



ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION DURING COVID-19

IN A CHALLENGING COVID-19 CLIMATE, BUSINESSES GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM BOTS

COVID-19 has rapidly and irrevocably reshaped the global business climate.

Virtually overnight, restaurants and bars have shuttered their doors to customers, transitioning to delivery and take-out models. Offices have closed, as entire workforces telecommute from home. Manufacturers of much-needed supplies from cleaning products to masks are overwhelmed by demand they're struggling to meet. Employees across the country have been asked to work differently: harder, longer, virtually—and sometimes more dangerously. And companies of all stripes have had to look for ways to make their cash stretch for an indefinite period that may extend much longer than initially imagined.

The silver lining of any crisis is that there is no better opportunity to drive change. No business can afford to operate the same way it was prior to the novel coronavirus outbreak. Not only must they do more with less, they must do it faster and smarter.



WHY BUSINESSES NEED ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION AMID COVID-19

For the middle market, the ability to adapt quickly is a matter of survival. The recipe for business resilience is intricate: financial discipline may be the primary ingredient, but too often cost cutting comes at the expense of performance and organizational agility. Adaptability calls for both cost efficiency and operational efficiency--which is where Robotic Process Automation (RPA) comes in.

What is RPA?

RPA is the use of software that automates manual tasks. These "bots" allow organizations to automate simple or repetitive processes to reduce the time spent on costly manual tasks and increase efforts to deliver mission critical work.

The software is designed to perform routine tasks across multiple applications and systems within an existing workflow. It performs specific tasks to automate the transfer, editing, reporting and/or saving of data.

Where there is paper, manual tasks and complex workflow steps, there is rich opportunity to inject RPA to improve accuracy, shorten processes from days to minutes and to dramatically improve business performance. This efficiency can ultimately save businesses critical dollars where it counts, allowing companies to scale quickly to fully meet demand, manage with reduced headcount, or maximize speed and accuracy.

RPA bots can work independently or alongside humans. Attended bots work collaboratively with humans to improve speed and accuracy of the menial aspects of their work, while unattended bots can operate autonomously, without any human intervention at all. For example, in a customer service setting, attended bots can be leveraged to retrieve customer data faster, allowing each customer service rep to work through a long queue more efficiently, thereby retaining customer loyalty.

Unattended bots are more frequently deployed to automate back-office activities involving the collection, processing and analysis of data. Imagine, for example, a hospital system attempting to project the number of ventilators they will need during COVID-19—and whether to redirect supply of these valuable resources from one hospital to another. An unattended bot could collect data from hospital admissions and medical charts to help determine the number of resources required for each facility.

What advantages does RPA bring to a COVID-19 environment?

The pressures of normal business operations have only been magnified by the current climate. Many companies have experienced significant revenue reductions and are under pressure to curb costs and do more with fewer resources to survive. RPA can help businesses address the following business needs:



Cost savings: RPA projects can generate significant cost savings. ROI is realized near-instantaneously, offsetting the upfront investment. A smaller implementation with 10 bots or fewer can be implemented relatively inexpensively and within a short period of time. RPA can increase the quantity and quality of work product, while allowing human capital resources to shift to higher-value tasks or be redeployed to other parts of the business—all contributing to the economics of automation. In the current climate, this is imperative.



Speed: RPA can slash the time spent on manual tasks by orders of magnitude—an essential need during the pandemic when lost time can translate to loss of life, as is the case for healthcare providers and manufacturers of critical medical supplies.



Productivity: As revenues have dropped, many companies have been forced to lay off or furlough workers. Maintaining productivity with fewer resources is a must. By automating parts of the workforce's daily activities, staff can instead focus on activities that require human problem solving.



Going virtual: With all nonessential businesses forced to cease in-person work and the timeline until a vaccine is available still likely one year to 18 months away, businesses must facilitate highly effective remote work as soon as possible. RPA can be used to expedite the setup process, ensuring employees have access to appropriate Wi-Fi at home and are registered for new equipment at home offices.



Business continuity: In some cases, automation can protect staff's physical health by limiting exposure. For example, essential businesses are using bots to evaluate each employee's current health and COVID-19 risk. Based on the survey responses it helps determine each day if the person is low risk enough to go into work. This use of RPA could become helpful when parts of the country look toward a phased reopening and want to prevent widespread infection in the workplace.



Accuracy: RPA allows you to eliminate the human margin of error, which in the case of repetitive tasks is set between 5% and 10%. Improved accuracy and quality of work product is essential in high-stakes tasks.



What are the benefits of RPA?

RPA has use-cases in every business department, from account receivable tracking to ensure on time payment, to federal and local COVID-19 compliance documentation.

 HR	New employee onboarding	Employee termination documentation	Short-term disability and sick leave
 Finance / Accounting	Ar tracking to ensure on time payment	Invoice processing/ duplicate review	Vendor verification/ inactivate unused vendors
 IT	New user setup	Remote work setup (wifi, vpn, hardware registration)	Inventory tracking
 Sales / Marketing	Sales campaign email management	Outreach campaigns	CRM automation/ address cleansing
 Customer Service	Order processing	Customer self-service	Chatbot enablement
 Others	Federal and local covid-19 regulatory compliance documentation	Data collection and management	Inventory management

NEAR- TO MID-TERM APPLICATIONS OF RPA DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

The potential use-cases for RPA in this climate are endless. Here are a few examples already in play:



Accelerate Patient Enrollment for Covid Testing

As diagnostic labs, drive-through testing centers, and hospitals test hundreds of Americans per day for COVID-19, there is a desperate need to speed up the process of looking up each patient in the site's electronic medical records, adding the patient to the system, sharing this information with the CDC, and reporting back to the patient. Often sick people are standing in line 6 feet apart with fevers and respiratory issues for many hours—compromising their own health and those around them who may or may not have the virus. Attended bots can save 8-9 minutes per patient and avoid manual data entry errors.



Facilitate Productive Work From Home

Companies nationwide are scrambling to ensure each employee has the internet bandwidth required to do their jobs adequately while sheltering in place. A bot can be leveraged to examine employee zip codes, see what their internet speed is in their local area and collect details on employees' Wi-Fi plans to determine where they need to invest in upgrading employee internet packages. As COVID-19 moves across the country, and with the possibility of a second wave in the fall, more businesses may need to enhance workforce productivity by ensuring employees' work from home situation is as conducive to working as being physically in the office. Other applications include registration of new hardware and setting up VPN.



Process Unprecedented Product Demand

From grocery stores, to meal kit companies, and personal protective equipment manufacturers, there are segments of the economy that are experiencing product demand unlike they have ever seen before. By using unattended bots to process these orders, overextended companies already coping with diminished workforces can redeploy critical headcount toward fulfilling the high volume of orders filed. These companies can thus capture maximum revenue while meeting the societal need to reduce loss of life from COVID-19.



Enable Rapid Hiring

From Amazon warehouses to delivery services and hospitals in COVID-19 hotspots, some industries need to increase their workforce at record speed to meet demand. Bot-powered solutions can help government entities and companies alike conduct background checks and evaluate employee eligibility, freeing up Human Resources staff to focus on the subsequent stages of employee onboarding.

HOW TO KNOW IF RPA IS RIGHT FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Businesses are making dramatic changes to navigate this new normal, creatively looking for ways to bridge cash flow through this challenging climate by creating additional revenue streams, asking employees to stretch into unfamiliar territory, and curtailing expenses.

As businesses build their resilience in the face of hardship, consider:



Cost savings: Are your personnel expending valuable time and effort on manual tasks?



Speed: Is your business struggling to keep up with spikes in demand caused by the current climate?



Productivity: Could automation increase the work output of each employee?



Facilitate Remote Work: Are your employees unable to work from home effectively?



Ensure Business Continuity: Are sick employees potentially putting the rest of your workforce in harm's way?



Accuracy: Is human error slowing down processes and reducing quality?

As management teams look to diagnose the best path forward, RPA can address the questions above— keeping companies in business, fully able to meet demand, and boosting the bottom-line.

CONTACT:



KIRSTIE TIERNAN

Principal & Co-Leader, Data Analytics
and Automation
312-616-4638
ktiernan@bdo.com



SEAN AHMADINEJAD

Director, Data Analytics
and Automation
713-548-0828
sahmadinejad@bdo.com

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