The smart approach to intelligent automation

Achieve successful automation with a controlled approach
As organizations streamline and adapt, the once-distant promise of business automation is delivering real results and defining tomorrow’s top competitors.

“I think the questions of ‘if’ and ‘when’ have been exhausted. I think they’ve been answered,” said Grant Thornton Digital Transformation and Management Principal and Leader Roy Nicholson. Forbes recently stated that “Intelligent automation can enhance the bottom line of almost any business.”

That’s because automation solves problems that are common to companies around the world. “Organizations are looking to embrace new technologies, to operate more efficiently, engage with their customers and employees or to offer new products or services,” Nicholson said. “Every single industry is impacted by the external forces driving the need for automation, and now it’s a matter of ‘How quickly can an organization get a transformation initiative started?’”

To build a business case for intelligent automation, achieve the right benefits and skip the standard mistakes, you need to start with an understanding of the benefits.

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Roy Nicholson, Grant Thornton Digital Transformation and Management Principal and Leader
Understand the benefits

Intelligent automation can provide three types of hard benefits and soft benefits.

When companies consider intelligent automation, “a lot of folks ask about ROI and hard benefits,” said Grant Thornton Digital Transformation and Management Partner Tony Dinola. He said that he has seen hard benefits break down into three areas, along with three types of soft benefits.

By understanding the potential benefits, a company can form a lens through which it can spot ineffective processes and systems. But the biggest possible benefits for your organization will depend on the unique nature of your processes and pain points, including the requirements and dependencies that surround them.

To consider where automation can provide the biggest benefits for you, conduct a clear self-assessment.

### Intelligent automation proven benefits

#### Hard benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time savings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Processes that require several days of manual labor can be completed in minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost savings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce the cost of manual labor, human error, and slow processing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher accuracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tasks completed using pre-defined rules and artificial intelligence eliminate manual error</td>
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#### Soft benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superior customer service</td>
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<tr>
<td>With robotics handling the volume of basic queries, staff can focus on resolving complex issues quickly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved employee satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employees welcome new technologies that lighten their workload and allow them to perform more valuable work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased strategic activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free your resources up to do more strategic value-add activities that have real impact on your organization</td>
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</table>
Conduct a self-assessment

“One of the common questions we get is ‘What are the best candidates for automation?’”

Vivek Rodrigues, Grant Thornton Digital Transformation and Management Senior Manager

To find the answer, you need to understand the unique characteristics of your processes. Use an assessment tool to evaluate each process, so that you can identify and rank which processes are likely to yield the best and fastest return on automation.

Intelligent automation assessment tool

This sample assessment targets processes that could benefit from intelligent automation technologies like robotic process automation (RPA) or intelligent character recognition (ICR). These questions can be revised to address unique situations or to include other technologies in the automation spectrum.

Data

1. What is your best estimate of the daily and monthly volume of data to be processed?
2. What is the type of data that the process uses, where does the data reside and is it digital or paper (e.g., a Word file, comma-separated values, or printed paper)?
3. If the process must produce documents, how many different templates are required, and about how many templates meet 80% of the needs?
4. Does the process use handwritten input or generate handwritten output, and about what percentage of the data is handwritten?
5. About what percentage of the total data cannot be handled by the standard process?

People

6. About how many manual hours are spent per week and per month on the process, and how much time is spent on transaction processing versus error handling?
7. Is the process prone to manual error, and about what percentage of time is spent on rework to complete the process?
8. Is the process consistently performed by all who manually complete the tasks and, if not, about how often and why does it vary?
9. How many different teams, departments or groups are stakeholders in this process, and where are they physically located?
**Process**

10. What is the frequency and timing for completing the process today and would it be better to complete the process more frequently or quickly with an automated solution?

11. Is the process standardized with a known set of definitive business rules?

12. Is the process relatively stable, does it change often and are there currently plans for an update?

13. Does the process require human judgement based on the experience of the person completing the process?

14. About how many decision points are performed to complete the process?

15. Does the process involve a person manually re-entering data from a paper source or electronic image, and what is the nature of that source material?

16. Does the process have cycle time or service level requirements for speed of completion?

**Technology**

17. What applications and technologies are required to complete the manual process tasks today?

18. Is optical character recognition (OCR) or intelligent character recognition (ICR) currently used and, if so, what is the vendor and accuracy rate?

Once you understand the inputs and tasks within a process, you can evaluate which technologies would be required to automate it.
Map tasks to the automation spectrum

Intelligent automation can be broken out to a spectrum of technologies that apply to different types of tasks.

“If you want to replicate manual work, RPA is a good solution – but, as you get into machine learning technologies, you can ask ‘What can this technology do, and what are some of the questions I’m looking to answer?’” Dinola said.

Data is the fuel for these technologies, and you will need to be realistic about whether you have the data to drive the solution you choose. “When you get into machine-learning-enabled technologies, the questions become ‘Do you have access to the data? Is the data of good enough quality? And do you have enough of it, so that you can back test it?’” Dinola said.

To accelerate the process of finding and implementing successful automation, you need a controlled approach that spans the stakeholders within your organization.

The intelligent automation spectrum

1. Intelligent character recognition*
   Machine learning enhanced character recognition

2. Artificial intelligence and machine learning*
   System-driven learning, prediction, and pattern identification

3. Natural language processing*
   Ability to understand, interpret human language

4. Data analytics and visualization
   Patterns and visual representation from complex data sets

5. Low code application platforms
   Solutions created through graphical user interfaces and configuration instead of programming

6. Robotic process automation
   Process automation through the user interface

*machine learning enabled technologies
Conquer complexity with a controlled approach

Companies can accelerate their business automation initiative—and help ensure control—by feeding their self-assessment into a structured methodology. “With the great opportunity that some of these technologies provide, you also need to be conscious of the potential risk if those technologies aren’t deployed in a well-governed manner,” Nicholson said.

A structured methodology for intelligent automation initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process assessment and discovery</th>
<th>Business case development</th>
<th>Automate, improve and learn</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Assess the process to understand current state, process, systems, performance indicators, FTE, etc.</td>
<td>• Develop a business case to identify opportunities for cost savings</td>
<td>• Define business and solution requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Refine the process to develop potential solutions</td>
<td>• Agree on use cases portfolio balancing between ‘points on the board’/component solutions and complex implementations</td>
<td>• Code and support code migration</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Determine automation feasibility</td>
<td>• Assess process complexity</td>
<td>• Test user acceptance and manage defects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assess process complexity</td>
<td>• Define the business and solution requirements</td>
<td>• Migrate code to production</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Stabilize and gradually ramp up</td>
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Operating model

• Identify and engage stakeholders
• Develop operating model and supporting processes
• Define intelligent automation delivery methodology, roles and responsibilities (COE) including Day 2 support
• Share knowledge to build skillset
• Implement operating model

Infrastructure and application readiness

• Provide initial view of technology architecture and capability recommendations
• Determine readiness of existing applications with respect to target platforms for target environment up

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“Intelligent automation is very much a business-led activity. Certainly, there are technology-related components – but your technology organization alone will not be able to surface and execute value without the input from the business.”

Tony Dinola, Grant Thornton Digital Transformation and Management Partner

Lessons learned from intelligent automation

Align stakeholders up front
Every process has stakeholders, with disparate requirements and opinions about how the process needs to happen. If these stakeholders express differing viewpoints or conflicting requirements while you are automating a process, it can quickly take your effort off the rails.

So, you need to establish strong and appropriate stakeholder alignments up front. “Some organizations take an enterprise-down approach,” said Nicholson. “They start the intelligent automation journey at the highest level of the organization, and bring in all stakeholders from all functions. Others take more of a bottom-up approach – they pilot the automation first, within a single department or functional area, and then look to expand. Defining that approach up front, and having an appropriate stakeholder either at the enterprise level or the departmental level, is important.”

Plan your change management communications
Communication is an important part of change management for any software initiative, and it’s especially important for intelligent automation. “There’s a lot of press out there about how technologies like RPA and artificial intelligence are going to replace the current human workforce,” Nicholson said.

Nicholson advised “Be clear up front on the goal of this program. We have seen that to be very important – if it’s going to be about cost reduction, then define and share that message accordingly. If it’s going to be about optimization for future business growth, then you have a different message. We have seen that it’s extremely important to the success of these initiatives to define that communication ahead of time.”

Select the best process
Process selection is the launch pad for your intelligent automation effort, setting the trajectory that will ultimately determine your level of success. If a process has external dependencies (or stakeholders) that are inflexible and complicated, it will only allow limited automation, and only yield limited gains. If you are considering more advanced automation, your selection process becomes even more complex.
“With some of the more fundamental technologies, like RPA that’s applied to very well-defined processes, it’s comparatively simple to define the process, evaluate its suitability for RPA and then prioritize,” Nicholson said. “If you’re looking at more advanced technologies like artificial intelligence, you have to come at it from a different standpoint. You also need to help departments understand how these technologies can be applied. It’s more ‘the art of the possible,’ versus just looking at an existing process.”

Address new business skillsets
If stakeholders and departments do not sufficiently understand intelligent automation, they might limit your success. Even when your organization uses external vendors for solution development, you need to ensure that you have the skills to drive buy-in, coordination and adoption by communicating the capabilities, benefits and limitations of automation with internal and external business partners.

“You need to have a different skillset within your organization, to help your different functions or departments understand how some of these technologies could be applied to their business process,” Nicholson said.

Communicate your cost/benefit analysis
Most organizations understand that it’s important to provide a cost/benefit analysis as part of the business case for intelligent automation. But, they often don’t follow up at the end. Nicholson said it’s important to both “define the business case and then measure and communicate the benefits out to the broader organization.”

“‘We’ve seen organizations actually be very successful in executing some of these intelligent automation projects, but not communicate the benefits of them more broadly across the organization. That results in the organization not being able to identify further opportunities to scale that technology,’” Nicholson said. “‘So, having the business case, measuring the benefits and then communicating out, as part of your change management program, is essential.’

Establish a center of excellence (COE)
Many companies explore intelligent automation with small pilot projects. This can help ensure a quick and agile implementation, but it can also make it hard to communicate and expand the project’s success across the broader organization. Without an enterprise COE that is responsible for intelligent automation, your organization may not effectively capture the lessons learned, motivation and keys to success from successful automation projects. And, you might not acquire the knowledge to expand your automation initiative.

“Establishing a COE for intelligent automation is a key tenant of success,” Nicholson said. While intelligent automation solution providers often claim that anyone in the organization can implement their technologies, “that is not really the case and, even if there are ‘citizen developers’ within your organization that can work with the technology, that’s not going to enable you to deploy it across the business,” Nicholson said.

Drive continuous improvement
Intelligent automation is still emerging as a mindset and a viable option in most organizations. Almost every organization has many opportunities for automation to yield true benefits, but automation initiatives must be communicated and expanded or else that potential will be lost.

Nicholson explained “A COE is important partly to drive continuous improvement. By having centralized capabilities for this journey, you can continuously improve how you execute on an ongoing basis.”
Build on your success

“It starts with identifying how to bring these new capabilities to your entire organization. But then, you need to constantly challenge yourselves to improve and transform.”

Tony Dinola, Grant Thornton Digital Transformation and Management Partner

Intelligent automation has become a new competitive requirement – no longer the realm of forward-thinking early adopters, it is increasingly a proven part of effective operations. It includes a spectrum of capabilities that can help meet pressing business needs and provide real financial returns for almost every business.

The potential for success and returns has been proven, but businesses need to be both controlled and visionary as they approach their intelligent automation journey today. Today’s mounting competitive pressures can quickly push organizations into the pitfalls of the past, so it’s increasingly important to target the potential of automation with an up-to-date understanding, self-assessment and controlled approach that can help ensure and expand upon your unique factors for success.

“It starts with identifying how to bring these new capabilities to your entire organization,” Dinola said. “But then, you need to constantly challenge yourselves to improve and transform. And always solicit feedback from employees – and customers – to make sure you stay relevant to the people that matter,” Dinola said.
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