

BEST PRACTICES

Building a Next- Generation Employee Experience: 2021 and Beyond

**A Playbook for Using HR Data as a Competitive Advantage
for Modern Organizations**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Employees and organizations have undergone a historic transformation of the work environment over the last year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Productivity, employee engagement, and overall effectiveness have been challenged by remote work, shifts in collaboration behavior to purely digital channels, and a storm of new applications and systems that lack sufficient context and add friction to the digital employee experience. As a result, digital environments are now in urgent need of an overhaul.

Many organizations now are focused on significantly streamlining and improving the employment experience by interconnecting multiple systems of HR data and other IT systems to create competitive differentiators that are more resilient and long-lasting. The scope of this new employee experience for 2021 is end-to-end, from recruitment through offboarding. This report explores how IT and HR can come together to create a more holistic, centered, and effective digital workplace.

Business Themes



Future of Work



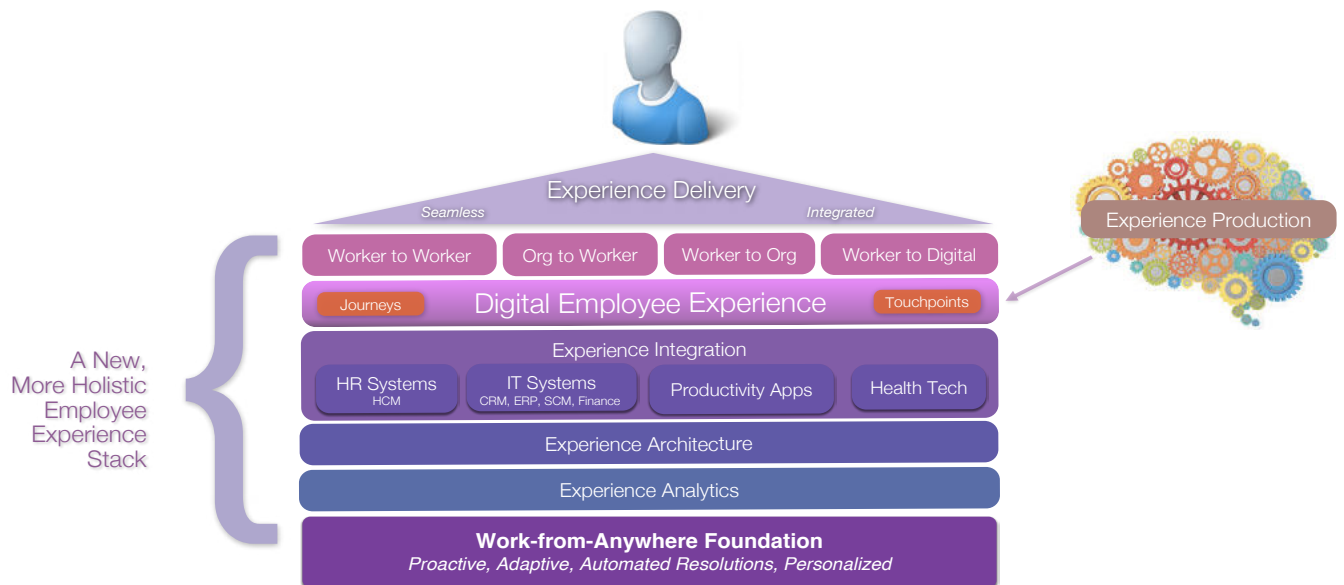
Technology
Optimization

HR DATA HAS BECOME CENTRAL TO THE MODERN EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Managing people always has been one of the most vital aspects of running a successful business. However, in today's highly automated and digital-centric world, where technology infuses virtually every aspect of employee experience, it's the underlying systems that are now the most central in determining the quality and effectiveness of the worker journey. Fortunately, a growing conglomeration of human resource (HR) software has emerged to help companies address today's large, distributed workforces—workforces that have become increasingly decentralized as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to make remote work the norm for many businesses.

Although these systems have become more sophisticated to meet the demands of an ever-more-complex workforce and operating landscape, companies increasingly have had to turn to integrations to establish the employee experience they desire across those systems. The result has been the emergence of a unified set of technology capabilities that are deeply integrated to deliver a more seamless and holistic employee experience (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. HR and IT Systems Must Now Be Brought Together into an Integrated Stack



Source: Constellation Research

As more organizations achieve easier ways to access and integrate their HR data, they are discovering that such integration significantly enhances their productivity and employee engagement. The key is to achieve it cost-effectively and rapidly enough to adapt to changing needs.

UNDERSTANDING THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF HR INTEGRATION

At face value, the concept sounds straightforward: connect the human resources information system (HRIS) to other essential HR and information technology (IT) applications. These range from applicant tracking, onboarding, and learning management systems (LMSs) to project management tools, issue tracking, and run-the-business enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems. As vendors in the business application space expand into adjacent and new categories as well as acquire other companies—and as many customers outright demand them—some integration capabilities have started coming standard with existing HR and IT suites.

However, these integration features typically cover too few applications, have a limited feature set, and are not designed by leaders in the field and thus are generally insufficient for the sheer number and variety of additional integrations needed by most businesses.

To help address these challenges, organizations can acquire an integrated platform from a single vendor that covers many core capabilities, from recruiting to benefits administration to analytics, and then procure point solutions for higher-order HR processes and hope for the best. Or, they can seek a one-stop shop that offers the most features in a single system. Finally, a third option is to mix and match all HR and IT systems with best-of-breed choices where it makes the most sense. Each approach brings certain benefits and levels of investment.

Integrate HR Data; Don't Interface

It's worth spending time to understand what integration means, versus other more limited approaches such as interfacing:

- **Integration** refers to a seamless connection of different systems via application programming interfaces (APIs), middleware, or a solution such as an integration

platform as a service (iPaaS). Because both systems are plugged into the same database, data flows from one to the other so they're always in sync and show real-time data. Any update in payroll, for example, automatically appears live in the current HRIS records.

- **Interfacing**, on the other hand, still lets two systems share information but is more limited, because they each have their own database and local copy of the HR data they must synchronize. An interface acts as a link so information can be transferred back and forth. The main drawbacks, however, are that HR data in different systems may not be up to date and that changes in the two systems need to be reconciled over time.

WHEN TO CONSIDER HR DATA INTEGRATION

Integrating applications of any kind in the past typically required significant time and resources. Adequate testing and ongoing maintenance also have been key requirements for achieving the benefits of more-accessible and better-integrated HR data. Because of this, it's vital to understand which situations call for integration and which don't. Every HR data integration scenario has its own unique circumstances. The best approach is to examine the specific needs for HR data to determine the most sensible path forward.

Generally, however, there are three main situations for which integrating HR data is recommended as a strategic approach.

Situation 1: The Current HRIS Can't Do Everything Needed

The challenge with HR systems is that there is no single product set that will provide every capability needed or a standardized feature set. Organizations have HRISs, human resource management systems (HRMSs), and human capital management systems (HCMs). Vendors can refer to them differently, and their functionality and data models can be inconsistent with each other, depending on the vendor and its various acquisitions.

Typically, the core HR system is the fundamental platform for employee management and includes elements such as benefits administration, recruiting, and compensation management. For the purpose of this report, it's assumed that HRIS refers to the basic HR toolkit that manages people, processes, and procedures. However, the reality is that most organizations have an HR system that lacks many capabilities the business needs and that, up until now, it's been difficult to add more capabilities or extend existing ones.

Organizations have often made up for this deficiency by attempting to implement separate systems for their extended HR processes. This is because as much as it might make sense long-term, it's often difficult or unfeasible to completely switch to a new suite that covers more of their needs. If separate systems is the overriding case, then the situation is a strong candidate for integration.

Given the potential difficulties and cost, HR data integration often has been considered a risky and overly complex endeavor and so has been avoided. But today's much-lighter-weight and more-standardized approaches to integration can quickly help HR operations and management run much more seamlessly and smoothly. Organizations operating different systems today frequently encounter the need for manual entry of data into multiple systems, data errors, processes that are overly difficult to use, lack of visibility, constant application switching, and a whole host of other issues that come with siloed systems. Integration is now a more accessible answer to all of these common problems.

Situation 2: Best-of-Breed HR Capabilities Are Desired

HR solution providers have come to realize the value to their customers of a fully integrated HR suite—not just for HR but also more recently for supporting the entire employee experience. The benefits of close integration are increasingly well understood and include seamless and up-to-date HR data across systems, 360-degree visibility, and the ability to project HR data into digital solutions across the organization. These benefits can effectively support HR-related business requirements and are just some of the improved outcomes that result from a unified, holistic environment.

The challenge for HR managers seeking a competitive edge and/or a leading bench of talent is that implementing an all-in-one approach to software often is not the best route for the organization as a whole. This is largely because no single HR solution does everything well.

As an alternative, using separate applications from a range of vendors may fit better with the HR manager's business strategy, because the resulting processes and capabilities can be better mixed and matched. Vendors that specialize in one area, such as benefits, hiring, or workforce management, will likely offer a tool with deeper functionality, because they are able to focus their resources and expertise on that smaller niche. Choosing point solutions for each HR process means getting the best of each. Although it's not impossible to achieve the same result with a single platform, it's worth noting that no large suite is regarded as having the best of breed in every feature or as fitting an organization's needs well across the board.

The HRIS landscape has shifted as dominant vendors acquire best-of-breed solutions that enable them to offer HR suites without necessarily sacrificing deeper functionality. However, many HR departments have discovered the hard way that this doesn't guarantee that each module in a vendor's suite will reach the standards of individual point solutions. Even worse, many of the acquired solutions are themselves not well integrated into the vendor's overall suite. As always, use prioritized business requirements as a barometer to baseline what is needed to accomplish integration and how best to achieve it.

Thanks to the power of today's new interfacing methods, such as APIs, point-and-click integration, and an increasing emphasis on integration standards, organizations are piecing together their own suites of HR applications. Not only is this easier than it used to be but it's also an order of magnitude cheaper today. However, organizations still will have to do the work of implementing and running all systems, along with integrating them, which will need to be part of the cost-and-effort calculus.

The bottom line: Carefully establish the overarching priorities and the business value of overall HR capabilities long-term before starting.

Situation 3: HR Is Budget-Constrained

Many organizations now are challenged by the investment required to adapt HR to today's new realities. They need the functionality of several systems along with the benefits of HRIS integration, but their budget isn't sufficient for them to move to a large master suite of integrated HR systems. They may also have HR tools in place and need to connect them but don't have the budget to carry

out a high-quality integration effort with a vendor that can connect all the dots. In either case, these organizations should consider specifically adapted HRIS integration platforms that already have most of the foundational work completed, including dozens or hundreds of off-the-shelf integrations that can be configured. In this way, organizations can get the best of both worlds and actually come out with a more mature and capable result in the short term.

CLARIFY THESE ISSUES BEFORE INTEGRATING HR DATA

Organizations seeking the best results from their HR integration journey should properly map out their actual integration needs. This is best done by identifying a clear and concise vision, along with a complementary plan of execution. It's essential to build a convincing business case while underscoring the improved strategic posture that better integration creates. Of note, both rapid innovation and digital transformation are far easier to achieve with an open and integrated set of HR and IT systems.

Therefore, before an organization implements HRIS integration, it should ask the following questions to ensure that it's fully prepared:

What Are the Motivations for Integrating HR Data?

Organizations need a clearly defined purpose and set of business needs. These needs may include:

- Eliminating data silos created by having multiple HR applications
- Creating a more seamless and streamlined employee experience
- Increasing worker and HR staff productivity
- Improving information access and transparency

For the best outcome, Constellation Research strongly recommends spending time gathering existing and desired business needs from top stakeholders, both internal and external, such as recruiting agencies and subcontractors. Once that step is completed, develop HR data integration goals based on those priorities. It's important to get feedback from both HR staff and others who regularly use HR data in their part of the business. Their insights will provide the robust picture of friction, pain points, and areas where HR and IT can enhance and transform processes.

What Is Required for Successful HR Data Integration?

For successful HR data integration to occur, Constellation Research suggests, organizations should capture and enumerate the elements and operating factors that will impact the integration, both pros and cons. Organizations can't expect to have a successful integration without first identifying and planning for potential obstacles and setbacks. In fact, understanding these up front will greatly accelerate the process by putting the hardest parts first, giving them the most time and resources to be adequately addressed.

Although there are always routine challenges with integration, organizations should also understand how their specific situation must be addressed by improved integration. They should determine the following, at least at a high level:

- What current processes will be addressed by integration?
- Which teams are responsible for system maintenance and data management?
- How must the HR data integration efforts fit into existing enterprise integration strategies?
- What are all the various ways HR data must be consumed by other parts of the employee experience?

By looking in detail at their current state, organizations can more accurately predict where and how their integration efforts will influence HR data usage in downstream systems and across the employee experience.

HR integration efforts also can't overlook the people part of the integration process. Organizations must determine what it will take to equip HR and IT teams in terms of skills and prior experience to redesign as well as adapt to the resulting new HR and business processes. The sheer complexity of the change will determine how much enablement, training, and support they'll require during the integration effort.

How Will the Success of HR Data Integration Be Measured?

To measure the success of their HR data integration, organizations should clearly define what success means for their stakeholders and business needs. They must also identify a way to measure this, postintegration.

If, for example, one of the goals of integration was to reduce the use of three systems to one integrated experience and thereby achieve 25 percent higher worker productivity, a before-and-after snapshot is needed to know whether that goal was achieved. Because integration takes time and investment, it's very much worth the effort to sustain support for it by capturing and sharing credible data on the early improvements it will bring to the business.

When Is the Best Time to Integrate?

Although organizations understandably are eager to reap the benefits of integration, sometimes they must do work in advance to prepare for the potential enormity of the project. In addition, organizations often must adjust the timing of their integration effort so it won't interfere with other top company initiatives. This means that integration efforts must devote time and people not only to conduct an effective integration but also to align with other efforts and avoid creating conflicting priorities. Conversely, if HR data integration is already an IT priority, the new integration effort can potentially join in with and build upon the existing effort, combining resources and accelerating the overall integration.

How Will the Integration Take Place?

One of the trickiest challenges is understanding the full range of capabilities needed—and the means by which they'll be provided and assembled to achieve the integration results identified in previous steps. Depending on the situation, an organization might be able to tap existing vendors as well as on-hand capabilities and systems to support and deliver the integration. The biggest advantage of bringing in outside help—vendor or otherwise—is that the additional assistance will not only ease the burden on the HR and IT teams but also enable the organization to leverage the invaluable experience of someone who's done it successfully before. A vendor with prior experience integrating its solution

with other systems can often have a better understanding of the latest best practices and help pave the road to success.

THE BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING HR DATA

Once organizations invest the time and resources to integrate their HR data with other key HR and IT systems, they can realize a significant list of benefits, including the following:

A Single Source of Truth

Achieving strategic business objectives requires having a complete view of the organization and what it knows. Siloed HR data acts as a key roadblock, because it prevents the organization from identifying trends and wielding knowledge of the big picture. HR data integration resolves that problem and gives organizations one master set of data to update and track. Once that's achieved, it opens the road to making smarter, more-data-based decisions. What's more, the organization can now depend on truly using what it knows to consistently drive the best outcomes.

No More Hand-Feeding of Different HR and IT Systems

Integration eliminates once and for all the painful process of keeping HR data synchronized across IT systems. There is no more importing and exporting, copying and pasting, or double entry of data into HR and IT systems. When a new hire is entered into the HRIS, for instance, that information automatically updates in the LMS, the timekeeping system, facilities access, project tools, and all other systems using HR employee data. Added up across every HR and IT system, this can translate to literally thousands of hours of saved time for workers across the organization.

Better Data Consistency

With integration and a single source of the truth, all systems are always in sync. This eliminates manually entering the same data into different systems and thus the risk of errors and omissions in retyped data. Additionally, workers won't be reentering data into different locations each time a change occurs. This provides substantially improved data accuracy and prevents mistakes in processes

that use incorrect data. Having accurate HR data is vital, especially in systems such as payroll or benefits. With downstream systems connected, information is automatically used from one source to the other, reflecting every update in both locations, back to the original system of record. The fact that information needs to be entered only once reduces costs as well. And it means that HR staff and others using HR data won't have to waste valuable time finding and fixing errors introduced by out-of-sync systems.

Improved Data Access

Instead of needing to employ several different credentials for several platforms, users can log into one system and easily access the other without toggling back and forth.

In addition, integration of HR data into other systems can give employees secure and direct access to information without making them go through HR at all. With integration, any connected systems can also better evaluate all relevant information in the context of the business process. Improved automation because of better data availability also will considerably reduce the chances for making a mistake.

Improved Reporting

Having HR data act as a central resource makes business reporting related to workers more accurate and efficient. Reports are only as effective as the data they're sourced from. By establishing a single source of information, organizations can simplify the reporting process and get insights they wouldn't have gained easily if they were working across disparate systems. In general, centralized HR data enables organizations to develop a consistent picture of what is happening to workers over time in a comprehensive way that siloed systems cannot easily provide—even with data warehouses, which can become out of date and fragmented over time.

Regulatory Compliance

Keeping abreast of HR regulations and compliance rules is not only important but is also usually the law. By integrating with one system—such as a governance, risk, and compliance (GRC) platform—

that ensures that those rules are followed, the organization has far less risk and more confidence in its operations. With integration, the HR system of record takes all the relevant information into consideration and automatically enforces the correct rules, even for other systems. This greatly reduces the chances of making a mistake and enables HR data to be used much more successfully in many more scenarios across the organization.

COMPELLING USE CASES FOR HR DATA INTEGRATION

Integrating HR data can provide the benefits cited above, but the most important impact is to the employee experience itself. Seamlessly integrating HR and IT systems enables a wealth of high-value scenarios from which workers directly benefit. These include, in rough order of business impact:

- **Preboarding and onboarding.** Few experiences have as much impact or require such deep integration as employee onboarding, which easily can require a dozen systems or more to be integrated into a single experience or portal.
- **Sales.** One of the highest-value areas to enable with business integration capabilities is where the organization drives revenue. This is a good place to start early with integration, because it's not mission-critical and it's relatively easy to create experiences that aid the sales process, boost organization revenue, and enable workers to spend more time selling. Helping in this function in particular often opens doors across the organization to bring the benefits of integration to other business areas.
- **Projects or operations.** The lifeblood of companies is their operations capability, which is particularly technology-intensive these days. Too many nonintegrated IT solutions crowd around workers in a project or operations capacity today. Because these functions are so key to the core of the business itself, this target-rich environment for integration creates many easily accessible opportunities for improvement via more-integrated digital experiences.

- **Other high-value functions.** HR portals, intranets, the most common or important business processes, and any cross-functional capability that draws on HR and IT systems with above-average intensity are also key areas where integration can improve the employee experience overall.

THE INEVITABLE CHALLENGES

There are well-known difficulties on the path to integration, but they are also well understood and most organizations can mitigate them without much trouble. First, adequate planning helps considerably in navigating difficulties and obstacles. Here are some challenges organizations should be prepared to address:

- **Insufficient time or resources.** Integration, even with today's modern platforms, takes time and testing. Set reasonable expectations about schedule and budget, and then use the high-leverage solutions available to accelerate the effort.
- **Poor technology standardization.** Very old HR systems in particular are hard to open up and have limited support for integration standards. These issues can be addressed up front, but be ready to invest in additional integration technologies if the system cannot be easily upgraded.
- **Data ownership issues.** HR data must be put to the service of stakeholders across the organization. Integration efforts must address the cultural issues of sharing that arise with departmental control over such data.
- **Resistance to change.** Change management, education, and training will help ensure that the resulting integrated processes are adopted and used more quickly.
- **Slow adoption.** Although most HR data integration efforts have a few very enthusiastic business stakeholders, it can take time to get the rest of the organization on board. Use a developer-network-style approach from the software world to help improve adoption of the integrated data sources and APIs.

- **Data quality problems.** Connected systems using HR data may change or corrupt the data when it goes back into the HR system(s). Be prepared to put data quality rules in place as well as enforcement at the API level.
- **Process issues.** HR often is not accustomed to being part of a large IT integration effort. It's also unfamiliar with agile methods frequently used by IT. Conversely, IT often is not accustomed to traditional project management techniques. Getting the two groups on the same page with each other's processes as well as the changed processes of the integrated HR systems makes it possible to address these challenges over time.

GETTING TO SUCCESS WITH HR INTEGRATION

The worthy endeavor of HRIS integration is both key to modernization of today's business systems and an undertaking of great importance as today's employee experiences shift dramatically. Fortunately, it's also easier and more straightforward today than it ever has been.

By taking the big leap toward the future and following the playbook outlined here, organizations can be sure their efforts will be rewarded. Integrating HRIS with other HR and IT systems will substantially boost efficiency, reduce errors, and provide a unified HR platform that enables superior strategic planning. Organizations looking to upgrade their current HRIS or that are seeking the best software to implement integration should use the perspectives here to navigate their efforts and ensure the best outcomes.

HR data integration has become a near-imperative in many organizations for all the attendant benefits it provides, both tactically and strategically. By giving it the time and resources needed, addressing the technology and people equations involved in the change, and having clear plans for some of the inevitable—but mostly minor—issues, organizations can greatly boost the technology readiness of their organizations for the growth, evolution, and digital transformation of their workplaces.

PARALLAX POINT OF VIEW

By Holger Mueller

My colleague Dion Hinchcliffe describes the classic challenge in enterprises where the accumulation of years of suite-versus-best-of-breed automation decisions typically leaves in place a system landscape that looks more like a lunar landscape than the digital nervous system of a successful enterprise. The consequences are clear: not only higher cost of automation but also a subpar employee and customer experience, not to mention a higher level of complexity that literally kills the agility that enterprises need to thrive when under enterprise acceleration pressure¹. These consequences are even more relevant when the value creation chain of the enterprise is under scrutiny due to a global pandemic.²

But whatever the landscape is, CxOs need to decide what the leading systems are for their enterprise: Start with customers (finance versus CRM) and products (product life cycle management versus supply chain management), but also include people. Enterprises fall into two camps when it comes to the system of record for people: the HR-managed HR core system versus the IT-managed active directory system. Both need to function in lockstep, because people need access to systems (active directory) and a rich body of information to do their work in other enterprise applications (in the HR systems, for example, they may need home address, salary, tenure, performance, skills, certifications, and succession information). As Hinchcliffe points out, this HR-related information is key for successfully working with productivity applications, sales automation, shop floor management, customer service, and many other applications that use employee HR data. Having to reenter that information and maintain it in parallel not only is frustrating and provides a subpar employee experience but also creates information pathologies that slow down an enterprise. There is no right or wrong answer between active directory and HR core, but the two definitely need to be integrated to enable the automation that enterprises require in the 21st century, and CxOs need to determine which of the two is the leading system for their enterprise.

But the real integration challenge related to HR systems is not in the enterprise but in the numerous statutory and legal interfaces required on a city, county, state, and federal level. Some of these interfaces can be automated; others require the printing and mailing of forms. The regulation

tsunami causing this activity is raging stronger than ever, and the result for enterprises is incomplete automation of people processes and related reports—with the risk of hefty compliance costs. A Constellation study in 2016 showed that a small to medium-size company in California (granted, a highly regulated state) would need more than 60 external manual interfaces outside the enterprise with vendor A and more than 80 interfaces with vendor B (with vendors A and B being the leading ERP suite providers, including HCM, thereby offering an enterprise the best integration across enterprise functions on the market). This has created the demand for “compliance as a service” (CaaS)—that is, an opportunity for service providers to act as the single inbox and outbox of an enterprise for all statutory demands and reporting needs. Unfortunately for enterprises, although there have been some encouraging forays into the compliance automation field, a holistic solution to the problem is not yet on the market.

In closing, there is no doubt that integration matters for enterprises, most prominently for the area in which enterprises typically spend and invest the most: their people. The need for integration has led to the need for integrated suites (ERP suites, HCM suites³, talent management suites, and so forth) that attempt to place the burden of integration on the vendor. But the price for that typically has been that suite vendors compromise best-of-breed functionality, which makes CxOs look at best-of-breed vendors, which then creates an integration problem. As Hinchliffe states, each enterprise is different and each integration scenario is different.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more on enterprise acceleration for people leaders, see: Holger Mueller, “Why People Leaders Must Embrace Enterprise Acceleration,” Constellation Research, July 3, 2018. <https://www.constellationr.com/research/why-people-leaders-must-embrace-enterprise-acceleration>

² For more on people-leader strategies during COVID-19, see: Holger Mueller, “Inside the Future of Work Changes in a Post-Pandemic Business World,” Constellation Research, June 9, 2020. <https://www.constellationr.com/research/inside-future-work-changes-post-pandemic-business-world>

³ For the leading HCM suites, see: Holger Mueller, “Propelling the Future of Work with Key HCM Suites,” Constellation Research, June 7, 2019. <https://www.constellationr.com/research/propelling-future-work-key-hcm-suites>

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Dion Hinchcliffe is an internationally recognized digital thought leader, industry analyst, business strategist, enterprise architect, transformation consultant, and keynote speaker. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in enterprise IT.

Currently the VP and principal analyst of Constellation Research, Hinchcliffe is a well-known industry expert on the topics of digital transformation, CIO issues, digital workplace, ecosystem strategy, digital business, and next-generation enterprises. His thought leadership can be found on ZDNet, ebizQ, On Digital Strategy, and the Enterprise Irregulars. He is coauthor of the bestselling *Social Business by Design* (John Wiley & Sons).

Hinchcliffe is an executive fellow at the Tuck Center for Digital Strategies and was recently identified as one of the top three people most mentioned by IT leaders. Industry analytics firm Onalytica ranks Hinchcliffe as the No. 2 influencer globally on the subject of digital transformation. He has keynoted or spoken at hundreds of leading industry conferences, including CeBIT, KMWorld, IT Roadmap, Dreamforce, CIO Perspectives, AIIM Conference, IBM Connect, and other industry events.

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Organizational Highlights

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- Experienced research team with an average of 25 years of practitioner, management, and industry experience.
- Organizers of the Constellation Connected Enterprise—an innovation summit and best practices knowledge-sharing retreat for business leaders.
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