

HR Zone

Software solutions right under your nose

If you're looking to reduce absence or provide better information to your senior management team, the answer might already be at your fingertips. Chris Berry, managing director of Computers In Personnel, argues that the HR system you already own could do far more than you realise.



There's something strangely contradictory about the way HR professionals approach technology. More and more organisations are investing in software to improve the way they manage their employees, from handling job applications over the web to introducing 'self-service' capabilities that allow employees to book their holidays online or receive electronic payslips.

Yet at the same time, large numbers of HR professionals aren't taking advantage of the software they already own – despite the fact that much of it could solve critical day-to-day business problems.

In fact, if you compared all the software that's been paid for in the UK with the features that are actually in use, you'd be left with the digital equivalent of an EU butter mountain.

This isn't a problem that is exclusive to the HR function – far from it, in fact. Across the IT industry, it is widely acknowledged that people rarely take full advantage of the software they purchase.

Just look at the desktop applications you use day-to-day. How much of the rich functionality that you find in Microsoft Excel do you really use? Are you a whiz on pivot tables, writing macros and using the advanced programming techniques available for in-depth data analysis? Or are you one of the majority who uses what they know, and occasionally wishes they'd been better trained to use the rest?

Software project

The reality is that most organisations never get round to finishing the job they start when they set out on a software project. Business software, including HR systems, typically come in modules that can be installed one at a time or in phased groups. After installing the core HR system that manages basic people administration, most organisations then focus on the aspects that tackle their most immediate business challenges.

If your biggest pain point is handling the volume of recruitment applications you receive, for example, you're going to focus on implementing a recruitment module before you think about anything else.

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But the reality of today's hectic HR environment is that once you've tackled one top priority, another one crops up – and whatever your best intentions, the remaining phases of your HR rollout will often end up on the back-burner.

Restarting a project is never easy, and as time goes by, it gets harder and harder to implement the remaining modules, particularly when the people who were involved in the original project start to move on.

That's why many of the business challenges that HR departments face today could be solved with a combination of installing more of what they already own and some shrewd, tactical investment in new additional software and training.

Control over spend

Software for basic tasks such as centralised training administration are commonly not implemented – yet they can help organisations tighten control over their training spend and get better data on the quality of training they're paying for.

If you consider that training is typically one of the first budget lines to get cut when organisations need to tighten their belts, being able to demonstrate training efficiency and show metrics on quality control will stand you in better stead for a discussion with the finance director.

Likewise, many organisations under-utilise the absence management capability built into their software. Most HR software systems contain functionality that allows you to gather and categorise absence statistics, along with reporting and analysis tools which enable you to drill into the figure and perhaps identify trends.

Introducing this kind of capability can directly impact your bottom line. Organisations often find that having better data on long-term absence, for example, gives them an opportunity to tackle problem areas earlier and save money. Some public and private sector organisations have gone further, displaying absence statistics in 'portals' that their employees access when they log in each morning – many have found that simply letting members of staff know absence is being monitored helps to reduce unnecessary days off.

Broader reporting capability, too, is often ignored. Most HR systems come with a wide range of reports that can help organisations analyse key people management metrics, going beyond the core metrics that HR departments have traditionally relied on to give a far bigger picture about everything from recruitment advertising effectiveness to voluntary turnover among high performers. With HR constantly under pressure to offer more 'strategic' input, this kind of capability provides a powerful tool.

New products

As well as missing out on software functionality they've already paid for, many HR managers are also unaware of new products that have been developed since they invested in their original system.

The software industry moves at a rapid pace, and if you installed or started to use your system three or four years ago, you may be surprised at the extra capability your vendor has since developed.

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'Self-service' is a good example. Over the last few years, more and more organisations have opened up parts of their core HR systems to people outside the HR department, giving managers and employees access to a wide range of information. By accessing the system over their internal network – or in some cases, securely over the internet – employees can find a wide range of information for themselves that in previous years would have required a call to the HR department.

At a basic level this means they can update their personal details when they move house or change bank, and in some cases, see their pay history and receive payslips electronically rather than on paper. But it goes further than that. Self-service allows employees to register for training courses and book holidays online – and once the necessary workflows have been set up, managers can also get involved in approving requests.

All of this cuts HR administrative overhead – and at the same time, with 24/7 availability, it provides employees with a better quality of service.

These factors are all worth bearing in mind if you ever find yourself complaining about the limitations of your HR system. Software can never solve all of HR's challenges – but they may well be able to solve far more than you realise.

HR Zone, 5th-July
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Story read 1643