

Automation

Strategic Automation Adds Speed, Agility and Resilience to Intelligent Workflows

New technologies that automate processes can improve customer service, free employees to do more meaningful work and drive growth



This Q&A is part of the Built for Change Perspectives series that is exploring trends in business transformation. To learn more, go to [IBM.com/smarter-business](https://www.ibm.com/smarter-business)

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Q: The term “automation” has carried many meanings through the last few decades. How should business leaders look at automation today?

A: Automation has had a stereotype of taking away jobs. But I feel it's being applied today in quite the contrary way. It's inspiring a growth mindset. Companies are looking at leveraging automation to make their supply chains more efficient, flexible and resilient; make their finance and accounting more intelligent; ease procurement; and bring autonomous processing throughout their enterprises. They want to be more nimble and quick in their operations—and they want their employees to focus on more meaningful, higher-value work.

Q: What are some specific needs for automation common to several industries?

A: A top priority across industries is virtual contactless delivery models. They also need the ability to connect all

areas—finance, customer operations and supply chain—across the enterprise in a single digital environment to bring transparency, governance and a 360-degree view into where they apply automation, and to measure its impact.

And many organizations now realize that they need to actually automate the adoption of automation. Meaning, they need to automate the process of mining and discovery to answer the question: “What should we automate?” There are many new solutions to decrease human labor, and companies need to discover and qualify which processes are the best candidates to apply them to.

Q: How does automation fit into intelligent workflows?

A: For all businesses, workflows have become more complicated as time has gone on. Companies have expanded globally and diversified. They're continually adding innovations and new products. So workflows have become highly complex and, frequently, quite manual in nature. They're analog, not digital, and they're not leveraging the organization's data. As a result, companies are drowning in their own processes and operations, and this prevents them from growing.

Extreme automation applies exponential technologies—such as robotic processes, intelligent business process management, deep analytics and

AI technologies like machine learning and natural language processing—to deconstruct and re-architect workflows to optimize ways of doing business in a state-of-the-art, more future-proof manner.

Q: What are the biggest changes the pandemic has caused in terms of companies implementing transformative automation?

A: The pandemic is causing a lightning-quick acceleration in the need for business transformation and leveraging automation. We're seeing an immediate adoption of automation initiatives that, before the pandemic, could have transpired over the next 12 to 36 months. And we're seeing use of automation approaching levels that we thought would gradually occur over the next few years.

I believe the shock of the pandemic will radically and permanently transform the way that we look at automation and a digital workforce. Automation will be infused into every operation, and companies will be forced to adopt it at levels they may not have considered less a year ago.

Q: Can you give an example of how companies have recently implemented automation to deliver value to their customers and employees?

A: Look at the banks that had to issue business loans very quickly during the pandemic. This was, and still is, a highly disruptive and volatile operation for banks to take on so rapidly. Almost overnight, they had to service a huge number of people in a very different way than they did before the Covid-19 crisis.

To handle the demand, several banks implemented automation to move data around and import disparate data into repositories and applications across the enterprise. Employees had traditionally done this work, but the automation freed them from drowning in the mundane, repetitive tasks it requires. It's allowing them to use their human ingenuity and creativity to come up with new solutions for people who really need help. Automating those burdensome workflows made that possible.

Q: A lot can go wrong when a company replaces slow, inefficient processes that are critical to the business with new, automated solutions. What advice do you have to help business leaders avoid the potholes?

A: First, I would tell them that rather than just cutting costs and increasing efficiency, automation can be a competitive asset for growth. Use automation to create new business opportunities.

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Second, you need a collaborative approach to adopting automation across your enterprise. It can't just sit in IT, finance, HR or in the hands of any particular business owner. Automated intelligent workflows will have tentacles into all areas of your operation, including supply chain and procurement, so everybody needs to come together—including upper management across the board.

Third, in choosing a partner to help you drive business transformation with automation, that company's ethics must align closely with yours. You must be in sync about the importance of change management, keeping humans in all the loops and using the technology ethically—applying what IBM calls “good tech.”

You also need to know what not to automate. With autonomous processing, you're entrusting bots, machines and software to act with integrity and make the best decisions that your human employees would make. If that's not yet fully possible in a specific workflow, don't automate it.

Finally, have the right outlook on automation. Steve Jobs said, “Computers are like a bicycle for our mind.” They won't replace people, just help us move from point A to B faster. That's the way I look at automation. For almost any workflow objective, it can get you there quicker—and that makes it a valuable competitive tool and a means to achieve your business goals faster.