



## Versatility – the Key to Success in HRIS

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If you're in the human resources information systems (HRIS) field and scanning the job boards or being recruited, the job description will no doubt contain the phrase "strong HRIS skills." Sounds reasonable...but what exactly does that mean? Right now, if there are 50 HRIS positions posted on the myriad job boards out there, I can guarantee that each one of those companies will define the required skills differently based on the way they are structured, how advanced they are in HR technology, their company culture, how much they've embraced outsourcing and an endless list of other variables. Company A just cares if you are an experienced SAP user, Company B wants someone to do project management and Company C wants a crackerjack report writer. Despite the fact that HRIS has been a recognized commodity since the mid-to-late 1970s, the definition of an HRIS position is as dynamic as the technology we deal with. So what's the key to success in HRIS? Be the 21st century version of a renaissance person – and versatility must be your stock in trade.

True story: Back in the mid-1980s, when I had paid my dues as an information technology (IT) programmer and then became manager of a corporate information center

(which meant I was the company's PC maven), our new vice president of HR, who had just come from a large well-known financial services firm, offered me the position of "HRIS manager." He had become frustrated by the lack of employee information available from his HR staff. When I asked what HRIS stood for, he responded "I have no idea, but we had it at Company X and I got whatever I wanted!" Okay, not too much information there. When I later cautioned him that my strength was systems but I knew nothing about HR, he replied, "Not a problem – you can pick it up in two minutes." I took the job and, in short order, found out he was way off base – HRIS proved to be one of the most developmental positions I've ever had, and no one can "pick up" HR in two minutes, considering how broad and changeable it is. Lesson learned: sometimes even the executives closest to HR have no idea what the scope and responsibility of HRIS is.

Professor Dave Ulrich and his associates at the University of Michigan recently released the results of a 2007 Human Resource Competency Study (HRCS), which describes what it takes to be profoundly effective in HR.<sup>1</sup> They described six core competencies as follows:

- Credible Activist – offers a viewpoint and is respected, admired and listened to;
- Cultural Steward – recognizes, articulates and helps shape a company's culture;
- Talent Manager – masters the theory and practice of talent management and organizational design;
- Strategy Architect – knows how to implement change;
- Business Ally – contributes to the success of the business; and,
- Operational Executor – administers daily work of managing people.

Some of the listed competencies could apply to HRIS as well, specifically the credible activist, strategy architect and business ally. One of our mandates in HRIS is to provide the tools and support that HR needs to reach full strength in all of these competencies. In order to accomplish that, we have to recognize what our additional skill sets and competencies must be.

Human resources information systems folks are hybrids. We straddle the HR/IT border and must speak the languages of both those societies in order to be most effective. Some HRIS departments report up through HR, some report through IT and in the end it isn't important. What matters is our breadth and depth of skills and the ability to recognize which are needed when. You should consider yourself the owner of the system and all of its related pieces, so although you will no doubt work with specialized resources in other areas such as system architects, general ledger gurus and benefit administrators, your ability to converse

and interact meaningfully with them can make or break your effectiveness and your ability to get things done. If you are the type of person whose typical response to something unfamiliar is “It’s not my job,” get out of HRIS now because you’re doing your company and clients an injustice. While this article will concentrate on the highest level of HRIS within your organization, whether that is a manager, director or vice president, the critical skills apply on a weighted scale to all positions on a varied HRIS staff.

There are eight skills that are key to maximizing anyone’s effectiveness in an HRIS role. The order of importance may vary according to your own organization’s needs:

- Technology aptitude,
- Project management,
- Operational knowledge,
- Financial acumen,
- Ability to educate,
- Communication flair,
- Global awareness, and
- Relationship management.

## Technology Aptitude

Your reaction may have been “duh” to this one since we focus on systems and therefore must have the requisite technology skills. However, most people in HRIS take too narrow a view of this competency. If you expect to not only contribute but have an impact, simply being the local expert on SAP, Oracle or ADP doesn’t cut it. While you don’t need to be a hard-core programmer, you do need to understand system architecture – servers, networks, bandwidth, instances, disk space – in order to ensure that the systems you are accountable for are implemented correctly, have sufficient horsepower and can “talk to” other systems without tying the entire HRIS or IT team in knots. Familiarize yourself with the latest technology developments even if you think you’re light years away from deploying them. If you don’t keep up with the latest offerings on the market and the perfect situation presents itself, you won’t recognize it and instead will recommend the “same old, same old” approach with no possibility of cost benefit, cost avoidance or process improvement. Don’t be afraid to be imaginative but let’s do a reality check here – I did not use the term “visionary” since I believe that true visionaries are the exceptions and this article is geared to the attainable and practical.

## Project Management

Knowing how to get from here to there in the best way and the shortest timeframe without stubbing everyone’s toes is an art. Your ability to influence others, marshal necessary resources, keep people on track to respond to and meet deadlines, energize an often disparate team, and recognize and resolve roadblocks quickly is a powerful skill set and an invaluable asset to any organization. In HRIS, the project could range from a software implementation to coordination of an annual enrollment or a massive acquisition initiative.

Scope, timeframes, and complexity may differ but the project management approach should not.

## Operational Knowledge

Do you understand how your employer makes money and how that translates into everyday processes? If not, you’re not a “business partner” and will not be able to envision how you can contribute to its success. Whether your company manufactures widgets, provides financial services or is in the public sector, make it your business to know the business. Human resources information systems people are problem-solvers – and the best ones recognize a problem in operations or processes before those who live with it daily but don’t know it can be fixed.

## Financial Acumen

You don’t need to be an accountant, but you do need to understand key financial concepts: a balance sheet and its components, how to calculate and prove ROI, capital projects versus expenses, the difference between hard and soft dollar costs, cost savings versus cost avoidance, to name a few. If you can’t justify your requests for project funding or staffing in fundamental financial terms, you have no room to complain when your request is refused or ignored. At some point, you will be expected to go toe-to-toe with the bottom-liners, so be prepared. This understanding does not have to be M.B.A. level finance. To partially justify the cost of implementing employee self-service many years ago, I did a simple time study of how long it took one employee to change his address.

With stopwatch in hand, I tracked the length of time it took him to make phone calls, retrieve and fill out forms, and call afterward to make sure it was done, then multiplied that times the average hourly rate of our employees and multiplied again by only 40 percent of the total number of our employees to be conservative. Since we had 70,000 U.S. employees, that dollar cost in lost work time alone took the finance people by surprise – and the project was approved. As an aside, note that I said “lost work time” rather than “lost productivity” – there is no guarantee that employees will use additional time productively, which most finance people will be quick to point out. Don’t dig a trap for yourself!

## Ability to Educate

This is an often overlooked skill that is critical to HRIS. In addition to the obvious need to train end users on the systems you own, HRIS is often the glue that holds everything together since the core database should be the single source of employee-related information throughout the organization. Your client base is very broad – besides Human Resources, you probably are accountable for interfaces and reports to IT, Payroll, Finance, Legal, Audit, the government and third-party administrators. You must be able to not only explain why and how data is kept but also how that data can become useful and vital information for all those entities.

Like salespeople selling their wares, you should “sell” the value of the information through education.

## Communication Flair

Whether you work in a dynamic culture where you must quickly think on your feet or a more traditional environment where PowerPoint is king, you must have a knack for clear and persuasive oral and written communication. Be succinct and choose the appropriate words for your audience regardless of whether you are addressing a group of executives or one of your subordinates sitting across from you. It can be a great asset to be multilingual – although, in this case, the languages might be C-level, Finance and IT rather than French or Spanish.

## Global Awareness

Raise your hand if you work for a global organization. Is your hand up? If not, think again. All of us work for global organizations in one way or another, even if it's having a co-worker whose native language is not English. Some of us are more impacted than others, e.g., having to run payroll in 30 countries worldwide or supporting an international database with multiple languages for self-service. The global economic picture changes daily and more and more American businesses are being acquired by non-U.S. based companies. There's plenty of available material on globalization, whether it's specific to systems, a webinar on cultural assimilation, or a cable show on the Travel Channel. Expand your horizons, both mentally and physically – you'll use that knowledge in every aspect of your life and career.

## Relationship Management

Some companies with large outsourcing initiatives have actually created positions with this title. In actuality, relationship management has been a part of HRIS' job since its inception. While large scale outsourcing has made it somewhat of a specialty due to contract complexity, HRIS staff have had to manage myriad relationships for years with providers, administrators, vendors, the government and even other departments within their own organization (try doing a general ledger interface without working closely and on a continual basis with your accounting department). To excel at this, you not only have to know your specific business, but you must understand how your partners do business as well. As the liaison between third-parties and your area, this can involve the art of navigating red tape, knowing when to cajole versus demand, understanding contracts and the dreaded legalese, how to nip a potential problem situation in the bud or escalate it, as necessary.

One of my former coworkers, Susan Story, joined Fidelity's outsourcing unit after having been an HRIS practitioner for many years. Since she has the advantage of seeing this issue from both sides of the house, she offered some thoughts as to the skills an outsourcer hopes its clients bring to the table. One of the biggest mistakes a company makes in outsourcing is becoming dependent on the

outsourcer for expertise in day-to-day tactical processes, legal and compliance issues and even strategic planning. The outsourcer is providing a service, but the exposure is the client's, so it is incumbent upon the client company to first maintain a high level of internal expertise, especially from a governance perspective. Secondly, the client manager should be a subject matter expert with institutional knowledge (such as the history of grandfathered benefit plans) – or at the very least, someone who knows how to get that information quickly. Third, if the client takes a “cafeteria” approach and outsources to multiple vendors, the relationship manager must understand the integration of services and the impact of changes to service, both upstream and downstream along the service continuum. Story also listed various caveats that can seriously handicap an outsourcing relationship.

- Beware the subject matter expert (SME) who isn't. An internal payroll SME who doesn't keep up with current laws and expects taxes to be withheld and filed in a manner that is not compliant can be a service provider's nightmare.
- Beware the client/vendor manager who represents the entire organization to the vendor but may only be familiar with corporate policy. This representative may think he or she can represent a smaller division or international interest with different policies and practices but lacks full knowledge, so the services contracted for create problems rather than solutions.
- Beware the client representatives who are spread so thin they cannot respond to vendor questions or meeting requests in time to meet key deadlines. Outsourcing managers walk a fine line between managing such deadlines and pushing their vendor to reply or take action on critical deliverables.
- Beware the client who tries to manage major changes, such as acquisitions or divestitures, without adding staff to support these initiatives. Thus, the ongoing staff is expected to do its daily work and step up to major projects that can extend for months or years, stretching internal resources beyond capacity.
- Beware client representatives who do not have any background in HR, systems, or the subject area they represent, such as the financial manager expected to manage the HR systems outsourcer. This increases the vendor's need to educate and communicate while continuing to manage contracted services.

Although HRIS positions do require mastery of the skills I've described, success on the job is also determined by your behavior, and behavior is driven by values. Formerly, as a practitioner in a very large multinational conglomerate and the leader of a staff of 40, I thought it was important to ensure that all of us subscribed to the same organizational values. Our department was called **H**uman **R**esource **T**echnology **S**olutions and we created the following list, which was posted around the office and frequently referred to. These values can apply to any position in any company but

they were particularly pertinent to HRIS in a challenging environment.

## HRTS Core Values

### H – High Standards

- You're a professional, so always act like one.
- You represent the department in the way you speak, the way you dress and the way you perform.

### R – Respect

- For yourself,
- For your coworkers, and
- For your clients.

### T – Team Commitment

- No man is an island.
- You can be a star but never at the expense of someone else.
- The person with the assist is as important as the person who makes the goal.

### S – Sensational Service

- Always give sensational service with a smile.
- Go the extra mile to get the answer or direct the person accordingly.
- “Do unto others...” What would you expect in that situation?

### V – Versatility

- Be flexible – if you don't bend, you'll break.
- Widen your perspective. Understand the big picture and what your contribution is.
- Accept unfamiliar assignments as a challenge and opportunity for growth.

### A – Action, not Reaction

- Challenge the status quo.
- Always ask the “next” question.
- Anticipate the future.
- Practice creative problem solving.
- No surprises – they're only good at parties.

### L – Learn from Mistakes

- If you lose, don't lose the lesson.
- Turn a negative into a positive.
- Never be afraid to take a “calculated” risk.
- Some of the greatest discoveries were the byproducts of failed experiments.

### U – Useful Communication

- Communicate clearly, consistently, frequently and appropriately.
- Never click “send” on an e-mail or leave a voicemail when you're angry. There are always negative consequences.
- If you need to vent, unburden to your leader – but don't take it outside of the department.
- Never write or record any message you wouldn't be willing to personally post on a billboard on a busy highway.

- Check your spelling and grammar – poor presentation affects your reputation and that of HRTS.

### E – Equanimity of Spirit

- Roll with the punches.
- Master and enjoy change.
- Positive attitudes are contagious.
- No matter what, always maintain your sense of humor.
- Celebrate small victories.
- Don't let naysayers defeat you – stay enthusiastic.
- Turn stress into positive energy.

### S – Shared Knowledge

- Grow by teaching others.
- Strive for continuous learning – it makes you a well-rounded person, a more valuable employee and it keeps senility at bay!
- Take responsibility for your professional development.
- Lead the way to improvement.

The role of HRIS in an organization may vary from company to company. But regardless of your position or level, you should approach the job as if you are an internal consultant. Versatility is the key to becoming a valued asset to your company. It's the classic “jack-of-all-trades” situation, with a twist, since you must also master all the trades. Combining the skills and values above, you'll be a high tech/high touch world-class HRIS practitioner – and those competencies will stand you in good stead regardless of which path your career takes.

## Endnotes

1 Robert Grossman, “New Competencies for HR,” *HR Magazine*, June 2007.

## About the Author



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