



White Paper

Defining and deploying an HR knowledgebase

What can be achieved

What is content and why is it so important to HR?

Human Resources is a communication intensive organization with a large audience. Information ranging from employee benefits programs, corporate policies, or process such as performance reviews requires the communication of detailed information across an often diverse workforce. This detailed information exists today as some form of content. Content can be paper documents, videos, presentations, graphics, or even information created by employees in wikis or in discussion threads. Content is essentially information kept in any format.

The content challenge for many HR organizations is that their essential information is often in disarray. Information is inconsistent, out-of-date, scattered across many locations, and difficult to maintain. When information isn't reliable or easily accessible, employees depend on their local HR representative to personally provide them with answers. As a result, HR spends much of its time answering simple questions about policies or programs instead of working on new programs or on other more challenging projects.

By consolidating disparate sources of HR information into one knowledgebase, HR organizations can dramatically improve their information management efficiency and reduce their content maintenance effort. An HR knowledgebase is simply a highly organized structure for centrally storing and managing content. It is similar to a library where every item has its place and can be easily found by any visitor with the proper identification. Once an effective HR knowledgebase is in place, HR representatives can start achieving their goals of reducing routine support efforts in three ways:



Table of Contents

- 1 What is content and why is it so important to HR?
- 2 Key knowledgebase features
- 3 Options for creating an HR knowledgebase
- 4 Measuring the effectiveness of your HR portal/knowledgebase
- 5 Drive more value from your knowledgebase

Delivering knowledgebase access to your workforce is a game changer. When your workforce can immediately get reliable answers to their routine HR questions without making phone calls, they are more satisfied with their HR service—and they didn't need to call HR.

- First, HR information resides in one place, providing one source of truth. Providing that one source of truth for employees reduces the time spent searching for basic answers. There is only one place for them to look.
- Secondly, information consolidation eliminates the proliferation of old policies and information. When information is immediately updated for the entire workforce through a single source, obsolete communications and handbooks become a thing of the past.
- Third, centralized management and distribution of HR information saves time for HR content owners. There is no need to juggle versions, perform time-consuming distributions, or ensure that old copies are retired.

The consolidation and organization of HR information streamlines both the creation and distribution effort for HR and provides faster and more accurate service for employees.

After an HR knowledgebase is created, the next step is to make it available to employees, managers and other constituents. Most often, this is done through a portal. It is important to differentiate a knowledgebase from a portal. The knowledgebase stores and manages the content. The portal provides the front-end that allows someone to search and interact with the knowledgebase content. Most often, a knowledgebase can also be coupled with a different commercial portal such as Microsoft SharePoint or a portal delivered by an ERP vendor.

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Key knowledgebase features

If deploying an effective HR portal/knowledgebase was simple, there would be more success stories. Instead, while there are many success stories, there are also many stories of tried and failed. Many organizations have struggled because creating an HR portal/knowledgebase that employees will actually use is challenging. The project requires more finesse than posting flat documents to an intranet site. In the age of Google, if workers cannot find an answer immediately or if the answer is wrong, they will quickly abandon the site and resurrect their smartphone.

There is a basic set of features that a portal/knowledgebase must have to attain successful user adoption. Some portal/knowledgebase feature essentials include:

- **Personalization**—Today's workforce is more diverse than ever. The HR policies for an executive in India bear little resemblance to the policies for a union worker in Chicago. If employees must search through irrelevant content to find what is specific to them, they may follow the wrong policy. They may also abandon their search and call HR. A knowledgebase must offer personalization, which ensures that employees only see what is specific to them.

- **Search**—Today’s workforce is accustomed to powerful and fast search engines. They will not be satisfied with hunting for information on an employee site. Essential search features include ranked results and suggested alternatives for additional information. Advanced features include an aggregated search, which can return search results from multiple public or private search sources such as Google, Bureau of National Affairs, or your organization’s internal SharePoint site.
- **Usage analytics and feedback**—It must be possible for HR to gather and analyze feedback on its knowledgebase usage. Usage analytics gather valuable quantitative feedback. Direct employee responses provide qualitative feedback. Employees should be able to rate content and make comments about their experience so that HR can hear directly from them. Employees are also more satisfied with their service when they are involved.
- **Availability**—Today’s workforce is often on the move or working remotely. Employees may also prefer to make personal decision with their spouse or partner in the privacy of their home. It is essential that the workforce can access their content outside the firewall. Searching content from a mobile device is also highly desirable. Imaging accessing detailed insurance coverage for a child while at a doctor’s office or easily accessing the latest PTO policy without needing to log in to the corporate network.
- **Content management tools**—A robust knowledgebase should offer tools for authoring, loading and updating content. Workflow for new or updated content is also an essential tool. An author should be able to submit a document or revision for approval. Others should be able to participate by editing, commenting, or approving. Workflow should also track the status of any document in progress so nothing gets lost.

A well-implemented portal/knowledgebase that serves the workforce precisely what it needs when it’s needed will achieve high user adoption. A portal/knowledgebase solution that makes life easier for HR will achieve greater internal support.

Options for creating an HR knowledgebase

As with any HR application, there are several options and each option has pros, cons, and risks to manage. Here are a few to consider:

- **Build**—Many organizations build their own knowledgebase from scratch using SharePoint, Websphere, or some other tool. At first glance, this option seems most expedient since it’s often pursued with existing resources and tools. However, a knowledgebase that is built without a well-defined structure may be more difficult to search and maintain. Also, these projects are often staffed with resources who have little portal or knowledgebase design experience, which may lead to a less than optimal result.
- **Engage consulting services**—Engaging a consulting partner is an option that has delivered a well-organized and highly usable portal/knowledgebase solution to many customers. Advantages to engaging a consultancy is that you can build a custom knowledgebase and portal experience tailored exactly to your company’s culture and programs and benefit from experienced guidance. The disadvantages are that you will need to have the skills and knowledge in-house to maintain and evolve your custom solution over time. Consulting services may also be costly in terms of both implementation time and price.

- **Software-as-a-Service (SaaS)**—Many organizations have successfully deployed an HR portal/knowledgebase using a SaaS delivery model. A SaaS provider offers a standard but configurable portal/knowledgebase based on experience across many customers. A SaaS-delivered knowledgebase can accelerate implementation times because the organizational planning has been done for you. Software-as-a-Service delivery may also offer more predictable support costs and effort. As with any SaaS product, there may be trade-offs between operational efficiencies and ability to customize the solution.
- **Hybrid approach**—Some organizations have already invested in their company’s HR portal and content development—either on their own or with a consultancy. They do not want to replicate this work. However, they see value in the highly personalized and searchable experience of a well-structured knowledgebase. Organizations that meet this profile have successfully deployed a standardized knowledgebase as a complementary component of their custom site. Adaptors are typically available for common technologies. Because no two custom portals are alike, some integration may be necessary.

While there is no absolute right or wrong approach for creating your portal/knowledgebase, some points for consideration are your resource availability in terms of people and budget, not only for the implementation but for ongoing support. Assess your organization’s portal and knowledgebase skills and think about your organization’s appetite for custom versus packaged solutions. Also, consider how soon you would like your solution up and running.

Another consideration is the state of your current content. Similar to transferring history during an application implementation, consolidating and cleaning your existing content prior to a knowledgebase implementation will also save you time and money and produce a cleaner end result.

Measuring the effectiveness of your HR portal/knowledgebase

Usage analytics and feedback were previously mentioned as key features for a portal/knowledgebase solution. Here’s why: Unless there is a shared services center where metrics are being gathered, most HR organizations aren’t tracking employee calls leading into the implementation of a portal/knowledgebase. This absence of “before” data makes it challenging to use “after” data. There is no basis for comparison. However, an effective combination of portal/knowledgebase with robust analytics can provide login and activity statistics that can measure adoption and site usage over time, thereby proving the value of the investment.

Additionally, analytics provide necessary feedback for the continual improvement of knowledgebase content. Human Resources will know if a policy is consistently rated as “confusing” and can revise it—and it will know if the number of visits to performance appraisal instructions is low and can proactively launch more communications.

Analytics and feedback may even inspire changes to general HR services. While personally identifying data should always be masked, aggregate statistics show that time-off documents receive more unique hits than any other content in an HR knowledgebase. Perhaps adding a floating holiday could improve employee satisfaction more than building a corporate fitness center.

Drive more value from your knowledgebase

An HR portal/knowledgebase combination can provide tremendous value to your workforce and to HR in all of the ways described.

However, there are additional purposes for an HR knowledgebase that should be explored.

Knowledgebase content can be embedded in any HR application to augment transactions with information. For example, a salary review transaction can be linked with the compensation guidelines for merit distribution. Managers and employees can get the information they need to make educated decisions delivered side-by-side with the associated transaction they need to complete.

Yet another way to extend the value of an HR knowledgebase is to use it within an HR shared service center. An HR knowledgebase provides a highly searchable repository of information where call center representatives can also go for that one source of HR truth. Often, a high-quality knowledgebase with a powerful search can replace static and impersonal call center scripts. When delivered tightly integrated to the shared services application, a knowledgebase becomes a powerful service tool.

Looking toward the near future, the way an HR portal/knowledgebase is used will continue to evolve just like every other application in the HR space. It is already a mistake to believe that employees hover over their HR portal pressing refresh in anticipation of a changing policy. Employees will want their information available to them on demand. Urgent information will need to find the correct employees where they are. It won't be enough to search for your information. Your information will also have to search for you.

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