

General Motors' Recent Success In Going e-HR

General Motors, internationally known as the world's largest manufacturer of automobiles, today likes to tout itself as an e-commerce company that just happens to build cars. From consumer web sites to business-to-business portals linking the company with its vast universe of suppliers, GM has taken to the Internet with a vengeance, even creating a special e-GM unit to lead the charge.

Internally, some of the company's efforts have focused on e-HR -- HR programs that seek to push as many HR-related activities as possible into an online environment. The company's four-year-old intranet site -- where employees once linked to 85 different GM-related sites providing information on everything from retirement accounts to flexible benefit enrollment -- has been transformed into an HR portal.

To the average GM employee, the real difference between the old intranet, dubbed "Socrates," and the portal, "MySocrates," is personalization. Employees now can receive news and information tailored to their position in the company when they log on to MySocrates.

As with every major corporate technology initiative, GM's portal project will be an ongoing endeavor. The launch represents the beginning stages for the portal, which now delivers customized content to two classes of employees but will, in the future, provide it to several levels. In pursuit of this goal, GM's information technology (IT) staff has been working hard to "portalize" data so it can be directed to the appropriate pool of employees.

THE GM PORTAL

The idea behind e-HR and what GM calls the "Employee Service Center" part of the portal is "part of an overall transition that will help focus HR on more strategic, consultative, and operational issues, and less on transactional issues," according to Katy Barclay, Vice President of Global Human Resources at GM in Detroit, Michigan. "The portal will further our goal of a web-savvy workforce and enhance our ability to communicate and collaborate with one another." The Employee Service Center does this by cutting out HR as the middleman, and allowing employees to directly modify their HR-related information.

Beyond the grand strategy of transforming GM into a wired company lies a more fundamental business case: A portal saves a significant amount of money and time. A customer service representative administering HR-related issues costs GM US \$1.50 to US \$2 a minute, while the web equivalent costs less than a nickel a minute. The portal also allows GM to move to interactive voice response systems and a smaller call center staff. GM believes that doing transactions over the web should reduce cycle times, improve quality, and provide more accurate, personalized information to the employee.

In devising a portal to help employees navigate GM's digital mountain of information, GM decided to create a role-based environment in which an hourly employee will see different information on the screen than a salaried one. A role-based portal allows GM to deliver customized information to different audiences, a salient advantage in a company with an employee population larger than many U.S. cities. As the portal evolves, more roles will be added, but it made sense to start first with the two major compensation groups at GM.

Already a large user of outsourcing services, GM figured the portal project would become a reality more quickly by handing it off to another company. GM discovered that no single company could provide every aspect of the project. So they cobbled together a deal in which an outside consultant would produce the portal with the help of the company's HR IT staff.

E-INFORMATION IN GM

MySocrates offers tailored messages to different GM audiences on the front page and gives users a large menu of information options -- such as reading e-mail, viewing a message from the company's chief executive office, learning about a new program, changing their addresses, creating a personal profile, and seeing their pay stubs. On the HR side, much of what once required paperwork and perhaps a visit with a supervisor or HR now takes place on MySocrates.

Another major advantage that the new portal offers (and that the previous intranet site did not) is that employees can access the site through the Internet, via user names and passwords. Previously, salaried employees generally used the intranet only at work because access from home required special access telephone numbers. Hourly employees worked in plants that lacked large numbers of computers for accessing the company's intranet. These employees did not bother attempting to log in from home, even though they could.

With security concerns largely solved, employees now can use MySocrates from anywhere through the Internet. The company continues to investigate the use of kiosks and other options for allowing access at manufacturing plants.

The portal's goal has always been about freeing employees to do their jobs more effectively. According to GM's IT Head, the bottom-line focus -- the key -- is about the productivity of the employee, not the productivity of HR. GM's philosophy in designing the portal was not just to get productivity improvement for HR, but the underlying tenet was productivity of employees, i.e., how to make the work and life of employees more productive. The portal becomes a framework for work-related job information that one can tailor and customize in a big organization.

THE GM PRE-PORTAL SITE

For every portal, there once was a simple intranet site. The Employee Service Center began as a skunk works project in 1997 involving some IT staff that had trouble even getting people in HR to attend their meetings. IT created a site with static documents, such as employee handbooks, various HR-related enrollment forms, benefits transaction forms, flexible benefit enrollment forms and requests for direct deposits.

During this process, GM decided to put General Motors University classes online, which turned out to be a major undertaking that required IT to program a middleware package just to transfer the data from the university's system to GM's intranet site. IT convinced management to reduce the amount of paperwork involved in registering for a class by putting the process online.

It amounted to the biggest stab at creating an interactive environment in the pre-portal stage. The system allowed an employee to enroll in classes online, to look at his training history, and to build a personal development plan he and his supervisor can review and maintain. That immediately started getting high volume use, especially with the policy that no approvals were required for employees. They just needed to enroll. GM wiped out middle bureaucracy after they learned it was acceptable to the organization.

Early on in the intranet's development, GM's IT department enlisted the communications staff to assist in the content architecture; the interface and user experience, especially the look and feel.

After a little more than a year in operation, GM saw as many as 15 million to 20 million hits a month on its pre-portal intranet site, with many users heading directly to the Employee Service Center part of the site for HR-related information and to use the handful of interactive tools available. The popularity led the company to move the center from IT to HR to sponsor further development.

Accounting for the high acceptance among employees was the success of the Internet and of e-commerce sites such as Amazon.com. If employees could perform transactions on the Internet, why couldn't they also perform them inside GM?

Fortunately, GM's service center had the makings of a mini-Internet on the company's intranet, and the employees noticed that the Company started displaying content and capability the same way the market was displaying content. This provided a lot of excitement.

With HR and management enthusiasm running high, the GM IT team moved forward to add more functions, among them job postings. They never stopped to make a business case for adding a function, knowing the bureaucracy would ensnare them in a web of strategy sessions and endless approval processes. GM's executive staff gave the IT Head and his team partial *carte blanche* to get the job done.

The strategy worked. The success of the web site and the service center proved so great, HR showed a tremendous appetite for moving even more HR content onto the pre-portal site. Much, but not all, of that content was static rather than transactional, yet employees used those parts of the service center site as much as any of the interactive areas.

If that may come as bad news to web designers who prefer concentrating on creating spinning globes and greater interactivity on the site, it represents what most employees want and need.

THE FUTURE HR PORTAL AT GM

Although GM plans to study how employees use the initial phase of the portal before launching new services, the Company has a few ideas in mind concerning future developments. For example, GM plans to make the MySocrates portal template available to international divisions and expects them to work toward their own versions soon.

In addition, more roles will be added to the North American portal, among them personalized information directed at managers, for example, or for retirees. As it stands, managers see the same portal information today as do other salaried employees. In the future, they will see content directed at them that will not necessarily be available to other salaried employees. The Company also has plans to match the roles with individual corporate messages focused on each target group.

MySocrates is never going to be a done deal. The GM IT team plans a new release every six months, with more functions, features, and services being added all the time. The portal's interface may not change every six months, but the continued personalization of information will make the project forever changing and growing.

Moving custom information up the ladder also will become a focus in the project. The Company foresees a day when leader or manager self-service allows supervisors to see, in one place, everything they need to know about employees, from performance reviews to compensation and benefit packages, and from the courses they have taken to their history with the company.

The Company also wants event-based options built into the portal. For instance, a birth would trigger appropriate information and forms to change health insurance coverage, an employee relocation would generate pages offering moving assistance, and so on.

Of course, employee self-service through the web brings a time of transformation for HR -- which arguably will spend less time filing and maintaining employee records and more time in business units solving problems. The portal is transforming the function of HR within the organization and it will free HR up from mundane activities and allow them to participate in more value-added strategies, activities, and services.

So while GM's e-HR strategy is on a high level, there is no reason why smaller companies can't enter the game and begin providing their employees with customized information.

