Predictions 2021: Automation

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At A Glance

- Business and technology leaders interested in the impact of the pandemic on automation should read our predictions for 2021.

- The "great lockdown" of 2020 will make the drive for automation in 2021 both inevitable and irreversible.

- Remote work, new digital muscles, and pandemic constraints will create millions of pragmatic automations in 2021; document extraction, RPA from anywhere, drones, and various employee robots will proliferate; and, as expected, the mad dash to automate will bring trouble.

- For further information and guidance, schedule an inquiry.

The Pandemic Aims Automation At The Employee Experience

Automation has developed gradually over many decades and is now a top priority. In 2021, digital transformation at more than three-quarters of enterprises will focus on automation, whether that's for core records, customer operations, or engagement. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), changes to work patterns as a result of the pandemic, and a fierce global recession have made this drive for automation inevitable — and irreversible.

- **A fifth of enterprises will expand investment in intelligent document extraction.** Intelligent document extraction platform (IDEP) opportunities are heating up. Cubicle workers, coordinators, and lower-level knowledge workers can no longer push papers around the office, as they're working from home. Even before the pandemic, IDEP saw strong investment as firms wanted to use it to classify documents by customer, topic, or security and compliance risk as well as for eDiscovery, contract analytics, email, and forms use cases. Combining computer vision with advances in machine learning has made solutions more valuable and easier to build and maintain. Enterprises can compare intelligent automation, public cloud, and text analytics platform options from independent software vendors.

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- **A notable failure will occur as a result of the rush to automation.** The pandemic accelerated investment in various forms of business process and IT automation. Two-thirds of enterprise organizations that encountered broken processes during the pandemic were pressured to patch in automation solutions.(1) But rushed and haphazard automation exposes systems and the business to serious risk, so the lack of focus on automation quality is alarming. It can lead to monumental failures that not only damage a company's reputation and customer trust but also limit broader public trust in automation (specifically AI) as a result of media scrutiny. In 2021, up to 30% of organizations will ramp up their focus on quality by better planning and testing automation before deploying it to production or exposing it to employees.

- **Intelligent automation suites will provide a quarter of all RPA solutions.** Commoditization, major enterprise software acquisitions, new entrants, specialization, and public market ambitions are resulting in a diverse robotic process automation (RPA) market. Like machine learning, RPA will become an embedded feature of many platforms by the end of 2021. While significant market share will accrue to three alpha pure-play and 15 tier two providers, RPA will be available from almost 200 software workflow transformation solution vendors. Enterprises should look at their overall strategic and tactical automation ambitions, organizational structure, existing investments, business process maturity, and central automation teams before considering further RPA investments.

- **A fifth of enterprises will use commercial drones to automate business operations.** Recent rapid growth in the consumer drones industry has sparked momentum in the commercial drone market. In 2019, 12% of global infrastructure decision-makers said that their firm owns or leases drones.(2) Commercial drone registration took off in the US and in China, as over 1,300 drone manufacturers produced and registered more than 330,000 drones. While social distancing is a factor in drone usage, two forces will accelerate adoption in 2021. First, governments are crafting better regulations to facilitate drone adoption and commercialization, with Amazon Prime Air gaining FAA approval for drone deliveries and India driving drone pilot training with new policies. Second, the rapid evolution of computer vision and 5G will enable real-time drone intelligence over ultrareliable, low-latency communications.

- **Intelligent automation will advance to support one in four home workers.**(3) Work has changed forever. Three times as many information workers will work from home all or most of the time, while many companies will institute hybrid models in which workers come to the office less often. Walking over to the IT department for troubleshooting help, to the HR department for assistance with benefits, or to junior staff for administrative support will be harder. As a result of the pandemic, new forms of automation will support one in four remote workers either directly or indirectly by 2022. Direct support in the form of giving a bot to individual workers to support their daily journey will be rare. But indirect support will blossom, as intelligent automation handles employee benefits questions and supports document, customer service, and line-of-business tasks that are often invisible to the home worker.

Sources:

(1) Forrester's Q1 2020 Global Digital Process Automation Survey.

(2) Forrester Analytics Global Business Technographics® Infrastructure Survey, 2019.

(3) We predict that 21% of global information workers will work from home most or all of the time by the end of 2021.

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