HR Technology:
Leveraging the Shift to Self-Service—It’s Time to Go Strategic

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Abstract
Attracting, retaining, motivating and developing knowledge talent remain critical challenges for HR practice leaders. The recent shift toward integrated human resource information systems technology and self-service functionality for employees and managers alike is a direct response to the competitive challenges of today's knowledge economy. For this reason, offering technology-based self-service is now the preferred method for improving customer service levels to managers and employees, as well as for enhancing the lines of communication between the company and its employees. In addition, there are clear tangible rewards from self-service that include lower cost of operations, increased productivity and, for those who are prepared to leverage this advantage, the opportunity to firmly position HR as an organizational leader and strategic business partner. Please note that due to space constraints it was not possible to discuss all salient aspects of this topic.

Introduction
Advances in Web-based technology in particular and computer technology in general will continue to be a driving force behind advances in the knowledge economy. A critical success factor influencing an organization's ability to lead, simply languish or ultimately falter in the marketplace will eventually come to rest on the positive synergy the organization is capable of generating between the human capital assets in its employ and the judicious investments in technology that it makes in its efforts to remain abreast of the competition.

The Right HR Service Delivery Model
"It is no coincidence that 89 percent of world-class HR groups have an explicit workforce strategy, versus only 41 percent of average groups."1

Defining the right HR service delivery model means aligning HR investments and resources to support core business processes and objectives. There are normally two key business drivers to this equation: administrative operations and the desire of the business for strategic HR consulting. Centers of excellence in relation to administrative operations generally involve simplifying, automating, eliminating or outsourcing low-value HR transaction processing. For those organizations that have not yet investigated and/or implemented self-service technology, it is important to highlight its role in streamlining HR administrative operations. Conversely, strategic HR consulting requires establishing a clearly defined mission for HR on which the HR service delivery model will be based. This should include obtaining input from senior management and internal clients and using this information to align HR with the core business strategies, goals and objectives of the organization.2

Using Information to Drive Innovation
“If we apply knowledge to tasks we already know how to do, we call it productivity. If we apply knowledge to tasks that are new and different, we call it innovation.”

Peter Drucker

From the HR perspective, strategically using the information assets of the organization means that HR business processes, organizational support systems and HR information technology are aligned to continuously capture, maintain and utilize key strategic information assets (i.e., knowledge and judgments) to improve business performance. To this end, it is incumbent upon HR practice leaders to understand the distinction between data, information and business intelligence and to use this knowledge to the competitive advantage of the organization (see Figure 1). Transactional self-service processes are generally fed by basic HR administrative data systems. The second level—information—is represented in Figure 1 under the heading “business support and execution role.” At this level, facts or data can generally be gathered and analyzed and a consistent pattern or trend can be identified to allow a conclusion to be drawn through deductive reasoning and/or by inference. However, at the third and highest level—business intelligence—a strategic partner is expected to possess the skill sets and competencies necessary to be able to perceive, discover, learn or come to understand (i.e., via data analysis, modeling, simulation capabilities, etc.) the best course of action for the organization, whatever the business scenario might be, and to make a recommendation to senior management accordingly. As a strategic partner, personal credibility, in addition to strategic capability, is crucial.

Self-Service Human Resource Systems
Self-service human resource systems for employees and managers have been the focal point of considerable attention within the HR technology community over the last several years for all the right reasons. First, the notion of using Web-based technologies to automate the growing list of admin-

2 Ibid.
istrative transactions for employees—payroll, benefits, training, corporate resources and the like—serves as a catalyst for transformation for those seeking to move the human resource function to a strategic vantage point within the organization. Another important reason for providing direct access to Web-based technologies is to improve service levels for employees and managers through the elimination of unnecessary steps in HR processes that add time and frustrating delays in HR-related transactions. Finally, self-service also means that HR specialists are now free to spend less time on day-to-day recordkeeping and focus on value-added functions that aid in meeting the goals and objectives of the organization (i.e., workforce analytics, talent management, staff development and retention, performance management, total rewards, etc.).

As a general rule, human resource information systems (HRIS) that offer self-service HR administration applications have evolved to a completely Web-based model, so that all that is required to access employee information is a Web browser. These systems are able to handle structured data, such as employee records, payroll and company directories, without difficulty. In addition, most HRIS systems are also able to reliably handle much of the unstructured data that is common in business today. Examples of unstructured data that an HR department would utilize online include human resource information contained within existing documents such as performance appraisals, e-mail, employee handbooks, and HR policies and procedures. These examples provide a larger vision of what managers and employees may want and expect from an HRIS.

Calculating Return on Investment for Self-Service HR Systems

Automation of a company's processes should result in reduced turnaround time per transaction, reduced cost per transaction, reduced number of inquiries to HR, increased management and employee satisfaction, as well as an array of other metrics that clearly demonstrate the efficiency and cost effectiveness of HR self-service. HR practice leaders seeking metrics to calculate a return on investment (ROI) for a self-service solution should use these and/or similar metrics in the workflow model used to justify an investment to be made in a self-service HR system.

The benefits of automation are significant. It can eliminate routine, repetitive paperwork, streamline organizational processes through electronic routing and approval, and enhance HR reporting by tracking and compiling HR metrics on a variety of tasks on a real-time basis. This replaces the traditional approach to HR administration—costly processes, redundant...
data management and paper-based systems. Self-service functionality results in reduced calls to the HR department, less paperwork and less duplicate data entry. These factors are intended to save time, improve communication and reduce the possibility of error. Self-service HR is a desirable goal for many organizations, but it requires a comprehensive understanding of self-service potential and functionality. If the right system is to be selected for the organization, HR transactions are like any other business transaction—they require supporting information, they are time-sensitive, and they are frequently part of a larger organizational process.

Portals and self-service technology provide HR one of the first significant opportunities for reducing administrative costs and enhancing productivity. However, care must be exercised in the formation of a project team and the project implementation phase. As with all implementations, antecedents to success include a thorough needs assessment and documented definition of requirements, screening and selection of a vendor, negotiation of the contract terms and agreement, and project implementation and follow-up. If carefully orchestrated, these crucial steps will ensure the organization’s anticipated ROI during the initial implementation phase and thereafter.

Web-Based Technology

In the recent past, corporate intranets have become a very easy way to bring information together in one place for use by the various people within the organization. Historically, intranets have been managed and developed by a Webmaster with varying degrees of utility to the users. With recent advancements in Web technology, Web portals have quickly become a popular replacement to the corporate intranet. Portals are designed to expedite routine organizational tasks—accessing the telephone directory and routine corporate information, starting shared computer programs and so forth. Portals also provide the solution to the knowledge management problem of having too much information and too little context by automating much of the content organizing and gathering process (i.e., due to portals’ ability to find, analyze and organize massive quantities of information according to the specific needs of the users and their business goals and objectives). Because portals are able to categorize information by content, they serve as a filter for a manager or employee so that only information that is pertinent based on a user’s identity will be displayed, i.e., role-based personalization. Portals provide a variety of other distinctive features, including smart searching based on the list of related links and resources on the page a user is viewing, the ability to integrate both information and interactive functions onto a single user interface and the ability to personalize the computer display to each user. However, the most unique feature of portals is the ability to organize and present large quantities of unrelated company information in both a structured and unstructured format.

Managing the Web-Based Technology Process

The information collected for use in the HRIS requires an understanding of the HR processes involved in order to ensure the highest level of system productivity. For this reason, HR should not be restricted by a costly and/or inefficient hand-off to a corporate Webmaster for the posting of information to the company Web site portal (i.e., a Web site that acts as a doorway to the intranet/Internet or a portion of the intranet/Internet targeted toward one particular subject). Ideally, HR should be self-sufficient in its ability to manage the information directly. Due to the technological sophistication of today’s HRIS applications, Web-based technology can be completely maintained and managed by HR department personnel without the necessity of any prior training and/or experience with Web-page building skills.

Web-Based Technology—HR’s Leadership Role

Because HR serves all of the employees within the organization, it has an ongoing need to communicate effectively and efficiently with the employees of the organization on a regular basis. As such, this is an opportunity for HR to demonstrate business leadership by investigating and recommending the move to portal technology, provided the return on investment criteria for the organization can be met.

Simply taking an existing HR database application and porting it to the Web is only a partial solution. Productivity gains are much more apparent when Internet technologies are also used to automate HR processes through communication and collaboration. Many HR transactions take place as part of a company’s standard processes, such as scheduling interviews for job applicants, orientation of new hires, scheduling and approval of performance reviews, and more. These processes consist of action steps requiring specific information at each point, in a specific sequence, together with approvals and a procedure for periodic feedback. A workflow model should be developed and standardized to ensure the integrity of the system and the information collected. This is a

much more sophisticated approach to self-service HR than merely creating Web-based forms to collect HR information.

Management Reporting and Workforce Analytics

HR controls important transactional data that can be used, in turn, to analyze the organization’s trends. Web-based technology can be used to mine this data by providing new tools to HR practice leaders, company executives, department managers and supervisors. Web-based reporting tools can help answer important questions related to attracting new employees (recruiting success and costs), retention (turnover) and employee development (performance management and career planning). New technology enables the transformation of raw data into useful information and puts it into the hands of individuals who can use it to help transform the business.

Results of Recent Surveys on HR Technology

There are other factors that require attention as well—new ways of doing business require new skill sets and competencies, and new skill sets and competencies require new approaches to learning and people management. As such, the following studies have been selected to help crystallize the paradigm shift in relation to the HR profession and technology and to clarify the expectations of senior business leaders related to the transformation currently underway in human resource management as a result of the challenges and opportunities of HR technology.

Transforming HR for Business Results: A Study of U.S. Organizations (February 2003)4

This survey conducted by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, is of interest from two vantage points. First, from the perspective of the HR profession, this study provides a reality check on how HR practice leaders currently spend their time at work, despite their best intentions, versus the way they desire to allocate their time (see Figure 2). This study reflects HR’s continuing struggle with identifying ways to automate and make more efficient its day-to-day administrative and recordkeeping responsibilities in order to devote more time and attention to a clearly defined strategic role within the organization. Second, respondents were given a list of HRIS modules and asked to rate the effectiveness of each at meeting their company’s needs. They were also asked to indicate the type of technologies used and answer questions about their return on investment. Over half of the respondents rated payroll and benefit plan systems (defined contribution plans and health and welfare benefit plans) as effective or very effective. Training, recruitment and performance management systems received the lowest ratings (see Figure 3).

Interestingly, organizations with an HR strategy plan rated the effectiveness of their systems significantly higher than those without a strategy on all items.

except compensation, performance management and payroll administration (www.mercerhr.com).

**Cedar 2004 Workforce Technologies Survey, 7th Annual Edition**

The Cedar survey reports on market activity and the state of organizations in applying technology to deliver HR services to the workforce. As HR takes a larger role in organizational improvement, this seventh edition research initiative assesses technology applications that directly impact the transformation of the HR function and the effect these applications have on improving overall workplace productivity, profitability and employee revenue. The survey collected data specific to service delivery trends, application deployment levels and vendor product usage levels. Consistent with data observations from prior year survey results, data analysis for 2004 continues to illustrate clear linkages between the introduction and use of workforce technology solutions and the achievement of organizational business goals. The survey generated 22 findings that indicate prevalence of workforce technology use, the results achieved and the strategies used by successful organizations to achieve desired outcomes. There were three key indicators that stood out in support of the survey findings: 1) self-service is a fact of life in organizations today; 2) the benefits from adopting these technologies are powerful; and 3) consistent with industry statistics confirming the growth of technology in use in the workplace, HR is growing its leverage of technology to administer, deliver and analyze service to the workforce. This annual survey is available free of charge at www.TheCedarGroup.com.


The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) and the National Governors Association (NGA) convened the Commission on Technology and Adult Learning in 2000 with a mission “to define and encourage a technology-enabled learning environment that will result in an engaged citizenry and a skilled workforce for the digital economy.” eLearning is defined as instructional content or learning experiences delivered or enabled by electronic technology. The Commission foresees a future in which eLearning allows learning to become a continuous process of inquiry and improvement that keeps pace with the speed of change in business and society. With e-learning, the learner has convenient, just-in-time access to needed knowledge and information, with small content objects assembled and delivered according to the learner’s specific needs. Commission recommendations include creating the

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**Figure 3: HRIS Effectiveness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HRIS Area</th>
<th>Very Ineffective</th>
<th>Ineffective</th>
<th>Neither Effective nor Ineffective</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Very Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HRIS reporting</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR operations reporting</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payroll</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defined contribution plan administration</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defined benefit plan administration</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and welfare benefit plan administration</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance management administration</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation administration</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and development administration</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting/applicant-tracking administration</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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highest quality e-learning experiences possible, implementing new measures and methods for assessing and certifying what individuals know and are able to do, and ensuring broad and equitable access to e-learning opportunities. This includes the adoption of common technical standards aimed at promoting open and equitable access while reducing development costs. One such noteworthy effort, led by the U.S. Department of Defense, is the Advanced Distributed Learning Initiative. More than 1,600 colleges and universities and more than 150 corporations have come together to develop an open architecture for online learning. Responding to the fact that several organizations were attempting to develop draft standards that lacked a common framework, the project partners incorporated many of the emerging standards into one content model. The Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) is a set of technical specifications that enable sharable, durable and reusable learning content (www.adlnet.org).

**HR on the Web: The Investment is Paying Off (2003)**

According to this 2003 report from Towers Perrin, human resource departments have been quick to adopt Web-based applications as a communication and transaction tool. The Internet has contributed to a new model for HR service delivery—one that is beginning to make good on its promise of increased productivity and a change for the better in the routine activities of HR professionals. Of the companies surveyed, 60% report a reduction in HR administrative work as a result of employee self-service. Manager self-service, while still not as prevalent, is also achieving positive results, with 47% of respondents reporting less administrative work for managers and for HR overall. Over and above the reduced workload, respondents report significant improvements in both data accuracy and timeliness of self-service transactions. In addition to the workload reductions from Web-based self-service, organizations have been able to eliminate other HR service delivery “channels,” such as voice response systems and paper-based transactions, thus adding hard-dollar savings to the workload reduction (www.towersperrin.com).

**SHRM HR Technology Survey Report (2005)**

Technology is now a fact of life—it has become an invasive part of everyday living. Technology can provide conveniences and allow for efficiencies both at home and in the workplace, particularly in relation to communication between people, as well as in relation to the secure storage of employee data. Unfortunately, the benefits of technological conveniences can quickly be lost and/or may not be realized at all if planning is inadequate and/or if unskilled staff does not understand how to capitalize on its use.

The top three obstacles that make it challenging to implement an HR technology system in organizations are budget/funding approval, resistance to change and an infrastructure that has not been properly prepared. The five most frequent expectations that HR professionals indicated were not met include: 1) HR staff does not spend less time on administrative work; 2) recruiting effectiveness has not improved; 3) HR staff has not been able to spend more time on strategic resource planning and leading the organization; 4) managers do not have greater access to employee information; and 5) employee satisfaction has not increased. The top five success stories reported by survey respondents are: 1) the accuracy of employee information has increased; 2) cycle time for processing employee information transaction has decreased; 3) HR staff does spend less time on administrative work; 4) managers have greater access to employee information; and 5) HR is able to manage the workforce with the same number of HR staff (www.shrm.org/surveys).

**Top 10 Trends on the Horizon for HR Technology**

The following HR technology trends are expected to gain momentum within the next two to five years:

1. The use of the Web for the delivery and utilization of HR applications via application service providers (ASPs) will continue to increase, especially among small- and medium-size companies.

   • Emerging trend: An ASP is a third-party organization that supplies software applications and/or software-related services over the Internet. ASPs allow companies to save money, time and resources by outsourcing some or all of their information technology needs. This service and delivery approach will enable small- and medium-size companies to obtain and use HR software applications previously affordable only to companies much larger in size.

   • Implication(s) for HR: Due diligence in relation to the software, vendor and the terms and duration of service agreements require careful scrutiny. HR professionals should ensure that they are prepared to assume this responsibility and/or seek advice from reliable internal or external subject-matter experts before encumbering the organization in a long-term agreement.

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2. Web-based manager and employee self-service applications will continue their evolution from basic HR transactions to strategic applications related to workforce analytics, such as talent management, staff development and retention, performance management, forecasting of incentive and reward programs, and succession planning, to include the preparation of gap analysis reporting and intervention recommendations.

- Emerging trend: The decrease in time spent on administrative functions by HR will also yield improvements in relation to turnaround time, accuracy of information and access to information for managers and employees.

- Implication(s) for HR: It will be incumbent upon HR to lead the way as a change agent for those managers who may be reluctant to assume responsibility for administrative work previously performed by HR, i.e., to make an effective and convincing business case to company executives and managers for the acquisition and implementation of new technology to improve HR services.

3. The growth in the use of e-learning is expected to continue.

- Emerging trend: Companies will increase their investments in the development and deployment of e-learning applications, providing employees with a wider variety of learning and career development opportunities than ever before.

- Implication(s) for HR: Certain employees may not adapt well to e-learning and require a more structured classroom environment to be successful in a training situation. HR will need to understand the strategic use of e-learning and determine how, where and when to deploy it for maximum benefit.

4. HR practice leaders will be expected to assume a strategic role in relation to HR technology issues.

- Emerging trend: Academic and business programs in universities and colleges will ultimately add HR-technology related course(s) to their curriculums as an HR degree requirement; expertise in HR technology will be required to function successfully at a strategic level.

- Implication(s) for HR: HR practitioners who lack HR technology expertise will, in all likelihood, be unable to advance professionally. It will become necessary for HR practitioners who are seeking advancement to gain computer technology expertise at the conceptual level (i.e., to possess a realistic grasp of the computer applications that exist throughout the organization, enterprise-wide, from both theoretical and applied perspectives).

5. Heightened awareness of HR data privacy is expected to continue.

- Emerging trend: Government legislation and regulations will continue to increase to ensure organizational compliance regarding the protection of employees, stakeholders and the public from concerns related to identity theft and personal privacy (e.g., HIPAA, Sarbanes-Oxley).

- Implication(s) for HR: Legislation and regulations may require additional staff and/or HRIS controls to ensure compliance. HR practice leaders will be required to stay abreast of governmental legislation and regulations in order to ensure compliance with regard to accessing sensitive data by establishing appropriate security access controls and privacy rights.

6. Technologies such as the Internet make it easier to buy HRIS services directly and/or possibly abolish (“disintermediate”) the HR function internally, as it is known today, through the wholesale outsourcing of HR operations to an HR business processing outsourcing (HR/BPO) vendor.

- Emerging trend: Outsourcing vendors are expected to have the most current and up-to-date HR technology and support systems available as part of their mainstream operations. Based on the economies of scale that a quality-minded high-volume HR outsourcing vendor should be able to provide, BPO vendors are expected to be able to demonstrate low-cost alternatives and high-quality customer service options, making them attractive from a financial perspective.

- Implication(s) for HR: HR practice leaders and/or senior management will need to exercise caution and good judgment in the preparation, approval and implementation of vendor service agreements. Contract specificity, performance metrics that capture standards in relation to quality as well as quantity of work to be performed, and/or penalties for failure to deliver the expected change in performance are all elements to consider in the preparation of an outsourcing partnership agreement. More importantly, senior management would need to weigh and anticipate the resulting fall-out and unknown financial impact on employee relations and the culture of the organization.
7. Vendor consolidation within the HRIS industry is expected to continue.
   - Emerging trend: There will be fewer vendors from which to choose over the next two to five years (e.g., acquisition of JD Edwards by PeopleSoft; acquisition of PeopleSoft by Oracle).
   - Implication(s) for HR: Because HR will have a smaller pool of vendors from which to make a decision, this could result in an escalation of the cost of hardware and software and a decline in the frequency with which new applications are introduced in the marketplace due to a lack of competition.

8. The use of wireless devices and 24/7 connectedness will continue to grow.
   - Emerging trend: Cost of devices will continue to decrease as the number of users increases; it will become easier to locate employees 24/7. An employee who is able to telecommute and/or who is on call or travel will find it very convenient to be able to stay connected to the workplace through these devices with minimal to no disruption to his or her personal life.
   - Implication(s) for HR: Employee productivity, in certain instances, may actually become degraded over time due to an increased level of connectivity with work; company policies should be established limiting and/or clarifying the utilization of such devices for personal use both on and off company time.

9. Companies will increasingly continue to transition to paperless direct deposit pay statements, benefits statements and related records, depending on state and local government regulations.
   - Emerging trend: The number of companies posting pay statements online and ceasing to print direct deposit statements will increase; within three to five years it is likely to be the norm to pay employees electronically, with no paper statements; employees would have self-service access to all payroll and benefits information online and could print personal records as needed either from home or from work via a user identification code and personal identification number (PIN).
   - Implication(s) for HR: There may be resistance from certain employees who do not wish to establish bank accounts and/or who prefer paper paychecks and/or benefits statements. In addition, certain state and local laws may prevent companies from making this change.

10. The adoption of universal standards for data exchange between HRIS applications (e.g., HR-XML, an extensible markup language) is expected to grow.
    - Emerging trend: Additional vendors will recognize the need to deliver applications that comply with the HR-XML standard.
    - Implication(s) for HR: Unless HR practitioners are cognizant of this standard, they will not make it a point to seek out and do business only with those vendors who comply with the standard. In addition, vendors could develop proprietary solutions, and/or another standard could arise to compete with HR-XML in the private sector (e.g., SCORM).

In Closing

“The coming changes in HR and HR consulting are closely tied to the new knowledge economy and information technology […] Knowledge is not limited simply to data or information. Rather, knowledge is information combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection that becomes anchored in the beliefs and commitment of its holder through collective sense-making and local learning.”

The HR profession has undergone steady evolutionary changes over the last several decades. In comparison, it would seem fair to say that the changes experienced in the recent past, due in large part to the benefits afforded the profession by HR technology, are both profound and revolutionary. HR practice leaders must decide if they are ready to stay the course, make the commitment and take the profession over the goal line. HR technology is an essential and necessary tool that can give HR practice leaders tremendous leverage in their quest for recognition as key organizational leaders and strategic business partners. It is now up to HR to accept this challenge and to avail itself of this opportunity.

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Additional Sources


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