

FEATURES Technology Rush

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December 1, 2007

Just because it blows you away on screen doesn't mean it will help attract, hire and train the employees your agency needs.

As technology transforms how people interact, network and learn, human resources directors, continuing education experts and workforce planners must sift through a torrent of new tools and applications to find those that really make a difference. Consider Facebook: The social networking site that originally targeted college and high school students now has 47 million regular users, more than 56,000 of them associated with the Army alone. There are 60 million Americans using iPods to listen to music, news, lectures and even to view television programs and movies. The largest private university in North America, the University of Phoenix, offers 770 online-only courses to more than 196,000 students.

But the very ubiquity of technology means HR staffers must not simply glom onto the latest software, hardware or social networking phenomenon in the hope that it will strike a chord with job applicants and employees. Finding the best solution for a given HR problem often requires identifying a tool to simplify and clarify a complex process, rather than one that adds the sheen of technological advancement as well as more complications.

Whether a filmed scenario in which prospective Border Patrol officers test their decision-making capabilities, a three-dimensional computerized model of a new weapon that a mechanic can train on, or a tracking chart that helps organizations visualize looming skills gaps, tailored solutions increasingly are available from vendors and in use at agencies.

Faster, Smarter Hiring

Technology is proving particularly useful to agencies hoping to streamline and improve the rigid hiring and recruiting process. The Census Bureau electronic hiring system, for example, provides managers with desktop, Web-based access to an electronic applicant tracking feature that provides images of résumés and transcripts within 24 hours. Since automating the process, Census has reduced the time required to fill positions for computer specialists, statisticians and others from six months to as little as three days. Since September 1998, Census has filled more than 1,000 vacancies using the electronic system.

Marta Brito Perez, chief human capital officer at the Homeland Security Department, touts technology as the key to screening and hiring large numbers of employees. "We touch 30 people before we hire one," Perez says. "That's a lot of processing, and there are a lot of opportunities throughout the process to screen [out] people who don't have the right skills."

The department's Customs and Border Protection bureau is using videos to evaluate the skills of potential officers, says national recruitment director Joseph Abbott. "The job of a CBP officer requires decision-making in certain circumstances," he says. "That is hard to replicate in a traditional interview

setting. We use technology to replicate the situations they would find themselves in if they were a CBP officer." The screening requires applicants to participate in true-to-life scenarios taking place on a television screen while a video camera captures their reactions. CBP hiring headquarters in Minnesota evaluates the videotapes; those who perform well enter the formal interview and selection process, Abbott says.

On the recruiting side, agencies must determine which talents their workers need and then develop relationships with people who possess them, says Chris Tratar, director of solution marketing at Taleo, a worldwide developer of recruiting and talent management software in Dublin, Calif. "It's a really tight labor market," Tratar says. "A lot of people that you're really looking for are generally going to be employed somewhere else."

Tools for managing candidate relationships allow HR managers to set specific criteria and then search the entire Internet - especially social networking Web sites such as LinkedIn and Jobster - for qualified candidates. "Candidate relationship management enables you to keep track of those people, keep information on them and proactively reach out from time to time to keep them updated on your organization or your agency," Tratar says.

Still, technology isn't always the best recruiting tool, Abbott says. For example, as CBP is working to meet a mandate issued by President Bush to hire 6,000 Border Patrol agents by the end of 2008, the agency must be especially creative in recruiting. "The challenge is not to rely on technology to be the solution to everything. The challenge is to be effective, not just glitzy with bells and whistles," he says.

To meet the 2008 mandate, CBP has turned to agents, not technology, to represent the agency and recruit people who share their passion for protecting the country. The campaign includes a visible presence at NASCAR auto races, where the agency communicates with fans about its mission using simple technology - monitors displaying current activity at the Southwest border and Internet access so interested applicants can submit résumés. "Human contact increases in value the more uncertain a person is in applying," Abbott says.

Tailored, Just-in-Time Training

Once employees make it into government service, targeted technologies can help keep them current. Targeted tech can be useful when agencies find gaps in the abilities of their workforces. Finding the right technologies, however, is crucial. It does no good to sign up employees for online courses that rely on software they can't download to their office computers, for example, nor is it helpful to encourage military service members to train on simulations based on gaming technology they are blocked from downloading onto their government-issued PCs.

Vendors who specialize in designing sophisticated training software say content and design are critical elements. James Chisholm is the co-founder of a Toronto-based simulation design company called ExperiencePoint, which provides everything from daylong business simulations in which participants run a company to similar software for a wide array of public and private sector clients. One of his favorites is called Omega.

This simulation offers a deceptively simple scenario presented in a "choose your own adventure" format. The player is assigned the role of a senior vice president of marketing and given a budget of \$10 million to promote four products, one of which is about to be recalled. Just before the point where the player can make a decision comes a final piece of information: The product that is about to be recalled is the company's biggest seller. The twist? For half the players, that information is delivered by the company

CEO, and for the other half, a subordinate. When the information is delivered by the CEO, players are more likely to devote money to the product that will be recalled.

"You can shock people into seeing we all have the same biases, and we need to be aware of them," says Chisholm. "If you're looking to build a simulation, don't get wowed by the technology. Ask what they teach."

Training succeeds only if its lessons stick, and that imperative is particularly important when the students are military technicians who need to apply their lessons on the battlefield. NGRAIN Corp. in Seattle creates interactive three-dimensional models of weapons systems and machinery that can be uploaded to personal digital assistants that mechanics can use in the field. Because the system is engaging and portable, mechanics have been much more willing to explore it, says Don Arnold, general manager of the federal sector at NGRAIN. "It's not just about technology. It's about putting the right technology in the right places," he says.

"You want to know how the bullet goes from the belt to the barrel, and if it doesn't, you want to know how to fix it," he says of a machine gun model. When it is intuitive to use and easy to access, technology can be a lifesaver - literally. Arnold offers proof: "Humvee wheels were falling off under speed, and it happened because of a mistake in the training process. We used a 3-D model so the beginning mechanics could learn how to do this. A few months later, we got some feedback - they said the wheels stopped falling off the Humvees. That's significant."

The key to NGRAIN's success with the models, Arnold says, is that they were a good fit with their audience and saved everyone time. It can take as little as 30 minutes for someone playing with the model to figure out how the machinery works. "It's fine for us to tell you facts, but if you're not listening, you don't care," he says. "You've got to appreciate the receptiveness of the learners."

Simple, Straightforward Software

But just as technology can facilitate learning, it can be an invitation to do less of the hard work involved in designing good training programs, says Kathleen James, manager of the Commerce Department's Learning Center. When she came to Commerce, the department offered 2,000 self-study courses. "When I hear that someone has more than 2,000 distance learning courses, my antennae go up," James told an audience at the HrGov2007 conference in Morgantown, W. Va., in September. "How many of you have experienced a course that's really PowerPoint? How many of you have gotten college credit for reading a book? It can be an activity that you do as part of training, but it's not really training. . . . Is there a place for those 2,000 self-study courses? If it's appropriate and achieves your goals, that's great. But to call it training is a disservice."

Sharon Fratta-Hill, dean of information technology and distance education at the USDA Graduate School, told conference attendees that she has tried to marry the most straightforward technology with a mix of capabilities to keep students engaged with the material and in touch with their instructors, even from a distance. For example, she rejected one e-learning software based on its complexity. "We realized [it] actually made you download software onto your computer, and we knew that wouldn't work for our government agencies [most of which prohibit downloads onto office computers]," she says. "Adobe worked over the Internet, and all you needed was Flash." A Flash player installed in a Web browser enables delivery of course content without downloading anything onto a user's computer. Using the simpler software meant USDA Graduate School programs would be more accessible. And when USDA designed the courses that Adobe would deliver, developers sought to combine multiple formats to make the courses engaging.

"We created two different formats," Fratta-Hill says. "One was asynchronous. You started with PowerPoint [presentations] that were in sync with audio and video. We interspersed activities every 12 or 15 minutes. We [create Adobe documents containing] all the materials they would have in the class. . . In the synchronous courses, students can instant message the teacher, they can raise their hands and ask questions via video."

More and more, the technology to hire and train federal employees is available and relatively simple to adopt and use. It enables learners to accomplish and understand sophisticated tasks. By trial, error and careful consideration, agencies are finding their way through the electronic wonderland to the right solutions.

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