In this Q&A, Shimon Senderowitz, head of HR innovation and analytics at ADP, discusses how and why the traditional relationship between HR and IT is changing, why these new partnerships need executive-level support, and what business and technology considerations organizations must address for successful HR-IT collaboration.

This conversation has been edited for clarity, length, and editorial style.

**Q: How would you describe the traditional relationship between HR and IT?**

**Senderowitz:** The traditional relationship is very straightforward. The technologies that HR implements have been mainly practitioner systems — essentially, big file cabinets. There are systems for recruiters to use. There are systems for people who administer learning to use. And, of course, there are the big, core HR systems to manage all basic transactions. Some of these systems have an employee-facing component, but they are limited in scope.

Now we’re working on implementing what we call employee experience type systems, which represent multiple perspectives at a whole new level. First, these systems need to be more fully integrated into other technologies used in organizations. They also require a different level of sophistication. For example, they need more user-experience designers because they are designed to be integrated into the flow of work.

Before, systems were designed around what practitioners actually needed and how they liked to do their work. Now it’s a very different lens. It’s about how people do their work in general, and it’s beyond the specific tasks that they’re doing. It’s all built around the role of an employee or candidate versus the role of a recruiter. That means that you have to consider many different perspectives to get the requirements right.

Another element is that, historically, the employees on the IT side who were aligned to help with HR were programmers with technology skill sets based on the company’s tech stack. Most systems were built on similar stacks, and as long as the users in HR provided good requirements, the tech team could build it with the expertise they already had in-house.

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Now we require IT employees with a much wider skill set that traditional IT teams simply don't have, and we also can't be limited to a specific tech stack because solutions need to be wide-ranging. That means that either IT and HR have to forge new relationships, or those IT teams have to upskill and expand their own teams to service the needs of today's HR organizations.

From an HR–IT relationship perspective, it was very transactional in the past. It wasn't as strategic. Interactions were mainly at the lower levels because they really didn't require senior-level involvement.

That's changing, because now we're talking about very strategic systems that are more fully integrated into the organization's talent-management and technology strategy.

Technology teams need to be more aligned with HR and dedicate more resources to HR than ever before — and to do so at higher levels — because, again, the conversations are increasingly going to be strategic, rather than tactical.

Q: Why is it important for these collaborative relationships to happen right now?

Senderowitz: There's a strong push for these employee experience type systems. People are demanding it; it's happening everywhere. And there is a gap on both sides.

On the HR side: HR doesn't always know how to solve for these needs, so they need IT to come and help them understand what's out there based on what HR is looking to accomplish at a high level, not based on specific requirements. That's my role, in essence, because although I sit on the HR side, I am a technologist.

On the IT side: Tech teams need to be able to understand the business, not just the requirements. I look for my partners in IT to have a strong domain focus and curiosity to understand what we do and how we do it on the HR side.

So with the conversation shifting from “Here are the requirements for System X” to “How do we reengineer Process Y,” it can no longer be a discussion between lower-level HR and IT professionals. Again, it's now more senior-level executives who are brainstorming how to change things.

Here's an example. One hot new HR technology involves internal mobility — the ability to be proactive and recommend open jobs to existing employees based on their skill sets and backgrounds. In the traditional process, recruiters post jobs, candidates see the listing and apply, recruiters review the applications, and if they like a particular candidate, they can make the introduction. The new technology turns the traditional process upside down. Now a hiring manager posts a job and candidates are automatically matched — and now the hiring manager is the first one to make a decision on that candidate. So there has to be higher-level involvement, because it's going to fundamentally change how we do things.

Q: What does an organization's top leadership need to do to enable effective HR–IT collaboration?

Senderowitz: It's important to establish governance. Organizations can establish a working group or council to take on this initiative within the business. It's important to ensure that key leaders are invited to participate. Having this level of participation can help create more accountability and a deeper level of understanding of the HR goals and how IT is helping to solve for them. This group should meet regularly to discuss those goals, progress on specific initiatives, and, when necessary, remove any obstacles that come up. With that level of collaboration, it's not just HR having a vested interest and asking IT to come help. It's the other way around as well.

Q: Can you provide an example of how such collaboration enables improved employee experiences?

Senderowitz: For instance, when talking about building a chatbot, instead of being a conversation about “What
is the HR chatbot going to look like,” it’s a conversation about “What is your company’s chatbot going to look like, and how does the HR component fit into it?”

The same conversation plays out when talking about portals, when talking about employee self-service and manager self-service. It’s a much broader conversation right now about the role that someone is in, rather the specific transaction someone executes on. We’re not talking about HR transactions that an employee has to be able to self-service. We’re talking about employees and the things they need to do, or managers and the things they need to do.

So we’ve developed systems that are designed around managers and their role as managers, and around the chief operating officer and the role of the COO, or around whatever role you have in the organization. That way, we can talk about it holistically. When you have that conversation, you need more people involved and you need to think about the solutions differently.

Q: Could you talk a bit more about HR chatbots, and about some other new and relevant technologies?

Senderowitz: Sure. Chatbots are virtual agents that not only provide a support perspective — answering questions like “Where can I find my pay stub?” and “What’s the policy on tuition reimbursement?” — but also provide conversational AI tools that can serve as a virtual coach or help you execute full transactions. So you can ask questions like “I need to have a difficult conversation with an employee; what advice can you give me?” You are not just automating a transaction; you’re taking on a function that was traditionally done by a skilled HR professional. But it’s important to remember the limitations: You are replacing those professional skills and expertise with a machine that does not yet have human-level intelligence.

HR has also gotten more sophisticated in using data to understand the employee experience and how to make it better, and using data to make better people decisions. So analytics is big. HR is producing so much data right now. There has to be a lot of data governance. There has to be good infrastructure behind the scenes to collect and manage and organize that data.

Q: What other considerations do companies need to know about building effective relationships between HR and IT?

Senderowitz: First, there are the people, and how and where they work. For instance, in some organizations, data scientists sit within HR. In others, they are centralized within IT. But that’s a skill set that’s been reserved, even in the last few years, for more front-line functions, not necessarily for HR. So do you enable HR by hiring such people — and it’s an expensive skill set — or do you give your HR department access to those people who are doing it throughout your organization?

It’s fairly easy for an IT person to understand what a core human capital management or recruiting or learning system needs to look like for a practitioner, to understand the requirements and build a system to do it, because it’s pretty much black and white. But now IT people are building algorithms that are, for example, screening résumés. From a technical perspective, the IT employees can figure out what they have to do if they have that skill set. But it’s harder for them to evaluate whether it’s actually working, because they’re not recruiters; they don’t know how to evaluate the résumés.

That collaboration needs to be tighter to get the developers to understand what the recruiters look for, what they value, and how they value it.

Another example, coming back to the chatbot: Many HR transactions are very sensitive. Someone calls because they have a sick child and they need to change their medical plan, or there was a loss in the family. An HR person has the intuition to have the right tone for that conversation.
Now you’re developing a chatbot that’s going to handle that conversation. Guess what? That chatbot is cold. It has no human intuition. Also, the person who programs it is an IT person and may not know the tone and the persona that needs to go into that conversation. That means the HR person needs to have a lot more input into how the conversation should be conducted, the type of dialogue, and so on, because when using a chatbot, you drop all the cues that trained HR people pick up and adjust accordingly.

So you could see how, in the past, when we needed to build a system, we would give IT detailed business and technical requirements, and if they followed it to a T, it would be fine. Now that’s just not good enough. You can’t write that down on a piece of paper. You need to feel it, you need to experience it.

That’s why some of these jobs are now done within HR. HR hires technical people, and HR people are learning some of those skills because they bring the other side to the conversation. It used to be that, as we’ve discussed, HR systems were mostly back-end systems. Now they’re all front-end systems. It’s a whole new way of thinking. And the only way that you can be successful is through a close relationship between HR and IT.

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