A woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a dark blue blazer over a white top, is sitting at a desk. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. Her hands are resting on a laptop and a notebook. The background is a blurred office or meeting room.

How to approach automation in application support and maintenance

Think big, but start small. A step-by-step approach starts with breaking down end-to-end processes into small bits and beginning automation with simple but high-impact use cases

Application support and maintenance teams face multiple challenges on a daily basis due to the complexities involved in their operations.

Automation can help change this state by bringing in newer efficiencies. Automation helps operations to be more predictive and preventive in an ever-evolving environment. It not only helps eliminate human errors and drive faster resolution of incidents but also enables the teams to focus on specialized tasks instead of routine and repetitive issues, thus helping prevent boredom in the team and keeping them motivated.

Challenges hindering effective application support and maintenance

The application environments today are heterogeneous and most systems used for supporting and maintaining applications are reactive and focus on fixing current issues. This leads to multiple challenges (See Figure 1) and lack of alignment to business goals.

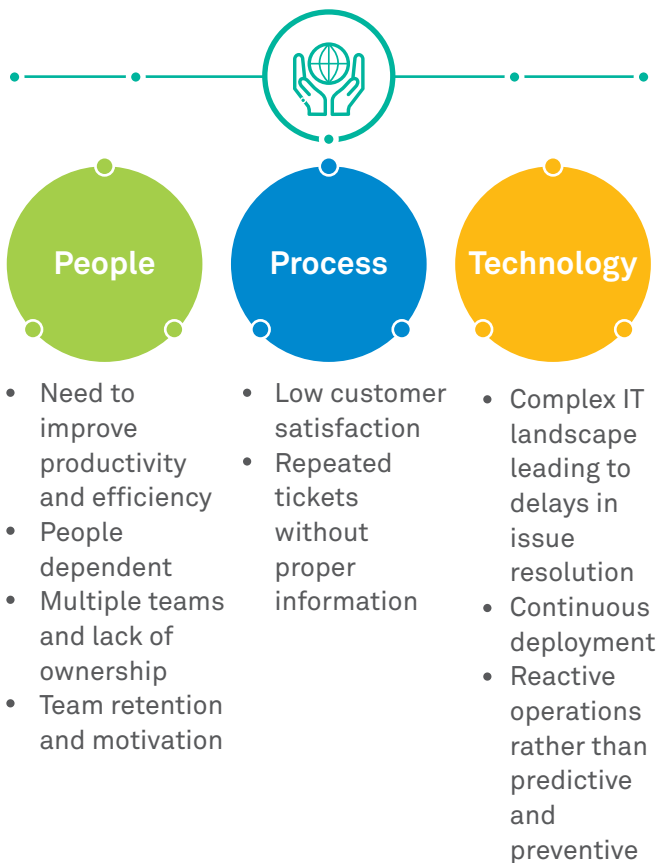


Figure 1: Challenges in application support and maintenance

Automation: The game changer & the involved challenges

Implementation of automation in application support and maintenance helps tackle issues like manual error-prone processes, high cost, and limited resources, and enables enhanced efficiency and productivity. However, automation in application support comes with its own set of challenges:



People

- **Inability to identify use cases** – Identification of use cases for automation can be a time-consuming exercise that needs involvement from multiple teams
- **Dependency on individuals due to lack of documentation** – In the absence of proper documentation, knowledge typically resides with couple of individuals. Overlooking some critical aspects will lead to the entire use case to fail in the production environment
- **Lack of involvement** – People consider automation as a yet-another organization initiative. Identification of use cases, doing POC, testing, implementing it, change management, etc. can be time-consuming activities. Motivating everyone to contribute towards automation can be a challenge but people involvement is critical to the success of automation



Process

- **Lack of unified processes across the organization** – Basic processes have to be implemented before embarking on an automation journey
- **Business Complexity** – Every business process may have multiple variants. Automating each variant might be difficult and may not give the desired ROI
- **Wrong approach taken for automation** – The most common approach taken for automation is to look for plug and play options or look through the partner ecosystem for automation solution. If something is not available or doesn't completely solve the problem, it's written off
- **Absence of central governance** – Automation is not the job of just the support team. There has to be a central team governing and encouraging automation across multiple teams. Multiple teams might have to come together to make it possible.



Technology

- **Ever-changing IT landscape** – Multiple releases happening every now and then, new applications getting added, addition of SaaS applications, etc. can make automation challenging
- **High degree of customization** – Customizations, especially in ERP environments, always increase the complexity when adding anything new in the application
- **Considering automation as one-time activity** – Once automation is done, people become complacent. It's important to remember that automation is a journey and not a one-time activity. Continuously training and retraining the models, looking at value delivered and identifying new automation opportunities is the key

The apt approach to automation

So, how do we approach automation? First and foremost, we need to understand that automation is a journey which has to start from within. The starting point lies in existing tools and infrastructure. It is essential to start with simple but high-impact use cases. The focus should not be on automating end-to-end process, but breaking it down to pieces and beginning automation with small steps. For example, before a support engineer deep dives into the system to investigate the issue, automation can help him/her gather the basic information by traversing through multiple related transactions and applications. Even better would be to update the ticket with all the information gathered, even before he/she starts working on the ticket.

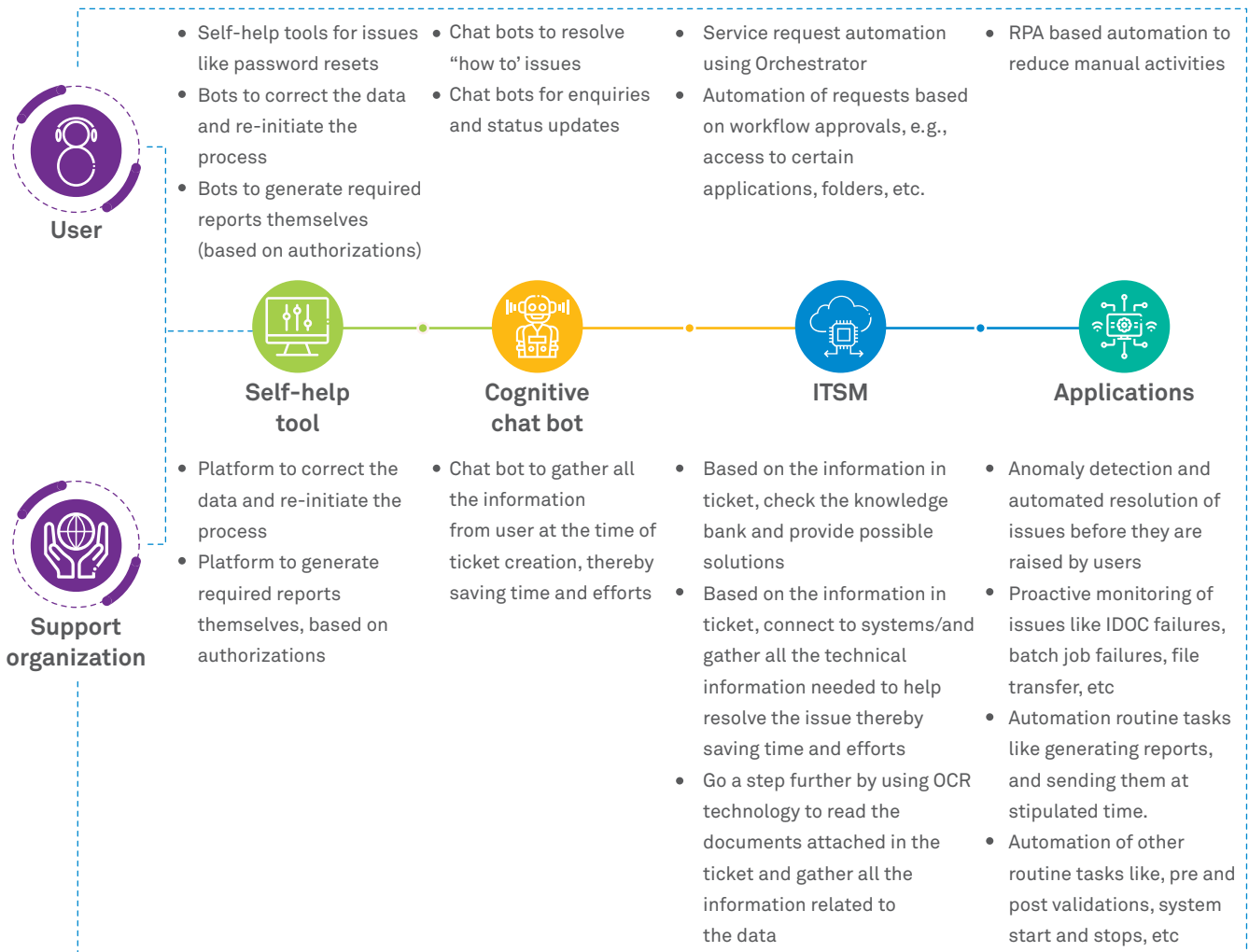


Figure 2 explores how automation can be enabled at each level of support ecosystem

To summarize, take a step-by-step approach. Start small but think big. It will give confidence to the organization and make the journey easier. It is important to remember that automation is not a job of one particular individual or group. It has to be a part of organization's DNA and involve larger groups/ teams.

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Lastly, automation should not be seen as a mission to reduce manpower. Instead, it should be seen as a way to help humans do more value-added jobs and leave repetitive and mundane jobs to bots.



About the Author

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Anmol is an automation consultant helping organizations embark on their automation journey. In his 18+ years' experience, he has played multiple roles in Consulting, Solution Architecture, Program Management and Service Delivery. Anmol's extensive

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