The Robots are Coming
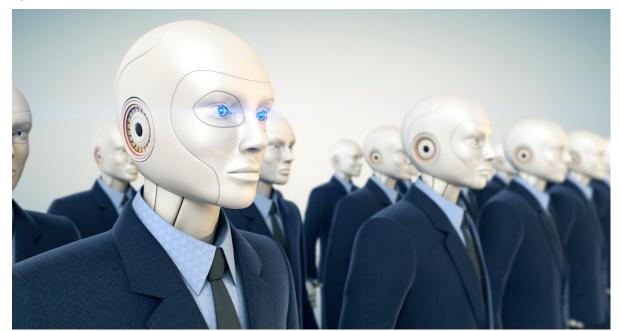
By A J Blackham, 10-30-2019

Most people are familiar with pictures of factories full of robots making automobiles, but they have difficulty envisaging what their office will look like once robots begin to take over their work.

The move has started. RPA (Robotic Process Automation) is a hot new technology designed to take over repetitive clerical tasks. Its value is quickly evident – faster throughput, fewer errors, lower cost. Yet this is the tip of a very large iceberg.

The promise of RPA is that it will automate entire business processes not just repetitive tasks. But like most new technologies, expectations exceed reality. In this case even the name is misleading. At best it should be RTA – Repetitive Task Automation.

But the promised results of fully automating the core transactional processes of a business are beguiling. Increasing productivity 10 fold, reducing processing time by 90% are real results from a relatively complex business – see a case study at xsol.com.

With such a transformational outcome possible what is stopping all businesses from attaining these results?

In one word – exceptions.

When Toyota became the world's leading auto-maker General Motors assumed that their advantage lay in their robotized factories and so they created their own fully automated factory to build Saturn cars. But the results were no better than their other plants and eventually Saturn was shuttered.

The problem – robots need to know EXACTLY what to do. Toyota didn't just give manual jobs to robots, not until they knew 100% exactly what the manual workers did.

A lack of understanding the need for accuracy has led to 3 barriers to successfully automating business:

1) The tools used to define business process lack integrity.

   With tools like Microsoft Visio you are literally creating drawings – the equivalent of cave paintings when it comes to accurately defining process.

2) Software vendors promote "80% is good enough".

   "Don't bother with exceptions – just map the happy path". One vendor uses the process of a making a cup of tea to describe their product. Great if everything is in place - kettle plugged in, milk in the fridge - but life isn't like that. Manual workers may figure out how to get around such problems, but robots can't. They have no experience of going to the 711 to get more milk.

   EXCEPTIONS paralyze robots. For automation to work all exceptions must be catered for – either eliminated or built into the process – for example, add "milk almost finished, go to 711 for more" to the process.

3) Lack of experience with process automation.

   Process automation is new to the office but not to the factory. People who have worked with process manufacturing understand what it takes to sustain a real-time always-on world, where exceptions cost a lot of money.

   RPA vendors don't realize that there is much more to the iceberg on which they are sitting. They have let the robot genie out of the bottle. This has opened the door to fully automated business and the type of real-time always-on processes that are required to take advantage of the coming of age of the IOT (Internet of Things) and 5G communications.

Despite what AI (Artificial Intelligence) vendors would have you believe; it will be a long time before robots can think like humans. Until then don't begrudge the robots your boring repetitive work. As robots make the world go faster your brain will be required to think up ways to help your business keep up.

And when you need business process automation remember to look for Exception Solutions – XSOL for short.

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