Do robots dream of perfect processes?

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Embracing our new colleagues

There is real excitement about technology's role in business right now, especially in the fields of robotics and artificial intelligence. Some people are describing this as the beginning of a period of profound change, even revolution. This excitement is understandable. In areas like BPO, where many tasks carried out by people are already being automated, the potential impact is clearly massive, as well as emotive.

However, revolutions are not known for being a time when cool, clear thinking holds sway. Amid all this enthusiasm, it is more important than ever to think carefully about what we want to get out of this technology. This may sound like a note of caution, but if anything, we are in danger of not being ambitious enough as we charge into this new era.

The introduction of Robotic Process Automation (RPA –the use of software robots to automate manual steps in typically repetitive and rules-based processes) should have a significant impact in the coming years. Many of the tasks delivered by BPO service providers involve people keying, checking, validating, aggregating and rekeying data. A new, virtual workforce will cut the number of manual tasks and bring improvements in terms of costs, accuracy, consistency, and compliance – all the things typically associated with automation. This is welcome news in a world of ever growing data volumes and increasing process complexity.

Nevertheless, technology like RPA also poses a potential danger for business processes. It could be easy to slip into the habit of prioritizing automation to cut people costs at the expense of everything else. This would be a drift back to the simple cost reduction equations of the old days of outsourcing, effectively persisting with the same bad processes but doing them more cheaply (now with robots, instead of workers in low cost locations). We could go back in time to the old 'your mess for less' approach to BPO – hardly a revolutionary change for the better.

While it sounds counter-intuitive, this technology also has the potential to delay business transformation more broadly. The temptation would be to use it as a sticking plaster to patch up the more fundamental problems that will still need to be addressed at some point– things like poor process design, legacy organizational structures or badly integrated software systems. Despite superficial appearances to the contrary, Bill Gates' old adage probably still holds in the end – 'automation applied to an efficient process will magnify the efficiency, but automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency'.

On a more positive note, the potential to do good is fantastic when we use technologies like RPA wisely. Today, people rightly expect much more from BPO and we now have a chance to free up time and resources to apply our expertise better, identifying patterns and opportunities for improvement in the processes themselves and in the business outcomes beyond them. With improved access to more accurate and timely information, we can also make the human interactions that remain much higher quality and more satisfying for customers and employees alike.

Across business, we also have an unprecedented opportunity to innovate. It's never been easy to follow the 'fail often and fail fast' innovation mantra in business processes, for some obvious reasons. Perhaps now we can be more ambitious. This is where things really could get revolutionary.

As software robots become more advanced, and Artificial Intelligence is more practically applicable, we can build sophisticated virtual environments where it is possible to simulate new processes and new ventures and see how they play out, before committing more time and resources. We can still fail often and fail fast, but where possible, we can make sure we fail safely and virtually. This would be a big improvement on existing modelling tools and predictive analytics, allowing more organizations to experiment their way to a competitive advantage. Whether it's a case of fine tuning existing processes or testing radical new directions, human ingenuity and creative thinking will still play a key role here – it just means that people can take a gamble on a left-field idea and let the machines take the rap.

This is where the robots can really power a great leap forward, to use some suitably revolutionary language.