BrainBlog

Planning on Implementing RPA?
Be Sure to Manage the Risk

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Ensconced at the white-hot intersection of automation and enterprise modernization, robotic process automation (RPA) is the latest must-have for every IT leader.

RPA at its core is actually quite straightforward. The starting point for this technology is screen-scraping: taking typically legacy user interfaces (UIs) and automating the user interactions with those interfaces. RPA can also automate applications via APIs when available, but many tools can handle such automations, leaving screen-scraping the primary approach for RPA.

Regardless, the automations that people build with RPA, or 'bots' (short for 'robot') are able to take the place of humans, who had been responsible for conducting basic interactions with the UIs of such applications. The core benefits of RPA, therefore, are a combination of reduced person-hours and fewer errors.

Understanding the Risks of RPA

Before jumping into an RPA initiative, however, it's important to understand its inherent risks. RPA's UI-centric approach suffers from two fundamental shortcomings. First, RPA is quite brittle. Change the UI – or the underlying data formats, process logic, or anything else – and the automations break.

Second, RPA adds to technical debt. After all, the reason that organizations choose RPA over more flexible approaches to modernization is because updating or rewriting the older apps is way too expensive. And yet, automating user interactions with those ancient interfaces only adds to the eventual cost of cleaning up the underlying messes.

For IT leaders committed to deploying RPA nevertheless, managing and mitigating the risks inherent in the technology should be of paramount importance. There are simply too many ways for RPA projects to underperform or fail outright.

Measuring and Lowering RPA Risk

At the core of every RPA initiative is the goal of replacing human interactions with automated ones. Therefore, it's essential to answer the following five questions:

What is the potential financial impact of the planned automation?

The goal of RPA is typically to reduce the amount of time-consuming busywork people spend on automatable tasks. Given the cost of deploying RPA as well as the even more significant cost of maintaining the resulting bots, is the initiative worth the trouble?

Of all the potential interactions, which tasks are the best targets for automation?

Some tasks are easier to automate than others. Some provide more value. It's also important to decide whether the focus of particular automations is on assisting personnel (say, by supporting customer service reps), or freeing them entirely from manual tasks. All of this information should feed a cost-benefit analysis.

Which workflows will bots execute?

Automating individual tasks is the simpler goal of RPA, but automating entire workflows is where the greater potential value lies. However, automated workflows are also more expensive to maintain. Choose the ones to automate wisely.

What are the most common and costly pre-automation user errors that RPA would ameliorate?

Automation doesn't simply reduce person-hours. It should also reduce human errors as well. Understanding which types of errors you'll eliminate and the cost benefit of such error reduction are important metrics.

What will be the most common and costly post-automation errors that bots will generate?

True, bots will reduce errors, but they're never perfect. Bots also make their own errors – albeit typically different ones than humans do. Be sure to analyze the sorts of errors bots will make and the resulting costs as well.

Leveraging User Analytics

Given that bot actions replace user actions, answering the five questions above centers on analyzing data about user interactions with the target applications – where 'users' might be either humans or bots.

User analytics technology like that from Knoa, therefore, can be an essential tool for mitigating the risk of RPA. Knoa has historically offered user analytics tools for SAP deployments – but it is also straightforward to configure its user analytics technology for any type of enterprise application.

Most importantly, Knoa's user analytics provides insight into user behavior regardless of whether the users are humans or bots. As a result, Knoa's user analytics tools are well-suited for answering each of the five questions in the section above.

Knoa can help organizations understand the current state of existing business processes by measuring user activities across all users and applications. It can identify the most repetitive, manual tasks, as well as the mix of applications that support those tasks.

Knoa can identify tasks that are prone to human errors and then monitor automations to generate a complete view of both human and bot interactions, including ongoing errors. Knoa can even compare human and bot performance for individual tasks, as well as provide quantifiable business benefits of RPA vs. manual interactions.

The Intellyx Take

Leveraging user analytics technology like the tools from Knoa doesn't fix the problems with RPA. Today's RPA solutions are just as brittle and high-maintenance with as without such technology.

Where user analytics technology is particularly useful is in making go/no-go decisions, both at the granular and big-picture levels. Knoa's technology can help deployment professionals identify the tasks and workflows that are best suited for automation by calculating the pros and cons of automation vs. not automating.

At the big-picture level, user analytics technology can be essential for helping organizations build their cost justification analysis for the RPA initiative as a whole. True, in some cases, this analysis might lead some leaders to conclude that RPA is a bad investment – but such a conclusion is best drawn ahead of time.

However, it's more likely that the appropriate analysis will indicate how best to deploy RPA to achieve the greatest business benefit, in spite of RPA's technical flaws.

As a final point, remember that nothing is ever static. RPA is a rapidly maturing market segment, and thus vendors are likely to address the flaws of the current generation of products in short order.

As a result, for many organizations, the RPA go/no-go decision isn't a matter of whether to deploy the technology, but rather one of timing.

Without the insights that products like Knoa provide, our best advice for most enterprises would have been to wait for RPA to mature before jumping in. However, Knoa has changed this equation.

Because it can mitigate the risks inherent in deploying today's RPA in spite of its shortcomings, enterprises can now rest assured in their decision to deploy RPA sooner rather than later.

About the Author: Jason Bloomberg

Jason Bloomberg is a leading IT industry analyst, author, keynote speaker, and globally recognized expert on multiple disruptive trends in enterprise technology and digital transformation.

He is founder and president of Digital Transformation analyst firm Intellyx. He is ranked #5 on Thinkers360's Top 50 Global Thought Leaders and Influencers on Cloud Computing for 2020, among the top low-code analysts on the Influencer50 Low-Code50 Study for 2019, #5 on Onalytica's list of top Digital Transformation influencers for 2018, and #15 on Jax's list of top DevOps influencers for 2017.

Mr. Bloomberg is the author or coauthor of five books, including *Low-Code for Dummies*, published in October 2019.

About Knoa Software

Knoa Software delivers solutions that generate unique insights for the optimization of the end-user experience and improved efficiencies for enterprise applications from vendors including SAP, Oracle and others. Knoa's patented software provides CIOs and business executives with the actionable metrics needed to ensure that organizations and end-users realize the full value of their software investment. Headquartered in New York City, Knoa helps hundreds of global corporations and government organizations make impactful, real-time, fact-based decisions that enrich and maximize the experience and productivity of over a million end users. For further information, visit knoa.wpengine.com or follow us at @KnoaSoftware on Twitter.

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