

Creating the future of human resources with watsonx Orchestrate

Using digital workers to automate data gathering, IBM HR empowers human staff to devote more time to high-value tasks

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A future for HR

Jon Lester was working in the future. And he didn't want to come

Why not? Because Jon was in a future where the skills of his coll department were being used effectively, such as on workforce pl on busywork, such as gathering data from multiple systems. It's onerous data gathering tasks are done automatically, helping sav HR staff to focus on delivering equitable processes and reviews i and promotion decisions.

We could all benefit from this future. So how did Jon get there?



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Faster deployments

In a pilot for IBM Consulting in North America, IBM saved 12,000 hours in one quarter

A technology advance in h
people get work done

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Jon was Director of HR Service Delivery & Transformation at IBM operations teams in six delivery centers around the world. The re regularly received new IBM innovations in the AI and automation became available to external clients—to test their limits in real-w

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One day in 2021, Jon and his team received a new technology from the IBM Watson® Research Lab—a trial version of software now known as **Orchestrate** solution.

They thought it was a new iteration of familiar digital assistant artificial intelligence technology, until they began working with it. Soon they were creating digital assistants to assist real IBM HR employees, automating 12,000 hours of previous manual data gathering and data-entry tasks in one quarter (see detail later in the presentation). They understood that the capabilities of this new software were about to be used not just for IBM's HR department, but potentially for businesses across the world.

Following the success of this first digital worker project, Jon was promoted to a senior role within IBM HR. He was looking forward to extending the new capabilities of the software. As Jon puts it: “I told them I want to take the future of work with me.”

The first real-world use case: employee promotions

IBM HR Business Partners are HR employees who help IBM business partners retain talent. One IBM HR Business Partner and their teammates were assigned to automate the quarterly promotions process, the purpose of which was to promote employees in a fair and timely manner and to help form promotions for employees not selected in the current quarter. The process's success is critical to retaining top talent within IBM.

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But the process was extremely time and labor intensive. It stretched across every 12-week quarter, putting serious time pressure on the HR team and other job responsibilities, such as strategic workforce planning, talent acquisition, and skills transformation with a focus on inclusion.

“It was heavily reliant on collecting static data from various systems,” an IBM HR Business Partner explains. This IBM HR Business Partner covers the North America region for IBM Consulting™. But this still involved pulling data on employee performance, from several systems, into spreadsheets with about 10,000 rows. She’d share that data with the appropriate IBM Talent, HR and business unit leaders—hundreds in all. “This manual work was a huge obstacle standing in the way of our *real work*: helping the business units effectively identify who was ready for promotion, who was getting close to it or not, in addition to helping them identify what’s needed to get them ready for a future cycle,” says the IBM HR Business Partner.

Thus, pulling and displaying the data necessary for the promotion task for which Jon and his team decided to try IBM watsonx Orchestrate between the HR Service Delivery & Transformation team, IBM Watson AI IT department and the IBM HR Business Partner and their HR colleagues, led to the creation and implementation of IBM’s first digital HR worker.

How digital workers empower human workers

The digital worker is called HiRo, and it is dramatically transforming the process during the promotions process. “HiRo is a rules-based system,” says the IBM HR Business Partner.

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performs many of the repetitive, manual activities that the IBM HR Business Partner and their teammates used to have to do *alongside* their higher value,

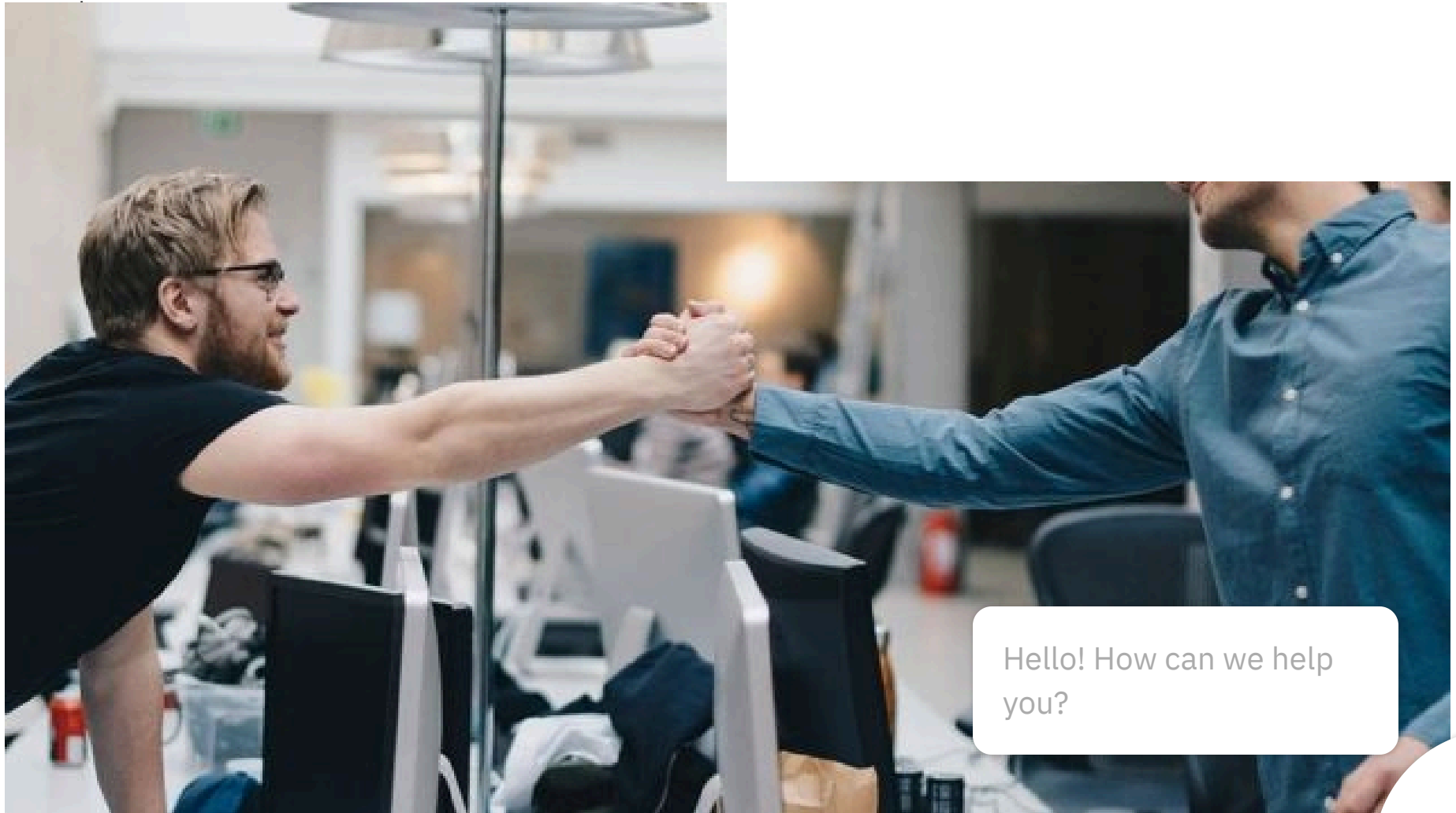
HiRo now handles the information compiling and formatting task much of the IBM HR Business Partner's time. The spreadsheets managers and leaders now receive an updated view of their employees displays whether the employees have met objective promotion criteria and need to be taken—by the employees and the managers—for fulfillment requirements.

A concern with automation, of course, is that eliminating human jobs. The use of HiRo shows how automation can *elevate* and displaying data, HiRo gives the IBM HR Business Partner and managers more time to consider which of the employees who meet objective criteria should be nominated for promotion. It also affords coaching other employees to help them meet the criteria, if not in the next. As the IBM HR Business Partner puts it, "The time that the managers are saving frees us up to do all the other things anyway, and we don't have to work long hours to keep up."

And although HiRo does not include machine learning capabilities, IBM's ethics underlying IBM's AI technology by ensuring data privacy and information (PI), and transparency around where the data is stored, a balance of duties between HiRo, the IBM HR Business Partner and ensures that the actual workforce decisions are made *by people*. When a pay raise or a nomination is made by the manager, the manager and the practice lead," Jon explains. Further, the cross-functional assessment to ensure that HiRo aligns with these five principles

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- **Explainability:** earning and maintaining trust by making clear decisions are made by humans and HiRo makes no decisions
- **Fairness:** applying rules consistently and displaying the same
- **Robustness:** guarding against adversarial threats and potent systems healthy
- **Transparency:** sharing information with stakeholders of vary trust
- **Privacy:** safeguarding data through the entire lifecycle, from



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Blowing chatbots and RPA out of the water

Before the HiRo project, the first question Jon had about IBM watsonx Orchestrate was what makes it different than a chatbot or an RPA robot. One of his team's recent successes with new technology was creating IBM's AskHR conversational AI, which automates more than 80 common HR processes. AskHR has strong adoption rates, and it saves the HR department, IBM employees and managers significant amounts of time spent completing or supporting HR processes.

“Conversational AI and RPA are also useful and valuable for automating manual, objective tasks,” says Jon. But there are things they can't do that IBM watsonx Orchestrate can. “AskHR does its tasks really well, but it can only do them one at a time. It can't link transactions across multiple processes or systems. And a chatbot lacks long-term memory. The moment you switch it off, it forgets that you exist. It has no memory of what you did before.”

When the team began working with IBM watsonx Orchestrate, they quickly noticed the capabilities that set it apart. Jon explains: “It can engage with multiple people, of different roles, at the same time. It remembers what you told it yesterday and can apply that information to actions today, where applicable. Once the rules are set by humans, HiRo will uniformly apply them. And it lets you build its skills: you can train it to do certain tasks within one process, but you can easily have it apply those same skills to other processes. So you can build use case after use case. It blows chatbots out of the water. It really is changing our understanding of the future of work.”

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Not just saving time, but transforming work

IBM HR first piloted HiRo in the second quarter of 2022, for IBM Consulting in North America. In previous quarters, for each employee manager, it took about eight hours to gather all of the necessary data and fill in the relevant nomination forms. Approximately 1,800 managers used HiRo during the Q2 2022 pilot, and they completed the data-gathering and data-entry work in about 1 hour each, collectively saving about 12,000 hours in that quarter's promotions process.

The time savings, of course, greatly accelerated the promotions process for the quarter. "We did the work of ten weeks in five weeks," says the IBM HR Business Partner.

Based on this success, HiRo has some growth opportunities of its own. It's about to be rolled out to other IBM Consulting regions worldwide. "We anticipate that the other regions where we roll this out will achieve similar results. The potential savings over four quarters could be 50,000 hours per year," says Jon.

Beyond saving time, HiRo and other digital workers' highest value may be their potential to transform jobs. We are in the midst of a global labor and talent shortage. People are expected to do more with less all the time. This technology can help. "It's not just that the work of four people can be done by one, it's also that that one person's role is totally changed," says Jon. "They can spend a much greater portion of their time on the most strategic work—like workforce planning and equity, and they can use IBM watsonx Orchestrate to supply the data they need to do that important work."

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So what's next? While HiRo itself will be rolled out to more regions in late 2022, it is about to gain several digital colleagues. The HR department is already using learnings from the promotions cycle to develop new digital workers for other processes. The new prototypes include an Onboarding Assistant and Learning Event Manager, and more processes are in the pipeline for evaluation.





About IBM

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Solution component

IBM watsonx Orchestrate™

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