

“Europeanisation” and the New European HRIS Business Environment



By Karen V. Beaman

Prediction is tricky when analysing the human resource information systems (HRIS) scene in Europe, because of the many conflicting forces the continent is subject to. In general, these forces can be summarised as dialectic of two trends. On the one hand, Europe has many nations, languages, cultures, histories, and nationalistic tendencies that

◆ As a result of EMU (European Monetary Union), the national economies in Europe are coming together. The euro — Europe’s new single currency — will inevitably move into widespread use.²

◆ Year 2000 problems are still plaguing many organisations. Some surveys are predicting that less than 50 percent of European companies are ready.³

European companies are looking more and more beyond their own borders at how other companies are doing things to find ways to improve their own competitiveness.

are pushing it in one direction; on the other, there are significant “Europeanisation” forces that are pulling it in another, more unified direction with the subsequent emergence of a pan-European business environment.¹

If there is anything we can safely predict about HRIS in Western Europe, it is that its growth will be a far more complicated process than it has been in the U.S. This problem can be grasped more effectively if one keeps the opposing forces — local diversity versus pan-continental unity — clearly in mind. This article discusses the major HRIS trends developing throughout Europe, at both the pan-European and national levels, and attempts to unravel these opposing forces by synthesising the key trends likely to dominate European HRIS in the next millennium.

THE CURRENT BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT IN WESTERN EUROPE

We can begin by considering some background to the major trends affecting business in Europe as a whole:

◆ Labour legislation is having an increasing impact on business. New legislation, like the European Union’s (EU) Working Time Directive and France’s 35-hour work week regulation, are posing more constraints on organisations, increasing labour costs, and making it difficult for companies to remain competitive against the encroachment of multinationals.⁴

◆ Concerns over data privacy and information protection are growing. As seen in the current struggle between the EU and the U.S. over data protection, Europeans are becoming increasingly concerned over protecting the privacy of their personal data.⁵

◆ Interest in “benchmarking” and “best practices” is growing as a means to increase competitive advantage. European companies are looking more and more beyond their own borders at how other companies are doing things to find ways to improve their own competitiveness.

A recent survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers⁶ asked management in 250 com-

panies in seven countries (Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Turkey, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK) to rank what they saw as the major issues that their organisation will face in the future (see Figure 1). The main issue for respondents in all regions of Europe (there were no significant differences between countries) was growth. The issues ranked immediately below were quality, cost reduction and new products and services — all of which, like maintaining growth, have to do with remaining competitive in a challenging marketplace.

Interestingly, globalisation ranked seventh on the list. Only 25% of respondents considered it important, far fewer than we would expect from an U.S. perspective. The same trans-Atlantic difference in perspective applies to downsizing, and mergers and acquisitions, all of which ranked much lower in Europe than they would have been in the U.S.

THE EUROPEAN HRIS ENVIRONMENT

The PricewaterhouseCoopers survey also asked HR executives about what issues the HR Department regard as increasingly important. Ninety percent of the companies surveyed indicated Quality of Employees and Quality of Management as the main issues of the HR Department (see Figure 2). Next, in terms of importance, the companies ranked Employee Motivation and Loyalty (85%) and Employee Communications (81%), followed by Career Management (63%), Labour Costs (60%), Recruitment (60%), and Compensation/Benefits (59%).

A strong inter-relationship can be seen between the key business issues (Figure 1) and the key HR management issues (Figure 2) in Europe. The three

leading issues from the organisational side — growth, quality improvement, and cost reduction — all highlight the importance of HR and what HRIS can do to help the business. For quality improvement, we need quality people. For quality people, we need to retain staff. To retain staff, we need to motivate people with opportunities. And, to motivate people, we need good compensation and benefits programs. But benefits and compensation must be balanced against the need to control costs, and HR technology and organisational change are central to effecting cost efficiencies.

Quite disconcerting, however, HR technology ranked last on the list of European HR concerns. This finding supports the observation that Europeans in general haven't yet accepted the importance of technology, the Internet, and the Web to future economic growth. Both personal experience and professional research support this finding. It is rare in Europe to log on and personally check one's email every day — this task is one senior managers relegate to their administrative assistants!

Research indicates that Europe has historically under-invested in effective HR systems, and that this under-investment has hampered HR executives. A study last year by INPUT, a computer software and services research institute, found that HR executives in Europe have experienced "frustration in their inability to contribute real added-value to their businesses" because of the under-investment in HR information systems. As a result, a high level of management effort must continue to be devoted to routine administrative tasks.⁷

This shortcoming represents an area of tremendous potential growth in Europe, as the need for advanced, integrated HR systems is addressed. An HR Department mired in routine administration, not using technology effectively to minimise resources spent on routine transactions — what more obvious target could there be for vendors of HR systems?

However, it is only in the last couple of years that the major vendors have begun to launch integrated HRIS products to meet this need. Many European companies are beginning to select vendors and to implement programs that support personnel, benefits, payroll, and advanced

HR management functions. This progression has been familiar to HRIS leaders in U.S. businesses who started their automation process with manufacturing, distribution and finance. Now that they are finished with all other ERP (enterprise resource planning) automation, they are finally "getting around" to automating HR and to integrating HR/Payroll with the rest of the enterprise. The bad news is that HR is seen as the least important priority in the organisation (read, "non-strategic"); the good news is that we're finally getting the attention we deserve!

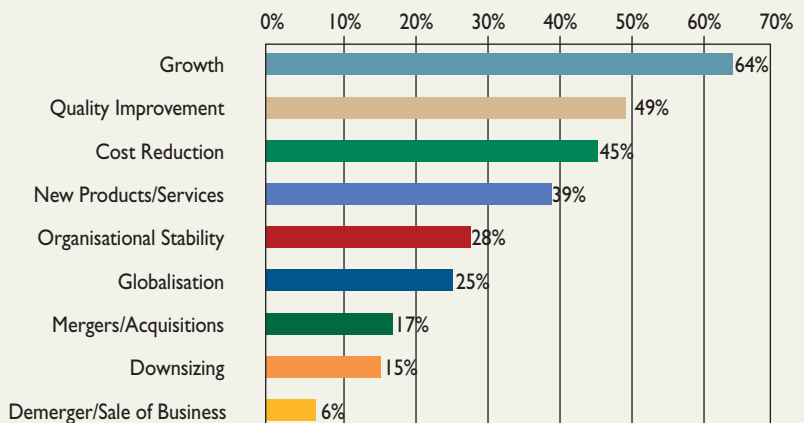
The implementation of new HR information systems in Europe, along with the development of externally provided HR services, will allow HR to start thinking more strategically about how to best perform its role. However, what is lacking in Europe to make this a reality are fully

integrated, pan-European HR/Payroll systems and services. What exists now is a multitude of local solutions, interfaced (at best) to a corporate data repository. In order for European HR to move into the role of strategic partner, we need to have systems that support both global and local requirements, across all European countries, that provide improved data access and management, that incorporate expanded Internet/intranet capabilities, and that support workflow and self-service solutions. While such systems have been in place for some years now in North America, this reality is only just now beginning to emerge in Europe.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN HRIS

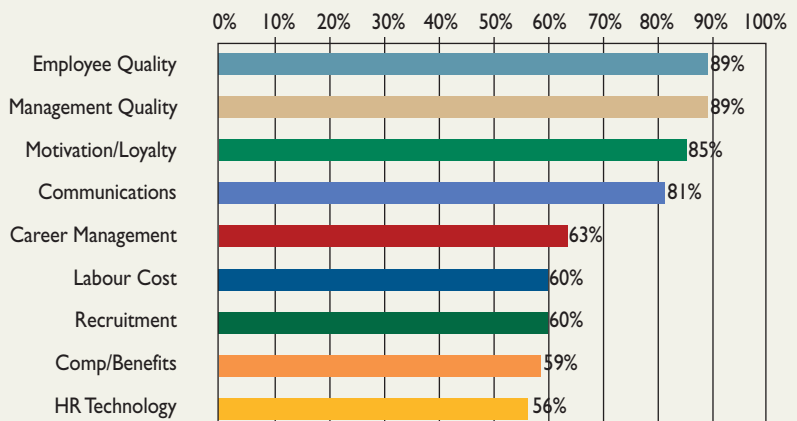
Useful though it is to look at pan-European trends, we must return to the other side of the European dialectic; dif-

Figure 1. Key European Business Issues.



Source: Pricewaterhouse Coopers 1998

Figure 2. Key European HR Management Issues.



Source: Pricewaterhouse Coopers 1998

ferences between nations and regions. Indeed, the HRIS situation varies markedly depending on which country you refer to. Renaissance Worldwide recently surveyed management in three countries — the United Kingdom, France, and Germany — regarding the primary motivation companies have for initiating a new HRIS project.⁸ The differences are instructive (see Figure 3).

United Kingdom. In the UK, the main reason that companies select to implement a new HRIS is for HR strategic and/or policy reasons. No less than 82 percent of respondents chose this answer. This finding supports the subjective observation that HR in the UK is further along in becoming a strategic

business partner in the corporation. Progress in this direction is, alas, much slower in France and Germany.

Business in the UK, more than in the other two countries, also focuses on employee retention and recruiting, because of rising turnover, a shortage of skilled labour and growing competition. For the same reasons, a larger contingent workforce and more flexible working conditions have developed. UK employers are more likely than German or French employers to support casual Fridays, flex time, and telecommuting. All of these conditions impinge on HRIS in obvious ways.

France. In France, the main reason companies indicate for implementing a new HRIS is technical constraints (55%

of respondents) — constraints such as the Year 2000 problems, euro compliance, and the need to migrate to a new platform (see Figure 3 again). There is increasing recognition in France of the need to replace ageing HR systems with advanced, integrated systems. This motive is paralleled by an emerging desire to catch up in utilising the Internet for competitive advantage (a topic discussed in more detail below).

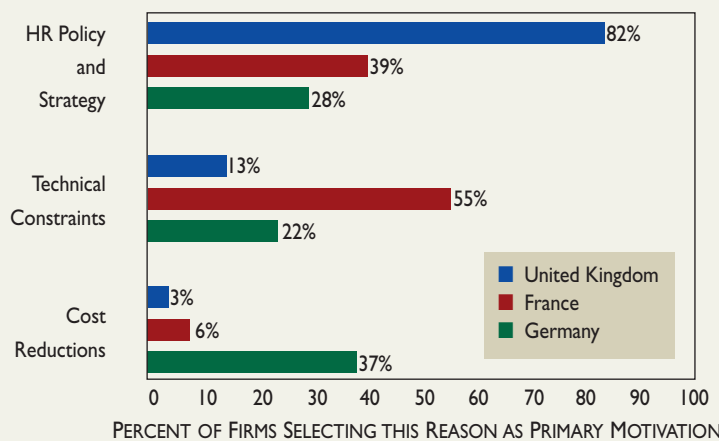
Of course, the other main challenge to HRIS in France is the integration of the new 35-hour work week regulation with the accompanying business and system changes. Companies are scrambling to figure out how to limit employee work weeks to 35 hours while still managing costs. The structural and organisational problems will be enormous. The rest of Europe will be watching to see how this social experiment, intended to create more jobs and reduce unemployment, will play out.

Germany. In Germany, we see a less marked difference in the major reasons companies have for initiating a new HRIS project (see Figure 3 again), however cost reduction appears to be the main driver. This finding dovetails with the PricewaterhouseCooper study presented earlier about the priorities of HR managers in Germany. In that study, Germany differed from other EU countries, in that companies ranked their biggest problem in HR as labour cost reduction (71 percent of respondents). Recently, mergers and downsizing have become stronger concerns in Germany than in the other two countries — another reason that labour cost reduction is such a significant concern.

Finding talent is not any easier in Germany than in other European countries. Recruiting continues to be a significant problem. Thus, headhunters are emerging in Germany, and Germans are sometimes surprised at the tricks the headhunters have to find people. Other services to help find people, such as Job Fairs and Assessment Centres, are also emerging. The biggest challenge to German recruiters is that employees often need to give six months notice before leaving the company — a policy that greatly complicates just-in-time hiring efforts.

Figure 4 (the data combined from several different studies) demonstrates some of the differences among the three

Figure 3. Main Motivation for Selecting an HRIS.



Source: Renaissance Worldwide 1999

Figure 4. Some HRIS Differences Among Major European Countries.

Main Reason for implementing HRIS	UK	GERMANY	FRANCE
	Strategic or policy reason	Cost reduction	Technical restraints
HR Projects managed by HR, not by IT	70%	57%	57%
Migration to PC/Client-Server	72%	66%	Not available
Internet Usage	88%	85%	64%
Self-Service	77%	10%	12%
Call Centres	36%	25%	12%
Willingness to outsource	Not available	61%	32%
Age of HRIS	40% are less than three years old	50% are over 10 years old	Not available

major European countries. Most of the items are self-explanatory, but one or two need elaboration. When HR projects are managed by HR directors, and not by IT, we see progress in the acceptance of HR as a business partner. The trend is, as usual, most advanced in the UK. In the UK, moreover, HR automation projects have in the past often been managed by payroll, so the high number now managed by HR is all the more encouraging. (However, the Y2K situation has caused IT to try to regain control of HRIS projects.)

As for outsourcing, once again, France lags behind its northern neighbours. In the northern countries, incidentally, one sees great interest in insourcing HR and outsourcing payroll. The reasons behind this are that HR is seen as strategic, whereas payroll is considered non-strategic and transactional.

To summarise the findings in Figure 4, we see that the UK is more open to ideas and best practices from North America than are other countries; they are particularly open to change. While Germans are stereotyped as being resistant to change, I have found them to be much more open to new ideas than are people from the southern countries. Moreover, whereas some countries are reflexively anti-U.S., Germany is very open to American ideas. France is the least oriented to innovation and change; the prevailing attitude in France is generally one of waiting to see how things work elsewhere before considering change. These findings exemplify a trend I mentioned in my previous article on Europeanisation: new ideas and technologies tend to spread in waves, beginning first with the U.S., then moving to the northern European countries (UK, Benelux, and Scandinavia), then to Germany, and then to the south (France, Spain, and Italy).⁹

THE INTERNET: PLAYING CATCH-UP

The Internet remains an important area of European growth.¹⁰ A recent survey conducted by the Wall Street Journal Europe interviewed 10,500 citizens in 11 EU countries between April and May 1999.¹¹ The survey asked the following question: What are the most important issues that you think Members of the European Parliament should address in the next five years? Not surprisingly, due to the high levels of unemployment in Eu-

rope, job creation was listed as the number one priority (see Figure 5). The top five issues seen by the citizens in the EU were the same top five in every country, often in the same order: creating jobs, promoting peace, improving the environment, controlling spending and ensuring a safe food supply.

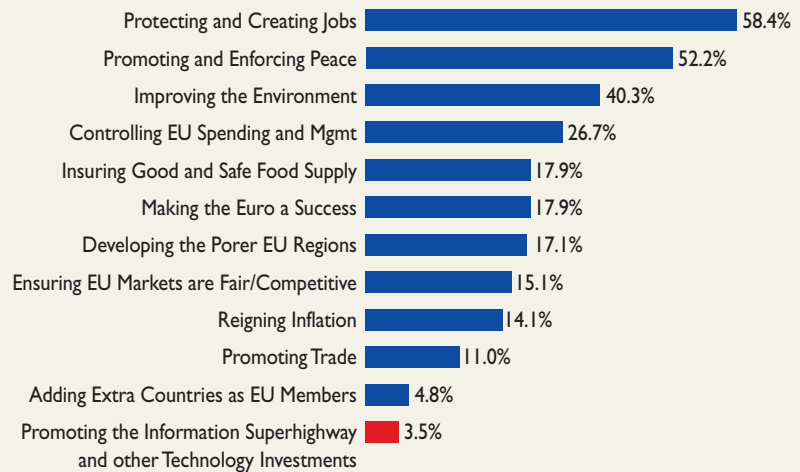
It is interesting to note that one of the EU's highest priority items involves expanding the EU eastward. But as you can see from this survey, EU expansion is clearly not that high a priority to the current citizens, only 17.1%. When asked separately, Do you think the EU should be expanded (to Poland, Hungary, Czech Rep, Slovenia, Estonia, Malta, and

Cyprus), 59.1% said yes, 31.3% said no, and 16.8% were undecided.

Most noteworthy from this survey, and not even mentioned in the Wall Street Journal article, is the fact that technology investments and promoting the information superhighway scored at the bottom of the list — only 3.5%. Without technology and the Internet, where is that going put Europe's competitiveness?

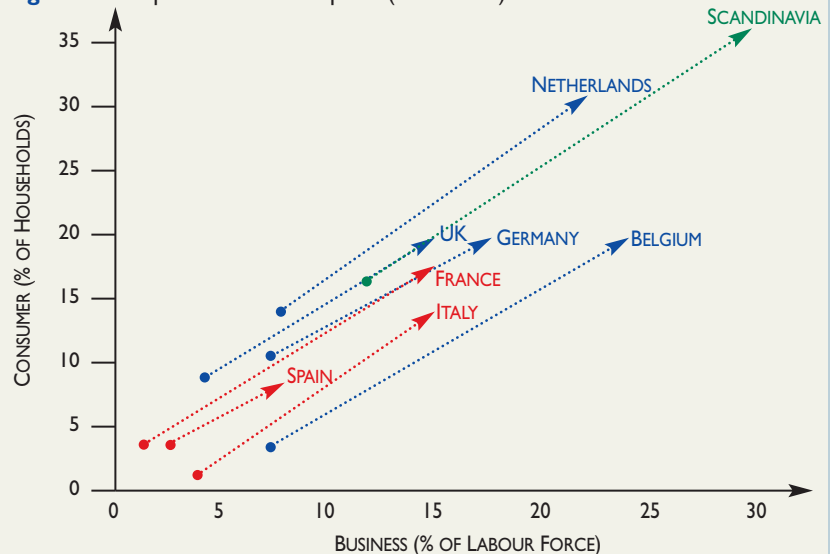
But once again, when talking about Europe, one must consider regional differences. A recent GartnerGroup study¹² estimated the current and projected growth of the Internet in Europe, for both business (as a percentage of the labour force) and the consumer (as a percent-

Figure 5. Most Important Issues for the European Union.



Source: Wall Street Journal Europe June 8, 1999

Figure 6. European Internet Adoption (1998-2001).



Source: GartnerGroup 1998

age of Internet-enabled households) over the next three years (see Figure 6). The projections differ markedly from region to region. Moreover, they shed light on another reason for the differences we see regarding HRIS — differences in prosperity among the countries.

The Southern European countries (Spain, Italy, and France) have been the slowest to adopt the Internet. One cen-

swered by a secretary, although you may never know it!

Finally, corporate awareness of the value of the Internet is lower in these countries, especially in smaller businesses. Nonetheless, Internet demand is growing. Businesses are beginning to understand that the Internet is important in order to stay competitive with the rest of the world. Still, the starting point and the

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tral reason is economic — these countries are less affluent than their northern neighbours. But other reasons pertain as well, notably the region's culture, which is more traditional and less accepting of "high-tech" innovations and the latest tools and gadgets.

In France, there is another unique element inhibiting Internet growth: the widespread use of a competing technology, the Minitel, which has largely obviated the need for the Internet. The Minitel was developed three decades ago by France Telecom, the national telephone monopoly. It was developed to be a sort of "online yellow pages"; however, it has grown considerably in scope since its inception. On the Minitel today, you can buy tickets for the train, the theatre, concerts, movies, or shows. You can look for apartments, find a date — essentially, anything you can do with the Internet. And it's all in French! Because the content of the Internet is mostly English and because English fluency is not widespread in France, the Minitel has greatly reduced the demand for the Internet there.

Internet growth in the southern European countries is slowed by several cultural factors as well. France is a verbal culture¹³, in which people often meet in the hallways or at the coffee machine to discuss business and make decisions. People tend not to want to sit in front of computers and interact via email. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the management culture in France is such that many managers still consider it "beneath their station" to touch a computer. Your email to a French executive will likely be an-

swered by a secretary, although you may never know it!

growth rate will continue to be slower in the south than in the north.

The Northern European countries — the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium) — are considerably more advanced in adopting the Internet. The reasons again involve both economics — these countries are more prosperous than their southern neighbours — and culture, since these countries have fewer traditional constraints against technology. In the northern countries one sees, for example, PalmPilots and other PDAs (personal digital assistants) regularly, while in France such "gadgets" are rare. Moreover, English fluency is more common in these countries (and universal in the UK, of course!), so that in large part, they have been able to leverage the considerable (U.S.) English content already on the Net.

The four Scandinavian countries — Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden — represent the only real European eZone — an online, cross-border e-commerce trading area. Forward-looking affinities, in both culture and technology adoption, have enabled the building of an Internet infrastructure earlier here than in other countries. Again, the countries' high levels of English-language fluency have also allowed them to make use of the predominantly English content.

The above findings suggest, among other things, that until we have more foreign language sites, English dominance on the Web will continue to slow the growth of the Internet in southern Europe. This raises the obvious question of how much effort Europeans are expend-

ing on creating foreign language sites. As it happens, European business is investing more per website this year than the U.S. The average European investment in Web development is more than twice the average amount invested in the U.S.¹⁴ ActiveMedia estimates that the average European budget for website development in 1999 will reach USD 76,799 per site. This compares to an estimated average investment of USD 33,580 in the U.S., and just USD 6,626 in Australia and New Zealand. Whether this means that Europeans are undertaking more ambitious website projects than the U.S., or that they don't have the costs of web development as well under control, it does indicate that Europe is at least undertaking the website development process in a serious way.

Another point to consider is that the growth of the Internet in Europe has received a major boost in the last decade from another force: the deregulation of the telecommunications industry and the dismantling of state monopolies. France Telecom may have the Minitel, but it must now deal with competition that offers Internet access. This has certainly been an impetus for its offering Internet access itself! These deregulation activities have reduced the cost of telephone usage and increased competitiveness. Free ISPs are also emerging that will help to accelerate this trend.

In summary, the factors influencing Internet adoption favour the Northern countries: English-language dominance of Web content; greater openness to technology (from PCs to cell phones); and greater affluence. In contrast, the Southern countries have a lower level of English fluency, less affluence, more reservations about technology and less-developed technological infrastructures.

PAN-EUROPEAN TRENDS AFFECTING HRIS

Five pan-European trends are likely to dominate the future evolution of HRIS in Europe.

(1) European Monetary Union

The most salient pan-European force affecting HRIS today is European Monetary Union (EMU). Whether or not the euro turns out to have been a sound financial policy, it will inevitably come into widespread use. It will remove most of

the burden of dealing with fluctuating exchange rates between EU countries, thereby bringing the national economies of Europe closer together. It will enable businesses and countries to work more closely together on a pan-European basis by making business decisions simpler and more transparent between countries.

One example of this is in the area of compensation. Because compensation differentials between countries will be harder to ignore, companies will have to change how they have traditionally built compensation plans. They will need to take a "transnational" approach,¹⁵ building structures and programs that meet both pan-European and local requirements simultaneously — not a trivial task. Other areas, such as pricing, will similarly have to be addressed.

(2) Globalisation

Another general force impinging on the future of HRIS in Europe is globalisation and the steady growth in multinational organisations and cross-border partnerships. Companies are realising that in order to survive they need to have partners outside of their own geographical borders. "Merger-mania," which has hit Europe as much as it has the U.S., is creating a multinational workforce. A natural consequence is the need for a transnational approach to people management in everything from recruitment to staffing, training and performance management. We also need to understand such tricky issues as responsiveness to local legal requirements in employment, and the vexing question of cross-cultural awareness, a daily concern in a multinational business environment.¹⁶

The growth of multinationals is also creating the need for global organisational management structures. Organisations can no longer be geographically centred, but instead need to be globally organised according to industry sectors and/or product segments. Matrix management and virtual organisational models will need to be created to address the needs of the new transnational organisation.

(3) Changing HR Technology

Surveys suggest that less than 50 percent of European computers are ready for the year 2000. That percentage varies depending on the economic situation of the country, making it hard to get accu-

rate details; but clearly, Y2K compliance is still an urgent issue in Europe that needs to be addressed.

European business must also understand and exploit the Internet. In a decade or two, the Internet is likely to be truly international. We can be assured that, in the coming years, Europe's many cultures and languages will find more representation on the Web.¹⁷ Given the momentum of the Internet, this process is likely to happen faster than it did in the U.S. but, as we have seen, much of Europe is still far behind.

Europe also needs to focus on some of the other obstacles that are inhibiting the use of technology for strategic purposes. A central concern is the need to overcome traditional biases and embrace technology for all it can offer in the area of productivity improvements. As we have seen, this obstacle is non-existent in Scandinavia and the UK, yet it is still a strong force in the southern European countries. Never before has technology given us the opportunities that we have today. European businesses must implement self-service strategies and web-based technologies to free HR from administrative, routine, non-value-added tasks.

(4) Providing More Employer Flexibility while Maintaining Worker Protection

Business in the U.S. can count on a strong tradition of employer flexibility. The U.S. tradition of "at will" employment allows U.S. employers to use layoffs, position eliminations and firings when needed, with relatively few limitations. In Europe, however, laying off an unwanted or surplus worker is much more difficult. Europeans have very strong feelings about employee rights and protection, and about worker representation.

Although there are many advantages to the European approach, it constrains business. In various countries and at the EU level, there is increasing legislation to protect workers' rights (e.g., minimum wage requirements, work hours limitations, minimum leave, data protection and work councils). These legislative developments are placing more constraints on organisations, increasing labour costs and making it difficult for companies to be competitive. In the future, we can expect increasing pressure on European legisla-

Figure 7. The Future European HRIS Environment

- ◆ **European Monetary Union**
 - Payments, wages, salaries in euros
 - Greater transparency of compensation differentials between companies and countries
 - Need for training and communication programs
 - Reprogramming/adapting current systems
 - Revised company pension programs
- ◆ **Globalisation**
 - Mergers across borders creating a multinational workforce and requiring global management practices
 - Move from geographically-based organisations to industry sectors, product segments and matrix management
 - Need for transnational approach to people management (e.g., recruitment, performance management, training, cross-cultural awareness and responsiveness to local legal requirements)
- ◆ **Changing HR Technology**
 - Year 2000 distraction is almost behind us.
 - Need to overcome traditional biases and embrace technology for all it can offer.
 - Exploitation of the Internet as companies begin to understand the efficiencies it can bring to the organisation
 - Implementation of Self-Service strategies to free the HR professional from administrative, clerical-bound tasks
- ◆ **Employer Flexibility with Worker Protection**
 - Profound belief in workers' rights and employment protection will continue to permeate the HRIS landscape
 - Legislators must balance these rights with employer flexibility, helping to curb high unemployment rates and increase company competitiveness
- ◆ **Knowledge Management**
 - Need to capture the "know-how" of the organisation and share this knowledge across borders, customs and languages
 - Need to build cross-cultural networks for sharing knowledge and "best practices" throughout the organisation
 - Need to put in place process to retain this knowledge as employee turnover rates increase

tors to balance employee rights with employer flexibility. After all, increased corporate competitiveness is the best medicine to cure high unemployment.

(5) Knowledge Management

It is challenging enough in an American organisation to share knowledge and capture know-how, but the difficulties multiply geometrically when dealing with multiple nationalities, languages, and customs. One central challenge for HRIS in Europe is to build cross-cultural, multi-lingual networks for sharing knowledge and best practices throughout a multinational corporation. Indeed, as employee turnover rates increase throughout Europe, the need for retaining knowledge inside the organisation increases as well.

In addition, in order to compare themselves to other organisations in the same or a related field, European companies are showing increased interest in what other companies are doing (both within and outside their own countries). The ability to provide meaningful transnational benchmarks across languages, borders and cultures is becoming an important challenge for HRIS.

While these five trends are the major ones, they are by no means the only forces affecting the HRIS environment in Europe. Another important facet of HRIS in Europe is data protection. Europeans are generally more reticent than Americans about democratising information. With the encroaching multinationals and the current struggle between the EU and the U.S. over data protection, Europeans are becoming increasingly concerned over how to ensure data privacy and information protection. HRIS developments will have to take European concerns in this area into account.

CONCLUSION

So what does all this mean for the future of HRIS in Europe? For one, it clearly demonstrates that Europe is undergoing a period of hypergrowth, thus HRIS will need to accelerate its growth in order to keep up. But what does the continent's dialectic of national differences versus European unification portend for the future of HRIS?

For one thing, localisation will prove advantageous by allowing Europe to perfect the idea of "personalisation." The

concept of "portals" (i.e., "doors") will be particularly relevant here. In the portal approach, individuals are given their own unique view of what they need in order to do their jobs. Each individual has a different view of the system and different access to it, based on the job he or she is assigned to do. Because of the variety of nationalities, Europe can exploit this concept by building portals that meet both global and local needs, giving the user the most appropriate interface for the activity at hand. In the end, the U.S. may be able to learn something from Europe!

But alas, no matter how strong the Europeanisation trend becomes, it seems unlikely that the benefits of this ongoing hypergrowth will be distributed equally throughout Europe. Regions without the infrastructures and cultures to take advantage of the information age will lag behind. However, HRIS professionals who take both forces into consideration — pan-European and regional — will be best positioned to understand and take advantage of the scene that does emerge.

ENDNOTES AND COMMENTARY

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For author's biography, see page 123.

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