Bringing robots to the fore

Luc Cavelier delves into the growing importance of robotics and automation.

Robotic Automation is a global game changer when it comes to increasing operational and cost efficiency for businesses, but there still isn't enough awareness about what the technology can do and just how much value it can add.

Both Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Robotic Desktop Automation (RDA) involve the application of software and algorithms to perform routine operations previously carried out by humans; RPA does it on a server processing level in a server room without humans, and RDA on a desktop level, alongside a human.

As companies around the GCC region (and around the world) experience mounting pressure to perform, the introduction of RDA in particular, brings opportunities to maximise output, reduce costs, increase flexibility, enhance accuracy and maintain consistency, while allowing staff to focus on other strategic areas.

Globally the impact is huge: the RPA market is expected to grow from \$183m in 2013 to \$5b by 2020 (Transparency Market Research) and according to People Management Magazine Online, one in six public sector jobs could be automated by 2030.

UNDERSTANDING RPA & RDA

The recently publicised use of robots to carry out industrial tasks has led to some confusion about what the terms RPA and RDA actually mean. In robotic automation, the term 'robot' is a metaphorical one, referring to software products.

RPA is the application of technology that allows employees in a company to configure computer software on the server to capture and interpret existing applications for processing a transaction, manipulating data, triggering responses and communicating with other digital systems.

The software has the ability to be aware and adapt to changing circumstances, exceptions and new situations, in short it is an emerging form of clerical process automation.

RDA automates rule-based processes, creating and design-

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ing 'robots' that manipulate other software like a human on the desktop. It optimises the way employees work by simplifying, automating and integrating the technologies and processes.

Using RDA, organisations can deliver faster, more seamless transactions that accelerate employee productivity and reduce customer effort while increasing operational efficiencies. An area with massive potential, RDA is considered as the 4th industrial revolution in the business industry, but the success will ultimately depend on how efficiently RDA is adopted.

USES & BENEFITS

RPA and RDA give businesses the opportunity to rationalise front, middle and back office processes, by freeing up resources, time and capital. Tedious repetitive tasks are transferred from human to software 'bots', which also have the capability to add logic as required.

Even if some administrative tasks require a cognitive decision, the huge majority of them - such as copy-pasting data from one application to another, opening multiple interfaces to have a unified view of the customer, or renaming and storing documents in a formatted way - require little thought.

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→ Tedious repetitive tasks are transferred from human to software 'bots', which also have the capability to add logic as required, says Cavelier.

Robotic automation is particularly suited to processes where a high number of staff are working on them manually. Every resource follows a standard operating procedure, which is made up of a series of data reading, decisions or business rules, and the actions are done by using a mouse and keyboard. Robotic Automation is doing exactly the same: it is the third hand of an employee, supporting him by reading the data, taking decisions and then acting accordingly.

Furthermore, robotic automation also offers the ability to continuously monitor business processes, as well as staff behaviour. That monitoring of patterns and events, gathered through machine observation, can then be used to implement future improvements or for quality control purposes.

Each step in a business process is fully tracked and documented within the system that is being automated. This helps a company become more compliant with industry, audit or governmental authority regulations and on top of that, Robotic Automation is capable of eliminating almost any processing error, allowing a high accuracy level.

One of the biggest advantages is the scope of its usability across various processes, and its ability to complete a variety of tasks; Robotic Automation is excellent at operating multi-step tasks across multiple systems.

What's more, there are no system changes required: no need to develop complex APIs that become obsolete when there is an upgrade of the system version the API is integrating to. Robotic Automation is interfacing at the user level just as the usual employee does; this means that security and confidentiality remains the same.

MOVING FORWARD

Robotic Automation is mostly perceived as a way to decrease the need for human labour, and it is true that the technology can be used as an effective way to streamline the workforce and remain competitive. However, it is also about freeing up employees to increase their overall productivity, so they can work on more value-added activities involving personal interaction, problem solving, and decision making, contributing to better employee satisfaction and retention rates.

To decide if a task can benefit from automation, it has to be definable, repeatable, and rules-based. Once that is the case, the agility of the solution allows companies to be creative in the tasks they choose to automate, and also to test new scenarios quickly and easily. One of the best ways to assess the potential value is to do a pilot. A pilot is a great way to maximise your budget and provide executives with the information they need to make decisions about the implementation of robotic automation.

In essence: identify the opportunity, validate it, design the mode, and deploy the pilot. Robotic automation is the next revolution, and it is already here; it is about understanding it and embracing automation to create a more productive environment for the benefit of your staff and your stakeholders. ■

Luc Cavelier, executive VP Business Development, Contextor.