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Marge Williams
Burlington Coat Factory

Smarter HR

Functional Reporting at Burlington Coat Factory

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The Information Age has brought knowledge empowerment to managers of every stripe. It has also brought new responsibilities to those most proficient at mastering the tools of information management while maintaining excellence in their own functional and departmental roles. A very good example of this is in the area of human resources or HR, where the role of Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) manager has only lately gained stature as a management function. HRIS isn't as technical as it sounds; in reality it's a mix of traditional skills and some technology acumen.

Marge Williams is corporate manager of HRIS and Compensation at Burlington Coat Factory, the familiar clothing outlet with nearly 400 stores in 44 states. She's also effectively an information broker, an intermediary who facilitates information requests for anything related to human resources.
As it turned out, I met Marge Williams during a particularly busy week, as the to-do list she rattled off indicated. “Our senior president of merchandise needs information on his buyers, our EVP of HR needs headcounts and breakdowns by department, recruiters need information on turnover rates by job codes, and they’re slicing and dicing it every way you can think of. They don’t usually hit me all at one time, but this week is busy.”

As it goes with most new information management functions, Williams wasn’t hired to the role she holds today. She joined Burlington in 2003 as a compensation manager but eventually would become the record keeper of all the worker-related files at her company – which employs about 28,000 people. Not long after she was hired, Burlington identified the need for a platform to better understand and manage its workforce. “They had called for a system and needed someone to direct it,” Williams says. “I kind of got into it and then they decided I was good at it and asked me to do a lot more. It kind of fell in my lap.”

Burlington Coat had implemented Oracle’s HRMS software in 2003, but it quickly came clear that, as a standalone reporting system, it required a good deal of support. To address the kinds of information requests cited above, Williams needed to go to IT, which in turn would delve into the Oracle system to deliver a report as soon as it was able. This took dedicated IT resources and wasn’t the kind of responsive system management had in mind.
Williams isn't a code developer and it made no sense to make her one. The Oracle system was certainly robust, but overwhelming to the skills of a non-programmer. “The problem was that if people came to me and asked for a specific headcount by department and what annual increases were going to cost in the coming year I could not do that because I had no way of writing a report.”

In 2005, Burlington turned to Noetix and its NoetixViews software, which is tuned especially for Oracle Enterprise Resource Planning and other applications including HRMS. The product sits above and helps configure Oracle in a way that lets non-power users view and access the data below in familiar terms, while hiding much of the complexity. In effect, the system portended Williams’ future because it made her a power user of HR data and - with her prior experience - enabled the important role she now owns. This was validated in early 2006, when Bain Capital Partners acquired Burlington Coat factory for $2 billion. Then and now, Bain needed monthly and quarterly analysis that required access to salary information - information IT is not allowed to view in detail. In the absence of a product like Noetix, IT would have to write a report for Williams to review, correct and send back for revisions.

Today Williams uses the same system to provide required reporting to ensure compliance with EOC and hiring rules, and provide information to Burlington’s legal counsel in the event of litigation. “They might want to know how many females were hired or how many promotions we gave in specific stores or regions,” Williams says. “They might need information on ethnicity, and I can slice and dice that any way they need it.” Products such as Noetix also help account for the auditing paper trail required by regulations.

But her primary concern is a constituency of about 50 end users that include executives and regional HR managers across Burlington’s national footprint. A good part of Williams’ job is to locate discrete information and fill in blanks for the end user community, which is helped by pre-built templates and use examples in the Noetix platform, which supports her considerable HR knowledge.

It adds up to more information - and more detailed information - in the hands of a category expert. “I keep thinking back to review time when I have to slice and dice compensation,” Williams says. “You know, ‘It would cost this if we [budgeted] this amount,’ the annualization of that is a big thing I could never do in the past. That has definitely given me access to more information and better detail to good information.”

But since detailed reporting has largely been handed from IT to Williams, the next logical challenge would be to enable end users to easily support their own information requests. In the long run, it’s a lot to expect of a manager to be a functional expert, a technology enabler, and an information broker. While regional HR managers are doing more of their own analysis and are building custom reports, they’d be better served if they didn’t need to fall back on Williams for detailed needs. “Since we have been using Noetix, my job around the company is known as, if you need any kind of report you go to Marge and she gets it for you. That is expected of me now.”

Neither Williams nor anyone else is opposed to self-service reporting. While regional VPs aren’t likely to be enthusiastic about writing their own reports, they are enabled to refresh existing reports with current data on store rosters, head counts etc. at the push of a button, which fulfills their primary handful of reporting needs.

Burlington Coat is exploring ways to extend self-service reporting on employee rosters to individual store managers as a service - and as business continuity insurance, as was made clear in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. “During the hurricane, no one in the field could get detailed information [about] who worked at the stores except us, and they needed that information because they were all trying to get in touch with their people. If they’d had access to report writers they could have taken care of it [at the store level].”

For this to happen, Williams and her team must first ensure that information is secure and access is restricted to the managers entitled to see it. That is simply another aspect of the growing role of HRIS manager, and, as most managers can testify, the type of issue that is handed down to the managers entitled to see it. That is simply another aspect of the growing role of HRIS manager, and, as most managers can testify, the type of issue that is handed down from nowhere during an evolving and important mission.

“The expectations are higher even though HRIS is pretty new to the HR field,” Williams says. “The systems are so much more robust than they were in the past. Before, people used the payroll system to get most of their information and now we’re coming up with all these new HR systems.”

As is ever the case, increasing access to information brings concurrent issues of information quality, security, access rights and in the end, relevance. That will make for a very interesting job down the road of writing job requirements to match the requirements of a Marge Williams. It will make those requirements increasingly relevant to policies around hiring, training, rewarding and retaining individuals in newly defined roles. For now, it’s more a matter of finding the right person inside the four walls at the right time.