The Pioneers of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) Software

We discuss disruptive technologies with **Alex Bentley**, Director of Corporate Development at **Blue Prism**

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Tell us about Blue Prism and what makes it unique in the market?

We were formed in 2001 and pioneered the RPA market. At the time no-one even had a name for the technology. Our founders had a vision to extend the reach of enterprise IT to help address the delta between what the business wanted to automate and what IT was able to realistically deliver. We started to develop robotic solutions to eradicate the drudgery from business operations and used client feedback to steer and inform the product roadmap.

Blue Prism coined the term Robotic Process Automation or RPA in 2011 and, since then, it's really taken off and a whole load of new entrants have stepped in. While most of them focus on task-level automation, Blue Prism concentrates on reorganising the work and reallocating all manual activity to the digital workforce so people can focus on the more interesting aspects of their job.

If there's one thing that I can point to about Blue Prism that's different from the rest of the market, it's that we've got really strong client credentials going back a long time. By the time the RPA market began to establish, we'd already been going for 12 years, which gave us a huge head start.

I came in at the start of that hockey-stick growth, and have seen huge market acceleration over the last four years. In 2016, we were the first RPA vendor to IPO, which has helped to propel the business forward.

There is a lot of excitement around RPA and the market potential, with various analysts quoting billion-dollar predictions in the coming years. Just how realistic are they?

Fairly realistic. I've seen a couple of predictions recently, and I think some of them are on the conservative side; we really are seeing exponential growth.

What advice do you have for companies who are looking to implement RPA?

I think there are five things to consider. The first thing is to approach it strategically. It's critical to get your enterprise architects and technologists on board. Organisations that take a tactical approach to architecture and infrastructure will very quickly hit the benefits ceiling. Secondly, you need to build out the organisational capability. Think about how the automation capability should be organised, what roles are required to support it, and how it should be governed. We refer to this as the Robotic Operating Model.

Third, it's important to communicate the value of the RPA across the company. Once your business stakeholders understand how RPA can help them and their departments, they will start to volunteer their own processes for automation, and that's when the momentum starts to build.

Fourth, you need to select the right processes, and that means prioritisation. Start relatively small in terms of process-scope and don't bite off more than you can chew. Pick something that immediately impacts the business and demonstrates real value.

Finally, think about this in context of the over-arching digital strategy. Use RPA to build out the platform that will enable you to digitise your business. Think what other technologies you need to extend the breadth of automation. RPA is a fantastic enabler for AI technologies that have historically been quite difficult to build a positive business case for.

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FINDING THE FUTURE

How much time do you invest in educating customers on the benefits of moving away from tactical usage to a more strategic one?

We're still in the education phase for sure, so we do spend time doing that. However, we have an indirect distribution model. We work really closely with all the big consulting firms who carry the message out to their clients. Our partners operate at a strategic level, and their core business is providing transformational consulting. As such, we are very lucky in that our partners are extremely well equipped to provide that level of education and advice. We provide support to both clients and partners that focuses on quality assurance and best practice of the core RPA solution.

What future developments and advancements can we expect in terms of RPA capabilities?

For us it's about three things, the first being interoperability. We see Blue Prism as being the operating platform for the digital enterprise. We can interact seamlessly with existing legacy applications, and we can provide the same level of interoperability with digital technologies across the whole artificial intelligence ecosystem.

The second one focuses on enhancing what we've got and, by that, I mean the ability to understand and navigate the environment that we're operating in. For example, the robot should know how to respond to and deal with a problem that perhaps it wasn't expecting.

Thirdly, we invest heavily in R&D. We've recruited expert technologists from a whole range of different specialisms. We're constantly reviewing new trends and how can we can apply them. And, of course, we're also listening to our customers.

Do you think the convergence of RPA and other intelligent solutions like AI is on the horizon?

History shows that there are one or two major paradigms every decade and there is evidence that suggests the next decade will be characterised by an explosion of artificial intelligence. AI technologies tend to be applied in addressing very specific problems, and the technology itself evolves very quickly. That makes it very expensive to integrate – and hence difficult. RPA changes all that. It means you can very quickly integrate AI tools and applications. And different AI technologies can be switched out with far greater ease than ever before. One way to think about it, is that RPA provides the 'arms and legs' for cognitive AI technologies that can think and make decisions, but on their own can't act.

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How do you think 'Brexit' will impact the RPA market?

Well, undoubtedly it will have an effect. The reality is that things are going to have to change more quickly particularly in the public sector. There will be further pressure to implement new regulation, and innovation presents you with an opportunity to tackle these challenges without a deterioration in service levels or an increase in costs. I believe Brexit is going to be a market accelerator. Organisations strive to remain competitive, and by freeing up your resources, you can focus on customer-centric activities, and growing the business.

Do you see the potential removal of the 'Freedom of Movement of People Act' affecting the availability of digital talent in the UK?

I think the problem is more global than that. The whole AI market is developing very, very quickly and demand will simply outstrip supply. Blue Prism is investing on the supply side, and we already have a mature

certification and accreditation programme. We work with a range of partners who are authorised and approved by us to deliver training, and we use the same global exam standard as Microsoft. We are also working closely with further education institutions and clients to pull more talent into the market.

Where do you see future talent coming from?

I think that the right type of person for RPA is somebody who has an appreciation of technology and a logical approach to problem-solving. The best Blue Prism developers are those people that get the technology but also have a good business understanding. Maybe they come from a Six Sigma or business operations background but, essentially, they have an aptitude for technology.

One of the key benefits of RPA is the reduction of the human cost. Are we facing an ethical dilemma here and do we, as a society, need to develop any rules to manage this?

I'm not sure we need to develop specific rules. The work that robots are doing is typically not the type of thing that people want to do. If you communicate the idea properly to people and get them to see the positive impact RPA can have on the work that they do, then they become really engaged in and motivated by it.

Of course, there will be some displacement, but in most cases, companies find new, higher-value work for people instead. And, that's without factoring in all the new jobs that will be generated by technology that we haven't even contemplated yet.

What's on the horizon for Blue Prism?

Right now, our vision is to remain the global market leader in this space. We're single-mindedly focused on growth, market share, and expanding across the different industry verticals. We will continue to evolve and innovate, and lead the market in terms of our whole product offering.