

The best automation strategies include a toolbox of robotic process automation (RPA) offerings that end users can search through to find automation options that they can deploy to help increase their productivity.

The Advantages of Managed Automation Marketplaces

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Introduction

Automation is traditionally associated with cost cutting, but it actually promises a lot more. When properly done, automation can help make working life easier, less error prone, and more efficient. For some companies, that may mean less expensive but better-quality products and services that benefit customers.

For others, that could mean moving faster than ever before to confront a devastating pandemic. But for nearly all companies, automation creates time for employees to be more creative and innovative.

Intelligent automation does not have to be a top-down technology imposed on workers by remote managers. In fact, automation works best when adoption is driven by employees themselves right across the organization.

Rather than being a threat to jobs or personal autonomy, automation should be managed as a bottom-up tool that employees at any level feel empowered to learn and use to make their working lives better.

Ideally, when employees spot opportunities for automation, they should be able to find and deploy simple robotic process automation (RPA), artificial intelligence (AI), and other automation tools from a managed set of tools that is supported by their organization.

The best automation strategies therefore include a variety of offerings that employees can search through to find automation assets that they can deploy to help increase their productivity.

AT A GLANCE

KEY STATS

According to IDC, nearly two-thirds of organizations have achieved some or all of their automation priorities: About half (48%) reported achieving some of their priorities, and 15% reported that they had achieved all of their priorities.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT

Intelligent automation does not have to be a top-down technology imposed on workers by remote managers. The best automation strategies include a variety of offerings that employees can search through to find automation assets that they can deploy to make their jobs more productive.

Benefits

The key benefits of intelligent automation revolve around the potential to help organizations reduce costs, chiefly by reducing the amount of time people spend on often repetitive manual tasks. This saving of time is not just about cost reduction; time saved by using RPA and analytics can be diverted into tasks that aim to grow revenue, such as tasks around innovation, strategy marketing, and sales.

Enterprises could often build these automations themselves, but they would probably not be as sophisticated or as well designed as commercial offerings, and they would likely be more expensive to create and support.

Intelligent automations can also increase the quality of products and services — for example, by increasing the accuracy of the organization's data, by eliminating human error, and so on.

RPA, analytics, and AI technologies can also help organizations do what they previously could not do. For example, the technologies can enable organizations to process, analyze, and/or display information that would previously have been hidden or not cost effectively accessible — information that might be monetizable or that could be used to create new products and services.

Organizations certainly recognize the value of intelligent automation. Despite sometimes severe budget challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, most organizations continued with their existing analytics, AI, and RPA projects in 2020, according to IDC's worldwide *Analytics, AI, and RPA Services Survey*, conducted in May 2020. Indeed, more than a quarter of respondents said they were accelerating their adoption of these technologies.

That begs the question of whether organizations are getting the return they hope for. Technology implementation projects don't always work out, and some organizations "follow the herd" and implement technologies because they are being hyped by suppliers or are being adopted by competitors. But there is evidence that organizations are beginning to see real returns from their investments in RPA and analytics.

For one United States–based company that operates more than 1,000 childcare centers worldwide, the use of an automation marketplace increased the velocity of its continuous monitoring program. The head of internal audit estimated that after three months of using intelligent automations like workflows, his finance team made more progress than it had in the three years prior. Eliminating dozens of hours of manual work each business cycle saves time and translates to lower costs and better departmental efficiency.

According to the previously mentioned IDC survey, almost two-thirds of buyers overall achieved some or all of their business priorities with analytics, AI, and RPA solutions: About half (48%) reported achieving some of their priorities, and another 15% reported that they had achieved all of their priorities. The jury was still out for around a quarter of organizations, emphasizing the importance of deploying these technologies in a structured and well-planned manner, with clear objectives.

The best ways of ensuring that automation initiatives meet an organization's business objectives are to allow ordinary employees to identify automation use cases in their day-to-day work and to allow employees to choose and deploy a ready-made tool from a curated portfolio of RPA, AI, and other applications — a kind of automation "toolbox" managed by the organization.

These toolboxes — or "managed automation marketplaces" — may contain dozens or even hundreds of ready-made applications and assets that users can download and adapt, sometimes from a multiplicity of RPA and software vendors. These applications are typically prescreened for quality and security, and the organization has already negotiated any commercial terms with the software maker and ensured that there will be technical support for the products, so the end user doesn't have to worry about these issues.

Ideally, the managed marketplace contains not just the RPA tools themselves but also a wealth of training and support materials, including walk-throughs, FAQs, and access to live customer support. Ideally, too, there is access to a community of peers outside the organization who use the same or similar tools so that end users can get peer-to-peer advice and inspiration from people who have successfully deployed a tool or a near equivalent.

This curation of RPA tools can be a critical success factor: It helps guide users to the best products, which are prescreened for quality and security; it helps users implement the products; and it takes a significant burden off users in terms of negotiating and validating the commercial aspect of tool adoption (and also protects organizations from the risks of uncontrolled spending on RPA technologies).

Although RPA is an enterprise-grade technology, it is becoming easier to configure and implement as it matures. Users report that it can be fairly easy to find and download automation applications from managed RPA libraries. Most applications will need some level of configuration or light customization, but with good-quality applications that come as part of well-managed libraries, this is not a problem.

It's important to look for a managed library that has good documentation so that it's clear what the application does and that the users understand what they are doing. It's also important to choose an RPA toolbox that is easily searchable and has a good user interface.

Some users like when the managed RPA library guides them through the different assets, giving examples of how the assets can be used rather than assuming users know exactly what they want. In this way, users sometimes come across useful applications of automation that they had not thought about — something that can be very helpful to them.

Trends

Rules-based automation is maturing as a technology and becoming easier to configure and implement, meaning it can be deployed and used by end users with little technical expertise, as long as they have appropriate guidance and support. This means that automation and RPA are fast becoming table stakes for well-run organizations.

According to the previously mentioned IDC survey, by May 2020, more than 90% of organizations worldwide had already deployed or were deploying basic task-level automation (such as auto-filling of web forms using macros). Perhaps more impressively, 80% had deployed or were deploying machine-augmented decision making, such as RPA.

As these technologies are "democratized," they will spread out across organizations. Around a quarter of organizations' analytics, AI, and RPA budgets are controlled centrally by the CXO suite — notably the CIO, CTO, or even the CEO. But almost twice that amount of spend (42%) is decentralized and is controlled by departments and business functions, such as marketing, sales, and finance. It's likely that as RPA technology continues to mature and becomes easier to deploy, it will increasingly be funded by lines of business across the organization.

While end users will influence or drive adoption in many companies, the CIO organization will still retain an important role in technology selection, implementation, and management — for example, in choosing which RPA platforms to standardize on enterprisewide and in choosing which managed services to buy. Citizen developers have a critical role to play in designing automated processes/innovation, but IT professionals will be expected to manage these technologies and will need to retain responsibility over how they are purchased and governed. This will be particularly true as long as security and legal compliance remain top challenges.

Organizations are evolving to adopt a balance between central oversight and local citizen-led innovation. Automation toolkits fit into a pattern of organizations encouraging "citizen led" innovation — for instance, through low-code/no-code application platforms. Managed libraries allow people at the ground level to be completely hands-on — innovative, creative, and productive in the way they work — while encouraging them to be proactive and agile. Well-managed RPA libraries protect organizations from the financial and reputational risks around deployment of data-rich technologies.

Because managed RPA libraries have safeguards and governance that prevent decentralized innovation from getting out of control and causing unnecessary risks, it's likely that in the future, an increasing number of organizations will adopt this model in order to achieve the right balance between governance and oversight on one hand and innovation and creativity on the other.

As RPA technology becomes more common, it will be measured better and more often. Organizations that adopt managed RPA libraries are putting in place tracking systems to monitor the cost and the benefits of automation. Enterprise users have found that it is important to have a mechanism in place early on to track the value that the organization as a whole is getting from the usage of managed RPA libraries. Ideally, when choosing a managed library, an organization should look for an offering that has measuring and monitoring built in and that connects easily to the organization's financial and performance management systems.

Considering PwC

PwC is a network of professional services firms with offices in 157 countries and more than 276,000 employees. Over 3,500 emerging technology specialists and more than 25,000 global analytics professionals, data scientists, and application developers work with its network of Innovation Centers.

PwC's automation marketplace, ProEdge Share, features more than 700 intelligent automations, ranging from bots and workflows to customizable AI models. The assets are up to date according to industry regulations and continue to evolve to meet changing needs, potentially saving thousands of hours in manual programming. These automation tools were instrumental in driving PwC's own transformation and have helped a variety of other organizations, large and small.

PwC uses a global network of nearly 40 Experience Centers and accompanying Emerging Tech Labs, Innovation Centers, and Impact Centers. These are dedicated physical locations at the firm's facilities. PwC Experience Centers bring together experienced strategists, designers, and technologists; PwC Emerging Tech Labs are where PwC helps clients understand how to leverage emerging technologies by developing functional prototypes within a business context; PwC Innovation Labs feature dedicated innovation specialists with team members who are embedded in industry verticals; and PwC Impact Centers feature practitioners working with clients to help them build their innovation capabilities.

PwC has a number of key intellectual property assets, including PwC Products, a suite of more than 40 offerings that tackle the business challenges clients face and thereby unlock new opportunities for growth in the future. PwC's human-centric, experience-driven formula helps clients realize a vision of digital transformation that maximizes impact

and minimizes disruption. PwC Products drive a variety of business outcomes, such as employing cloud services, reimagining clients' marketing and sales approaches, and automating finance functions to move more quickly and efficiently. PwC provides a variety of workforce and transformation products, including ProEdge, a digital upskilling platform, and Change Navigator, a digital workbench to help organizations manage change.

Key annual thought leadership from PwC includes the *Global Digital IQ* report. PwC also publishes its own business and management magazine, *Strategy+Business*. The firm is a partner of tier 1 technology vendors including Adobe, AWS, GCP, Microsoft/Azure, SAP, Oracle, and Salesforce.

Challenges

Not surprisingly, organizations report that security and privacy issues are their top challenges in adopting analytics, AI, and RPA solutions. While these technologies have the potential to cut business costs, increase the quality of an organization's offerings, and free up time for employees to be more creative and productive, they also carry with them the risk of exposing sensitive data belonging to organizations as well as their customers and trading partners. This risk emphasizes the importance of having a layer of governance and management to oversee the selection and use of RPA technologies, particularly when organizations are decentralizing the purchase and use of RPA.

Automations rarely work completely "out of the box"; usually there is a need to spend time carefully configuring the applications. This may be harder than expected for people who have not used automation technology much before. Every organization has a level of uniqueness, and there is rarely a solution that will work for an organization 100% out of the box — minor modifications will invariably need to be made for it to fit perfectly.

But the need for configuration is a by-product of the design of a good RPA tool: Automations should be organization neutral so that they can be deployed anywhere. The experiences of managed RPA library users IDC has talked to indicate that it is relatively easy to configure automations if they have been well chosen.

If RPA is mis-sold as a "magic bullet" solution, the result will be disappointment, so it is important for organizations to ensure that the RPA solution they select is well managed and comes with tools and services to help the end user choose the right automation and configure it quickly and appropriately.

RPA libraries are growing fast, and the breadth of choice is expanding — some can have 700 or more RPA assets to choose from. At one level, this level of choice is good because it increases the chance that "there's an app for that." Yet it can be a double-edged sword: The sheer breadth of choice can be off-putting for some users as they search for the right automation for their needs. The solution is partly to build or buy a well-managed RPA library that is easily searchable and that guides users when they need advice or education. It's a good idea to look for a supplier that can advise on where automations can be plugged into a certain process or problem because this guidance can be valuable.

Assuming enterprises have the right RPA library for their organizations, they need a pragmatic and iterative approach to using it. It's important to allow users to try things out on the fly and to take a decentralized approach to deciding which automations to deploy. If organizations take an approach to RPA library usage that is too controlling and top down, they risk alienating users and losing an important advantage of managed libraries: the enthusiasm and active participation of their users.

Managed RPA libraries are not necessarily cheap — the automation platforms that they use are provided by commercial software makers and require licensing and support. Organizations need to assess the costs of both the software and any support services provided as part of a managed services contract to ensure that the costs are proportionate to the benefits.

A related issue is that RPA libraries themselves may not come with sophisticated tools to estimate and monitor the return on investment of tool usage, which encompasses both the costs and the benefits.

The costs of RPA can be easy to underestimate; for example, it's easy to overlook the cost of informal support that users give their peers when configuring and using RPA tools, and it's possible to underbudget for things such as support services. The benefits of RPA can also be difficult to estimate and to monitor, and applying benefits metrics requires time and energy on the part of the enterprise and its management. But if an organization does not estimate and track the costs and the benefits it gets from RPA deployment, it could find that its return on investment is hard to justify to senior corporate leadership.

Conclusion

IDC believes that decentralizing adoption of automation/RPA, accompanied by supporting oversight and controls, can play an important role in making organizations more efficient as well as more productive and creative.

Giving workers at the ground level the power to choose and use RPA products for their local needs will play an important part in making organizations digitally native, proactive, and entrepreneurial.

The key for successful RPA adoption is to balance local autonomy and innovation with central oversight, economies of scale, and good governance around security, intellectual property protection, cost control, and so on. It's important for organizations to choose the right managed automation solutions for their needs and to monitor the usage as well as the costs and benefits of the solutions. When that happens, organizations have a good chance to use RPA in a way that balances decentralized innovation and creativity with good enterprisewide governance and controls.

Giving workers the power to choose RPA products for their local needs will play an important part in making organizations digitally native, proactive, and entrepreneurial.

About the Analyst



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