

HR Executives making more of technology

North American HR executives are increasing their commitment to talent management and the HR technology supporting it, according to Towers Watson, the global professional services company. Their 13th annual survey of HR service delivery trends and practices found that human resource departments are more confident than ever in the value and efficiency resulting from enhanced talent management systems.

42 per cent of the 456 organizations surveyed listed 'talent/performance systems' among their top three HR service delivery issues for 2010. In fact, this was the most frequently selected issue identified by respondents and ranked highest as top issue by the greatest margin ever seen in the history of the survey. 51 per cent of the organizations involved classified themselves as multinational/global companies and almost two-thirds (64 per cent) had more than 5,000 employees.

The most critical HR service delivery issues for 2010 identified in the survey were:

- Talent/performance management systems (42 per cent compared with 35 per cent in 2009)
- Streamlining processes/systems (35 per cent - no change from 2009)
- Increased involvement in strategic business-driven issues (27 per cent, up from 23 per cent in 2009)
- Defining human capital metrics and dashboards (22 per cent compared with 17 per cent in 2009)
- Recruiting/staffing services/systems (21 per cent, up from

12 per cent in 2009)

Tom Keebler, Global Practice Leader with Towers Watson's HR Service Delivery and Technology practice said: "Talent management technologies have unquestionably become one of the best ways for companies and HR departments to drive better employee performance and enterprise success following the recession.

"In spite of the initial costs, organizations are increasingly deploying new or enhanced systems, recognizing that efficient and effective HR processes enable the flexibility and agility employers need in an uncertain but growth-oriented business environment."

It is worth noting that the issue of 'cost' was not included in the list of top HR service delivery issues. Last year it was listed as one of the top three. Moreover, HR practitioners said many technology budgets escaped being cut during the recession with only 36 per cent of respondents having lower technology budgets in 2009 with 54 per cent having increased budgets for 2010 and 29% maintaining last year's levels.

According to Tom Keebler:

"HR's reliance on technology to achieve greater efficiency and cost savings during the recession allowed it to maintain and even grow HR technology budgets in a challenging business environment. As companies recover and budgets expand once again, leaders appear ready to make a forward-looking commitment to talent management systems that will reap substantial long-



term rewards for the HR department, line managers and the broader organization.

"In this environment, talent management technology has become a 'must have' competitive element, allowing managers and HR professionals to identify and develop talent through a more rigorous focus on performance and human capital metrics.

"In our experience, companies are able to achieve greater satisfaction with their talent management systems when planned for holistically," he added. "HR leaders who determine their integrated needs and clearly articulate their business strategy before making buying and implementation decisions are better equipped to differentiate among various options, make informed selections and align the HR function's needs with business objectives." Engaging Employees Through Self-Service Manager self-service (MSS) and employee self-service (ESS) features are

now common in the workplace. 70 per cent of organizations believe that ESS and MSS lead to faster, more accurate transactions. Also, they may encourage greater engagement and employee satisfaction among employees.

Tom Keebler commented:

"Past Towers Watson research, including the 2010 Global Workforce Study, has shown employees' and managers' desire for on-the-job empowerment. By implementing self-service options for critical career and rewards categories, organizations are simultaneously creating an environment of ownership and self-reliance that employees can build upon."

ESS and MSS have increased the efficiency of the HR function with 68 per cent of HR generalist/specialists and HR service centers/administrators reporting that ESS programmes resulted in less work. Only 15 per cent reported an increase in workload. - hrmguide.com

How career dreams die

Research from Ohio State University and the University of Florida published in Social Cognition studied what is required to convince people that their career aspirations are unrealistic. Researchers found that informing participants they did not have high enough qualifications or appropriate skills was insufficient. The negative consequences of failure also had to be made explicit.

Patrick Carroll, assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State explained: "Most people don't give up easily on the dreams. They have to be given a graphic picture of what failure will look like if they don't make it."

The researchers suggest that this is of particular relevance given the impact of the current economic situation on the graduate employment market. Patrick Carroll said:

"Educators are trying to lead students to the most realistic career options. You want to encourage students to pursue their dreams, but you don't want to give them false hope about their abilities and talents. It's a fine line." "This research is important to understanding how students make revisions in their career goals and decide which career possibilities should be abandoned as unrealistic given their current qualifications. They can then zero in on more realistic possible selves that they actually are qualified to achieve." The researchers studied separate groups of 64 and 70 senior business and psychology students at Ohio State. A career advisor informed participants about a new master's degree programme designed to qualify them for lucrative consultancy work as business psychologists. However, the degree was non-existent. The study analysed participants' reactions to varying degrees of threat to falsely-raised career aspirations.

Participants provided background information including their current grade point average (GPA). They were then divided into four groups: a control group was told there was no GPA requirement for the programme; the other three were told the GPA requirement was .10 above whatever figure they had provided.

The participants were provided with increasingly detailed negative feedback. One group was simply advised



that their GPA was lower than that required. The second group was told they were not suitable and that they were unlikely to get a place. However, they were encouraged to persevere if they were sufficiently interested, because their application might be reviewed sympathetically by a lenient admissions committee.

The third group was given similar feedback to the second with the proviso that, if they gained admission by this means, they would probably struggle with the demands of the programme. If they managed to graduate they would have no job prospects. The careers advisor cited known examples of futile outcomes of this type.

Patrick Carroll said: "In this case, the students were given a very vivid picture of what might happen if they failed."

The study found that students in the control group and those who were told their GPA was not high enough continued with their ambition, demonstrating less self-doubt about their ability and greater commitment to pursuing the degree.

Patrick Carroll commented: "We have a brilliant ability to spin, deflect or outright dismiss undesired evidence that we can't do something. We try to find reasons to believe."

Conversely, participants given the most detailed negative feedback experienced greater self-doubt and a significantly higher level of anxiety about their future prospects. This diminished as they lowered their expectations of a career in business psychology.

Common workplace annoyances

(12 per cent)

But one in eight (13 per cent) of respondents said that they experience none of these as common annoyances and 3 per cent typically do not work with others.

The study found that workers under the age of 35 are more likely than those over 55 to complain about loud noise (25 per cent compared to 16 per cent) and political conversations (15 per cent compared to 8 per cent). Women are more likely than men to be annoyed by messy communal areas (28 per cent compared to 23 per cent).

Among participants identifying poor time management as a major grievance, over one in five (22 per cent) said this took the form of co-workers taking excessive breaks (including long lunches, smoke breaks, and online surfing). Other aggravations in this category include co-workers who abuse sick days (11 per cent) and habitually miss deadlines (9 per cent). Disorganised meetings in various forms also proved a significant source of contention:

- no agenda or structure (11 per cent)
- outside normal working hours (10 per cent)
- starting and finishing late (10 per cent)
- attendees distracted on their Blackberry or by texting (10 per cent)

Those under 35 are more irritated by meetings cutting into personal time than their older co-workers (16 per cent compared to 7 per cent). Some respondents are most annoyed 'when the request 'have you got a minute?' turns into a lengthy meeting' (5 per cent).

The study found similar grievances raised by respondents highlighting inappropriate use of social media during work hours. These include: the amount of time wasted (28 per cent); when it results in users asking co-workers for help with their work (20 per cent); when users complain they are over-worked (11 per cent) or miss work-related deadlines (9 per cent). Only 4 per cent are concerned that social media use has the potential to reflect poorly on their work performance. Those over 35 are more concerned about time wasted in this way than younger co-workers (30 per cent compared to 22 per cent).

The most common annoyances related to email include:

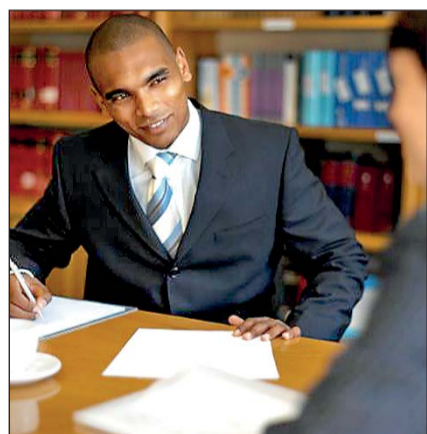
- forwarding chain emails and jokes (19 per cent)
- misuse of 'reply all' (12 per cent)
- lack of response to appropriate messages (9 per cent)
- question asked that was answered in previous email (7 per cent)
- used to solicit for personal fund-

raising (7 per cent)

- unnecessary cc's (6 per cent)
- one-word replies (5 per cent)
- discovering a co-worker maliciously 'blind copied' (4 per cent)
- entire message typed in 'subject' line (3 per cent)

Women are more likely to be annoyed by unnecessary 'reply all's' (15 per cent compared to 10 per cent of men). Younger employees are more likely to be annoyed when asked a question that had just been answered (12 per cent compared to 4 per cent for older respondents).

Respondents tend to deal with grievances in different ways. The most common response is to speak directly to the person(s) involved (29 per cent). Other strategies include: complain to co-workers (10 per cent); raise the issue with a manager (9 per cent); contact by email (2 per cent); leave anonymous note or complain via social networking site (1 per cent). However, over a quarter (27 per cent) say that they do nothing to address their grievance. Women are more likely to complain to co-workers (24 per cent compared to 15 per cent). Younger employees also are more likely to complain to co-workers (23 per cent compared to 17 per cent); older workers are more likely to speak to the person concerned (31 per cent compared to 23 per cent). - hrmguide.com



The most common causes of annoyance in the workplace are co-workers with poor time management skills (cited by 43 per cent of respondents) and the prevalence of gossip (36 per cent) according to an online survey of over 1000 employed U.S. adults conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs-Randstad.

Other grievances are:

- mess in communal areas (25 per cent)
- intrusive noise (21 per cent)
- smells including perfume, food or smoke (20 per cent)
- overuse of personal electronics during meetings (15 per cent)
- political conversations (12 per cent)
- misuse of email (12 per cent), and
- personal use of social media sites

Telecommuting better than office working

Recent research from Brigham Young University published in the Journal of Family Psychology found that telecommuters experience a better work/life balance than office-based employees even when working significantly longer hours. The study analyzed data from 24,436 IBM employees in 75 countries to identify the number of hours that had to be worked before 25 per cent reported interference with personal and family life.

Office workers with relatively inflexible schedules reached this point when their hours exceeded 38 hours per week. Those who had the possibility of telecommuting were able to achieve 57 hours per week with their time typically divided between office and home depending on the nature of the task being undertaken. Both male and female workers appreciated the advantages of flexible working arrangements.

Lead author E. Jeffrey Hill, a professor in the school of family life noted:

"Telecommuting is really only beneficial for reducing work-life conflict when it is accompanied by flextime."

Formerly one of IBM's first telecommuters starting in 1990, Jeffrey Hill commented:

"Managers were initially skeptical about the wisdom of working at home and said things like, 'If we can't see them, how can we know they are work-

ing?'"

The study found that more than 80 per cent of IBM managers currently agree that productivity increases when flexible working arrangements are made available. In the current economic situation, financial constraints are encouraging more widespread introduction of such schemes.

Jeffrey Hill commented: "A down economy may actually give impetus to flexibility because most options save money or are cost-neutral. Flexible work options are associated with higher job satisfaction, boosting morale when it may be suffering in a down economy."

Who Telecommutes?

Rising gas prices have resulted in many professionals considering telecommuting as an economical work option, but spending too much time working from home can mean saying goodbye to the corner office.

Surveys developed in 2006 by OfficeTeam, a leading staffing service specializing in placement of administrative professionals, were conducted by an independent research firm and include responses from 100 senior executives in Canada and 150 in the USA.

They found 32 per cent of Canadian respondents and 43 per cent of US respondents said telecommuting is



best suited for staff-level employees, compared with 28 per cent and 18 per cent respectively who felt telecommuting is most beneficial for managers. In addition, more than half of Canadian respondents and more than two-thirds of US respondents said senior executives at their firms rarely or never telecommute.

When asked, 'At which level do you think telecommuting programs are most beneficial?' participants responded:

When asked, 'Overall, how frequently do senior executives at your firm telecommute?' participants responded:

According to Diane Domeyer, execu-

tive director of OfficeTeam, it is often easier for staff-level employees to telecommute because their work can be performed autonomously. However, even those people who work from home need to spend time in the office.

Diane Domeyer added:

"Effective management requires plenty of 'face time' with employees. Supervisors should have an open-door policy, and that means being available to staff who need guidance with projects. Employees who work from home must ensure that being out of sight doesn't also mean being out of mind for promotions, team projects and plum assignments." - hrmguide.com

Health effects of work-related stress and shift work

Recent research from the University of Michigan Medical School published in the American Journal of Gastroenterology found that nurses working shift patterns, especially those rotating between day and night, had a significantly higher risk of developing Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and abdominal pain compared to those permanently on day-time rotas.

Lead author Sandra Hoogerwerf, assistant professor of internal medicine said:

"We know that people participating in shift work often complain of gastrointestinal symptoms such as abdominal pain, constipation and diarrhea. These are the same symptoms of IBS."

The researchers explain that IBS is the most common functional bowel disorder. It is not amenable to diagnostic testing but is identified by clinical symptoms such as recurrent episodes of abdominal pain or cramping associated with altered bowel habits.

The study recruited 399 nurses working three shift patterns: 214 on permanent day duty; 110 on permanent nights and 75 rotating between the two. More than 85 per cent were women. Researchers identified a higher prevalence of IBS and abdominal pain in participants working shifts, particularly those rotating between day and night. This finding was independent of reported sleep disturbances.

Sandra Hoogerwerf explained:

"We know the colon has its own biological clock and that's what increases the likelihood of having a bowel movement in the first six hours of the day. Shift work can cause chronic disruption of that biological rhythm, resulting in that clock to constantly be thrown off and needing to adjust, creating symptoms of diarrhea, bloating, constipation and abdominal pain and discomfort."

The researchers suggest that patients with IBS should be alerted to the possible impact of their work schedule on their condition.

Stress And Coronary Heart Disease Research from Universite Laval's Faculty of Medicine published in the

Journal of the American Medical Association in 2007 has demonstrated that chronic job strain after a first heart attack may double the risk of suffering a second one.

The researchers explain that previous studies had confirmed a relationship between work-related stress and

a first coronary heart disease (CHD) event, but the few studies conducted on the association with recurrent CHD were limited in scope and inconsistent in their findings.

Researchers led by Chantal Brisson followed a group of 972 people aged 35 to 59 who had suffered a heart attack.

They were interviewed at six weeks, two and six years after returning to work concerning their health, lifestyle, socio-demographic status, and degree of work stress. A job was defined as stressful "if it combined high psychological demands (heavy workload, intense intellectual activity, and important time constraints) and little control over decision-making (lack of autonomy, creativity, and opportunities to use or develop skills)."

The study found that 124 participants suffered a second heart attack and 82 experienced unstable angina. People reporting high levels of work stress at six weeks and two years were twice as likely to suffer another CHD event. Researchers found that the risk remained the same after allowing for variables such as severity of the first heart attack, other health conditions, family history, lifestyle, socio-demographic status, personality, and other work-environment factors. They also found that job strain did not increase the probability of experiencing a second CHD event during the first two years. Chantal Brisson commented:

"It makes sense on a biomedical level, since the pathological process at the source of the CHD requires some time before it can manifest itself."

The researchers conclude that these findings should alert employers to the need to protect people from potentially harmful situations when they return to work after a heart attack.

