



The HR Technologist 21st Century Transformation

Many people like me got their start in HR technology in the late 1980s/early 1990s in what has traditionally been called the HRIS department. The HRIS department staff were the data and system experts. Other HR functions would come to this department with report requests, changes to employee information, requests for new system capabilities, and training on systems. The skills needed to be successful as an HRIS professional were technical, tactical, and project-focused. With operating systems from AS400 to IBM Mainframe, Time Sharing Option (TSO) editors and reporting tools that made you learn field numbers, the HRIS staff were vital to make sure that Human Resources departments were able to use all the data that was entered into these systems. Because of the “technical” nature of this role, there were also many great debates about where this function should reside, in HR or IT. The Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) did not even recognize this area as an HR specialty until sometime in the 2000s, so the HRIS professional always worked in the “in-between” of HR and IT.

As the technology transformed and the internet became a mainstream point of access, the promise of self-service became a reality. The systems of the early 2000s were built for use by managers and employees through access via the web. The HRIS departments and professionals were challenged with supporting the legacy client/server systems of the 1990s and the web-based systems of the 21st century. While the technical and tactical skills were still required, added to these were business process design and analysis along with vendor management. The early 2000s also became the time when the HRIS professional needed

to think strategically about how the technology would support the business. Prior to this, for the most part, technology was for Human Resources department efficiency.

The HR technology platforms of the 2010s and beyond make the information available to everyone via a variety of devices. The HRIS department, that back office bastion of personnel transaction forms and the keeper of the reporting tools and knowledge, has been replaced with a new breed of HR technology and technologists. The 21st century HR technologist role is to understand what information is needed to make business decisions, create processes to capture the information at the source, make the information available to everyone, and educate business leaders on how to obtain and interpret the information.

To have the right information, there must be processes in place to capture the information, and data standards used to ensure that the information will be consistent and accurate. With direct access to reporting tools, the constructs of the data need to be such that an end user can view information without needing to know data relationships and dependencies. Direct access to information also necessitates the retirement of “smart coding,” that technique used by 1990 HRIS technologists to quickly be able to identify people, jobs, and departments.

Today, with a “mobile first” delivery strategy, unlike the “self-service” tools of the 1990s, mobile devices have made capturing data more convenient than ever. It is in understanding the new reality of easy, convenient access via a mobile device that the real transformation for the HR technology professional must occur. This is the final transition away

from a role that is focused on transaction processing and controlling of the data. The new role of the HR technology professional is to build business processes and information channels.

Processes need to be built from the perspective of the employee and manager. There must be a fundamental assumption that all information needed to execute that process is available to them, ideally via their mobile device. In many cases, it not only involves putting information that has been historically held in MS Word documents and MS Excel spreadsheets online, but in the hands of every employee.

Thinking through how a manager or employee will consume the information is critical and requires understanding how the information should be presented based on how it will be used. This requires an understanding of the decisions that will be made when viewing the information. The fundamental process of gathering requirements must change from one of asking what fields should be presented and in what order from left to right, to what decisions you want to make, and the HR technologist needs to translate the needs into the fields of information that will be most useful. These reports also need to be clear and easy to understand; codes need to be translated into understandable words.

Once the responsibility of making information changes is turned over to managers, the next step is to train them on key concepts like “effective dating.” This needs to be clearly understood not only when entering changes, but also when viewing information. So, while training is still an important skill for the HR technologist, it is now redirected from system training to business process training. While training on how to use a mobile device may not be needed, there is a level of education needed to understand the

information and impact of decisions.

The new HR technologist must also take the lead role on any new software purchases. Unlike the purchasing process of 20th century on-premise products, the new cloud products require a different evaluation method – one based on business process. Cloud products of today are process-driven and have configurable work flow; however, the configurations are not limitless. The evaluation of these products requires documentation of which positions in the organization will have roles in the process. While there is still a component of feature sets that will be scrutinized, the products of today are very similar in what they can do. The differentiator is how it accomplishes the result: how the configurations will work, how easy the product is to use, and how the work flow in the product accommodates the desired future state.

This is the value of the 21st century HR technologist, someone who has an understanding of business, how decisions are made, the business process, and educating users on execution of these processes. This is a transformation from a tactical and technical role to a strategic role supporting the business.

Those that will thrive will learn how the business needs to be supported through direct access processes and information, and the impact of accessibility anywhere and everywhere. They will help drive the use of human capital information to make business decisions and lead the change from thinking of HR technology as a back-office function, to a true strategic business partner.

Those that cannot make the transition are destined to be relics, much like that old PC monitor that is too heavy to move, so it sits on that desk in the back corner of the room, gathering dust, reminding us of times past.

About the Author

Jacqueline Kuhn, HRIP is an HR professional with more than 25 years' experience in strategic planning, systems management, project management, services delivery, and general human resources. Throughout her career, she has worked with organizations in all sectors global and domestic to create strategic plans around their human capital management (HCM) systems, as well as leading selection and implementation projects for talent management, talent acquisition, and HRIS systems. In her role at HRchitect, she oversees HCM strategic consulting group which encompasses HRchitect's HCM systems strategic planning and evaluation and selection practices. She spends much of her time with HCM vendors being briefed on their technology offerings, ensuring that HRchitect provides the most current information to clients who are looking for a new solution. She enjoys working with organizations to impact their HCM strategies utilizing technology. She is a Certified Professional of Human Resource Information (HRIP). She is a sought-after speaker at industry events and is published in professional magazines and journals. She can be reached at jkuhn@hrchitect.com.