Process Frameworks: Faster Process Automation Without Sacrificing Stability
By Holly Lyke-Ho-Gland

You can't turn around these days without reading or hearing something on robotic process automation (RPA). What started as efforts to improve customer satisfaction and productivity through automation in manufacturing, marketing, and contact centers has quickly moved into high-value and high-risk areas like finance and HR. Couple the expanded potential with the growing accessibility and maturity of RPA technologies, RPA is quickly becoming a staple of the process management toolbox.

To help understand the ins and outs of RPA , APQC conducted a survey to understand organizations' process automation efforts from their project practices and teams to the common benefits and challenges of their efforts.

What we found was that though the opportunities seem unlimited and RPA is often viewed as the latest technological "silver bullet", organizations struggle with effectively implementing it.

What Are Organizations Struggling With?
There are several challenges associated with RPA—from classic change resistance to the coordination with IT. However, the most predominant challenges from the survey are even more fundamental—a process foundation (Figure 1).

Top Four RPA Implementation Challenges

48.0%

Lack of pre-existing process foundation

43.5%

Need to streamline or transform processes for automation

42.9%

No guiding strategy for automation efforts

39.5%

Lack of business decision or business rules models

Figure 1

It unfortunately does not come as a surprise that organizations will often dive into automation efforts without conducting the appropriate pre-work to ensure their efforts are not simply automating pre-existing inefficiencies. To create sustainable solutions, organizations need to rely on their process management teams. These teams not only ensure the organization has a solid process and decisions model foundation, but can help re-examine and adjust pre-existing processes for digital execution.

The good news is that most organizations have an active process management team that is involved in their automation efforts—either as the shepherd of the projects or part of the project team. The bad news is that most of those teams tend to only have a "developed" maturity, which means that though they have a documented process foundation, it is often not standardized across the organization and lacks the measures and data tied directly to the processes. So there still tend to be process, data, and business rule gaps that become part of each automation project.

The Unspoken Challenge: The Need for Speed
A great deal of the appeal of RPA is that it's fast. Not only is it relatively quick to develop bots with today's software it doesn't have to go through the lengthy development cycle of so many other IT-led system solutions. However, the speed benefit has set expectation with management that organizations need to execute RPA projects quickly. This can ultimately require that organizations move past the traditional process life cycle or bake mapping and decisions model development into a couple of days or a week's worth of work. This can lead to rework because steps were overlooked, the process wasn't adjusted for automated delivery, or exceptions weren't captured.

If you're anything like me, hearing that people say just move fast and let's worry about all that process work later creates a pit in my stomach. However, all is not lost

there are several ways organizations are addressing this challenge including the use of process frameworks to help them move quickly without sacrificing sustainability.

The Role of Process Frameworks

The answer to how frameworks can help RPA efforts is linked to what makes a process a likely candidate for automation. RPA is best fit for processes that are high-volume, transactional processes with numerous repetitive tasks. By their very nature these processes are not typically unique, lack high-levels or variations or exceptions, and only need to perform at industry standard, like those found in frameworks.

In other words, frameworks role in addressing the common RPA challenges is very similar to their primary purpose—as a reference model and common language to guide conversations around processes. Process frameworks are explicitly beneficial for RPA and process mapping because they help save time. A process framework provides a list of all the common process elements found in most companies that organizations can use as building blocks for their mapping or standardization activities during automation projects. Additionally, a framework provides a standardized taxonomy or language that the organization can use when referring to its processes which helps cut through the dissonance when organizations use varying terms and naming conventions among groups internally.

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