Accelera

Dancing with Disruption
Answering the big questions on organisational change

AUTOMATION

Achieving customer success with business-driven Automation

Many businesses have taken the road to making their processes more efficient and less people-intensive, with a major driver being cost reduction by removing head-count. Some businesses are sending menial activities to low-cost, off-shore labour markets, while others are bringing them back on-shore with intensive automation, often resulting in taking people out of the equation altogether.

But automation can also deliver great customer outcomes, and help deliver customer-centric initiatives to improve sales, market traction and loyalty in markets that are being disrupted.

Automation as an enabler for Innovation

Automation of IT platforms processes can deliver outcomes more quickly, with less people. One example is DevOps, which shortens the time developers wait for new infrastructure to test their latest code release, by automating the IT operations steps and making them part of the code release process. DevOps as an underlying IT platform function helps organisations' innovation capability.

Frequently releasing new features to a website or app is far simpler when the test systems' deployment is automated as part of the release cycle. To work smoothly, the underlying technologies need to support these features. Public cloud platforms such as AWS have them baked in private cloud platform tooling is now starting to also support them.

Improving process efficiency

Where a process involves people doing repetitive and sometimes unproductive tasks, businesses can remove these inefficiencies by automating some, or all of the steps.

One way is to develop, or leverage, new software platforms that emulate or replace manual process steps. Another approach when considering a new platform, is to rethink the business process altogether. This provides the opportunity to ask why certain process steps are carried out at all.

It could be that a system, technical trend, or risk mitigation driver for having designed a process a certain way is no longer relevant, and a better process can be designed.

Will automation reduce headcount?

Using automation to reduce the number of people to perform a function in the business is still one of the biggest drivers, especially in larger organisations.

Automation that seeks to drive this business outcome is getting interesting. Robotic Process Automation (RPA) enables the development of 'trained' software 'bots' to perform part, or all, of a business process on a repetitive basis. Software bots can work 24x7, be re-trained if needed, and they support scaling of a business function independent of people. RPA can also be used to overcome integration issues, where software systems can't otherwise communicate with each other - and where the business currently uses people to replicate information from one system to another.

Automation of business processes helps enforce business rules, reducing risk with better compliance, and prevents steps being missed, information being lost, or balls being dropped. Any company which passes a customer between functions benefits from automation in reducing friction in this way.

Whether automation significantly reduces headcount really depends on the application. In recent years many IT functions have been automated, but skills demand for a highly automated function like cloud is now white hot. That's not ironic, it's just a sign of jobs being shifted in a changing economy. Automation will continue to drive these shifts.

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Improving the customer experience

Bots, AI and ML are driving some interesting outcomes for backend business processes such as resource planning and management, too.

Where statistical models have traditionally been used, some quite advanced machine learning techniques are now being applied to develop efficient planning outcomes, such as the best way to prioritise a sales rep's visits in an area based on the highest potential value at stake (sales won, churn prevented, etc.).

Automation is also getting widespread adoption in the customer experience side of the business. A bot can engage with a customer, and through natural language processing backed by machine learning, guide them to an answer that saves them a call or pre-qualifies them to speaking with a person in the right area of the business.

If you've ever called a company and been asked to describe in a few words what you want in order to best direct your call, you've experienced some of this automation. A common feature of this automation is for the system to be improving itself based on the success of answering many queries per day and feedback loops on success and failure rates into the model.

Automation as a driver for customer delight

While automation can provide focused business outcomes aligned with process improvement, cost reduction and headcount re-allocation, it can deliver superior customer experience.

In general, using automation to shorten the time needed for a customer to go from "I am interested" to "I have been fulfilled and you have been paid" can be very successful.

Anthony Woodward is founder and Chief Executive Officer of Accelera

Asking the right questions about automation

Are my internal processes well defined, still relevant for us and customers, and being followed well?	There is an opportunity to really think about processes as you consider their automation. If they are not a good fit, a re-engineering of a process before automating a broken one, is a better way forward.
Can automation improve the customer experience by making us more responsive, available and able to focus on more complex problems?	Customers can also get frustrated by complex processes that take time or require them to re-explain themselves to each new operator as they are passed around inside a call centre or through different departments. Helping customers get to resources and serve themselves, or get to the right person more efficiently, can really help the customer experience. But bear in mind, some people will take time to catch up with this approach, so give them a way to speak to someone if they are really lost.
Is there a logical starting point to consider for automation in our business, to get the process, platform and people aspects right on a small scale?	Automation can be addictive, and quickly grow into a large project. It's easy for organisations to get overwhelmed with the end-to-end nature of business transformation that presents as an opportunity from automation, so start with something small and test the process before developing a bigger plan. This will also help folks come up to speed with the focus on re-skilling and on more complex tasks, rather than thinking about their job security.

About Accelera
Strategic Disruption Specialists

Accelera is a business-first digital transformation consultancy for mid-market companies. We help private and government organisations get ahead of change and lead disruption by improving their digital capability. With 25 years of real-world experience creating and helping mid-market businesses leverage digital transformation, our purpose is to enable businesses to not only cope with change, but to become innovative disruptors.

We put strategy before technology and results above all. Partner with Accelera today.