Digital Technologies in HR Alignment Practice: Identifying Five Key Issues and Their Relationship to Ethical Use

The age of digital transformation, as characterized by the rise of platform technologies, predictive analytics, and artificial intelligence, has created a newer set of challenges and opportunities for organizations to compete differently and specifically in a broader ecosystem change. At the same time, this digital ecosystem has presented criticisms and specific to the effects of whether digital technologies will accelerate greater or less ethical use to different areas of HR practice – ranging from talent acquisition to performance management. In this roundtable session, we select examples of digital technologies currently utilized in HR practice and through which to examine five key issues and opportunities specifically that of over and underestimation of talent, data privacy, diversity and inclusion, social isolation, and displacement and customization of work; in this roundtable session, we interrelate these issues to three ethical frameworks, ending with broader implications for HR management educators.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the rise of digital technologies inclusive of Big Data, predictive analytics, and AI, digital technologies have converged upon organizations as not as just a nice-to-have, but also as must-have in organizations. At the same time, and especially given the effects of COVID-19, there is much concern as to whether the use and over-reliance on digital technologies may lead to deleterious effects. Some of these sample effects that are in contention, and which have been highlighted more generally both within and beyond HR practice, include whether digital technologies may lead to greater burnout (e.g., Mheidly, Fares & Fares, 2020); reduced learning or e-exclusion (e.g., Abbott, 2007); increased need for isolation and separation (Moss, 2020); as well as loss of identification both within individuals and organizations (Isari, Bissola, & Imperatori, 2019).

The above effects may hold different implications especially as organizations more holistically face rapid change and the need to reframe more quickly not just external value for key consumers and stakeholders, but also where they derive value internally for their employees as well. At the same time in the context of HR practice, there is a critical need to understand, even prior to COVID-19, how the aegis of digital technologies within the past decade have only exacerbated the above dynamics by looking and reinforcing fluidity, often at the expense of their ethical use inside and beyond their organizations (See Lewis, 2019 for an example).

Theoretical Frameworks and Traditions

With the above in mind, the effects of digital technologies are still emergent and new. At the same time, there has been some studies into their proposed short-run and long-term effects in fields such as privacy (Pekka et al., 2018; Cutler et al., 2018) to justice (Holdren et al., 2016), solidarity, inclusion, social cohesion (Floridi et al., 2018), future of employment/worker rights (Crawford et al., 2019) among others. The current void however relates not just to areas

of how digital transformation can shape HR practices differently, but also how they may evolve

and change the existing employer to employee relationship? For example, what levels of

alternative forms of governance or tolerances for greater fluidity should be allowed?

We identify five key considerations in this regard – and which are the focal point of this

changing relationship and for discussion in our roundtable session. They include how digital

technologies in HR may 1) over and underestimate talent, 2) create alternative risk

considerations in data privacy, 3) reconceptualize diversity and inclusion, 4) reduce or increase

social isolation, and 5) alter displacement and customization of work.

Given the effects of digital transformation, we argue that these five areas become salient

not just in terms of HR alignment and use, but how social contract theory would apply in this

new world. Social contract theory is a normative theory in business ethics modeled on political

social contract ideas from Locke, Rousseau and Hobbes, which state that there is an implicit

social contract between "between society and an artificial entity in which society recognizes the

existence of the entity on the condition that it serves the interests of society in certain specified

ways" (Hasnas, 1998: 29). In this case, there is a social contract between the firm and the

employees.

The emergence and changes to this social contract via digital technologies in turn also

serves the basis to elaborate seminal ethical debates. For example, the original theories of

'deontological requirements,' 'consequentialist considerations,' 'the categorical imperative,'

'rule utilitarianism,' 'the hedonistic calculus,' 'human flourishing' in ethics were restated as the

three main normative theories for business ethics i.e., stockholder, stakeholder and social

contract theory to make them more relevant and practical to the corporate world (Hasnas,

1998).

In the interest of this session, we focus on three of these ethical frameworks and how

they might interrelate with the five considerations that we highlight above - and specifically

how digital technologies may alter social and psychological contract considerations.

Learning Objectives

With the above in mind, the learning outcomes associated with our roundtable session include:

- Understanding how digital transformation and HR alignment play out differently among these five considerations

- Identifying what key ethical issues and lenses can provide additional forms of transparency

- Understanding what alternative considerations should be put into play

As preparation points, we suggest that those who want a better background on the differential effects of digital transformation on HR review the following.

- DiRomualdo, A., El-Khoury, D., & Girimonte, F. (2018). HR in the digital age: how digital technology will change HR's organization structure, processes and roles. *Strategic HR Review*. 17(5): 234-242.

- Mitrofanova, E. A., Konovalova, V. G., & Mitrofanova, A. E. (2018). Opportunities, problems and limitations of digital transformation of HR management. In *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences EpSBS* (pp. 1717-1727).

- Rimon, G. (2017). Six surprising truths about how digital transformation will change HR. *Strategic HR Review.* 16: 102-104.

Session Description and Plan

To achieve our learning objectives, our roundtable session is thus planned as follows:

- **Introduction (10 – 15 minutes)** – We will introduce the general issues around digital transformation and HR and how they have converged upon the five issues that will affect the social contract of employer to employee in HR practice. These five issues as stated above include how digital technologies may 1) over and underestimate talent, 2) create alternative risk considerations in data privacy, 3) reconceptualize diversity and inclusion, 4) reduce or increase social isolation, and 5) alter displacement and customization of work. For those who are less familiar with ethical frameworks, we will briefly present three frameworks for consideration.

- **Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)** – We will assign participants to one of these five areas either in smaller pairs or in groups to find examples of the key issues that we introduce, and how they might be tied to ethical use and practice. As part of this activity and roundtable discussion, we will ask participants to leverage either their current familiarity and/or to use their laptops and/or cellphones to conduct a brief search on current issues and practices pertaining to their area and digitized technologies. Participants will then be asked to write-up their points on a shared Zoom PowerPoint to share as part of our debrief.

- **Remaining Time Debrief and Discussion (20 minutes)** – For the remaining time, we will ask participants to share their findings from our roundtable activity. We will also ask participants to provide suggestions as to how they might utilize their learnings for integration into HR-related classes.

- **Target Audience –** HR or management educators with an interest in newer trajectories on the effects of digital technologies, HR, and ethical use

- **Materials Needed** – Zoom, Computer and PowerPoint

- **Total Time Requested** – 60 minutes

Application to Conference Theme and Unique Contribution to MOBTS

As part of this year's conference theme, we examine how the convergence of digital technologies has now questioned traditional concepts in terms of the social contract relationship in HR and specific to employer to employee practice. We articulate this to the emergence of five key areas that need to be considered by HR educators and practitioners.

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This is the first time this proposal has been presented to MOBTC and at a conference.

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