

E-Signatures Streamline Remote HR Document Processes

By Roy Maurer
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E-signature technologies integrated with core HR systems have helped HR teams that have been supporting a largely remote professional workforce since the emergence of the coronavirus.

"Even before COVID-19, manual paper processes slowed everything down," said Jim Rapoza, the director of research at Aberdeen, a market intelligence and research firm in the Boston area. "But with workplace shutdowns, HR functions interrupted by manual steps and paper processes are difficult—if not impossible—to carry out now."

He added that having to go from an in-office environment to working from home very quickly has been a "huge challenge for HR," especially when they typically do onboarding, training, and payroll and benefits in person.

"Using e-signatures helped us evolve into the new remote-work environment, because I can't go sit at someone's desk and ask for a signature anymore," said Rachelle Comeau, manager of talent coordination and operations, with a focus on candidate experience, at San Jose, Calif.-based Adobe.

Comeau has been working remotely since March. Having an e-signature option was critical when working with and onboarding new hires, she said.

Aberdeen found that the top driver behind modernizing HR document processes is employees spending way too much time completing tasks. "Things that could be done in minutes take hours or days, resulting in delays and lost productivity," Rapoza said. "The volume of requests coming into HR is also growing, putting limits on legacy technology infrastructure not designed for remote work."

Comeau said that her team manages offer letters, employment agreements and other aspects of talent acquisition and "doesn't have a lot of time to be spending on paperwork. Applicant tracking systems have evolved to push through more candidates, which helps us close time to fill, but it means there is a lot more paperwork to get out in a shorter amount of time to be competitive."

In a recent Aberdeen case study, a large financial firm that adopted e-signatures saw turnaround for signed documents go from an average of several days to under 20 minutes. "Previously, people were waiting for documents to be faxed or mailed," Rapoza said.

Comeau uses Adobe Sign, which was integrated with Workday, the company's HR management system. "Productivity on our team has gone up significantly, as we're not having to go through as many approvals outside our core HR system and we're able to push out offer agreements quicker," she said.

Being able to integrate with HR systems is key, Rapoza said. "If I have to leave my HR system to get an e-signature from an external tool, that is totally unnecessary. A single-click solution speeds processes and increases agility for HR, lowers costs and improves productivity."

He recommended that employers implement e-signatures for high-volume processes "where you will see the most value-add, then focus on the next highest value-add process, and so on. You'll see the benefit immediately."

Compliance Standards

The U.S. Congress passed the E-Sign Act in 2000, recognizing that electronic signatures carry the same legal status as physical signatures, but some businesses are still wary of their validity, explained Jesse Wood, the president and CEO of eFileCabinet, an electronic document management company based in Lehi, Utah.

The E-Sign Act states that e-signatures with the signer's consent are just as valid as their paper equivalents, and therefore subject to the same legal scrutiny of authenticity that applies to paper documents, which means that maintaining compliance standards is important to ensure their legitimacy.

"While electronic signature capabilities are available in a wide range of business software, including in PDF readers, for a fully compliant electronic signature there are several factors that need to be considered when choosing a platform," Wood said.

These include:

- Being able to verify signers through multiple identifiers, including IP address.
- Sending a consent form in addition to the documents to confirm that the signature is an affirmative act.
- Securing the documents and e-signatures to ensure authenticity and guard against the possibility of tampering.
- Providing easy access to the signed document to all parties involved.

"The most important part is being able to prove that the e-signature is legitimate and that all standards have been met," Wood said. "It's why electronic signatures need to be accompanied by indelible documentation that a legitimate transaction occurred. Every time a signature is created, an unalterable audit trail which tells a complete history of the document needs to be generated and stored."

Many compliance standards and regulatory bodies require multifactor authentication methods for e-signatures, including answering a set of questions based on the signer's personal identifying information and inputting a randomly generated code via text.

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