Rethinking Robotic Process Automation (RPA)
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Mark McGregor

Before diving into this month's Article, I wanted to share some news. As some of you may be aware, I recently joined ABBYY as Director of Process Intelligence. In my new role, I will be working with our product, marketing, and sales teams to espouse and expand our messaging around the ABBYY Timeline product. ABBYY Timeline is a core component of the ABBYY Digital Intelligence strategy and is focused on bringing intelligence to the process side of organizations. I share this news with you so that you can make up your own minds as to whether there is bias in my articles. As regular readers know, I always try to stay as neutral as possible, but of course, my thinking will inevitably be informed by what I am seeing, hearing, and doing on a day-to-day basis. So, with that in mind, let's jump into this month's piece.

People, process, and technology - the combination of all three together has long been seen as the key to success in improvement and transformation efforts. However, when it comes to people, there is a tendency to talk more about replacing people, getting people to conform or comply, or about the mistakes people make. Plus, we always seem to talk about them in abstract terms, as though people are just a commodity.

Rarely do we read about people like you or people like me; it often seems that vendors are talking about everybody without making it relevant to somebody. Even in marketing, teams seem to come up with pretty abstract personas and seemingly mythical problems. Wouldn't it be nicer if words like you and me became more common than the generic "they?" As I hope to show below, thinking in these terms can have a transcendent effect on using and applying technology.

When it comes to technology, nothing is hotter right now, than RPA. Almost everywhere you turn, it seems the little bots are being seen as the silver bullet to making us comply, stop us making mistakes, or even be needed at all, which may seem appealing to some!

Many executive teams are still too focused on costs and staff reductions. Meanwhile you, me, and many others like us need jobs. Without them, not only will we struggle to feed and keep our families safe, but we won't have the money to spend. Spend on the very goods and services those executive teams hope to generate revenue from. Whether directly or indirectly, the money we earn keeps the economy moving. We are not just a cost to be modeled. We are, in fact, the drivers for growth and profitability.

Meanwhile, for those who seek to change staffing levels and apply new technologies, the third of our pillars comes back into fashion, process. It does not matter what you do or want to do. It is how you do it or will do it that will define you and your organization. As my former colleague and friend Gero Decker, CEO of Signavio, is keen to say, "process is sexy again." I agree, in the past 20 years, there has never been so much interest in process. Whether from a discovery, analysis, design, or automation perspective, it is excellent to see managers, executive teams, and even vendors start to take a greater interest in process.

As part of my onboarding at ABBYY, I spent quite a bit of time with ABBYY's Chief Innovation Officer, Anthony Macciola. It has been fantastic getting so much insight into where ABBYY is headed into the future.

Much of our broader discussion centered around Robotic Process Automation, hyper-automation, and, as you would imagine, the confluence of Content Intelligence and Process Intelligence. As Anthony explained, some of the new things already coming down the pipe in terms of skills for teaching content how to be smarter, it got me wondering.

I am starting to think that maybe we have got it wrong with RPA. You can't converse much with anyone these days about automation without talking RPA. It seems the little bots are getting everywhere. It's almost like an alien invasion! But always, the talk seems to be about creating and imposing bots on us.

A bot for this and a bot for that, pretty soon you have dozens of little creatures (think about all the little gremlins in the film of the same name!) all nibbling away at pieces of your work. Helpful they maybe, but at what cost?

In the UK and USA, as we came out of the 2008 financial crisis, economists were left scratching their heads. They were wrestling with what they call the productivity puzzle. Historically economic growth was always been closely tied to productivity, e.g., if output per worker does not grow, then the economy does not grow. In the UK, productivity was actually lower than before the crisis hit. So if productivity growth is required, it only stands to reason that tools to increase productivity are a useful thing to have. (I know I am oversimplifying, but I think it works for where we are going).

What if RPA, instead of being about Robotic Process Automation instead became about Robotic Process Assistants. In this new world, we would each have just one robot on our desktop/laptop/machine, a little like Automator on a Mac. Our assistant would be there to assist us in boosting our personal productivity.

We could still use task mining and desktop recorders, but we, as individuals, would task our assistants this time. We could collect and analyze our logs, identify tasks we require help with, and using PDD-like scripts teach them the skills they need. Of course, we could also use skills marketplaces where we might find already known skills that we could use or adapt. In this way, we could educate our assistants to perform more of the tasks we might appreciate help with.

Maybe it's not a great business model for the existing RPA vendors, as it's likely to significantly reduce the number of robots or assistants we need. But if RPA is genuinely about helping efficiency, then the switch from many robots to one robot assistant would undoubtedly improve robots' efficiency. Maybe it's time for people to focus on robot productivity as much as the robots seem to focus on our productivity. I see many organizations that have deployed bots via RPA, where the bots might only be working for a few minutes a day. Which has to make one smile when you think of the purported desire for increasing the efficiency of assets, then we go and deploy an underutilized asset to do so.

It will probably never catch on, but to me, Apple and Microsoft are both in pole position. Meanwhile, I am happy that my and ABBYY's future rests more on the task mining (education of robots) and content/process intelligence, aka skills, than it does in pure-play automation.

Meanwhile, I still see tremendous opportunity for those who can perform that HR function for robots. We seem to spend a lot of effort working out how to train and deploy them. Smarter organizations are even thinking about where they deploy them before doing so. But how many RPA COE's are thinking about performance management for the robots, testing whether they are effectively performing and delivering against KPI's? Do they have an annual or 360-degree review process in place? Or indeed have processes in place to retire or fire robots? This last one is essential as the bots you deploy today will not be the ones you are using in two or three years' time.

What do you think, would a robotic process assistant that you could deploy and train with multiple skills be something that would help you?

Author

A former Research Director at leading IT industry analysis firm Gartner, Mark has an extensive background in enterprise architecture, business process management, and change management. He has held executive positions with several technology companies. Since retiring from Gartner, he has worked with clients such as Changepoint, Erwin, Mega, Planview, LeanIX, Signavio and has now taken up the position of Director Process Intelligence at ABBYY.

Mark has authored or co-authored four books on business and process management, including "Thrive! How to Succeed in the Age of the Customer" and "In Search of BPM Excellence" and "People-Centric Process Management. Widely respected for his knowledge and views on business change, he is the creator of "Next Practice" and has been described as a" BPM Guru," a "Thought Leader" and a "Master of Mindset."

Mark is passionate about the people aspects of change. He has spent much of the last twenty years traveling the world, learning, teaching, and researching the cultural issues of change and how executives perceive business and process improvement. In this capacity, he has taught hundreds of people and been fortunate to interview and interact with many CEO's

Mark holds certifications in Six Sigma, PRINCE2, Sales, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and Hypnosis! Mark suggests that it is the variety of his studies, which provide the depth he offers to his clients. In his words, "It is the difference that makes the difference."Connect with Mark via LinkedIn
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