

If Your HR Process is Broken, No Technology Solution will Fix It

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**Audit and align your HR processes before you invest
in and implement a technology solution.**

At the HR Technology Conference in Chicago a few months ago, there were three major messages that resonated throughout the proceedings:

1. The value and benefits of an *integrated* approach to human resource processes
2. The importance of finding and implementing the right technology solution
3. The need to first get your HR processes in order before integrating and implementing them via technology

This article focuses primarily on the third point and the idea of a readiness assessment and plan for effectively laying the ground work and ensuring the implementation of a successful HR technology solution. First, however, a few words about the first two points.

Linked and Aligned Strategic HR Processes

Until recently, integrated HR systems primarily referred to the sharing and portability of data between multiple transactional HR processes such as payroll administration, compensation management and benefits administration. Today it means the alignment and linking of strategic HR processes such as employee selection, assessment, development and retention, commonly referred to as “integrated talent management” solutions. With an integrated approach, a company can:

- Facilitate the exchange and sharing of information that is relevant to multiple HR processes;
- Eliminate process redundancies and inefficiencies;
- Reinforce key performance measures and metrics across HR processes;
- Track, monitor and manage the employee life cycle more effectively;
- Implement longer-term human capital planning and talent management.

This is a significant evolution for human resource technology because unlike tactical HR processes, which rely on technologies that have mostly enabled accurate record keeping, data capture and recall, and reporting, integrated strategic HR processes require technology applications that are *smarter* and even *intuitive*:

- They need to provide information, not just data.
- They need to help drive the HR process.
- They need to facilitate real-time or just-in-time decision-making and actions for multiple functions, business divisions and even on an enterprise-wide basis.
- They need to question, verify and validate information they receive, not just simply capture data.

- They need to include user-centered tools, information, reports, analytics, etc.

The emerging technology solutions underlying strategic HR processes such as employee selection, assessment, development and retention are also appealing because, given the right technology-based solution, HR professionals can actually deliver on organizational expectations that they have traditionally struggled with, including:

- Bottom-line business results;
- Compelling performance metrics;
- The achievement of strategic organizational initiatives despite constrained resources;
- The expectation for immediate and tangible business impact.

The Abundance of Choice – a Blessing and a Curse

This leads to the second key message at the conference: the importance of finding and implementing the right technology solution. This is a tall order. The marketplace is replete with choices and options. A careful perusal of the solutions featured on the exhibit floor at the HR Technology Conference made it clear that there is something available to meet every company's budget, timeframe, system requirements, organizational fit, and technological level of sophistication. Most are packaged solutions with varying levels of customization; a few solutions, featured during case study presentations, were proprietary and built to a particular client's system requirements and specifications.

The fact that there is something for every need, ironically, makes choosing the right solution that much more difficult. An abundance of choice not only means there

are many options, but it also means there are many similarities and differences across those options. Figuring out which approach is the right one for your organization may require significant time and effort to compare and contrast the options; analyze the benefits, limitations and costs of each; and conduct scenario testing. Even with all of this effort, making the wrong choice is not only quite likely but also very costly.

Consequences of the Wrong Solution

Most likely, you will only have one opportunity to make the right choice. Besides the obvious costs of money spent and time wasted and lost in implementing the wrong solution, having to undo it, and then having to implement something else, choosing the wrong technology solution has other significant consequences. There is the potential loss of credibility among organizational leaders, colleagues and stakeholders, and the general employee population. Will you have their trust and will they give credence to your recommendations and assurances in the future?

There is also the potential resistance or aversion to trying again with a different solution. Taking the wrong approach the first time can lead to a steeper acceptance and adoption curve the next time. That translates into having to invest more money and time to overcome resistance.

Moreover, one wrong turn in this arena has a way of rippling through other major organizational initiatives. Even if they are separate and unrelated, every strategic HR initiative is vulnerable to scrutiny, and the level of effort going into other initiatives may have to increase significantly to overcome any potential negative fallout.

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Assessing Readiness

Which brings us to the third key message from the HR Technology Conference: no technology solution or application – however elegant, proven or practical – will be effective for your organization if you don't first do the groundwork needed to get your HR processes in order.

In actuality, the groundwork extends beyond your HR processes. It involves conducting what amounts to an organizational readiness assessment, identifying areas of risk, and developing an action plan to eliminate or mitigate those risks.

The focus here is on the HR processes, but the readiness assessment should also examine two other organizational components: technology processes and maintenance and support procedures. The purpose for looking at these three areas is to:

- **Get the lay of the land.** See what exists, how it works, what's effective, what needs to be changed or fixed, and what to keep as is. Document how employees feel about existing processes and technology, including factors like training and support, and their appetite for new systems.
- **Scope the situation.** Understand what level of effort will be required before, during and after the technology implementation.
- **Define the groundwork.** Specify the tasks and activities in each area that need to be completed before any work can begin on implementing the technology solution.
- **Identify the obstacles.** Determine the potential risks (e.g., resistance to change, competing organizational initiatives, and lack of knowledge or skills needed to make the change) and how to mitigate them.

*First,
map out
your HR
processes;
then decide
on the
appropriate
technology*

Examining Relevant HR Processes: Five Key Steps

1) Ask the basic questions

One of the first things you should do, even before you begin examining your HR processes, is to step back and ask some basic questions:

- “Why do we need to do this?”
- “What do we expect will change for the better?”
- “What are the business reasons for integrating these systems?”
- “If we do nothing, what do we expect will happen?”
- “What's the worst thing that will happen if we wait a year?”

You need to answer these questions (and check if other key stakeholders agree with your answers) to confirm that you are proceeding with a clear and agreed-upon purpose and objective.

2) Map the relevant HR processes

If you are planning to integrate several HR processes that are currently disconnected, map each process separately first, then identify the intersection or interaction points across all the processes. For example, the knowledge, skills and competencies that you assess when interviewing potential new hires may be the same ones you use to assess employees during the development planning process. Alternatively, the assessments that employees and their managers complete as part of the performance management process may be data points that should feed into succession planning. In addition to identifying the intersections and interactions among different HR processes, you should identify relevant tools, templates, forms, and other content, and indicate on the map where these materials come into play.

If your integrated HR application is expected to be an enterprise solution and your company has business units, divisions or regions that currently have their own HR processes, your mapping activity should highlight any differences that exist at the business unit, division or regional level. If possible, you should do the mapping activity with all the relevant process owners and key stakeholders in the room, so that the resulting map reflects their perspectives and input. You should also review the process maps with a few process users (e.g., line managers, field employees). They can provide you with valuable perspectives on what works and what could be improved from the user's experience.

3) Determine the changes, fixes and gaps

Once you have developed the different HR process maps and have highlighted the intersection and integration points, take another step back and answer these questions:

Do the HR processes do what we want and need them to do?

For example, does your performance management process lead to a clear and concrete picture of each employee's performance and results from the previous year? Does it provide reviewing managers with useful information to support their feedback to employees during performance reviews?

If you discover that the HR process does not achieve intended objectives, determine what changes to make to the process, tools and materials to ensure that it does. This will be less complicated and difficult than waiting until you have selected and are implementing a technology solution.

Is there anything that doesn't work well, needs to be changed or fixed, or is missing?

For example, in your selection process, do recruiters have a method of summarizing their assessments and ratings for all job candidates they interview on one form, or do they have one assessment form per candidate that they have to refer to when discussing candidates with other recruiters or hiring managers? Wouldn't a single candidate summary form be more effective?

Again, you should also review the process maps with a few line managers and employees. They will provide you with perspectives on what works and what could be improved from the user's experience.

Ideally, you should test the usefulness and functionality of all forms, tools, templates and content related to any HR process before you transition it to a technology-based process. Don't waste time or resources developing a technology-based version of any materials or functions that aren't particularly useful or that don't really work.

Actively involve process owners and users before committing to a technology solution.

4) Revise the processes

If you are developing an integrated enterprise solution where there had previously been separate HR processes in the business units, divisions or regions, you should take this opportunity to establish the HR process that will become the standard for the enterprise. This includes developing or revising relevant forms, tools, templates and other related materials. Part of this effort should include incorporating best practices from the business unit, divisional or regional HR processes. It should also involve eliminating redundancies, addressing inconsistencies, and establishing shared standards for the enterprise-wide HR solution.

5) Validate the changes

Once you have revised the HR processes and associated tools, templates and materials, it is important to loop back and reality-test the

changes with the original process owners, key stakeholders from the business units, divisions or regions, and line managers and employees. It's not enough just to walk people through the new process map and to show them the revised materials. Ideally, you will have people actually try to complete the process steps and activities and use the tools, templates, forms and materials, even if it's just in a simulated environment and without the actual technology solution in place. This approach is preferable because it enables you to:

- Determine what communication, training and other support mechanisms you may need to provide to ensure the new process and materials are effectively adopted;
- Identify any additional system content, features and functionality – such as FAQs, help content, hyperlinks, downloadable samples, etc. – that your technology solution should include to ensure a quality and valuable user experience;
- Establish good will, buy-in and support up, down and across the organization, which will be critical to have when you begin implementing the technology-based HR processes.

A Closing Note of Caution

Before you begin revising your HR processes and materials, you should first also complete a technology readiness assessment and have narrowed down the technology solutions you will consider. Why? Because your technology readiness assessment may reveal certain

system limitations, restrictions or requirements that will influence the features and functionality of the technology solution you will ultimately select or build. Alternatively, once you have narrowed down the technology solutions that work for your company, you may find that your first choice has feature and functionality restrictions that conflict with changes you were going to make to your HR processes and materials.

For example, let's say you are going to implement an online assessment tool to determine employees' development priorities. In preparation for this assessment, you update your company's competency model. Then you discover that the assessment template that comes with the online solution you have purchased has word-count limitations that preclude using your well-established competency definitions and behaviors because they are too long. Either you have to revise the competency model (again!) or you have to invest in a different technology solution. In any case, this means rework and wasted resources.

In the next article in this series, we will give advice on how to assess your organization's technological readiness from a process and systems perspective. Meanwhile, in the spirit of "first things first," an offline examination of your key HR processes, how well they align at present, and how they could be better connected for more effective talent management, will first lead to better design of each process and next to the selection or development of an appropriate technology solution.



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