

Leveraging SharePoint as the Framework for your Human Resources Portal

By Michelle Grant, Enwisen

Your organization has made a substantial investment in Microsoft SharePoint – an excellent tool for sharing documents, collaborating within groups and tracking workflow on projects. You are not alone. SharePoint is the fastest growing product in Microsoft's history and is used by 78 percent of *Fortune 500* companies. Between 2006 and 2011, Microsoft sold over 36.5 million user licenses.

Microsoft's self-stated agenda for SharePoint is: *"...to become the single point for all information aggregation, search and collaboration in your organization."* – Steve Ballmer, CEO

Aggregation, without proper organization and control, can become very chaotic, very quickly. By definition, an aggregation is a group or mass of distinct or varied things, all held in the same location. Within your company's SharePoint implementation, users may be able to provision shared and private sites with no requirement for specialized knowledge. This means that all who have access to SharePoint in your infrastructure potentially have the ability to set up blogs, wikis, document shares and create lists and libraries. The creation, maintenance, and governance of a SharePoint site can quickly become unwieldy. At that point, the initiative to empower employees to help themselves in an HR self-service environment may be overpowered by the chaos of the environment itself, placing more demand on your HR organization.

Seven Reasons Why HR/HRIS, not Corporate IT, Needs to Drive HR's SharePoint Business Strategy

Generally, it is your Corporate IT department that initially implements and supports SharePoint. Once SharePoint has been established within your organization, your executive management team and Corporate IT department will most likely take on the buy-versus-build question in order to maximize their SharePoint investment. In other words, if there is a business requirement that SharePoint can address, you'd better have an excellent business case for not going with SharePoint, if you believe a different solution will be better!

In addition to sharing documents, collaborating within groups and tracking workflow, your company SharePoint initiative may be to create business applications to support all internal processes and data within your organization, whether that is supply chain management, customer satisfaction tracking, or creating applications to support your HR needs.

As SharePoint deployments grow across the enterprise, your organization may now be facing the new challenge of using a horizontal data management system, available to all users across the enterprise, to host the applications used in your specific vertical line of business, like HR self-service applications. While the idea of collaborating on documents and projects in a shared environment is enticing, hosting HR data in the same environment can become worrisome. Managing HR data and processes in an aggregated environment in applications built by corporate IT does not guarantee privacy and is not sustainable.

This need for data security, privacy, and maintenance brings the realization that SharePoint may not answer 100 percent of your HR self-service needs. It can, however, provide a valuable framework and offer tools to wrap and deliver your existing HR self-service applications and content.

SharePoint's key strength is that it's a flexible tool to meet a wide variety of corporate portal needs consistently and across the enterprise. But, when it comes to HR's needs, here are seven reasons why HR and the HRIS, not Corporate IT, need to drive HR portal strategy:

1. Human Resources content is often the most complex in an organization, because it is difficult to create, maintain, organize and secure.
2. Human Resources content often "lives" in several applications. Determining which of those applications is the "system of record" serving up appropriate data – or which applications need integrating to accomplish this – is a decision that belongs with HR.
3. Human Resources understands how critical it is for employees to find pertinent content in relation to transactions if the portal is to be used effectively.

- Getting relevant search results is key – SharePoint search within an HR knowledge base needs to be HR-directed.
- Personalizing content for pre-determined employee groups will also ensure effective utilization of the portal.
- Availability 24/7, outside the firewall, when most employees need it is a growing concern. With the right configuration, HR can achieve this.
- Beyond the enormous effort in launching HR apps, HR knows the larger project comes in maintaining content and functionality – this is not typically Corporate IT’s “forte.”

Filling the Gap between SharePoint’s Capabilities and HR’s Needs

As your organization recognizes the gap between what SharePoint can offer and what you need in order to serve your employees and offer self-service options, you must then consider options not only to mind the gap, but also create permanent solutions that will work in the near term and going forward. You don’t need tape and glue; you need a concrete, sustainable solution. In these cases, your options will be to:

- Write custom code in SharePoint and then assign Corporate IT and HR/HRIS resources to keep the applications and content current, compliant and documented.
- Engage a third-party consultancy firm to build your applications and content repository, and train IT and HR staff to keep the applications and content current, compliant and documented.
- Integrate hosted third-party applications delivered with HR-specific content that is maintained either by your HR resources or by provider resources.

That being said, don’t be discouraged. Your organization is on the right track. It is possible to leverage your company’s growing SharePoint footprint while simultaneously assuring that your team and your employees get personalized and secure HR service through your HR portal. Most importantly, it is advantageous to use SharePoint as the portal framework to wrap your HR self-service applications and content for better HR self-service results. It is the combined function of these complimentary solutions that adds value to your organization and provides the tools necessary to support employees:

What Employers Want:	What Employees Want:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A portal employees will use A portal that is easy to maintain Leveraged SharePoint investment Up-to-date HR information Content managed by subject matter experts Security maintained by appropriate HR personnel Reduced impact on IT, HR, HRIS resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answers in 2-clicks or less One source search Available outside firewall Intuitive, in context to transactions Personalized – system knows user role, location Comparable to the users’ consumer-grade experience, i.e. Amazon

The next obvious question is, how can you combine the flexibility of SharePoint with an HR self-service model; enabling ease of access, reducing costs, and increasing employee satisfaction by resolving the majority of employee questions by the employee themselves, or upon the initial contact with HR?

With HR business applications, especially self-service applications where most matters are handled by the employee, SharePoint alone may not be the best choice. But, SharePoint is a robust platform perfect for delivering HR self-service solutions.

Basically, you want a portal framework with an HR service delivery application and content, designed by HR practitioners and subject matter experts – one that is updated and maintained by subject matter experts who are keeping in mind benefits and best practices and the support of strategic HR transformation initiatives.

The Advantages of SharePoint with an HR Knowledge Base

A combination of a corporate SharePoint portal and hosted HR applications can offer IT and HR the best of both worlds: a portal that is easy to maintain by IT/HRIS and applications that offer employees best practices, personalization, and content they would expect to see from their HR systems, all while being maintained by a third party.

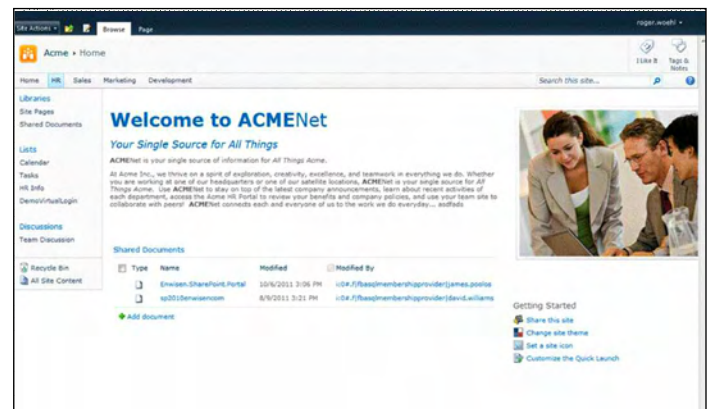


Figure 1. Employee Portal Built Using SharePoint.

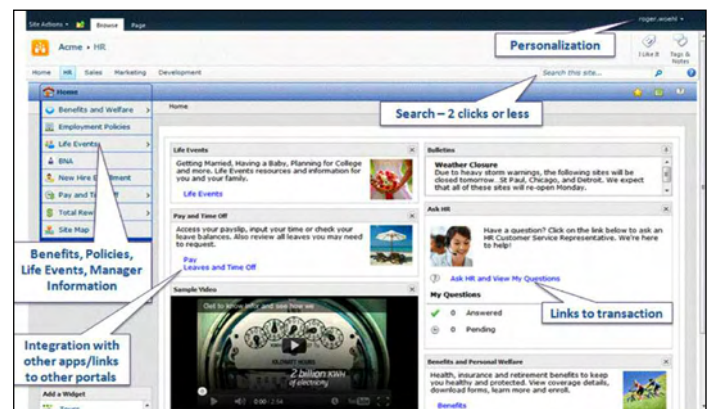


Figure 2. Third-Party HR Business Application Hosted in SharePoint.

In the example screens shots (Figures 1 and 2), the advantages of using a third-party Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) application becomes clearer, including:

- **Full-service hosted solutions provide quick access to significant functionality without adding head count in HR or IT**

Most hosted HR business solutions provide current technology combined with full-service configuration and integrated best practices. For you, this means HR/benefits and technology experts on staff are at your disposal when you need them, considerably reducing the impact on your HR and IT departments. Additionally, SaaS environments are supported in a hosting facility with staff specifically designated to support the environment, alleviating further dependence on your corporate IT department with a wide variety of projects.

- **Solutions specific to HR transformation**

Carefully selected hosted business applications are highly optimized to the unique needs of HR. All processes and tools support the core need to optimize HR service delivery.

- **Extensive functionality not available in-house**

Hosted solutions provide numerous capabilities not available with in-house solutions. These would either have to be purchased separately or forgone, including deep-linked content in context with transactions. As an example, an employee planning an addition to his or her family through pregnancy or adoption could search “adding a family member” and not only be given access to only those benefits that he or she is enrolled in or entitled to, but provided with links to related inquiries, forms and self-service, including adoption assistance, Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) policies, short-term disability policies and forms, steps for adding a dependent and more. Or, another example could include, depending on configuration, making the HR knowledge base and transactions available outside the corporate firewall, so employees can evaluate important HR/benefits decisions with other family members outside of the enterprise.

- **Delivered integrations**

Hosted solutions have an investment in delivering a certified integration to other HR systems’ providers. The integration provides a dynamic passing of indicative data to personalize the site, along with hundreds of pre-mapped integration touch points.

- **Strong HR user community with ongoing research and development (R&D)**

Many SaaS solutions represent years of R&D investment and the collective feedback of hundreds of world-class customers. Additionally, third-party applications usually come with user groups and educational conferences, which can help you leverage the experience of other users.

Using a hosted solution can ensure that your Share-Point investment is leveraged, your employees get the ease-of-use of a well-organized intuitive self-service solution, and your HR department gets the assurance that the hosted applications represent current and reliable data.

HR Need	Corporate Portal – Resources Required	Hosted 3rd Party Business Applications – Resources Required
HR applications manager to evaluate appropriate business applications	Programmer + Web Designer + HR Subject Matter Expert + HRIS for Security	Hosted HR applications contain best practices and predefined content, existing HR/HRIS team will suffice
Graphic design	Web Designer	Design included in HR business applications
Information architecture	Programmer + Web Designer + HR Subject Matter Expert	Pre-built site structure and navigation – including usability research and customer input
Group filtering and personalization	Programmer + HR Subject Matter Expert + HRIS for Security	Pre-built and configured group rules based on inherent HRIS data ensure employees see only info pertinent to them
Search engine meta tags and optimization	Programmer	Pre-built search optimized for HR inquiries ensures that employees get answers to inquiries in two clicks or less – lack of good search results is the number one reason corporate portals are abandoned
Intuitive interlinking/relational cross-linking between applications	Programmer + Web Designer + HR Subject Matter Expert	Delivered cross-links and user friendly interface for HR to build company-specific links
Content development and loading	HR and Content Subject Matter Experts + Programmer	Original HR content set up in delivered application and imported into predefined tables/fields by application implementation team as part of implementation
Benefits plan comparison	Benefits SME and third-party calculator and/or Programmer	Automated business application versus custom programming of multiple comparison charts by group
Medical cost estimator, including healthcare data	Benefits SME and third-party Calculator and/or Programmer	Dynamic calculators are usually pre-built and configured to help employees make informed benefits decisions – significantly reduces calls to Benefits and HR
Medical cost data	Benefits SME or third-party Purchase	Included in some HR business Solutions
Life events construction	Programmer + Web Designer + HR Subject Matter Expert	Business application with pre-built life events and the ability for HR to add their own through friendly user interface
Extranet/VPN access for employees and dependents outside corporate firewall	Third-party Purchase	Business application access control
Manager/HR professional content for events such as hire/terminate/review	HR Subject Matter Expert + Programmer and/or third-party Purchase	Predefined and preloaded data often included in business applications
Site statistics and analytics with group filters	Programmer + Web Designer	Pre-built dashboards often included
Single sign-on integration with all back-end HR transactional and record systems	HR Subject Matter Expert + Programmer	Pre-built and provided – increasing portal usage via a single point of access
QA and testing	Analyst	Managed by business application provider
HRMS data integration	Programmer + HR Subject Matter Expert+ HRIS for Security	Pre-built integrations with major HRMS often included – allows employees to complete transactions in same session as information inquiry and decision support

Getting Buy-In from Executive Management and Corporate IT

Let’s face it, no matter if they process accounts payable, answer incoming calls, process orders, or have face-to-face time with customers, the most important data to employees is their own personal HR data. When it comes to HR applications, employees want answers quickly and easily and without third-party intervention. You know this is true, but how do you sell that to your Executive and Corporate IT teams?

Happy employees go a long way with these teams, as well as the argument of retention of a company's most valuable assets – its workforce. However, it is often the case that a company stops looking at what is best for their workforce and starts looking at the dollars and cents for these efforts. Then, it is up to the HR team to provide proof with information that supports the company's initiatives and provides the ideal approach.

Where Do You Go From Here?

The HR information managed and processed by HR business applications – including employer policies and legal compliance, employee benefits and personal information – is complex to identify, evaluate and implement. Beyond that initial “cleaning and loading,” ongoing efforts are necessary to keep the content current and in line with best practices. The majority of this data is also time sensitive, and requires additional levels of security to maintain and distribute. Rather than depending heavily on the IT department to enhance and maintain an HR business application and HR data, evaluate to see what a third-party SaaS application can do for you.

Contemplate the following when evaluating hosted HR business applications to fit within your SharePoint framework:

- Make sure the application hosts content that is relevant to your needs.
- Select an application that is aligned with your business processes.
- Review information architecture and search optimization.
- Analyze the application's impact on IT, HRIS and HR resources.
- Review pre-built HR content – such as regulatory, life events, calculators, etc.
- Assess configurability for your specific applications with pre-built templates.

- Evaluate the level at which HR can design and personalize all content.
- Invest in an application with ongoing research and development, including leveraging extensive best practices from an extensive user community and staff of subject matter experts.
- Confirm that the solution leverages application partnerships with all major HRMS and self-service vendors.

If an HR portal is to be a powerful tool for your HR organization, then the content delivered to the portal should come from subject matter experts. It should be organized and relevant and maintained by people who understand the importance of HR content. It should also be easy for employees to access. If an HR portal is to be employee friendly, information has to be personalized, searchable, in context to transactions where applicable, available outside of the corporate firewall, and easily accessed in two clicks or less.

Without these considerations, employees will abandon the portal and call HR – resulting in increased costs and lower satisfaction. But, the integration of hosted HR solutions into your SharePoint framework is a cost-effective way to maximize your SharePoint investment and enrich the user experience. In other words, provide better HR service delivery.

About the Author

Michelle Grant's HR technology perspective is driven by years of customer insight, competitive experience, and product expertise in the evolving field of HR technology. She is an HR service delivery expert at Enwisen, with 20 years of expertise and a strong customer perspective that informs her writing. She can be reached at [**Michelle.Grant@us.Lawson.com**](mailto:Michelle.Grant@us.Lawson.com).