# “E-HR and Employee Self-Service (ESS) in a British public sector organization: an exploratory analysis”


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# SECTION 4. Practitioner's corner

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# E-HR and Employee Self-Service (ESS) in a British public sector organization: an exploratory analysis


## Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to present empirical research on the use of an Employee Self-Service (ESS) system in a British public sector work organization, and issues associated with its introduction. A case study approach, detailing interviews with managers and employees is used. Content analysis and selective coding are employed to analyze data. Results indicate that management and employee perceptions of using ESS differ, and challenges arise in ESS implementation, including: the relevant HR role; cultural/emotional adjustments needed from staff; and those associated with appropriate organizational development/change and project organization/management. The limitations of this study include interviews with a small number of staff, which limits the generalizatility of results. Practical implications and recommendations are provided, namely HR staff need to build a coherent approach regarding ESS implementation. The value of the paper is that it represents new empirical data on ESS in practice, and a critical appraisal of it from remote home workers. Moreover, it contributes to research via contrasting findings with the prescriptive/descriptive consultancy-led literature.


**Keywords:** electronic human resource management, employee self-service, Britain.
**JEL Classification:** M, M12.

## Introduction

Recent advancements in technology offer potential solutions in managing HRM operations on-line, or via an external service provider, now commonly referred to as Electronic HRM (hereafter, e-HR). The potential benefits of e-HR are argued to be: accurate and real-time communication; accessible and timely employee information; streamlined and integrated HRM processes; and cost-effective HRM service delivery (Financial Times, 2002; Wilmott, 2001).

Although some evidence exists on the take-up of e-HR initiatives in the British HRM literature, much of it derives from consultant's claims and/or internet sources, and is, thus, arguably questionable in terms of methodological rigor. Little academic research currently exists that evaluates the use of e-HR by work organizations in the UK, and even less on the uptake of Employee Self-Service (ESS) systems there. The contributions of this article lie in providing an overview of the extant e-HR and ESS literatures, and an exploratory empirical case study investigation into the issues involved in implementing an ESS system in practice in Britain, reporting both management and employee views.

This article begins with a review of the literature on e-HR and ESS, and problems associated with their use. Reporting of the methods used to gain data and case study findings follow. The article closes with a discussion of the issues raised from the findings, and conclusions arising.

## 1. Literature review

**1.1. Background.** Advancements in Information Technology (IT) hardware and software have led to the transformation of information systems such that they are able to hold and process data quicker, and provide key information to managers in terms of statistics on their human resources, i.e. trends in absence, turnover, and pay. Work organizations seek to use IT in HRM because they wish to become more innovative, efficient, and achieve cost reductions. HR also may need to use IT effectively to make an enhanced organizational contribution to avoid being 'balkanised' (Adams, 1991), or even outsourced altogether. For example, payroll has been outsourced according to some U.K. work organizations (Holbeche, 2002), total outsourcing of the HR function has occurred at BP, Blackburn and Darwen Council, and BAE Systems, and some HR functions have shrunk to become cost-effective providers of HR services only (Oswick and Grant, 1996).

**1.2. Electronic Human Resources (e-HR).** Broadly, e-HR refers to web-based access to human resource data and transactions in the workplace (e-HR.com, 2002). Hence, e-HR has been defined as:

The redesign and implementation of employee services and the relationships between human resources, organizations, their suppliers and customers using e-business as a process and service enabler (ECR Concepts, 2002).

While there appear to be different service delivery options, the e-HR literature indicates some similarity in terms of the objectives work organizations have when wanting to implement the use of e-HR technologies. These include: a need for accurate and

real-time communication; accessible and timely employee information; streamlined and integrated HR processes; and the optimization of investments in enterprise technology (Financial Times, 2001; Watson Wyatt, 2001). For example, justifications for the implementation of e-HR at Cisco Systems include the benefits of 'workforce optimization', and the removal of administrative tasks (Cotter, 2001). Some proposed outcomes of using e-HR include gaining a fully integrated, organization-wide electronic network of HR-related data, information services, tools and applications that are generally accessible at any time by employees, managers and HR professionals (Kettley, 2002).

However, critics of e-HR systems suggest that e-HR is possibly a fad introduced by IT companies to further their business relevance, and that the high IT literacy levels in such organizations enable them to achieve success in it, as their workforces are technically skilled enough to manage data protection, design flexibility, and choice of infrastructure/applications (Trapp, 2001). Figures on the prevalence of e-HR technologies in the UK are difficult to compile as many come from the web pages of HR consultants, who may have a vested interest in 'talking up' the benefits of e-HR. As the HR consultancy literature contains the most detail on e-HR and ESS initiatives, we may need to use it to develop more rigorous academic research in this field. We now outline the various types of e-HR technologies in use today.

**1.3. Web-enabled HR: Intranets/HR portals.** Work organizations have adopted various options of web-enabled HR. Intranets enable online access to basic information such as HR policies/procedures, news of internal vacancies, organizational newsletters, and training program details. The choice of web-enabled HR used depends on fit to organizational vision and culture, the nature of the business, and their financial strength, geographical spread, dynamism and technology-orientation (Arkin, 2002).

Intranets/HR portals are used to link employees in diverse functions and locations, with different schedules and levels of knowledge/expertise. In advanced cases, some work organizations use them to provide training to new and existing employees in multiple locations. For example, BP Amoco, Cisco Systems, Accenture, and Oracle Corporation all claim use of their Intranet has facilitated knowledge sharing between work groups, and produced improvements to research creativity and productivity through gains arising from knowledge transfers (Collison, 1999). The implementation challenges of using intranets involve articulating realistic objectives, managing cultural transition, and selecting suitable technology infrastructure. But unsuccessful shifts towards using web-enabled HR have also led to sub-optimization, and are limited to distributing documents only (Stevens, 1996).

**1.4. Interactive voice response technology (IVR).** IVR is a common, basic level of automation adopted by work organizations to manage Business-To-Customer (B2C) interfaces in a bid to keep employee headcounts low, and to offer a consistent quality of service. The telephone is a traditional medium (hence, the term voice), but technology has linked this information to computer networks too. IVR technology now extends to HR, where employees use telephone or web-based media to provide a significant level of self-service, which is basic, administrative and largely transactional in focus. Hershey Foods uses phone-based IVR, and transfer data entry regarding employee benefits to employees directly, and Motorola uses integrated Internet and kiosk activities to form an integrated benefits' self-service unit to meet the (claimed) needs of a diverse workforce (TALX, 2002).

**1.5. Employee self-service (ESS).** Employee self-service (ESS) is an intranet solution that provides on-line communications direct to users, while interfacing with other HR information systems. Broadly speaking, ESS enables employees to view and update personal information, apply for training, leave, or holidays, and choose or renew flexible benefits packages. Managers tend to have more access and authorization privileges to ESS systems than employees, and can access employee information, authorize HR transactions, and generate relevant reports on-line. These reports can be made from a desktop, or remotely, such as benefits enrolment information, job-postings and personal data on new recruits and employee pension provision (e-HR.com, 2002).

By embracing ESS, organizations can claim benefits that derive from employees and managers 'helping themselves'. While the concept of ESS is relatively new, its use can be adapted to operate within an intranet or via an interface with the internet (Trapp, 2001). Essentially, ESS systems have the potential to give employees more control over their personal information, and to increase the transparency of HR transactions. However, the drivers of ESS implementation tend to centre on the desire for cost reductions and efficiency, so organizational justifications for using it may appear quite calculative. But other organizational drivers also include: empowering employees to have information at their fingertips; creating more flexible ways of work; and striking a balance between using technologies to foster a

strong sense of community, and delivering a personalized HR service to employees (Davis, 2002).

The business case for adopting ESS systems suggests that devolving administrative HR activities to managers and employees can produce a number of benefits. These include: speeding up of HR processes and decision-making; increased organizational flexibility; customized HR service delivery; innovations/efficiencies in HRM (Manchester, 2002; Mitchell, 2002). However, there is little academic research evidence to support these claims, so measuring HR's contribution is difficult, as is quantifying outcomes that HR interventions produce (Gartner, 2001).

Evidence from one HR consultancy suggests that ESS adoption is marginal in the U.K., currently limited to IT companies and large multi-divisional organizations, and only gradually trickling down to other sectors (Watson Wyatt, 2001). But a growing deployment of ESS technology in HR service delivery is seen in the U.S. Department of Defense, who implement an employee/member self-service targeted at the military, civilian employees and retirees. This service gives employees access to their records, and some element of privacy when doing so, as stipulated by legislation (U.S. Department of Defense, 2002).

A U.S. survey of ESS initiatives indicates a 100% return on initial investment, an average overall labor cost reduction of 60%, and a reduction in headcount of up to 75% within one year of adoption. However, in Europe, 90% of HR managers/directors are unable to determine returns on investment of adopting ESS (Gartner, 2001). Such findings draw attention to potential gaps between 'promise and delivery' regarding ESS systems by technology vendors, and HR consultants too.

**1.6. Challenges and concerns arising.** Most of the literature reviewed above appears optimistic on the gains ESS systems can provide for work organizations, and does not necessarily examine the challenges experienced in their implementation, which include: problems associated with ESS vision not being communicated at all organizational levels; the technology used not being compatible with or unable to cope with demands placed on it; and a lack of communication about introducing a new ESS system. In addition, there may also be a lack of employee buy-in to ESS, and of project leadership/management when ESS systems are introduced (Davis, 2002). Ambitious plans in the ESS literature tend to escalate managerial and employee expectations regarding the speed by which technological improvements like ESS can be introduced, and the HRM outcomes they can deliver. Awareness of such issues by HR is, therefore, critical before HR embark on adopting an ESS system (Davis, 2002).

In general terms, the centrality of the need for effective communication regarding ESS systems has never been clearer, as typical concerns include unidirectional flow, suppressed, erroneous or purposeful distortion of information, and employee reliance on the grapevine for information (DeGreen, 1982). A fundamental flaw is the assumption that internal communications mechanisms simply exist to tell employees what to do, and not to influence their thoughts, expectations or motivations (Senge, 1990). In best practice identified at Honeywell, adoption of an ESS system was communicated to employees via an internal marketing exercise, and its success was claimed as a reason for the widespread adoption of ESS there (Mitchell, 2002).

As with e-HR in general, one concern regarding implementing ESS systems is dealing with the differing levels of IT literacy in both managers and employees. The forerunners of ESS use remain IT and knowledge-based organizations and tend to work within organizational cultures that are both supportive of technology and its potential, and whose workforce IT literacy levels are high (Trapp, 2001). In contrast, organizations with large, predominantly blue-collar workforces may be less able to present a convincing argument for ESS adoption producing a transformation in employee 'empowerment', because of the depth of mindset change and skills required to make such a shift a reality. Systemic change models advocate influencing individual behavior through negotiation and compromise (Whittington, 1994); meaning ESS implementers should perhaps consider generating positive and supportive attitudes among employees towards new ESS systems.

Challenges for the HR function regarding the introduction of ESS systems include: the need to ensure data accuracy of information; that HR has ownership of the process; and for HR to position itself at the core of ESS initiatives. In addition, a key success factor for employee engagement with ESS may be one which covers general employee needs outside the office, i.e. holidays, travel, and flexible benefits, as these may re-affirm corporate values on employee well-being – which are claimed as 'winning factors' at Cisco Systems (Cotter, 2001; Mitchell, 2002).

The creation of an appropriate organizational climate is important in facilitating a transformation in employee behavior when ESS systems are introduced. Following business transformation, HR's role appears central to incorporating culture change initiatives and in producing an organization-wide

communication program to sell the initiative internally to employees (Hope-Hailey, 2001). Some HR challenges include sustaining the momentum for ESS adoption while managing to answer the concerns of all organizational stakeholders that adopting ESS poses for them. Such concerns from unions and employees include: the need for strict confidentiality on the disclosure of personal information; the replacement of office camaraderie with impersonal electronic communication; and the need for clarity on the legitimacy of asking more personal questions of employees, where guidelines are not covered by general HR policies (Cooper, 2001).

Lastly in this section, there are also a number of challenges that derive from the organizational development and change literatures which may apply when implementing ESS systems. These include, *inter alia*, leading change when the objective of transforming organizations is prevalent; understanding the 'strategic feasibility' of such change; providing training needed; and understanding resistance to change (Kotter, 1996, pp. 4-14, 75, 106, 133). Additionally, relevant points made in the project management literature regarding such implementation may also include: the need to organize and lead developments that integrate tasks on the part of all functions (in sizeable firms); understand and organize tasks needing completion; and involve those directly in projects so they are responsible for results achieved (Burgelman, Maidique and Wheelwright, 1996, pp. 665-667). We now detail the methodology used in our study, along with background data to the case study detailed.

## 2. Methodology

A case study of the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) in the U.K. was undertaken to illustrate and illuminate the range of issues that may emerge when an ESS system is introduced. PINS is a government establishment that uses home-based remote workers (Inspectors) as its core staff, and has introduced an ESS system in pilot form. Semi-structured interviews were completed at PINS to gain rich data from the participants on their experiences of the ESS system, namely 7 departmental staff (out of 25) where the ESS system was being piloted. Such staff included 2 senior managers, 3 line managers and 2 employees. Interviewees were selected on the basis of job designation, length of employment and experience. The constraint of a small number of respondents, therefore, applies to our study, but our interviewees represent 28% of the key staff group that experienced the pilot run of ESS at PINS, meaning that they have personal experience of managing, operating, or using their ESS system in action. Thus, our study represents an initial exploratory empirical investigation of the issues surrounding the implementation of an ESS system in one work organization in Britain. All of the interviews were held at the Bristol offices of PINS, and were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed by content analysis and selective coding.

## 3. Case background

PINS are a government establishment under the former office of the Deputy Prime Minister, U.K. The vision of PINS is to be a prime source of impartial expertise for resolving disputes about the use of land, natural resources and the environment. The primary responsibility of PINS is to process planning and enforcement appeals, and to hold enquiries into local development plans. PINS employ 864 staff located across 2 offices in Bristol and Cardiff. The organizational structure of PINS is that it is headed by a Chief Planning Inspector, who is assisted by a Deputy who, in turn, supervizes five Directors – each heading a core function. The HR function is not directly represented on their equivalent of a Board of Directors (but via a Director of finance and management services), and is split into two – inspectors and management services. The history of PINS is that it has had a strategy of employing Inspectors as home-based remote workers for over two decades. Contract/consultant Inspectors are also engaged when caseloads require additional expertise, and they represent the inspectorate's peripheral workforce.

**2.1. The rationale for introducing ESS at PINS.** Following a broad range of civil service reforms, and backed by the Electronic Communications Bill, British government establishments have been mandated to adopt automated, web-enabled processes (E-Communications Act, 2000). PINS lacked a coordinated system of information for management decision-making across distinct HR databases, and to solve this problem moved to operate an ESS system with employee and manager modules being hosted on their corporate intranet.

The ESS system at PINS is titled *Empower: E-xtend People*, supported by a leading technology service provider, and managed by an in-house IT team. It was introduced and then withdrawn following significant technical IT-related problems, which included: incorrect data in the staff directory; poor integration with existing management processes; outcomes mis-aligned with business needs; and intermittent access for managers and employees. In addition, the original project leader, project manager and senior director all responsible for *Empower* left the organization. Later in the same year (of its introduction and withdrawal), a senior manager took on

the responsibility for *Empower*, and both the IT and HR functions attempted to resolve the technical problems associated with it. *Empower* was then re-launched the following year on a pilot basis in one department, with an objective to roll it out organization-wide if successful. Our interviews took place after this later, newer, pilot test version of *Empower* was re-launched.

This 'new' version of ESS at PINS embraced information on employee, Inspector and local authority directories, training courses, internal vacancies, holidays and sick leave. HR policies and procedures are provided on the PINS Intranet (PINSnet), as reference guides for both managers and employees, so employees can access and update their personal records, while managers have access to employee data, and approve absences. Manager and employee opinion regarding the findings on ESS at PINS is classified below under the following headings: reasons for adopting ESS, manager and employee experiences of using ESS, challenges in ESS implementation, HR's role in ESS implementation, and future recommendations, all of which are now detailed.

## 4. Findings

**4.1. Reasons for adopting ESS.** All management respondents stated that PINS needed to comply with "government policy" in moving to e-working, emphasizing the theme in the literature of the "cost savings" that could be made as staff became responsible for updating their own records, and therefore, from having to employ "fewer staff in the central HR function" to do so. Other savings include "efficiency" gains and the opportunity for HR to bring all HR information "together". One senior manager noted that using ESS enabled employees to access their own personal information, as "it has been very hard for individuals to know where they stand", with one employee agreeing, stating that "previous systems were not up-to-date", and that "this one allows people to have control of their own data".

**4.2. Manager and employee perceptions of using ESS.** The literature highlights problems in introducing a new IT system such as staff technical adjustment and perceptions. One senior manager described them at PINS as:

"We have two sets of problems: one is technical and the other is perception…a lot of people who work in HR don't see any problem with the current systems… [as] all of these [systems] were driven by the e-business agenda of PINS rather than by the HR people".

A managerial perception is that it was the technical problems with the new ESS system that seemed to be causing most concern. One senior manager stated that "had it worked from the word go, it'd have gained people's confidence", and line managers noted that "the system is fairly new to us and has caused a lot of problems". They pointed to "the online tutorial… [which] could have been more basic", as an example, and that sorting out "problems" with the system "can be time-consuming" too.

There were some positive comments about ESS from all interviewees. Senior managers stated that "we do have a reliable record now, which all parties accept as a good system, which I think helps get the job done", and that the ESS was "helping managers get a grip" in terms of doing HR work more effectively. Other senior managers added that ESS was "helping staff to know where they are", which was a common theme amongst other staff:

"[Employees] they're able to go in and look at their own records for the first time…they get instant access".

Line manager

"In other places of work, you don't know what information HR holds about you. So here, you know what is held and you can correct areas that are incorrect".

Employee

Additionally, ESS was also being used to ensure fair and consistent treatment of employees, as:

"PINS have a great many female staff who work really hard and they take great care to do their jobs by the rules. It's appalling for them if they see people who are young men who bend their way around the rules, getting away with it. We need to have a useful weapon [ESS] to use and that we're seen to be fair".

Senior manager

Indeed, one employee thought that the ESS system was better than the old IT system, as "some of the HR and flexi systems were not totally user-friendly", and that *Empower* was "working very efficiently".

**4.3. Challenges in ESS implementation.** For one senior manager, challenges in ESS implementation include the need:

"To show everybody the importance of the system…we've still got a lot of bugs to iron out… [because] very often, what's promised by the sales people isn't actually delivered".

These 'bugs' included a need for training in how the new ESS system worked. This 'training needs' theme was a common one amongst all respondents. Line managers thought that there needed to be "more training for us as test-users…as some of our questions were

even more basic than the training package", and one employee requested "more training, more explanations of how these things work, and how they do better things". A need for PINS to appreciate the culture change required in raising IT literacy levels in the move to an ESS was mentioned by one senior manager: "perhaps we have a small proportion of people who are not very comfortable with IT".

The need for the organization to alter the way in which management changed work arrangements at PINS was something that all respondents were agreed upon:

"It could have been done in a better way, a more comprehensive way, rather than 'this is what is happening, this is the way it's happening, use it".

Employee

"You can collect data from the smart card to show who's in and out at certain times of the day. That wasn't very well worked out…to some extent there's always a temptation for management to go one step further than it should, and for the unions to fight back".

Senior manager

Further, for one employee, a key challenge consists in management persuading staff to accept ESS as a useful system *per se*, as management needed:

"To get people signed up to it. There's a wide range of people working in PINS: Inspectors – 'later in life people' – who would slightly resist it…we need the top managers to reinforce the new way of work".

Employee

**4.4. The role of HR in implementing ESS.** Some managers thought that HR needs to take a leadership role in managing any future ESS system at PINS:

"HR needs to be responsible for the integrity of the data. It's all right for the individual to enter it, but someone's got to make sure the individual does what s/he's meant to do".

Senior manager

"[HR] they do need to get in there and take control of it [ESS]. My perception has been that HR has not been keen. They have seen this as a system that has been thrust upon them as opposed to something they wanted to develop themselves…I think it's time HR stepped in and did their job well".

Line manager

But another line manager had a slightly different view, which seemed to indicate some confusion among interviewees, in stating that HR "have developed the system, and as far as I can tell, they are the ones who are rolling it out".

**4.5. Future recommendations.** A common theme from all interviewees was that PINS needed to manage the future re-introduction of ESS in a better way than they had done previously. A senior manager stated that HR needs "to have individuals who personally feel responsible for the system", and that "in introducing technical things, you need people with credibility, people who understand how the company works". For one line manager, this included making sure that "emphasis needs to be made that it's the line manager and the individual's responsibility" to manage the entry and maintenance of employee data. For employees, it included being more considerate regarding staff skill levels in IT, as:

"I think we could have been a little bit cleverer at selling it to people who maybe are not quite so familiar with technology itself".

Employee

We now duscuss our findings.

## 5. Discussion

Our findings regarding PINS's adoption of an ESS reflect some of the themes in the literature detailed earlier, such as it being used as a vehicle to satisfy government wishes for web-enabled processes (E-Communications Act, 2000); gain cost savings (Gartner, 2001); devolve administrative activities to employees (Manchester, 2002; Mitchell, 2002); and give employees control over their personal information (Davis, 2002).

The perceptions of managers and employees of using ESS at PINS also highlight a gap between the 'promise and delivery' of ESS by technology vendors (Gartner, 2001). Here, specific concerns seen include technical problems that exist in the technology being used, those due to the lack of project management, a lack of leadership in action (Davis, 2002), and the costs in both adopting ESS and adapting to using it being difficult to determine in terms of management time (Gartner, 2001). But other staff perceptions of ESS at PINS also seem positive. These include a sense that the overall data accuracy in *Empower* is good (Cooper, 2001), staff are able to help themselves in accessing their own personal data (Trapp, 2001), that ESS addresses the specific requirements of employees (McCartney, 2002), and that ESS gives employees more control over their personal information (Davis, 2002).

We can see that some of the challenges in implementing an ESS system mentioned in the literature, therefore, apply at PINS. These include gaining

employee buy-in to using the new ESS system, a need for more training in it, and communication of it too (Davis, 2002), and for top management to take ownership of the whole ESS process (Cotter, 2001; Mitchell, 2002). Indeed, our findings also raise questions on the HR role in implementing ESS systems, including taking ownership of the ESS system (Cotter, 2001; Mitchell, 2002), and the project management/leadership aspects of ESS as a whole (Davis, 2002). Further, the recommendations regarding using ESS for the future also include ensuring due consideration of who the project manager/leader is for it (Davis, 2002), and acknowledging the IT literacy levels in PINS also (Trapp, 2001).

In addition to the HR aspects identified above, issues seen in the organizational development/change and project organization/management literatures also seem to apply at PINS. On the former, some of the 'errors' identified by Kotter (1996, pp. 4-14) include: a sense of complacency about the direction and outcomes of the ESS initiative itself (especially regarding technical issues which needed solving prior to implementation, and the overall perception of it); HR failing to create a powerful coalition to introduce/implement ESS; and HR underestimating the need for a clear vision on what ESS entails for all relevant stakeholders involved (including combating any confusion, and communicating it to them). Further related issues may also include allowing the departure of the project leader to block the HR vision regarding ESS; and failures regarding the need for extensive culture change. Moreover, this case also perhaps raises questions about the 'strategic feasibility' of the ESS project at PINS; the need to provide adequate training to support it; and why momentum in it appeared to be lost – allowing some potential resistance to it to emerge (from line managers, unions and employees) (cf. Kotter, 1996, pp. 75, 106, 133).

Regarding project organization and management (and cf. Burgelman, Maidique and Wheelwright, 1996, p. 667), this case also seems to suggest that the team structure used was a 'lightweight' rather than 'heavyweight' one, and as such, meant that HR appear to lack status/influence in the organization, power to re-allocate people/resources, staff to integrate functions, and to that ensure tasks are completed. Additionally, this circumstance perhaps also means that the advantages of having a 'heavyweight' team structure behind the ESS initiative at PINS may have been lost, namely the integration/integrity provided by system solutions, as have those associated with an autonomous team structure, i.e. full control over the project team (including resources), and the ability to create their own practices, instead of following organizational ones (cf. Burgelman, Maidique and Wheelwright, 1996, pp. 668-669).

In sum then, it is apparent from the case findings that implementing ESS at PINS has not been easy. The driver of government policy has provided an opportune but complex context for adopting ESS there, and work organizations like PINS have been persuaded by the general business case for adoption of an ESS system (Cotter, 2001). However, there is some data from the PINS case that not all of the benefits touted about adopting ESS systems from HR consultants are necessarily seen in action, and that work organizations need to carefully examine the implications of ESS adoption. The staff experience of using ESS at PINS illustrates that successful implementation of an ESS system requires effective project leadership/management, communication, training, and culture change, along with a need for strong leadership and employee involvement in future e-HR initiatives (Drakos, 2002), meaning that HR may need to re-define their role and remit there (Arkin, 2001, 2002).

HR's lack of ownership and leadership in ESS implementation at PINS suggests that the arguments for a stronger and more visible stance by HR in business transformation are valid (Hope-Hailey, 2001). However, as HR's role in the public sector is only recently rising beyond a traditionally secondary one, it may lack the political power and influence necessary to drive change of the magnitude that schemes like ESS require (cf. Oswick and Grant, 1996). Hence, a partnership between HR and top management may, therefore, be needed to drive such change forward, i.e. to produce an organizational plan that takes proactive consideration of the people dimensions in ESS implementation (cf. Kelly and Gennard, 2001). Thus, Ulrich's (2000) message on the importance of HR professionals being able to use IT systems in HRM effectively is perhaps worth noting. We now offer some conclusions, limitations and ideas for research that arise from our study.

## Conclusions

The PINS case illustrates that HR professionals need to carefully consider introducing and implementing ESS systems in action, as doing so is not always a straight-forward process, and to handle the cultural/emotional adjustments required from all staff when such systems are used, in addition to the change, project and business management aspects of doing so, as detailed. The limitations of this study include interviews with a small number of staff only, which limits generalizability. The contribution of this study lies in providing a reflective empirical

examination of an ESS system in action in one British organization. Future research could include further evaluations of claims by HR consultants on the supposed benefits arising from introducing ESS systems. Single case studies or a longitudinal approach could monitor organizational ESS implementation processes, and proceed using national, comparative, and international data to build the knowledge base in ESS in particular, and by doing so, that of e-HR more generally.

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