



TenStep Supplemental Paper

7 July 2005

Wedded Bliss

Visualize this scene, a wedding between two functions: information technology and human resources. Neither party is sure it wants to tie the knot with the other, but they have no choice. In such a case, a powerful weapon called learning technologies can bring them together.

Let's review the lineage of these two families. HR is the home of the people - those helpful individuals whose job it is to assist recruiting, compensating, evaluating, retaining and eventually removing people from organizations. IT, on the other hand, is focused on machines - procuring, installing, programming, maintaining and eventually unplugging them. On the surface, you couldn't find a less likely set of partners.

In some ways, however, HR and IT have a lot in common. HR uses machines to manage people and IT uses people to manage machines. Both have to deal with a mixture of the two worlds. Both are staff functions and enjoy relatively low regard within the organization; when they get together, they can console each other. Perhaps their reputation problems arise because both are responsible for something (people and technology/information) that is really too big, too pervasive and too important for a single business function to address. HR and IT have many similarities.

There have also long been similarities between these two groups on the information transaction side. Now, you know what interest the IT organization has in information transactions, but you may not realize that HR is hardly a stranger to transaction processing. The first IT application in business was, after all, payroll (way back in 1953). Some large companies, including PeopleSoft Inc., made their mark in HR transaction systems. A very large group of people work on HR transaction systems; they even have their own association, the International Association for Human Resource Information Management, with tens of thousands of members. Dave Ulrich, a University of Michigan professor and HR expert, argues that HR functions don't win the right to address higher-order issues unless they have first gotten the transactions correct. Of course, the same might be said about IT.

Neither HR nor IT is solely concerned with transactions. HR, in addition to being on the line to ensure that you are paid and charged the right amount for dental insurance is expected to develop new skills and expertise among employees.

The Urge to Merge

Clearly, both HR and IT have moved beyond transactions to focus on such ostentatious concerns as knowledge and learning. Also, both face critical challenges in converting these concepts into improved human and organizational performance. They're both in the church, but the preacher, the vows and the compelling urge to merge are missing.

The preacher came in the form of Gloria Gery. She's been giving sermons on the topic for more than a decade; the bible of the movement is her book *Electronic Performance*



TenStep Supplemental Paper

Support System. The concept requires technology to support learning on the job at the time when the learner needs it. The learning should not remove the learner from the business transaction but should be integrated with it through the system interface. The knowledge presented to the learner must be appropriate to the task and the employee. Gery is strict about these vows and will demand that any pairing of HR and IT adhere to them.

Saying "I Do"

If the IT half of the marriage (probably the groom, since IT departments are disproportionately male) brought new tools and a strong interest in knowledge management, the HR half (more likely statistically to be the bride) brought a strong orientation to improving job performance and a focus on knowledge use. Knowledge managers, and the IT profession more broadly, have often attempted to put as much knowledge into repositories as possible, without regard to how the knowledge will be used in the context of particular jobs. As a result, the repositories don't support any particular job very well. Performance supports emphasis on particular job contexts and knowledge management's reliance on knowledge employees and a wide variety of learning objects make for a healthy, diverse relationship.

So these two functions are joined in holy matrimony until death do them part. They've merged to such a degree that it's often difficult to tell which camp each came from.

Like all marriages, however, there are occasional setbacks. The IT world, for example, is buzzing with enthusiasm about corporate portals - one-stop shopping destination for all information and knowledge content within the organization. This idea seems to have worked pretty well on the Internet; billions of dollars in market value for companies like Yahoo Inc. and Lycos Inc. tell the story. However, it's a bad idea for internal corporate applications. It's the knowledge management fallacy run amok; there is nothing resembling a specific job context for the application of portal-based knowledge. It's one-size-fits-all knowledge delivery. Let's hope that IT's better half, the HR/OL/performance support crowd, kills this idea before it goes too far.

The progeny of this marriage will be the real HR/IT hybrids. Future generations will draw from the best features of organizational learning; IT infrastructures, performance support and knowledge management, and their hybrid vigor will dramatically improve organizational and individual performance.