

Reality HR: Susan Herbert, Manager of HRIS, Meridian Health

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Meridian Health is a system with three major hospitals in New Jersey and several partner companies consisting mainly of nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities and physician offices. The company employs 7500 employees in total.

HR.com: I understand that one of your recent successes involved a change in your employee appraisal process. Can you tell us how this project came to light?

SH: When I joined Meridian, one of the first initiatives was to look at the performance appraisal process, which starts in for us every January - March. By the end of March, we start receiving performance appraisals, which are comprised of a very lengthy document containing up to 20 pages. I'm responsible for the service center of 6 employees who scan all of the performance appraisals. Each of the appraisals is scanned into an employee folder for record keeping.

As those boxes of forms started coming in, and we realized the time it took to scan them and the lack of use of the valuable information in the surveys, we started to look at a better way to manage that process. Up until now, whoever had time would spend hours scanning the material into the computer... the process would take up to 6 months.

HR.com: What happened next?

SH: It was actually a coincidence that at the time we started to evaluate our process, we had viaPeople helping us conduct a 360-degree feedback process with our top 30 executives. This project was going very well so it was a natural progression for us to look at using them to help with this project.

As a first step, I looked into having our existing documents scanned because there was some value in that. It would free up my employees and viaPeople was able to provide analysis on all of the data collected on the performance evaluation forms which we would be able to use. We had overall scores stored in our HRIS system and there may have been some analysis based on the scores, but there was no analysis being done on the competencies. This project is going to give us two huge benefits. First, they scanned the 112,500 pieces of paper and burnt the information onto CDs which contain all 7500 performance appraisals. Second, they are looking at all of the valuable performance data collected on the evaluation forms, including position specific competency data, and providing us with insight on the capabilities of our workforce that we have never had access to before.

HR.com: Can I assume that your future appraisals will be done online?

SH: Yes, when we go to an online performance appraisal process, the information collected will all be contained on the vendor website. We will receive reports on competencies, training needs and overall evaluation scores. This has been a great transition year for us. We hope as we move forward to go completely online so we have access to all of the information and it is more cost effective to do this.

HR.com: How many competencies in total would you have?

SH: Too many! We have approximately 900 competencies. They are something that is created along with the job descriptions. It's all paper-based and for the performance process, they are printed. We are moving now into getting into an online performance process. That project is just beginning this year.

HR.com: How did you determine your competencies?

SH: The job description contains all of the competencies required for success. Two people may have very similar positions, but the jobs could have a completely different list of competencies. We aren't at the point where we are standardized. By moving to the online performance appraisal process, we are tackling the process of standardizing and streamlining competencies across the organization.

HR.com: Having competencies mapped to individuals is very valuable information if utilized. What are your plans for using this information?

SH: We want to be able to understand the talent and make sure we are appraising people on the right competencies. At the moment, we have so many competencies linked with so many positions, we're not sure we are standardizing and we may be going to the 'nth' degree when that may not be necessary.

HR.com: Do you think that you would have an easier time in the hiring process if you had a complete list of competencies for each job?

SH: Yes.

HR.com: What is your next step?

SH: For every new hire, we have a 90-day introductory period. At the end of the three months, we do an evaluation for every new hire into a position and for every transfer into a new position. We are starting our migration to online performance evaluation by putting that three-month probationary evaluation online. That's our pilot. We are in the process right now of selecting the pilot group so that we can go forward and redesign the three-month evaluation form based on competencies and then move forward with that pilot. After the 90-day pilot, we will expand that system-wide and begin to use the 90-day evaluation tool throughout the system for all new hires and position transfers. Based on that, we will move forward with the annual performance appraisal.

HR.com: What do you think your acceptance rate will be with the employees by doing this online versus on paper?

SH: I think that it will be well received. Right now it is an unmanageable document because there are so many pieces to it. As long as we do the proper amount of communication and training up front, I think that it will be a very successful project.

HR.com: Any words of wisdom for anyone wanting to take on this type of change?

SH: It's very difficult to make this leap. People become very comfortable using the paper form and it is difficult sometimes to make the jump to the technology. But, this is going to do tremendous things for Meridian, and I would definitely say 'bite the bullet' and move to the technology base. With the right training and communication, we hope to be able to capture the entire workforce.