Artificial Intelligence – HR game changer or game wrecker?

By Carmen Arico

Great Resignation. Quiet quitting. Artificial Intelligence.

What do these three phrases have in common?

They are all listed as some of the top 10 HR buzzwords of the last five years.

But are these buzzwords new practices or merely old practices given shiny new names?

In the case of AI, this is the shiny new toy, although the acronym has been commonplace in lexicons since at least the 1950s. Only very recently has AI been discussed as a possible tool to support HR in the workplace, and it's within this remit that we should be exploring the realities of utilising artificial intelligence in the workplaces of today.

Impact on HR

When we talk about AI in the context of human interactions, what we're really saying is that artificial intelligence is simulating human intelligence processes in order to deliver results faster, smarter and more efficiently. However, while it is routinely described as a game changer, AI is also known to get things wrong. Errors delivered through AI mechanisms can have wide-ranging ramifications from an HR standpoint, particularly in the hands of users who are not quite yet adept at the nuances of the tool.

Using AI as an HR tool to reduce the load on HR teams is a smart move, but it is not yet mature enough to be entrusted with the ethical nuances of HR without human intervention and close supervision. As a technology, AI has no conscience and so human ethics still play a huge role in ensuring integrity and fairness is applied, particularly in HR areas such as policy generation, where biases and factual errors can creep into the output.

One area where HR teams can really benefit from using a ChatGPT-style tool is in the area of employee queries. The conversational style of ChatGPT makes it an easy tool to adopt and allows HR teams to analyse and track the types of queries that are posed to the tool, which can identify different areas where more detailed information may be required by employees.

AI can also support recruitment processes, by screening out unsuitable candidates or sourcing potential candidates, or facilitating some of the administrative tasks such as setting up interviews or managing hiring managers' diaries.

However, when it comes to anything more than rote HR administration or basic query response, AI users need to be aware of some of the potential pitfalls and security and ethical concerns.

AI security and ethics

The Asilomar AI Principles are some of the earliest and most influential sets of AI governance principles, having been developed around 2017, and one of the tenets of these principles state that *"Advanced AI could represent a profound change in the history of life on Earth, and should be planned for and managed with commensurate care and resources."*

AI systems are becoming quite adept at general tasks normally carried out by humans. The challenge for HR in this instance lies in the access that internal AI systems have to sensitive or confidential employee data, and

the risk that misuse of such an AI system leads to unintentional or malicious disclosure of this information. How does HR, and indeed the wider organisation, go about ensuring that their internally used AI systems are highly robust and can deliver the tasks required without exposing sensitive information (either through malfunctioning or by threat actors)?

From an ethics standpoint, how does an organisation align an AI system with its set of values, and what are the moral and ethical implications of the use and/or misuse of the tool? Who will ultimately be held accountable for any such lapses in functionality? Given that in the age of data privacy and robust legislation such as GDPR and POPIA, employees have the right to access, manage and control the data they both generate and own, which can be in conflict with an AI system's ability to analyse, use and potentially misuse this same data.

These are all the questions that need to be asked and answered before organisations integrate AI systems within their HR processes. While AI has immense potential to alleviate workload within HR teams and to create efficiencies in processes, the inherent risk of having access to sensitive employee information or the potential to subtly perpetuate human biases should never be downplayed. Robust governance principles and processes specifically tailored for an AI-in-HR environment should be implemented well ahead of implementing AI itself.

Carmen Arico is a Chartered Reward Specialist and Managing Director at Ignite Reward Consulting.

RATE THIS ARTICLE