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Simon Bisson & Mary Branscombe 's Blog

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Employees are our most valuable asset (snigger)

By [Simon Bisson & Mary Branscombe](#) in [Editorial](#)

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Actually, if you're read your Dilbert, you'll know that's not true and it's really photocopiers; employees come in around number nine on the list (and a copier manufacturer once sent me the statistics to back it up).

But number one or number nine, your employees are the source of your business's knowledge and ability; you may think you have business processes but it's your employees who actually get things done (often by entirely different methods). So what technology are you using to manage that asset and how much more can you get out of it?

HR isn't just there for the nasty things in life; if you use it properly, HR could be a repository for useful information about the skills in your organization, the candidates who turned you down but might be worth approaching again in a year's time - and when the most people will be out of the office, if you're trying to pick a good time for a major network upgrade. The HR team knows when new employees will start work; you could get the manager to ask the IT team to order them a PC while the facilities team books a desk and a phone line - or you could have a system that does it automatically when HR enters the day they'll start work.

You need to know when people actually make it to work, when they're on holiday, ill or just AWOL. Do you let them enter that into the system themselves, or have them fill out a form, show it to their manager and send it on to a third person to put into the system? Sounds like an obvious choice but according to Chris Berry, MD of HR automation specialists Computers in Personnel, efficiency isn't what a lot of companies are thinking about. At one large company that he's too polite to name, when Berry suggested an automated system employees could use directly, the head of HR told him they couldn't consider it; after all, what would the 50-strong admin team do then?

You can't leave everything up to employees; there have to be checks and approvals for some processes. But there are plenty of approvals that can be automated as part of a workflow without taking up two people's time. If I'm putting in an order through a purchasing system and it's under my sign-off level then it shouldn't need to be countersigned. If I want to update my bank details, I shouldn't have to mail it to someone who prints of the email, hands it to an admin and has it typed in 'to make sure it's right'. I'm motivated to give you the right details in the first place, because I want to get paid, and if I get them wrong, I'm motivated to come back and correct them - or I don't get my money. And if I'm using a self-service system, the form can have validation built in so I have to type in a sort code with six digits; you can't do that in email!

It's joined up business; not only do you save on admin time and get more of your data right first time, you're bringing another layer of information into systems where you can analyse it. Usually we think about upgrading technology to make a server or application run better rather than because it's slowing individual employees down; but if you could see that you get more transactions through a server when half your team is away on holiday, you might have some different questions about load balancing.

There are the nasty things to take care of too; from compliance audits to spotting office bullying through odd patterns of who's taking days off, to outright fraud - CIP has found more than one ghost employee, on the books just for payday every month. And there's one publicly listed company with tens of thousands of employees that's started using CIP's software and noticed that every single senior manager is within five years of retiring. That has to count as important business intelligence...

-Mary