The ties that bind
HR & IS

By Al Doran, CHRP
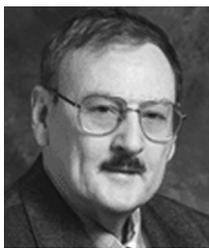
*I*was recently asked to speak to a first-year class of human resources management students and in getting to know them, asked, "Why are you studying to be an HR professional?" At least half of them stated, "I want to work with people." Boy, are they going to be in for a shock. Thankfully, the other half of them had a mix of reasons for entering the field, but seemed to have had a better sense of awareness that the field has its challenges and rewards, and that the reality of the situation is that the HR professional today does not have as much one-on-one contact with employees as they once did.

Personal contact was once the cornerstone of customer service in HR. Today managers and employees want results and answers to their questions, not just meet-and-greet relationships that historically HR was known for. Many of the time-consuming HR practices can now be automated and delivered to the customer via the 'Net, voice mail or alternative methods.

Gone are the days when an HR question required a phone call to the HR department for a discussion or an appointment, all of which normally fell in the nine-to-five time-slot. Now access to the information is expected to be 24/7. Technology today has allowed this to happen.

Are HR and IS finally working together?

Critical information essential to the operation of the business is now accessible through systems, networks and secure connections through the Internet. Human resources professionals are becoming authors that transfer their knowledge into these smart computer systems. This enables direct entry and access by those in the organization who require this information. These systems provide just-in-time support, guidance and auditing at the level the user requires. This responsibility is bringing HR and information systems professionals together.

Information systems rely on the specialized knowledge that HR professionals bring to related systems development while HR relies on the technical expertise that IS brings to automating functional processes. Many HR professionals have been historically apprehensive in dealing with systematic processes and hard numbers, preferring to focus on the softer side of HR. While this may have been well intentioned, there has indeed been a shift to the more strategic and global needs of the organization, critical to the future of HR. Closer ties with the IS department may assist HR in achieving this objective. There is definitely a trend to develop an HRMS unit within HR that combines the skills of HR and IS to manage HR information.

The ties between HR and IS are only going to grow stronger. (Both of these functions come from backgrounds where enormous amounts of energy have been spent on transaction-based activities.) Traditionally it was the responsibility of IS to identify and automate business processes. Few of HR's processes beyond the payroll function were considered eligible for this automation. Many have been surprised to find that many workflows related to the

management of HR were ideally suitable for being automated.

If HR wants to be involved in the construction of the future then it must learn to be critical and analytical of every process with a goal to automate it or the changes will be done in spite of its efforts.

Where does HR sit in the technological spectrum today?

Unfortunately, there are still some roadblocks to HR becoming fully competent in the use of technology. Examples:

- **HR professionals are often technophobic**. Many HR professionals avoid technology, preferring to defer to the technology experts from inside and outside the organization. This is dangerous for both the HR professional and for the organization. HR will fail as a function if it does not begin to understand technology. We must understand technology so that we can design applications to meet our own objectives. In defense of those who fear technology, it's critical to remember that no matter how good the automated system may be, there will always be a need for a qualitative assessment of the information generated by the system.

  Though often labeled as "change agents," HR itself is very slow to change. HR professionals talk a good story and attend the right seminars on the hot issues of the day – and are in fact sometimes quite aggressive in change management initiatives outside their own department – but often the HR department itself is an island of legacy processes and methods that are holding the organization back.

- **HR often has a paper focus and avoids technology.** Many in HR wrongly believe that the best method to protect the privacy of employee information is to be a physical gatekeeper of the HR system. With limited comfort with technology within the department, the norm is to keep it on paper under lock and key. Only some

key elements of employee information are maintained on the corporate HRMS, leaving much of the valuable information in hard-copy file folders or, worse still, in stand-alone databases within HR. One of the driving forces behind this habit is fear of obsolescence; the fear is that their hold on the data reduces the value of the HR department to the organization.

- **Employees are trained to use a single input methodology.** Driven by the belief that consistency and control of information demands a single point and method of entry, HR departments continue to limit the number of input options made available to employees, often limited to hard copy only. Employees will expect multiple methods of data entry and access in the very near future. The employee will want to choose their own method of input, just as they do with their banking.

- **Too many stand-alone systems in HR today.** Most organizations today still cannot produce one single employee count that everyone can agree to. HR will have one or more, while payroll will have another, and telecommunications may come closest of all with a phone list, but none are in full agreement. The problem is that organizations still allow entry of redundant and inconsistent information into stand-alone, interfaced, or allegedly integrated systems. The challenge of linking all of the HR business systems together is far more challenging than the vendors would lead us to believe. To make good business decisions we need good integrated systems where information is entered once and is made accessible to all the parties in the organization that need it.

- **HR remains focused on input rather than on strategic information.** HR must focus on the real business information needed to manage the company and the productive practices and offer true support to their clients. Otherwise, HR will be considered a roadblock rather than a catalyst for business success.

How can HR change to facilitate a more effective use of technology?

- **An integrated HRMS.** The kind where all relevant information is accessible when required in a format that is capable of generating business outputs on demand. HR needs to move away from the silos of information with its non-integrated stand-alone systems, spreadsheets and hard-copy files. The vendors must become more sensitive to the fact that many of their systems are too cumbersome and expensive to really be of use to HR today. In the interim, HR can make significant progress towards integration by simply ensuring that all inputs are non-redundant across the organization. Collect information once, close as possible to the source.

- **Death of the HR function?** If much of the work HR does today can be automated through technology then HR must change or die. The HR "gurus" such as Dr. John Sullivan are writing that a paradigm shift is needed to redefine and educate HR professionals, employees and organizations on what human resource management can and should be providing to organizations. HR's repetitive transactional activities will need to move into reasonably-priced, comprehensive and rapidly-customizable business application software. Moving the care and feeding of these systems to an HRMS type of work unit, frees up HR professionals to focus on the development of business-critical human resource solutions and strategies. Information from the core HRMS will be the tool of choice for the HR professionals and business managers to make critical corporate decisions.

- **Outsourcing – the trend continues.** As key performance measures are identified and their tracking is further automated, there will be less need for the control exerted today by HR on the employee/employer relationship. The effective management of HR informa-

tion through fully integrated systems may not be a corporate competency and these functions can be outsourced. Managers using truly integrated information systems will be able to analyze data rapidly to determine the best options for meeting a business requirement. The goal should be for quality data, collected just once, close to the source, immediately available to all related systems. This will provide cost-savings and improved data integrity. Suitable automated controls and audits must be built in with updates taking place logically, immediately, accurately and efficiently.

- **Moving to the paperless office.** Employees are already getting tired of employers who claim an inability to cater to their preferred data access methodology. Employees are coming from other companies where it's already being done for just about everything in the business environment and will have little patience for the company that still insists on paper for capturing information. New employees entering the job market are already aware of new technology so it's a step backwards to enter a company driven by paper. The cost of storing data continues to drop. The former challenges associated with capturing the data are all but disappearing.

- **Responsibility for data entry is shifting.** The burden is shifting to the end user as self-service options are provided to information stakeholders. By removing roadblocks to the direct access and manipulation of information by company stakeholders, the responsibility for accurate data entry will be transferred to where it belongs. Well-designed systems will improve the quality and integrity of the data.

- **Change will bring change.** A few short years ago who would have believed that all HR managers would have a PC on their desks? Who would believe you when you told them they would actually use them? Just look around to what e-mail and the Web have done to change the picture. No one can accurately predict how things will change in the future, however, I do think it's very safe to predict that we have only seen the tip of the iceberg. There will be many changes to come.

Conclusions

Technology is not the solution to all the problems in HR, nor will it ever be. Nonetheless, the potential for significant rewards is out there, but proceed with caution. All the ground rules are not known yet. All HR professionals need to be actively involved today with technology and should not be hiding from it. It is here to stay and will have a major impact on our success in this profession. □

Al Doran, CHRP, is president of Phenix Management Int'l, a Toronto management consulting firm specializing in HRMS issues. He is co-author of the HRMS book published by Carswell, Human Resource Management Systems: A Practical Approach. *Doran is also the editor of the IHRIM Press book,* E-Work Architect: How HR Leads the Way Using the Internet. *He may be reached at aldoran@pmihrm.com and his home page is www.pmihrm.com.*