



## HRIS: The Invisible Linchpin

By Rich Berger, HRIP, SPHR, Citrix Systems

What makes HRIS an “invisible linchpin?” Let’s start off with some quick Wikipedia definitions:

1. **Linchpin** – Fastener used to prevent a wheel or other part from sliding off the axle upon which it is riding. The word “linchpin” is also used figuratively to mean “something [or someone] that holds the various elements of a complicated structure together.”
2. **Invisibility** – The state of an object that cannot be seen. An object in this state is said to be invisible (literally, “not visible”). The term is often used in fantasy/science fiction, where *objects are literally made unseeable by magical or technological means...*

While we are not magicians, human resources information systems (HRIS) professionals bring together different skills and competencies in such a way as to achieve magical outcomes. We will look at how we can claim our role as a Human Resources’ linchpin and, at the same time, move ourselves from organizational invisibility into the light of day.

Let’s look at visibility. One gains visibility and adds value by actually providing measurable deliverables on schedule. This is a simple statement to make, yet one that is very complex to deliver. To meet the goal, the HRIS professional needs to be able to be a project manager, a metrics professional, a politician, and a technocrat all at once.

Almost every activity that HR works on today has a technological component. Think of the parts of an employee life cycle: attract, hire, onboard, retain/manage talent, offboard – even in small organizations, the ability to successfully complete each process requires various levels of technology. Start each activity by developing a plan – even for short projects. Who is the requestor and who is the sponsor? What skills are needed to complete the task? Who are the people that have the subject matter expertise? Do they have the time to participate, and does their manager approve of this? With these questions as your framework, you will be

able to develop a credible plan and obtain sponsorship and support.

### Does HRIS have a “seat at the table?”

Human Resources Information Systems is the glue embedded in a process as it moves from concept to execution and ongoing use. Without proper HRIS presence, even the best-designed solutions may not be executed in a way that is successful. As you build visibility, your work is outside HR, as well as inside. Some examples of how HRIS can bring together disparate groups are:

- **Employee recognition** – It is important to have a process that matches your company culture and provides an environment for recognition and potential rewards. This means you need employee data and organizational structures right alongside the business goals of “why recognize?” Input from HR and managers will help to build the specifications and the solution.
- **Facilities management** – While not seen as an HR activity, this is very dependent on data that HRIS can provide. Standard definitions, agreed to timing, and flexibility to adapt to changes mean that the HRIS team must understand the needs of the facilities team and be able to influence the use of source systems (not spreadsheets), which are maintained as part of the normal daily business life. The ability to form partnerships helps to develop creative solutions.
- **Legal compliance** – Governments have regulations with which a company must comply. Some, which are focused on the employee (code of conduct, medical certifications, privacy, etc.), need to have a robust set of employee data along with a learning management system to be able to easily assign and track progress. Other compliance activities are cyclical and require time-management skills to deliver (and to avoid costly government penalties). Pay attention to those cycles and team up with your legal experts to be proactive in this area.
- **Workforce planning** – This is one of many areas where HR and Finance intersect. Here, the ability to have solid definitions and business rules is paramount. While Finance may want to have budgeted heads or future targets or even contingent workers in their counts, HR looks at the regular workers and perhaps contractors. Without HRIS pushing for agreement on definitions, rules, timing and naming, we see that meetings where people are discussed devolve into “my number is three different than yours...where did yours come from?” This deflects everyone from the real business issues at hand. Be sure you reach an agreement on what is called “head count” – the skill you need here is the ability to manage executive sponsors from various departments,

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which have different business drivers. Once you come to an agreement, then you free up time to focus on the problems/opportunities afforded by workforce change.

Does your HR, Finance, IT or line organization “forget” to include you until it is the last minute and everything is designed? Do you feel that you have no choice but to say “yes” and figure out how to implement? Then, what you need is the ability to be more vocal and visible. Project management skills come into play:

- Create a set of operating principles that have senior executive sponsorship. This represents your governance model to use to escalate and determine a request’s real priority.
- Come to an agreement on ownership of data and where is the “single source of the truth.”
- Have a defined playbook on how to engage with other departments – use this when others are needed on projects, as well as when HRIS is asked to be on other team projects.
- Use planning and organizational skills to help you to take that step back and evaluate the scope of the request and when it will best fit into the calendar to be completed. Just because a team forgot to do something until the last minute does not make it an emergency for HRIS to solve. In actuality, jumping to a quick solution could solve the short-term need, while creating a long-term issue.

Let’s look at an example. The Sales team has been developing sales analytics for six months. They are about to go live and want to do productivity measures. When a sales team wants to be able to look at productivity, they need both the sales figures, as well as accurate people data. Unfortunately, Sales didn’t include HRIS in the project at the onset. They made the assumption that people data would be available (even though from a non-authoritative source), and focused inward on their project goals. When HRIS becomes involved it has to ask the questions such as:

- What is the accuracy of the source?
- Is data accessible?
- Is it for the same time period as the sales data?
- Do these metrics exist somewhere else – even if they are not 100 percent aligned, can they be used in the interim while full design takes place?
- What activities are needed to align, who works on them and when?

The better way: Sales would have included HRIS early. Together, they would have identified their people data and process needs, who would be able to complete the work, and when it could be scheduled.

## Listen to the voice of the customer.

Leveraging project management only gets you so far. Human Resources Information Systems expertise should include design thinking (empathize, define, ideate, prototype,

test, iterate) in order to influence products that will be used by your workforce. It is important to show the value that comes from involving the customer/end user early and often in the process. Users, in fact, our most vocal and/or radical users, are the best source of redesign ideas. Through design thinking (see <https://dschool.stanford.edu/dgift/> for more information), we can demonstrate leadership and align our solutions to the needs of the customers.

If we are looking at a major project, such as replacing all of your HR technology, the key to success is “casting a wide net” to include non-HR teams along with a full representation of your HR structure – local and worldwide. Human Resources transactions impact Finance and financial structures impact HR – therefore, both of these departments need to be considered in the project. Explain the project through “road shows,” which can be live or recorded. Allow for input from people who are not on the project team; in fact, allow as much time for listening to feedback as you spend presenting. Make the vision, plans, status and all questions/comments transparent and visible across the organization – fact is, the larger the project, the greater the need for two-way sharing.

Here’s another example:

Data mining involves partnerships with Finance, Sales, HR and IT. Human Resources data is at the core of “big data” opportunities. Having each function focus on its own silo misses the common denominator of people information. This leads to solutions that are technologically sound, yet are lacking in the richness, which comes from multiple internal and external sources.

To collect the voice of the customer, look at tools such as surveys or social sites to collect feedback. The survey results can be used to justify qualitative return on investment (ROI) for projects. Use techniques such as face-to-face interviews (in-person or via GoToMeeting®) along with anonymous survey tools to gather your results. Create the strategic statement based on this input. Expand that into simple, one-word principles. And finally, provide measures that can be used to judge your project’s success.

With your strategy in hand, you create the story that can show the connections that sometimes only HRIS sees. For example, you could have a set of users who say: “The systems have not changed in 10 years.” Or, some users might say, “Without HRIS, I feel a little ill – and not just because we’d spend all our time filing paperwork.” It is your role to take these potentially opposite views and determine what audiences they represent and how each of these pieces of feedback can make your solution richer. The output could look like this:

- **Strategy** – Update our HR technology to make information available when and where needed;
- **Principles** – Self-service; modern/mobile; automated;
- **Look/feel** – Simple processes that are aligned; single data entry closest to the source/owner; and,
- **Measures** – 90 percent of all transactions will be completed via self-service; 98 percent of all new hires will use a mobile device/smartphone to apply for open positions.

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## It's all about behaviors.

We've seen the impact of process and design, yet that's still not enough. People on your team bring the final piece of the puzzle. Knowing your strengths, those of your HRIS team, and those of the people you work with enables you to better plan and influence the outcomes. Selecting the right people to form a cohesive team comes down to knowledge and behaviors. It is straightforward to determine the technical skills you need for your project team, and to source people with those skills. The difficulty comes in determining the types of people, based on behaviors, that can work together to accomplish the goals.

Here's an example:

Your project core team is made up of six people – two are HRIS and one is IT; these three know the technology. Two are from HR and know the current processes, and one is a subject matter expert from an affected department.

- The technology people are “rapid responders” – their natural behavior is to react quickly, think through the problem and come back with solutions. They then use e-mail to send out their ideas and expect responses back from the rest of the team immediately.
- The other team members are more “deliberate” in their behaviors, and they take time to consider not only the solutions presented, but other ideas as well. They want more time to study the process and look at the impact to their constituents.
- What happens is that the rapid responders expect their counterparts to immediately react, and they feel that roadblocks are being put in their path. Frustration starts to rise. On the other hand, the deliberate members of the team feel that they are being harassed by the e-mails and pressured to make a decision that might have future implications. Productivity suffers, and team cohesiveness begins to falter.

To avoid this conflict, try to understand the natural tendencies and behaviors of your team members. Hold a session with the team and talk about each person's style and how the team will work together. Share your thoughts, and then build a team internal governance model. Ensure that you create a safe environment so that members can raise concerns based on the project and not based on personalities. This is not an easy task, but one that is vital to the “magic” that can come from a well-oiled team.

## Remember these five keys to success.

As you look at all that you do on a daily basis, keep in mind that you are in control of your destiny. Here are five ways:

1. **Awareness** – Know your skills and those of the HR people you work with. Leverage technology and explain it in a way that enables others understand what it can do.
2. **Empathy** – Just because you can see the bigger picture of technology-enabled processes, your HR and line clients don't necessarily have that skill. Take the time to listen to what they envision and to incorporate into your design. Help to bring people along at a pace that is

comfortable to them.

3. **Creativity** – Even when implementing cloud packages, it is the role of the HRIS professional to find new ways to incorporate the requirements into the solution. Follow your instincts, and look at new ways to solve old problems.
4. **Partnership** – Work not only with your vendor/IT organization, but also with HR and end users. Partner early and often to be a change leader.
5. **Small wins** – Trying to get everything done at once creates more stress. Working on identified pieces and delivering them leads to credibility.

## HRIS is the invisible linchpin.

Human Resources Information Systems is the foundation that underpins the pillars of today's HR organization. The profession is relatively new and HR and IT people are still learning its capabilities. Be a visible, positive force for change that ties together extremely complex structures both organizationally and technically.

Know that changing your own behavior is difficult and changing the behavior of others is nearly impossible. With this in mind, be up-front about the project and personal goals and how you will achieve them. Keep lines of communication open even when there is little time. Focus on the outcomes and how these will benefit the most people.

Learning from some of these examples will allow you to increase the visibility and importance of HRIS as a key component of HR and will provide your company, your team and you with immense benefits.

## About the Author



Rich Berger, HRIP, SPHR, has more than 35 years of experience as a practitioner and thought leader in HR and HR technology and currently serves as the group director of Global HRIS & Metrics at Citrix Systems in Fort Lauderdale, Florida where he is responsible for HRIS strategy, metrics and analytics, and HR technology for employees. He previously was employed as the vice president of HR Transition and Transformation at Affiliated Computer Services (a Xerox company), as well as the director of Core Process Redesign at Motorola, Inc. He was awarded the IHRIM Summit award in 2013 and has been an IHRIM member since 1993. He was on the board of the Midwest Chapter, the CFO for Florida Sun, and on the international board for seven years in two terms. He was one of the founding members of Global Special Interest Group and started the successful global forum conferences. In addition, he has worked with the committee that became the workforce analytics committee. He is a frequent speaker at major conferences and his writing has been published in industry magazines, journals and books. He holds a B.S. from the University of Massachusetts/Amherst, and an MBA with a concentration in HR from Western New England University. He can be reached at [richard.berger@citrix.com](mailto:richard.berger@citrix.com).