



Creating a Consumer-Oriented HR Platform for Global Communication

By Chris Keys, Towers Watson

For many years in HR we have focused on standardizing processes, and then standardizing global processes. Of course, we take a strategic and thoughtful approach – determining which processes are business-specific and should remain so, which can be centralized versus executed locally, how mechanisms can be introduced to identify bottlenecks and improve services, and so on. However, when it comes to communication, we often default to established practices of drafting, version control, publication and distribution. We may begin to address global issues to an extent by having some content translated into local languages, which may make the finalizing of content – usually at the last minute – even more frenzied than usual. But, everyone understands that “we just have to get it done.”

Why is it that we undertake all sorts of planning efforts when it comes to processes, but fail to take a similarly thoughtful

approach when it comes to communication, a fundamental pillar of HR? Despite the fact that we spend an inordinate amount of time drafting and socializing, finalizing, translating, and distributing messages around the world, why do we often overlook this first step, which is so critical to the development of effective, global HR communication?

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The Content/Engagement Conundrum

For many years, we have bought into the idea of sticky content – we create Web

content that draws people back to our “site” to ensure a sustained viewing rate, and in so doing, users will see what we feel is important. In some instances, perhaps the user is permitted to decide what content takes precedence, or how to organize their digital world to some degree based on the content flavor of the month. While the principle of sticky content still holds to a certain degree today, the modern consumer has redefined the notion of what is sticky. We have a new word for it now – engagement.

Consumers engage with content in different ways. At one end of the spectrum is the consumer who wants to be interactive, learning through almost tactile interaction, yet with embedded subliminal messages. At the other is the chapter and verse policy guru who can parse out the inner depths of cross-document dependencies and workflows. Do we then also have to cater to the masses in the middle, or is there a medium that cuts through the clutter?

There are many types of media at our disposal today, even in HR! We have the trusty magazine and the printed page, along with its digital partner the eMag. There is the lights/camera/action C-suite headliner video, as well as the almost-now-acceptable webcam stream. We have a preponderance of white board videos with targeted educational and awareness material, alongside games and puzzles to engage the cortex and make learning fun. However, the key to success is to choose the appropriate media and messaging for the right population and, at the same time, ensure that employees are not being distracted by HR issues.

There are some indicators that can help us better understand employee information needs based on their level of technical sophistication and behavior. How many of your workforce are in line when a certain new device hits the shelves? How many calls to the service desk are about passwords, where the post-it note has blown off the desk and vanished into thin air?

Getting the right message to the right population, however, runs the risk of requiring a small army. We face the challenge of knowing that we need to think globally while connecting locally, yet drafting and approving, and hoping the onward translations and distribution of content are both effective and accurate, *and something that* raises the pulse just a little more each time. Enter the infamous “portal.”

Portals, Intranets and Policies – Oh My!

Ten people will define a portal in 10 different ways. Everyone has a portal these days – an HR portal, wellness portal, rewards portal, benefits portal, retirement portal, new hire portal, recruiting portal, and so on. These portals all share some common features and functionality, but to truly support global HR, a portal must provide a few essential elements.

- **Easy access** – Embarking on an endeavor to establish a single starting point for all things HR first involves making the site easy to access. After years of challenges in this regard, some organizations have opted to make a surprisingly large amount of HR content available on their public website, thus avoiding password problems. In these situations, organizations should certainly discuss how to best balance the ease of access with the potential disclosure of competitive information. However, there is good news on the ease-of-access front. Now, more than ever, we are seeing the emergence of mature identity-management solutions and federated authentication services.

In a nut shell, even if a user is on the Internet, it is now feasible, acceptable, and becoming preferred to have your own IT organization be the one to prompt for network credentials and then grant access to HR solutions. And yes, in cases where those solutions are hosted by partners and providers, you should ask these third parties when they will support service-provider-initiated single sign-on.

- **Personalized experience** – For a moment, let us define a portal as a combination of both content and data. With this definition, a consumer-oriented portal serves up the contextually correct information to the user based on available data. A global HR portal, therefore, is most effective when information presented is relevant to the individual based on employment status, region and country, tenure (hire date, retirement eligibility date), program eligibility, plan participation, role (employee, manager, executive, people leader), and more. By way of an example: an end user accessing an HR portal could be greeted with manager news and calls to action based on having a new hire coming on board, be educated about a change in policy by virtue of being a participant in a certain program, and see that the regional HR offsite is on the calendar for next quarter based on being a member of the HR community.
- **Data component** – There is always a temptation to find every data element for every HR discipline in every system around the globe, but oftentimes this boil-the-ocean approach will stall and stagnate rather quickly. Rather, it is best to identify what data should be emphasized and ensure it is readily available. For instance, a benefit-eligible employee in the U.S. may be continually focused on the balance of a health savings account, while a line coordinator may be focused on a time-off balance. Neither really needs a

virtual HR data warehouse in the sky if, indeed, seamless access to authoritative systems is also readily available.

- **One-stop-shopping** – Is this phrase over-used yet? Perhaps, but similar to sticky content, the definition may well be changing. We have all lived through – or continue to experience – the proverbial link farm, where one-stop-shopping means a page of somewhat organized links to other online resources. However, a modern era HR portal includes a wealth of content within the portal, whereby searching for information quickly returns a set of results and follow-up filter capabilities akin to the Internet search experience. Search results should not be exclusively based on the author’s ability to maintain “tags” (and then re-tag, and then re-tag...), but should be based on actual text contained in .pdf files, office documents, Web pages, brochures, policies, and more. Extending search across multiple online resources has been hailed as providing the ultimate consumer experience, and is now becoming more feasible and more reliable across both internal and external service providers.

How to Balance the Balancing Act

As we look around the globe, and as the notion of global HR content evolves, there is a fine balance between centralized command and control and what we endearingly call content anarchy. If we are fortunate enough to have an army of authors, then we

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need to focus on process and training to ensure consistency of format, structure, and overall usability. On the other hand, if a few individuals are expected to maintain content globally, this oftentimes results in a failure to sustain. Then, additional online sources and, especially, in-country supplements begin to pop up

to plug the gaps. A multi-layered governance model and content partnership across centers of excellence, supported by the right portal technology mitigates this challenge.

In the HR domain, some content is indeed truly global. Consider compensation philosophy, high-level total rewards messaging, global mobility programs, leadership communication, recruitment, and more. This list expands as we circumnavigate the globe and work on standardization and alignment. Having a limited group of employees assigned to maintain such content centrally and to make it available in multiple languages helps mitigate the risk of having error-prone variations slip in during translation and dissemination.

Moving on from global content, regional or local country content should be managed by in-region resources or designated regional owners. This regional content might be maintained in a few languages based on consumer needs, with regional versus global approvals for publishing content. In turn, the online experience should offer an integrated view of some globally-managed and some regionally-managed information, presented in a consumer-oriented fashion independent of our classic HR organizational silos and in the preferred language.

There is another level of governance that is equally important for sustaining engagement and use of the portal. In addition to content governance, there is also the need for governance of the portal itself. A partnership of senior HR leaders charged with keeping true to the original vision of the portal is critical to success over time. This body, which should meet regularly, serves to both react to big picture ideas and proactively ensure communications around the world are in alignment with the portal vision. For example, when the ideas of using the portal as a means for employees to compare notes on their self-diagnosed medication conditions bubbles up to the content governance team, the team will validate that suggestion against the charter for the HR portal as a whole. Conversely, should the team learn of an expensive program promotion at the country level that has circumvented the portal governance pro-

cess, this group will review the situation and course-correct as necessary.

This idea of both portal governance, as well as content governance, enables an organization to fully leverage the HR portal not only as an on-demand information resource but also as a true ongoing communication and change channel. The aforementioned churn of drafting and socializing, finalizing, translating, and distributing is very much streamlined with shared authoring and publishing, positioning the portal as a tool that helps organizations prepare for change, communicate during the change, and press those other levers of transformation. Being able to prepare content for online dissemination, but which goes live only when you are ready, further supports content governance and timely publishing.

Effective portal technology enables organizations to manage many types of HR content without the need to turn to expert IT resources. Such technology offers more than page layout support, and allows for the creation of Web pages, articles, plan documents, policies, brochures, and guides with different functionality and features including videos and graphics.

Holding Hands

Consumers of HR information often need an outlet that provides further clarification or interpretation of content. Ideally, of course, a quick search should lead to the sought-after information, thus avoiding the need for further in-person follow-up and curtailing service costs. But, as we know, not all consumers are good at fishing for themselves. An effective portal makes it easy to identify how to get help. This might involve making use of an online case management solution depending

on the region of the world with which the user is associated, or directing the user to the local HR business partner. In either case, the servicing entity also needs ready access to tools to complement those provided by the portal. Whereas the consumer is served up personalized content and information, the support personnel needs access to more broad-based information to support a range of different consumers. One emerging approach is to allow the support agents (for want of a better description) to see exactly what the consumer is seeing while giving them access to a supplemental information store containing exception processes, instructions, etc. In this way, the consumer-facing portal can contain all content structured for readability, findability, personalization, and ease of consumption, while the information store for agents is streamlined for efficiency, cross-organization navigation and rapid updating.

Bringing It All Together

Technology platforms, specifically HR portals designed to provide a rich online experience, now support sought-after content creation processes that enable both global governance and local ownership. By selecting a portal technology that delivers a superior consumer experience and equipping support personnel with the right tools, HR can create a sustainable communication platform that presents an integrated and personalized view of “all things HR.”

About the Author



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