

To get business process automation right, focus on analysis first

"The moment you reach any kind of scale as a business you simply can't rely on manual ways of doing things anymore," says Alexander Mehlhorn, CEO of software development company Framework One.

"90% of companies out there are still doing everything with spreadsheets and phone calls, and it's one of the reasons that 90% of companies are still small companies. When things stay manual too long you make mistakes, slow down and start losing customers."

Mehlhorn says automating business processes - especially the ones that account for major bottlenecks - can position a company for rapid growth if it sets the right objectives. "You shouldn't measure the success of an automation project in terms of lower costs," he says. "You should be looking for higher sales, more new customers and better customer retention."

To get there, however, companies may need to delve deeper into their habits and ways of doing things than they ever thought possible.

Business process vs. system process

"There is a very important difference between the business process you are familiar with, and a system process that needs to achieve the same goal," says Mehlhorn.

"For example, you may think your order-taking process is really simple: The customer phones, you capture the order, you find the item in the warehouse, pack it up and send it out, end of story. But you'll be missing a lot of stuff that happens in people's heads - like knowing that you're running low on stock and need to order more, or checking the customer's delivery address. The process you thought was four or five steps will often end up being more than 50 once you translate them into system terms."

For this reason, he says, business process analysis is 80% of the work of building a successful automated system. "Once you know exactly what the processes are you need to automate, it's just a matter of putting the right building blocks together in the right way. We are software developers, but we know that the success of our work depends on how we do the analysis."

"Process thinking is new to most people, so clients often brief IT companies that they want to automate, but not change any processes. A developer who accepts that brief won't be able to deliver a system that works. In fact, you might even slow

things down because you'll miss essential elements of the process."

According to Mehlhorn, automating manual business processes is the only way most companies can overcome obstacles to their growth. "A successful automation project will reach a lot deeper into your company than you ever imagined, and expose connections and dependencies you were never aware of. It's essential to choose a software development partner with very strong analysis skills and an excellent track record. With the right partner, automation can help a company break through growth bottlenecks."

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