Mobile HR: The Global Challenge

Regional variances in culture, security, infrastructure and device type pose challenges for global deployments of mobile HR applications.

By Howard Baldwin

From Asia/Pacific to Europe to North America, companies around the world are adopting mobile human resources applications. Based on a global survey conducted by Bloomberg Businessweek Research Services (BBRS) in November 2010 of more than 1,000 executives, a majority of companies plan to provide employees with access to HR and human capital management (HCM) data via mobile devices (see Figure 1). However, the regulatory, cultural, technology and security issues involved differ widely across the world. In addition to looking at how issues and challenges vary by region, this report looks at how IT leaders are managing these differences.

Deploying mobile applications to a global enterprise involves navigating a matrix of challenges more closely suited to the talents of a superhero than a CIO. The intersection of mobility and HR involves highly variable levels of maturity, not only in terms of connectivity and applications but also in terms of culture, devices and security. "When I think about the different regions of the world, it's like my kids being different ages," says Mindy Geisser, vice president of global people services for Colliers International, a commercial real estate firm with 512 offices in 61 countries. "There are different levels of sophistication among the users and different levels of infrastructure among the countries."

Europe and Asia/Pacific, for instance, lead the United States in enabling access to mobile HR data (see Figure 2). This may relate to the fact that most of those countries had a single, governmentally sanctioned telecommunications provider, which made infrastructure build-out simpler than in the United States—where, after the AT&T break-up, seven different companies had to invest in infrastructure.

Global deployment represents a huge concern for IT, says Kevin Benedict, an analyst at enterprise mobility consulting firm Netcentric Strategies. "How do they secure everything? How do they standardize mobile applications on one middleware platform that's easy to manage? How do they get single sign-on? What kind of governance do they need? Everybody is still trying to figure it out." Global challenges also relate to differences in culture and business maturity. For instance, the understanding of commercial real estate is much more advanced in traditional western countries, but those users may not find using mobile devices to be intuitive, says Colliers International CIO Veresh Sita. "In Asia and Latin America, where our business is not as mature, the average age of employees is much younger and they're much more inclined to use mobile devices," he says.

Obstacles Not Insurmountable

Overall, global challenges fall into three major areas:

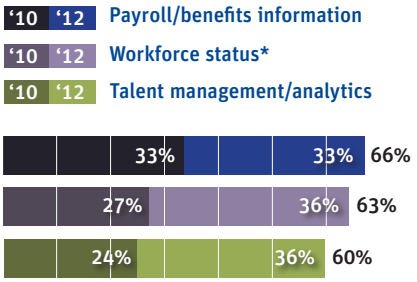
- **Security:** Protecting the mobile devices themselves, along with the data when it is uploaded or downloaded.
- **Privacy:** Adhering to local or regional regulations regarding personal data.
- **Connectivity:** Understanding the vagaries of international networks, which affect decisions about where data is stored, in addition to potential billing/roaming issues when crossing borders.

First, there is the question of operating system security. Some regions have more than

Figure 1

Jumping on the HR Mobile Applications Bandwagon

Within two years, the majority of respondents said a variety of HR information would be available to employees via handheld device. (% of respondents indicating which type of information will be accessible by a mobile device)



*Workforce status=Staff availability and time tracking.
N=1,004 respondents
Source: Bloomberg Businessweek Research Services

their fair share of hackers sniffing for wireless data, and mobile devices make these areas potential targets. One of the reasons iPhones are selling so well, suggests Netcentric's Benedict, is because Apple has provided a methodology for securing them. Google's Android operating system, on the other hand, uses open-source code, and there is not currently a system set up for certifying security. Some vendors are working on firmware upgrades to accommodate this challenge, Benedict notes.

Then there is a question of specific security issues, which fall into two categories: securing data and data access. The first challenge comes from countries having different rules about not only privacy but also breach notification. The European Union's Data Protection Directive prohibits European firms from transferring personal data overseas to countries with weaker privacy laws, unless the recipients agree to adhere to the DPD's standards. Japan has regulations regarding encryption. Korea has rules around solicitation.

Bethany Larson, a partner at consulting firm Deloitte & Touche who focuses on risk, information security and application security, advises getting a granular understanding of each country's rules, including those regarding stored data versus transmitted data. "In a global organization, if they're sharing data in one system, the corporation needs to understand the rules for each country of origin. You encounter risks of violating privacy information with the onward transfer of data [from one country to another]. You have to make sure that you're properly authenticating all the users of the corporate system."

Data access presents its own global obstacles, notes Martin Khun, the Sydney-based executive director of strategic marketing operations and commercial support in the Asia/Pacific region for Merck, Sharpe & Dohme, a subsidiary of $27.4 billion pharmaceutical company Merck & Co. "Some countries censor Internet access, blocking certain servers or information tools. In Vietnam, you can't access Facebook. In China, our VPN won't work the way it's supposed to because the government is screening the content."

Crossing No-Man's Land

Connectivity is yet another challenge. Countries differ considerably in the ability for employees to access wireless networks. Like the United States, countries that have strong connectivity in urban areas may have less coverage in outlying areas. For employees whose work takes them across regions, that presents difficulties.

When connectivity is a big issue, it affects the ability of companies to control data security. For that reason, some companies prefer to keep corporate data off mobile devices. "In the Philippines, once you step outside of Manila," Kuhn says, "you're in a no-man's land in terms of connectivity, so there we have to have offline and online solutions. Employees sync up data when they get back into range, but we have to have security policies that accommodate that."

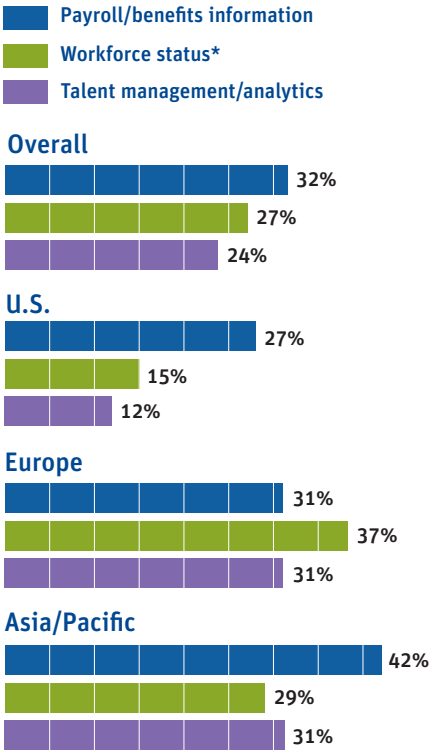
When connectivity requires data to be downloaded to a mobile device, companies restrict the type of data accessible. This frequently depends on the particular business; for instance, notes Colliers' Sita: "We'll allow property particulars to reside on devices. But if it's sensitive or confidential data, we won't allow it." Another connectivity issue to watch out for is billing. Netcentric's Benedict travels frequently in Europe, where you can get on a train and be in a new country in 30 minutes. "Suddenly, you're only a half hour from the office and you're hit with $500 in monthly international roaming charges."

Figure 2

Europe, Asia/Pacific Lead U.S. in Handheld Access to HR Apps

In all cases, payroll/benefits information leads other HR information in terms of mobile access.

Q: Types of corporate information accessible today by your organization's employees via handheld.



*Workforce status=Staff availability and time tracking.
N=1,004
Source: Bloomberg Businessweek Research Services

Silicon Valley-based writer Howard Baldwin has written about technology since 1987. He has covered mobile technology for Corporate Computing and PC/Computing *and has written white papers and articles for Microsoft Windows Mobile and RIM.*

Think Globally, Act Locally

Not everyone agrees on the solution to these challenges. Some companies implement highly consistent policies, while others acknowledge the need for some flexibility. "Our organizational structure and policies are fairly straightforward and consistent globally," says Craig LeClair, CIO at Altera, a San Jose-based provider of programmable logic solutions that has 2,600 employees in 19 countries. "The policies I have in San Jose are the same ones I have in Penang, where we have our second-biggest location."

Franklin Templeton Investments, the San Mateo, Calif.-based global financial services firm, has offices in more than 30 countries and does business in more than 150. Karim Rehemtulla, vice president of corporate systems, is focusing on creating an identity management system to serve the company's data access infrastructure. "HR is the system of record that defines title, role and status, which controls access to other applications. We're building a repository to capture this information, so we can identify employees and contractors and give them access based on those roles."

According to the BBRS data, the question of who gets mobile access to corporate information differs according to region, with the United States more likely than other regions to enable higher ranking workers with this capability (see Figure 3).

Some companies apply a consistent policy, with a few local variations. Arun Gupta, CTO at Shoppers Stop, a Mumbai-based multi-channel retailer operating 43 department stores and 10 big-box hypermarkets in 18 cities across India, says: "For multi-country operations, there may be variations depending on local regulations or laws, and you need to factor these into the solution. For IT, the opportunity is to keep all stakeholders aware and gain acceptance, which is normally difficult to achieve," he says.

The Next Challenge on the Horizon

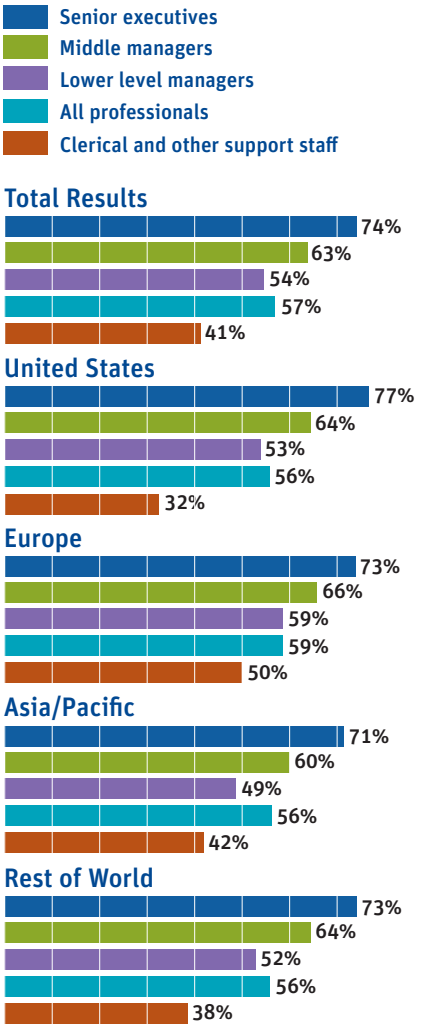
Going forward, an increasingly important issue for companies dealing with a global workforce is the simplicity of the application interface. David Krebs, practice director at VDC Research Group, cites the advancements of touchscreens as a big step forward. A reliance on commonly understood graphical icons rather than words helps with international adoption and overall usability, he says.

The day may come when connectivity, consistency and usability—as they relate to global deployment of mobile devices and data access—are no longer the bugaboos they are today. In the meantime, the question of which path an organization follows remains rooted as much in internal culture and policy as in governmental dictates. As we advance toward an even more global economy, though, it is likely that enterprises will soon enjoy a greater commonality and simplicity on all these fronts. ■

Figure 3

Who Gets Mobile Access Depends on Global Region

Although senior executives in the U.S. are more likely to have mobile device access to corporate information, European and Asian companies are more likely to provide such access to lower ranking employees. (mean % of employees with mobile device access to corporate information)



N=1,004 respondents
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Mobilizing HR Applications

Mobility is more than just another trend. It is literally changing the way business is done. Companies that adopt mobile device access to enterprise applications for their workforce can improve employee productivity, increase managerial insight and support better decision-making by their executives. With mobile solutions from SAP, organizations can capitalize on the mobility revolution using a platform that helps ensure security and applications that extend business processes beyond enterprise boundaries.

SAP offers a wide selection of mobile HR applications geared to meet role-specific needs within the organization with individualized content and services. These apps are intuitive, scalable and secure, connecting everyone in the organization to relevant HR processes and information on a wide range of mobile devices.

Employees can now perform a wide range of HR-related activities from their mobile device of choice. For example, they can access the organizational structure of their company and look up employee contact data as needed. They can also enter timesheet data while on the go, and it will soon be possible for them to track time and expenses for project-related resources, practically in real time.

Employees can view vacation days available and submit leave requests. In addition, they are able to capture travel receipts using mobile device-specific capabilities, such as the camera function, and then create travel expense reports directly from their devices. All data submitted integrates with back-office systems to provide a single version of the truth that helps companies make confident decisions across the board.

Managers can check the availability of their direct reports on a team calendar, no matter where they are. Among other HR-related duties is an interview assistant app, which helps hiring managers track candidates, access documents during interviews and collaborate quickly to land the talent needed to thrive as a company.

Proven Platform

The SAP mobile HR apps are built on the proven Sybase® Unwired Platform and the Afaria® mobile device management solution. With this technology, organizations can centrally manage a variety of mobile apps, devices and data. Mobile apps are readily provisioned and updated wirelessly without involving the end user.

For More Information

To learn more about how mobile solutions from SAP can help your HR organization boost productivity, increase efficiency and engage the workforce, visit this Web page: www.sap.com/mobile/hr.

SAP Mobile Apps for HR

- SAP Employee Lookup
- SAP HR Approvals
- SAP Interview Assistant
- SAP Leave Request
- SAP Manager Insight
- SAP Timesheet
- SAP Travel Expense Approval
- SAP Travel Receipt Capture

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