



## Catch up or give up

By: Annie Gregory

The good news? Technology is increasingly helping many of your HR brothers and sisters play a more strategic role. The bad news is that most of them aren't in manufacturing. Although, according to Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), more HR departments in general are adopting HR information system (HRIS), manufacturing's share lags way behind both private and public sectors. According to CIPD's Vanessa Robinson, they are generating current, reliable HR data for the business to make better-informed decisions, boosting HR's credibility and enabling it to make stronger cases for different ways of managing and developing people. She continues: "This data is also helping to improve employee communications and engagement - which research shows is crucial to delivering improved business performance."

Christopher Berry, managing director of Computers in Personnel (CIP), confirms that manufacturing is not seizing the technological opportunities with anything like the same enthusiasm as other sectors: "There's a general lack of understanding of what can be done. They see IT as a tool for basic administration: payroll, recording hours, managing attendance and absence - not as a means of improving the way they run their business."

It's not all bad. There are some shining examples of sophisticated HRIS usage. Companies like Coca-Cola, BAE, Rolls-Royce and Dupont are up with the best in using technology to produce a two-way exchange of information across the enterprise as well as providing career development opportunities. More companies are getting to grips with more flexible, family-friendly working pattern, including annualised hours, with or without rostering technology. There are, moreover, very good reasons why what works in a civic centre or a finance house simply isn't practical in a manufacturing organisation. It's easy to disseminate information, collect data and solicit opinion when all employees have a computer terminal on their desks. It's not when they are on a PC-free production line. And it's easier to let employees manage their own working hours when the day's output doesn't grind to a halt because someone's having a 'duvet day.'

Nonetheless, Berry believes that there are elements in wider HR practice that could easily be adopted by manufacturers. For example, more and more non-manufacturing clients are making intranet based self-service systems available for home access over the internet. If parents don't have home PCs, most of their children do. "There is no reason why an employer shouldn't give them facilities to request leave, to get on line information about pay, shift rosters, or holiday entitlement. It builds a better dialogue - and removes a substantial chunk of personnel's workload in dealing with routine questions. "Organisations like his can even host the whole thing.

He is, however, noticing an uptake in online recruiting. In Berry's view, the advantages are indisputable: all information is collected in advance; the administration is streamlined; the whole response mechanism is slicker; and it makes for a better interview. Plastek UK is a good example of the role specialist recruitment software - in this case Compel Recruitment Manager supplied by CIP - can play. The arrival of the injection mould and plastic components producer in Mansfield in 1998 boosted a then depressed area. As a result, 1500 people applied for around 250 jobs. Without IT support, the sheer volume would have been overwhelming. Instead, the system managed the entire workflow of vacancy and applicant tracking, processing applications, timetabling and tracking interviews and recording the results, working from templates to issue the right follow up letters and, ultimately, administering the starter information for those who were successful. The data collected was used to populate the new HR database, also built on Compel.



## Catch up or give up...cont.

Not everyone has the luxury of a Greenfield site like this. However, established companies can also exploit technology more gradually. Hull-based Tryton Foods is an excellent example of what can be achieved by a technologically receptive HR team focusing on the business as a whole. The home of Aunt Bessie's products, with a sales growth of 70 per cent in the last five years, Tryton is now the fastest growing frozen food manufacturer in the UK. With 550 employees, up to 150 agency staff, three factories and around 20 million Yorkshire puddings to produce every week, it continuously reviews its business practices to sustain this growth rate. In 2004, it replaced its manual clocking system with Kronos's Workforce Central, using biometric finger scanning rather than clock cards. Carol Fletcher, Tryton's HR manager openly admits initial ambitions were limited: "We were just looking for something to replace manual clocking, tally up the hours and get the pay right. What we discovered was that it's given us an HR system as well."

Even so, Tryton experienced in spades all the normal advantages of a good time and attendance (T&A) system: 10 hours a week saved in clock card analysis, an accurate payroll run that takes five minutes, not 16 hours, and the ability to kiss goodbye to complaints. But, by using it to store all HR data, its role began to grow. Adding extra modules let HR connect basic attendance data with individual personnel records. "It meant we could help managers handle their own employees' absences better," explains Fletcher. The information is all there; they can even print calendars to provide a visual display of absences with a complete history. "It's such a useful tool. Now, the moment someone comes back, we produce an individual return to work form, pass it to the manager and they get an immediate appointment. Previously, we would trawl through manual records, hoping they were up to date and they might get an interview a week afterwards. Some slipped through the net and we weren't consistent in handling things." This allows HR to spot patterns and trends like recurring problems or regular Monday/Friday absences. Absence fell so significantly on the main site - by around 27 per cent - that HR changed the way it operated. "Managers were asking for more of the same so we restructured, putting an HR advisor and an HR officer on each site. It's a biggie for us. We have been able to change the status of HR in the business to something more proactive and professional."

It got even better. HR can give planning and finance teams instant access to the previous week's labour costs. It now uses the system to inject greater financial transparency into labour management across the site, including the transfer of manpower to meet peaks and troughs in demand. When operatives are moved to another site, the system recognises it and incorporates it in weekly reports for accurate cross-charging. It is also supporting important efficiencies in the handling of agency staff. Tryton's agency arrangement gives it half an hour to decide if it needs the full complement of operatives that day. Beyond that, staff must be paid for. "The size of the plant meant we were often paying for extra bodies because we couldn't get the information we needed in time," explains Fletcher. "Now we know within the first five minutes of the shift who is in. It's a direct cost saving. "The agency also has access to the system for handling its own payroll. System use developed incrementally. Installing terminals in the canteen for people to view entitlements and request and confirm holidays with their manager saved major administrative effort. Adding in a workforce leave module gave effective management of the kinds of issues that are increasingly beginning to hit HR departments hard, like maternity and paternity leave. Tryton handles individual cases using template letters to suit the occasion but it can also run detailed reports of the picture across the whole business. "We now do things proactively because we have got the time and the tools to look at important things," explains Fletcher. "We can do age profiles, ethnic breakdowns, male/female splits - everything we want. If someone asks for an employee breakdown, give them the answer in two seconds. Previously it would have taken us at least two hours."



## Catch up or give up...cont.

Many companies with a 24-hour process claim it doesn't lend itself to flexible and family-friendly working. These are often the same ones having trouble filling vacancies. Tryton operates continuous, three-shift production yet still manages to offer part-time shifts and job-sharing within that." It is a lot easier to accommodate people when you have the information at your finger tips, as we do now." The labour planner uses the system daily, too. Now Fletcher is looking at a new development that links to planning: "It will let us see how many people we need over what period to make x product. It will tell the planners exactly how many people they already have available for those days and let them reallocate if necessary." It's a major advance; instead of simply giving planners current information, they can help them forward plan on the one system against the order book, using constantly updated information.

Fletcher has sound advice for those taking the plunge: "If you use the system well, you get more from it. We could have used it simply for clocking. Instead, it has totally transformed the way the HR team works and the information and the value we provide to the business. It's made my job a lot better, too. Automation really makes a difference."