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Robotic Process Automation: A no-hype Buyer's Guide

Boost ROI with Full-featured AI-driven Robotic Process Automation

Introduction

Automation holds great promise for enterprises that rely on rapid, streamlined processes to gain efficiency and deliver better experiences to customers and employees. There are many paths and possible entry points, from standalone software solutions to extreme automation platforms designed to deliver digitally transformed, technology-driven IT and business processes. Each has its own advantages, drawbacks, potential benefits and level of risk.

One technology that continues to receive a lot of attention is robotic process automation (RPA). RPA is often a gateway — a way to introduce automation and gain business benefits at low cost with near-zero risk. The concept is simple and well- known: a software "robot" replicates routine human-computer interaction to automate, repetitive tasks. RPA bridges the gap between manual interaction and full automation.

RPA is particularly appealing where IT resources and budgets are limited, or for working with back-end applications that lack good APIs and would be difficult to automate without significant change to your systems. But to deploy RPA wisely, it helps to understand the technology's benefits and limitations, how to expand its evolving capabilities, and the value it brings.

"The RPA market is projected to reach USD 10.6 billion by 2027." Grand View Research, February 2020

IBM

Where does RPA fit into the automation landscape?

Deploying RPA software isn't the same as building fully automated processes and platforms from the ground up. With basic RPA, a software robot literally does what a human would do. This includes routine tasks such as data retrieval and entry, button clicks, file uploads and downloads, or invoice processing. While this is an important limitation, basic RPA is nevertheless advantageous because it can improve the speed and accuracy of task completion while freeing humans to focus on higher-return work.

Full automation, on the other hand, employs systems, processes and even third-party services that are purpose-built for automation from the outset. For this reason, the potential benefit of full automation is much higher — but so is the commitment.

There's a middle ground, however. When integrated with other automation software to enhance its base capability, RPA can be used in more situations and become a valuable component of an automation strategy that includes technologies such as process mining, artificial intelligence (AI), data capture, business rules and workflow.

For example, when RPA is integrated with AI, AI insights can be acted on by sending instructions directly to bots that complete tasks via other systems, such as an automation platform:

- With no lag time or human intervention.
- For improved efficiency as well as improved customer and employee experiences.

Today, many AI insights are directed to human employees to take action. As an example, many Procure to Pay workflows still involve invoice processors at some point, usually at the point where you need to approve an invoice for payment. When RPA is combined with AI, it's possible to easily identify the manual steps, quickly build an aligned RPA robot, and then add it to the pool of invoice processors. A workflow engine would gradually determine that the best way to handle certain types of invoices is to route them to the bot, sending recommendations directly to it. This automatic routing reduces response time, saves time for the invoice processor to focus on other work, and enables end-to-end automation of the process.

RPA: What it is, and what it isn't

Basic RPA is a way to easily automate individual, relatively simple tasks that would otherwise be handled manually. It doesn't automate entire business processes or workflows on its own.

Basic RPA pros and cons

Pros

- Basic RPA can automate repetitive back-office tasks, such as invoice or claims processing, that don't require human judgment.

- It is easy to implement in the right use cases and carries low risk, because it replicates manual tasks that already exist.
- There is no need to retrain employees or alter existing processes.
- It liberates humans from routine, repetitive tasks which can lead to improved job satisfaction, morale and productivity.

Cons

- Basic RPA is not well suited to more complicated tasks that depend on complex decisions or have multiple paths.
- It can't fix processes that are poorly designed or inherently inefficient, so any current bottlenecks may still exist.
- It is inherently limited in scope and potential benefit, and isn't a substitute for purpose-built, fully automated processes.
- It is hard to scale from pilot projects.

What level of automation is right for you?

How best to deploy RPA depends on the use case. It's important to match capabilities with desired outcomes in order to achieve strong ROI.

There are, in effect, two options:

- Deploy basic RPA as a simple way to introduce automation.
- Combine RPA with additional components to create a more sophisticated "RPA plus" capability.

The key is to clearly understand when basic RPA is enough, and when it's time to consider a more full-featured RPA solution that includes capabilities such as unstructured data capture, intelligent chatbots, or advanced decisioning or content services.

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Basic RPA:

When to use

To speed simple tasks that can be precisely documented and have a defined sequence of steps.

Task characteristics

Routine. Repetitive. Predictable. Prescribed. Does not require flexibility.

Implementation cost and complexity

Very low. Deployment in days to weeks with little IT skill required.

Potential ROI

Moderate to moderately high, depending on how much routine tasks currently cost.

RPA plus: Enhanced and integrated

When to use

For processes which, due to complexity and dependencies, need to be coordinated. Enables RPA to be used for more complex, conditional actions that may involve decision-making or multiple outcomes.

Task characteristics

Non-routine. State-dependent, with multiple variables and multiple outcomes. More reliant on human interaction and judgement.

Implementation cost and complexity

Greater than basic RPA but still relatively low compared to full automation. Deployment may take weeks or months and require assistance depending on internal capabilities.

Potential ROI

High due to the added value provided by more extensive and sophisticated automation.

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