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Human Resources: Do It Yourself HR

By Bob Violino

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People

Managing human resources is one of the most labor-intensive processes at a law firm. Keeping track of payroll, benefits, leave time, and lots of other information is time consuming and costly. Fortunately, there is plenty of software — both commercial and home-grown — that can help firms automate many HR functions. Firms that are using these tools are seeing benefits — such as cost savings and increased efficiency.

Bingham McCutchen (www.bingham.com), with nine United States offices and three overseas, has 950 attorneys and 1,150 executives and support staff. In the mid-1990s, the firm began using an HR tracking and analysis system called HRVantage, from Spectrum Human Resource Systems Corp., (www.spectrumhr.com). The system helps the firm to track and report on HR-related tasks including new hire processing, employee status, benefits enrollments, employee history and performance/salary reviews.

The software, which runs on Microsoft Corp.'s Windows operation systems, replaced manual, paper-based processing



From left: Bruce Phillips, Carole Schloz, Milly McInnis, Sarah Burghardt

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of HR information that was time consuming and costly.

As Bingham McCutchen expanded rapidly through acquisitions — since 1997, it has merged seven firms into its fold, and increased its number of offices — the firm needed to provide easy access to HR data for all its offices, says Amy Murphy, HRIS administrator. In 2000, Bingham began using another Spectrum product, called iVantage, which provides the same functions as HRVantage but is web-based, and allows HR employees to enter and update personnel information in the system.

"HRVantage was a standalone system, and only people in the Boston office had access to it," Murphy says. "I was the data entry person for the whole firm." That was manageable when Bingham was much smaller. But the addition of regional offices with their own HR departments and attorney recruitment officers made it necessary to provide access to HR data, she said.

The HR system has become a key resource for sharing data across the firm, Murphy says. "It allows the local HR offices to access data in real time, rather than having to make a request to Boston," she says.

A self-service feature in iVantage lets all of the firm's personnel log in and update their information, such as address, dependents and emergency contacts, and view personal information such as salary and benefit enrollments. During open enrollment periods, employees can use the system to make changes in benefit information, saving the HR department significant data entry time.

Murphy says Bingham did not track any metrics on return on investment, and declines to say how much the firm spent on its HR software.

According to Sybil Romley, Spectrum's president and CEO, the cost of iVantage software for a typical 1,000 user law firm would run between \$30,000 to \$50,000, depending on what modules were chosen and the specific configurations and customization required. The figure does not include ongoing maintenance fees or implementation costs, she says.

Tracking Time

Some HR software helps firms keep track of support staff work time. For example, Thompson Hine (www.thompsonhine.com) uses Workforce Central, from Kronos Inc. (www.kronos.com) to help its HR department track attendance, time worked and vacation accruals for non-lawyer staff via the internet, says Cathleen Baskey, associate director of human resources. The firm has 380 attorneys and 472 executives and support staff, in seven U.S. and one overseas offices.

Thompson Hine began using the software in 2003 to track work hours and accruals for support staff, including secretaries and administrative staff in finance, HR and IT. Workforce Central is linked to the firm's payroll system, so

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staff overtime can be processed efficiently, Baskey says.

The Kronos software, which cost the firm about \$125,000, has eliminated the need for manual time sheets. Because users can go online to check on vacation and personal day accruals, "it cuts down on thousands of phone calls [from workers] asking what their balances are," Baskey says.

The firm also expects to save money by avoiding inaccurate records of work time and the resulting overpayment, and by eliminating document copying expenses, Baskey says. The firm initially estimated it would save more than \$100,000 in the first three years of using the software, and Baskey thinks that goal has been reached.

Thompson Hine also uses an internally developed evaluation tool for all levels of personnel, including lawyers. The application, rolled out in 2003, automates the entire review process, enabling users to view their self-evaluations and feedback from managers on the firm's intranet. Previously, the review process was done on paper and took much longer, says Kevin Kendall, human resources manager.

Morrison & Foerster

With 1,070 lawyers, 230 paralegals, and 1,200 executives and support staff, Morrison & Foerster (www.mofo.com) has 18 offices: 11 in the U.S., five in Asia, and two in Europe. The firm uses PeopleSoft HCM from Oracle Corp. (www.oracle.com) for a variety of HR functions including payroll, benefits and benefits administration, and attorney and support staff recruiting.

The firm has adopted a series of HCM modules for different functions over the past five years, says Carole Schloz, senior human resources systems and analysis manager. Her HR team includes business process manager Bruce Phillips, IS specialist Milly McInnis, and IS analyst Sarah Burghardt.

Schloz says the web-based software "has allowed us to provide greater access to HR data for those people who need it to do their jobs." The firm has seen a decrease in its reliance on paper reports, as managers and supervisors can now go online to review data on their direct reports.

The PeopleSoft application enables Morrison & Foerster to process future-dated transactions, and the firm has used that feature to streamline its "on-boarding" of new hires, Schloz says. The software's global functions allows the firm to easily adapt it for use in its international offices, she notes.

She declines to say how much the software cost, and says the firm is not at a point where it has captured any metrics on cost savings or other returns.

According to Oracle's price list on its website, HCM is priced at \$125 per employee.

New Hires

In addition to tracking current staff and attorneys, HR software helps firms automate the process of bringing in new hires.

Michael Best & Friedrich (www.michaelbest.com) positions itself as a midwest-based firm, and has four offices within Wisconsin, two in China, and two others, in Montgomeryville, Pa., and Chicago.

With 250 lawyers and 226 executives and support staff, it uses business process management software from Metastorm Inc. (www.metastorm.com) to gather information on new attorneys and support staff, from HR people and hiring committees. The data is automatically sent to various departments — such as IT and operations — which can set up new hires with computer equipment, office supplies, phone and business cards.

"The biggest problem with HR is people being brought in and setting them up with what they need," says Peter Ferr, director of IT. "Every department does [its] own thing." The business process management software, which runs on a Hewlett-Packard Co. (www.hp.com) server, keeps the process uniform and data consistent throughout the firm.

The Metastorm software replaced a largely paper-based process that took much longer because it involved sending documents by mail among the firm's six offices. Michael Best also uses the software to automate the process of support staff evaluations. Ferr declines to say how much the firm spent on the software.

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Metastorm spokesperson Jayson Schkloven says pricing is structured by server, seats, and application, and notes that an enterprise software is available. The minimum investment to get started with the software is about \$100,000, he said.

As far as return on investment, Ferr says there isn't a way to measure the efficiency gains from the automation.

"The uniform information gathering and data integrity was the goal of this project," says Ferr.

Challenges

As with any other technology, adopting HR software comes with challenges as well as benefits.

"The biggest challenge was learning a new technology, and the second was training other users to use the system," says Murphy of Bingham. Another concern, especially with many people in the firm maintaining data on the HR system, was keeping information accurate and timely and avoiding omissions in data, Murphy says.

To address these concerns, Bingham's HR department developed a training manual to help employees use the system most effectively, and periodically provides training via online meetings.

Morrison & Foerster discovered that PeopleSoft HCM modules aren't designed specifically for law firms. The firm had to customize the software to fit its requirements, Schloz says, building an internal team to work with the system even as the firm was implementing the software.

"We partnered with consultants to assist us with each phase, along with MoFo resources actively participating in the project work," Schloz says. With each phase the firm built in time for "knowledge transfer" with the consultants to help ensure that the hand-off from consultants to Morrison & Foerster's people went smoothly.

Kendall of Thompson Hine says anytime a process is changed it will likely meet with some resistance. "Some people have apprehensions [about] automation," he says. For example, he says, some of the partners prefer not to use a computer, and still rely on paper forms for HR processes.

For those who embrace technology, though, HR software is making life easier. "It has brought us to the next level of service that we're able to provide to our people," says Baskey.

Bob Violino is a New York-based freelance reporter, whose work has appeared in Computerworld and Baseline. E-mail: bviolino@optonline.net.

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