

By Johan Fourie

opinion



TECHNOLOGY

The future of HR

HR technology has taken surprisingly long to get going. The human element could be the reason for this.

Human resources. HR. From recruitment to managing leave to paying monthly salaries until, ultimately, you get the dreaded letter in the mail informing you that your services will not be required anymore. HR is the liver of an organisation: it unobtrusively ensures that everyone works smoothly, and where necessary, removes those that are harmful. You can't live without one.

Yet HR is typically an expensive part of any organisation. Many founders try to go it alone; when there are only a handful of employees, it is still easy to manage payroll issues themselves. But this becomes burdensome (and frustrating) very quickly, which is why HR tech is now a thing. I spoke to the founders of two South African HR solutions geared towards small businesses about what it is that HR tech can offer.

"It is about bringing together everything you need to manage and grow your team," says **Kobus Ehlers**, founder and CEO of Radar. "Previously companies had to perform a variety of manual functions, or use different systems, to keep track of leave, manage HR and make sure their payroll is processed. With Radar we integrate that all into a single platform that you can use, even if you are not an accountant or HR professional."

Hellohr was founded by Bernard Bravenboer. He explains that most existing software packages which offer HR solutions have been priced beyond the means of small businesses. "Our product allows managers to digitally join different HR functions and do so affordably in the cloud. This allows employees to have a higher degree of control over their personal information and salaries."

This makes sense, but why has HR tech taken so long to get off the ground? Perhaps one reason for the slow roll-out of HR tech, I venture, is that human resources is, by definition almost, about interaction with other humans. No one wants to be fired by a robot, for example. How do you balance automation with the need to meet with a person when you need help?

"Rather than removing humans from HR," explains Ehlers, "the software takes care of all the repetitive administrative tasks and manual processes to free up time so you can focus on things that really matter – developing your employees and empowering managers to grow their teams. We think it's silly to spend time tracking leave in spreadsheets or having employees fill in paper forms when your HR team can be growing your employees."

Surely this has also meant that HR managers now have better information available, changing the way they manage their teams?

Says Bravenboer: "We're seeing that change happen very dramatically, yes! In finance, for example, we saw bookkeeping move from data capture to financial planning and analysis. Similarly, HR managers can step beyond the

filing cabinet and use compelling analysis to pre-empt workplace disputes or get a pulse of employee happiness much more accurately."

Transparency can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a transparent company can lead to more gender and racial equality – equal pay for equal work – but on the other, it can create resentment if everyone's salary is widely known. I ask Bravenboer how accessible the salary information of co-workers is, and whether most employees prefer the transparency that platforms like theirs offer.

"While the debate around salary transparency is a very interesting one, we think it is important that these kinds of privacy shifts are led from the employer's side and that it has buy-in from everyone. If our current customers are representative, then I'd wager that the majority of South African employers are not ready to go fully transparent yet."

At least since George Orwell's 1984, we are worried about Big Brother watching. Are employees not afraid that HR tech can become invasive, tracking their performance closely and "watching over their shoulder" all the time?

"We started building software to help people build healthy companies," says Ehlers. "Our product is designed to guide you towards making sure your employees are well looked after. We don't believe constant monitoring or tracking is helpful or productive and we don't support these in our products. Technology simply amplifies the culture of your business."

Let's zoom out from the benefits to the firm, to the benefits for society. Arguably the most critical issue facing SA right now is unemployment. How can innovation in HR tech contribute to alleviating the problem?

"At Hellohr, we are very bullish about the role of SMMEs and entrepreneurship in solving our high unemployment rates. Given how much of SA's employment processes still need to be digitised, we believe that there are heaps of efficiencies that can directly impact our employment rates."

Ehlers concurs. "The unemployment conundrum is one of the reasons Radar focused on SMMEs in building this product. Thousands of small businesses in SA are employing people and contributing to the economy in tremendously challenging times. By making it easy to manage and employ more staff, businesses save time and money and can spend their scarce resources on growing their teams rather than expensive administrators or compliance."

Just like the liver of the human body, HR is there to make sure everyone is making a productive contribution. HR tech can make that process more efficient and affordable. To survive, I suspect, more companies will soon need a liver transplant. ■

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