

Will we need workforce planning in a future filled with blood sucking robots?

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During a recent radio program (insert link) a much admired talent management colleague raised an interesting observation about the value of workforce planning in a rapidly changing world. Kevin Wheeler of the Future of Talent Institute noted that workforce plans can quickly become obsolete due to radical shifts in technology. Kevin raised the example of phlebotomy machines being developed to draw blood samples. Historically phlebotomists have been critical skilled positions. Many healthcare organizations create workforce plans that forecast supply and demand of phlebotomists several years into the future to ensure they have adequate staffing levels to support critical business operations. But the advent of robots that safely draw blood could swiftly make these workforce plans obsolete and potentially irrelevant altogether. Kevin noted that these types of changes in technology are happening in all sectors of the economy. He then raised a valid question about the value of workforce planning in such a volatile labor market.

As with many things Kevin says, his comments challenged me to reconsider my views regarding talent management as it relates to workforce planning. Workforce planning is not necessarily a difficult exercise but it can be somewhat time-consuming. One might reasonably question if it is worth developing workforce plans if there is a risk they will become obsolete due to changes in technology. I came to three conclusions that suggest that workforce planning will continue to be valuable, even if the world is increasingly filled with blood sucking robots.

It is better to revise existing plans than operate without guidance. It is widely acknowledged that skilled labor will become increasingly scarcer over the coming years (cite). The depth of labor shortages varies widely depending on industry and geographical location, but virtually all companies are finding it harder to acquire high performing, highly skilled talent willing to do the work they want at prices they want to pay. Workforce planning allows companies to forecast where labor shortages are going to have the biggest impact on business operations. Workforce planning decreases the risk of business operations slowing down or stopping altogether due to a lack of key talent in critical roles. While changes in technology may force companies to adjust workforce plans, it is better to be aware of the need to make these adjustments than to be caught off guard due to a lack of planning. This is true in two different ways. First, if technology decreases the need for certain kinds of employees then the sooner you reduce recruiting of candidates into these roles and start re-skilling existing employees to take on new positions then the less disruptive this change will be. Second, most technology changes will require acquiring or developing employees with new skills. The faster you recognize this and get a jump ahead of your competition in the war for talent the more you will profit from this change.

Most workforce changes are incremental, not qualitative. While some disruptive technologies can completely eliminate certain jobs, these types of changes tend to be the exception not the rule. I would argue that for every qualitative workforce technology change like “automatic phlebotomy machines” that could totally eliminate the need for skilled phlebotomists, there are far more incremental technology changes that lead to shifts in skill sets as opposed to eliminating positions altogether. For example, the shift to digital radiology machines from film did not eliminate the need for X-Ray technicians, but it did require technicians to expand upon their existing skill sets. These incremental

technology shifts require companies to adjust workforce plans and emphasize why it is important to constantly monitor and update these plans, but they do not make existing workforce plans obsolete.

What if the world doesn't change all that much? There are two points I want to make here. First, even though technology may change the future of certain jobs, it also may not. When I was a kid watching the Jetsons I figured when I grew up we'd all have robot maids. I'm still hoping someone will create a functional robot maid, but in the meantime we're still employing human housekeepers. Second, while I can marvel at all the things technology has changed, I can also marvel at how little technology has changed many of our basic behaviors at work and at home. Remember when people said internet technology was going to spell the end of on-site retail shopping? It didn't happen. It turns out shopping isn't just about the ability to buy things. It is also about the human experience of going to the store. I suspect similar things will be true when it comes to technology changes in healthcare and other fields. A blood sucking robot may be developed that can safely and effectively poke needles in our arms and draw samples. But we may still want a person present to operate the robot, give us orange juice so we don't pass out, tell us not to look at the needle when it goes in and sympathetically hold our hand when it does.