

Self service solutions in management

Avoid a heart stroke



A pile of files is waiting for director's acceptance, employees are asking, what to do in order to obtain social fund benefits, what is more employee appraisal date is approaching. How to organize work not to let the manager drown in the flood of papers and applications "making his life easier".

Not knowing the law is harmful and does not exempt from abidance. This "golden rule" does not excuse us from such reflection: what are the labor inputs in order to get familiar with the corporate "law"?

An organization hiring several dozen employees is able to produce a pile of documents dealing with segregation and systematization of its' work. Only in human resources department one can find different regulations for remuneration, bonuses, gaining social fund benefits, managing with personnel changes, business trips and so on.

Each of these documents is important and the knowledge of each of them is required by the managers. Is in necessary to 'swot up' all the 50 pages of information obvious from the HR department point of view by all the managers or directors?

First of all: man...

In all these elements, the key role plays a man, involved in particular processes. Obviously, the tendency of delegating responsibilities on the line managers has got its' followers and opponents, but decentralized management, in general, brings positive effects. Only the question is, on which conditions such decentralization will work the best?

Trainings developing communication and team management quite often use a kind of play named "dead phone line". The rules are that the group is divided just as it is in the organizational structure, with its' president, director, line managers and employees.

Using the small cards – which are e-mails – the president has to decide, which symbol used on the cards given to the employees on the lowest level is common for them all.

This exercise can be complicated on different ways, however, it always leads to two conclusions: the hardest task has the line manager, and the possible improvements will not be useful for the directors.

Why is it this way? In case of directors this exercise shows that on each level instead of caricature of task delegation, that is “find someone, who will do it and is available right now” must be a certain degree of processing the information considering a certain level. Still, the amount of the reports being exchanged is small.

The situation changes diametrically for the managers responsible directly for the employees. In the theory of project management, a formula for number of communication channels $n(n-1)/2$ finds its use. Extreme cases are represented on the scale of few dozens of direct subordinates of the line manager.

Naturally, it can be grounded that yet not everyone communicates with everyone, but the manager is the center. Nevertheless, still in the context of this number and these dozens of pages of regulations, daily work of a line manager starts to look slightly in a different way.

Large part of his work concerns tasks related with employees' service – work time management, business travels, employee appraisal, education planning. He becomes a kind of 'mini-HR'. Consideration whether this way is correct will be left this time. Instead, let us think how to realize these processes so that they are effective, how to support an employee so that he is able not only to realize them by himself, but also efficiently?

Modern HR

IT system supporting HR is normally one of the parts of a bigger, so called 'integrated' system, connected with other areas, i.e. payroll with finances and controlling.

Talking about an 'integrated' system normally we refer to such processes like purchase of goods, production and their sale, like delivery 'just in time' or support of material flow on production with bar code scanners.

In HR such chains of processes also can be distinguished. Budget calculation for trainings without knowing about invoices being booked or full information about training's expenditures without the knowledge of travel costs is hard to imagine. Trainings planning as itself requires the knowledge of planned developmental activities in the framework of developmental programs.

Furthermore, rises planning requires the knowledge of current position valuation or competencies' models existing in the company.

These and other processes are interrelated with each other creating an HR system, which is a set of separate processes, but resultant of their fulfillment. A vision of human capital management necessary to build an HR system is an awareness of meeting points of components and costs of their integration – yet, not only ignorance of law is harmful, but its' inefficient execution too.

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Modern organizations solving this problem use a service attitude, which composes of two main elements – building of the system and making it accessible. Building of the system refers to planning its' development: instead of adding new elements created under the needs of single business problems, companies focus on long term planning of achieving certain effects, i.e. trainings process management is connected not only with the content resulting from developmental plans, programs like talent development, but also with current costs calculation. Finally, it lets to manage the budget actively, to find better suppliers or consistently fulfill the promises made to the employees.

The other side of the coin is making the system accessible. An employee wants to know the status of a certain case (i.e. status of leave and business trip applications), on the other hand – an information that the motion should go to the proper HR worker in a place A, and an application Y to a payroll cell in the headquarter is unimportant.

It does not undermine the relevance of bonus task appraisal or leave acceptance by the line manager, but vastly is connected both with the number of employees, for which he is responsible, and with the number of procedures, knowledge of which is necessary for their realization. Procedures, which from the point of view of the manager cannot be separate elements – separate applications for time management, employees' appraisal, leave planning, business trip calculation, putting forward training requests...

The whole in such a depiction is reflected as a system supporting full chain of processes with its' most important element – employees involved in its' work thanks to the possibilities enabled by delivering them a tool of either manager or more generally employee self service.

Information technology and its' place

Previous lack of mentioning about the information technology is intended by all means. The old rule here proves correct that there are no well defended penalties, there are only badly shot ones. Analogically is with implementation of IT systems. More often than a bad system a badly implemented one can be met.

The reasons for such situations can be long discussed. Lets pay attention to two biggest threats: firstly, the awareness, what the system can do, secondly, its' use in the next years perspective. Wrong decisions in this area give usually an effect, which causes an increase of different applications to support separate fragments of business. Two other important elements are possibilities and tools of expansion of functionalities and amount of labor to maintain the system.

Starting with an assumption that IT system will be expanded, usually arouses controversies. Yet, as we decide for buying such an expensive "something", we should have everything. And when we talk about payroll or time management, often in terms of standard configuration we can get a lot – starting with possibilities dependent on the class of the system and ending up on support of changes resulting from business changes and support of the producer delivered on such an occasion.

However, are we at least able to imagine a fully standardized process for a so called soft HR, regulated additionally with acts and codes? Flexibility of a chosen solution and its potential is an aspect, which cannot be depreciated answering this question.

Naturally, one should not exaggerate in the second direction either. The best bricks in the world can be bought and the best architects chosen – although it might be better they start from something more than a foundation – they already have certain elements ready. Is it worth to invest in a precisely fitting possibility of realizing all the processes?

Each investment is valued by the financial director from the point of view of costs incurred and possible benefits. If it is easy to explain the increase of income with a new marketing campaign or introduction of a new product on the market, a change of attitude to work management is harder to calculate in ROI.

It is also difficult to value the source of competitive advantage, which determines the quality of work environment on a more and more demanding labor market.

The element of system maintenance costs is often a taboo for non-IT specialists. We have, though, a department, which 'only' has to support applications being not that critical for business. The question 'only' refers usually a support team to first, second or even a third technology, in which a certain element of application was built.

The applications supporting self service processes are composed of three layers: data model, path of acceptance and visualization

These costs contain such 'trivia' like educational trainings for IT department, possibilities of normal human ability of understanding and parallel supporting of technology X simultaneously, construction and maintenance of interfaces between particular elements of the chain of processes, till introduction of corrections or performing upgrades of different components in system's landscape, which despite the fact of them having to use standard solutions, suddenly cause trouble. Unplanned trouble, because not taken into consideration during the starting idea of developing the system.

Few words about technique

Which components are to be considered first while building an application supporting self service processes? Usually it is taken that such a system is composed of three layers: data model, path of acceptance and visualization.

Data model layer is responsible for elements connected with business logic, so even for correctness of leave quotas calculation, taking the list of subordinates on the basis of organizational structure, budget verification for grants. Important is that the layer ensures a set of standardized interfaces letting for communication with other elements of architecture, that is a possibility to make records, read and modify data.

Paths of acceptance layer is responsible for standardization of information flow, that means for decision when, where and on which conditions certain information should get to a certain person. Depending

on the type of information – set of data describing the motion or application, the next decision-maker can be i.e. a direct superior for leave motion, a financial controller for acceptance of casual work contract motion, when it crosses a certain limit value etc. The main thing is here to consider the elements of changeability of organizational structure and the substitutions mechanism. It will ensure the work fluency of the whole system, which means avoiding information blocks, i.e. when a certain motion awaits superior's acceptance, who is on leave at this time.

Visualization layer is in theory the easiest, what results from plurality of technologies used in that purpose and their flexibility. A necessary element is here again standardization of this layer, so that the presentation of particular motions is more coherent independently from the information it carries. The biggest mistake possible to commit on this stage is causing that each and every motion in the self service system "looks" and works differently. It is then violation of the basic rules of system service ergonomics by the end user.

All these layers must fulfill also a stipulation of standardization on the general level as a whole, allowing for an easy entering of the new motions to the self service system, which after using a proper configuration of acceptance paths and preparing an adequate visualization are parts of a coherent body.

While designing such systems one has to remember that the process is the starting point, but nothing verifies its' work better than soulless computer science. A paper application is patient from its' nature – finally it will find a desk of its' destiny. An IT system is already less patient and ensuring a coherent understanding of the regulations is usually one of the hardest project challenges.

"Quo vadis"?

During the industrial revolution, Taylor was proving in his research that the size of the spade has got the meaning. In his works he stated that efficiency of tools being used has got a colossal effect on labor efficiency.

In the modern IT world such a revolution should not be expected, one reflection remains, if looking at the operations, which burden the employees everyday, and which have usually a direct relation with the profit, can not this work be earnestly rationalized?

Self service system is really a circulation of information, which carries the information critical for the company as a whole. There are no doubts, though, that an effective leave management, business trip management or bonus motions circulation is important for every company. Obstruction of such a system in extreme cases can lead to a stroke – insufficiency of HR services and dissatisfaction of the employees. Is improvement of such a process grounded by expenses?

Time saved for implementation of such a system and consequently its' numerical value can of course be calculated. On this basis, can we draw any conclusions about an automatic profit for the company? Unfortunately not, from a very simple reason that the circulation itself does not provide thinking. The head fulfills this function. A condition necessary for the head to want to work additionally for the company is to guarantee it time and work comfort.

While enhancing the self service systems – our everyday spade of 21st century – we save time. However, it depends from us whether and how the saved time is at all exploited.



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