



Back to the future

Scott Beagrie looks at software developments over the past 10 years, and finds there is an abundance of choice for both business and personal use, and increased affordability as a result

A decade ago, the dotcom bubble had well and truly burst, and everyone was feeling rather more cynical about the internet and the web than a few years previously.

The decade had begun with a growing buzz around concepts such as eHR, e-learning and e-recruitment, all of which were allegedly going to streamline our processes, increase efficiencies and reduce costs. But while media attention largely focused on the high-profile collapse of a number of consumer dotcoms, there was also growing disenchantment in the business-to-business services market. Drop-out rates for e-learning were reputedly far too high, online job boards delivered on volume but certainly not on quality of candidates, and many organisations found they were struggling to make eHR a reality.

Meanwhile, payroll remained cautious observers as acronyms such as ASP (application service provider) began to enter the vernacular. The importance of data and its security to the function meant that migrating to these new ways of working were deemed too radical for many payroll professionals who were happy to watch the first dotcom wave pass by from the sidelines.

Net maturity

The internet, however, did grow up, and just as broadband became more widely available in subsequent years, so did it begin to fulfil its potential. Hardly surprising, then, when asked what have been the most significant technological developments to impact the function, industry experts typically say web-based services. Today, few could deny the workplace will ever be quite the same.

'Over the past 10 years, business applications on the web have really come to the fore, making technology widely available in the workplace and accessible from wherever an employee or manager needs to be,' says Simon Macpherson, operations director at Kronos Systems.

'It is now commonplace for employees to use self-service terminals to check work schedules, holiday entitlement and overtime. Things that would have needed a phone call or perhaps written communications 10 years ago can now be checked in minutes. Employees and managers have real flexibility in how they interact with each other.'

The web has, without doubt, given employers huge scope when it comes to how they work as well as where they work, with home and flexible working finally becoming a practical reality for many organisations and providing geographically dispersed companies with a far more cost-effective model. 'The move towards web-based applications has also enabled organisations with multiple sites or locations to benefit from accessing the functionality of the product, regardless of geographic



location,' explains David Hughes, head of marketing at Crown Computing. 'There has been a definite shift away from the older, more centralised, model. Web-based applications also offer rapid deployment and low cost of ownership.'

During this period, technology has streamlined and sped up processes and, in theory, reduced much of the drudgery and administration associated with both HR and payroll. Systems integration is no longer the black art it once was, and data no longer needs to be input several times across an organisation. In HR in particular, automated workflows have been key to this streamlining, according to Simon Fowler, managing director of the commercial division at Advanced Business Solutions. 'Workflow is seamless; in other words, co-ordinating the flow of information around the organisation while ensuring the HR system is automatically updated,' he says. 'This has resulted in more efficient HR processes, cost reductions, timelier information and greater transparency.'

The evolution of workforce management systems that provide employers with far greater visibility of their workforce needs, and which allow them to plan far more effectively, has also had a major impact. 'There is a wide choice available, and the benefits gained from leveraging technology to plan, allocate, manage and review how labour is utilised, provide significant competitive advantage to organisations,' says Macpherson. 'Capturing attendance alone and managing it effectively leads to significant benefits, both in terms of financial cost and employee morale.'

Macpherson claims that about two in five of the employee self-service/data capture terminals that Kronos provides contain biometrics for identification, but he reckons this will increase to around seven in 10 over the next five years, as organisations empower employees further with self-service.

More recently, still another acronym has encroached on the payroll function with the advent of SaaS, or Software-as-a-Service, which allows organisations to buy their software on a subscription basis and access it across standard browsers. In theory, it removes the need for costly on-site servers because the applications and data reside elsewhere and means users never have to be concerned about upgrades as they automatically receive these. The beauty of SaaS in tough economic times is that organisations can scale usage up and down, in keeping with business needs.

Cloud conscious

SaaS is a subset of cloud computing, which is further changing the way in which organisations buy and use software and, indeed, conduct their business. According to research by Gartner, the cloud is a top technology priority for CIOs in 2011, and the number of organisations using on-demand computing will rise to 43 per cent within four years.

And there can be little doubt that the cloud will further extend the flexibility to create new ways of working and further liberate them from the desktop. 'More recently, we have seen an upsurge in internet-enabled portable devices, and this is

having an increasing impact on HR processes,' says Fowler. 'An organisation's people are increasingly expecting instant and direct access to HR data via mobile devices, with the ability to amend this data themselves in a controlled, audited and approved way. This is driving the development of mobile-friendly workflow and self-service technologies.'

Hughes agrees and reckons this will pave the way for more: 'Another major trend will be making HR and workforce applications accessed on smartphones by mobile workers or people who travel as part of their working day,' he explains. 'Such apps will deliver functionality for basic administration tasks in real-time, supporting more flexible working models. In the case of workforce management, this could be employees clocking on and off, requesting leave or viewing rosters and schedules, and managers reviewing absences and allocating resources in line with fluctuating demand.'

Fowler cautions that the shift towards users accessing corporate systems from non-corporate devices such as tablets and BlackBerries means HR and payroll software providers will need to ensure users are provided with a secure means in which to access HR and payroll information remotely.

Pervasive technology

The blurring of lines between work and home that technology has brought will continue, in the same way that there has been a blurring of consumer and business applications when it comes to user expectations. 'Expectations set by consumer technology have had a considerable impact on workforce management solutions,' says Macpherson. 'The latest applications don't need an instruction manual, they are intuitive, easy-to-use, guide one to resolution of staffing problems and are available on mobile devices – and this is what today's Generation X and Generation Y expect.'

The past 10 years have also seen increased use of business intelligence and analytics software to not only assess past performance but also help predict and make more accurate decisions about the future. As the familiar line goes, payroll and HR are the custodians of some of the most valuable data in the company, but the functions need to be more proactive in this area.

Hughes stresses that companies are not using this 'big data' to its full potential. 'Ever-increasing amounts of workforce data are becoming available – a development we have seen building over the past decade,' he says. 'There is an opportunity to data-mine historic information and also analyse the real-time flow of data from workforce systems for strategic decision-making. This will enable management to align the organisation more flexibly and quickly with new business opportunities.'

Technology often brings as many challenges as it does benefits, and a refusal to embrace the next big trend isn't always a bad thing. A healthy scepticism and measured approach to implementing new technology can often stand a user in good stead. The challenge for both HR and payroll over the next decade, though, is identifying when such an attitude holds you back and starts to impede progress. **PW**

The blurring of lines between work and home that technology has brought will continue

FACT FILE

Over the past decade, business applications on the web have come to the fore, making technology widely available in the workplace and accessible from just about anywhere

It is now common for employees to use self-service terminals to check work schedules, holiday entitlement and overtime. Things that would have needed a phone call or written communications 10 years ago can now be checked in mere minutes

The move towards web-based applications has also enabled organisations with multiple sites to benefit from accessing the functionality of the product, regardless of geographic location