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The intranet in the E-HR: a tool put to the test of the regulation's processes between Human Resources actors.

In response to a more competitive environment and stronger requirements from the customers and the shareholders in terms of profitability, reduction of the structural costs, the Human Resources Department has to convince the Board of Management of its capacities of innovation, adaptability and flexibility. For this purpose, the HR Management invests increasingly in a new model of functioning: the e-RH.

According to literature the e-HR, based on a company strategy and linked to the Information and Communication Technology, is a global functioning mode of a company around a significant number of HR processes which leads to the sharing of HR information and its treatment by direct and free access of the employees, the Management and the HR function and to the setting-up of a new HR organisation in order to optimise the customer relationship. This dynamics leads the HR Management to design its own way of changing by optimising its organisation and by trying to convince the HR actors to adopt this role of strategic business partners, in the scope of which they are supposed to reduce the costs of co-ordination and to favour co-operation between the various groups of actors.

Achieving a better distribution of messages and optimising the HR service are the first objectives. The middle management is one of the privileged customers to satisfy, because its own role within the company also changes. The improvement of HR communication is generally accompanied by the development and the integration of an HR intranet. There are various steps of development of this tool associated to different functionality. Usually this tool, based on the Information Communication Technology¹, is considered as a technical support with which the required performances can be obtained.

However, as useful as this tool might be, it is first of all a person-related instrument which means that its potential efficiency depends on individual strategies and schemes. A good co-operation between HR actors requires daily efforts. The cost of such efforts is difficult to measure. Our assumption is that the level of internal co-operation influences the elaboration of a stimulating contents, leading to the concrete use of this tool for the HR actors as their customers.

The subject of our communication will be a better understanding of how this regulation between the various HR actors is built, and to know about the consequences on the HR intranet's enrichment. Our communication will articulate in three parts. Firstly, we will come back on the e-HR concept in a way to enrich the definition proposed above by a systematic approach. In the second and third parties, we will see how this model, mentioned in all the speeches, meets the logic of the different actors and how the differences between them could be managed. Which raises a issue to resolve.

¹ We will use the abbreviation « ICT ».

1. For an enrichment of the e-HR concept.

The evolution of the HR function has been announced in specialised magazines since the end of the 1990s. Some researchers have made aware HR professionals of their difficult position in the company and of the necessity to transform the function (Ulrich, 1997). Thus, the HR department must show its added business value. To do so, certain guidelines must be followed: become more service-oriented, more focused on its clients, being aware of HR commitment and contribution towards the company performance (Lepark and Snell, 1998 ; Ulrich 1999 ; Wright 1998 ; Rüel, Bondarouk and Looise, 2004). In this context, the support of Information Communication Technology (ICT) is considered to be essential – which leads us to the e-HR concept.

1.1 A brief story about the e-HR concept.

Different models of this concept exist, but many of them are influenced by a technological determinism. According to us, e-HR is more than a concept. It is a new way of thinking the company and its actors. This is why it seems important to schematise it differently by articulating the evolution of actors of the company in various stages of development of an HR intranet. It is our proposal to exceed the risk of the technological and organisational determinisms and provide us with a more systematic approach.

1.1.1: e-HR as a basic element of a new model of functioning.

Regarding the definition of e-HR, we have been influenced by the thinking of Huub Rüel and his colleagues. According to them, the e-component is not only the symbol of a technical advance, but the imprint of a deeper transformation of the HR position within the company: a new “*way of thinking about interaction, service-provision, and communication*” in order to “*redefine HR profession*” (Rüel, Bondarouk and Looise, 2004 : 17).

The use of ICT would have an impact on the management of the HR process and would transform the relation between the HR department and its environment. A model of functioning based on e-HR stands for the access to and a treatment of the HR information by all actors of the company, not only the HR staff. Thus, this system would provide employees with the responsibility to manage their own personal data and their own professional development, whereas the manager, without an intermediary, would completely intervene in the HR process. That is the aggregation of new actors in the HR area.

1.1.2 The HR intranet, an adequate support for the change.

In the literature, the HR intranet is presented at the same time as a tool for supporting the middle management (Messeghem, Pierson, 2003) and for improving HR performance (Matmati, 2002). The main question is to know why these two actors would accept to change or not in connection with the development of an HR intranet.

For an HR actor, anxious to show his added value to the business, the intranet tool can become a material support on which a number of new HR applications can be found. These services would provide the HR function with the opportunity to change.

For the middle management, things are different because it is considered a key actor of the company’s transformations. Its position is between the Board of Management and the staff, and it is this position, which makes it to manage concretely evolutions of identities, of professions and larger work transformations. It means that the middle management “*becomes*

the initiator and the founder" of ICT (Laval, 2000: 85). This is why HR consider him as their first customer to satisfy.

According to this vision, the accessibility of new HR services would give the opportunity to the middle management to explore new forms of organisation and to become more independent (Messeghem, Pierson, on 2003; Kalika, on 2002).

In their article, Florence Laval, Veronique Guilloux and Michel Kalika explain the Intranet potentialities as the main instrument for the HR department to improve its performance. They present six applications² in relation with three stages of HR intranet development.

- The first stage corresponds to the **"Intranet Corporate"**, which is mainly focused on internal communications, with a special site for HR information (HR processes, legal elements...). It is dedicated to all employees of the company.
- The second stage is called **"Intranet RH Généraliste"**³, of which the originality is e-administration. Using the workflow technology, HR offers to employees some on-line automated administrative services (leaves, bills, certificates ...). Others sections are: more information about mobility management; an access to training services; specific applications to support new forms of network organisation. This intranet is currently managed by the HR function. Such on-line administrative services lead the HR intranet manager to create specific interfaces for each actor (employees, managers, HR staff, and the Board of Management). It corresponds to an **HR Self-Service** approach.
- The **"Intranet Spécialisé"**⁴ is the most accomplished stage. Containing the previous level, it has been further enriched by new applications: e-learning, e-competence and knowledge management. We are in a transversal dynamics, of which one of the main objectives is to capitalise the company's knowledge.

It is evident that the intranet tool has the potential to help the various actors of the company to change. Nevertheless, we think that it is not enough to speak about a concomitant evolution of the role of the manager and of the HR actor, without a strong link to the level of the HR Intranet tool's development.

...

The essential question is to determine how these transfers of competencies are concretely being made? How the "hierarchical" learns to become this "first HR" according to Ulrich, and then become more and more the "manager-boss". And, on the other hand, how does the HR become a real "business-partner", then a "consultant-expert" while it is currently considered a mere administrator ? How can a compromise between these two actors be found?

Beyond the abstract and normative models, the concrete approach of these crossing points is scarce in the academic literature.

Far from claiming to revolve around these complex questions, we propose an ongoing modelling of these crossings of change's trajectories by adding progressively three hypotheses.

² Six applications : HR information, e-administrative ; e-mobilité ; e-recruitment ; e-learning ; e-competence and applications for knowledge management

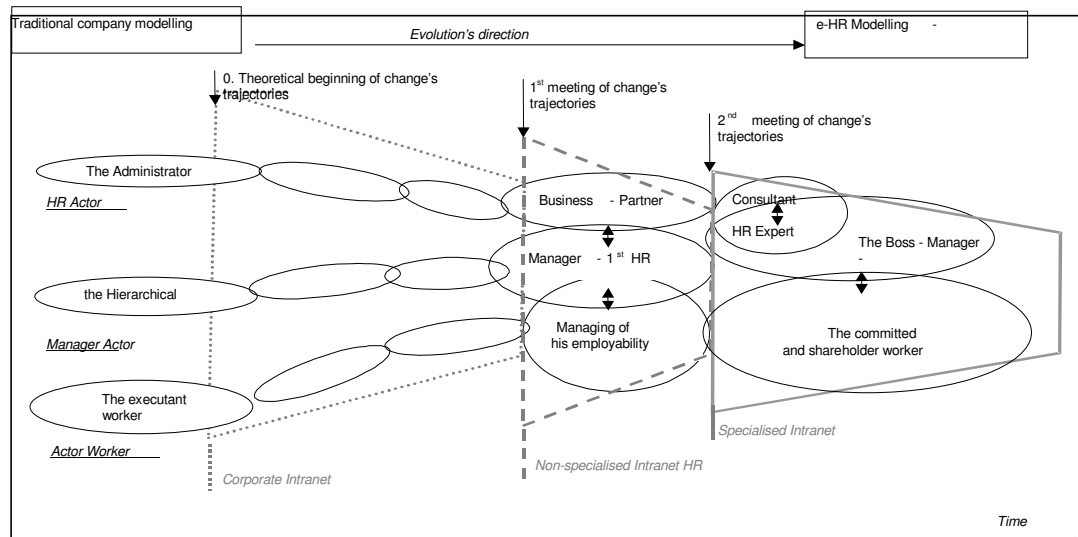
³ Non-specialised HR Intranet.

⁴ Specialised Intranet.

1.2 An ongoing modelling of the crossing of change's trajectories.

1.2.1 Hypothesis 1: the interdependence of the change's trajectories.

The first additional hypothesis concerns the interdependent character of these changes which occur in the company. In the figure below, we want to show that these trajectories of change are more than simultaneous, they are interdependent. The level of transformation of an actor has a strong impact on the evolution of other actors on the scene.



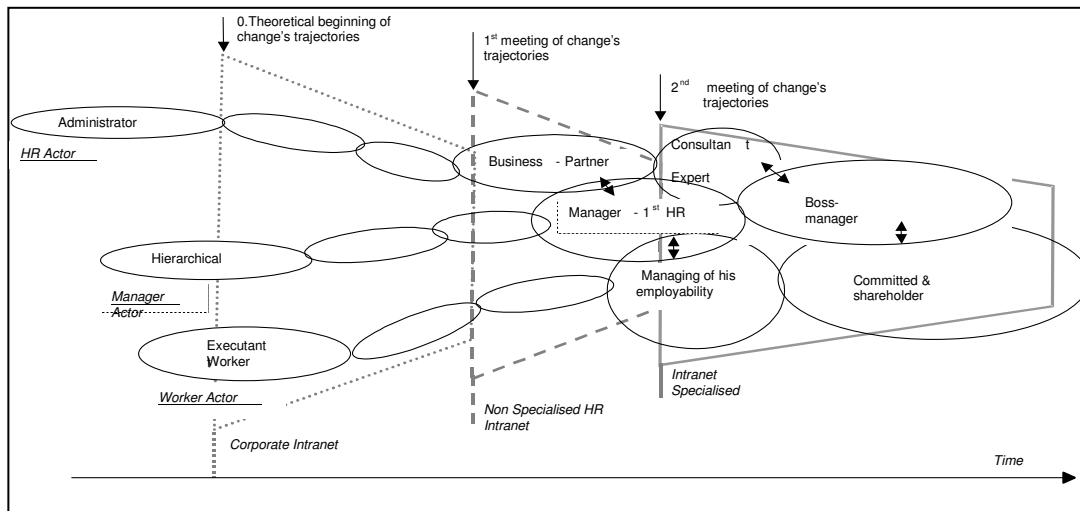
Nevertheless, this first figure does not suffice, because the simultaneous character of these changes does not seem real. If it were, this would mean that all actors of the company would change at the same time. However, each actor is different and has his own rhythm of change. If we follow normative speeches, HR should lead the change. In this case, the HR actor must pull the other actors on his trajectory of change.

1.2.2 Hypothesis 2: the consideration of various temporalities of the change.

The temporality of the change is the time necessary for negotiations, learning, and appropriation. If we are in a logic of movement of the standards and the construction of new actors (Iribarne, on 2001), this means that change can take its time according to the actor concerned.

Without wanting to describe here the all possible situations, we can distinguish three possible tendencies of evolution according to the motricity of actors.

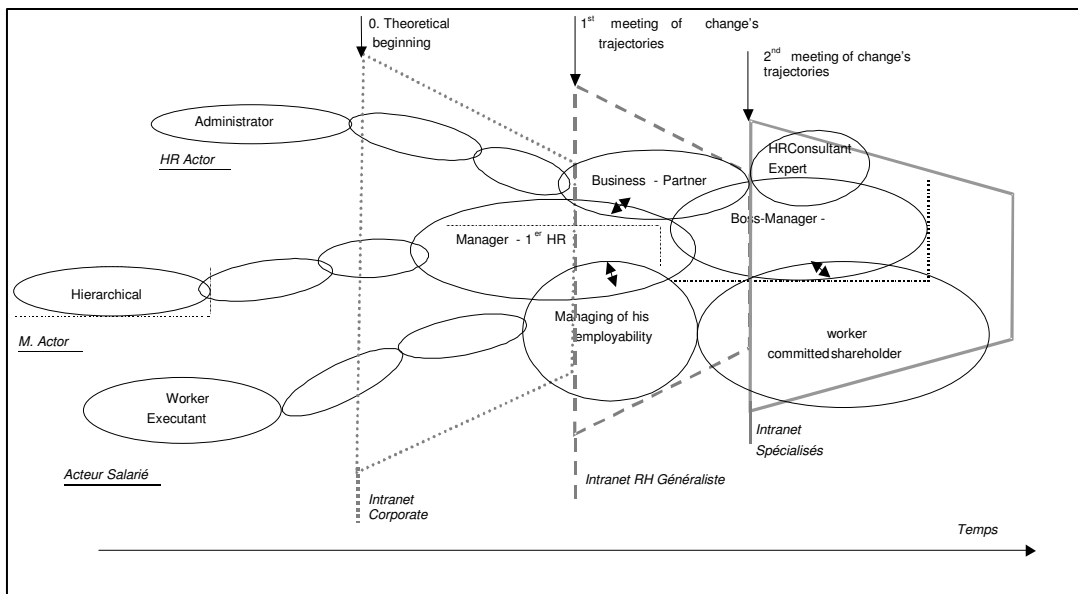
- *Tendency 1, the HR as main pilot of the change:*



This first case corresponds to the most optimal situation for the HR staff because they are the first actors who have started their change trajectory. Their evolution will make the other actors of the company enter in the change process.

This situation would remove the outsourcing risk from the HR function. In this case, we assume that the HR intranet would bring to the middle management as to all employees genuine services, which effectively allow them to evolve.

- *Tendency 2, the middle management as precursor of the change.*

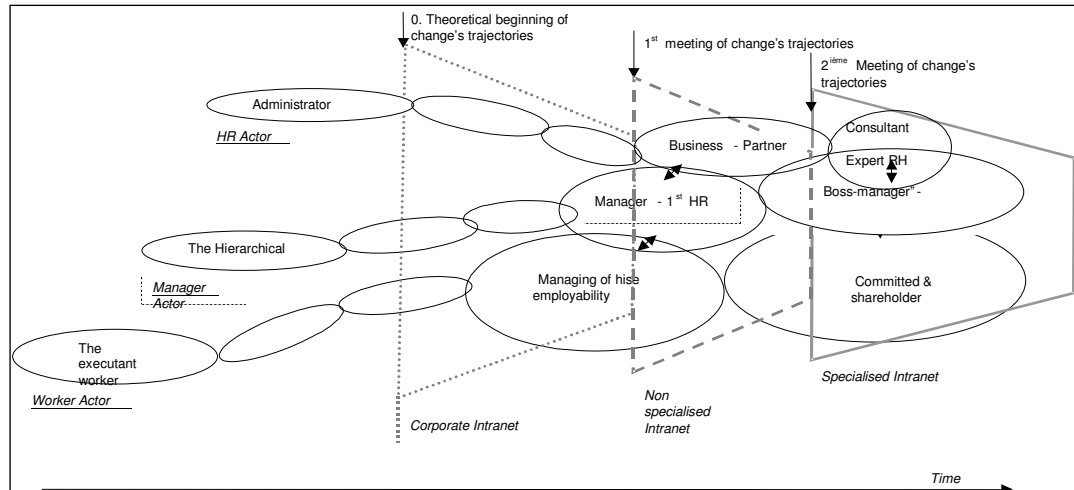


Even if becoming the first HR is not an enthusiastic idea for many middle managers (as this increases their daily workload), their needs oblige them to act and to stimulate the other actors of the company. Here, the middle management takes the lead and concretely implements the change.

However, this trajectory of change is not very advantageous for the HR. Risks of outsourcing or reorganisation are real, except if old internal alliances protect the HR actors.

In this case, we can assume that the HR intranet is not being used. Because it is managed by the HR department which is not in phase with its customers' needs and expectations, because the HR function is the last actor of the company to enter into a dynamics of change.

- *Tendency 3, Employees as pilots of the change*



The employees pull their superiors to evolve, and these managers pull HR to change. This change's trajectory is not favourable for the HR actor, because they still are the last ones to approach the change. Perhaps, the effect of a domestic use of Internet could explain this advanced employee position in change dynamics (Iribarne, 2001).

The interest of all these figures is to show that the change could take different trajectories in the time according to the actors. This last hypothesis makes us conclude on the heterogeneity of the various collectives. Or, we strongly assume that we also find this heterogeneity in one and the same collective.

1.2.3 Hypothesis 3: the consideration of the different actors' plurality

We made our thesis in a company in management science. During our first year, we realised a survey: 53 middle managers had been interviewed concerning their feeling and use of the HR intranet. This work confirms our hypothesis of the actors' plurality.

We concluded that the middle management was composed by five typical actors⁵. Each of them considered and used the HR intranet and by extension had a different approach on the change. We concluded that the way of understanding and using technology depended on the nature of the user's activity and on the organisational structure in which he evolves.

We think that, like the middle management, the HR actor is pluralistic. If we return to the most optimal situation for the HR function, in which it leads the change, this will imply that the HR must work in a real spirit of co-operation. However, we think that it is exactly this heterogeneity of the HR which is difficult to manage.

We propose to give you concrete examples of the daily difficulties to manage this HR's heterogeneity in order to create useful information and to enrich the HR intranet.

⁵ Our five typical actors are « super technicien » ; « patron de chaîne » ; « artisan industriel » ; « électron libre » ; « hydride ».

2. A brief story about the HR intranet of an Aeronautical and Space company

If we admit that the HR intranet is above all a tool built, managed and used by different profiles of individuals, then we can assume that the HR strategy, the level of co-operation within the HR department, the methods and means chosen to stimulate the appropriation and the use of new applications, are essential indicators which lead us to understand the real state of the HR change.

2.1 Research method.

As we have already said, we prepare a PhD in management science within the Human Resources direction of a major Aeronautical and Space company, which we shall name *Aero*. During our first year of study, we realised a survey about the perception and the use of the HR intranet of the middle management. Our method was classic. We collected data through semi-structured interviews (53 middle managers had been interviewed).

Nevertheless, we had to change our method of collecting data for studying the HR actor, because of our real integration in the team in charge of the HR intranet project. What classifies our work in the register of “recherche-action”⁶ (David, 2002).

2.2 The Aero’s HR intranet : its implementation and the consequences of a new high management for its evolution.

For a better understanding of the difficulties to manage an intranet project, we think it is important to explain you, in few words, the evolution of the Aero’s HR intranet.

2.2.1 From 2001 to 2003 : the beginning of the HR intranet as an official vector of information.

At the end of 2001, the director of Human Resource thought it important for his department to have an HR site on the Corporate Intranet, which had recently been created by the department of Communications. For that, an HR intranet manager was appointed to take care of HR information and to work together with the other department in charge of the intranet project: Communications and Information System.

At the same time, the director of HR keeps on investing in the domain of communications. He creates a internal communications service inside his department. Therefore, the simultaneous investment in a HR intranet site and a service dedicated to the communication shows his determination to manage and control better the quality and the distribution of the HR information. His strategy is to transform the HR image. In reality, this directorate is considered being isolated, whose policy and actions are not transparent.

How did the users (the middle management and employees) react to the implementation of this HR tool?

Reactions are mitigated. We note that this tool, as the Aero’Corporate Intranet, had been introduced without any specific communication and training strategies.

Concretely, employees discovered the HR intranet either on-the-job or by friendly relations. Many of them consider the Corporate Intranet, including the HR part, to follow a fashion.

⁶ « research - action »

The middle management, who is usually interested in technology, did not massively use the HR intranet. Some of them thought that this type of instrument had to remain in the domain of secretarial work.

Over this period, the HR Intranet was used, but not too frequently. In reality, this tool did not find its place among the other tools of information support which were already used by the Aero's employees and were more settled in their habits of communicating.

2.2.2 Since April 2003: a dynamics of communication in relation with a new top-level management

In spring 2003, a new generation of leaders is arriving at Aero. The new CEO and the new HR director share common interests: their profiles and their methods of management, inspired by American practices, strongly differ from the ones of their predecessors. An important HR re-organisation has begun, which directly impacted on the evolution of the HR intranet. The new HR strategy is closer to the case presented in our first part⁷, which considers the HR function as the leader of the change.

According to the new HR director, the HR function must resolve a double difficulty: at the same time, HR must change itself and must help the other departments in their processes of transformation. To succeed these challenges, the internal communications service is considered as an essential support.

The HR re-organisation officially hands over the management of the HR intranet to the internal communications manager. And a new HR intranet manager arrives with more technical skills than his predecessor. This new element provides the internal communications service with a concrete solution to enrich the HR intranet.

2.3 The concrete evolution of the Aero HR intranet

Before having the means to develop the HR intranet, an only intranet site exists "*Espace du Salarié*"(site for employee) which readily corresponds to the "Corporate Intranet", the first level into the HR intranet typology presented by Michel Kalika and his colleagues (Kalika 2002, p 70-74).

The evolution of the Aero's HR intranet drives from a concrete structuration of HR information according to the specificity of the actors. This results in the creation of two additional HR intranet sites: a "*Espace du Manager*" (site for managers) at first and a few months later a "*Espace RH*" (site for HR staff). There, we can find our three key actors of the company.

In the vision of HR creators, these two virtual spaces have been imagined as a combined answer to resolve the double HR issue: the *Espace RH* must be a tool privileged by HR staff to better work together and to improve the HR service. The interest of the *Espace du Manager* is to bring to the managers a HR and Corporate information that corresponds better to their needs and expectations.

⁷ Cf : 5 page.

3 : An example of an extension of the HR intranet

3.1 This project derives from the initiative of the internal communications service.

The project concerns the virtual site for the HR staff, “*Espace RH*”. It will be an on-line application for a better identification of the HR members.

This project is above all the idea of the internal communications manager. According to her, this tool is indispensable, because the department of Human Resources has known a recent reorganisation. In this context, it is necessary to provide the HR staff, from any hierarchical level, with the possibility to know exactly and find “*who is who*” in its department, and “*who does what*”.

This project is a concrete example of an internal solution to the double challenge of HR transformation⁸. In this line, the on-line “*who is who*” could help the HR actor to improve its service. For example, if one of a HR member’s customers ask him a specific question, and he cannot answer it because he does not know who in the new HR organisation is now in charge of these questions. With the system proposed, the HR actor can run a specific on-line query (different fields exist as “keyword”). With the tool’s answer, he can directly contact the responsible person and provide his customer with a useful answer. Or he can refer to this other HR expert if he judges if it is necessary for revolving customer’s issue.

In reality, this on-line tool on the “*Espace RH*” is not so original and innovative, because before its creation the HR department functioned anyway. However, this knowledge of the HR staff depends on the number of years spent in this same department. That is why we think that the tool’s originality consists in having created a sort of cultural shortcut, a new solution to reduce functional costs.

3.2 An individual negotiation around contents.

After discussion⁹, the method, which has been chosen to pilot this project, is composed of four steps. The main objective is to involve the HR individuals in the dynamics of a collaborative work.

Step no. 1: explanation of the project and its learning-by-doing methods

From the list of all HR staff and with the first model of this on-line “*who is who*”, we contact each HR member by telephone to present the project of this specific application and globally the philosophy of this HR virtual space. Currently, this exercise goes along with a direct application. We ask the individual to use his keyboard at the same time as we do in order to accompany him in this first discovery of the tool and for many of them the “*Espace RH*” too. For testing the application, we ask them to click on the precise name of an HR staff member¹⁰. Then, they directly obtain a concrete example of which type of information the tool can supply.

⁸ As we have already said, the HR department faces a double challenge: changing itself and at the same time helping other departments to change.

⁹ Between the internal communications manager, the HR intranet manager and us, we decide that we will be in charge to contact all HR staff.

¹⁰ We propose the name of someone who works for a very long time in the HR department. In reality, we assume that this person is known by anyone and especially her tasks too. We have the assumption that if the future HR user of this tool already understands better its utility during the first trial, we can hope of a better internalisation, and finally a better use of it.

Step n°2: the HR future-user becomes a supplier of contents : the beginning of negotiations.

In a second step, the HR individual has to describe his main tasks in some keywords. All the negotiation is focused on the limitation and the choice of the keywords. The user provides us with his proposal of contents either at the phone (we take notes) or by e-mail. It is important to note here the important association of various tools of information support. It refers to the concept of “*wallet of communications*” (Kalika, 2002).

Step n°3: the first HR individual visit for validation of the content.

After having received the content of his main responsibilities, we enter this information in the tool's system (only the HR intranet team has the access right to do it). Then, we send an e-mail to the HR staff member concerned to ask him/her to verify if our summary is correct, or if she wants us to integrate some modifications. In this e-mail, we purposely refer to the access to the “*Espace RH*”, without a hypertext link in order to incite her to try to do it alone.

Step n°4: last negotiations for a final validation.

We think that our first step, reserved to an accompanying discovery of the tool and our direct request around the validation of professional activities, leads us to think that it is a good method to interest and to stimulate a co-operative work inside the HR department.

The HR staff seems enthusiastic to have had the opportunity to describe their jobs without any hierarchical pressure. In 100 % of the cases, we obtained a validation accompanied by only a few modifications (not fundamental).

3. 3 a successful process of regulation between HR actors?

It is difficult today to say if this project is a success. It is obviously too early to interpret the rates of connection. Indeed, these last ones were important, because we asked the HR individuals to verify their on-line contents. That means that these first visits remain on a learning stage and do not translate the real internalisation of this tool.

The interest of this project is to have allowed two HR entities to work collectively: the internal communications service on one side and every HR individual on the other side. Each entity had its own strategy for driving the other in a positive direction:

- the HR designer with his four step method, trying to push the HR individual to use the on-line tool,
- and the HR member wanting to impose special keywords to show the value of his/her work to the HR designer.

Regarding this point, we studied some cases where the negotiation around keywords was harder. The phone contact was not enough, a “face-to-face” meeting was useful to find a consensus.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we wanted to show throughout this work that the concept of e-HR is much more complex than it appears. This complexity comes from the interdependence between technological evolutions and movements of the standards and the construction of new actors. These transformations have different temporalities.

Our example of an extension of the “*Espace RH*” demonstrates that thinking concretely the change requires many efforts of negotiations, discussions, in order to find a compromise between the various HR actors (HR designer and HR future-user). The will of being more service-oriented associated to the HR Intranet’s development is a new topic for the HR function, which requires a particular learning stage and new competencies (especially in the domain of communications). This concrete example shows that even if the strategy of the HR director strongly incites to adopt a different behaviour by using this tool, it is still difficult to change the current habits.

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