

[TECHNOLOGY]

Value-add ESS

Employee self-service has proven itself to be one of the great timesavers for HR over the last few years. With this in mind, *Human Resources* looks at some of the latest developments in ESS and how to get the most out of your system

A wide range of functions that were previously the domain of admin-immersed HR departments are now carried out by employees themselves via ESS systems. But while many of these functions are fairly well known, there have been some more innovative developments recently which build upon the basics of ESS to allow HR professionals to concentrate on the aspects of their roles that add greater value.

Some of the more common functions include the ability to change personal and company contact information, provide emergency contact details, change bank account details, view and apply for leave, and update formal qualifications, skills and licence information, according to AGL's Susan Halloran, project manager of HR ESS portal implementation and Catherine Dickson, HR philosophies manager.

AGL has also implemented manager self-service (MSS), which automates core HR processes such as recruitment of permanent and contract staff, termination, exit interviews and position movements such as acting/relief and secondments.

“All of these processes are linked into internal service groups such as IT, building services, audit and fleet, so that each division is given the information they need to execute the request,” they add.

AGL uses the MSS component and its ESS system chiefly for approval workflows and notification, so the company has service-level agreements in place between internal departments that detail turnaround times and delivery expectations, and regular meetings are held to monitor progress and ensure continuous process improvement.

Another example of tying in with other existing HR systems can be found in the financial industry, which is currently under stricter controls with the *Financial Services Reform Act*. Among other things, this requires relevant companies to produce a gap analysis between the skills a position requires and the skills an employee holds in that position at any one moment, according to Bob Bosiveski, HR operations manager for QBE Insurance.

The company's ESS is tied in with its training module and learning management system in order to achieve this, Bosiveski says. This provides managers with access to employee's training and education histories, which are also requirements under the *Financial Services Reform Act*.

Admin-ease-tration

One of the more commonly cited benefits of ESS is around reduced data entry. Administrative load is one of the biggest gripes of the HR profession, and spreading that across a workforce via self-service can mean significant time savings for HR professionals.

“The key advantage of the self-service centre is that it provides one channel for everyone to input their details, rather than a multiplicity of phone calls, e-mails to individuals, etc.” report Halloran and Dickson. “All data is captured in the one place and the one way.”

This also has a positive flow-on effect to data integrity: “Whilst it’s still early days, we’ve already seen improvements in data integrity, not only with basic employee data but also with respect to gaining some visibility in core HR processes within the organisation that historically we were not always aware of. This increase in visibility has become obvious in a very short period of time and has the potential to drive some of our more strategic activities,” they say.

Data integrity is key to more robust and comprehensive reporting as well. While it’s fine for managers to have a leave history in front of them, Bosiveski has found it much more beneficial for them to be able to generate insightful reports on relevant issues.

“The value-add is in being able to leverage and use the data that’s already there. For instance, you might view the percentages of under 25s and how many leave days they’ve taken, or salaries relative to males versus females in a department. That’s what we certainly want to achieve. It gives the power to the managers to generate these comprehensive reports, and based on those they can change things for the better.”

ESS challenges

However, as with most other technology-related HR processes, ESS doesn’t come without its fair share of challenges.

While AGL’s HR team has been able to take a more strategic role since the implementation of its ESS, this has, surprisingly, also presented the team with one of its biggest hurdles.

“One of the major challenges has been changing the business perception of our people and our culture team and what we do,” Halloran and Dickson assert. “Because our model is about self service, there is a dramatic shift away from people and culture providing administrative support for core processes, to our managers and employees providing information in a structured way that they are not used to, to enable us to provide more strategic HR assistance.”

Entrenched mindsets are cause for another challenge often arising out of ESS implementation, namely changing the ‘modus operandi’ and trying to get new messages across, they add. While they found implementing the ESS component relatively easy, the

MSS component involved a large amount of change to how things have traditionally been done within AGL. “It’s been a challenge to move the business towards new ways of doing things when the tendency is to continue to do things the way you know how or have always done so,” they explain.

However resistance can also be found in the wider ranks when rolling out ESS. When employees are used to dealing in a paper-based environment, the shift towards a wholly-electronic system can be hard, according to Joanne Hawkins, administrative assistant in HR with Merck Sharp & Downe.

“There was some initial resistance among employees. That was over a year ago, but with time, training and force-feeding people to use it through changing processes, they’ve shifted and come on board with it. They’re really ripe for more technology, so I think the organisation’s in a great position to embrace more of it.”

ESS measurement

ROI is a core ingredient of any successful ESS. With both tangible and intangible benefits, some ESS components are easier to measure than others, according to Halloran and Dickson.

AGL used a set of measures for a period after going live, which HR used for collecting data in order to assist it with the identification of system and process issues. After being live for about three-and-a-half months, AGL no longer collects the system-based measures as its system has stabilised, but process measures are still collected.

“These measures are cross-functional and we meet with other service areas of the business on a regular basis to discuss different aspects of the end-to-end business process. The measures assist help us identify things such as breakdown or bottlenecks in process, process improvements, and transaction volumes,” they explain.

“From this information we’re able to see where we can further streamline or improve our processes, reduce administration, increase automation. We can also do something less tangible, such as running an education program which will result in further take-up of the system, the provision of more reliable information, or the removal of end-user frustration.”

ESS lessons learned

As with virtually any other HR process, there are lessons to be learned in hindsight. The biggest lesson for AGL was around having clearly defined processes before even looking at products on the market.

“Understand what it is you need – there are many ‘bells and whistles’ that don’t always add value and that will lead you down a longer and more complex implementation path,” Halloran and Dickson report.

IT systems are an indispensable component of any ESS rollout, and working hand-in-hand with the IT department can help iron out any glitches before they strike. “We probably would’ve had more interaction with our IT people,” Bosiveski acknowledges. “There were some hardware issues, but the process has helped us get our organisational structure cleaned up.”

Moving forward, QBE is looking to make slight changes to the kiosk every three to six months: “We want to keep people interested and keep developing it, rather than having it developed completely as we need it, then rolling it out. We’ve done quite a bit of homework, and we’re rolling it out business unit by business unit, rather than across the board at once,” Bosiveski states.

Halloran and Dickson conclude with the following advice:

- communicate continually to your audience, with the same message to reinforce the change
- provide ‘hints and tips’ on the front page to keep interest
- keep content changing regularly to ensure credibility of the site
- make things as simple as possible – view moving to an ESS system as putting your paper forms online – don’t build in more complexities than what you have in your paper processes just because the technology means you can
- continue innovation and implement learnings into new forms
- involve people from the business early in the project; these people become your ‘advocates’

Lastly, if it’s too hard for the top down approach, go for the bottom-up – it’s the bottom that will make the most use of an ESS system.

Vendor news: Employee Connect

EmployeeConnect’s philosophy is that Employee Self Service (ESS) should be an enterprise-wide solution. A quality ESS implementation will provide significant value beyond the basics of an HR/Payroll intranet. Consideration should be given to automate all administrative business processes with your ESS system. This may include HR/payroll, finance, IT, purchasing, and real estate as a few examples. Key benefits of EmployeeConnect, include: integration with leading HR/Payroll/ERP systems; efficient delivery of service to employees enabling a reduction in paperwork; highly configurable forms and workflow to automate your business processes; ‘One stop shop’ for information access supported by our flexible role based security; best of breed solution; protection of existing investments in payroll software; short implementation times, enable higher return on investment, and open technology standards to work with your corporate IT environment. For more information call (02) 9837 5810 or visit www.employeeconnect.com.
