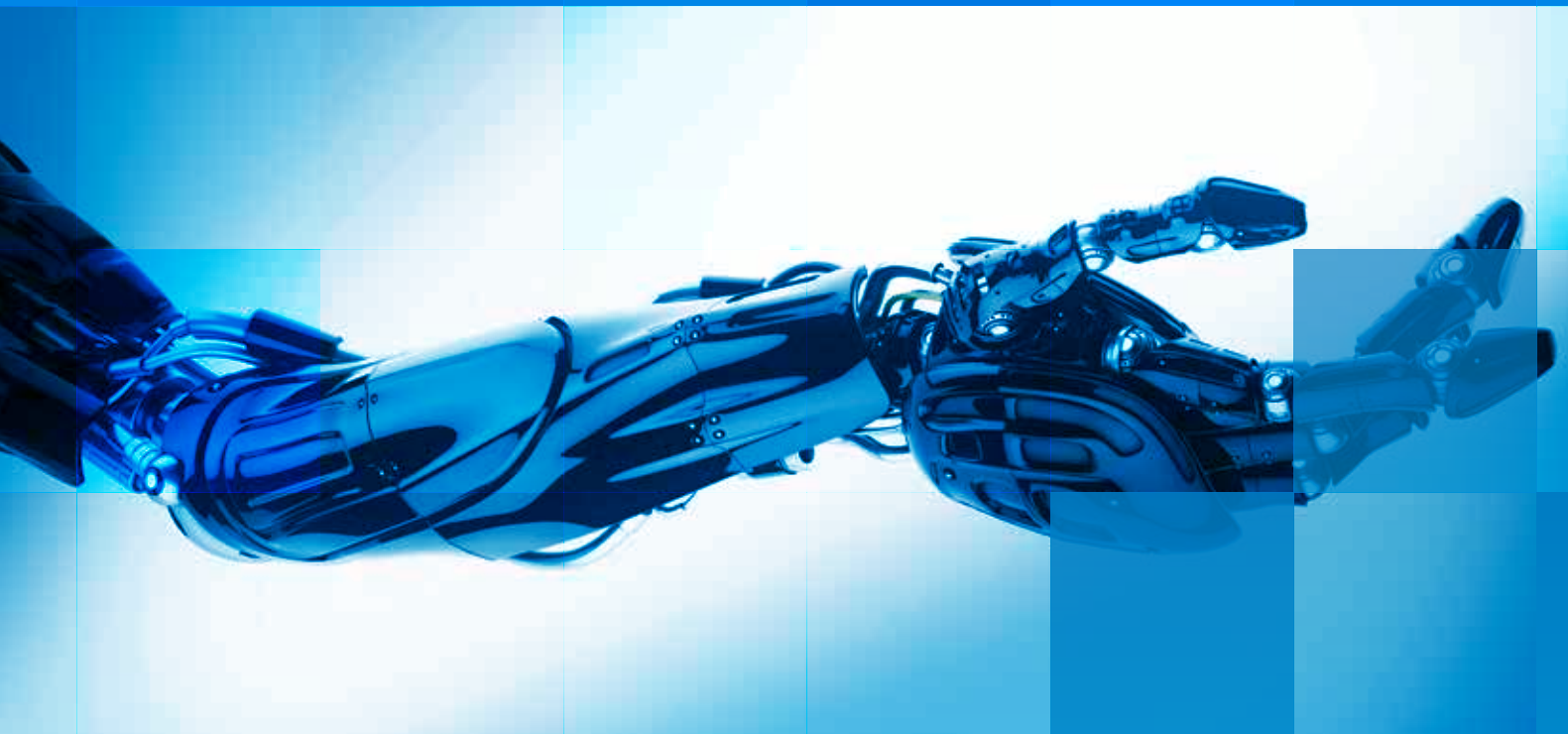


PERSPECTIVE

The Future is Here

Gear up for Robotic Process Automation



Nithya Prabhakar

Abstract

A revolution is quietly underway in business process management (BPM) in the form of Robotic Process Automation (RPA). It promises greater agility and improved business performance, and increased productivity and quality. But as in all forms of disruptive technology, Robotic Process Automation too, has the potential for workforce upheaval. In this paper, we attempt to get past the hype and pull the reality out. We attempt to answer questions such as: Would it bring about productivity improvement as high as 10X? Would it mean a completely touchless process? How would it benefit professionals?



Automation returns to the forefront in business process management (BPM) circles

Once a murky word, 'automation' is returning to the forefront in BPM circles in the form of robotic process automation (RPA). In January this year, a bank in Japan deputed robots in front-office operations. Last year, cheerleading swarm robots were launched in playfields. In fact, robots are now being tested to teach everything from mathematics to vocabulary in classrooms.

Automation is not new in BPM but it has now moved from script and workflows to intelligent and distributed software agents or robotics, thanks to advances in software and artificial intelligence.



The promise of Robotic Process Automation

Similar to industrial robots in the manufacturing industry, automation is changing the way we think about and manage business processes, IT support, workflow management, remote infrastructure, and back-office processes. RPA addresses the many drawbacks of macros and traditional 'system of records' technologies such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and provides remarkable improvements in accuracy, cycle time, and productivity. It does this by eliminating human intervention from dull, repetitive tasks. In essence, it removes the clicks and scrolls, and mimics both rule and judgment-based activities such as data capture, reconciliation, report generation, response to statuses, et al., without impacting the underlying IT applications.

As most of the work on the BPM floor comes and goes back electronically and is performed as per a set of predefined rules and repeatedly executed, the possibilities with RPA are huge. Theoretically, everything is automatable as a majority of activities in all processes – be it HR, finance & accounting, sales and fulfillment, or sourcing and procurement – have logic or rules, that are repetitive and require little or no judgment. Vendor management, customer master data management, catalog processing, journal

entries load, order entry / modification / booking, invoice processing, and claims processing are just a few examples of automatable activities.

It is projected that a productivity improvement as high as ten times would be possible eventually. Not just that, huge cost savings would be possible with the elimination of mundane / tedious tasks.

The silver lining

RPA is designed to reduce or eliminate the need for people to perform high-volume, high-value tasks. Undeniably, many feel threatened. But it doesn't represent all gloom for BPM workers. Completely eliminating human intervention would require a solution that is reusable, highly configurable, and process-agnostic to enable a near zero touch operation or a touchless perfect process. It would need to not only just mimic repeatable, rule-based tasks, which require little or no cognition or human expertise, but also replace human expertise or judgment. While advances in artificial intelligence, deep learning, big data, and natural user-interfaces have made this possible, there are still limitations. Therefore, while most activities across processes can be automated, automation would not lead to slashing staff. Rather, it will provide opportunities, as enterprises will need skilled resources to implement, manage, and maintain these programs. It would open up more interesting and

challenging jobs which would mean up-skilling through domain training and Center of Excellence (COE) setup, and would free up time for more demanding work from the highly skilled worker who previously performed transactional jobs. In the future, I see RPA being offered as a service on cloud with a highly capable, easily configurable solution that requires minimal human intervention, performs straight-through processing and then distributes only the fallouts to human agents.

Conclusion

The BPM industry is quietly moving towards RPA, the possibilities of which will fundamentally reshape the industry. All routine, repetitive, rule-based tasks will soon be performed by software bots and people will move up to higher value activities. Enterprises will need to take measures to make a smooth transition to a more automated floor / infrastructure.

About the Author



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Nithya has over two decades of experience across both IT and ITES. In her current role as Head - Automation, she is responsible for driving automation solution development and deployment across various client operations in BPO, which will help enhance perfect process performance and increased client experience, i.e., 'to do more with less for more, leveraging automation.'

In the last 15+ years, Nithya has played multiple roles at Infosys, viz., Delivery and Operations Management for large Retail Clients, Unit Business Planning and Assurance for a \$1 billion unit, client relationship management / account management for key accounts, and large organization change management and program management of large and complex E&P programs for an energy client. Nithya has a Masters in Mathematics and is a Post Graduate in Computer Science from Guindy Engineering College (Anna University), Chennai, India.

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