Personalisation In HR: Some Ideas

Are you able to personalise?

By **Tom Haak**

A friend complained to me about one of her co-workers. This IT-consultant lives around 100 kilometers from the office, and his daily commute is two times ninety minutes. When the project team is working overtime as a deadline is approaching, he is always the first one to leave. "I have to drive a long way, so I am leaving. See you tomorrow". My friend considered this to be unfair. They have to continue working, while he is driving home. What was my view?

Are You Able and Willing to Personalise?

It has to do with the ability and the willingness of the organisation to personalise, and with the level of acceptance of differences of the employees in the organisation. If you want to engage and retain the employee who lives far away, you might want to tailor your offering to his wishes. Can he work from home? Can he work from an office closer to his home? Are the remote working facilities up-to-standard? Can he have a driver and work from the car? Can you support his relocation to a location closer to the office?

You will hear objections, like: "If we do this for him, there will be many people who want similar arrangements". Why is that an issue? Not everybody lives 100 kilometres away. Different people will have different issues, and if you are able to deal with these issues, or even better, anticipate on possible issues by offering personalised solutions, you might be a popular employer.

Segmentation is not Personalisation

Treating employees as individuals and not as part of a group or segment is one of the most important
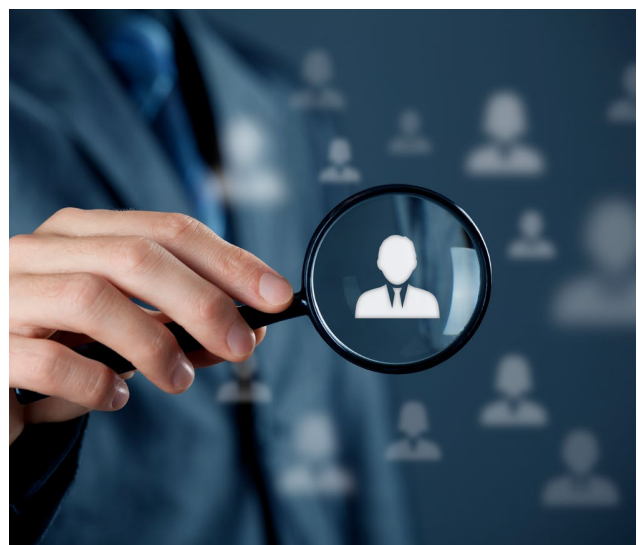
long-term trends. The way organisations deal with employees is still far behind the way organisations deal with clients, but there is movement. HR can learn a lot from marketing.

Today most organisations still segment in simple ways. Young versus old, Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z, Managers and non-managers and so on. Many untested assumptions are used to design policies and career tracks. "Gen Y wants more work-life balance". "People above 55 want to slow down". With big data analysis and with sophisticated algorithms, it has become easier to detect and predict individual preferences of employees, and organisations can act on the insights with tailored programs and interventions.

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What is Personalisation?
Personalisation and customisation
In her article "Personalisation defined: what is personalization?," Katie Sweet defines personalisation as

"The act of tailoring an experience or communication based on information a company has learned about an individual."

Personalisation is different from customisation, but the concepts are closely related. In personalisation a company modifies an experience, without any special effort of the customer (or employee). With customisation the customer (or the employee) can tailor the experience him/herself.

Hyper-personalisation
These days you also hear a lot about "hyper-personalisation". My understanding: this is personalisation, but faster and allowing for even more granular personalisation, by leveraging artificial intelligence and real-time data.

"Hyper-personalization takes personalized marketing a step further by leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and real-time data to deliver more relevant content, product, and service information to each user."

Do People have Common Needs?
Luckily people have some common basic human needs we can take into account. Anthony Robbins merged the different models in this area into "The Six Human Needs" (Source: Chip Richards: What are the six basic human needs).

1. Certainty: The need for safety, security, comfort, order, consistency and control
2. Variety: The need for uncertainty, diversity, challenge, change, surprise, adventure
3. Significance: The need for meaning, validation, feeling needed, honoured, wanted, special
4. Love and connection: The need for connection, communication, intimacy and shared love with others
5. Growth: The need for physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development
6. Contribution: The need to give, care, protect beyond ourselves, to serve others and the good of all

The work of Robbins builds on the famous work of Abraham Maslow; the hierarchy of needs. The more fundamental needs (physical, security) were taken for granted in the list of Robbins.
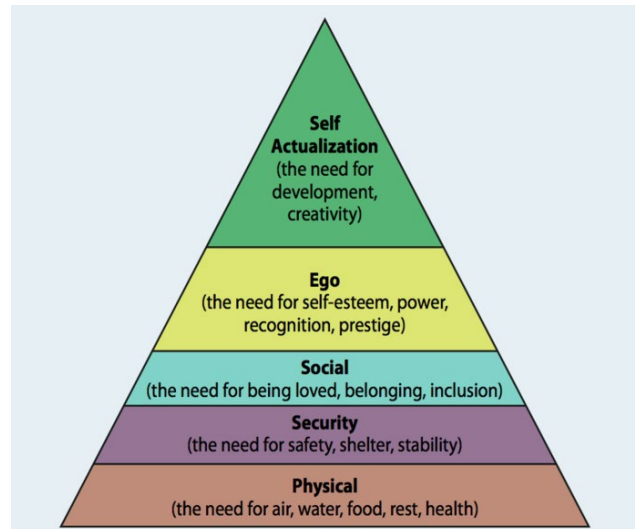
Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Source: Neel Burton

The thought could be: before bothering too much about personalisation, please first make sure the basic human needs are met.

Learning More about Candidates and the Workforce
Personalisation has become easier with the advancement of data collection and data analysis. A must read is Josh Bersin's article Employee engagement 3.0 – Humu launches nudge engine. The key phrase in this article: continuous listening. In a next blog post we will get into more detail about techniques to be used to detect (and predict) the individual capabilities and preferences of candidates and employees.

Personalised HR: Some Ideas
Some thoughts about the implications of a more individual approach in different HR areas (in alphabetical order). Some personalisation, and some customisation.
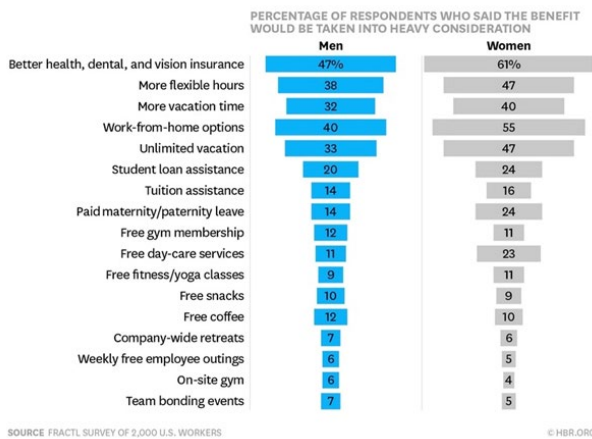
Compensation & Benefits
This is an area where traditionally we have seen some personalisation and customisation. More customisation than personalisation. Taking the

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perceived value of individuals of compensation and benefit elements into account could be one of the areas where improvement is possible. There are certainly individual differences in perceived value, and why not take them into account? An example: in the chart below you can see the difference in preferences for certain benefits between men and women (2017 data). Hypothesis: there will also be considerable differences within these groups. If you have this data, you are able to offer employees (and candidates) the benefits they value most.

Which Benefits Do Men and Women Prefer?
When choosing between a high-paying job and a lower-paying one with better benefits, men and women differ in how much various perks might sway them.

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAID THE BENEFIT WOULD BE TAKEN INTO HEAVY CONSIDERATION

	Men	Women
Better health, dental, and vision insurance	47%	61%
More flexible hours	38	47
More vacation time	32	40
Work-from-home options	40	55
Unlimited vacation	33	47
Student loan assistance	20	24
Tuition assistance	14	16
Paid maternity/paternity leave	14	24
Free gym membership	12	11
Free day-care services	11	23
Free fitness/yoga classes	9	11
Free snacks	10	9
Free coffee	12	10
Company-wide retreats	7	6
Weekly free employee outings	6	5
On-site gym	6	4
Team bonding events	7	5

SOURCE FRACTL SURVEY OF 2,000 U.S. WORKERS   © HBR.ORG

From Kerry Jones: [The most desirable employee benefits](). *HBR, February 2017.*

Internal Communications

The trend is: from 'sender determines channel' to 'receiver determines channel'.

In the past the sender determined the channel and the receiver had to adapt. Today, the power is shifting to the receiver. With my wife I communicate via WhatsApp. With my oldest daughter via Facebook. If I want to reach my son a direct message via Twitter is most effective. With most business partners I use Slack, and to communicate with clients or prospects it is LinkedIn, e-mail or phone. And this might be different tomorrow, which I find out if people become silent.

Today it is easy to find out the preferred communication channels for each of our employees.

If you want to communicate in an effective way, as management or as organisation, you have to find ways to tap in to these preferred channels, and to adapt the way the message is communicated to the different channels.

Learning & Development

Leaning & development is typically an area that is still dominated by a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Standard onboarding programs. Traineeships. The typical management development programs for different levels (beginners, middle management and senior management). Many organisations state that they are in favour of the 70:20:10 approach, but in reality they focus on the easy 10% (courses and training).

It is very difficult to design effective interventions in the learning and development domain. The learning needs of employees are different, as well as the learning styles. Fortunately, current technology will enable a more effective personalised learning and development approach.

In the two pictures below, I try to outline some elements of personalisation, in relation to learning. In the "old" situation: groups of people (new employees, high potentials, leaders) are treated as a group, and receive basically the same learning intervention. Often in a classroom, away from the real work.
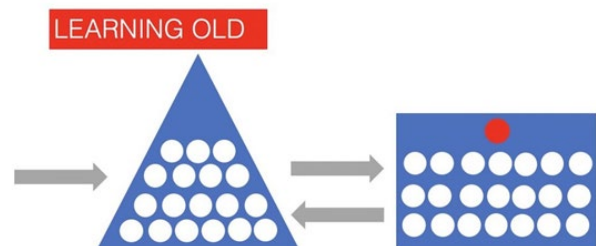

Traditional classroom learning. The triangle is the workplace, the rectangle the classroom

In the new situation, employees (and other people working for an organisation) are treated as individuals. Most learning takes place on-the-job (the lower part of the picture). Tailored to the individual needs, a wide variety of micro-learning solutions is

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offered. Of course, when people must learn something new that will take a considerable effort, this will happen off-the-job, but preferably not as collective as in the old situation.
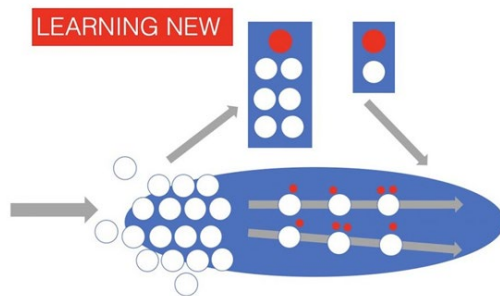
Micro- and macro learning. Micro learning: small learning interventions provided in the flow of work. Macro learning: learning something new, in the classroom or in another way.

Personalisation related to learning and development can be done for different aspects.

- The actual work of the employee
- The performance level of the employee
- The learning style- and preferences of the employee.

Management & Leadership
Good old situational leadership is a good example of personalisation: how to adapt your leadership style to the specific needs of individuals and the organisation.

There might be other opportunities to personalise management and leadership, like matching managers and employees based on personality and other relevant criteria.

Office Layout
Many organisations are moving back from the "everybody in open space" concept. Employees prefer an individual approach, where they are able to choose their working location in line with their individual preferences and personal needs. Not one-size-fits all. This will require more creativity and flexibility of the office designers. Tech can help to make the best match between current needs and available space.

Modern office design takes into account the requirements of specific work elements, and the individual preferences of employees and others involved in the work.

Onboarding
Onboarding can benefit a lot from personalisation and customisation. A simple example. A big retail store offers all their new shop floor staff a standardised onboarding program of around twenty hours. Per hour the program outlines in detail what the new employee should do. The onboarding program is not personalised. Some of the new employees might already have experience with some of the tasks. There are people who learn faster than other people. Some learn by doing, others learn best by listening to instructions. By personalising onboarding, this retail company could save money, and improve the employee experience.

Most onboarding programs are very top-down: what does the new employee need to learn? The question: what can we learn from this unique new employee is hardly ever asked.

Organisational Design
Sometimes it looks like all organisations are transforming into self-managed teams, holacracies, flat organisations and what have you. A flexible workforce is the norm. Most of the time the shape of organisations is not taking the individual needs of employees into account. There are people who flourish in a hierarchical organisation. Others are looking for a secure job, preferably from nine to five. Some people hate to be told by a boss what they should do. There are people who prefer to work alone and people who love to work in teams.

How powerful would it be, if you are able to provide employees an organisational set-up that fits best with their personal profile?

People Analytics
Most people analytics efforts today are very much focused on the needs of the organisation. Focusing on the benefits of people analytics for the employees requires a different approach. Some people are

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very eager to learn more about their behaviour, and how they can use personal data to improve their performance. You could focus on this group. Provide the early adapters with personal trackers, monitor their behaviour and performance and help them to analyse the data and use the outcomes to become better.

Performance Consulting

Performance Consulting is focused on helping people to become better. The focus is on the individual employee.

Performance consulting requires a very individual approach. Employees benefit from very specific and tailored feedback. It is not very helpful to give a top performer the feedback that she is "excellent". She will want more granular and detailed feedback that can help her to become even better.

Recruitment

Recruiting for specific jobs and standard traineeships are slowly fading. The trend is to look for people who have future proof capabilities and a certain

personality and who have a fit with the culture and purpose of the organisation, and then check how suitable candidates fit with opportunities. Less fixed jobs, and more diverse teams with individuals with complementary capabilities who can be assigned to a challenging opportunity.

Maybe candidates can design their own jobs, as they can customise your shoes online (for Example "Nike by You"). Or more automatically: look at the personality and capabilities of candidates, and offer them a personalised job (content, location, boss, colleagues, clients and other aspects).

The Talent Experience

Talent management has also suffered from the unstoppable urge to standardise. High potential profiles, career paths, training programs and coaching and mentoring are often designed for the group, and not for the individuals.

Talent management can benefit a lot from a more personalised approach. Taking the wishes and capabilities of the individuals into account, or even

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taken these as the starting point can add complexity ("Everybody wants something different!"), but the rewards can be high as well (higher productivity and lower turnover, for example).

Work

Personalisation and customisation of the work people can do, is probably the most promising area.

- **Job crafting.** Allowing employees to reframe their work, physically, socially and cognitively. Read: Job crafting – The DIY approach to meaningful work. It could also mean making sure there is a good match between the capabilities, wishes and needs of employees and the assignments you give them.
- **Flexible working hours**. A classic customisation solution, making it possible for employees to create a better work-life balance by working on the hours that suit them best (to a certain extend, as most flexible working hours arrangements are rather rigid).
- **Flexible working amount**. HR can learn from football here. Many football players are measured in the morning, and based on their physical and mental state their individual training program for the day is designed. This could be done at work at well. Detect the readiness of an employee, and adapt the daily workload. My AutoSleep app gives me a daily readiness report.
- **Work location**. Also one of the more traditional solutions, that could be extended. A call centre found out, that home-work distance was a good predictor of retention (shorter distance > longer retention). The cut up the big call center in small units, that were located centrally in residential areas. Some personalities fit well in an urban environment, some more in rural surroundings. The more options you offer, the more you are able to personalise.
- **Employee-Boss fit**. Can you determine the employee-boss fit? I am sure that with some creativity (and solid data) you can make some predictions. Letting employees choose their own boss might also be a possibility. Similar matching processes you could design for employee-team and employee-client.
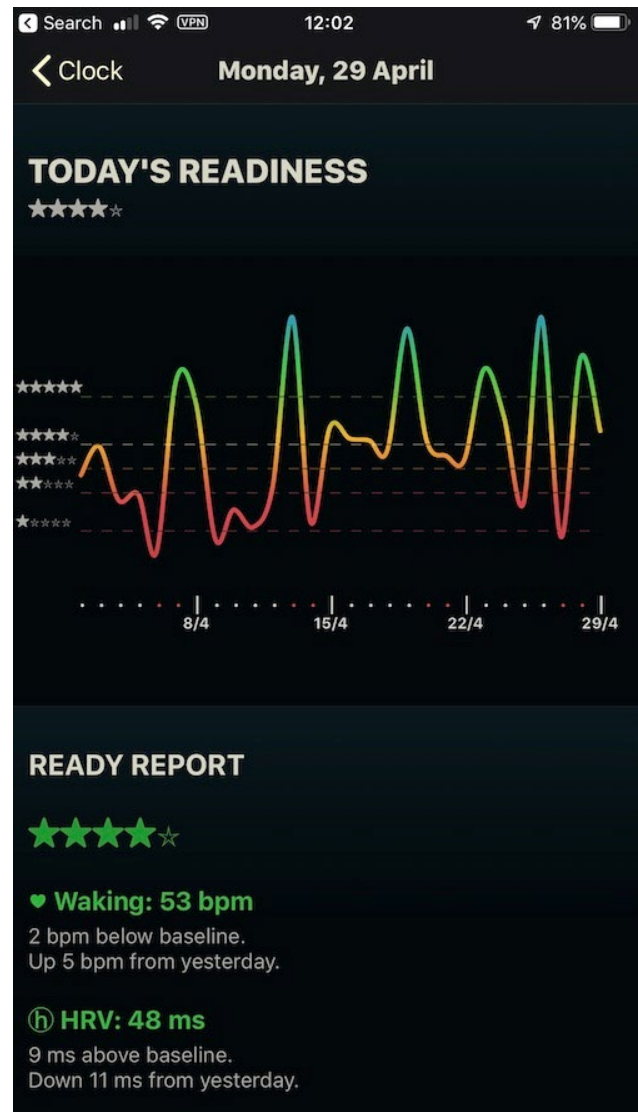
Tom Haak is the founder and director of The HR Trend Institute. Prior to founding the HR Trend Institute in 2014, Tom held senior HR positions in companies as Arcadis, Aon, KPMG and Philips. The HR Trend Institute detects, follows and encourages smart and creative use of trends in the field of people and organizations, and also in adjacent areas.

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