

# It's Not You, It's Me

Want to boost engagement? Make sure your new tools put the employee first.



By **Tammy Burns**

“The average attention span of a goldfish is nine seconds; human beings, it’s eight seconds,” says Ofelia Isabel, Canadian rewards, talent and communication leader with Towers Watson. “As a communicator, how do you deal with that? If you think about programs that employers have, they’re all complicated, there’s a lot to them, and you’ve got eight seconds to actually grab somebody’s attention.”

Grabbing that attention has long been a concern for employers, which have to communicate on plans, policies and procedures without overwhelming their audience. Meanwhile, as technology continues to progress at a rapid rate, changes in best practices for communication add another layer of complexity.

But, as many employers are realizing, advances in technology can actually provide fresh and exciting ways to engage with employees. Taking inspiration from social media, games, virtual reality and other new media tools, the HR industry

is offering up applications that put employees front and centre, giving them a strong sense of control—and even a dash of entertainment.

### All About Me

Anyone who uses Facebook or other social sharing platforms knows how social media focuses on the individual. Even Internet search engines such as Google now tailor their query results to match your location, your previous search terms, your social media likes and any other details that it can pull from your digital footprint. And this customized interaction is no longer just a gimmick; it has become ingrained in daily life to the point that it’s now the way we expect to receive information.

Personalization is key. For example, Morneau Shepell’s new Fitness Coach Connects program helps members to carry out a personalized fitness plan based on a health risk assessment and personal goal-setting process. Participants are remotely paired with a coach and given a

wireless tracker, called a Fitbit Zip, which monitors their daily activity and enters it into a database. Together, the participant and coach set out a personal program; the coach conducts three scheduled sessions, periodically checks in with the participant and monitors activity to ensure that they’re meeting their fitness goals.

“This three-pronged approach keeps people engaged and motivated, resulting in the best opportunity to achieve their fitness goals,” explains Paul Sywulych, a partner with Morneau Shepell. “I think we’ll see more of these solutions—leveraging technology, connecting with an expert and having an automated way of connecting those two people together.”

In a similar move toward personalized solutions, Sun Life Financial is updating its mobile app to offer increased capabilities for individualized drug plan management. In addition to basic drug information, the app will enable users to look up alternative options for their prescriptions and see the coverage discrepancies among those alternatives.

“[It] will really empower the plan member to have a discussion with their physician or their pharmacist about what alternatives may be available to them,” explains Wayne Millar, assistant vice-president of product development, group benefits, with Sun Life Financial.

And these new connections aren’t limited to health matters. Standard Life launched its Financial Inertia program and Motion Profiler online tool in October 2013. Available to the general public, the Motion Profiler is intended to help Canadians understand how finances and investing fit into their broader life goals and concerns, as well as what might be preventing them from saving or holding them back from investing. The program asks a series of questions based on factors such as social values, attitudes and motivations that affect how people engage with their finances. The tool then creates a character snapshot of the individual’s financial behaviour.

Standard Life also launched Plan for Life in 2013, an online educational

platform for members to help them plan a saving and retirement strategy. The key here is the focus on individualization, explains Sophie Bellemare, associate vice-president, digital strategy, with Standard Life. “If you’re close to retirement, you will not need the same financial information as somebody who is 20 years old and joining a plan for the first time,” she says. “If you [enter] your knowledge of investment and your age, [the tool] guides you through what you should know based on your profile.”

### Alternate Realities

The industry is also seeing emerging solutions that connect the online world with the off-line through augmented reality. For example, Desjardins Insurance is currently experimenting with such technology with its Your Way app, which enables a printed or online statement to “talk” to plan members. A member downloads the app for a smartphone or tablet and points the device at a statement, which launches an online animation that explains the value of contributions and investments and also links to a retirement planning tool.

“We wanted to not just push technology,” says Jackie Patel, director of marketing and sales support, group retirement savings, with Desjardins Insurance. “We wanted to push it in a way that was educational and with a call to action as well. It’s important that, once we catch their attention, we do something valuable with it.” Push notifications will be sent to users to ensure that they have access to the latest videos as new content is added, and users will be able to access the entire library of videos with a scan from their mobile device.

As plan providers strive to find new ways to engage employees, gamification—which incorporates playful learning and fun competition into communication—is another big trend in the technology space.

In February, Sun Life Financial introduced its money UP program, in which users complete levels and missions that involve information on investing and retirement. Interactive web-based tools such as avatars and quizzes offer a fun factor, while a live leaderboard allows participants to compete against colleagues and share their finished missions on Facebook and Twitter. That social aspect has the potential to be a huge driver for increased interaction. “We’re inundated

with all kinds of information on a daily basis,” says Isabel. “But one thing that really seems to resonate with people is, we’re all interested in what everyone else is doing.”

Likewise, Great-West Life’s new smartPATH 2.0, which launched in December 2013, has a game-like feeling reminiscent of The Sims and other avatar-based programs. Users navigate their way through a virtual neighbourhood customized to reflect their group retirement and savings plan. Touch points throughout the neighbourhood educate enrolled members about their plan and encourage non-members to enrol.

Gamification can also be applied beyond HR plans and incorporated into a company’s overall business model, suggests Karim Kurji, director of technology solutions with Buck Consultants. For instance, he has worked with a client to develop a crowdsourcing platform that allows employees to submit business ideas and use a points system to vote on others’ suggestions, boosting employee interaction and encouraging friendly competition among colleagues.

With all of the exciting tools coming to market—not to mention the innovations that haven’t even been dreamed of yet—it’s easy to dive into the quest for the newest toy. However, successfully building and implementing new technology requires employers to weigh the costs and outcomes, consult with users and strategize how such a tool fits into the bigger picture.

“It’s important to do your homework upfront and have a strategy of what it is you’re trying to accomplish,” says Isabel. “Figure out what those outcomes or employee behaviours are that you’re trying to drive and then figure out how technology can help you with that. So often, we get excited about the latest tool, and we just go ahead and implement it without thinking, *What are we actually trying to get out of this? And how are we going to measure success?*”

Above all else, the user experience must always trump the coolness factor. “People will look at it and [think] it’s cool, but after that, the cool factor will go away,” warns Patel. “But if there’s something in it for *them*, then you can continue to make it live.”

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