

How to Keep People at the Center of Hyperautomation

Succeeding with
Automation in
Times of Disruption

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The disruptive impact that COVID has had on enterprises today has raised the stakes on business process transformation. As a result, many organizations are turning to automation technologies to improve processes and their resulting business impacts.

However, to succeed at the broader business transformation necessary to thrive in such disruptive times, organizations must rethink their business processes, and even more importantly, rethink their entire approach to business process transformation.

There are many automation tools and technologies on the market that purport to help organizations with such automation-driven process transformation initiatives. However, they all suffer from the same flaw: true business transformation must be human-driven, not tools-driven.

According to Marcus Torres, IntegrationHub GM& VP of Platform Product Management at ServiceNow, "Intelligent automation will expand what's possible for enterprises, but business leaders must remember to take a human-centric approach for process transformation that focuses on augmenting human activities rather than replacing them."



The Changing World of Work

Amidst all the noise and tribulation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, it leaves us with an important business takeaway: proactive business agility is essential for dealing with disruptive change.

Business agility, which we define as the ability to respond quickly and efficiently to change in the business environment and to leverage such change for competitive advantage, has long been a strategic priority in organizations large and small.

There's no question the sudden appearance of the Coronavirus represents an example of particularly disruptive change. Rushing to become an agile organization after the fact, however, pales in comparison to those organizations that were astute enough to invest in business agility ahead of time.

It's too late, of course, for inflexible organizations to retrofit themselves with business agility in order to deal better with the pandemic. It's not too late, however, to learn this most important business lesson of the COVID era. Better late than never.

"Unfortunately, some critical processes are cumbersome with clunky legacy infrastructures and 20th-century architectures that are too slow and siloed to respond to modern-day business challenges," according to Marcus Torres, IntegrationHub GM & VP of Platform Product Management at ServiceNow. "Enterprises must address this in order to prepare themselves to survive the next major business disruption."

One might think that technology is the key to any transformational effort that promises greater agility. To be sure, many technology-based efforts facilitate increased flexibility and in turn, competitive advantage. But technology isn't the right place to begin.

The starting point for any such effort is the people within the organization – in particular, how they work and interact. In other words, we must begin our transformation with business processes.

Rethinking Business Process

Business process transformation has been the stock in trade of every management consultant for decades. Today, it's still true that any strategic transformation initiative must include such process-centric change.

However, according to Torres, there's more to this story. He believes that to achieve the goal of proactive business agility, organizations must also rethink the very nature of business processes themselves.

A standard definition of a business process is a sequence of tasks that leads to a business result. What's missing from this definition? "People, of course," notes Torres.

In fact, there are several different people missing from this notion of a business process. The most obvious are all the workers participating in the process – for example, those who ask for certain tasks to be completed along the process, and those responsible for actually performing these tasks.

Then there are the people who created the process: the people who sat in a conference room at some point and drew some kind of flow chart describing the workflow.

The final group of people are the managers – the people responsible both for ensuring the process creators are aligned with business needs and ensuring workers are literally on task.

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In the modern business environment, however, these archaic management structures give way to digitally transformed organizations that break down organizational silos and drive decision-making down into the organization. Empowered employees leverage technology to realign the operations of the business to focus on customer and employee needs and desires on an ongoing basis.

Any discussion of business process transformation must take into account this modern organizational worldview. "The role technology plays in business process transformation must evolve. For instance, automating a sequence of tasks is no longer a broadly useful way to think about the role automation plays, even for those who have transformed their processes," says Torres. "Instead, we must rethink the very nature of automation, what it should be, and how it supports business transformation goals."

Automation Trials and Tribulations

In the vernacular, automation refers to computer control of various types of equipment, from factory assembly robots to the sorting machines at package shipping companies. Such common examples of automation fall largely into the area of operational technology (OT).

When we talk about the automation of business processes, in contrast, we step away from the automated assembly line to focus on the day-to-day processes of people within organizations – in particular, the knowledge workers who spend much of their work time interacting with computers and other 'smart' devices.

If assembly lines leverage OT, then it follows that business process automation would leverage information technology (IT) – and to be sure, the history of process automation is littered with various IT offerings, from business process management (BPM) software to more modern offerings like intelligent business process management suites (iBPMS), digital process automation (DPA), and robotic process automation (RPA).

With this alphabet soup of technologies, it's easy for organizations to lose sight of their underlying business transformation priorities," Torres says. "Throwing technology at the automation problem might be straightforward, but there's no sense in automating poor processes that no longer meet the business needs at hand. All you'll end up with are broken processes that run faster."

Such tools-driven approaches to process transformation, unfortunately, often lead to poor results. Remember: processes are about people and how they work, not about technology. And this wrong turn on the way to business transformation is its most dramatic with RPA.

The Limitations of Robotic Process Automation

At its most basic, RPA seeks to replace human interactions with one or more computer screens by automating the tasks that human would undergo by interacting with those screens – in other words, entering data, clicking buttons, and the like.

The idea is to take low-value, routine tasks out of human hands – but at a cost. RPA offers short-term task automation solutions, but doesn't lead to long-term process improvement on its own. Instead, organizations must combine human-centric workflow with RPA-based task automation to achieve the long-term business benefits

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they desire.

RPA can show short-term business benefits to be sure, but everyone from RPA customers to analysts to the RPA vendors themselves recognizes that RPA is not a long-term business process transformation solution.

To emphasize this point, Gartner has come up with a new term: **hyperautomation**, which **Gartner defines** as “an effective combination of complementary sets of tools that can integrate functional and process silos to automate and augment business processes.”

According to Gartner, RPA is part of the hyperautomation story, along with iBPMS as well as process discovery and mining tools, low-code platforms and tools, and business rules engines.

The reasoning behind hyperautomation is that RPA focuses on task automation rather than process automation, so companies should add more tools to the mix to automate processes beyond what RPA can deliver.

However, organizations that have yet to undergo the more difficult effort of process transformation – especially in the context of broad-based business transformations like digital transformation – will never be able to achieve the long-term goals of hyperautomation.

The Relationship between Automation and Human Augmentation

The challenge of hyperautomation, and indeed process automation in general, boils down to putting humans first.

“People and process are where automation initiatives go wrong, so it is vital to quantify the value of automation projects, while also standardizing a common KPI across functions,” said Torres. “You should align on who the automation implementation is targeting, whether it is the worker who interacts with the technology, the automator responsible for building the technology itself, or the manager who ensures the technology meets the right business needs. In many cases, it’s all of the above.”

In fact, as we push the responsibility for decision making into the organization, the lines among these roles blur. Workers might be automators, and everyone has manager-level responsibilities to customers and the organization at large.

In practice, this blurring of lines leads to collaborative interactions among people and automation technologies. Software may take tasks out of human hands to be sure, but it may also improve a human task that remains human.

People may simply follow a process that software lays out for them, or in other situations, people may actively work to improve the automations as they work.

Unlike robotic assembly lines, rarely if ever will automation software entirely displace a knowledge worker. Instead, the primary purpose of process automation is human augmentation – a fancy way of saying that automation software supports the actions and purposes of humans but doesn’t replace them.

There will always be work for people to do. Improving technology will continue to shift the way people spend their time at work, as less valuable, routine tasks give way to



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activities that humans are both best suited to perform and also provide more value to the organization and its customers.

Furthermore, combined automation/human work patterns will never work in only one direction, where technology helps people but not the other way around. People will always be working to improve technology and how it in turn supports human work. Automation helps work work better for people, and people help work work better for software as well.

"RPA still has an important role in this vision of human-centric process transformation, as long as we leverage RPA as a tool for transformation vs an all-in-one cure," states Torres. "Let the human-driven process transformation requirements drive the discovery of the tasks that should be automated with RPA."

As with any technology, RPA provides the most value in the context of human interaction and business value. Don't let the 'robotic' nature of RPA confuse you – it's as human as every other aspect of business process transformation and the automation technologies that support it.

The Intellyx Take on Hyperautomation

How, then, does hyperautomation fit into this human-centric, transformational approach to automation? It depends on how you approach it.

The simplistic approach to hyperautomation is tools-first. Such an approach will please the vendors of your software to be sure, but is unlikely to address the fundamental transformational issues that impede your organization's business agility.

That being said, it is certainly possible – and recommended – to take a human-centric approach to hyperautomation. Think broadly of the strategic priorities of the organization in the context of the disruptive change it is facing and is likely to face in the future.

Those priorities should drive organizational change that breaks down silos and leverages technology to better align the business with customer needs – change we call digital transformation.

Torres has the final word. "Intelligent automation will expand what's possible for enterprises, but business leaders must remember to take a human-centric approach for process transformation that focuses on augmenting human activities rather than replacing them."

Automation can and should play an important part of such transformation – as long as it is human-centered, focusing on augmenting people's work rather than replacing it. Get that right, and you'll have achieved your hyperautomation goals.



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