

HR's automation aid: HRIS

Human Resources Information Systems (HRIS) have been gaining in popularity over the years. Jacqueline Burns looks at how a number of companies have benefited from implementing HRIS and exposes some of the common pitfalls of such systems

If the analysts at Gartner are correct, HR professionals must prepare their companies for an imminent and dramatic revolution. Business-to-Employee (B2E) strategies, which use and leverage e-business approaches and internet technologies to manage and optimise the workforce, are the latest business imperative.

There is already wide acceptance of B2E as a management philosophy. There are few HR functions that cannot already be performed by an employee through an internet or intranet-connected PC. Moreover, in Australia there is a surprisingly high degree of HR self-sufficiency, with many workers harnessing smart systems and software to conduct their own employee housekeeping, from performance evaluation through to processing leave requests.

Gaining momentum in recruitment

Simon Higgins is HR director, Australasia for Hudson Global Resources. Having recently celebrated one year in the job, he describes Hudson's HR technology as "quite fragmented".

"We don't have an all-encompassing HRIS in place. In fact, we have a gap in our structure that we're currently looking to fill," says Higgins. That does not make Hudson a hot prospect for IT vendors. The company has discounted purchasing a new system or software, given it's not fully utilising the technology it already owns. For example, Hudson is about to enhance its current payroll system, CHRIS, by upgrading to the latest version and making use of the various HR modules that are attached to it.

"Our core strategy is to take what we have and make it work more powerfully for us," Higgins explains. "There will be some associated costs as we migrate from the current position to the desired position, but we're not talking huge sums of money, just some implementation charges."

In the process, Hudson will broaden access to its HRIS by establishing a network of kiosks. In that way, its 1,200-odd employees will be able to engage in self-service, such as by accessing and updating their own data, including personal and banking details.

Momentum, a purpose-built performance management system designed last year by MIS, is making the most positive contribution to Hudson's business in this region.

Around two-thirds of Hudson's workforce is on variable pay and paid performance bonuses – related to both individual and business performance – quarterly, biannually or annually. Without the aid of an information system, this would be a huge administrative burden.

Momentum tracks and reports performance using KPIs and a scorecard arrangement. It then provides a process flow for the electronic authorisation of payments and feeds that data directly into CHRIS so that Hudson's people are paid efficiently.

Importantly, Higgins can extract from Momentum important, performance-related data – enabling him to analyse trends in group, team and individual performance – which can be tied back to business objectives and to the business strategy.

Higgins describes the system as "excellent and very efficient", adding the decision was a no-brainer given it is so close to the operational aspect of Hudson's business. "The way we pay people and the way we measure and record performance is critical to what we do," he notes.

24/7 HR

Being 24-hour operations, Conrad Jupiters and Conrad Treasury Casinos require around-the-clock HR support. However, thanks to technology and the automation of its policies and procedures, the HR team no longer needs to be on call 24/7.

"If a team member needs to be suspended on the weekend, we have a very clear policy which even has the form attached," explains Rolanda Ayling, Conrad's director of HR strategy and development. "The manager can't really go wrong because we've made it so user-friendly. It's all based on Q&A and is a step-by-step process."

Conrad is well advanced in its HRIS strategy. Most of the casino's HR information is now provided online via an intranet called Conrad Connect and a raft of Lotus Notes databases. Staff members who do not have a computer on their desk can access Conrad Connect from a computer lab, located in each Casino's employee dining room. In the long-term, remote access will be made available. The intranet serves as a repository for over 100 HR policies, as well as for handbooks and the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.

E-learning courses, which cover topics such as OHS, sexual harassment, and fire and evacuation, are also

delivered through Conrad Connect. Staff can access their pay details online, view leave accruals and review information about their superannuation. Advertising employment vacancies on Conrad Connect aided in 340 people being internally placed last year.

Later this year, Conrad will implement a new roster system for its food and beverage unit. Virtual Roster will allow the food and beverage manager to input individual preferences into a central roster, allocate people to shifts, track sick and annual leave, view at a glance when people have been absent or not showed for work, match skills and capability to duties, and post messages to staff. It will even send broadcast text messages to listed mobile phone numbers, notifying staff of available shifts. That feature alone will produce a productivity improvement by eliminating the need for a member of the HR team to spend hours each day on the phone trying to fill staff vacancies.

When Conrad commenced its HR migration online, one of the issues it unearthed was that a proportion of its 4,500 employees had a very low level of computer literacy. Some did not even know how to turn a computer on.

Previously, this had not been an issue – computer skills are not necessary to perform food and beverage, facilities, stewarding or housekeeping roles. However, in a self-service environment, training had to be readily addressed.

Shared services appeal

Amcor Australasia shares some of the same challenges as Conrad in that a number of its factories operate on three shifts, 24 hours per day. To support those sites around the clock, Amcor has made all policies and procedures available via the company's intranet.

However, unlike Conrad and Hudson, Amcor is only in the early stages of developing an HRIS strategy. When its outsourced payroll arrangement was recently compromised, Amcor scanned the market for a new payroll and HR system. It considered around eight generic options, including SAP and PeopleSoft, but ultimately settled on a local product, largely due to the cost and speed of implementation.

Lance Johnson, Amcor Australasia's group manager HR administration, says his department, which provides a shared service to 60 sites, wanted to go down the self-service route and automate as much of the paperwork as possible.

The majority of Amcor's 6,000 employees are manufacturing workers who do not have direct access to a computer. Therefore, like Hudson, Amcor will establish a kiosk system to enable those employees to participate in self-service.

The first phase of the strategy will be rolled out to the 1,500 employees who have desktop PCs. The second phase will extend self-service to all staff via the introduction of the kiosks, and also introduce management self-service, automating paper-based salary review, labour request, and performance review systems.

Time is on my side

Automation has certainly changed the makeup of the HR workforce. When Conrad Jupiters first opened, its HR department included a typing pool of 12 people. Now, a team of 19 manages 4,500 employees across two sites.

Ayling finds the suggestion that her team must have more free-time amusing. "We don't really have spare time because we're constantly revamping what we do. Each HRIS has a life and depending upon how it advances you move on to a new system or one with more flexibility.

"Paperwork is a necessary evil," she adds. "If you can simplify it as much as possible it gives you time to focus on other more important things, such as spending more time teaching people or helping them with challenging issues."

Automation also allows Ayling's team to add "colour, movement and sparkles" to capture people's attention and make their online experience as exciting and attractive as possible.

"Our overall branding includes treating our internal team the same as our customers. They don't want boring things online. They want it to be exciting and different so it's more fun for them," Ayling concludes.

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