



Open all hours

These days, most managers have to incorporate a range of HR tasks in their day-to-day role. Kirstie Redford sheds light on how software can help to lighten the load

In many organisations the HR function is no longer an admin-led function, dealing with basic processes such as holiday requests and payroll. The HR department is now expected to be more strategic, looking at wider issues such as human capital management, retention strategies and employer branding.

This shift by HR means that many traditional people management tasks now fall into the remit of line managers. The breadth and depth of these responsibilities varies from firm to firm, but today's managers certainly have more HR-related tasks to deal with than their predecessors.

This new responsibility means added pressure on managers' time and many struggle to fit HR tasks around their normal workloads. HR software is therefore becoming an increasingly attractive option for many firms who are turning to systems to automate core processes and lighten managers' loads.

One increasingly popular solution is a 'self-service' system, which allows line managers and staff to input and view their own HR data. Individual employees are given passwords to access their own HR records online and can perform a number of tasks, whether it is updating their personal details, viewing a payslip, booking holiday, or keeping track of their employee benefits.

"Much HR admin is repetitive and of low

value," says Ian Sparrow, programme director at provider ADP. "If entering your own details into the system, you are committed to entering the correct information and it means the same data doesn't have to be input two or three times."

Staff don't have to be desk-bound to access self-service systems. Those on the factory floor for example can get access via kiosk technology, where computer terminals are set up in public areas, such as the canteen. And with most systems now using web-based technology, employees can even update their details online at home.

In control

With the right approach, this can avoid the familiar problem of changes of address being scribbled on post-its and holiday forms getting lost behind radiators.

"As long as staff are encouraged and given time to access the system, there is no reason why all employees can't use it effectively," says Karen Bull, product manager at provider Midland HR.

"We've found that staff don't resent doing the work themselves as it makes them feel in control. If someone changes their bank details, it is low on managers' lists of priorities. And simple things such as holiday forms getting lost can really stress staff out. Most staff prefer to sort out their own admin."

sickness absence across different departments or production lines can also be collated to alert managers to unusual patterns.

Systems can also prompt managers to comply with health and safety rules. Brian Cormican, director at provider Oracle UK, says that systems can, for example, include features that ensure new starters are equipped to start work as soon as possible. "When you are working on a production line you need to wear the right clothes and head gear. When new staff are enrolled onto the system, it will ensure that the right clothes and equipment are ordered. This means that staff start work on the production line as soon as possible and are compliant," he says.

Spotlight on skills

Software can also be used to support more strategic HR tasks, such as recruitment and succession planning. Keeping a log of your workforce's skills can identify training needs so you can grow your own talent and help identify areas that need a recruitment push.

By getting staff to input their skills, qualifications and experience, you can identify weak areas and spot potential skills gaps in the future. You can also use the data to help fill skills gaps quickly if someone is off sick.

Bull says: "Many workers in manufacturing firms have very unique roles with specialist skills. If someone is absent, this can cause huge problems. It's a big challenge identifying staff at short notice with the right skills to step in, so having these logged onto the system will greatly help contingency plans."

For recruitment, systems are available that allow candidates to apply online and then match their skills against selection criteria. Automating this process can save managers time sifting through CVs and it also means candidates can get prompt feedback.

Performance management is another area where HR software can provide support.

Ali Gill, managing director of talent management consultancy Getfeedback, says that she recently worked with Vauxhall to help improve its performance management using a web-based system. "Performance appraisals were run every six months, feedback was collected from colleagues about an individual's capabilities, objectives were reviewed, conversations were documented, training requirements reported and bonus payments calculated. While the process worked, the amount of time managers spent just managing and administering the process was calculated to be three full weeks every six months.

"Shift patterns mean that it's difficult for managers and staff to get direct access to the HR department. Allowing a manager to check the details of an HR policy while working a night shift can avoid them feeling isolated"

Steve Foster, Northgate HR

Self-service software can be integrated with other automated systems, such as payroll, to streamline processes across the business. So for example, an employee could fill in their time sheet online, their manager could then be prompted to approve it and the pre-populated information could then be sent to payroll to ensure the employee gets paid for the right hours.

Craig Sullivan, vice president of international products at provider Netsuite, says that improving data flow in this way can really improve efficiency. "If you have separate systems for employee records, accountancy and payroll, you are forced to replicate much of the data. If this data differs between systems, you are never sure which information is the most accurate. Data needs to flow between functions so there is consistency across the business," he says.

Storing HR policies in the system can also give line managers instant access to information without having to run to HR every five minutes. Steve Foster, business strategy manager at provider Northgate HR, says this can be really useful where managers are working unconventional hours. "Shift patterns mean that it's difficult for managers and staff to get direct access to the HR department. Allowing a manager to check the details of an HR policy while working a night shift can avoid them feeling isolated," he says.

However, many systems offer more than just an electronic filing cabinet. For example, absence figures can be recorded so that managers are prompted to investigate if employees have been absent for a worrying number of days. Trends in

So we helped them implement a web-based performance management process with online 360-degree feedback," she explains.

Gill says that the cost saving in management time was estimated to be 50%. But more importantly, managers could access a full audit trail of objectives sent, with a history of changes made for each of their team members. "Employees could also initiate their own feedback prior to performance reviews and the HR team could produce the important training needs and bonus calculation information for the whole organisation at the click of a button," she says.

Balance

When using software to support tasks that are not purely admin-led, it is vital to strike the right balance between automation and the all-important human touch.

"As long as staff are encouraged and given time to access the system, there is no reason why all employees can't use it effectively"

Karen Bull, Midland HR

Management is, after all, a discretionary art and some processes fall flat if face-to-face contact falls by the way side. "When it comes to performance management software, it should only be used as an alerting tool and an evidence base. Managers still need face-to-face contact with employees," warns Midland HR's Bull.

Oracle's Cormican agrees that software should never replace one-to-one performance reviews. "What software should do is let you see last year's reviews and objectives, allowing the employee and the manager to plan what they are going to say, so they are not starting the conversation from scratch. The appraisal discussion then becomes a verification exercise," he says.

Relying too heavily on absence management software can also be a dangerous game. "A classic mistake is if you have a system that prompts managers to take a set action if an employee exceeds, say, three absences. Every case is different and you need to allow for this. The system will quickly lose credibility if managers don't investi-

gate individual cases before making decisions. Managers need to intervene and use their people skills to get to the root of problems," says Bull.

With so many offerings on the market, it is hard to know where to start when choosing a system. The key is to be clear on your business goals so you know exactly what you want to achieve. Do you want to simply automate HR admin or integrate more strategic tools to help managers identify trends, such as absence levels, or prompt them to take action? Also consider whether you want all the data streamlined across the business, so that it feeds into other departments or so it is compatible with payroll software.

There are fully integrated systems with a myriad of HR tools, or niche systems with rich functionality, that are designed to deal with just one aspect of HR. Northgate HR's Foster says it's important to ask managers what they want from the system before deciding on the most suitable type.

"You need to know what managers want to get out of the system. Also ask the provider how easy the software is to use. It should be designed in an intuitive way so minimal training is required. Few managers have time to go on three-day courses to learn how to use it," he says.

Bespoke systems can be made to order, but will cost more money than off-the-shelf products. Foster says that it makes sense to opt for standard applications as bespoke systems can mean expensive upgrades in the future. "Building in new functions will cost money. It makes sense to adapt business processes instead of forcing a system around it," he says.

Try before buy

Bull says that firms should be able to try a system out before buying. "Don't just look at a shiny pamphlet; ask the provider how it works. Then ask for a workshop after the demo and get staff to try it out," she says.

Also, don't be afraid to ask for references. A good provider should put you in touch with other customers from similar firms. You should ask what return on investment they have seen.

And finally, don't just think in the here and now – look to your future needs. "You need to ensure the system is scaleable so it will still be suitable if the business grows. You don't want to have to buy another system in two years. Also ask if the technology is future-proof and what upgrades and long-term support you can expect," says Bull.

Costs will of course vary. Basic self-service systems can work out at just a few pounds per head, but for more sophisticated systems, there could be significant set-up fees, so make sure you ask for a comprehensive breakdown. Systems cannot be implemented overnight – so ask for realistic timescales for setting up each part of the system. The more components to the software, the longer it will take to install. Remember that the market is competitive – so do your homework, be clear about your needs and shop around if you want to get the best deal. With the right consideration, software should be able to take at least some of the headache out of HR. ■

For IT solutions go to
www.worksmanagement.co.uk/IT

