Empathy-Led Hyper-Automation

On October 28th, RPA companies Automation Anywhere and Spectar brought together a panel to discuss automation in local governments in Australia. The panel brought together Greg Hill, an industry advisor for Spectar, Hardeep Randhava, the director of sales for Automation Anywhere, Dinesh Rajendran, the business improvement lead for Brimbank city council, and Pamela Warwick, the business transformation lead from Melton city council. With panelists representing both the technological side and the business side of RPA work, they were able to walk attendees of the webinar through the whole process, front to back, of installing an RPA to do work in a local government. During this illuminating discussion, the panelists walked us through current events to how RPA can help businesses increase their resilience during these difficult times.

Greg Hill opened the webinar with a "scene setting" of sorts, describing the disruption and chaos in the world as a result of COVID-19. Specifically, he zeroed in on the workforce and how much jobs had been forced to change over the past few months since coronavirus became a problem. Hill said that "We're seeing a holistic move from the way we've worked in the past to… how we have to work now." Hill focused in on the way that COVID revealed inefficient processes in work environments, and emphasized that business must be resilient and change to fit the times, stating that "Change needs to happen not just for the sake of change, but for the betterment of the systems that we rely on."

This focus on resilience, changing to fit the times, and agility in businesses led him to his discussion of the Spectar group. Spectar produces RPA, or Robotic Process Automation, bots. These bots are designed to assist with work, specifically the rote or menial tasks that can easily be automated rather than have humans working on them. Some of the examples Hill gave of what bots could do included data collection, taxation reporting, data analytics, and animal registration (more on this last later). He cited automation as a way to step forward as a business in a "new age of transformation."

In his presentation, Hardeep Randhava also emphasized the impact of COVID-19 on people everywhere and went into how he believed automation could help. Randhava focused on how automation could "bridge the gap" between front end and back end employees, and on how digital work ought to *compliment* a human work force. He spoke on how humans can empathize, and problem solve, whereas digital workers do rote tasks without tire and without error. Again referencing the current state of the world in the midst of a pandemic, Randhava said that "Anytime spent by a doctor or a nurse filling out paperwork is a tragedy." He believes that the way around this is automation, filling in the gaps, shortening the steps of lengthy processes, and bringing stability to the workforce.

Dinesh Rajendran spoke next on his area of expertise – Brimbank city council's journey to RPA. He found that many people in local government were very passionate about their jobs. They were passionate, but they were also frustrated by having to complete the same mundane tasks day after day. For one notable example, the people had to fill out a long-winded animal registration progress, the vast majority of which was simply copying the animal's name and pasting it on a new page. This left a great deal of room for human error, and it was not a value adding experience.

Naturally, Rajendran went about contacting companies to automate this process. It was apparently a deeply easy process to automate, the duplicating of information, and this freed up the workers' time to do the things they were passionate about in the first place.

Pamela Warwick had a similar experience to Rajendran in Melton city council. Melton is one of the fastest growing cities in Australia, and as it needed help dealing with the current health crisis, Warwick turned to automation to refine the processes that the city had to deal with. She specifically emphasized the importance of determining what did and did not need to be automated. She isolated over one hundred tasks that workers were frustrated with or found to be rote but did not end up automating all of them. Certain tasks she said may be automated in the future, but certain tasks just required human workers. Warwick wanted to affirm that not all tasks could be done by machines, and humans were necessary to make some decisions, but that automation helped to "free up human resources to do more important tasks."

Greg Hill then asked the other panelists some questions about RPA after their individual presentations. He first asked how each of the respondents would go about selling their automation to shareholders. Rajendran responded that "that was the easy bit," and Randhava concurred that hardly any executive would say no to automating a task and, by extension, saving money. Warwick's advice for the situation was to have an executive sponsor in your corner, to refine the pitch, and to talk not about automation itself, but the business opportunity.

The next question the panelists were asked was what to do with people who were nervous about bots taking over or taking their jobs. To this, Warwick said that they ought to acknowledge the fear of replacement but reassure the workers that this automation of work is because they and their time are valued, that they are needed for higher level work. Rajendran joked that robots were not taking over the world, but added that people ought to communicate with workers from the start so that they better understood the tasks taken over by the bots and the tasks that would be delegated to them.

When asked what the big RPA takeaways were for the day, Rajendran said his top was engagement at every level. Warwick said they out to be clear, be imperfect, and manage change effectively. Hill resonated with engagement and said that *people* should be included from day one.