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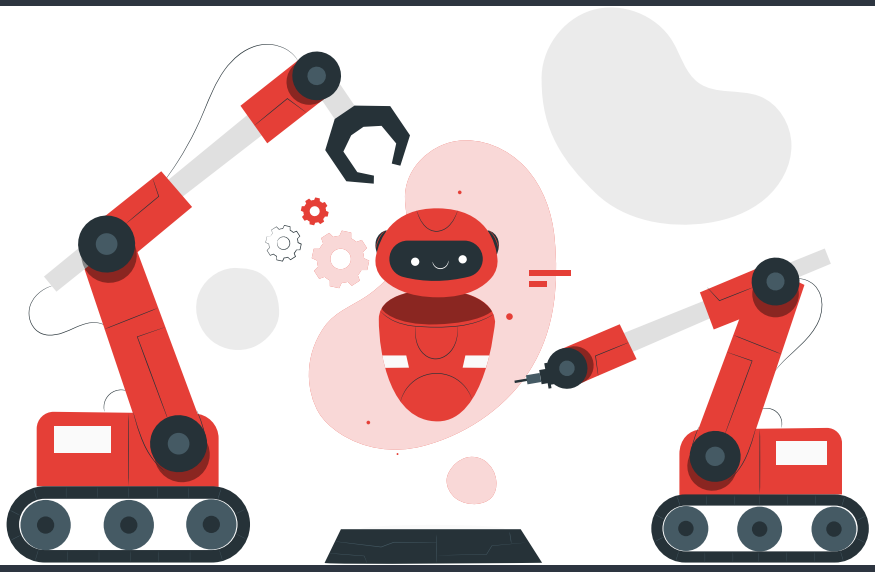
A guide to getting started on thinking about Robotic Process Automation



A Conectys made Whitepaper

Introduction

Robotic Process Automation (RPA) has become a major topic in the past 3-5 years, and the focus on its potential benefits has been massively driven forward by COVID repercussions on businesses. Just over the summer of 2020, we saw articles about how RPA is growing at an insane worldwide CAGR of 29.8%, how it might represent the future of healthcare revenue cycle management, how it could be a "game-changer" for the financial sector, and how even marketing and sales silos are using it.

Admittedly, what's driving some of the discussion forward is the potential around cost containment, as even Information Week recently acknowledged. That part of the equation can be trickier to discuss -- no one wants to think about the potential of lost jobs, especially theirs -- and while cost containment is a focus of the RPA push, that's not everything going on.

What we wanted to do here was discuss a few things that someone would need to understand to have an initial, high-level view of getting started with RPA, including:

- What types of projects are best?
- How do these projects end up not working out well?
- How does RPA help a company with cost control, quality of information, and time-to-market?
- How long do these projects take to implement?

There's a lot of potential in this space, both customer-facing, and back-end. Let's begin to explore.

What processes are best automated with RPA?

A basic list includes:

Highly-manual and repetitive processes: Think about high-transaction volume or processes that occur daily. Accounts receivable and invoicing fall here, often.

Prone to human error: What are some of your processes most prone to human error, that then causes additional work for others? Some HR functionality typically applies here.

Rule-based processes: Think of processes that follow a specific set of "if-then" type rules, and can easily be turned into a template. When decision-making is based on a series of standardized rules, that process makes sense as an automation contender.

Low exception rate: These would be processes with a low number of various scenarios. Exceptions create complexity, and a project can often be completed by partially excluding exceptions with low volumes.

Standard readable electronic input type: Excel, Word, XML, ERP, CRM, readable PDFs. There is now RPA work being done with unreadable types, including OCR -- but that does require an assessment of what's necessary to make it readable.

High volumes: high-transaction volume and high frequency.

Mature and stable processes: Think of well-documented processes with known

operational costs. Again, billing often falls into this bucket. Vendor selection RFP could as well.

There are two other critical factors to take into account when first looking at different processes to use RPA on:

- Automation savings: It is recommended that you only automate processes that would yield savings. Cost containment is a major factor in RPA selection. It's not necessarily about reducing jobs, though, as much as letting human beings work on valuable, critical tasks and not waste time on repetitive processes.
- Short-term changes: If there's a high likelihood that a process might change in the short-term, we do not recommend automating it. It will lead to webs of confusion, potentially.

Seems so simple, right? Well, unfortunately, it's not that simple. RPA projects can fail. But how?

The perils of RPA: How and why projects don't work

THERE TEND TO BE FIVE BIG REASONS:

Misunderstanding where RPA can bring value / "The Silver Bullet" problem: This can take a few different forms, but generally it arises from senior leaders (those who can write checks for new projects and technologies) not fully understanding what RPA is and where it works best. They view it as a "silver bullet" that will help fix lots of processes and even drive new revenue, and while that's possible, it's not the best way to use RPA, necessarily. You could use RPA to build out more complex solutions with the aid of the robots, or you could update current tools -- but thinking of RPA as a "silver bullet" won't lead you to success.

The IT buy-in problem: You need to keep IT abreast of what's happening, what's going on, what the strategy is, what your goals are, and how RPA intersects with all their existing protocols and processes. If business drives the RPA process but IT isn't informed, what happens is that when IT changes its systems, the robots stop working for the business. Communication between "revenue-focused" and "IT" is crucial here.

Automating weak processes: Garbage in, garbage out. If a process is weak and you try to automate it, it doesn't work well. First, you need to improve the process; then you can automate it.

Pipeline management issues: Teams will chase smaller projects because certain sponsors demand them, as opposed to looking for projects with more significant ROI. Executives will also try to build the team before the processes are in place for consistent, long-term success.

Miscommunication of goals and priorities at the organizational level: This is sadly very common. Anything with automation is scary to human employees because it was likely researched and brought in, in part, because of FTE reduction. Clear communication is a must. Here's what happens when you don't communicate well with people about the strategy behind AI projects:

> *"We saw this in another of the companies we spoke with when we learned that despite having integrated AI, managers were modifying the output values from the algorithm to fit their own expectations. Others in the same company would simply follow the old decision-making routine, altogether ignoring the data*

provided by algorithms. Therefore, human behavior is central to implementing AI."

Spend money on new technology and process and have your managers "modify the output values," in part to assure their own future employment? That's NOT ROI. Make sure you communicate and explain how roles can adjust and change -- not firings or FTE reduction, but that human employees can ideally work on more value-add projects, and RPA will handle more of the manual, repetitive work.

KEY CUSTOMER-FACING AND BACK-END BENEFITS

Manage personal info more securly

Working towards (GDPR)Compliance

Decrease the costs of service delivery

By eliminating manual service

(Near)Real time servicing

24/7/365 support availability with minimal wait times

Front-end

Easily handle spikes in demand

Reduce the need for redundancies

Increase productivity

24/7/365 productivity world-wide

Back-end

Eliminate human errors

Reduce re-work from errors

A quick summary:

- Cost-control: On the customer-facing side of the business, the reduction in manual activities (and repetitive activities) decreases the cost of delivery. On your back-end, you increase productivity with a 24/7/365 connectivity.
- Quality of information: Customers have an increased sense (and reality) of data security, and you are working towards compliance with GDPR and other protocols as the holder of their data. On your back-end, you can greatly reduce (close to fully eliminate) human error, which reduces redone work from human error.
- Time-to-market: When we talk with clients about RPA, this is often their primary concern -- and RPA does provide benefits here. On the customer-facing front, you provide real-time servicing, which allows for 24/7/365 connectivity with limited wait times. On your back-end, you can more easily handle spikes in demand, which reduces redundancies.

How long do these projects take to implement?

This is the million-dollar question, and the answer does vary by a host of factors, including your scope, your industry, your vertical, your goals, your existing IT team, and more.

In general, though, for a low process complexity RPA bot, you're talking about a process of:

- Design
- Build and test
- User acceptance testing
- Go-Live

That can often be accomplished in 3-4 weeks depending on various factors.

For a medium process complexity RPA implementation, you work through the same steps as above -- but the design phase itself might take 2-3 weeks, and the overall implementation could run 6-7 weeks.

For a high process complexity RPA implementation, you are usually looking at 9-11 weeks.

Again, all these numbers will vary by your specific situation, goals, and needs. We are more than happy to discuss a process you think is ripe for RPA, though, and attempt to give you the most accurate timeline possible.

Who works on the implementation?

Great question. Usually, it will work like this:

- The first tier is the "Build" tier. These people are putting RPA bots together and making sure your goals will be met. This includes:
  - » Process Discovery, usually conducted by the RPA lead
  - » Process Analysis, usually conducted by a mix of a Business Analyst, Subject Matter Expert, and RPA Lead
  - » The development itself, led by the developer
  - » User Acceptance testing, which is driven by the Business Analyst, the developer, and other units of the business that may touch the RPA bot
  - » Production release, led by the developer and the business units
- The second tier is the "Control" tier, which involves the maintenance and running of the RPA bots. That includes:
  - » Scheduling
  - » Running
  - » Monitoring
  - » Maintenance
  - » Dashboarding

How does Conectys play into all this?

We have helped clients automate processes for years at this point, but in 2020 we doubled down more, hiring our first Head of Digital Services and beginning to build out an RPA-focused team of analysts and developers. Especially after COVID started, we began hearing from clients that they wanted to do more with RPA, and it was increasingly becoming more than just a buzzword for them.

We are insanely client-focused, so we invested in our RPA future as a result. Right now, we're working with several industry sectors on RPA and best process selection -- and we'd love to help you out as well.

We have the background, the team, the process knowledge, and the data to help you delight customers and save money.

Let us know how we can help!

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Contact us at sales@conectys.com

Or learn more from our Blog.