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Cobots – A Five-Step Program for HR to Create a Highly Efficient Digital Workplace

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The future workplace is undeniably digital, and enterprises are currently moulding it by leveraging bots, embracing AI and all things cognitive. The "Automation First" era has enabled some organizations to leapfrog into the future, pushing them to think and implement smarter business delivery models. Intelligent automation is destined to change the future workplace and is a major catalyst for redefining the roles and responsibilities of employees. Consequently, there will be a huge impact on the human resource functions, including how they recruit, train and conduct performance reviews for employees.

Bots in the HR function

In many organizations today, bots have made headway in cross-functional teams or horizontal functions. These bots come in many shapes and formats: humanoid bots, virtual assistants / chatbots, Robotic Process Automation (RPA) bots, and industrial bots, among others. One of the most common examples are software bots or RPA bots deployed to perform horizontal activities in the areas of Finance, IT and HR.

In the HR function, IA can free up the HR representatives' time to focus on critical employee issues that require strategic decision-making or emotional intelligence, thereby allowing them to put their energies in cases where a human touch is needed and appreciated. Such tasks include attracting and retaining top talent and guiding employees through Change Management and organization restructuring.

In fact, the entire value chain of hire-to-retire is ripe with opportunities for Intelligent Automation. Some of the common examples include – processing employee payroll, employee onboarding, processing vendor and customer invoices, screening prospective employee resumes, scheduling interviews and much more. Employee Queries or FAQs on the Company Policies is another area where bots can come in handy. These chatbots or virtual assistants can also identify the context and the intent of the interaction and take appropriate actions, thereby reducing the number of tickets and inbound calls to a contact center.

Bots of the future will not just work alongside human employees, but with them. These co-existing, co-working bots or Cobots (short for collaborative robots) or Hubots, will be tasked with delivering accelerated and accurate business outcomes.

Role-based bots

Bots are used to screen candidates based on qualifications such as minimum work experience, academic success, a specific skillset, availability of interview panel, and timeslots for interviews. They can even go one step further and help in onboarding employees by performing document collation and verification, induction sessions and taking feedback from the new joiners. Unlike operational bots that require the human in the loop, role-based bots completely remove the need for employee intervention and can act as virtual subordinates / teams.

Despite the growing acceptance of bots over the last several years, many enterprises struggle to implement the cobot model. These challenges can be due to the rigidity of the inhouse legacy systems, or security issues or bot extensibility and scaling up problems. HR executives – tasked with ensuring their companies' workforce is as highly skilled as possible – have an opportunity to make an impact here. They can address some of the more sizable obstacles, including the employee mindset that equates bots with job loss, little buy-in from the top management, and an overall myopic view with respect to Intelligent Automation.

So, how can HR departments support the incorporation of hubots into the workplace to achieve efficient and accurate outcomes that wouldn't be possible by humans or bots alone?

Step 1
Creating Awareness

For any organization to kickstart its automation journey, the HR department plays a crucial role by being the flagbearer and driving an organization-wide culture change, reducing the overall resistance from employees. Led by HR, organizations need to assure their employees that bots are not here to supplant them but instead to enable them to transition toward better and strategic roles. Giving employees the confidence that bots are a logical extension to their work, and not an overhead or threat, will help engage employees in the process of designing, integrating, implementing Intelligent Automation in their respective functions. HR, working with departmental managers, can help design new job descriptions and career paths to enable employees' transition towards better, strategic roles.

Step 2
Maximizing ROI

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HR professionals can be involved in the design of bots, which could help them draft newer policies that are better suited for a cobot-friendly organization. Virtual Assistants or chatbots being relatively inexpensive to design, quicker to train, their implementation can be easily handled by a non-technical HR person. These bots should be designed keeping a specific use-case in mind with a clear demarcation of the role / job between bots and humans.

An organization can save exorbitant operational and infrastructure costs by gradually replacing their contact center setup with virtual assistants. Cobots can help gain RoI by speeding up the response times, being available 24*7 and freeing up the human counterparts to take up more meaningful roles. In order to reap the maximum ROI, business units and HR professionals need to tackle the fragmented processes challenge by looking at business problems or processes, and the employees responsible for them from a use-case and a business ROI perspective rather than merely as set of tasks.

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Step 3
Leveraging Partnerships within the Organization

There needs to be a joint effort beyond the integration of cobots into a business unit. This includes the individual employee, business unit leadership, the information technology department and HR. An organization's business units always have a pulse on the market in terms of how their customers are operating manually and digitally. They need the required technical prowess, the feasibility in terms of the readiness, underlying platforms, systems and umpteen other parameters. IT helps the business evaluate, validate and implement the solution. And HR responds with updated staffing requirements and training needs. The HR-IT-business unit relationship needs to be a hand-in-glove initiative where business becomes the demand-generation engine for bot creation, and IT and HR evaluates and implements.

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Step 4
Governing and Training the Digital Enterprise

Designing a risk and governance framework that suits the intelligent automation will alleviate security and compliance concerns. HR can proactively train employees on the usage of bots, tools and platforms, clear segregation of bot duties, and access and identity management. This will help avoid misuse of privileges and confidential data. Well-designed bots ensure compliance with regulations and security and reduces the need for HR to oversee training in this area.

Take the example of fraud detection or money laundering risks that could cause banks to incur huge losses and reputational damage.

Chatbots can be programmed to detect these risks and compliance failures early on (e.g. during customer onboarding) and get even wiser and smarter at risk and compliance management with time. Highly regulated industries in the healthcare field are making their bots HIPAA-compliant to ensure stricter compliance in areas where patients' personal information is involved.

Step 5
Coexisting and Evolving Together

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Bots are evolving every day, learning from historical data and unique scenarios, improving themselves with time. However, as these bots handle more complex tasks that involve decision-making and strategizing, they'll still need that "human touch" to make sense of what they do and how they handle exceptions. HR department can and should be involved with training staff on how to work with bots: when to raise issues about bot performance and how to make recommendations on evolving bot functionality. The cobot relationship needs to be a symbiotic one – the more they interact with one another, the more they'll learn from each other and become the cornerstone of what is becoming a digital society across enterprises.

Imbibing a Cobot Culture

For this to work, enterprises should envision a business delivery model that encompasses bot-human work teams where the combined efforts contribute more than each one could separately. By envisioning multiple ways of bonding humans plus bots to work cohesively, HR executives can help strengthen the bond. HR can design and maintain a common forum for employees to share their bot experiences and a strong Rewards & Recognition program to imbibe a cobot culture in the organization. Only when enterprises embrace this collaborative way of working with open arms, will their operations and customer experiences transform dramatically.

About the Author

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In a career spanning 22 years, Swapnil has played key leadership roles in large-scale strategic and transformational initiatives for marquee customers across India, US, UK, Europe, Australia, Canada and South Africa and has delivered complex automation projects with multimillion-dollar benefits for customer GICs, Captives and Shared Services across industries.

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