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Operating efficiently: implementing HR information systems in large organisations

Practical insights from large organisations on how HR information systems can be used to improve organisational efficiency and access to people data

Change management necessarily needs to happen at a grander scale than in SMEs when large organisations seek to standardise people processes, increase automation, extend self-service or improve access to people data. This is especially the case when the change significantly impacts many people and how they do certain tasks. Large project teams assemble to implement the change and it's normal to take a year or more for a new HRIS to 'go live'.

It's such a complex undertaking that vendors often recommend large organisations use certified consultants to configure a new HRIS, fix an existing one or integrate it with other solutions. It's not possible to 'get your hands dirty' to try out different HRISs as people professionals in SMEs could do when they choose their HRIS. Even with the help of consultants, it's not easy to get everything right when the change is complex and impacts thousands of people.

In this article, people professionals from three large organisations share their insight and learning to give a sense of what to look out for when implementing an HRIS that serves thousands of employees. Their organisations migrated to a new HRIS between 2017 and 2019 and employed between 10,000 and 60,000 people at the time of writing in June 2021. Their names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Melanie Roberts, Global Project Lead for HR Solutions, ChemicalCo

ChemicalCo transformed its HR operations from one with highly localised processes to one that was more standardised with better accuracy and access to organisation-wide people data. Getting to where it is now wasn't straightforward.

When Roberts joined ChemicalCo almost a decade ago, the organisation focused on gaining efficiencies through outsourcing activities such as HR administration and payroll across 90+ countries. With almost 200 different payroll providers using their own systems and calculations, it was difficult to get a global view of people data. ChemicalCo's first attempt at standardising HR administration processes wasn't a success. The processes were very technical and the people aspects of change were overlooked. It hadn't consider the large amount of localisation needed, so people continued using their own processes to get the job done as they had before, creating shadow support models.

ChemicalCo 'wiped the slate clean', clarified what it wanted to achieve and partnered with a consulting firm to help it implement a new HRIS and case management tool. This time, it didn't just look at the technology but also included people and process objectives.

Standardisation was still a key objective but this time the transformation programme team spent time balancing global standardisation with legally required localisation that might need to be considered. This included deciding which legacy data and processes to keep in the new HR operating model. The HR structure changed accordingly.

To improve access to people data, ChemicalCo extended employee and manager self-service. The transformation also looked at the end-to-end enterprise requirements. With the new HRIS deemed the single source record for people data, the transformation programme team integrated identity management, email and finance systems with the system. This ensured functions such as IT and finance can get the data they need to create and change email accounts or process travel and expenses.

Key learning points from Roberts

1. **Be clear about who benefits from the change.** Don't say it's for the organisation if it's mainly for the people function. For example, using [Robotic Process Automation](#) to automate back-office processes is a big part of the people function's internal portfolio because it enables the function to become more efficient and reduce outsourcing cost. But it's not promoted to the wider organisation because it doesn't directly benefit most people.
2. **Have a plan for embedding the change.** Invest in hypercare because there is always something unexpected that needs to be managed. [Hypercare](#) is a period of assisted running where the project team works closely with the business-as-usual team to resolve any technical or people-related problems. The level of hypercare to

plan for will depend on how much support you think your organisation needs during the transition period.

3. **Provide alternative ways for people to access and update their data.** One of ChemicalCo's big wins was 'enabling employees to manage their data on the go' by giving them access to self-service on their smartphones, tablets or laptops. This is a big culture change, particularly for employees who don't normally use computers at work. Employees at these sites could either use self-service or ask their nominated Local Point of Contact colleague for support.
4. **Clearly establish who within the people function can have access to what data.** Don't assume everyone needs access to everything. Agreeing these principles are essential for ensuring data access obligations are met. You will also need to agree a change process because when roles change and people move to different parts of the organisation, their view and edit privileges in the HRIS need to change accordingly.

Brad Jones and Sam Moore, Employee Journey and Experience Leads, FinancialServicesCo

FinancialServicesCo's new HRIS had all of the features the organisation had specified when it launched. The organisation did a lot of communications on how the system would 'revolutionise' how work gets done. It also invested in hypercare.

But that was not enough to iron out teething problems or get the level of adoption that it had hoped for. Part of it was timing – the HRIS was launched in the same year a new CEO joined, and then the pandemic struck. The other part of the problem was because some of the self-service processes were difficult and time-consuming for busy line managers to learn.

To drive adoption, FinancialServicesCo had to put in a lot more effort than expected to get employees to use self-service instead of their old processes. It provided ongoing support, communication and education. It also grouped local colleagues together to resolve technical problems.

Some of the ongoing support is delivered through a chatbot, which the organisation continues to refine. *'There is a finite amount of resource in the team and there is an infinite number of questions,'* Moore said. If many employees are not satisfied with the chatbot's answer at a particular time, the queries could quickly escalate and occasionally create a backlog for human advisers. Finding the optimum balance between employee satisfaction and cost of staffing advisers can be difficult.

Jones noted that some organisations have gone ‘full circle’ in their approach to offering advice and reverted to doing things on behalf of managers. *‘While it goes against the nature of self-service, considering the time and energy you’re spending on meetings, back office and resolving issues, it’s a lot quicker and more cost effective to do the actions on behalf of the line managers while you sort out the process in the background.’*

Key learning points from Jones and Moore

1. When implementing a highly customisable and complex system, be careful about **balancing risk-averse governance with ease of use**. Emphasise the latter where you can.
2. If it’s not in your control to make it simple, **be prepared to invest additional resources for ongoing support**.
3. Be patient and keep talking with employees – your ‘customers’ – to **understand how you can continue to improve and embed the new way of working**.

Jane Stewart, Employee Services Manager, UtilitiesCo

Like ChemicalCo, UtilitiesCo also set out to standardise its processes and increase self-service when it implemented a new HRIS. Stewart was seconded to help design processes for her business unit – the same processes that she used when she transferred to her current role in Employee Services just before the HRIS was implemented. ‘Keep it simple’ was the project’s strapline, which wasn’t always possible to do across all business units because people didn’t want to change their legacy practices.

UtilitiesCo is also investing in Robotic Process Automation to automate repetitive back-office tasks like checking whether payments are due and pulling reports. Stewart was quick to point out that in her team’s case, automation was about freeing up time for first-line query staff to pick up some low-level case work that case advisers would normally do. It started small with just one student on industrial placement in her team doing the automation and it’s paying dividends. In 2020, the automation saved 850 hours of processing time.

Key learning points from Stewart

1. **Get buy-in from senior stakeholders and not just from the HR director**. The HR director who was the project sponsor was very vocal and made sure that executive level stakeholders openly supported the project. This ensured that the right people from across the organisation were brought in to contribute at various points during

the project.

2. **In large projects, give internal people who are assigned to the project team the time to contribute.** Temporarily take them out of their normal roles to give the project the best chance of success. The project manager, project administrator, the culture change managers and Single Point of Contacts in the business units like Stewart were assigned to work full time on the project.
3. **To get the best uptake of self-service, focus on good digital employee experience.** In UtilitiesCo's case, it sometimes meant sacrificing opportunities to make back-end activities more efficient. But it's much easier to communicate the benefits of self-service if employees find it useful and easy to use. Stewart advises to *'concentrate on the ones that are willing to change. They sometimes will turn the ones that are on the fence and bring with them.'* Only a small minority of employees were 'anti-self-service' and they tend to be the ones that were used to relying on their personal or administrative assistants.

See our partner Personio's [Change Management Guidelines](#) for more information supporting employees and managers through change.

Our insight series on digital transformation continues in the next chapter with a focus on [using technology to improve hiring and onboarding](#). For the full list of articles, visit our main [Digital transformation: practical insights from people professionals](#) page.