The service desk: a launchpad for automation

By Ranjoy Nag   18 Oct 2018

Transformation has been a trending word for a while, as businesses across the globe incorporate their own interpretation of the word into their businesses. Digital transformation, in particular, continues to be a topic prioritised in many boardrooms. However, digital transformation is not a button that you press to enable; it's a journey, comprising many steps and technologies to work for your business.

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One of the front runners of digital transformation is automation, and the method and ways in which a business automates can determine the success of their digital transformation strategy. While automation is being affected in various ways and at various levels in organisations across the globe, South African businesses are still at the very early stages of exploration and investment by comparison.

Automating in segments

South African businesses are recognising the benefits of automation such as improving their service delivery to customers. However, despite a desire to automate and streamline wherever possible, most South African organisations are still reliant on legacy systems in which they've made significant investments

Legacy infrastructure isn't conducive to full automation, so businesses are automating in segments, where it makes the most sense. The level of interest is spurring many organisations to assess what they have, benchmark it against international standards and formulate a transformation strategy accordingly.

This segmented approach is not a bad thing, saying that automation should be a process beginning with automating the more mundane tasks, before working your way to high end, niche skills. This also allows for better integration of automation into an existing environment.

Start at the service desk

One of the easiest and most impactful areas for businesses (in terms of ROI) to start automating is the service desk, where responders often deal with multiple similar requests and queries on a daily basis.

While IT service providers provide services to their customers, it's every organisation's own IT department that is responsible for delivering services to their customers, both internal and external. It's the first point of contact for anyone experiencing issues or needing answers to a query. IT's main prerogative used to be helping people to do their own jobs better, however, there has been a paradigm shift, where IT is also responsible for delivering value to the organisation and its customers so that the people can focus on their core business. The service desk forms a vital part of IT's value-add.

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However, many of the requests and issues that service desks respond to are common and repetitive. Time is almost wasted in addressing the same issues daily when IT departments could be addressing those issues that are truly problematic and require technical expertise, or building a better value offering to their business.

Automating common issues in such a way that the customer can solve the issue themselves, by interacting with a chatbot or clicking through a menu of options, means that IT need not focus on repetitive requests, and the customers receive an enhanced experience which may often be faster than if they had called a service desk.

An automated service desk delivers seamless, effortless assistance to customers across the board. It reduces the frustration of dealing with the same issues all the time and also increases ITs productivity as they direct their freed-up time to more pressing or business critical requirements. It also provides the perfect use case for businesses to trial automation and launch it into other areas of the business.

Clear the path

Automation at this level clears the path for users to better adapt to automation. Users are trained to adapt to new processes, and often see the benefits and ease of use immediately. As they grow accustomed to automated interactions, they spot use cases elsewhere in the business and are more accepting, if not enthusiastic, about automation in other areas of the business.

This helps address one of the key challenges of automation: user resistance to change. Automation introduces a need for change management across the business, to ensure uptake and acceptance. Organisational change management projects are often a learning curve, for the business and users, as both adapt and learn to use new digital channels. A partner with experience in organisational change management can minimise this through working with the organisation to effectively

communicate with and guide users, increasing adoption.

Top-down encouragement of automation coupled with immersive, hands-on training is key, as is understanding of - and integration with - a business's culture. Automation implementors need to work hand in hand with the business to enable and engage users, then enforce use. Once users see the advantages and how it simplifies their lives, they tend to accept the change.

The most commonly cited opposition for automation is the perceived reduction of manpower due to a smaller requirement for human effort, or intervention. However, this is not the case, as people who were involved in contributing to human intervention can be upskilled and redeployed to areas of the business where they are more required. This creates new opportunities for resources to hone their skills in other areas and contributes to an environment of innovation.

For instance, in a service desk scenario, many of the people are technically capable and have insights into common challenges making them ideal candidates for working on how IT can better serve the business. This knowledge also contributes to a knowledge repository, from people to automation assets, contributing to a leaner, more proactive and consistent delivery framework. Thus, automation is not about cutting back resources, but rather using them more effectively to drive business outcomes and benefit its customers.

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