

Need an HRIS Person? Consider a Digital Native

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New HR professionals are carving out roles as go-to troubleshooters, social networking experts and project leaders.

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For years, Ben Eubanks has known his way around computers. "I was always messing around with some kind of software," he says. "Everyone in my family knew I was the computer guy. Whether I knew what I was doing or not, they would ask me to fix things."

Now 23 and in his first HR job, Eubanks' colleagues at Volunteers of America North Alabama Inc., in Huntsville, turn to him when they have problems with their human resource information systems (HRIS). "They had just purchased the HRIS before I started, and no one knew how to do the most basic functions," he says. "I made it my goal to learn how to do anything and everything with it. Now I'm the go-to guy."

Eubanks is part of a youth movement in HR technology. Despite college HR curricula that lack technology training (see "Teaching Tech" in the July 2008 issue of *HR Magazine*), under-30s are, like Eubanks, troubleshooting, working on HR system implementations and helping figure out social networking strategies. Some are even involved in metrics and workforce analytics.

"In some organizations, HR is so far behind the technology curve that these young upstarts are heroes," says Paul Belliveau, SPHR, a senior principal for human capital management consulting in the Quincy, Mass., office of Infosys Technologies Ltd., an outsourcing company based in Bangalore, India. "By necessity, we see younger people, not the older ones, becoming the experts."

Digital Natives to the Rescue

The age demographic of the HRIS profession has not been studied much. The International Association for Human Resources Information Management (IHRIM), an HRIS professional association, doesn't track members by age, according to Lynne Mealy, IHRIM's CEO. Steve Boese, an HRIS consultant and adjunct professor of HR technology at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y., searched several academic databases and found no such studies.

But there is anecdotal evidence that there's a youth movement in HR technology. Mealy says attendees at IHRIM's annual conferences have been getting younger by the year. "What attracts younger HR people [to HRIS] now is that they understand what technology can do. They're

more technology-savvy."

Through blogs and Twitter, Boese keeps up a dialogue with a growing number of young HR professionals interested in technology; he connected *HR Magazine* with some of them, including Eubanks. "The opportunity is there in technology for young HR professionals to make an impact sooner than in the past, and many of them realize it."

Christine Ferguson, vice president of global human capital management strategy for Workday Inc., an HR management system (HRMS) provider in Pleasanton, Calif., says, "We work with some project leaders under the age of 30 who don't even want the IT staff's help; they feel empowered by technology and want to do it all themselves."

Members of the Millennial generation are what one consultant calls "digital natives," not the "digital immigrants" of older generations. Today's technologies—and the fact that they change quickly—are not alien to digital natives, who grew up with computers, cell phones, game players, the Internet and every conceivable digital interface. Members of the Millennial generation do not have the psychological block to technology that many others do. They do not shy away from new software and devices, and they have used social networking much of their lives.

Below are examples of the modest and major influences that digital natives are having in HR.

A Whole New World

Eubanks never heard of "human resources" until his second year in college. Having worked in the family business—a small machine shop—he knew about hiring, training, compensation and compliance. "I knew about HR issues. I just didn't know there was a field that dealt with them," he says. After writing a paper on HR for a business management class at Athens State University, in Athens, Ala., he decided to major in HR.

As in most undergraduate programs, HR technology received scant attention. "In one class we learned the definition of HRIS, and that was as far as we got," Eubanks says. "There's a whole world dedicated to HR technology that I didn't know existed until I went looking for it. It was a rude awakening."

It was also exhilarating because Eubanks intuitively understood the power of technology. "I know that any improvement to help us cut costs or automate processes will save us time and money and allow us to focus on more important issues, less on transactional stuff and more on strategic HR," he says.

During his job interview at Volunteers of America North Alabama, a nonprofit social services organization with 700 paid employees serving 80 facilities, the HR vice president wanted to make sure Eubanks was comfortable with technology. "I told her I wanted to learn everything about the new HRIS. She was thrilled," he recalls.

Each of the Huntsville organization's other five HR professionals has a functional specialty. "I

saw an opportunity to distinguish myself with the system," Eubanks says. "Now, if someone needs something, I can do it, instead of calling tech support." The system, Sage Abra HRMS, from the Sage Group Plc in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England, has HR, payroll, benefits, training, recruiting and compliance features. "No one runs reports except me," he says.

Eubanks' attraction to HR technology is natural. "I have a comfort level with technology," he says. "I grew up with a desktop computer. I got a laptop for college and wouldn't have survived without it. People my age are usually pretty comfortable with technology anyway."

Got Tech Skills?

Kelly Mitton had her first taste of HR technology before graduating from the State University of New York at Buffalo with a degree in business and an HR concentration. In 2007, during a paid internship at an HR shared services outsourcing firm, Mitton prepared spreadsheets for merit increases and helped with an HRIS conversion.

"I've been involved with technology my entire life," she says. "I worked on computers in kindergarten. I learned Excel my freshman year in college. I've used Facebook for years. I'm open to changing technology, and I don't pretend it will stay the same."

Through the internship, she also learned about the importance of data, metrics and return on investment (ROI). She helped calculate turnover rates for each department and establish new-hire metrics. "One of the first things the boss drilled into me is that we're HR but we contribute to the bottom line and need metrics," Mitton says.

Now in her first full-time job, 23-year-old Mitton is an HR coordinator at Buffalo-based Top Markets, a regional supermarket chain that owns 76 stores and has more than 10,000 employees. She's contributing her knowledge to HR technology in various ways.

During an internship at Top Markets late last year, before she was hired in January, Mitton began to use Twitter and think about its use for employee communications. Now, working with the HR employee communication manager, Mitton has presented ideas to company executives, including the CEO, on how social networking tools might play a role. She's developing metrics and considering how to measure the ROI of any social media technology. She also leads an effort to develop a company policy on employees' use of social networking.

"Kelly brings us the perspective of someone who has grown up with social networking," says Jack Barrett, senior VP of HR at Top Markets. "Her challenge has been to educate the executives, including myself, and show the business relevance of social networking. She's about to complete that project. We'll factor this knowledge into our capital investment program with respect to technology."

Mitton was hired for her overall capabilities and academic record, Barrett says, but her technology savvy was also important: "The technical fluency set her apart."

Early Adopters

At 28 years old, Kristin Ferrara has worked in HRIS for a decade, starting as a data entry clerk on a PeopleSoft system during a high school internship in the San Jose, Calif., office of Fujitsu, a Japanese electronics company. "I loved troubleshooting, and I could figure out how it worked," she says. "I had a great mentor, the HRIS analyst/manager, who taught me many of the ins and outs."

Ferrara is now associate director of HRMS for Inverness Medical Innovations Inc. in Waltham, Mass. Working remotely from her home in San Diego, her task is the worldwide rollout of Workday as the HRIS for 8,000 employees. Having grown up in the Silicon Valley, Ferrara's technical acumen is not surprising. What is surprising is how early she began working in HRIS.

Until this current role, HRIS was always part of a broader scope of HR duties at the companies where she worked. After graduating from high school, she worked full time at Fujitsu while taking community college courses. Thus began nearly a decade of holding increasingly key HR jobs while attending college part time. She eventually received a degree in communications from the University of California at San Diego. Although she had experience with three employers, she wasn't sure she was committed to HR technology.

Two years ago, while working at a medical technology company, which was soon to be taken over by Inverness, Ferrara was tapped as project leader for a Workday rollout. When the merger was announced, plans were put on hold until Inverness executives decided they wanted to adopt Workday and kept Ferrara as project leader.

Ferrara agrees her generation is more attracted to technology than other generations, but she offers a different slant on why. At the same time this tech-savvy generation is entering the workplace, new business applications are available. These applications, designed like the web sites everyone uses, are simpler to install, configure and use than previous software. If the HRIS implementation at Inverness had been something older, she might not have been as interested, Ferrara says.

"When I used other systems earlier in my career, it was great, but it wasn't as logical and fun and didn't stir creativity the way these new ones do," Ferrara says. She finds that HR colleagues 10 to 20 years older than she is are more fearful of technology, but when she shows them how easy this new system is, they get over their fear.

"I spend a lot of time getting these people to learn to run their own reports, and it is paying off," she says. "If we were still on a big enterprise resource planning system, they might be justifiably scared off."

Tech Transition

The oldest among these youngsters is Jen Frost, 31, a global IT project manager at Life Technologies Inc., a global biotechnology company based in Carlsbad, Calif. She has worked on PeopleSoft, SAP and Excel spreadsheets at several organizations. Frost discovered her knack as

a power user of Excel and Access databases when she was an undergraduate at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) in San Luis Obispo. She eventually got an MBA at Cal Poly with a dual concentration in HR and information management systems.

Frost has spent her entire career in HRIS. She was involved in her first PeopleSoft implementation—an upgrade to the web version—as an intern in Cal Poly’s HR department. She is impressed by the technical savvy of young HR professionals, and she says it may impact HRIS staffing. "Kids know this stuff. If you are hiring a more technologically savvy workforce, then you don’t need an HRIS specialist," she says. She sees a future that may not need as many HRIS specialists because the younger generation will be functional specialists who are able to use the technology with little or no help.

Frost offers this advice: "Companies would do well to recruit interns and recent graduates who demonstrate logical/systematic skills and strengths and start them off as junior analysts directly within the HRIS function."

Naomi Bloom, a longtime strategic HR consultant and managing director of Bloom & Wallace, a consulting firm in Fort Myers, Fla., began her HRIS career on mainframe computers and is not surprised at this youth trend. "With each successive generation," she says, "the folks coming along are more naturally adept at technology than the ones who came before."

She adds a note of caution, however: "There are many nuances about HRIS that a 23-year-old will not know. A bright new group of HR professionals who embrace technology and know what it is to use it would be good, but they will benefit from experienced governance."

The author is HR Magazine’s contributing editor for technology.

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