



Executive Interview



Jonathan Ferrar

Interview conducted by
Shawn Fitzgerald,
WSR co-managing editor.

WSR: Welcome to this interview for Workforce Solutions Review featuring Jonathan Ferrar from IBM to speak about the future he's expecting to see in the HR technology world. Thanks for joining us, Jonathan.

Jonathan: Thank you. Good to be here.

WSR: As we get started, why don't you share your background with our readers?

Jonathan: Sure. I have been an HR professional for about 20 years working for multinationals in a variety of HR executive management roles in the areas of recruitment, learning, generalist, and M&A.

In 2010, I took a global leadership role at IBM, focused on workforce analytics and HR strategy. In the last two years, I've taken an external client-facing role in IBM, focused on workforce solutions, human capital solutions using cloud technology, and behavioral science to help clients deliver value through technology and analytic solutions.

WSR: As you reflect on the progress of HR technology over the past 10 years, what trends have you seen, and which ones are still around?

Jonathan: Ten years is a long time in technology, and if you look back we find that many things that exist in today's life weren't around 10 years ago, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, email, Instagram, the iPod, the iPhone. That is the consumer angle, but since all employees are consumers as well, it gives us an indication of some of the HR technology trends. In the HR world, there has been a trend towards centralization of technology in HR processes. That followed with outsourcing of some of those functions.

Then we entered into an era where social technology was prevalent in the workplace, called enterprise social networks, and we saw

sharing for collaboration, for networking, and for understanding profiles, expertise, and skills. Organizations began to shift away from big, on-premise, process-driven technologies into things that would be more collaborative and socially-led, but still typically still on-premise.

Then the trend over the last three or four years has been movement to cloud technology, lowering the price point, increasing the user interface, and changing from customization of everything in HR. Cloud technology helps HR enable those trends through the subscription model and has driven employees to act like consumers. Employees are now demanding things like mobile technologies and improved user interfaces, on any device, so that now HR processes are fundamentally using technology to engage the employee in the same ways that consumer technologies are getting consumers to interact with products and services in the external world.

HR technology has really gone from, shall we say, massive centralization of company-led technologies to a high-end user interface, with mobile technologies that are delivered by the cloud now to allow the employees a much more user-centric style of interaction. That is driving HR processes to look much more at the employee interaction with the task, whether that's learning in a training course, reviewing some new policy or process, recruiting new talent, etc., but whatever it is, it's a very different experience today than 10 years ago.

WSR: As you think about the next 5 or 10 years, how do you think HR technology will evolve?

Jonathan: I believe we will continue to see expansion of the consumer technology trends influence on employee technology with big impacts on how HR looks in the future.

Let's take wearables like the Fitbit. Today in the consumer world they are used by health conscious people, health advisors, gyms, etc. In the HR space, that consumer trend could lead to a wearable in the workplace that moni-

tors our health and might help prevent health issues or recommend health benefits. And now we have smart watches with access to the Internet. So, could social collaboration in the workplace actually lead us to wearing devices that allow us to be connected to the Internet at all times?

Another future trend is sensors. Sensors have been used to monitor a variety of things. In the workplace, they have been used to monitor foot traffic in buildings that allow for real estate management. In terms of the workplace, what if a sensor could tell who of your top 50 employees are in the office, and therefore you can identify where the free seats are and which of those top employees are available for you to interact with in person. You can get connected immediately.

Perhaps the experience of the virtual meeting will evolve with sensors and hologram technology can create a more straightforward virtual team room, virtual meeting room, or virtual interview. This could provide a much more realistic, almost a holographic interaction, and therefore it could take interviews away from the real-time to a virtual, holographic type of interview experience. That could change the way in which recruitment happens.

Next, let's talk about neuroscience. Imagine the way in which you could use brain monitoring and neuroscience to look at assessment of leaders. That could change leadership development or succession planning. You could also use neuroscience to look at real-time assessment of anxiety in decision-making, anxiety in judgment, or before performance conversations.

Then there is the trend of biodata. We can use a fingerprint now to access the Internet on a computer or on a tablet. A sensor in the fingerprint scanner could also read your pulse rate that could give an indication of an employee's engagement in the workplace.

Imagine though if you combined a biodata sensor of your fingerprint and a pulse rate to provide your employee with your happiness quotient in real-time or the actual level of anxiety, engagement, or some other biological signal that could indicate something of use in an HR product.

There are just a number of things that I think will come in the next 10 years. I

certainly think they'll be probably mainstream in a few years' time.

WSR: Jonathan, can you give us your thinking on gamification and where it's going in the workplace?

Jonathan: Gamification has probably been around for 30 years or so in the actual gaming industry. As games have become much more sophisticated and are now used in social networks, people are now making friends in the virtual world and using games to interact with those people. Put that interaction into the workplace, and we could use gamification to bring people into a virtual world for the purpose of collaboration and meetings or for learning and development. The employee could physically go into a virtual world and "play games," but the games aren't on a video console, they're games that allow people to interact in a virtual world around real scenarios for learning and development.

If we apply gamification to recruitment, we're already doing some of that with interviewing, but in the future, you could also present an interview scenario in a created virtual workplace. Rather than giving a candidate a hypothetical scenario, you could actually present questions or exercises in your virtual, potential workplace. So, you're effectively playing out a scenario that you will play out if you got offered the job in the real world.

WSR: What do you think are some of the technologies that organizations aren't using that they should be using?

Jonathan: The big issue in the last four years or so has been the shift to cloud technology, but still, there are many companies that are using hybrid solutions; some of its applications are in cloud technology, and some of its applications are still on-premise, in-house built systems.

Resource or money has caused the move to less expensive versions of technology in the cloud, but I don't think that's really what's shifting people to cloud. It is the user experience that's really shifting people to cloud, and

that user experience cannot be replicated in on-premise systems, frankly just because of money and sheer development time scale.

The shift to cloud is going to accelerate, and I think the shift to cloud for analytics is going to accelerate even quicker, which means that your data is going to be hosted by other companies, not yourself. As companies get more comfortable with that idea, the privacy and the security aspects are going to be much tighter. The way in which HR departments then utilize analytics to make decisions, and that's not just sheer demographic analytics, but could be social analytics around the use of collaboration systems. All of these things are going to be much more readily available as soon as more applications in a workplace move to the cloud and more data is therefore in the cloud. This allows managers the ability to make decisions quickly because of the analytic platforms that allow for analysis of the entire human and personnel data stored in these cloud platforms.

WSR: Any other new technologies that organizations should be adopting?

Jonathan: Cognitive technologies are coming along and machine learning and robots have started coming into discussions, as well. Again led by the consumer market there are drones,

but I wonder if there will be a time in the next 10 to 15 years when robots in the workplace may actually be prevalent to do fairly rudimentary administrative tasks.

There will be a blur between what humans do in the workplace and what technology does in the workplace. Will we see a time where people and robots work side by side doing different style of tasks? Might we be in an office environment where each of us has a robot on our desk and we will ask it questions? Or the robot listens to what we're

saying or typing and it suggests the next most important task that we should accomplish? Or the robot suggests leadership development or management development as we're on the job?

We could have a personal robot assistant sitting next to us saying, "You did that well," "You didn't do that well"? I can see that in the next 15 or 20 years and that really shifts the boundaries of what humans and what technology does in HR. I just hope that I get a nice robot that's very supportive.

WSR: Jonathan, any final thoughts you'd like to share with our readers?

Jonathan: Whilst some of the futuristic ideas are very new and can be scary, let's bring it back to today. In today's world, we are consumers. We do like our smartphones. We do like the ease of access in applications. In the near future, the next two to three years, we are going to see the continued proliferation of HR cloud and HR processes being underpinned by HR cloud technologies. That is going to change the employee user experience and it changes the way in which we might undertake some fairly routine things, like connecting to colleagues, selecting our benefits at work, recruiting staff, and finding top talent in the organization. This is going to make our work experience so much more pleasant and interesting and it means that HR professionals become much more business advisors because they're not focused on managing these processes. The technology will literally replace the process and allow the HR organization to actually focus on the risk management, the value, the benefit, the employee collaboration, etc., and the things that are important in the workplace.

As a final comment, think about how you interact with your smartphone and how pleasurable that is and how different that was seven or eight years ago, and that's where we're going to get to from an HR point of view in the next three to five-years' time.

About Jonathan Ferrar

Jonathan Ferrar leads the Analytics practice for IBM Smarter Workforce. He focuses his time helping HR clients improve business performance through the application of people related analytics solutions. In this role, he leads a team of over 100 consultants, behavioural psychologists and product managers to deliver the full range of IBM's analytics, data, consulting and workforce science solutions. These include employee engagement surveys, behavioural and skills assessments, predictive and cognitive analytics solutions and consulting services. Ferrar has been with IBM since 2000. He holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Cambridge, UK. In addition to his IBM responsibilities, he is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK and regularly speaks at external events. He is based in New York but splits his time between the UK and U.S. He can be found on Twitter [@jaferrar](#) and LinkedIn.