Systems Administration – The Case for System Admin

One thing that we often see following great implementations of HR Software is said software being left 'to rot'. Systems don't get better with age – they get worse. Much like a treasured vehicle - whilst we liken our system reviews/healthchecks to a comprehensive service, these exercises in no way replace the BAU whereby regular MOT and above all day-to-day good care of an expensive and relied upon piece of kit is imperative.

System Administrators come in many different forms – for small organisations often this function is added into the role of the Payroll Team, or HR Business Partners. Larger organisations tend to have those with the title of System Administrator, System Analyst or Business Analyst. Some insource this function to their Internal IT team, or outsource to third party providers (like Phase 3). But what do System Administrators actually do?

The Role of The System Administrator

This list, which isn't exhaustive aims to answer just that question:

1. Keep the system up to date – with patches, upgrades, hot fixes and Service Packs
2. Test, Test, Test – ensuring that said patches etc don't cause problems – our administrators ensure that our processes are safeguarded from clumsy mistakes by software vendors
3. Maintain Data Integrity – There are 7 dimensions to data quality (Completeness, Accuracy , Consistency, Conformity, Currency, Duplication and Integrity) – and a key role of the system administrator is to 'gatekeep' the systems they maintain to ensure only useful data is being entered, it is being entered correctly and by those who have permission and is being exported in the correct and most convenient way
4. Security – with restructures, role re-alignment, outsourcing and review come changes to access requirements. Almost never are security profiles left alone following initial implementation. Password Resets for those not using Single Sign On also falls into this category – often a time consuming and costly effort
5. Support Users – Ask any System Administrator how long they spend on the phone to customers each week and you may be surprised. Systems are intuitive – but not everyone will be able to navigate them, hand holding and screen sharing are common!

The Responsibilities of The System Administrator

I define this separately from the Role of the system administrator for one very clear reason. As sys – admin's can be the gate keepers of the HR system – they can also then be expected

to enter the data and maintain that data. This may result in some fundamental risk points for the business:

1. System Administrators are not usually HR or Payroll Administrators – they have a very different (yet equally valid) skill set – we often expect our system administrators to take on every piece of work just because it involves the system which is often challenging
2. They are often involved in most 'people' projects – for similar reasons to above. Any project which requires people data or additional records to be retained usually results in a System Administrator being required to be part of the project. We should remember that they do have a day job too – and upskill our teams to be IT Savvy – only asking the sys admin for support once the questions have been formulated
3. They can become a single point of failure – System Admin teams are rarely of an adequate size – the more we add into HR Systems the more there is to maintain – this is often forgotten – and when those people leave the business they take an incredible amount of knowledge with them

We'd like to add to the risk points that of lack of investment in the function – and in particular overlooking the requirement at project outset. It should be factored into cost and I've seen business cases swiping out all in-house roles on HRIS because of a "managed service" *from the vendor* and/or assuming that HR can do it all.

The message here – be clear about the responsibilities and accountabilities of this team – ensuring no muddy water or overwhelmed teams. Ensure there are clearly defined differences between then work expected by IT, the Vendor, the system administration function and the 'Super-Users' within functions.

The Role of The System

HR Systems are expensive and we expect a lot from them. The technology we invest in should be smart enough to cope with all of the requirements surely? We can restructure and reduce our FTE in system administration because of our new smart system? (Our reason for being the "People Behind People Technology" is because we fundamentally disagree with this). Systems Should:

1. Be smart enough to recognise when they need Human Input and alert a Human to this fact
2. Include Workflow and Scheduling tools to allow automated processes
3. Be user friendly and intuitive to reduce the 'support' requirement of the users
4. Reduce the burden for HR and Payroll Users
5. Integrate with other Key systems and Interface cleanly
6. Be easy to extract data from for users – reducing the reliance on HR/Payroll/IT teams

And the people should:

1. Be Human – approach using systems as any other user would – if you can find a way to 'break it' then other users will certainly be able to as well
2. Follow the alerts from systems – they tell us when they need help and we must follow up on that
3. Maintain those workflows and scheduled routines – which automate many of the key processes
4. Integrate with HR and Payroll Teams – support those users to get the most out of the system
5. Extract, review and improve all things data!

In Summary…

The System administration function must be factored into the 'Business as Usual' as well as project mode. Maintaining HR Systems is essential in supporting Compliance, Accuracy and Quality of Service. Ensuring teams are correctly resourced to support users is a must.

For help with any System Administration function please contact info@phase3consulting.co.uk or call 0800 321 3032