HR Strategic Information System in Governments

Many states and Departments have tried to establish and run HR-MIS, with limited success or at best varying success. Some have been successful in setting up a database and populating it after substantial efforts. It has just remained there. In some states, it has been maintained and used and have failed after a couple of months, particularly as it was dependent on one person. In some states, given the transparency the system was bringing about (sometimes unintended outcome), the initiative was creatively torpedoed. Based on our experience of working on HR-MIS in Health and other departments across states, for a Human Resource Strategic Information System (HR SIS) to work, there are several pre-requisites:

1. System is based on real needs of the users; Simple, but has all important details
2. Users have a say in design and utilization
3. System is dynamic enough to accommodate the changes required
4. Good quality Information fed and information is regularly updated
5. Users and contributors are incentivised to contribute the most latest information, promptly
6. Deep understanding who wins and who loses in implementing the system and appropriate and proactive actions
7. Technology does not overwhelm the users; rather is a facilitatory factor
8. Strong leadership within Department which pushes for usage of the reports
9. Realistic expectations of the leadership on what a system can and cannot do (or can do in phases)
10. Adequate documentation on process and capacity of maintenance with redundancies, reducing chances of the system crashing after the key person leaves or moves out.
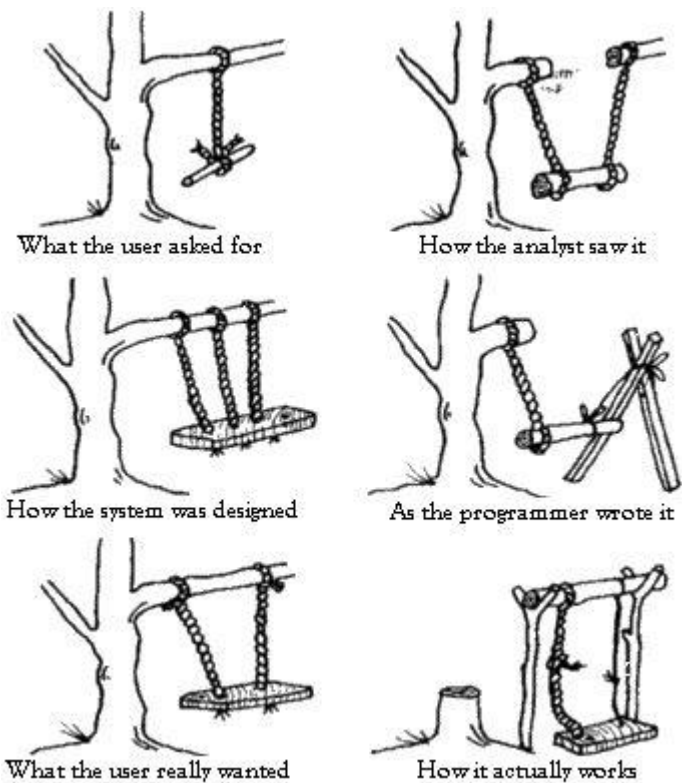
Usability, dependability, credibility, incentivisation are all crucial. More important are the behavioural issues – why people like certain kinds of systems, fears, insecurities, loss of power or gain, habits, unfamiliarity, technophobia all play a key role on how the system is perceived and used. So the behavioural side needs adequate thinking through, not from a manipulative purpose but from an appreciate enquiry and critical thinking perspective. Without this, the system is unlikely to move forward and all gains can be reversed. It is the behavioural elements which are missed by most facilitators and the price is high.

1. **Real needs:** Any system needs to be driven by real needs of users. For this, the users have to be defined first and then their needs have to be articulated. There are times when the user will be unable to articulate needs clearly and therefore may give a long 'laundry' list of things. Here it is important to force the user to think through certain strategic lenses and also force ranking will ensure a small but important set of requirements will emerge. Critical, useful and desirable lists, each of them short can make decisions more strategic.

Note developed by Catalyst Management Services (CMS), based on its long experience of working with HR & OD issues. Reproduction of part or full needs to annotated and referenced to CMS.

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2. **User participation**: In designing, implementing and using the system is crucial. Otherwise system builders are likely to build a system they like. To this end, a User group or a Core group guiding the process of system development and stabilisation is useful.

3. **System dynamism:** The system should be responsive and accommodate the changes required; however, it the changes are made far too soon, then the design has not been thorough. The design should be modular and agile; modularity gives the advantage of building the system in parts, ground up. Agility of getting user response and feeding it into the system change process is critical. For this, a system of 'tickets' from users on changes required should be collected and the Core group of users prioritise these changes and make them part of the system.

4. **Quality Information updated:** Information quality is important and so are regular updates. To this end, regular quality audits and field verification should be part of the system. System need to be set up in a way that the updation of records are inter-linked to other events – like salary, leave, promotion, etc. This interlinking will ensure that the system will be updated.

5. **Incentivisation:** Users and contributors are incentivised to contribute the latest information, promptly. To this end, a set of incentives and disincentives have to be developed and institutionalised. Some examples –Fully filled profiles and updated regularly will be given priority for choice in trainings, leave application cannot be approved unless profile updated. 'Brute' disincentives are unlikely to succeed in isolation. Here is where behavioural science inputs are very important and keeping in mind how people are likely to perceive and behave, system will need to be set up.

6. **Who wins, who loses, so what:** Deep understanding who wins and who loses in implementing the system and appropriate and proactive actions are key to making the system work for all. HR-SIS usually will change power structures. Persons currently holding the ownership for system may gain or lose – power and money may be involved in clear and many times intrinsic ways. This analysis is crucial in understanding how things need to be designed and how interests can be protected. Sometimes interests have to be 'broken' and rebuilt. This will require careful negotiations. Top leadership should be aware of these interests and act on these interests; otherwise usually the system is blamed; easily so.

7. **Technology:** Technology is only a tool and the 'the tail should not wag the dog'. It should be seen that technology does not overwhelm the users; rather is a facilitatory factor. Choice of technology should keep in mind ease of use, cost of ownership, sustainability in terms of ease of maintenance and linkages with other systems. Today's technology can be easily web based, distributed and easily updatable from different locations; this power has to be harnessed. There is a temptation to go for the well-established platforms like Microsoft; while familiarity is useful, there are solutions in the 'open-source' world which are equally good, cost effective and sometimes more robust. So choices have to be made carefully and keeping the above factors in mind.

8. **Leadership:** Strong and clear leadership within Department which pushes for usage of the system are seen to be one of the most important factors. Without a leader who is both strong and clear, the system will be lead down different paths and move itself into a knot. Good advisors on technology and systems are also crucial for the leaders to access and use.

9. **Realistic expectations:** Many strong and clear leadership styles sometimes do not listen enough and may have unrealistic expectations. Words commonly used are 'in one click I should get reports'. In practise this is not feasible in any system. It is important for the leadership to know and understand that every sophisticated requirement costs time and money. Therefore they need to be strategic and minimalistic. It is important to know what a system can and cannot do. Also there is always the space to phase outputs – systems can be put in place in phases with the minimum requirements met quickly and other modules added later.

10. **Continuance:** Adequate documentation on processes, databases, queries, programme codes, data dictionaries are required for the system documentation. Redundancy and back up roles within teams will help continuous support to the users, when individuals leave or unavailable for short periods. Making the system over dependent on one single individual can be very dangerous and therefore the above steps are important to ensure that the system can be run irrespective of changes in staff; although realistically change in staff will affect the momentum. However the system should not crash after the key person leaves or moves out.

What the user asked for

How the analyst saw it

How the system was designed

As the programmer wrote it

What the user really wanted

How it actually works

These 10 commandments are borne out of experience of successes and failures. We would love to hear your views – please send your comments and suggestions to shiv@cms-india.org

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