Human resources information systems and university effectiveness

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The purpose of this paper is to describe the importance of implementing and maintaining a high quality human resources information system (HRIS) in a college or university and the many ways in which such a system can be used. In the current economic conditions, there is increasing pressure on universities to reduce costs, boost productivity, recruit and retain the best people, and to provide the best products and services for the best value. In addition to economic incentives, there are governmental and accrediting agencies that require an ever-increasing amount of data to support their decisions about about an institution. Just as more traditional businesses have learned to benefit from well-designed data management systems, universities can give themselves a competitive edge by effectively collecting, organizing, and retrieving available employee data.

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INTRODUCTION

In the current economic climate, businesses must adapt in a number of ways in order to stay competitive. Although not traditionally considered to be a "business", colleges and universities face challenges similar to those found in many large corporations. To be successful, both types of organizations need to increase productivity, reduce costs, recruit and retain the best people, and offer the best products and services for the best value to consumers.

As federal and state funding continues to decrease, in order for universities to remain solvent it is important to examine all aspects of the operation and to identify areas that could be enhanced or modified in order to maximize efficiency. One area of the organization that is often overlooked is the Human Resources Management division. Long considered to be a cost-center that contributes little to the bottom line, the field of HR presents many opportunities for organizational improvements that could increase the overall sustainability of the institution.

For any organization to be successful, administration needs to be able to make quality decisions based on accurate data. Too often in higher education, decisions are made without the benefit of a comprehensive analysis of the current state of the university. These decisions can lead to misusing existing funds, continuation of ineffective programs, or overlooking ways to create positive change for the institution.

By the very nature of the field, HR collects and stores a wealth of information about employees along with their associated costs. A solid human resources information system (HRIS) can be an invaluable tool to help administration effectively respond to economic challenges and to comply with the many reporting requirements from outside agencies.

For example, there is an increasing demand from governmental agencies to supply information on organizational efforts in the areas of affirmative action, veteran status of employees, and equal employment opportunity compliance. In additional to federal and state reporting requirements, organizations responsible for accrediting a university and its programs have their own types of data that they want to be able to review.

Not only are there outside pressures to effectively maintain and utilize employee data, employees themselves are demanding more service from their university's Human Resources department. Many times, employees expect 24-hour access to certain benefits such as information about their contributions to retirement plans, employment applications, employee assistance programs, and access to their payroll and tax information.

In order to meet these needs, it is now more important than ever for Human Resources departments to maintain an efficient information system. Although the initial design of a good system that works well within a university's organizational structure can be challenging to establish, once in place, a well-run HRIS can be effectively used in almost every specialty area of Human Resources. From Compensation to Employee Relations to Benefits and beyond, HR managers in higher education should learn to make the most of their information systems.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the many advantages that universities can accrue from maintaining an accurate and up-to-date HRIS. Just by implementing one or two of the following practices, an HR department can significantly increase its effectiveness, decrease the workload for certain HR staff members, and increase employee satisfaction with the HR department's service.

Human resources information systems

HRIS AND EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Perhaps the area of Human Resources that can benefit the most from an efficient HRIS is Employee Relations. Much of the Employee Relations' function requires employee data. For example, annual reporting of the EEO-1 and Vets-100 forms can be made much easier and more accurate with a good database. Without a systematic way of keeping track of employee variables such as race and gender, completing this annual form can be a record-keeping nightmare. Many commercially available programs such as PeopleSoft or Cyborg can provide an Employee Relations Specialist with the data necessary to complete the required paperwork. Some programs even offer the capability of printing out an exact replica of the form completed with customized company data.

Many universities must maintain affirmative action plans in order to support their policies of non-discrimination. This is another area in which a good HRIS can help. Affirmative action plans generally require racial and gender information on employees as well as hiring, promotion, and termination records. Unless this is stored in a systematic manner that is easy to retrieve, many hours can be wasted trying to report this information accurately. Also, if an institution ever is required to undergo an audit by the OFCCP or other agency, the auditor may demand a number of items to be turned over in a relatively short period of time. Again, an HRIS can really be of assistance in a case like this.

Another way in which an HRIS can help the Employee Relations department is in the area of turnover tracking. Through the systematic process of interviewing employees as they voluntarily terminate their employment, trends can be studied to determine why employees are leaving the organization. Since hiring and training new employees is such a large expense, if an Employee Relations Manager can determine why employees are leaving and make changes based on this knowledge, it can ultimately save the university money.

In addition to tracking voluntary turnover, disciplinary actions and involuntary terminations can be tracked in most Human Resources Information Systems. Besides being able to track trends within departments or by particular managers, this type of information can be very beneficial in the case of ex-employees who sue the institution for wrongful termination. Thorough record keeping is essential in proving that a university followed its own policies and did not discriminate in employment decisions. Not only is it important to keep this type of information, but institutions must be able to provide it to attorneys, sometimes with very little notice.

Other Employee Relations tasks can be improved or simplified through the use of an HRIS. From major university initiatives such a hiring freeze or budget cuts, to everyday activities such as employee birthday or service award lists, most of what an Employee Relations department does can benefit from an HRIS.

HRIS AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment is one area that has experienced a great boost from information systems over the past few years. Most major universities now have websites where potential employees can either apply on-line or, at the very least, find out about current vacancies. These websites are

now a vital part of the Employment Managers' recruiting strategy and must be professionally designed and up-to-date in order to make a good impression on potential candidates.

An HRIS is not only helpful in soliciting outside applications, but it can be useful for internal recruiting and career-path planning. Some commercially available HRIS software can even keep track of employee variables such as motivators, long- and short-term goals, skills and training (Kallis, 1999). Through maintaining a database with information on current employees' skills and education, sometimes key positions can be filled by internal candidates who might not have even known that a certain position was vacant. Promoting from within is a great way to retain talented personnel and instill employee loyalty. Without an efficient way to search and identify employees who might be eligible for promotion, Employment Specialists must rely on referrals from managers and co-workers which can be flawed and spotty at best.

One Employment duty that can particularly benefit from an HRIS is the process of applicant tracking. Many organizations are required to keep records of who has applied, what their race and gender are, and the position for which they are applying. This can be an especially daunting task, depending on the number of walk-in applicants a university might have. A well established website along with computer stations for walk-ins can be set up to automatically track this type of information and keep it separate from the rest of an applicant's file. With this type of system, reporting is much easier as well.

HRIS AND TRAINING

An HRIS can also be beneficial for training professionals. Many times, senior administration will require that all employees attend certain training programs either for continuing education or for accreditation purposes. Keeping track of which employees have attended and which still need to attend can be a complicated matter. Things can get even more complex if administration wants all employees of a certain type or level to attend (i.e., full time faculty in a particular location, entry-level departmental administrative assistants, etc.)

Identifying trainees and keeping records of which classes they have taken can be beneficial for a number of reasons. For example, promotion and salary increases are sometimes dependent on employee training participation. In some cases, disciplinary actions or terminations may be necessary for policy violations and it can be helpful if a university can show that the employee did, in fact, receive training on the policy in question. Training, just like most of the other areas of Human Resources, can definitely benefit from accurate and easily retrievable records.

Commercial programs are available that have been designed to simplify training record keeping as well as perform other helpful tasks. For example, some information systems can help training personnel reserve rooms, keep track of equipment, and plan trainer schedules (Filipczak, 1991). Management reports can also be easily generated that provide training related information. Some companies may choose to purchase a stand-alone training system but many times an all-purpose HRIS will contain a training related component.

Another area in Training that is growing through the use of an HRIS is Computer Based Training (CBT). CBT is designed based on how adult learners perform best and allows for workers to be more flexible and self-directed in their approach to training. Research has shown

that this type of training can not only improve skills but also fosters a better attitude towards the training experience (Sandler, 1998).

HRIS AND BENEFITS

Another functional area of Human Resources that can be improved through the use of an HRIS is the Benefits department. As mentioned earlier, employees are becoming more demanding of HR departments and expect fast, accurate service regarding their benefits at any time of day or night. Many universities now provide on-line self-service where employees can log in and check a variety of things through the internet. This is not only valuable for employees but can be a time-saver for Benefits staff members who normally would have to look specific employee information up if requested.

One example of how an HRIS can help employees help themselves is through on-line enrollment and administration of insurance plans, retirement plans, etc. Human Resources departments used to have to keep large quantities of benefits forms in stock, employees would have to make time to come by the HR department to get the forms, and then have to wait while the necessary changes were processed. Now, many companies have placed their forms on an employee website for download and some can take changes on-line and immediately update employee records.

An HRIS can help the Benefits staff keep up with many of the day-to-day tasks required in this area of Human Resources. Information such as names of an employee's dependents, home addresses for written communication, social security numbers, etc. can all be easily tracked and reported through the effective use of an HRIS. In addition, it can provide an easy way for employees to submit benefits-related questions and have benefits information available at any time. One institution, The University of Louisville, has taken this idea further by allowing faculty, students, and alumni access to update their own information such as address changes, name changes, etc. (Caterinnichia, 2005). This alleviates some of the workload for HR staff to update and maintain accurate records.

HRIS AND COMPENSATION

In addition to the many examples discussed thus far, an HRIS can also help the Compensation department with their duties. One of the main responsibilities for many Compensation departments is the administration of annual increases. Since salary information is tracked within the HRIS, it is easy to perform various mathematical functions to determine the financial effect of different levels of salary changes.

It can also be beneficial to examine salary levels across departments, divisions, or regions to assess salary equity between groups. If one group is consistently being compensated at a higher rate than another, it is sometimes easier to identify when university-wide trends can be extracted from a centralized database.

Annual performance reviews can be simplified through a centralized HRIS by permitting managers to input information on employees directly into the database, thus eliminating the need for clerks to key information into the system. This is another way in which the Human Resources workload can be decreased through the use of a well-designed system.

HRIS AND PAYROLL

Finally, HRIS can assist the payroll function in many ways. For example, on-line paystubs can be e-mailed to employees or made available through a secured university intranet, thus reducing or eliminating the need for paper paystubs that have to be printed, sorted, and delivered to the entire workforce. W-2 information can be maintained on-line and used to simplify this end-of-the-year process.

Payroll Specialists who need to continually have access to employee records to answer questions regarding pay can have fast, up-to-date access on-line and be able to help employees much more efficiently.

CONCLUSION

Overall, a major function of Human Resources in universities is keeping accurate information and being able to access it quickly. According to HR Focus (2003), being able to access and analyze employee data is one of the most critical issues in the field. In order to provide quality service to both employees and university administration, it is essential that HR is equipped with the proper systems. Through the assistance of a well-maintained information system, many HR functions that historically have been very cumbersome to complete can now be executed on a routine basis without much difficulty.

Many large companies have made great strides in implementing effective information systems for tracking, retrieving, and reporting employee data. Colleges and universities can benefit from utilizing many of the same strategies to maximize their effectiveness and competitive edge.

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