

ARTIFICIALLY INTELLIGENT, SO YOU WON'T BE BORED

Robotic process automation is taking over a lot of our most boring back-office tasks, says **Anthony Sharpe**, leaving us humans to focus on more important things

Is your job boring and mundane? Is your job repetitive and filled with time-consuming tasks? Do you ever think a robot could do your job? If so, you're probably right. All over the world, robots are getting handed the boring, mundane, repetitive, time-consuming parts of many jobs.

This is all happening via what is known as robotic process automation (RPA). Think of it as the boring side of artificial intelligence (AI): software robots are taught a sequence of repeatable tasks through observation of the computer's graphical user interface, then mimic these actions by interacting with the user-interface system, much as a person would do. "Basically, the robot logs into systems and downloads data, makes decisions, completes forms, uploads data, manages diary invites, forwards emails, and so forth," explains Prof Herman Singh, CEO of digital transformation firm Future Advisory.

"Robotic process automation is software that is designed to help primarily with office-type functions that require the ability to do several types of tasks in a sequential order," says Ashley Maistry, associate director of robotics and intelligent automation at Deloitte Consulting Africa. "RPA can be introduced to execute these series of steps, often adding additional benefits such as improved speed and accuracy. Often with these repetitive tasks, the data is being manipulated across platforms and applications so a physical robot is not necessary. Instead, the software robot is deployed with the ability to launch and operate other software to execute these repetitive tasks."



WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF RPA?

Maistry sees improved efficiency, greater productivity, cost savings and lower turnover as the chief benefits of employing RPA. On the last point, he says, "when human employees are no longer forced to do boring, repetitive tasks, their satisfaction levels will naturally rise."

In addition, workers will have the ability to participate in more high-level projects, leading to greater employee satisfaction and retention."

Maistry says the greatest barrier to RPA is the upfront cost (though he is quick to point out that this is inevitably offset by increases in productivity and efficiency), with many businesses unable to find spaces in their budgets to set up the system. Despite this, RPA is less expensive to implement than more sophisticated AI tools. "It's relatively cheap," maintains Singh. "For R100 000, a firm can have a robust system implemented. No integration is needed — that is what makes it so elegant."

SHOULD YOU BE USING RPA?

Any business with many back-office tasks that are taking up (more) valuable human hours could benefit from RPA.

"It makes a lot of sense for companies with multiple generations of disparate systems," says Singh. "It's good for middle office work, not front office. Basically, work in the messy middle where systems are not fully integrated and humans play the role of connecting the

workflow between them. So it's good for almost any industry with a large middle office. This is heavily concentrated in the financial services and telecoms spaces, although government, healthcare and even logistics firms can benefit."

WHO IS USING RPA?

Several vendors operate in South Africa, catering to a growing market for RPA. "All the banks have these systems running and have achieved very significant benefits in costs, speed and reliability," explains Singh.

Maistry gives the example of a global asset servicing company whose local entity was required to reduce operating costs. Deloitte created a prioritisation matrix for automation and identified 150 potential candidate processes, of which 25 had the most impact, covering more than 20 full-time employees. "We developed a business case for automation with a potential saving of R77-million with the first three years."

SHOULD WE BE WORRIED?

There's much concern in South Africa around RPA, because of the impact it could have on the job market, making low-skilled clerking jobs obsolete.

"The blanket statement in which RPA is said to replace humans," says Maistry, "is not entirely correct. RPA is used to free up employees from mundane tasks. This is done to focus those employees on other areas of the business, thus utilising them where there is more opportunity to generate additional business and revenue for the organisation." Which is, at the end of the day, what every business wants, isn't it? ■



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