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Virtual Reality and Human Resources: Inspiring a Gaming Generation

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Abstract

Virtual reality (VR) and artificial reality (AR) are emerging technologies that may impact many areas of human resources (HR) practices. This article highlights four major areas of HR that will likely be impacted by AR/VR technology (recruitment, on-boarding, learning, safety and collaboration) and highlights what Alberta companies are doing in this area specifically to spur on innovation in human resources.

Artificial reality continues to make headlines as its powerful use in business becomes better understood. Digi Capital predicts that the AR/VR sector could become a \$150 billion dollar industry by 2020.¹ The majority of that spend will no doubt come from the gaming world, but the business world is starting to take notice and invest in artificial reality as well.

Artificial reality refers to the technology used to create virtual (VR), augmented (AR) and mixed (MR) reality experiences. VR is a fully immersive, typically computer-generated environment. AR on the other hand, is only partly immersive. You can still see and interact with your real environment in AR, but that environment is supplemented by computer-generated “assets” such as objects, videos, graphics

or GPS data. MR is a hybrid reality, combining the real and virtual worlds. Unlike augmented reality, virtual objects in mixed reality can be manipulated and not just viewed.²

For today's human resource (HR) practitioners, artificial reality is a game changer. The time has come for HR to abandon its laggard ways and adopt a technology that will fundamentally change how we recruit, on-board, develop, and collaborate in the workforce. Using examples from the author's experience working in Alberta, this article provides some ideas on how organizations can use virtual reality to inspire a new generation.

Recruitment

One of the challenges that employers face is in showcasing to prospective candidates what it would look like to be part of their company. Virtual reality provides an immersive opportunity for candidates to experience a company's culture and perhaps gain insight into "a day in the life" of hard-to-fill positions.

The ability to experience a job, the company and the company's culture, in advance of signing on is an important advancement for prospective candidates. It allows them to "opt out" of applying, rather than experiencing "buyer's remorse" after they have been hired. It also shows a company as being innovative and investing in new technologies, an important attribute to younger, technologically focused generations brought up in the digital age.

For Deutsche Bahn, a mobility and logistics provider based in Berlin, VR has provided an innovative means of attracting a younger generation. In late 2015, Deutsche Bahn realized that they were facing significant issues with an aging workforce, and a need to hire 10,000 people per year in Germany alone. By creating virtual reality experiences targeted at hard-to-fill positions, such as train conductor, electrician and construction roles, Deutsche Bahn was able to provide prospective hires with a chance to experience a "day in the life" of those roles. As a result, they began receiving almost 10 times as many applications for those hard to fill positions, in addition to receiving higher quality applicants.

Virtual reality can also be a powerful tool with respect to candidate assessments. For example, the military in the UK is using virtual reality to simulate combat, and in doing so, they can test a candidate's response and reaction to high stress, life and death situations. At Jaguar, candidates use a VR app to play code-breaking puzzles. Those that perform exceptionally well are fast-tracked through the recruiting process.

On-Boarding

Onboarding is one of the most obvious areas for utilizing virtual reality. Companies are able to create 3D videos that take new recruits through a virtual tour of their workspaces, meet the executive team, and virtually go to job sites, all before they start. This can help reduce the stress of the first day.

Taking it a step further, virtual reality can help build a shared emotional connection among employees, by bringing corporate values and social responsibility commitments to life. VR can greatly increase empathy in businesses. Empathy combines understanding both the emotional and the logical rationale

that goes into every decision we make. No other tool available today has the power to create empathy in people as VR does. It is crucial to corporate culture, and it moves people beyond sympathy and into a state of shared understanding and experience.

When employees have an emotional connection to an organization, they bring not just their talents to the table, they bring their passion. Consider the example of the military investing considerable time and expense to train a sharp shooter. They then send that sharp shooter out to war but discover that he refuses to fire his rifle. Why? Because although he has the skills and knowledge to do the job, he does not have the motivation and may not believe in the cause. The emotional connection is missing.

Learning

Albert Einstein once said, “I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.” Virtual reality helps to create the conditions most conducive to learning. Stanford Professor Jeremy Bailenson has discovered that users retain 33% more from virtual reality than standard video.³ The reason behind this is that unlike other learning modes, such as video, VR is experiential. Experiential learning creates a visceral and emotional reaction to what you are experiencing. Those reactions are fundamental to how we form muscle memories. In essence, you learn it by living it.

For example, Edmonton-based Serious:labs is using virtual reality to make heavy equipment training safer and more engaging.⁴ By utilizing equipment simulators such as their Aerial Work Platform, Crane VR Simulator, and Snubbing VR Simulator, trainees are able to hone fine motor skills in a safe and repeatable environment, as well as review potential errors. The Saskatchewan Cattlemen’s Association found a creative use for virtual reality in educating consumers about what cattle are fed, and what antibiotic free or anti hormone free actually means. Their objective was to tackle the mounds of misinformation on the cattle industry that consumers are fed every day.⁵

Safety

Safety is one of those areas in virtual reality where I most hear people say “it makes so much sense now that you say it out loud!” The goal of VR safety training is to immerse workers into dangerous places, to better understand the risks of the jobs. All while remaining perfectly safe. This type of experiential learning is easily absorbed, especially by a generation brought up on video game technology. The ability to respond to a threat appropriately and immediately is critical to keeping people safe. Traditional eLearning is inadequate when it comes to providing employees with the opportunity to practice their responses.

Virtual reality on the other hand, allows companies to create real life safety situations that that employees can practice responding to over and over again. In the event the situation does arise, the employee’s response can be fluid and conditioned, rather than fumbling to find the safety manual. Think about the fire drill that many of us go through with our companies. When the alarm goes off, we instinctively know what to do because we have practiced it.

Collaboration

Finally, virtual reality will change the way we work and collaborate. Companies such as Doghead Simulations and Serious:labs in Alberta are creating collaborative virtual “rooms” that users enter in avatar form. In these rooms, you can hear each other, read body language and collaborate on joint projects.

This is exciting from a human resource perspective because it is a giant leap forward in creating virtual teams and tapping into talent anywhere in the world. This is in addition to other benefits, such as reduced travel time and expense, and gaining real-time visibility into team dynamics.

As human resource professionals, we have a responsibility to craft a work environment designed to maximize engagement, innovation and creativity. We need to build critical skills in a way that the next generation finds appealing and familiar.

The virtual reality transformation of HR is here and it is bringing with it new ways of engaging talent in experiential and visceral ways. It will become one of the most effective HR tools you will ever use. By embracing VR’s potential, human resource practitioners have the ability to significantly advance hiring, on-boarding, safety and as a result, organizational performance.

About the Author

Susan Shea is a seasoned executive in human resources. She has worked with a variety of organizations to deliver exceptional human resource programs and offerings that build change capacity and strength. Susan is the founder of InnovateHR, the President of EDGE Human Resource Solutions and an avid blogger. Susan has participated in many speaking engagements, having been a guest lecturer at Mount Royal University's HR Strategy course, guest speaker at Royal Roads' MBA Leadership course, guest speaker at the Women in Leadership conference, seminar leader on Change Management with CPHR Alberta and a recent speaker at DisruptHR in Calgary. She is committed to bringing innovation in Human Resources to life. Susan can be contacted via her [website](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Twitter](#).

Endnotes

- ¹ Digi Capital. (2015, April). *Augmented/Virtual Reality to hit \$150 billion disrupting mobile by 2020*. Retrieved from: <https://www.digi-capital.com/news/2015/04/augmentedvirtual-reality-to-hit-150-billion-disrupting-mobile-by-2020/#.WmjDIKinE2w>
- ² See <https://www.foundry.com/industries/virtual-reality/vr-mr-ar-confused> for an explanation of VR, AR and MR.
- ³ Bailenson, J.N., Yee, N., Blascovich, J., Ball, A.C., Lundbald, N. & Jim, M. (2008). *The Use of Immersive Virtual Reality in the Learning Sciences: Digital Transformations of Teachers, Students, and Social Context*. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 17, 102-141. Retrieved from: [https://web.stanford.edu/~bailenso/papers/JLS%20\(in%20press\).pdf](https://web.stanford.edu/~bailenso/papers/JLS%20(in%20press).pdf)
- ⁴ See <http://seriouslabs.com/>

- ⁵ Wilson, K. (2017, November 22). Saskatchewan Cattlemen's association uses virtual reality to educate customers. *Global News*. Retrieved from: <https://globalnews.ca/news/3876005/saskatchewan-cattlemens-association-uses-virtual-reality-to-educate-consumers/>