A psychologist walks into a technology conference:
Reflections on the 2019 SAP Sapphire User Conference

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I spent last week at the 30th annual SAP Sapphire conference in Orlando. The following are thoughts that went through my head while listening to conference keynote presentations and interacting with around 30,000 SAP customers, partners and coworkers. Think of it as a look at SAP through the eyes of someone with expertise in the psychology of work.

The world does run on SAP technology. If you have never attended a conference for a major global technology firm like SAP, it is amazing to see the breadth of impact these companies have on the world's systems and infrastructure. Even Lady Gaga was impressed by the impact of SAP, commenting during her show that "70% of the world's food is delivered by SAP software". I'm not sure if Lady Gaga got the statistics correct, but the world does rely on SAP solutions to get the right information and materials to the right people at the right time in the right way. SAP plays a critical role in ensuring companies and governments can effectively manage money, people, materials, processes, products and customers to deliver goods and services across the global economy. And if you wonder, as Lady Gaga did, how software affects food production then check out this video showing how SAP is using blockchain technology to make the global fishing industry more safe, sustainable and efficient.

Improving SAP software improves the world, so let's improve it faster. Millions of people interact with SAP solutions every day. They use it to for critical activities such as landing airplanes and performing surgeries. They also use it for entertaining pursuits such as downloading music or improving sports skills. Advances in SAP technology are helping get energy to the roughly one billion people in the world who currently live without power. Web-based learning and staffing systems make it possible for people to build global careers and overcome constraints that historically limited access to jobs and education in certain communities. Online commerce platforms allow small entrepreneurs to reach new customers around the world. It may sound like marketing hype, but SAP software really does "help the world run better and improve people's lives". This is why it is critical to constantly improve these solutions. It was great when Hasso Plattner, SAP's founder told customers to expect a constantly accelerating pace of innovation from SAP. The faster we move, the quicker we can improve the world.

Human data is coming to the forefront of business software. Sapphire started with the CHRO of the NBA talking about the role technology plays in creating a culture where employees are able to make every day better than the day before. This was followed by Bill McDermott and Ryan Smith talking about the value of using experience management technology to measure people's attitudes, beliefs and feelings. They did not use this term, but what they were describing is the science of psychometrics. The next major leap in business technology is incorporating psychometric data, which SAP calls "X data" to understand how actions of companies impact the experiences, attitudes and emotions of employees and customers.

Measuring employees as assets instead of costs. Phrases like "intelligent enterprise" and "HANA databases" do not mean much to most Human Resource professionals. But the concepts these terms describe are posed to transform the field of HR by enabling exponentially faster analysis and transfer of data across business systems. This makes it possible to link HR data, operational data, customer data, and financial data into a single system. Companies using these solutions can see how actions that

impact employees also affect business performance. For example, tracking how changes in staffing methods influence operational productivity which in turn impact customer satisfaction levels and financial profitability. Or understanding how differences in employee skill levels impact operational efficiency and sales. These innovations are making it possible for companies to finally achieve the "holy grail" of workforce analytics where employees are measured as assets based on their contributions, and not just as costs based on their salary.

Data is a new form of currency, and like money it can be stolen and used amorally. A highlight of the conference was hearing the CEO of Apple talk with Bill McDermott about the value of data and the implications this creates on technology companies. Data has become a new form of currency. Massive organizations have been created using business models where users trade personal data for access to web services. Every time you use systems like Facebook or Google you are paying for it, but instead of paying with money you are providing data about yourself that the company can sell to others. In most cases, this data is used to provide customized services and information that we value and appreciate. But there are examples of companies using data for things that go against the interests and values of the users who provided it. As I have discussed elsewhere, balancing the value of data access and analysis with the importance of data privacy and control is one of the biggest challenges facing companies and societies over the coming decades.

As a person with a passion for using technology to improve the world of work, I found the Sapphire conference to be highly inspirational and educational. If you have never attended, I encourage you to attend in the future. Hopefully I will see you there along with 30,000 of our closest SAP colleagues, partners and customers.