

Virtual HR: Communications and Technology

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Abstract

VCU Human Resources has eliminated most paper communications in an effort to speed information delivery and to save money. Through electronic leave, time, and departmental reports; web-based employee and manager self-service centers; and other electronic technology, HR has improved service to approximately 10,000 faculty and staff.

The Instant HR electronic system provides departmental administrators with quick and cost-effective access to information about HR-related programs and services. VCU's HR website is a key mechanism for service delivery of electronic forms, automated job postings, and online training. Annual web contacts totaled 3.9 million, averaging more than 326,000 "hits" per month. Implementing an automated self-mailer process for applicant acknowledgements decreased by 96 percent the preparation time (from four hours to 10 minutes) to mail 200 notices.

Employee Self Service (ESS) and Manager Self Service (MSS), web-enabled, password-protected centers, provide nearly 24-hour-a-day access for faculty and staff. In June, ESS recorded over 4,700 employee contacts when the University eliminated paper pay and leave forms and began providing this information online. Departmental administrators used MSS to conduct over 4,300 online HR transactions, which included job postings, new-hire data input, and personnel data changes.

Introduction to Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) [<http://www.vcu.edu/>] is a Carnegie Research-I University, one of the three largest research doctoral institutions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. U.S. News & World Report ranks sixteen of the University's graduate, professional programs as among the best in the nation. Twelve are ranked in the top 20. Two-thirds of VCU's 108,000 alumni live and work in Virginia.

VCU enrolls 25,000 students in more than 160 undergraduate, graduate, professional, doctoral, and post-graduate certificate degree programs at 11 schools and one college. The University's location in the capital of Virginia gives students a unique opportunity to combine academic and real-world education, allowing them to create their own educational goals.

VCU recently launched VCU Life Sciences, a comprehensive undergraduate and graduate program involving academic and medical faculty. In addition, the University is developing the Virginia Biotechnology Research Park in collaboration with business, civic, and government leaders. Approximately 10,000 employees make the University the city's single largest employer.

VCU's Medical College of Virginia (MCV) Campus is now one of the most comprehensive academic health centers in the nation,

complementing the University's nationally ranked School of the Arts, School of Social Work, and other schools and programs. The VCU Health System on the MCV Campus provides more than \$100 million a year in indigent-care services in Virginia.

Problem/Initiative

In an effort to speed information delivery and to save money, VCU Human Resources eliminated most paper communications. Through electronic leave, time, and departmental reports; web-based employee and manager self-service centers; and other electronic technology, HR improved service to approximately 10,000 faculty and staff.

Design

The Strategic Plan for the Future of Virginia Commonwealth University fosters excellence in teaching, research, public service, and patient care that has established VCU as a leader among the nation's major research universities and provides an environment for working and learning that attracts, supports, and retains diverse and dedicated faculty and staff. VCU Human Resources is an essential partner in the implementation of the University's strategic plan and has a strong commitment of providing support, services, and on-going communication to an exceptional and talented workforce of the University.

Education, communication, and service delivery are integrated with all of the traditional HR functional areas and are critical processes in our Human Resources strategic plan. The result is a record of quality customer service and technological ease of access. Key elements of our communications efforts include establishing the following HR functions:

- Instant HR email communications
- Electronic delivery of leave, time, and department action reports
- HR Partners training sessions
- *Lines of Communications* newsletter
- Human Resources website
- Web-based Employee Self Service
- Web-based Manager Self Service

VCU worked with ClientSoft, a leader in e-business solutions, to help develop the University's ESS and MSS web-enabled features. Initial start-up costs compare favorably to industry standards. In addition, other University administrative systems rely heavily on this web capability, including student registration and the University's grading system.

In support of its continuing efforts to provide web-enabled processes, VCU recently implemented a new "e-Print" web reporting system for all HR and payroll production reports. These web-based reports substantially reduce paper costs, distribution efforts, and retention and

storage requirements, while improving the timeliness and quality of data access.

Benefits

HR's technology communications effort has impacted services and constituents in the following ways:

- Eliminated paper communications, including transactions and departmental reports.
- Improves departmental learning of technical HR information.
- Enhances communication to approximately 10,000 faculty and staff.
- Streamlines quality process improvement and speeds communication to departments.
- Supports state, federal, and university compliance regulations.

Instant HR

In the fall of 1999, VCU Human Resources implemented *Instant HR*, an electronic communication system to provide "instant" news and information about HR-related programs, services, and resources to department Personnel and Fiscal Administrators. This is HR's ultimate link to approximately 10,000 faculty and staff, via the University's e-mail system.

The electronic communication system is entitled *Instant HR*, and the goal is to provide information instantaneously with minimal cost and distribution effort to designated staff who are involved in the

administration and communication of HR-related matters within their own schools and departments.

Instant HR is sent on an as-needed basis and the topics range from announcements of new/changing benefits, revised policies and procedures, human resources training announcements, payroll and transaction processing updates, periodic reminders (e.g., holiday schedules, inclement weather), and new services (e.g., on-line employment verification). Since its origin, more than 80 *Instant HR* notices have reached Personnel and Fiscal Administrators throughout the University. Past issues of *Instant HR* are archived on HR's website at <http://www.hr.vcu.edu/communications/index.htm>.

Electronic Report Delivery

To virtually eliminate massive paper reports, HR also has introduced the electronic delivery of leave reports, time audit reports, and department action notices to Personnel Administrators and Fiscal Administrators via the University's e-mail system. This electronic delivery eliminates the time-consuming and manual mailing process.

HR Partners

To enhance and expand university-wide communications further, in March of 2001, VCU Human Resources launched *HR Partners*, an informational training series specifically designed for Personnel and Fiscal Administrators. These quarterly in-services are designed to keep the

department representatives informed about HR news and to provide a variety of training opportunities in HR practices that affect faculty and staff throughout the University. The focus of the sessions is to provide updates in addition to training topics that emphasize the University's compliance with federal and state laws and University regulations and policies. Examples of past training sessions include benefits services, enhanced recruitment and employment practices, Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) compliance, updates in compensation management, and effective performance management.

The *HR Partners* sessions also provide a forum for obtaining feedback and input into HR services. Information and recommendations obtained in these sessions have been successfully used to streamline and improve services to our constituents (e.g., employment process). Departmental administrators have given very positive feedback on these training sessions.

HR Lines of Communications

Annually, HR produces the *Lines of Communications*, a newsletter on HR compliance issues that is disseminated to all faculty and staff. This newsletter is in its fifth year, and each year it highlights important federal and state laws and/or policies that relate to University employment. Recent topics have included confidentiality in the virtual workplace; addressing fraud, waste and abuse; health insurance qualifying events;

overtime and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA); and threats of violence in the workplace.

VCU Human Resource Website (<http://www.hr.vcu.edu/>)

The HR website has become a key method of service delivery, saving money and staff time and improving institutional liability. It provides the following important functions:

- Electronic forms for management, supervisors, and employees.
- Links to our automated job posting site and our job opportunities listings.
- Links to our new Employee Self Service and Management Self Service sites.
- On-line training registration and on-line training courses.
- Important information and updates on processes.

All HR current and archived communications are maintained on the web for ease of accessibility. For the fiscal period ending June 2002, HR's improved website recorded approximately 3.9 million contacts, averaging more than 326,000 web "hits" per month.

Employee Self Service

Employee Self Service (ESS) is a web-enabled, password-protected service that allows employees to view and, in some cases, update their personal University information. Employees have access to the following features:

- Personal data
- Payroll information
- Leave balances
- Tax Deferred Annuity contributions

ESS is available virtually 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In its first few months of inception, over 3,000 on-line transactions were made through *ESS*, eliminating the paper transactions.

In June 2002, HR recorded over 4,700 *ESS* web "hits" when VCU eliminated paper pay and leave forms and began providing this information only on-line (saving about \$10,000). Almost 96 percent of VCU's 2,300 classified employees made their pay or leave bonus elections on-line through *ESS*.

Manager Self Service

Manager Self Service (MSS) is a web-enabled, password-protected service that allows Personnel and Fiscal Administrators to view and, in some cases, update HR information on their employees. *MSS* interfaces with VCU's Human Resources System (HRS). All information is secure.

Features of *MSS* include the following:

- Express Hire – allows departments to input basic hiring data on new faculty and staff for issuance of identification cards and e-mail, parking and building access prior to their actual original appointment.

- Job Posting – allows departments to post jobs – initiating the recruitment process for classified and hourly positions.
- Personnel Data Changes – allows departments to update certain HR information such as working/faculty title and tenure data.
- Non-employee database – allows departments to input information about individuals who are affiliated with but who are not employees of the University.
- Department information – allows departments to view and print HRS information, such as work location, phone numbers, etc.

MSS is available virtually 24 hours a day, seven days a week. During its first month of inception, *MSS* processed almost 1,000 on-line transactions, thus saving 1,000 paper transactions.

Actual dollar savings for implementing these e-processes are difficult to measure. Yet, in terms of efficiencies and convenience to employees and managers, the impact is vast. That being said, however, employees are able to directly and privately obtain a wide range of benefit-related information and records on-line, which offers employees and departmental managers a convenience and enhances efficiency and reach for the HR function. VCU used existing in-house skills to integrate its web-enabled systems with a minimal amount of training.