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AUTOMATION WILL BE LED BY WORKERS

Citizen developers will create AI
assistants to make their jobs easier

By Daniel Dines

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"Citizen developer" has been a popular phrase in tech circles for almost a decade, but 2022 will be the year that this role takes on a new importance as non-technical developers come to the fore of digital transformation.

Due to operational changes with the onset of the pandemic, the speed and scale of technological development has reached heights unseen since the beginning of the digital revolution. A McKinsey & Company study published at the end of 2020 found that Covid-19 – and the requirement for employees to work remotely – had accelerated digital transformation projects by as much as seven years.

Automation is in the driver's seat for much of this change. In fact, a survey done by my company UiPath this year found that 40 per cent of employers increased investment in automation in 2021. Up to this point, IT teams or automation Centres of Excellence (CoE) have led much of this initial development. In 2022, however, citizen developers will be at the forefront of this acceleration.

These non-technical employees use no-code and low-code platforms to create simple automations for themselves, their teams and their departments. They may have roles in HR, finance, sales and marketing, legal, procurement and other business functions. Of course, they are not a substitute for the company's IT team or CoE, but they play a critical role in creating smaller automations that require a deeper understanding of individual tasks and departmental processes.

These employees will be an organisation's secret weapon for unlocking the power of robot assistants at scale. Successful delivery of digital transformation hinges upon automation touching every layer of an organisation, and this requires first-hand insight into day-to-day processes.

It's important for organisations to remember that even the very best IT teams and CoEs have neither the means nor the capacity to deliver digital transformation on their own. Around 40 per cent of tasks can only be automated when you allow employee-driven demand. To reach the full potential of automation, citizen developers will amplify and evangelise automation. In many cases, automations created by citizen developers for a particular team are found to have greater use across the organisation.

In order to achieve this, organisations will need to invest in education and training in 2022. This is already happening: 44 per cent of respondents to our survey said they had received automation training within the past year, and of those, 91 per cent believed it had improved their job performance. In addition, 73 per cent of office workers said they'd be more willing to continue working at a company that offers them opportunities to learn new skills or enhance current ones.

Some companies run "Bot-a-Thons" to encourage employees to create their own robots. Others are offering self-selected upskilling courses, or their employees are taking advantage of free robotic process automation training found online. As automation becomes ubiquitous in the workplace, workers with skills in creating and using software robots will be in demand.

The financial benefits of fostering a citizen developer community shouldn't be under-estimated. If used effectively and developed in conjunction with a culture of learning and collaboration, citizen developers will lead the charge for automation at scale in 2022.