Are your HR processes focused on control or enablement?
How technology causes and solves bad HR.

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HR processes can be divided into two categories. The most traditional are "control" processes used to ensure employees are working in a way that supports the goals of the company.   Things like time tracking, organizational hierarchies, certification tests, and annual performance reviews tend to fall into this category.   These can be contrasted with "enablement" processes that help employees be more productive and engaged in their work. Things like team building, employee recognition and coaching fall into this category.

Enablement focused HR processes tend to be viewed fairly positively. Control based HR processes are often reviled as bureaucratic and dehumanizing. Nevertheless, control based processes are used widely despite being disliked and largely ineffectual.   How did we ever end up with all these control processes given they neither work well nor are enjoyable? And more important, how can they be eliminated?

Technology is the problem. Many of the control-based processes people hate are a result of historical conflicts between the need to scale HR processes and limitations of existing HR technology.   Perhaps the best example is the annual performance review.   It is unlikely anyone intentionally created a process that encourages managers to provide feedback once a year in a single discussion covering past performance, future goals, career development, and compensation. Yet that is what many traditional performance management processes do.   This is probably because of historical technology limitations.   As companies grew in size they wanted a fair and consistent way to measure performance across large workforces.   But for many years the only performance management technology available was paper forms and inflexible computer templates.   Companies created once-a-year annual performance appraisal processes because it was the best they could do given the available technology. They continue using these processes primarily because they are familiar, not because they are effective.

Technology constraints underlie the use of many other widely disliked HR methods. For example, the hierarchical "org chart" dates back to the Roman empire as a method to manage large numbers of people.   Companies continue to use org charts even though they encourage functional silos and artificial distinctions between job roles.   Why? Because companies need some way to define roles, responsibilities and accountabilities and the org chart has been the best they can do with existing technology. Similar technology explanations can be made for other dysfunctional processes such as percentage based pay increases, time clocks, job applications, and mandatory training programs.

Technology is the solution.   As HR technology develops we can look forward to a time when ineffectual control-based HR processes will be abandoned or radically redesigned.   The advent of mobile and social performance management technology is allowing companies to shift away from annual performance reviews to methods that emphasize ongoing, continuous performance coaching.   Social learning technology is replacing structured classroom training programs with more engaging peer-to-peer learning programs.   Companies are exploring how to replace organizational charts in favor of dynamic technologically enabled methods that encourage natural formation of self-managed teams based on shifting work needs and workforce capabilities. Many other control based HR processes will soon face similar fates.

For technology to be the answer you must use it correctly.
Innovations in HR technology are enabling companies to replace control based processes with processes that emphasize enablement. But this won't happen unless HR professionals approach the use of technology with this vision in mind.

Table 1 illustrates how this shift in mindset changes several common HR processes. There is a big difference between processes that emphasize "assigning goals" vs. "aligning goals" even though both involve focusing employee attention on job relevant activities. One is about telling people what they are supposed to do while the other is about engaging people in discussion about what needs to be done and how best to do it.   Similarly, having a process that accurately evaluates previous performance is valuable for guiding talent decisions, but performance management should clearly be focused on the future not the past. And anyone who has ever sat through a mandatory training course knows that "attending a class" is not the same as "learning from others".

Controlling Behavior and Resources	Enabling Action and Results
Assigning employee job goals and telling them what they need to do to support the company	Aligning employee job goals with their career objectives and the overall company strategy
Making ratings and evaluating past performance	Discussing accomplishments and encouraging and supporting future contributions
Taking classes and attending courses	Learning from others and sharing experience, knowledge and insights
Completing processes and complying with requirements	Engaging input and doing high quality work

Technology can create HR processes that either control or enable employees.   It is up to HR leaders to choose which path they want to take. This requires understanding what current technology can do and using this knowledge to challenge and rethink existing HR processes.   We don't live in the past and we shouldn't use HR processes that were designed to work on past technology.