

## Applications of Robotic Process Automation Webinar

On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) held a webinar on Applications of Robotic Process Automation, or RPAs, moderated by Kathleen Walch. RPA was described by one of the many illustrious panel members as being the process of training a non-human workforce a defined, structured, digital process. In other words, RPA bots are robots designed to do menial tasks around the office.

The webinar was opened with remarks from Mitch Winans, Senior Advisor of Enterprise Digitalization at the IRS. After this, Walch had all the participants introduce themselves and their history with RPAs. There were eight panelists, including two people from the department of labor and Allan Zimmermann, the founder of OpenRPA. George Duchak, the director of information at the DLA, said that he wanted to be a part of this panel because “We [the panelists] are ahead of others just beginning their bot journey so I thought we had something to share or lessons learned to be repeated.”

The panelists gave a brief introduction to RPA. RPA bots can take on simple, repetitive tasks within a workplace. One example given by Lou Charlier, the Deputy Chief Information Officer for the Department of Labor, was that of the Department of Labor using an RPA bot to select eligible vendors for government contracting. He also said that the Department of Labor had saved over 220,000 hours in labor thanks to RPA bots.

There were other examples given of bots in the workforce already. A bot to execute contract actions in a timely manner, a market research bot to find products and services. The group of panelists touted the benefits to the bots, such as their ability to run faster, to run at any time of day, and the cost saved by having bots rather than people scanning through data quickly. The discussion of bots and their Return of Interest went into cost saving, work saving, and person saving.

The panel then discussed attended versus unattended bots. Attended bots are bots that are observed and worked alongside by human workers, whereas unattended bots work autonomously, either on a schedule or triggered by events. Unattended bots were considered to be favorable by most of the panel due to the cost saved, however all agreed that bots ought to have some supervision, even if only being vetted by a cybersecurity team at the location to which the bot is being deployed. Still, unattended bots have their own credentials and in Duchak’s own words “can perform their functions without the attention of a human – 24x7x365 if necessary.”

Towards the end of the panel, they discussed the risks inherent in RPA bots. One of the biggest risks cited is that as companies’ needs change over time, the unattended bot will not change. The process will continue to plug away in the way it has been trained before, which can be a problem as the needs of the company employing the robot move on. They warned also that a bad process cannot be improved by a bot, it can just make a bad process faster. The process that the bot is trained to do must already work before the bot is implemented. Finally, they warned that bots ought to be treated like self-driving cars – helpful, but not something that should run on autopilot. The bots still need to be overseen and cared for by people with critical thinking skills, for now.

Duchak said in a follow up to the webinar that the most important takeaway from the webinar was as follows – “You first need to make sure that the business process that you want to automate is good/solid. Automation does not improve a bad process.”