Robotic Process Automation: The journey of a tool to a product

This article discusses the role of Product thinking in the area of Robotic Process Automation. Robotic Process Automation is the core tool that helps enterprises undergo digital transformation through automation. To build a superior RPA product we need to think beyond the tool and design the product according to customer requirements. The customer requirements will in turn decipher what augmenting technologies are to be clubbed with RPA to create efficiencies when it concerns digital transformation.

RPA might be the core of the solution an organization might require to transform their business processes but we need to consider the use of RPA technology as one part of a holistic automation approach. Augmenting RPA with other technologies – taking a broader, more strategic approach to automation is often called Intelligent Process Automation (Dutton, 2018). This article tries to delve deeper into how Robotic Process Automation can be enhanced through these technologies and what course these amalgamated technologies will take in the future when it concerns not just the product but how it enhances the consumers interaction with the product itself.

Robotic Process Automation: Underlying principles for selection of the RPA product

RPA is typically a tool employed in a digital process to make the process more efficient and is not a product in itself. What makes this tool a product is how it is utilized to improve the particular complication that the process presents itself with. A holistic RPA product would require thinking on multiple levels across numerous touchpoints depending on the transformation need of the client. These four dimensions before choosing any RPA software need to be considered:

1) Software quality & robot maintenance
2) Security & risk management
3) Ease of deployment & scalability
4) Ease of coding & robot deployment (Everest Global Inc., 2018)

How will augmenting technologies shape the future of Robotics Process Automation?

The first level would involve building an ecosystem of augmenting technologies that can make RPA more effective. Robotics, optical character recognition, process orchestrator, analytics, Machine Learning from the underlying systems for Smart RPA solutions. These technologies are applied according to the process they are automating. Coupling RPA with a blend of AI technologies, such as computer vision, optical character recognition (OCR), Natural language processing to process all types of documents, extract relevant information and feed output into downstream applications is called Intelligent Document Processing. Banking and Financial Services and Insurance have been the early adopters of IDP with over 50% share followed closely by Consumer packaged goods (CGP) (Everest Global Inc., 2018). Each industry has a common operation inefficiency that needs to be solved. The combination of RPA and these augmenting technologies come together to form an integrated product that slowly specializes in the particular vertical. Finance & Accounting has large amounts of unstructured data that is processed on a daily basis and Intelligent Automation can help automate these tasks with the help of AI-enabled technologies.

Maximizing the potential of smart RPA through enhancing customer experience

The second level would involve examining the process it is being applied to and the third level would involve making it convenient to use for the human agents that will be involved in the process. This would require the utilization of foundational capabilities to drive rapid and sustainable implementation.

1. It's extremely important that the companies who are looking to transform their digital operations first identify a 'high' impact journey that would generate significant benefits from the desired transformation. Depending upon the business objective for transformation the company can choose the relevant metric that they would like to improve i.e. customer experience, new-customer acquisition, customer service and cost productivity. In case there are multiple 'high' impact journeys; it would be feasible to prioritize and subsequently implement digital transformation

2. The various improvement levers need not only be sequenced correctly but also should derive the multiplier effect feeding off each other and subsequently providing greater benefits to the organization

3. At most companies, 20 end-to-end journeys account for more than 70% of the costs and more than 80% of the customer experience. Transforming these core journeys touches all parts of the organization and deliver multidimensional improvements

4. Reskilling and deploying staff is a critical step in monetizing the value generated from the next generation operating model alongside a continuous-improvement mindset should become the new “steady state” (Mckinsey Digital , 2019)

The zero-based design approach encourages people to cast aside assumptions to expand the scope of discovery. The factors to transform customer experience are:

a) Designing and digitizing customer journeys
b) Increasing speed and agility in insight generation
c) Achieving customer adoption of digital customer journeys
d) Developing agility in delivering journey transformations

Organizations can make the digital journey relevant to the consumers through

- Pooling of content and creating a delightful experience

- A singular platform simplifies the user experience of the user as he can access majority of the information on a single platform

- Making sure that the most frequently used services have returning users to not only engage the customer but also collect valuable customer-behavior data

- Improving and innovating digital journeys by simple tactics, such as color coding functional elements can increase time spent and ease of usage.

Customer Journey Transformation becomes extremely important especially where RPA has reached a maturity level. Banking and financial services tend to be front runners when it concerns the level of maturity achieved by RPA. Organizations then look beyond just the more tangible benefits achieved by automation and look to enhance the quality of the user experience. The ‘customer journey’ will take precedence over the channel used to reach out to the consumer thereby allowing companies to develop more compelling propositions and deliver more streamlined products and services. This will be facilitated by customer self-service through emerging technologies like mobile messaging, phone-based communication. Combining separate cloud environments into a unified hybrid platform increases the efficiency of the organization; eliminating duplication of efforts and potential security risks are some of the examples of an augmenting technology enhancing the customer experience of the enterprise.

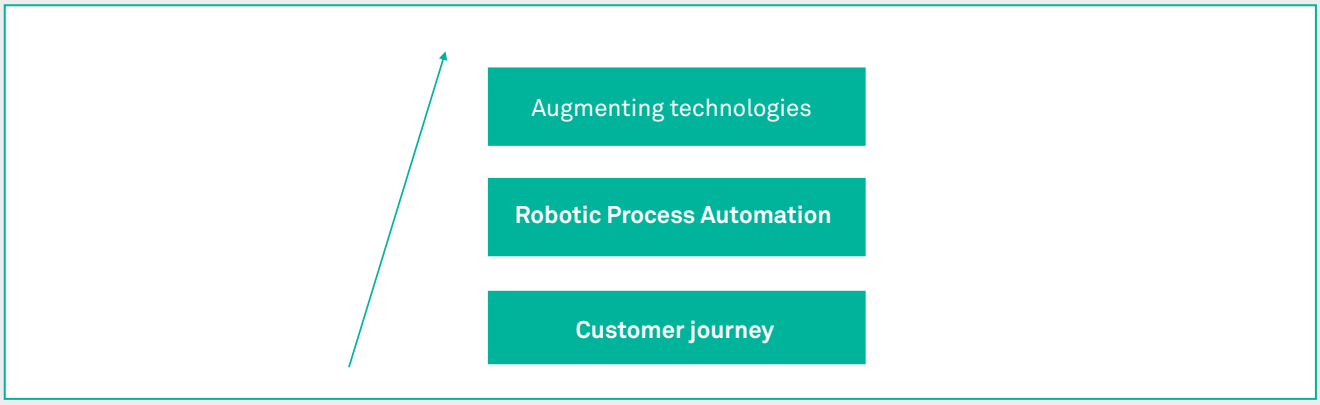

Figure1: Intelligent Process Automation – Product thinking strategy

RPA as a product would typically involve thinking across the three layers that would make an overall process more efficient. Each layer within the entire product would be tied to various end objectives that are typically defined by the client. The customer journey would typically be used to extract the consumer requirements from the process. As a product concept, the effect that RPA will have on the overall journey should be looked at from a down-up perspective since the RPA/ Augmenting technologies have to interact with either the consumer or the orchestrator. To maximize the human synergy, it is important we design the product and its implementation depending on the end user.

RPA is a tool that is supposed to increase the efficiency of the process beyond what simplification, standardization and workflow management can provide therefore it is important to have a strong base on which your RPA solution is built. Majority of the RPA software providers are single-mindedly focusing on adding features to their product but the effective usage of these features can only come about through a process that is efficient in itself. So it is safe to presume that Intelligent Process Automation is not just the RPA software but the entire workflow management coupled with RPA capabilities? If RPA vendors are only supplying the software, then is it safe to assume that the Intelligent Automation product is not just the Software but ecosystem that this software company has built that involves the workflow/BPM management experts as well? Does this mean that the tool is as important as the experts that are creating the efficiencies through process engineering?

The journey of the Intelligent automation product will be a cumulative journey of all the three layers. As technologies develop, the experts would not only have to adapt to these technologies but also reimagine the processes to extract even greater gains that will further create the need to develop these technologies. The machine-human synergy is bound to grow through this feedback loop that will be created, where humans will augment machines and machines will in turn augment humans.

This feedback loop has led to the creation of a platform which is an assembly of talent, capabilities and technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and advanced analytics. This is an indication of how machine-human synergy can be leveraged to create further efficiencies. This creation of efficiencies might even result in the major consolidation between not only RPA software/ technology companies but also service providers in the coming years leading to major shifts in the business environment across the globe.

References

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