The Self-service Quandry

Making self-service work for you by utilizing technology that keeps the customer in mind. User-friendly functionality should be a foremost requirement of any implementation. By Paul Davies

The manager or employee looking at their in-tray after an HRO provider has implemented self-service could be forgiven for thinking that HR has outsourced services to its own organization. The impression can be created that the provider has brought nothing but technology to the table while the actual work of collecting data, submitting and approving, etc. has been deftly handed off to overworked supervisors and employees.

This perception can undermine the financial case if it is successfully argued that the cost of effort has been retained. It can muddle quality measurement when quality is expressed—as it often is—in terms of the customer experience rather than the key performance indicators. Also, it can have a material impact on the strength of resistance with which one must cope when implementing the HRO change.

Sometimes it is not necessarily the self-service process itself that causes the problem. The limitations of the buyer's own IT capability or policies can be overlooked. For example, high on any checklist of building blocks for technology-based self-service is unique employee IDs, position hierarchy, and single login capability. This is easy to say, but in large global organizations with a history of decentralized HR and IT development, it can be troublesome to achieve.

Nevertheless, supervisors who are already irate with the notion of serving themselves will be exasperated beyond measure if, in order to do so, they have to log on several times or manage multiple passwords. Irrespective of the reason for the problem, they are likely to blame the outsourcing.

Additionally, where large numbers of employees are not provided with intranet access or an e-mail in-box at their place of work, the issue of remote-access security and the number of user accounts comes to the fore. Self-service kiosks appear inconvenient when many employees have internet access in their own homes. But at the same time, having employees use their personal e-mail and direct internet access poses credible security concerns. This assumes, of course, that one isn't still struggling with the concept of dumping paper to begin with.

A factor to consider in this regard is the viability of multi-channel self-service. Where paper forms are machine-readable, employees can create paper requests that can be scanned or faxed so that minimum third-party intervention is required to complete the processing. Hardly a next-generation solution, such measures can assist employees who engage in rare, event-based record changes.

For others, the functionality and user friendliness of the electronic self-service approach has a major impact on their perception of to whom HR has outsourced the work.

Perhaps the greatest quandary regarding the utility of self-service lies with the decision to use an ERP solution or so-called "best fit" applications. The assessment can sometimes revolve too much around the utility of an application for HR professionals rather than the end-user. For traditional organizations, in particular, it pays to formally assess the change in the daily workload of a supervisor and choose the self-service tools accordingly.

A key component is how supervisors obtain the data they are required to enter. For example, if the unique employee ID number is required, how is this obtained? A drop-down box of all reports or a search by name would help. Similarly, for career planning purposes, it pays to have a hierarchy that allows the supervisor to pick a job position from an organization chart rather than ask the supervisor to look up and enter the job code.

Another consideration is making data and reports previously not readily available now accessible. Putting the company manual on a website probably will not lead to the manager burning the paper version. However, a search facility that collects the tools and resources associated with a given request will probably do better.

Placing HR tools directly in the hands of managers and drastically limiting approvals is another way of enabling the self-service concept. This speaks for itself in the case of learning, career development, and performance, but a salary increase or promotion can be empowering if self-service has the instant effect of making it happen.

Overall, self-service works best when the overall mindset changes and the software benefits the user taking on the work. Keeping old control mindsets and choosing technology for the HR professional will be seen exactly for what it is: outsourcing HR administrative tasks to already overworked managers and supervisors. HRO

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