

Cutting through the Fog

RPA is very simply defined as software that mimics human actions. It is typically used to automate repetitive tasks to increase productivity at large organizations.

In our experience, customers have seen huge efficiency gains by automating core processes like Order-to-Cash and Procure-to-Pay, with 10X - 20X increases in employee productivity.

But the RPA picture isn't completely rosy. RPA implementations have [very high failure rates](#), and even higher post-implementation failure rates.

We'll explore 3 points of failure:



Organizations do not have a clear understanding of RPA



Organizations have poorly defined business processes



Organizations choose the wrong RPA platforms



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Understanding Robotic Process Automation

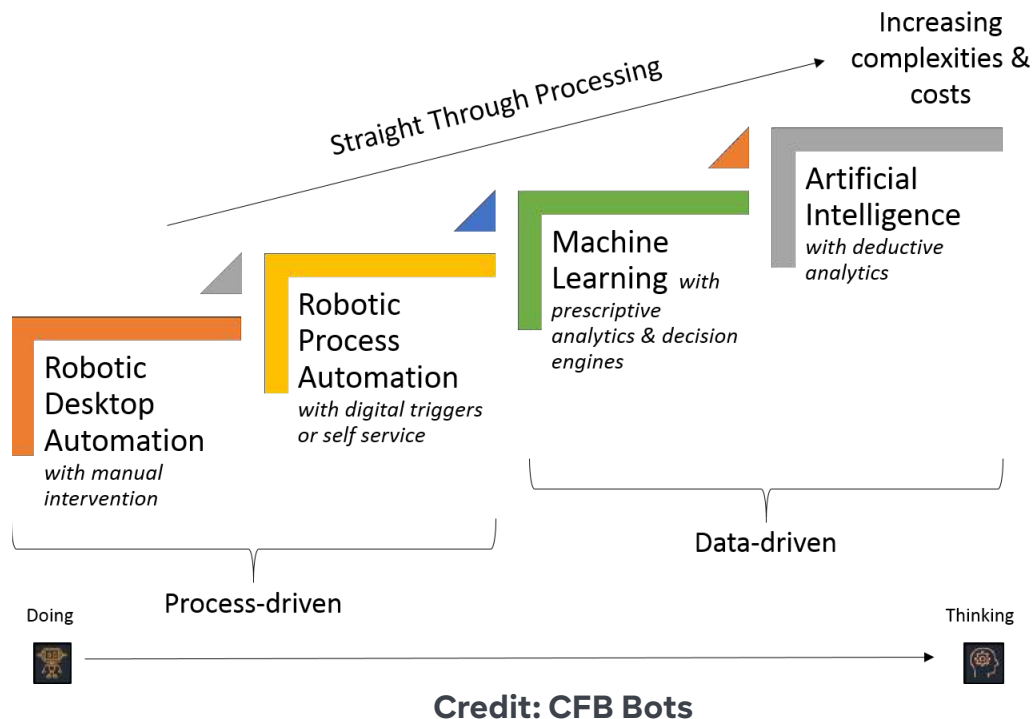
To bluntly address the first point of failure - most organizations do not have a clear understanding of RPA and its capabilities. At Forrester's New Tech & Innovation 2018 Forum, I had a CIO of a Fortune 100 company tell me:



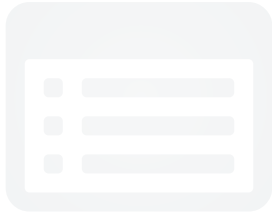
"We're going to use RPA to apply AI to our Procure-to-Pay process."

Huh? That was a shocking moment for me - some key decision makers had a fundamental misunderstanding of different technologies. RPA is not Artificial Intelligence (AI), it is not Machine Learning, and it is not Intelligent Automation (IA).

Rather, robotic process automation is a single method on a processing spectrum called Intelligent Automation. CFB Bots have a [great article](#) that illustrates IA:



RPA is about automating the "doing," but not the "thinking." You first need to define your process, automate the tedious tasks with RPA, and gather data over time. This data can then be fed into Machine Learning software and eventually Artificial Intelligence software, but the idea that RPA will give you AI overnight for all of your business processes is just simply false. It is a LONG, expensive journey.



Poorly-Defined Business Processes

In 100% of our RPA implementations, we first had to fix the business process before it could be automated. I have no reason to believe that this will ever change. Organizations have business processes that are clunky and require classic, old-fashioned business process re-engineering. As Sanjay Srivastava from Genpact notes in [this article](#), one of the major reasons RPA projects fail is that automation software is used without business process redesign.

If your RPA vendor does not have the capacity or skills for business process re-engineering, then you need to turn to your trusted consulting provider. If your consulting provider does not have the capacity or skills, then you're in big trouble and will most certainly fail.

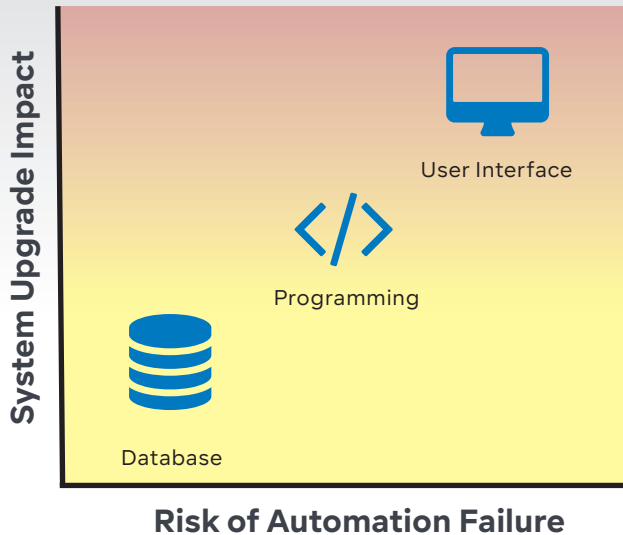
The business process needs to be sound before you automate it, otherwise you will automate the production of exceptions and introduce a nightmare of manual intervention.



Picking the Right Platform

Of the 3 points of failure, RPA platform selection might be the most important. There are 2 basic methods of applying RPA to your software systems: screen-scraping and API integration. A majority of the RPA platforms on the market are screen-scraping solutions, including the Big 3. However, as Jason Bloomberg of Intellyx notes in his [Forbes article](#), there are huge dangers with screen-scraping that lead to maintenance nightmares and a massive total cost of ownership.

Any time a software system releases a new version, database models change least frequently, followed by moderate changes at the programming layer, followed by heavy changes in the user interface. That means if your RPA bots depend upon the user interface, a large percentage of them will break when you upgrade that system (see diagram on next page).



However, screen-scraping might not be a big deal depending upon the category of the system where you want to implement RPA. We have the 3 general categories highlighted below. If you have all 3 categories in your organization or even in a single business process, then you absolutely need to consider owning multiple RPA platforms if you want to be successful:

- **Homegrown Custom Applications** - your organization will have complete control over these applications, which means you control how and when software updates are made. On top of that, these applications typically do not have APIs or stored procedures. Homegrown applications are a perfect case for a screen-scraping platform, but a poor case for an API-driven platform.
- **On-Premise COTS Systems** - your organization has some control over these applications. As ERP and CRM vendors release new updates, your IT department can generally decide when the application is updated. Screen-scraping platforms will automate processes on a specific version of these applications, but once you upgrade, many of these bots will break. API-driven platforms are more stable for the applications since these vendors are on the hook to keep APIs working between versions. However, smaller, less-mature COTS platforms may not have APIs either, so screen-scraping may be your only choice.
- **Cloud Software** - for the most part, your organization has no control over these applications. This means changes to the user interface are out of your control, and thus you should NEVER use a screen-scraping platform. API integration is the only stable option.

Another factor to consider in the screen-scraping vs. API integration argument is re-usability. Once an RPA vendor has automated a process using an API from a platform like SAP or Salesforce, that bot can be reused by any organization running SAP or Salesforce. What that means is that API-driven RPA vendors typically have a treasure trove of thousands of pre-delivered bots that will work against your COTS systems from Day 1, which rapidly accelerates your ROI. Reusability of screen-scraping bots is murky at best, since it depends upon your user interface being exactly the same as another organization running that same software.

Conclusion

Robotic process automation is a powerful concept that can have a huge impact on your business, but nearly half of all RPA projects fail due to misunderstanding RPA capabilities, poorly defined business processes, and simply selecting the wrong RPA vendor.



About the Author

Jon Gilman is the founder of Clear Software, an Attended RPA platform that fixes broken business processes to protect and extend your technology investments, actualize business potential, and rapidly achieve time to value. Clear is trusted by some of the largest organizations in the world to automate processes across systems like SAP, Salesforce, and Oracle EBS.



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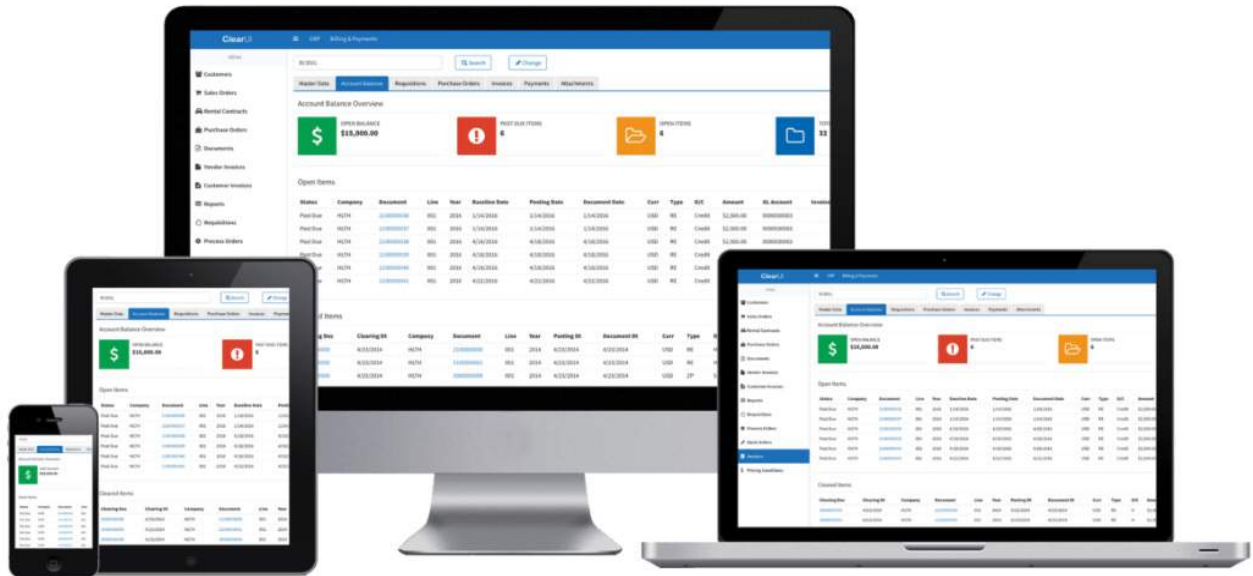
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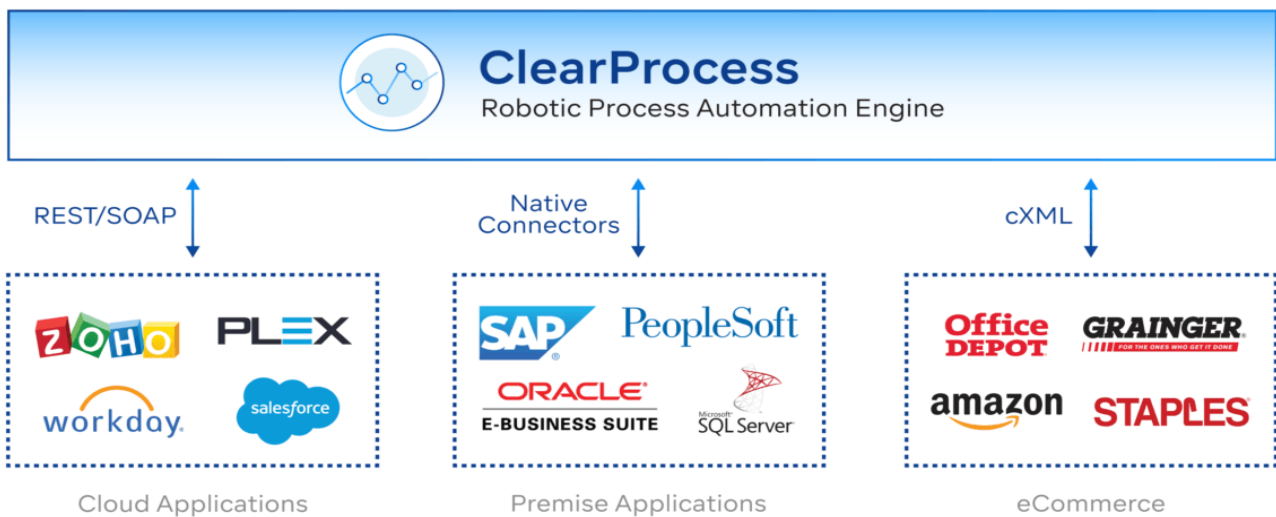
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