

Product Specs

Abra Suite 6.0

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PRODUCT USE
HR and payroll administration,
including compensation and benefits,
government compliance, time and
attendance, recruiting, and training.

New Functions Upgrade a Familiar Product

By Jim Meade

Your company is small, with perhaps 150 to 500 employees. Your "HR function," such as it is, is a collection of spreadsheets, filing cabinets, scraps of paper and your own best guesses. You may not even have a full-time HR person or a full-time information technology person. You know you're ready to "get with the program" and automate your HR, but where do you start?

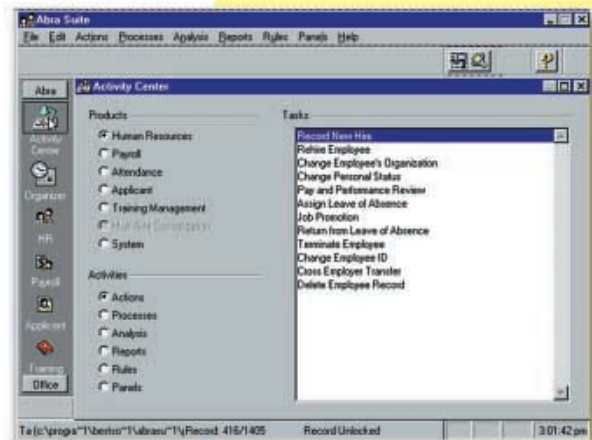
Abra Suite 6.0 from Best Software of Reston, Va., brings serious HR information systems to small to mid-sized companies. It automates HR, payroll, attendance, applicant tracking, training management and more. *Abra Suite* has been around since 1997 and existed before that under a different name. In this latest version, Best adds innovations offering local tax support for payroll compliance, stepped-up benefits administration and resume scanning and searching.

What It Does

Once you log in to this Windows-based program, you find yourself in

an activity center where you click menus, buttons or shortcuts. In one group of choices, you select a product—human resource, payroll, attendance, applicant or training management. You click to select an activity within the module you've chosen—actions, processes, analysis, reports and more.

Once you choose your categories to work in, familiar, simply worded HR tasks appear in a list on the screen. You can record a new hire, rehire an employee, do a pay and performance review, record a job promotion, or do any of more than a dozen other things. Click to record a new hire, for example, and you see a series of tabbed panels that lead you through the steps for the task, taking you through the employee's personal information, pay information and so on. Want to check your equal employment opportunity com-



EQUIPMENT REQUIREMENTS
Pentium processor, Windows 95/98/NT;
runs on Novell or NT LAN.

RELEASE DATE
October 1999.

INSTALLED BASE
15,000 users of previous version.
Version 6.0 numbers not available yet.

LIST PRICE
HR functions for \$985 (for up to 75
employees); full suite, including
payroll, starts at \$4,400.

pliance? Click to see such analysis as "EEO Analysis by Reject Reason."

You can fit *Abra Suite* to your industry. For instance, Felicia Smith, benefits administrator with Williams Brothers Lumber Co. in Duluth, Ga., uses her earlier version to track

standard things like an employee's last increase or next scheduled review. For her industry she also must keep records for federal Department of Transportation drug screenings, physicals and random drug screenings.

The standard reports are plentiful. You can find benefits reports, Occupational Safety and Health Administration reports, and Family and Medical Leave Act reports. For applicants, you can get interview and status reports and much more. A feature new to the 6.0 version gives complete benefits history for all candidates, so you can find not just what benefits someone has but what the person used to have and when. The benefits history is helpful if you need to compare your current benefits program with a previous one or if you simply need to answer an employee's question about his or her past benefits.

Jana Highwart, a consultant with Best Software business partner Delphia Consulting in Columbus, Ohio, used *Abra Suite 6.0* during its beta stage and says she is impressed with its reports. "The payroll deposit reports are a tidy package," Highwart says. "A lot of people refer to that as their Bible." By integrating her payroll deposit reports with Microsoft Excel, she projects wages and overtime through the end of the year for each employee.

You also can adapt and generate your own reports with an easy-to-use report writer function. Smith compiled a benefits report and, using *Abra's* integrated Microsoft Office products, put it in a letter to employees. "Employees were

impressed that we were providing benefits of as much as 25 percent of their earnings," she says.

What I Like

This HRIS package gets right down to the real business of HR and does what you do every day. It even rolls up its sleeves and does the exacting job of payroll, a job so tricky that HR departments often outsource it.

Here's an example of a typical task this software can accomplish. Highwart worked with a financial analyst trying to reconcile his company's insurance billing. "We made sure all the data—employer expense, dependent premiums, employee contribution—matched the plan the analyst was using." Now, she says, with a click of the mouse the analyst compiles a reconciliation that used to take four or five days every month.

The user interface is truly outstanding. Navigation is logical. You see the right things for getting your work done, and you don't see a lot of dizzying extras.

"It's usually very, very easy for someone to get up to speed once they understand how it all works together," Highwart explains. Also, she adds, "*Abra's* documentation is really awesome."

Support and training, too, are strong. "I've never run into something they couldn't fix for us or tell me a way around," attests Smith.

Pricing fits the intended, low-end market. Basic HR functions begin at around \$1,000, and you can get comprehensive functionality for under \$10,000.

This latest version has innovations like robust tax compliance and strengthened benefits administration, thereby addressing two of HR's biggest nightmares. The tax compliance information covers over 4,000 jurisdictions and provides payroll tax filing services. The benefits administration functions simplify enrollment and make plan set-up, tracking, reporting and history easier.

The easy-to-use software has gotten easier in the latest release, too. Highwart says the software's "interviews" lead you through tough tasks. "You wouldn't know what to put where," she says, "but the interviews ask for information, then put it in the right *Abra* place."

Perhaps the biggest benefit from so many technical advantages is a "soft" benefit. Giving employees quick, reliable information and fast service is good for morale.

What Needs Improving

With so much to like, what's to worry about? Here's a consideration for users automating HR for the first time: Be sure you have your business processes in place, or clean them up if you don't. "If you do what you always did, [once you automate] you get what you always got," explains Highwart.

Training is always a good idea with powerful software, even if it is easy to use. It's helpful to learn details such as how to get the most out of the report writer. Smith does offer this caution: "If I had it to do over again, I'd wait to go to report writer training for a while. Get the product and first see what's already

there. Figure out, ‘What do I need this software to tell me?’”

If your company has more than 1,500 employees, you can still use *Abra Suite 6.0*, but you may want to consider its sister product, *Best Imperativ HRMS*, or another product aimed at handling larger users’ needs.

If your company is big enough to have an IT department, check with it about *Abra*. The package will run on a local area network, but it is not a client/server product, and some IT folks prefer a client/server setup.

Also, some IT departments do not like products written in Microsoft FoxPro (as *Abra* is) but prefer those written for Microsoft’s SQL line of database products. IT departments sometimes worry that FoxPro-based products become less

stable as the amount of data grows, whereas SQL-based systems handle any size database. If your company is small enough that you don’t have an IT department, you might ignore this concern. You probably won’t have a large enough database to cause problems anyway. But if IT does oppose your choice, I wouldn’t recommend that you ignore them. You want all the IT support you can get when implementing HRIS.

Note that users of the software, like Smith and Highwart, insist that FoxPro has not caused any problems. “Our [*Abra* computers] have never crashed,” says Smith.

Summary

If you’ve been doing HR on spreadsheets and filing your employees’

records in manila folders, you probably will be amazed at how much you can automate and how easily you can do it with software like *Abra Suite 6.0*.

When you improve your HR processes, you can show employees that you care about them and maybe even keep them on board. As Smith says, in today’s job market, “you need all the retention tools you can get.”

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