

Data-Driven HR

To help workers thrive, focus on the big (data) picture.

Interview by David Ward

From the heart of Silicon Valley, Jenny Dearborn has a clear message for HR leaders everywhere: “Big data” is truly huge. In fact, it should be the catalyst for positive change and increased productivity for every person in an organization.

As chief learning officer and senior vice president at SAP, Dearborn leads a team responsible for designing education and training programs that drive measurable results for the software company’s nearly 90,000 employees worldwide. She is a well-known thought leader in general business and human capital management, as well as the author of *Data Driven: How Performance Analytics Delivers Extraordinary Sales Results* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

Her new book, *The Data Driven Leader: A Powerful Approach to Leading with Analytics, Driving Decisions, and Delivering Breakthrough Business Results* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), shows how you can transform the HR function and improve your organization’s effectiveness by using data to make decisions grounded in facts rather than opinions, while also identifying the root causes of any company’s thorniest problems.

What led to your interest in data and analytics?

I grew up in a big family where you always needed to prove yourself during discussions at the dinner table and back up your assertions with proof while everyone else tried to shout you down. So early in life, I saw that the need for facts and data is irrefutable.

In the corporate environment, I began to look for ways for data to provide, with surgical precision, exactly

what each individual worker needs to know to be as effective as possible. If I can find that, I can make sure people can be their very best selves at work.

HR is often viewed as a people-driven profession. So why should HR embrace data-driven analytics and decision-making?

Believe it or not, using data allows HR to be more people-driven. It can help you identify exactly where to focus and when to intervene. We’re already using this information in lots of ways.

For example, algorithms help us predict which candidates are likely to be the most effective workers. We’re letting new employees know during onboarding why top performers do well and what it will take to work at that level. Predictive analytics reveal which employees are at most risk of leaving so we can find ways of retaining them.

Jenny Dearborn



Is there a danger that HR will misuse big data?

Yes, there are inherent concerns with any organization that holds a great deal of information about people. So it’s critical for corporations to be transparent about what they collect, how they use it, what insights they are mining for, what actions will they take based on those findings and so on. Privacy is important, and so is open communication about the ethical implications of data, a culture of trust and a commitment to integrity.

How can HR ensure that every employee at every level buys into data-driven decision-making?

It’s up to HR to show employees the value of data and how it can help them do their jobs better. If you’re a sales rep, you need all the help you can get to close deals. For example, you’ll welcome it if someone says, “I’m going to pull all these data sources together and use an algorithm and a chat bot to point to exactly where you need to focus your energy.” If that enables you to close that deal, you’re going to say, “Heck yes, I want more of this.” Once you show people how to use data to advance their careers, you’ll get tremendous buy-in.

What talent development initiatives are underway at SAP?

We have done a great job over the last

several years of making the individual pieces of the company's HR best-in-class. The challenge now is putting it all together into an innovative, seamless, personalized employee experience. In my role, I'm looking at all the pieces. We start with the big picture—geopolitical events, the global economy, market forces, and how that all drives the company's strategies and goals. We then look at whether we can grow the talent we need internally to achieve our corporate objectives. If not, we'll hire externally. Then it's a matter of connecting all the pieces of the talent framework—from recruiting, to onboarding, performance management, learning and career development, succession, etc. We want to make sure all those functions

are elevated based on a data-driven approach that joins everything in one consistent but highly personal way.

You worked as a high school English teacher after college. What skills do you think today's youth must improve upon to perform well in the workplace?

The future of work for people is grounded in the knowledge, skills and abilities that are uniquely human—the work that can't be automated and that robotics and artificial intelligence can't do. The work of the future will involve asking the right question. STEM is critically important, but studying the liberal arts is even more important now to develop critical-thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, emotional

intelligence, cross-cultural awareness, empathy, active listening and creativity.

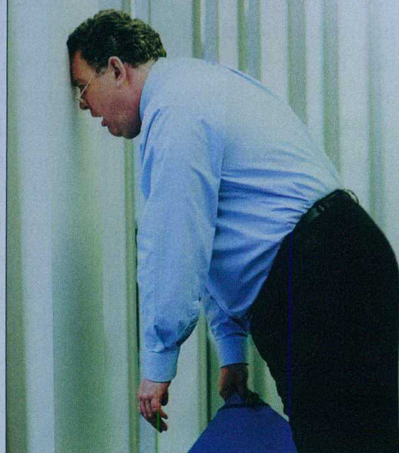
You were diagnosed with dyslexia, attention deficit disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder as a young adult. What's your advice for people dealing with similar disabilities?

It gets better. Your experiences in a traditional school structure will be very difficult and frustrating because most schools have a narrow definition of how learning works. But neuro-diversity is highly appreciated in the real world. It's this incredible gift to be able to see the world differently. **HR**

David Ward is a freelance journalist based in North Carolina.

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