

Technology versus people

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What role should tech play in building a successful company culture? Claire Lawrence, MediaCom's Chief People Officer, investigates

MediaCom is driven by its people and their relationships. So how can technology, which is often accused of depersonalising and isolating human contact, fit into a wider people strategy? The obvious – and partially correct – answer is that technology plays an important role in helping us work quicker, smarter and more intelligently, making manual processes disappear. But there is so much more to technology than simple operational efficiencies.

Many years ago, as a fresh LSE graduate, I was responsible for helping to build emergency response teams for a global NGO. Key to my new gig was finding ways of

sourcing, interviewing and deploying specialist talent at pace so they could be deployed into some truly awful humanitarian disasters. Upon meeting one of the royal patrons for the NGO, I showcased with pride the new technology underpinning our then cutting-edge applicant tracking system and online interviewing tool. Then I saw the look of horror on their face: “One does assume with all this technology, that one would still get to do the very important thing of actually meeting people in person?” Chalk up lesson one of my fledgling career in people management: relationships matter.

That’s still the case, even in the age of applied behavioural technology. We still need to work out how technology can help us build relationships, not replace them. For me, at MediaCom, nothing beats seeing our amazingly talented people on their feet, bursting with ideas, driven and passionate about sharing their insights and solutions, so full of creativity they literally can’t sit still. That’s when our people are unstoppable in their belief of how they can influence our business, grow our clients’ businesses and learn from and influence the wider society in which they live and work.

That’s People First right there. In this context, it’s our passion, our belief and our sense of belonging that moves us forward, not technology. Technology can help us assimilate vast data sets and enable our teams to turn human behaviour into real and actionable data driven solutions for our clients. Without question, it enables and informs our ideas and is at the heart of the way we work. But fundamentally, I believe technology should be there to help us build the right environment and space for ‘people magic’ to happen. We should use it to personalise our employee experiences and support our focus on ‘whole person wellbeing’.

At MediaCom, we are currently in the process of rolling out an employee experience chatbot called Amber. Amber will engage regularly with our people at key points in their employee journey (for example, soon after joining or after their first year) and help us gauge real-time engagement measures and gain insight into their beliefs, association and sense of belonging to MediaCom.

Already successfully piloted across APAC by our APAC HR lead Sonia Fernandes, it is a simple tool that will help us understand, on a global level, the attitudes and experiences of

our people. Amber will also allow us to frequently review these important benchmarks. Critically, Amber will be valuable in assisting us to identify, understand and predict future behaviours to drive up retention and address any individual issues or concerns quickly. I wish I'd had such technology in my second post-graduate job.

Having proudly introduced a talent dashboard showing historical churn rates, my then boss's forthright response was: "Tell me something that helps me manage my future, rather than focus on data I can't do anything about." Chalk up lesson number two of my early people management career: invest time in understanding the people around you if you want to truly influence future success.

Looking to the future

As we enter 2020, technology will take an increasingly central place in building company culture and creating personalised high-touch, high-value, relationship-driven employee experiences. I'm passionate about how all businesses can apply technology to amplify their talent strategies, potentially using algorithms, for example, to identify candidates based on skillset and remove bias from the selection process. Indeed, algorithms can also let you match a candidate's performance, engagement and readiness with environmental factors to ensure the right talent is matched with the right role.

In our business specifically, we're also considering how we can use technology to help us look more effectively at the way we resource bespoke, agile team structures that adapt to our clients' changing business models, and how we can use behavioural science to build an app that enhances our existing online appraisal process. Ultimately, we're trying to ensure we put different communication technologies in place so that, even in a world increasingly driven by individual interaction with mobile technology, we keep wellbeing at the heart of what we do, encouraging a culture where people simply take the time to ask their colleagues, "How are you?" It's key to a business that wants to empower a People First ethos.

4 WAYS YOU CAN USE TECH TO PUT PEOPLE FIRST

1 / Use tech to automate processes. This can free up your people to add real value through thinking and insight or focus on building stronger relationships with clients. Empower them to let the magic happen.

2 / Use tech to connect people. Make it easier for teams – particularly those based in different offices – to communicate via chat-type platforms. This can create a more natural, creative conversation than formal email and lead to a more creative approach.

3 / Use tech to boost talent retention. Technology allows us to measure employee engagement and understand the moments when people are thinking of leaving and why. Talent is critical to the success of your business, and tech can help retain your best people.

4 / Use tech to understand resource needs. The number and type of people needed for a particular task will change and evolve as that work progresses. Technology can help you build agile resourcing solutions that can flex, expand and contract to the changing needs of your business and your clients.

OPINION