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POINT OF VIEW | DATA INTELLIGENCE & AUTOMATION

Why Automation First Is a Winning Talent Strategy

A purpose-driven approach to hyperautomation can overcome labor shortages and ignite employee engagement

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Summary

As the Great Resignation continues, organizations struggling to retain employees and fill vacant positions feel the consequences of those challenges in poor service and declining business performance. But the current situation could also accelerate digital transformation through intelligent automation solutions. By adopting an automation-first mindset — a proactive commitment to drive automation throughout the company, wherever it adds value — organizations can leverage technology to overcome worker shortages and create a more satisfying, fulfilling work experience for employees.

If companies think the Great Resignation has run its course, they might want to review the latest research. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) data released in February 2022, 4.3 million Americans voluntarily quit their jobs in December 2021, only a slight decline from the record set the month before.[1] It marked the sixth straight month of more than 4 million resignations, by far the most pronounced trend since the BLS began the survey in 2000.[2] And the problem isn't limited to the United States; one study of 9 million employee records across 4,000 global companies found that resignations rose 20% in 2021.[3] What's more, some studies suggest the mass exodus is likely to continue through 2022. A Joblist survey (released in January 2022) of 20,000 people found that 68% of employed workers said they plan to leave their jobs in the next year.[4]

Explanations for the Great Resignation vary, from workers reevaluating their life choices amid the ongoing pandemic to those simply capitalizing on the job seeker's market to land better pay and benefits. What's clear is that organizations in every industry struggle to maintain performance standards as unfilled positions and high turnover create a dearth of fully trained and experienced employees. For many customers, daily life makes the consequences of the labor shortage readily apparent in longer wait times, unavailable products and subpar service from untrained or burned-out workers, among other problems.

While the past two years have created unprecedented challenges for most organizations, there's a silver lining: an opportunity to accelerate digital transformation initiatives. Specifically, intelligent automation solutions to help companies overcome staffing shortages and not only return their business performance to prepandemic levels but make it better than ever. With every company under pressure to do more with less, automation can potentially handle thousands of repetitive processes with no human intervention, improving the speed and quality of service at lower costs. At the same time, freeing employees from mundane, unenjoyable tasks can improve their work experience, foster greater long-term retention and engagement, and even lead to rewarding new career fields.

Organizations of all kinds are already pivoting to automate IT, customer service, human resources, finance and marketing tasks. The potential use cases are limitless. However, realizing the game-changing benefits of widespread automation may require a mindset change. Companies must begin to think in terms of an automation-first approach, a proactive and holistic commitment to adopting automation wherever it adds value.

Understanding the automation-first approach

Automating basic tasks has slowly been taking hold in the business world for at least 10 years. While many organizations have had some success with basic automation, most are still far from a state of intelligent automation maturity. That could be because they've implemented automation only sporadically, in isolated cases with limited impact, or because the automation they've tried hasn't helped as much as they envisioned. It may also be because they're automating processes that were bad to begin with and that the automation is simply producing bad results more efficiently. Additionally, most companies only automate certain processes after it becomes painfully apparent it needs to be done.

An automaton-first mindset is the antithesis of this piecemeal, misguided, reactive approach. To think automaton first is to wholeheartedly embrace the idea that intelligent automation is the way of the future and promote a company-wide strategy to implement automation in all the right places, as often as possible.

At the heart of the automation-first mindset is the concept of hyperautomation. Simply put, hyperautomation means anything that can be automated should be automated (provided, of course, that automation adds some measurable value to the process). Rather than stopping at the automation of a single task, hyperautomation connects multiple technologies to achieve end-to-end automation of a multi-step function. Imagine baking bread. Automation might take over the simple task of kneading the dough, whereas hyperautomation would measure and mix the ingredients, knead the dough, pop it in a preheated oven, set a timer and later remove a perfectly baked loaf.

Automation first takes the idea of hyperautomation even further, proposing that organizations should not just automate everything they can, but do it proactively and systematically. Rather than wait until employee shortages or poor performance make automation imperative, companies should search for opportunities to get ahead of the curve and automate even the things that don't seem problematic today. In other words, when it comes to optimizing business processes, automation should become the rule, not the exception.

Beyond the basics: Intelligent automation

Intelligent automation is the application of artificial intelligence (AI) and other automation technologies with traditional process or rules-based tools like robotic process automation (RPA) and workflow. The addition of natural language processing (NLP), optical character recognition (OCR) and machine learning (ML) enables organizations to move beyond simple tasked-based automation and into end-to-end automation of complex processes and autonomous decision-making capabilities.

An automation-first approach must be embraced at the leadership level, championed and funded as a core strategy throughout the organization. As the business becomes less dependent on human labor to perform low-skill work, it becomes more resilient against workforce availability issues and can perform more consistently. And as prolific automation takes more mundane chores off employees' to-do lists, what remains is a more engaging and rewarding work experience.

Although automation may remove people from some aspects of the operation, a need will always exist for human oversight to ensure automated tools perform as expected. Automation that takes over jobs in one area may also create new jobs in other areas. For example, companies with more advanced automation capabilities often find opportunities to upskill/reskill workers to train AI programs, develop additional automation bots or serve as managers of the new hybrid workforce. The net result of automation doesn't have to be fewer employees; it can be a higher percentage of high-quality jobs.

Why the time is now

The case for scaling automation across the enterprise has never been stronger, even before taking the Great Resignation into account. Three related trends encapsulate the key drivers for adopting an automation-first approach:

1. Competitors are moving faster.

Digital transformation is no longer an aspirational vision to pursue in the future; it's an absolute necessity for enterprises to compete in the modern world. For years, leading companies in every industry have harnessed technology to streamline business processes and become more agile. Automation is undoubtedly a critical part of the equation.

Younger digital-native companies use speed and efficiency to aggressively capture market share from industry incumbents. Because they've been automating since day one. Companies slow to adapt risk being left behind.

2. Customer expectations are higher.

As businesses leverage technology to work smarter and faster, they can offer customers (whether consumers or business-to-business clients) a heightened level of service. In turn, customers now expect instant access to information and convenient, on-demand digital experiences — much of which automation powers — and they demand it from the businesses they frequent.

3. Employee priorities have changed.

A culture shift has taken hold, especially among the knowledge workforce, as younger generations focus less on compensation and more on the overall quality of life their career provides.[5] Highly qualified employees look for enriching and fulfilling work experiences that tedious, repetitive drudgework can't offer. Automating many of these monotonous tasks makes work more satisfying.

Equally important, today's tech-savvy employees expect tremendous flexibility — the freedom to work from anywhere and still easily access the data and services they need to do their jobs. These capabilities have only become more critical during the pandemic. Automating certain aspects of the employee experience, such as onboarding and IT support, can help prevent common frustrations and boost productivity among a distributed workforce.

These three factors were in play before workers began leaving their jobs in droves. The Great Resignation exacerbated these challenges and created a heightened urgency for companies to automate everything possible.

The broad benefits of automation

In any market condition, an automation-first approach can help organizations achieve both quantitative and qualitative improvements in many areas:

- **Productivity.**
  Automated programs handle repetitive tasks much faster than people can and they work 24x7, freeing employees to tackle higher-level work.
- **Accuracy and quality.**
  Reducing dependence on manual data entry equates to fewer errors, less rework and better business results.
- **Lower costs.**
  Automation may give organizations the option of maintaining a leaner workforce, saving not only wages but benefits, training, real estate, technology support and other related costs of employment.
- **Business resiliency.**
  Automated systems greatly enhance a business' ability to continue operating and serving customers effectively in the face of unexpected circumstances.
- **Enhanced employee experience and retention.**
  By taking over time-consuming and mundane tasks, automation can help employees focus on more cognitive work and achieve a better work-life balance.
- **Customer satisfaction.**
  Automated solutions, such as virtual agents and chatbots, can solve many customer issues immediately. At the same time, a more engaged workforce is empowered to deliver top-notch service when a human touch is needed.

Automation in action: Four common use cases

Opportunities to automate business processes are everywhere. Nearly every sizeable organization needs to compile and decipher data, complete and route documents, resolve routine issues, and answer basic questions from customers and employees. In many cases, one or a combination of automation technologies can perform these tasks. RPA, for example, is a computer program written to complete tasks like fetching information from designated sources and filling out forms. Virtual agents and chatbots can use AI and NLP to answer questions and complete transactions. Self-service tools can enable customers and employees to handle tasks themselves (supported by automation in the background) that used to require support staff.

Traditionally paperwork-laden industries, such as insurance, healthcare, banking and finance, are rife with tasks that beg to be automated, but the benefits can extend to almost any type of business. The following are a few common applications:

- **Document processing:** Insurance claims processes, whether in property insurance or healthcare, are notoriously tedious for agents who must gather the data, complete forms and route information to designated parties. Many of these tasks can be assigned to RPA bots. For example, NTT DATA helps clients implement intelligent document processing solutions that use AI and NLP to extract data (both structured and unstructured) from various forms and contract documents, and then route the data to RPA bots working on upstream or downstream tasks. A small number of agents can monitor the process and handle any special exceptions where human intervention may be necessary.
- **Customer service:** Inbound call centers and other service-oriented jobs are areas where the pandemic and Great Resignation have had a severe negative impact on job satisfaction and service metrics. Connecting overworked, under-trained, ill-equipped agents with frustrated customers is a recipe for disaster. But virtual agents and chatbots can help reduce the burden by solving many customer issues with no human intervention or wait time. Automation also helps human agents work more efficiently.

A recent report from research firm Everest Group sums up the need for customer service automation perfectly: "To improve the agent experience, companies need to invest in the right digital solutions to ensure that their workforces are capable of delivering next-generation customer experience. Tools and technologies that help eliminate transactional or manually intensive activities are a crucial part of overall agent experience as they improve productivity and allow agents to focus on more judgement-intensive and complex activities."[6]

- **IT support:** Workplace technology professionals at the typical company are often inundated with low-level support tasks that divert their attention from larger issues. Onboarding a new employee, for example, might entail setting up the employee's profile, assigning a device and granting system access privileges — all excellent candidates for automation. The same goes for routine support matters throughout the employee lifecycle, such as renewing credentials, provisioning new software and issuing security patches. All can be automated, saving IT staff valuable time better spent on more strategic activities.

- **Software development:** In the past, certain developers might have been charged with the lone task of manually testing new software. Today, thanks to automated tools that help build and test software, integrated with progressive ways of working like DevOps, a single developer might oversee an entire pipeline of software engineering. The organization gains the coveted agility to launch new products and upgrades faster, staying a step ahead of the competition.

These are only a few ways organizations can put automation to good use. And while most modern organizations already employ automation in some of these areas, few have mastered the ability to do all of them well. Bringing the benefits of automation to every corner of the company — driven by a central commitment to maximize efficiency through technology — is what the automaton-first mindset is all about.

At NTT DATA, automation hits close to home

Today, NTT DATA advocates for hyperautomation to our clients, but the automation-first approach originated as an internal initiative. More than a decade ago, our business process outsourcing team challenged members to use automation wherever possible to deliver faster, higher quality service to clients. Since then, automation first has become a company-wide mantra to drive efficiency through everything we do. The automation solutions and expertise we've developed in-house, we now put to work to benefit our clients. Here are several examples:

- Our AVATAR solution uses automation to create new RPA bots. The program captures video of a person performing a certain task on a desktop, uses that video to learn the steps in the process, and then generates a bot script to perform the task automatically.

- Cognitive AI Trainer automates the process of training AI for use in virtual agents or chatbots. Instead of human data scientists and linguists manually entering thousands of phrases for the virtual agent to learn, Cognitive AI Trainer does the job automatically.

- Our Bot Converter technology enables companies to easily switch from one RPA platform to another without scrapping and rebuilding existing bots. Automating the conversion process saves untold hours of expensive software development time.

- Emotion-Centric Observations (ECO) enables users to provide real-time feedback about their experience with an application as they use it. ECO helps development teams forgo time-consuming and expensive focus groups, and the timely and specific input it gathers is far more valuable than users trying to recall their experience after it happens.

Bringing automation first to life

As experienced business leaders know, it's all too easy to make grand pronouncements about the company's technology vision, only to watch good ideas dry up as indecision and bureaucracy prevent any meaningful progress. So, how can companies truly achieve an automation-first mentality and execute real-world projects that move the organization toward widespread automation maturity? NTT DATA recommends starting with the following four considerations:

1. Establish an automation center of excellence (COE) and governance program.

To graduate from one-off automation projects to a more coordinated cross-functional effort, companies need a COE and an enterprise-wide governance framework to guide their actions. A COE brings together representatives from different groups across the organization, so they can align on the strategic goals for automation and how to apply specific tools to help meet those goals in an orderly way. The COE manages the governance program, which helps the company keep automation initiatives in check and avoid critical mistakes. For example, governance rules might keep an automation project from accidentally creating a security risk or breaking some overlapping process. The governance framework may also outline approved procedures for talent, change and demand management, as well as performance monitoring. With a strong COE and governance framework backed by upper management, a company can move forward with confidence, knowing that automation projects add value and build resiliency while not inviting more risk.

2. Align hyperautomation initiatives with business objectives.

With a COE and overarching strategy in place, companies must take time to identify specific business objectives that can benefit from automation. While the automation-first concept advocates the widespread use of automation, it's important to acknowledge that it's not always the answer for everything. Objective, measurable data should help companies prove that automation will make some meaningful positive impact, be it through cost, productivity, quality or other metrics. In other words, they should avoid the temptation to automate for the sake of automation

3. Make strategic investments in multiple technologies.

Automation isn't a technology, per se, but a capability enabled by various technologies. For example, an organization may start its automation journey with an RPA bot that assumes control of one simple task. Extending the reach of automation across an entire business process, however, may require other technologies, such as workflow automation, OCR, intelligent document processing, NLP and ML. With an in-depth analysis of each small step in its most critical processes, companies can tie these technologies together to improve business outcomes by leaps and bounds.

4. Prioritize organizational change management.

As powerful as automation can be, humans are still required to make it a success. If the organization's employees are unwilling to embrace an automation-first mindset and support the adoption of new technologies, it will be difficult to scale automation beyond basic, isolated use cases. A company-wide push toward automation should include a robust change management element to inform, educate and motivate employees. This might include practical training for employees on how automation can help them save time and a program to reskill/upskill workers who might otherwise be at risk of downsizing.

Inciting the great reengagement

Few would deny that the technological development of this century plays a leading role in our evolution as a society and will continue to do so. Over the coming years, we believe an exponential increase in the use of automation will power a profound transformation in the way the world lives and works.

At face value, automation is a tool to streamline processes, serve customers more efficiently and grow profit margins. It can help organizations overcome the current shortage of workers in key positions and retain the employees who still work there. But automation is much more than that. It unlocks the next level of human performance and achievement. When organizations embrace automation as a critical component of every business function — an automation-first approach — it creates unprecedented opportunities for people to rise above the grind of unfulfilling taskwork and unleash their full potential. It opens the door to more creative, exciting, rewarding endeavors best suited for the human mind.

In this way, hyperautomation can help organizations move past the Great Resignation and usher in what may one day be known as the Great Reengagement — a turning point in history when our understanding of work changed forever. And as the workforce of tomorrow works in lockstep with technology to achieve incredible levels of productivity, agility and resilience, businesses will be well-equipped to manage whatever challenges the world has in store.

About the author

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Tim has spent his career focused on using cutting-edge technology to design and deliver innovative products and solutions for clients. He heads NTT DATA's strategic portfolio of offerings focused on data intelligence and automation and is the leader of NTT DATA's Global Intelligent Automation Center of Excellence.

Ready to get started?

Your organization can make meaningful progress toward automation maturity in a relatively short time. Begin by looking at the company's current transformation and modernization projects, and then build in automation where appropriate. By incorporating automation into business optimization capabilities, an automation-first approach comes naturally. At the same time, use process data to identify the best opportunities to automate. For example, process mining tools can dig into processes and recommend those where automation will produce the highest return on value.

NTT DATA Intelligent Automation can accelerate your digital transformation.
Contact an NTT DATA expert and get started today.

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