

CONTENT ETHICS - RPA AND ETHICAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how potential ethical concerns about robotic process automaton (RPA) as a replacement technology may affect change management and user adoption of automation solutions. It first provides a characterization of RPA as a solution, reviews the ethical issue from a change management perspective, and then provides some practical suggestions.

WHAT IS ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION?

Gartner characterizes RPA as follows:

“RPA automates repetitive human tasks by emulating the same human transaction steps, mainly via orchestrated UI interactions . . . An RPA tool operates by deploying software script that emulates a human process/task within a workflow. This runtime executable of the RPA script is commonly referred to as “robot” or “bot. (Gartner Magic Quadrant, 2021)”

The RPA application (“tool”) essentially mimics the point-and-click and keyboard actions of a user working between computer application interfaces, be they web-based, a client or terminal emulator. It has been referred to as swivel chair integration or a “duct-tape” work-around for integration gaps. (*The Practitioner’s Guide to RPA*, Sireci, pg. 22-24) As such, it is often adopted as a low-cost alternative to building robust integrations or developing functionality in core line-of-business applications (ERP, CRM).

The application element is somewhat familiar from screen-scraping integration tools and regression testing software. The more powerful aspects of RPA lie in its orchestration and management capabilities, which allow multiple, virtualized “bots” to be deployed, load balanced, and coordinated at enterprise scale. (See Sireci, pgs. 12-16). A central justification for RPA deployments is its ROI. It reduces FTE headcount. As such, it is a form of “substitutive automation.” (*The New Laws of Robotics*, Pasquale, pg. 172)

SOLUTION PERSPECTIVES

From a solution perspective, RPA can be viewed in different ways. The first way of looking at it is as a pure play solution. As such, it is deployed to automate human tasks involving interaction with interfaces to solve specific problems. In this form it reduces labor hours spent on these tasks and can be seen as a low-cost alternative to building integrations between systems using APIs, web services or other methods to exchange data and trigger actions in a core system (ERP, CRM, etc.). It can also be seen as an alternative to building a particular process into a core system. (Sireci, pg. 25)

The second way of looking at RPA is as a component with a set of technologies deployed to provide a total solution. These technologies can include the full stack of ecm platforms such as workflow, content repositories, intelligent capture, case management, and others. With the addition of cognitive capabilities such as intelligent capture and AI driven tasks to the total solution, this approach falls within AIIM’s concept of intelligent information management.

These two deployment models will increasingly blur in practice as RPA vendors add OCR and AI / machine learning functionality to their solutions to fully automate business processes end-to end. (*The Robotic Process Automation Handbook*, Taulli, pgs. 217-256)

ETHICAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT

As a substitution technology, RPA can raise concerns that affect employee perceptions and adoption. As Sireci states, “RPA primarily creates value by automating work that current employees perform.” (Sireci, pg. 68) This characterization applies most directly to the RPA pure play solution scenario outlined above. Also, RPA is often presented as a replacement technology, with the use of terminology such as “robot” (UiPath, Taulli, pg. 4) and “digital worker” (Automation Anywhere, Ibid, pg. 5). Further, its deployment is often envisioned as an army of individuated bots that constitute a kind of isomorphism in their relation to impacted workers. Negative perceptions and legitimate concerns can lead to change management problems and undermine user adoption. (Sireci, pgs. 81-84. and Taulli, pgs. 22-23)

Adopting an **ethical change management** approach can mitigate employee adoption issues while addressing concerns of other stakeholder groups. There are two ways to approach this. One way is to attempt to mitigate or offset potentially negative effects on employees. This approach I would loosely associate with the pure-play scenario. The second way is to **digitally transform** employee work in a way that can be considered additive. This approach can be associated with the second full-stack solution scenario (including Intelligent RPA solutions that integrate with AI/ML, BPM and other capabilities).

Mitigation

To mitigate downside effects of automation and increase upside effects, a number of measures can be taken.

- First, RPA experts recommend clear communication of the automation vision. This creates an understanding of where the organization is going and will improve trust. (Sireci, pgs. 88-90, Taulli, pgs. 130-131)
- Second, engage in comprehensive planning and develop an automation roadmap that identifies all valuable automation opportunities, including those that are not attached to FTE hours. There are often high value opportunities to automate that have little to no FTE hours associated with them. These are tasks that do not actually get done. For example, RPA processes might capture data that can be used for optimization purposes that hitherto has not been captured. This could improve operations and reduce downtime.
- Third, as part of a comprehensive automation plan, look at processes in full and identify those that have strategic value that can be maximized if knowledge workers were able to spend less time doing data entry and more time applying communication and critical thinking skills.
- Fourth, look for opportunities to enhance worker productivity and value by including attended bots in the model. Attended bots can be perceived as assistive as opposed to substitutive, and can improve employee experience by providing control and opportunities to innovate.
- Finally, where FTE reduction is the primary driver of ROI, consider (if possible) realizing gains by avoiding future addition of FTEs and/or by shifting displaced employees to other work assignments. (Sireci, pgs. 69-70)

Digital Transformation

The second approach is to consider whether the target processes are potential targets of **digital transformation**, not just automation. This suggestion may be initially confusing because RPA is often described as a digital transformation technology. But digital transformation is a vague concept that can be defined in different ways. The relevant characterization is from Westerman, Bonnet and McAfee in their book, *Leading Digital: Turning Technology into Business Transformation*, pgs.108-109) According to the authors, digital transformation “. . . is the fundamental redefinition of a process or product through technology”. It is distinct from **substitution**, which is . . . the use of new technology as an alternative or replacement for the same function . . .” And it is also distinct from **extension**, which improves on existing products and processes “but still focus on doing the same activities as before.”

Many pure-play RPA use cases fall within the above characterizations of “substitution” or “extension. They automate the exact steps of an existing process, and add efficiencies through speed, throughput and accuracy. More precisely, they automate tasks within processes. Sometimes they are deployed to automate inherently inefficient tasks. (Sireci, pgs. 35-38) It is possible, therefore, to miss opportunities to transform the whole process. The whole process is transformed when new (in kind) value is created. This can be done by re-orienting or adding objectives to the process, giving it new or other ends. And this re-orientation can be created by more fully integrating knowledge, information and people into the processes using a broader range of integrated technologies.

For example, a contract approval process can be digitally transformed by not just automating certain tasks (e.g., extraction of data from different systems), but by providing opportunities for reviewers to analyze key components so that they can optimize legal and business terms. Technologies that surface relevant information such as contractual language, legal analytical notes, business goals, and past KPI metrics would add value to the contract review process and enhance the knowledge worker’s experience. Auto-classification of incoming content and integration of workflow with expert directories for escalation are other ways in which the whole process can be transformed. Such transformation is more expensive. It requires a deeper analysis of business processes and a broader technology stack. It also brings human judgement and experience into play, which would likely offset reductions in FTE hours eliminated by RPA automation. However, if such transformations can improve competitive position, customer retention, and reduce risk, there will be a strong business case.

CONCLUSION

RPA can raise legitimate concerns for employees that in turn have implications for adoption. An ethical change management approach should be adopted that includes clear and comprehensive communications, as well as uptraining and mitigation strategies. More importantly, change management should be part of a digital transformation strategy that add value for the business and its customers and at the same time enables the full contribution of its employees.