

Passing on Tribal Knowledge

Knowledge transfer should be a pivotal competency of HRO providers. Still, guard against HR administrator incapable of thought beyond going off a script.

By Paul Davies



Paul Davies is an independent advisor in HR services and outsourcing. He can be reached at paul.davies@debunkhr.com.

If only the in-house HR administrators could be moved from their various locations to a state-of-the-art service center on an idyllic South Pacific island with Swiss grade infrastructure and Zimbabwean monetary policy and then be paid local wage rates in local currency to do their current jobs. Costs would be shredded as fast as the banknotes, and more importantly the organization would receive the same exhaustively knowledgeable service to which they had become accustomed during the past 100 years.

Alas, even if the place existed and current employees were open to relocation, paying local rates would fail to get them there. Which is why in most outsourcing deals, transferring the knowledge rather than the people is the only option.

At the most basic level, in-house HR administrators prove the point that knowledge matters more than face-to-face contact, an onshore location, or in-house employment. Because if the current, omniscient benefit administrator were to switch employer, move to a palm-fringed beach, and conduct business over the telephone, most customers would be none the wiser.

Knowledge, then, is at the core of a successful outsourced service, and consequently getting it from the buyer to the provider's administrators is one of the key provider competencies.

Most outsourced, shared-services offerings concentrate, quite correctly, on codifying procedures. HRO providers have a wealth of experience in mapping processes and recording the nub in detailed standard operations documents. Where necessary, decision trees are used to capture the less-than-linear ways of handling matters, and in case of doubt there is always escalation.

To underpin the effort, the industry maximizes systems to support workflow and case management in ways that buyers' HR departments only dream of, prompting administrators to take action, tracking turnaround times, and automatically routing approvals. In fact, at the processing level of HRO, providers have more or less debunked the myth of in-house staff magically navigating local rules. The knowledge has been weighed, evaluated and, in most cases, unromantically but reliably turned into system workflow rules.

But "how" to process, whether it be employee sickness declarations or any other item in the long list of HR administration agonies, is only one part of the knowledge

boutique. Often what sets the in-house HR administrator apart is knowing in what ways the process does not work.

In countless situations, they avoid problems by identifying them in the embryonic stage or even earlier. Most experienced administrators have a tick-list of past misdemeanors against which to sense-check anything they are processing, and some providers try to also tap into this level of knowledge. Though far more difficult to reliably codify than processes, they have integrated knowledge management systems into service-center technology suites, and diligent process analysts have populated them with commentaries indexed to specific process steps.

Once the knowledge is captured, it benefits from being edited and augmented by the administrators so that new knowledge is made available to others—present and future. And after being sufficiently standardized, comments can be transformed into rules and auto checks, enhancing the approach further.

Improving the transfer of knowledge beyond process codification and knowledge management becomes contentious. Providers thrive on demystifying the "black box" mystic of highly trained administrators by replacing them with codified knowledge that requires much less experienced staff, so the suggestion of personally attributable levels of expertise are not always well received. Yet, while providers have swung the pendulum in a welcome direction, we should all perhaps guard against it swinging too far.

Subject to cost parameters and the correct identification of thought-dependent tasks, customer service benefits from independently knowledgeable, "thinking," administrators. This begins with the already existing knowledge base of new recruits and is supplemented by the training regime.

It means where possible employing service-center staff with relevant HR experience and offering relocation packages, if required. In the early days, it can also mean providing training "experiences" alongside the in-house administrators to learn the ropes the old fashioned way. Though there is a danger of transferring bad habits, the right quality candidates should be able to differentiate.

To some, it may appear to be akin to having and eating one's cake, but in all honesty, that is exactly where most customer-service oriented industries usually end up. **HRO**