast sums to attract and acquire via the right hand.

Decade after decade of employers and employees alike experienced the hard knocks of layoffs, caused by all manner of reasons. The conventional outplacement services soothed the rough, sharp edges of regret, perhaps guilt, and worry over long-term reputational implications. That solution had its place while employees still assumed a more passive stance regarding their own career trajectory.

Some outplacement services and their consultants nobly and authentically concentrate on helping outgoing candidates make their next best career match. But the drive for business efficiencies being what it is, and human nature being what it is, the outplacement world has become somewhat commoditized. And success is all too frequently measured by speed rather than quality.

Today, as you walk through the corridors of your workplace and consider your employees, you're looking at workers who have taken active ownership of their own career trajectories. Quite independently, as a matter of fact, of whatever plans your company may have for them. They are using the various social networks and databases to their own personal advantage. Which is why, as we discussed in this chapter, LinkedIn very likely knows more about your employees than you do. It's all about the timely, to-the-moment, even voluntary updating of relevant data — organized and stored in a way that is most beneficial to both the individuals and employers.

This caliber of data collection is within your own grasp as a private employer. When you take up the resolve to actively gather essential data on your employees' developments, several benefits occur:

• You gain strategic insight and are better able to reinvest in your current employees and potentially even alumni.

• You reduce expenses associated with recruiting, onboarding, training, unemployment, and severance. Don't overlook the intangible expenses, such as reputational and brand-negative impacts on your company.

• You are best equipped to align your workforce strategies with business strategies, well in advance of actually needing the abilities in place. With a robust data collection strategy, you can quickly identify who already has the heretofore untapped abilities that will be essential in the near future. You can also identify who is best positioned to perhaps take on new training to acquire those necessary skills. And, you can even tap your alumni, inviting them to return because in the intervening years, they have become exactly what you will be needing very soon. And you know this because your data collection system has presented them to you for your consideration.

In its simplest iterations, this dedication to a robust data gathering program could be easily seen as mere "career empowerment." It's always healthy for employee engagement,

good will, and your employer brand to be seen as an organization that takes an active interest in your employees' career well-being.

But in this context, career empowerment is a critical component of *business empowerment*. It is *always* to the company's best strategic and competitive advantage to know exactly what skills and abilities are available to it at any given moment. Whether your most compelling need at the moment is a redeployment of talent from one business unit to another, or a temporary stand-in for a gig that offers developmental opportunities to the employees, the more insight you have in the talent that is closest to you, the more agile you are – ready to stay ahead of your market needs and competitors' challenges.

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After going through a layoff himself, Sanjay Sathe founded RiseSmart to deliver higher quality career transition services via cutting edge, proprietary technology to forward-thinking and compassionate employers who wanted their employees to land the right new jobs—fast. RiseSmart, now the nation's fastest-growing outplacement firm, was led by Sathe as CEO and President from startup to the 2015 acquisition by Randstad, one of the world's largest HR services providers.

Prior to founding Risesmart, Sanjay served as vice president for enterprise data management for Sabre Holdings, the parent company of Travelocity and a $2.5 billion global leader in travel commerce. Before Sabre, Sanjay was senior vice president of marketing for Brierley & Partners, a CRM and loyalty management company that serves global brands such as Hilton HHonors, Hertz #1 Club Gold, Sony, and Nokia. He also has worked in marketing management in Europe and Asia with Lufthansa, HSBC, and other major corporations.

Contact Sanjay at ssathe@risesmart.com.