Employee Self–Service Portals

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INTRODUCTION

This article begins by discussing how the role of human resource management has changed in recent years, and the implications of this for human resource departments. Providing employees with the information they require about their employment relationship is then explored by investigating how information technology can improve the quality of this information flow. The role of employee self-service portals is outlined, covering the range of information they currently provide and the future role of employee self-service portals. Acknowledging that employee acceptance is crucial to the success of employee self-service portals, implementation issues are discussed. Technology acceptance by employees is necessary, and the article ends by discussing this important key to successful employee self-service portal implementation.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY ORGANISATION

Organisations have become increasingly dependent on their employees for success in the service and knowledge environment that exists across industries and the public sector today (Ruona & Gibson, 2004). Knowledge resides in people, and knowledge has also been identified as a key resource for competitiveness (Hall, 2003). As a result, attracting, retaining, and motivating employees have become major issues for organisations. This has happened following an era when, across the developed and developing countries of the world, the range of law covering rights and responsibilities of employers and employees has increased. Human resource (HR) departments must ensure that staff are paid, records kept, policies and procedures developed, and that legal compliance and reporting in relation to income tax, superannuation, and health and safety, are maintained. At the same time, linked to the importance of people to the organisation, the demands on HR staff to perform an increasingly strategic role have increased. To free HR staff to perform their more strategic role and to ensure employees receive the information they require, many of the operational tasks related to information provision activities are now performed using human resource information systems (HRIS). Employee self-service systems (ESS) enable employees to access HR information (Hawking, Stein, & Foster, 2004), reducing the range of transactional tasks performed by HR personnel.

Along with supporting payroll and legal compliance, HRISs are increasingly being used to communicate directly with employees, providing the information employees require and ensuring a higher level of communication than in the past.

TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE IN HR MANAGEMENT

Information technology (IT) has an important role to play in providing access to a broad range of information, and ESS portals can bring this information to employees when they want it. The HR function has also been quick to integrate technology into its operations, with the payroll process being one of the first to be automated (Lengnick-Hall & Moritz, 2003).

Along with supporting payroll and legal compliance, HRISs are increasingly being used to communicate directly with employees, providing the information they require; thus reducing their dependence on HR administrative officers. Employees use the ESS portal to access a range of information stored within the HRIS, for instance to check their leave entitlements, pay records, superannuation benefits, and performance assessment and professional development plans. By making HR information more easily and readily available to all employees, ESS portals can support performance improvement of the HR department and across the organisation.

ESS PORTALS

Like all portals, ESS portals provide an access point to information. ESS portals may be part of an HRIS, a comprehensive system or one offering limited information only, or integrated within an enterprise resource planning system (ERP) of which HRIS have, in recent years, become a subset. ERPs integrate information from a diverse range of areas and

applications within an organisation (Ashbaugh & Miranda, 2002). For instance, through a common database, human resource, financial, and production information may be integrated for report generation and planning purposes.

ESS portals enable employee self service by providing access to information stored in an HRIS, that, in turn, may be integrated within an ERP.

What ESS Portals Do

Portals enable information from multiple sources to be pooled, organised, and distributed through the gateway that the portal provides. ESS portals provide information relating to the employer-employee relationship. Personalised access can enable individuals to gain the information they need as it relates to them and their employment.

ESS portals are an example of business-to-employee solutions (B2E) (Harris, Phifer, & Berg 2002 in Ruta, 2005) that enable organisations to provide HR information and answers to employees' queries using their intranet. Ulrich (2000) identified the need for Web-based technologies to support the HR function and its HR practices. This he termed "e-HR." Like e-commerce, e-HR is about conducting business transactions using the Internet; with HR transactions conducted using an organisation's intranet. ESS portals provide an interface for accessing, entering, and retrieving information. In fact today's sophisticated e-HR systems may include enterprise resource planning, HR self service, interactive voice response, and even voice recognition systems (Lengnick-Hall & Moritz, 2003).

The main roles of ESS portals are now discussed.

Providing Information to a Range of Users

The role of portals is to provide a gateway, or means of access, between the user and information stored within the organisation. ESS portals provide a conduit between employees and the HR system within an organisation. They enable access to HR manuals, leave forms, and a wide range of employment information. Here, ESS portals are providing employees with access to information, or enabling them to complete and submit forms without the assistance of HR staff, at a time convenient to the user.

ESS portals, or e-HR (Ulrich, 2000), provide an interface that enables access at a variety of levels, whilst maintaining employee confidentiality.

HR Activities Supported by ESS Portals

Some of the HR activities that can be provided, or supported, by an ESS portal include:

- **HR Manuals:** Providing employees with details of their entitlements and procedures that can be located using keyword searches instead of thumbing through large hard-copy manuals. This can include general organisational information—history and current mission and vision details—for employee induction purposes.
- **Access to Leave Entitlement Information:** The confidentiality that the ESS provides can be of importance to employees when planning family leave needs, for instance. The benefits for the organisation include ensuring that employees are aware of the timelines surrounding longer periods of leave, such as family leave, supporting good workforce planning.
- ESS portals can provide means of communication between the organisation and individuals on extended leave for study, family, or other purposes. Employees continue to feel part of the organisation because they are aware of what is happening within the organisation during their absence. This enables employees to settle back into their roles more quickly upon return.
- **Information on Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and Services Available within Them:** EAPs involve the provision of a range of counselling and related services by qualified practitioners from outside the organisation and available to employees. These services may include relationship counselling, financial counselling, or assistance for people with addictions to alcohol, other drugs, or gambling. The benefits to the employee are obvious; for the organisation it means that a formerly productive employee is assisted to return to their previous level of performance, having received assistance in coping with a personal problem that was interfering with on-the-job performance. The confidentiality provided by the ESS can encourage employees to use these services before the issues in their lives adversely affect their work performance. Personal contact with HR staff to learn of services may prove embarrassing, and deter those requiring assistance from seeking it.
- **Access to Leave Forms for Completion and Submission for Processing:** This has built-in immediate recording and updating of entitlements, as well as providing employees with information on current accrued leave levels.
- As well as providing the information on general HR procedures, an ESS portal can provide employees with access to the organisation's organisational health and safety (OH&S) manual, with the employee arriving at details of health and safety procedures as they relate to their role in the organisation.
- Training programs can be advertised, and applications to attend processed via an ESS portal. Up-to-the minute employee training records can be linked to training program completion, and OH&S training, linked to

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