

**From managing information to managing
change: how HR is coping in today's
challenging economy**
A survey of HR directors and managers by
Webster Buchanan Research

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Executive Summary

This report analyses the findings of a survey of 100 HR directors and managers in the UK. The survey examined a broad range of topics relating to effective people management, including HR's preparedness for dealing with today's challenging economic conditions and the role of software systems, services and emerging technologies in supporting HR's efforts. Key findings include:

HR's readiness – and ability – to manage change

- Three quarters of respondents were confident they have sufficient change management expertise to manage any necessary workforce restructuring. But if they do need to restructure, almost one in ten were not confident their organisation has the information it needs to make informed decisions about the value of individual employees
- Three quarters of respondents believed their company's workforce strategy will be guided by advice from senior HR management, as opposed to HR simply being asked to execute the board's decisions. However, 64% of respondents agreed that HR is primarily seen as an administrative function in their organisation, not the owner of people-based information and strategy

Drivers and barriers to investment in HR software and services

- Top drivers for investment in HR software and services were improving quality of service, cutting HR administration costs and reducing IT costs. These were followed by the need to improve the quality of management information and free HR from its administrative burden to provide more strategic input to the business. Among other factors, four out of ten respondents cited the need to reduce operational risk (e.g. the risk of relying on an ageing IT system).
- Surprisingly, 44% of respondents agreed that expanding their personal experience and enhancing their CV was an important factor in determining whether to invest in HR software or services – a finding that may not please board-level executives, but one that gives an indication of the critical role software and services play in the HR manager's role
- Just over a third of respondents (35%) plan to spend less on HR-related software and HRIT services in 2009 than 2008 – but half (51%) expect to spend the same as last year, and 14% will actually spend more
- Negative factors that influence investment were 'lack of resource to implement projects, even if they offer potential benefits and cost savings', closely followed by budget constraints, other HR priorities and other IT priorities

Rapid growth of Payroll and HR Self-service

- Payroll self-service is emerging as one of the most popular forms of self-service, perhaps because its transactional nature lends itself to cost reduction initiatives. Almost six out of ten respondents either already provide online pay advice ('electronic payslips') or plan to do so within

twelve months, while a third expect to do so long-term. Similarly, 11% of respondents enable employees to view their pay history online, with 38% planning to within twelve months. In a related field, 14% of respondents enable employees and managers to input time and expense data online, with 47% planning to do so within 12 months

- Among traditional HR capabilities, self-service adoption is climbing in areas such as recruitment, where half of respondents (51%) already enable candidates to submit applications online or plan to within twelve months, and 28% expect to enable them to track the progress of their applications within twelve months. Other key areas of adoption include HR administration (41% now or within 12 months), absence (35%), benefits (35%), and training (33%)

Divided opinion over Web 2.0

- Opinion was sharply divided about the use of web collaboration tools such as blogs, wikis and social media sites. A third of respondents agreed that they provide “great ways of communicating with employees and will become increasingly important to HR over the next two years” – but another third disagreed, with smaller companies particularly unimpressed
- There was also disagreement about the use of social media sites for recruitment. Well over a third (38%) of respondents see them as an extension of traditional employee referral schemes, providing a great way to reach potential new recruits - but a quarter (26%) disagreed

The outsourcing option

- Almost a third of respondents agreed that today's challenging economic environment will make them more likely to consider HR and payroll outsourcing.

Perennial problems in reporting and analytics

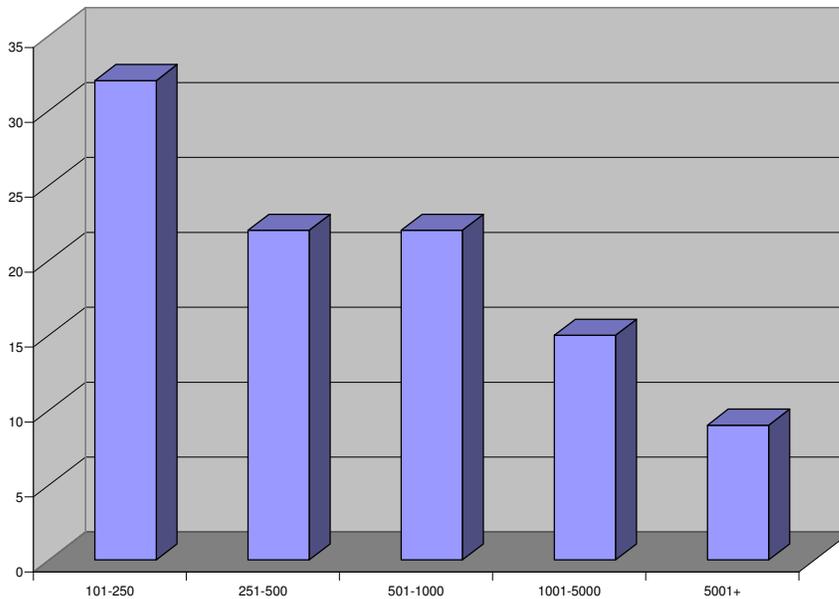
- Data management, software and personnel issues continue to hold back HR's efforts to assess trends and deliver meaningful information to senior management. 78% of respondents agreed that “the difficulty of getting relevant data together undermines my reporting and analytical capability,” and 62% of respondents agreed that they do not have the software tools they need to do anything beyond basic HR reporting. Just as significantly, almost half of respondents (46%) agreed that even if they had the right software tools, they lack sufficient analytical skills within HR to take advantage of them.
- Most respondents were confident about their ability to report on the staple metrics of HR, including inwardly-focused metrics such as the composition of the workforce or ‘days to hire’. But as Webster Buchanan's research has consistently demonstrated, HR managers tend to be less confident about reporting on how broader people-related issues affect the business. For example, only 44% claimed to be good at measuring the business impact of voluntary employee attrition, with more than a quarter (28%) admitting to being poor.

Respondent Profile

Webster Buchanan Research conducted a survey based on interviews with 100 HR directors and HR managers in the UK. Interviews were carried out with respondents from a cross-section of private sector industries during January and February 2009. As well as assessing the aggregate response to all of the questions, responses were analysed by company size, measured according to the number of employees in the UK and broken down into five categories:

- 100-250 employees (32%)
- 251-500 (22%)
- 501-1000 (22%)
- 1001-5000 (15%)
- Over 5000 (9%)

Figure 1. Size of company, measured by number of employees



Part 1: Purchasing Software and Services

1.1 Dealing with a challenging economy

Survey respondents were generally confident that they're well positioned to tackle today's challenging economy, in everything from their change management expertise to their HR systems. There were, however, some notable concerns.

Three quarters of respondents (75%) were confident or extremely confident that they have sufficient change management expertise within their HR team to manage any necessary workforce restructuring. However, 19% were neutral (neither confident nor unconfident), including one in four interviewees from small companies, and 6% of respondents were unconfident that they had the necessary expertise.

A similar number of respondents (72%) were confident or extremely confident that if they needed to restructure their workforce, their organisation has the information it needs to make informed decisions about the value of individual employees, with 19% neutral. Looked at from the opposite perspective, this implies that almost one in ten unconfident respondents (9%) could make workforce reduction decisions based on incomplete information.

At a strategic level, respondents were generally confident that they would play a key role in shaping the workforce during the downturn. Asked whether their company's workforce strategy will be guided by advice from senior HR management, as opposed to HR simply being asked to execute the board's decisions, almost three quarters of respondents (73%) said they were confident or extremely confident it would, one in five (20%) was neutral and 7% were unconfident. At the same time, however, 64% of respondents agreed that HR is primarily seen as an administrative function in their organisation, not the owner of people-based information and strategy.

From a core infrastructure perspective, almost three quarters of respondents (73%) were confident that their HR systems and processes were sufficiently flexible to manage change, whether downsizing or growth – although one in ten were not, the majority of them from smaller companies with 1-500 employees. Asked whether they have the right systems or outsourced services in place to tackle a range of specific HR disciplines, respondents were also mostly positive, although it's surprising that as many as three in ten respondents were neutral (neither confident nor unconfident) about activities such as managing HR administration or training. In summary:

- Almost four out of five (78%) of respondents were confident (including 'extremely confident') and 22% neutral about their ability to **process payroll**
- 77% were confident, 18% neutral and 5% unconfident about their ability to identify and quickly **hire suitable candidates** to fill existing vacancies or new roles
- 76% were confident, 21% neutral and 3% unconfident about their ability to **manage absence**
- 67% were confident, 31% neutral and 2% unconfident about their ability to **manage training**
- 65% were confident, 29% neutral, and 6% unconfident that they could **manage HR administration**
- 64% were confident, 26% average and 10% unconfident about their ability to manage individual **employee performance**, with most of the unconfident respondents coming from companies with 1-500 employees

1.2 Drivers and barriers to IT investment

The findings on HR managers' investment plans reflect the realities of HRIT: in a recession, some spending will inevitably decline, but there remains a real need for effective HR systems and services where they generate efficiencies. Slightly more than a third of respondents (35%) plan to spend less or significantly less on HR-related software and HRIT services in 2009 than 2008. Yet around half of respondents (51%) expect to spend the same as last year, and 14% will spend more or significantly more.

The drivers behind these investment decisions shed some light on HR managers' thinking in the current climate. Respondents were asked to rank how important different factors were in helping them determine whether to invest in HR software or services, using a scale of 1-5, where 1 is 'unimportant' and 5 is 'extremely important'. Inevitably, cost was high on the list, with 89% citing the ability to reduce HR administration costs as important or extremely important, and 88% citing the ability to reduce IT costs. But both benefits were pipped by the desire to improve the quality of service provided to employees or managers, with 90% of respondents ranking it important or extremely important. While cost reduction is more likely to carry weight for investment decisions made during a recession, the findings imply that HR managers are confident they can put a tangible value to the business from making service quality improvements.

Two other drivers scored highly. Firstly, improving the quality of management information was important or extremely important to almost four out of five respondents (79%), a sentiment that was reflected in later findings regarding reporting and business intelligence (*see Part Three*). Clearly, in a harsh

economic environment, getting access to people-related information is a priority. Secondly, almost three quarters of respondents saw benefit in investments that free HR from its administrative burdens to provide more strategic input to the business, with 73% ranking it as important or extremely important.

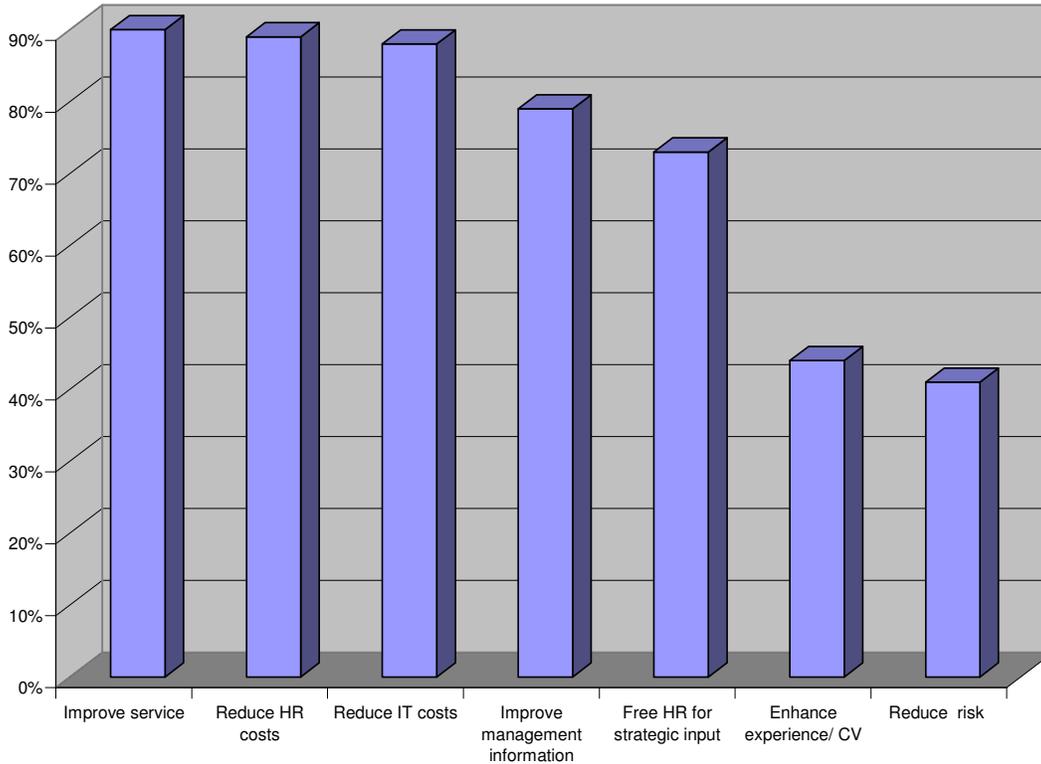
There was a big drop to the next two factors, but both had important twists. The need to reduce operational risk (e.g. the risk of relying on an ageing IT system) was seen as an important or extremely important investment driver for 41% of respondents, with 34% neutral and a quarter (25%) seeing it as unimportant. Companies with 501-1000 employees delivered the highest mean score. These findings need to be interpreted carefully, and shouldn't be taken to read that operational risk is being discounted by the majority of respondents – it's far more likely that a large swathe of interviewees believe their existing core systems are already sufficiently robust. What's more eyebrow-raising, in fact, is that four out of ten respondents feel the need to reduce operational risk, a sizeable proportion of the HR community.

Respondents were also asked to rank how important expanding their personal experience and enhancing their CV was in helping them determine whether to invest in HR software or services. Surprisingly, 22% ranked it as extremely important, with a further 22% rating it important and just 19% dismissing it as unimportant. While board-level executives will be surprised and disappointed to see such a high percentage of investment decisions influenced by personal career factors, the finding is also a strong indication of just how critical software and services are to running today's HR function.

On the other side of the investment equation, top of the list of negative factors that influence investment in HR software or services was 'lack of resource to implement projects, even if they offer potential benefits and cost savings', which was cited as important or extremely important by 87% of respondents. The mean score on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 is 'unimportant' and 5 is 'extremely important') was 4.3, with the largest companies seeing the issue as slightly less of a problem at 3.9. The resource challenge was closely followed by budget constraints, which was important or extremely important to 86% of respondents.

Respondents also felt that investment was being held back by other business priorities. Over two thirds of respondents (71%) said that other HR priorities represented an important or extremely important challenge to investing in HR software or services, with 63% saying the same of other IT priorities.

Figure 2. Drivers to Investment in HRIT



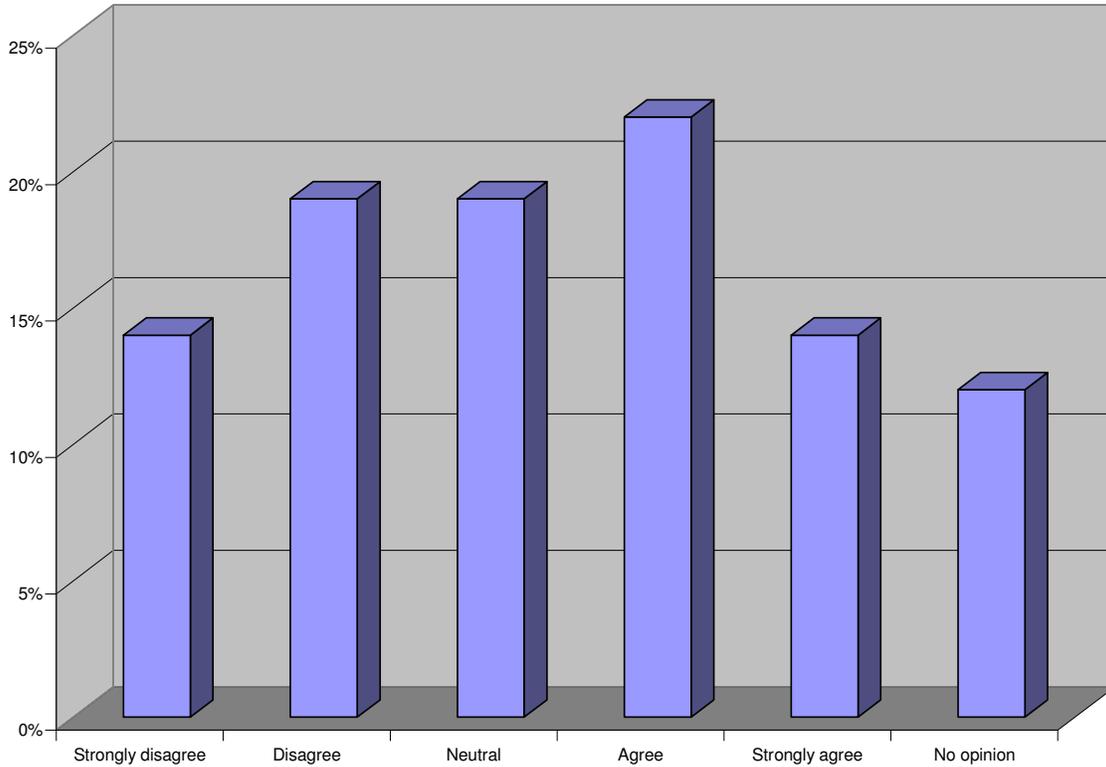
1.3 Differing opinions over HR and Payroll IT trends

Responses to current and emerging trends in HR and Payroll technology reflected significant differences of opinion among HR managers. Survey respondents were asked to rate how much they agreed with three statements about their HR and payroll software, using a scale of 1-5 where 1 means 'strongly disagree' and 5 means 'strongly agree'.

Two questions addressed web 2.0 technologies, the user-generated tools that have exploded in the consumer world and are making their way into the business sector. Asked if they agreed that “Web collaboration tools such as blogs, tagging, wikis and social media sites provide great ways of communicating with employees and will become increasingly important to HR over the next two years,” over a third of respondents (36%) agreed or strongly agreed – while another third (33%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The positive findings were weighted towards larger companies: with a mean score of 3.0, the smallest companies registered 2.6, while companies with 1001-5000 employees registered 4.1. That skewing may reflect the pressing need for collaboration tools in larger companies, where complex organisational structures make for significant communications and collaboration challenges.

Figure 3. Do you agree that web collaboration tools such as blogs, tagging, wikis and social media provide great ways of communicating with employees and will become increasingly important to HR over the next two years?"



Opinion was also divided about the use of social media sites for recruitment. Asked whether they agreed that “Social media sites such as Facebook and Linked-In are an extension of traditional employee referral schemes and provide a great way to reach potential new recruits,” 38% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, while 26% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In this case, there was less diversity by size.

These findings suggest that opinions about Web 2.0 have shifted over the last year, not least when compared to a survey of HR managers carried out by Webster Buchanan Research in March 2008¹. Asked to rank the effectiveness of different recruitment tools, social networking was positioned a distant tenth as an effective recruiting tool in that study, well behind traditional techniques such as media adverts, executive search and online advertising, and was predicted to stay at tenth over the next two years.

¹ “Recruitment 2008: from marketing theory to the practicalities of web-based hiring”, a survey of HR directors and senior managers by Webster Buchanan Research, March 2008 www.websterb.com/hcinsider

The third question – “There is a lot of functionality that I am not taking advantage of in my existing HR systems” – addresses a recurrent problem within the HR sector, where organisations purchase multi-module HR systems but don’t implement all of the available technology at the outset. Usually, the decision not to do so is made for sound business reasons – companies are keen to get quick returns and typically target their initial system work on the core infrastructure, or on areas that will deliver the most impact. But the outcome is that modules scheduled for implementation at a later stage often never see the light of day – clearly an issue for the 31% of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

1.4 Outsourcing

As they look to improve efficiencies within the HR and payroll functions, HR managers will invariably cast an eye over their outsourcing options – and the findings from the survey suggests that they remain as divided as ever over its merits. Asked whether they agree with the statement that “today's challenging economic environment will make me more likely to consider HR and payroll outsourcing”, almost a third of respondents (30%) agreed or strongly agreed – and a similar number (32%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Part 2: Employee and Manager Self-service

As adoption of Internet-based self-service continues to grow, organisations are beginning to experiment with a broader range of capabilities². Once seen primarily as a way of automating basic HR administration – by allowing employees to directly input address changes or bank account details, rather than sending a form for an HR administrator to fill in – it now influences a range of HR disciplines from recruitment and training to performance management.

Webster Buchanan Research divides self-service into two types: informational/promotional and transactional. Informational self-service is about giving employees, managers, and in some cases job candidates, access to information that would previously have required them to call or email the HR department – including, for example, details of training courses, job vacancies or employment policy. Transactional self-service enables managers, employees and job candidates to interact online with HR and payroll – for example, by submitting individual employee performance reviews, applying for training courses or submitting a job application and tracking its progress. Informational self-service is often a good place to start a self-service project because it's usually an easier technical project, focused primarily on information broadcast rather than the management of workflows and processes.

Historically, most self-service activity has been carried out in the HR field, but the survey demonstrated that interest is growing in payroll, perhaps because its transactional nature lends itself to cost reduction initiatives. Some 17% of respondents already provide online pay advice (an 'electronic payslip') today and 42% plan to do so within twelve months, while almost a third of respondents (32%) plan to do so long-term. Similarly, 11% of respondents already enable employees to view their pay history online, 38% plan to within twelve months, and another third (34%) are looking to do so long-term.

In another payroll-related field, 14% of respondents enable employees and managers to input time and expense data online, with 47% planning to do so over 12 months and 23% looking at it long-term.

Among more traditional HR self-service capabilities, current and planned adoption levels of most capabilities vary, but with a clear long-term trend towards adoption:

- **Recruitment** Slightly more than one in ten (13%) of organisations currently enable internal and external candidates to submit job

² "Beyond efficiency: building a broader business case for self-service," a research report published by Webster Buchanan Research, November 2007 www.websterb.com/hcinsider

applications online, while 38% plan to do so within 12 months and 29% over the long-term. While the forecasted adoption level is encouraging, actual take-up today is similar to the findings of Webster Buchanan Research's survey in early 2008³, suggesting that adoption may have slowed during the economic turmoil of the last year. A smaller number of companies (8%) currently enable internal and external candidates to track the progress of their application online – again, similar to last year's survey – while 20% plan to within 12 months, 37% long-term, and 35% have no plans.

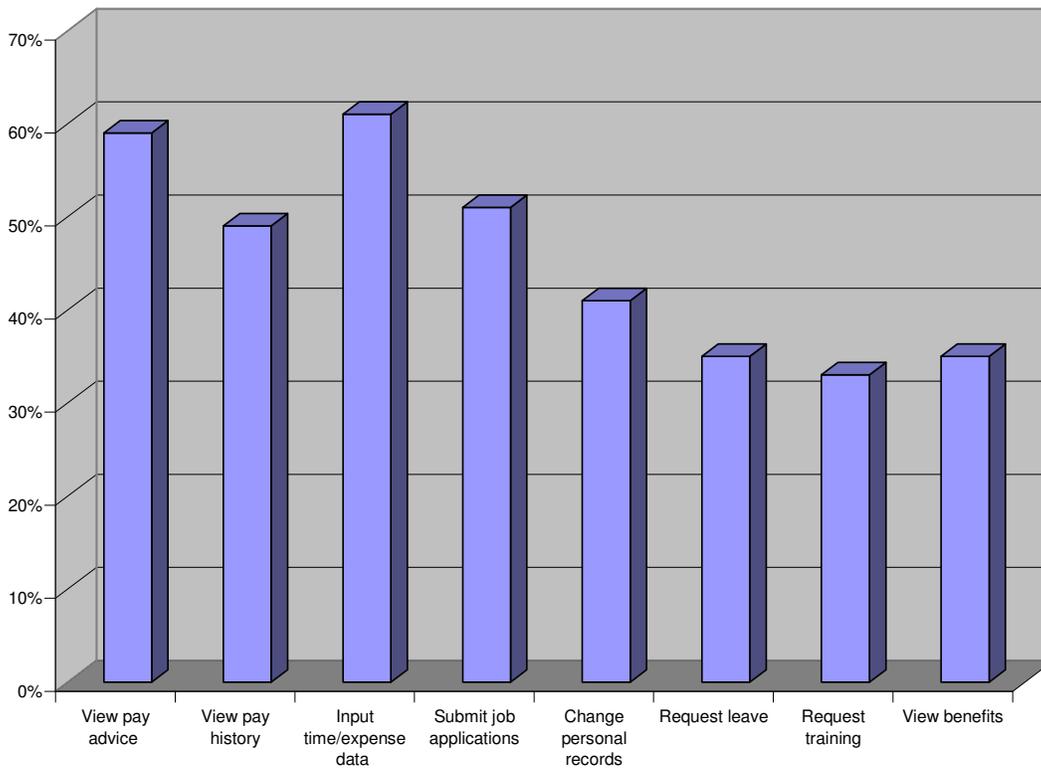
- **HR administration** Within 12 months, approximately four out of ten respondents will have enabled employees or managers to change their personal records (e.g. home address or bank account details), with 16% already doing so today and another quarter (25%) planning to do so over the year. In addition, slightly more than one third of respondents (36%) plan to enable this kind of interaction long-term. Given that this is one of the most basic components of self-service, it's perhaps surprising that almost a quarter of respondents (23%) have no plans to embark on this kind of project, although many of them are in the smallest companies where the lower volume of changes required would result in less significant time and cost savings
- **Absence** Just over one in ten (12%) of respondents already enable employees or managers to *request* holiday time or leave, with another 23% planning to do so over the year and 39% looking to long-term. The same proportion (12%) already allow managers to *approve* holiday or other leave online, with 29% planning to do so over the coming 12 months and 40% long-term
- **Training** A third of respondents will enable employees or managers to *request* training/education programmes within the year (7% today, 26% within 12 months), with a further 40% expecting to do so long-term. Today, just five per cent of organisations allow managers to *approve* training or education programmes online, but 29% plan to within 12 months and 45% long-term
- **Benefits** Over a third (35%) of respondents will allow employees to view benefits information within a year, with 8% offering that capability today, 27% planning to within 12 months, and exactly half expecting to long-term. The slightly higher projected adoption rate for viewing benefits compared to more basic HR administration/employee data entry (85% over the long-term versus 77%) may reflect the fact that this kind of service is often outsourced rather than built in-house. In terms of the transactional component of benefits, no respondents enable employees

³ "Recruitment 2008: from marketing theory to the practicalities of web-based hiring", a survey of HR directors and senior managers by Webster Buchanan Research, March 2008
www.websterb.com/hcinsider

to *change* their benefits online today, but almost a quarter (23%) plan to do so within 12 months and 48% long-term

- **Performance management** Just five per cent of respondents currently enable employees to view personal performance data (e.g. results of performance appraisals), but 20% plan to within 12 months, and 42% will do so long-term. Interestingly, that leaves a third of respondents seeing no benefit in doing so, with a significant proportion of the largest companies opting out
- **Sharing documents** No respondents currently enable employees or managers to upload and share electronic documents (e.g. copies of driving licence, employee performance reviews), but 16% plan to within 12 months, and 49% long-term

Figure 4. Top self-service capabilities already offered by respondents today, or planned to be offered within twelve months



The extent of planned self-service adoption is reflected in respondents' dismissive attitude towards classic adoption barriers. The vast majority of respondents (82%) dismissed concerns that not all of their employees have internet access at work or home, suggesting either that they believe home

usage is prevalent or they're confident that workplace self-service kiosks can cater for any employees with limited internet access. Similarly, 70% of respondents said resistance from employees was not a barrier, dispelling objections during early waves of self-service adoption that the technology shifts the burden of HR administrative work onto employees. In fact, with home banking and other online commerce now widespread, the likelihood is that the majority of employees may well expect to manage their own information over the internet.

Finally, the majority of HR managers (59%) said resistance to self-service adoption within the HR department was not a barrier. However, four out of ten respondents ranked it 3 out of 5, on a scale where 1 reflects a significant barrier and 5 no barrier at all. This suggests that while many HR managers do not expect internal resistance to thwart a self-service implementation, they're aware that they will need to sell the concept to team members who may be wary about its impact on their jobs.

Part 3: Reporting and Management Information

3.1 Reporting and analytical capability

While most respondents were comfortable with their ability to report on core HR activities, the survey findings suggest that data management, software and personnel issues continue to impede HR's efforts to analyse its operations, assess people-related trends and deliver meaningful information to senior management.

Access to data – which in most organisations tends to be distributed across multiple systems, some of them manual – continues to be a significant challenge. Asked their views on the statement that “the difficulty of getting relevant data together undermines my reporting and analytical capability,” 40% of respondents strongly agreed, 38% agreed, and only 15% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Similarly, 62% of respondents agreed with the statement that “I do not have the software tools I need to do anything beyond basic HR reporting”, although encouragingly, almost a third (31%) disagreed. Just as significantly, almost half of respondents (46%) agreed that “even if I had the right software tools to carry out more sophisticated reporting and analysis, I do not have sufficient analytical skills within the HR function to take advantage of them”.

Finally, while almost a third of respondents (32%) agreed that the level of business-relevant information provided by HR to line managers and the board needs to be significantly improved, almost three in five (57%) believe they are providing the necessary information.

3.2 Operational reporting and business impact

At an operational level, the vast majority of respondents (78%) were confident in their ability to report on HR operations, with 64% also comfortable that they can analyse people-based trends. Some 62% of respondents also said they were confident that they can manage people-related data, although a third were neutral (neither confident nor unconfident).

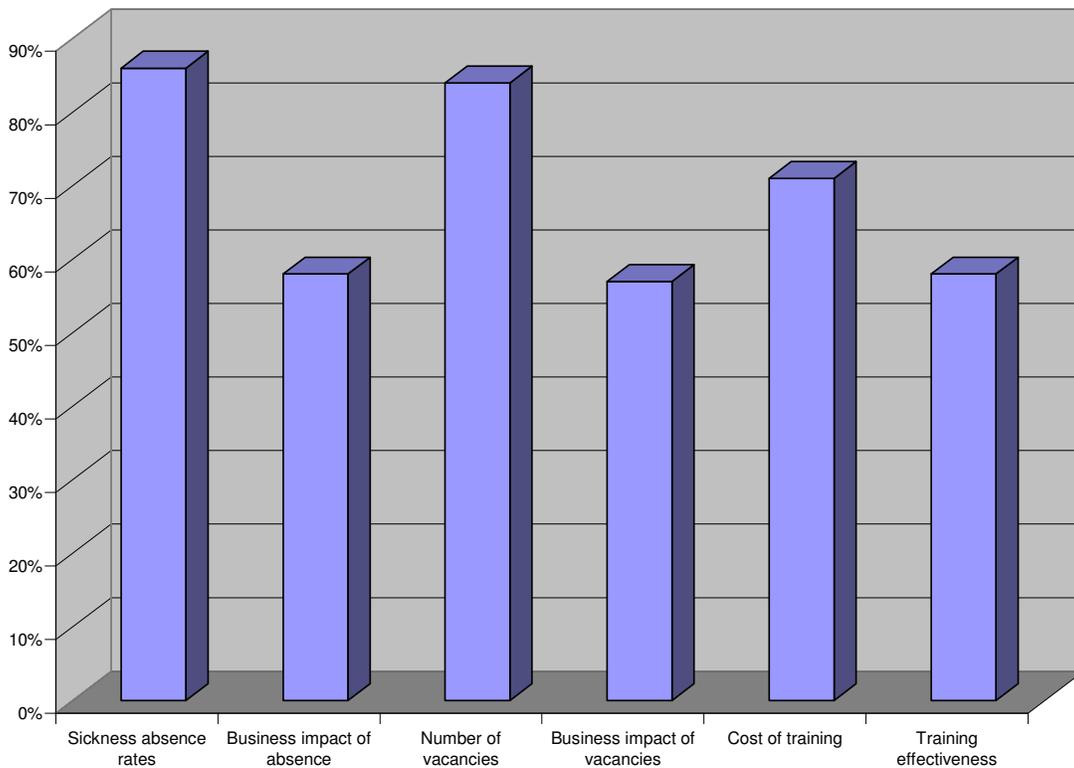
Asked to rate their ability to report on a range of workforce issues, most respondents were positive about the staple metrics of HR, including inwardly-focused operational metrics. For example, four out of five respondents (80%) said they were good at reporting on the composition of the workforce, while three quarters (75%) were good at reporting on the number of contractors.

But as Webster Buchanan's research has consistently demonstrated over the last eight years, HR managers tend to be less confident about their ability to report on how broader people-related issues affect the business. Vacancies are

a good example. The vast majority of respondents (84%) said they were good at reporting on the *number of vacancies*, but only 57% said the same about reporting the *business impact* of unfilled vacancies (such as the impact on productivity), with over a third (36%) describing themselves as average. When it came to more detailed analysis of vacancies, the numbers dropped further. Just under a half (49%) of respondents said they were good at reporting voluntary employee attrition rates, with 29% average and 22% poor – and only 44% claimed to be good at measuring the business impact of employee attrition, with more than a quarter (28%) admitting to being poor.

Similar patterns were seen in the recruitment field. Four out of five (80%) respondents said they were good at generating staple HR metrics such as days/time to hire. But the number who were good at reporting on direct recruitment costs (such as adverts or agency fees) fell to two thirds (66%), with 13% admitting to being poor – and those claiming to be good at reporting on indirect recruitment costs (such as time spent by HR or line managers) fell to 56%, with 30% saying they were average and 14% admitting to being poor.

Figure 5. Respondents indicating they are 'good' or 'very good' at reporting on a sample of workforce issues



Analytical capability in absence and training followed the same pattern. The overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) said they were good at reporting on sickness absence rates – but that slipped slightly to 76% when it came to measuring the cost of absence, and fell further to 58% for the business impact of absence (e.g. on productivity), with 22% conceding they were poor. Given the high profile of absence management in the UK, this indicates that many companies still have some way to go to deliver meaningful data.

Likewise, almost three quarters (71%) of respondents said they were good at measuring the cost of training, with 13% poor (the smallest companies being the worst). Asked about measuring training effectiveness – such as the impact of training courses on individual growth – only 58% described themselves as good, 30% as average, and 12% as poor.

Finally, approximately three in five (59%) of HR managers believed they were good at measuring revenue and/or profit per employee, with 21% admitting to being poor, and 60% said they were good at measuring the relationship between employee compensation and performance, with 18% admitting to being poor. At a time when the link between reward, incentive and performance is under close media scrutiny, that suggests that some 40% of companies still have a lot of work ahead of them.

End Notes

About the Author

Webster Buchanan Research is a market research company specialising in business management and the supporting role of technology. Webster Buchanan's primary focus is on People Management, Multi-country Payroll, Strategic Payroll, Customer Relationship Management and Financial Management. The company is based in London, San Francisco, Singapore and Hong Kong. For more information and copies of recent research reports, visit www.websterb.com.

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