

WSP engineers better HR processes with Sage

Summary

The engineering organisation, WSP, has implemented HR software from the Sage HR & Payroll suite, SnowdropKCS, to improve the quality of its employee information; streamline internal communication and reduce administration.

About the organisation

WSP is a provider of multidisciplinary planning, engineering, environmental and management skills and is active in the building, environmental, consultancy, transport and utility infrastructure fields. It is also one of Europe's largest consultants, employing 2500 people in the UK and approximately 6,000 people worldwide.

The case for new HR software

Risk reduction

WSP has separate HR teams, distributed across six operating companies. Its data was previously held in different locations, with an inevitable variance in quality. This was compounded by HR information being held on additional ad hoc spreadsheets that were not linked to its software. Furthermore, separate systems for HR and Payroll data caused inconsistency in information between the two departments.

Inaccurate records meant that HR did not know the fundamentals about its employees, such as their cost and location and consequently took a number of uncomfortable risks. It had uncontrolled absence; non-compliance with HR/HSE regulations; exposure to tribunal claims; loss of property and staff dissatisfaction. One 'leaver' drove off in a WSP company car and it was not returned until a year later when the lease had expired.

Data disparity also led to an inconsistent approach to managing employee relationships. The disjointed nature of HR resulted in poor communication between HR and line managers, whilst senior directors were seen as out of touch with employees. Essentially, WSP was not regarded as an employee-friendly place to work.

WSP chose SnowdropKCS because the application is both flexible and customisable, with a simple interface for easy navigation

Improving process management

As a large organisation, WSP has a lot of movement that needs to be carefully monitored and controlled. In 2003 WSP had 733 starters, 930 movers and 692 leavers, which involved significant administrative costs.

Salary reviews were an intensive annual effort, involving the manual integration of information across six operating companies. In addition, payroll was a monthly, error-prone paper chase, often incurring double entry of information. As with the other processes, it proved to be extremely labour-intensive.

The project vision was thus: "To provide an easy-to-use system that enables effective business & people management, supporting decision-making through the use of accurate employee information."

The new system

WSP initially bought personnel, performance management and self-service modules from the SnowdropKCS software suite. This included an integral reporting tool, containing several hundred standard reports and workflow, an information tool that picks up and delivers information via email. After their successful implementation, WSP bought **SnowdropKCS Training & Development** to add to their suite of HR products.

WSP chose SnowdropKCS because the application is both flexible and customisable, with a simple interface for easy navigation. As a modular solution it fitted with the organisation's implementation plans for ongoing development, to keep up with business growth. Importantly, the modules could seamlessly integrate, appearing on one interface that could be accessed by the whole HR team, regardless of location. This would address the issues of inaccurate or duplicate data.

HR felt that the many administration-reducing tools in SnowdropKCS would be invaluable to WSP in cutting the amount of time spent upon process management. Online functionality was seen as particularly important in empowering staff to maintain their own information, whilst reducing the administrative strain upon HR.

An essential differentiator between Sage and its competitors was its commitment to the project. Sage understood WSP's business structure, demonstrated through a thorough questioning of HR's processes and requirements. Sage also promised efficient implementation.

The combination of a proven track record of satisfied clients, an established internal helpdesk and ongoing support was also of great reassurance to HR. Sophie Ashdown, Project Manager at WSP, felt encouraged by Sage customers, who were "happier" than the other clients she saw. More importantly, Sophie felt that she 'got on with' Sage better than other suppliers, a good indication of the business relationship she could expect to maintain later on.

Implementation

Approach

WSP took an iterative approach to implementation, installing the personnel module first and then rolling out self-service to line managers and employees.

It was important for the organisation to act with caution, as they were aware of resistance from some areas, due to concerns that an HRM system might take away jobs. Following 9/11 the construction industry experienced a significant downturn, with resultant scepticism from employees about any investments that they did not perceive to be directly linked to profit making.

HR was also keen to allay any fears regarding data security. Some people expressed concerns that colleagues other than line managers would be able to view their personal data, or that IT would have unlimited access. Gradual implementation would allow people to get used to the system slowly and help HR to combat these fears. Taking time to sort through the data and get HR trained on the system was also of vital importance. A rushed implementation would only serve to repeat the problems surrounding the previous systems.

Stages of implementation

Employee access to self-service

All employees were given access to their data via the self-service system, re-named 'Opus' by WSP. Rebranding SnowdropKCS as 'Opus' was essential in engaging employees with the new online software. A separate identity was an important part of identifying that the system belonged to them. WSP also held a competition for the name to reinforce that the solution was for employees – giving them ownership.

WSP made sure that Opus was marketed well to employees. Adverts demonstrating the benefits of online access were posted on the intranet, advertising for example, how to book holiday via Opus. Posters were put up on noticeboards, refreshment areas and, most successfully, on the backs of the toilet cubicle doors (a sure fire way to capture staff's attention!). HR also did a series of presentations to all offices, which served to raise its profile and visibility.

Employees could view job, property, holiday entitlement and sickness entitlement details, whilst having the facility to edit, amongst others, address, bank and dependant details. Sophie Ashdown felt that allowing everyone to get to grips with personal data would be a good introduction to the system for line managers, before providing them with extra access.

Later on, WSP introduced an editable area for education, qualifications and professional memberships. The HR team felt that giving access to potentially sensitive data reinforced a key WSP value of 'Trust'. Reports were emailed to line managers by workflow, with qualification updates, to keep them in the loop.

The HR team also began to gather photos for all employees to view on Opus, which fed into the intranet telephone directory.

Line manager and director access to self-service

Line managers and directors were given additional online access. They could view team data including emergency contacts, home telephone number and job details. They also had the facility to authorise absences and view the annual Health & Safety review.

To assist line managers with the administrative side of Opus, an "authoriser" level of access was set up for selected PAs and secretaries. These PAs are copied in on any workflow emails that prompt line managers to authorise leave requests. If the line manager is out of the office or too busy, the "authoriser" can update the employee's absence request on the line manager's behalf.

WSP then updated the 'salary modelling' function that is used by all directors to conduct annual salary reviews and produce salary letters. A new health & safety area was also created to record H&S data and produce cards for site access.

In the final stages of the self-service roll-out, holiday booking and online authorisation were enabled. All absences can now be booked and recorded online, including sickness, paternal leave and compassionate leave.

'Be realistic and honest with your HR teams, but also be firm. Sometimes you have to say "No". It's an HR system, but it won't make you a cup of tea.'

Sophie Ashdown, Project Manager for WSP

Benefits since implementation

Since implementing the new system, WSP has experienced a number of tangible business benefits, particularly with regards to process management and data integrity, including:

- One source of accurate and consistent employee data
- Streamlined processes between the HR teams
- Hugely improved starter / leaver processes
- Instant notification to appropriate staff of employee changes
- Much better management and retrieval of company property
- Provision of statistical employee information required for bids
- Assistance in the production of management reports.
- Meeting HR legislation requirements
- Online absence authorisation, reducing the paper trail and improving authorisation times
- Assistance in restructuring: employees all assigned to a specific HR contact, which has added to the new personal approach

A major benefit of the new system is the reduction in the average number of "Sickies", through visibility of absence for both line managers and employees. People can now see how all their odd little absences stack up, making them aware of how their sickness appears.

The new system has also tackled the problem of employee relationship management head-on, with the effect of significantly improving communication between HR, managers and employees. The new system has:

- Raised the profile of HR in the organisation
- Ensured employees get a more personal service from HR
- Empowered employees through control over personal information
- Empowered line managers, who no longer have to go to HR to retrieve basic information
- Provided a means of putting names to faces
- Improved communication between operating companies and offices
- Made sure that employees feel that WSP is taking better care of them

A major benefit of the new system is the reduction in the average number of "Sickies", through visibility of absence for both line managers and employees

Future plans

The next step for WSP is to roll out the online part of the training & development module, enabling online booking, authorisation and training management. WSP has a 'university' of courses, for employees to book online. Previously employees failed to follow up appraisals with training booking, resulting in an average spend of only 40% of a department's training budget. With online access WSP is hoping to move this closer to 100%.

There was also an increasing trend for employees to not show up for internal training courses or cancel at the last minute, wasting time and money for the trainers. However this trend is now being reversed as the training & development module tracks any "no-shows" or "last-minute cancellers" who are then reported to the Executive Committee every month.

Opus is already linked to WSP's accounting system; Customer Relationship Management system; Purchase Ordering software; IT Helpdesk system; CV Database and intranet telephone directory. But there are further plans to link Opus to HR systems in other WSP regions. Eventually WSP plans to have one source of employee data for all of its 6000+ staff worldwide.

Key lessons learned

Rolling out an HR system is a complex process, requiring commitment from both supplier and customer. Sophie Ashdown gives the following advice to HR teams looking to implement a system.

- Consult with all areas of your business
- Make sure your software supplier understands your business and the goals of your project
- Define the functional limits of the application to manage expectations
- Allow plenty of time for testing and piloting
- Specify and build your reports early
- Market the application internally
- Implement in small chunks
- Make sure the data is accurate before releasing to employees
- Re-brand and customise the application visually
- Don't underestimate the power of communication

Sophie says: 'Be realistic and honest with your HR teams, but also be firm. Sometimes you have to say "No". It's an HR system, but it won't make you a cup of tea.'