

## Are Robots Helping or Hurting the Future Workforce?

By Vasu Yedavalli

**I**n a time when houses can turn on their own lights and cars can almost drive themselves, it is no wonder that new technologies are transforming the workplace. Robotic process automation, commonly known as RPA, is the newest line of technology shaking up the way people think about work. Not only is RPA building stronger, more efficient companies, it is empowering employees to utilize their true talents by taking routine activities off of their daily responsibilities, freeing them to tackle more creative challenges. But is RPA competing with the human workforce, and could it ultimately lead to a leaner headcount?

In order to answer that question, it is important to first look more closely at what RPA is and to truly understand its capa-

bilities. Also known as software robotics, RPA is the use of a new class of software to automate business processes at a fraction of the cost of traditional solutions, without the need to change current IT systems. RPA is able to perform many of the functions currently undertaken by employees, such as using existing core systems and legacy applications; accessing websites; and manipulating spreadsheets, documents, and email. Using RPA software involves mapping out current or new processes, linking those to existing applications, and scheduling them to run on one or more robots whenever required.

### Benefits of RPA

Automation software by itself is not all that new; RPA is the early incarnation of the automation paradigm that ultimately leads to machine learning and artificial intelligence. What sets RPA technology apart, however, is its ability to work with existing systems, rather than requiring the purchase of custom platforms.

For example, without RPA, a company has two options when trying to integrate multiple systems. The first is to use



an extract/transform/load process to build an application program interface, a platform that allows communication among systems. This typically involves the purchase of new integration tools and is often labor-intensive and expensive, potentially costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The second option is having employees connect to each custom system and manually download and format data before uploading it into the new common system or database. Companies often go this route when the first option is too costly or impractical. RPA allows companies to automate the human activity without the need to acquire new and expensive integration tools.

The use of RPA versus human power, in this scenario, not only increases the speed of the activity but also eliminates human errors. It can reduce manual operations costs by 25% to 40% or more, all while improving service and compliance and typically providing a return on investment in less than a year (*Get Ready for Robots*, EGYM Limited, 2016, <https://go.ey.com/2BGHh7f>).

Another way in which companies can benefit from robotic automation software is through reporting and analysis. Most companies today use their human workforce to crunch data, which can consume a large portion of an individual's day, leaving precious little time for actual analysis. By leveraging RPA, companies can greatly reduce, if not eliminate, the time spent data crunching, leaving employees to use their analytical capabilities to support management in decision making. These activities not only enhance feelings of pride and job fulfillment; with proper training and restructuring, they can produce even better business partners within organizations.

For CPAs specifically, RPA can address various tasks that are typically performed by the human workforce, such as bank and account reconciliations, journal entries, financial close and

consolidation processes, intercompany processes, financial reporting, and internal audits. RPA can also lead to reduced costs and a more effective audit (internal and external), as well as reduced risk and improved compliance for controls testing. RPA can be especially useful when companies do not have integrated systems and tools, providing better and improved financial reporting, quicker close through automating manual general ledger journal entries and intercompany reconciliations, and enhanced regulatory and tax reporting.

With that said, automation benefits are

importance. With a company's basic functions on autopilot, employees can devote their time and attention to bringing value to the workplace. The result is a happier, more fulfilled workforce that works harder and is retained longer.

As companies increasingly begin to adopt RPA technology, it is important to think about the right way to divert personnel resources in order to maximize efficiency and employee satisfaction. No technology is perfect, and errors will occasionally occur. By combining RPA technology with human judgement and analytical interpretation, companies can

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only as good as the process being automated. A redesigned and better-streamlined process will drive stronger automation benefits as opposed to an inefficient process, which will result in suboptimal automation benefits.

### The Human Cost?

With all of RPA's unique capabilities, it is no wonder that many people see the technology as a threat to their jobs. After all, one robot can work as fast as three employees and can operate 24 hours a day with 100% accuracy (*Robotic Process Automation*, EGYM Limited, Dec. 3, 2015, <https://go.ey.com/2F188W0>). The reality, however, is that RPA—when used to its full advantage—can be a complementary rather than a competitive force.

By taking on the more mundane tasks that consume a person's day, RPA allows employees to focus on stimulating projects and challenges of greater strategic

benefit from an amplified workforce that includes both human and robotic employees. Human employees are also better equipped to focus on the activities that machines cannot perform. RPA enables preservation of the human element in workplaces, allowing us to engage in relationships, activities and projects that are more inspiring and better aligned with an organization's purpose.

While RPA is revolutionizing the way people think about work, it will never be able to truly replace a person's intellectual and emotional value. It is important to look at this burgeoning technology as a helping rather than a hindering force. By utilizing software robotics and deriving value from its automation capabilities, employees are better empowered to apply their true talents at work. □

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