Overcoming Three Common HR Hurdles

Automation can help the HR department promote diversity, safety, and efficiency.

By Stephanie Armbruster and Tom Strasburger

Managing a district's human resources department and keeping busy educators and even-busier administrators on task with compliance requirements may feel at times like herding cats.

Director of feline acquisition? Chief human resource cat-alyst? Okay, perhaps not.

The HR department at Dublin City Schools, outside of Columbus, Ohio, is responsible for managing evaluations, workers' compensation claims, unemployment processing,

compliance tasks, and training for 1,990 staff members. And at times, the hurdles seem insurmountable.

With supervising so many tasks, so many actions, and so many changing requirements— much less following up to ensure completion—running into obstacles is inevitable. HR professionals are typically faced with ensuring completion and documentation of staff training for various roles across multiple sites, working inside and outside the district to capture all needed records for workers' compensation claims, ensuring that new hires have signed off on all required policies, and finding high-quality substitutes and candidates for vacancies.

That list does not even touch on the task of communicating annual open enrollment or benefit changes, managing leaves of absence, vetting benefits brokers, or staying on top of personnel matters and files. The processes and players are diverse, and the time commitment required to be effective is heavy.

Thankfully, with innovative technology, effective practices, and some flexibility, districts can overcome those hurdles and achieve increases in organization, communication, and even peace of mind for themselves and their colleagues.

Hurdle 1. Hiring Faculty and Staff to Support the Diverse Student Culture

As student populations continue to diversify, Dublin City Schools wants to support that change with more staff diversity. For example, the district's Hispanic and Arabic student populations have increased, yet those students do not always see an educator of the same ethnicity standing in front of the classroom. Recruiting and sustaining an ethnically and culturally diverse staff are challenging for this northern Columbus suburb.

To address that challenge, the HR department defined potential barriers that might keep qualified minority candidates from applying and then outlined the steps the district would take to recruit minority employees, including contacting minorities who recently or soon would be graduating from area teaching programs. The department also developed processes to ensure that those employees felt supported.

Dublin City Schools accomplished that goal by forming a diversity committee consisting of members of the business and religious communities, as well as teachers and administrators. The committee is working toward providing diversity

and inclusionary training for all staff members on how to build relationships with minority students and how to work with various cultures.

The district must support an additional student population: students with special needs. Dublin City Schools previously struggled with hiring highly qualified individuals to serve students who need speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, and other specialized services. Failure to provide those critical services not only negates the district's compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act but also affects student achievement.

To effectively recruit qualified candidates with those niche skills, Dublin City Schools' HR team hires highly qualified candidates for support staff positions with the potential for promotion. For example, if there is a vacancy for a paraprofessional (specialized teaching aide), the HR department may fill that position with a candidate who is working on a teaching degree or therapist license. Once the new hire has successfully been licensed, he or she will be considered for any intervention specialist vacancies. That strategy is mutually beneficial for the new hire, the students who need specialized intervention services, and the district as a whole.

Hurdle 2. Reining in the Unwieldy Training Process

Making sure that employees are up to par with requirements and professional skills is a major responsibility of the HR staff. It is also among the most complex processes to manage. Scheduling time for training, assigning the right courses for each occupation, and ensuring that employees complete their training on time to show compliance with district, state, and federal requirements can be a difficult process when

- Districts use antiquated training and tracking methods.
- Staff across the district have diverse or multiple job responsibilities.

- Time or resources are insufficient to track changing or new requirements, much less to implement training to meet those requirements.

In the past, Dublin City Schools hoped it had the complete roster and all of the appropriate sign-offs. Noncompliant employees were manually tracked down at their respective buildings to ensure that training assignments had been completed. With 1,990 employees, that process was quite time-consuming.

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To remedy that antiquated and cumbersome process, Dublin City Schools replaced its inservice staff training and pen-and-paper tracking methods with a new online safety training program. Valuable inservice days and countless hours that were once spent traveling to each building to deliver and track training were replaced with the automated online training system. Now, staff training is assigned to employees who are notified en masse through automated email, with the process tracked electronically in real time and reported to HR automatically.

With the automation and electronic tracking featured in the new system, the district HR team reclaimed both time and sanity. Because the process is now hands-off, and because the HR-maintained employee directory integrates with the new online safety and regulatory compliance system, as new employees are added or current employees transition to different job assignments, they are automatically assigned appropriate training for their new roles in the district.

During the training period defined by the district, the system sends designated employees automatic email reminders with a link to their online training. If an employee fails to complete training by the deadline, the system automatically generates noncompliance reports and sends them to supervisors. Also, a district-wide noncompliance report is sent to HR.

Imagine how many hours were regained by both supervisory and HR staff, who once directly managed the start-to-finish training process at numerous school sites, and who now need to follow up with only the handful of employees who have not finish their assignments.

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Additionally, the district's online safety and regulatory compliance service provider—and not its HR team—monitors all legislation pertinent to schools.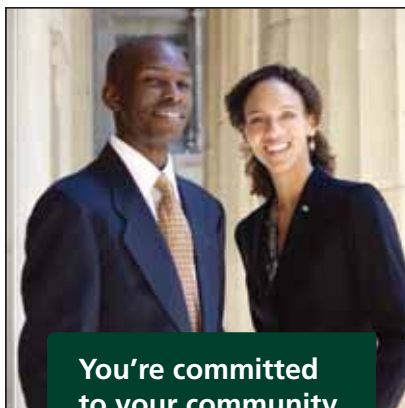 So when new or modified legislation requires additional training, the service provider proactively creates the training content to comply with the legislation, communicates the legislation and changes to district administration, and automatically deploys the training to the appropriate staff roles.

With the online tracking of records—in addition to the automation within the system—HR ensures continuous training compliance, which is no small feat!

Hurdle 3. Managing the Complexities of Workers' Compensation Claims

When an employee is involved in an accident, the speed at which HR handles the claim matters. Time is of the essence when processing a claim, investigating how an accident occurred, fixing potential hazards, arranging postincident retraining, and taking other preventative safety actions. HR wants employees back to work as soon as possible to help the employee feel valued and to prevent instruction declines caused by his or her absence, as well as to sustain lower insurance premiums.

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negative effect on the costs associated with employee injuries. When an accident occurs, the HR department is responsible for managing the claim and for making sure the Bureau of Workers' Compensation, managed care organization, third-party administrator, injured employee, and supervisory staff are updated as appropriate. Manual paper processes are inefficient and fraught with potential mistakes that can affect the employee and district negatively.

By transforming its staff accident reporting process to an online system, Dublin City Schools made its claims process faster and easier. The online accident report is dynamic in that it hides irrelevant questions and prompts for additional information according to the previous responses entered. That feature ensures that all necessary information is captured the first time, preventing delays from incomplete information.

Once a completed report has been submitted, the automated system notifies the appropriate supervisors, investigators, and HR staff to take whatever action is necessary. When there is a claim, HR verifies the employee's information, reviews accident details if needed, and follows up with the employee to check on his or her well-being and to ease the transition back to work. Additionally, when the accident reported is a claim, the district's managed care organization and third-party administrator are instantly notified with the information, as well as emailed the first report of injury. Finally, because the accident reporting system integrates with the training system, the employee is enrolled in and automatically notified to take the appropriate postincident retraining.

The system helps the HR department stay on top of all injured staff, whether a claim or an injury, to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Since accident reports are captured in this central online system, the system tracks and can report on any trends identified by employee role types, accident locations, and other factors. This reporting tool, plus the integration of the other online tools, gives HR the knowledge and ability to implement preventative steps for improved safety and reduced claims.

As the education landscape continues to transform—whether it is through compliance mandates, advancements in technology, or improved support for diverse student populations—it is imperative that HR professionals are flexible and innovative in overcoming new hurdles as they develop.

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