

The robots coming to our rescue

How work changed
forever in 2020



Foreword

Never before has automation taken centre stage as a transformational technology. This is as true for businesses as it is for individuals.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, automation has allowed businesses to continue responding to the needs of society at a time of huge and global disruption; most importantly, it has helped us to face into and solve new and emerging challenges. It is no mean feat to be able to support a globally dispersed workforce, which remains under pressure to respond to unrelenting and growing demands. The crisis has accelerated digital adoption and shown us just how dependent we are on digital technology to keep business and society functioning.

Even before the current crisis, automation was a platform through which we drove operational efficiency, effectiveness and growth in productivity. But emboldened by the increasing acceptance of technology and the benefits it brings, there are bigger opportunities ahead for businesses everywhere to leverage automation to “build back better,” particularly when combined with other transformative technologies such as AI, machine learning, data analytics and the internet of things.

Getting this right means not just focusing on how businesses can use automation, but what this change means to the way in which we work. And in order to make the best of the man and machine partnership, we are going to see greater demand for soft skills alongside digital skills. Retraining and a commitment to lifelong learning will be crucial to make sure we take every part of the workforce forward with us on this automation journey.

This is an unprecedented opportunity to create a positive future of work that benefits all and builds businesses that innovate quickly and thrive because they put digital transformation at the heart of their agenda.

Jacqueline de Rojas, President, techUK



Executive summary

The COVID-19 crisis has changed the world forever. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way we work. We're all now experts in video conference calls, online collaboration and working remotely.

As our working lives have changed, we've also seen the increased use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) across every sector of the economy. [Put simply, this is the use of software to undertake simple processes on a computer in much the same way a human would](#) – using the screen, keyboard and mouse virtually. It's made the difference between organisations being able to continue operating and falling apart.

This report delves into the way in which RPA – also referred to as software robots – has turned a corner and is now one of the most important technologies available to us as we continue to deal with the crisis. The main findings are outlined below at a glance.

The operational challenges organisations have faced owing to COVID-19 include:

- Demand from customers increasing, yet the capacity for organisations to respond dropped owing to staff working from home.
- Many sudden new demands on organisations, such as the need to cancel subscriptions en masse.
- The need to maintain vital processes that are paper or office-based, such as handling invoices or insurance claims, when people can't get to their places of work or use the postal system.

The solutions that have been found include:

- New software robots to manage en masse requests. If thousands of people are all cancelling the same subscription or making the same request for an insurance policy, let robots undertake the repetitive process, not a human.
- Introducing software robots to assist employees in complex tasks requiring a human intervention, shaving minutes off each transaction. When scaled across an enterprise, this adds up to significant savings.
- Revisiting old software robots and redeploying them to support staff.
- Maintaining business continuity with existing software robots that continued regardless of the lockdown.
- Foreseeing looming challenges and putting software robots in place to tackle them – such as being ready for huge pent-up demand.
- Assuring the safety of staff and customers by ensuring they don't have to visit offices.
- Using software robots to keep operations going in the short-term. As they've settled in, staff have been able to turn their attention to higher-value tasks.
- Maintaining business-critical or revenue-generating operations going when entire teams were struggling.

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Staff have been engaged in this process through:

- Encouraging people to experiment and create their own robots rather than having them thrust upon them.
- Telling real-life stories and showing examples of software robots rather than talking in complex abstracts or jargon.
- Encouraging people to strive for a better job that doesn't involve dull, repetitive tasks – then introducing the concept of a software robot that takes away the boring bits.
- Encouraging lifelong learning and training so people get the skills they need to work alongside robots rather than seeing them as a threat.
- Proving the value of automation by offering it to staff when they were struggling most – for example, when juggling home-working and child rearing or home schooling.
- Only automating processes where people were retiring or changing roles.
- Naming robots, celebrating their birthdays and welcoming them into teams as digital buddies.

The future of automation looks bright. Specifically:

- The pandemic has moved the use of the automation forward by five to ten years, and what would have taken months to roll out has taken weeks.
- There has never been a better time to implement automation owing to the need to maintain business continuity.
- It's allowing more people than ever to take on more rewarding work.
- It's offering a solution so that people don't have to carry out tasks like before.
- It's likely to be adopted by SMEs as much as enterprises. People are used to digital assistants at home (Alexa and Siri) and expect them from big organisations. SMEs will be next.
- Possibilities we never thought existed are presenting themselves. Once people have seen automation in action, they begin to think about other uses. But we must bring people on the journey. It can't be imposed on employees.
- It's breaking down barriers between the business and the IT team. Operational staff are the ones building software robots to do jobs for them – not asking a member of the IT team to do it.

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We need to remember:

- Robots are only robots and must be used as such. We will still need humans to serve humans – and to manage the processes.
- Ensuring people have the skills for tomorrow is the biggest challenge we face.
- Lifelong learning is no longer an option. It's vital.
- Governments must choose to invest in education or face higher unemployment payments.

