

Workflow-Oriented Services

The next logical step, given today's portfolios

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It was nearly 30 years ago that I left the relatively stress-free world of no responsibility, also known as college. I entered the workforce at a time when there was a major upheaval occurring in the technology industry (or what some refer to as the information communications and technology [ICT] industry). If you can believe it, the world of business productivity was going to be turned on its head due to the introduction of the Intel 386 processor. At the time, the company I worked for, NCR, was touting something it called “open cooperative computing” — a vision that projected a world of client/server systems architectures with loosely coupled processing power based on the Intel x86 chipset, and software that would be based on standards and intercommunicate.

In a world of centralized computing dominated by the IBM mainframe, the thought that this vision would actually take hold and rapidly become the standard was a bit difficult to believe. However, this is exactly what happened and the explosion in applications aimed at worker productivity leveraging this distributed processing power began. As a sales associate selling to major accounts, it was amazing to see the speed with which customers adopted this newfound, distributed computing power. IBM was on its heels and companies like Compaq, HP and Dell began to claim a stake in the emerging desktop PC and server market — a stake that remains strong to this day.

Fast forward to today and we have seen enormous advancements in technology (both hardware and software), and not just in the ICT industry. We have also seen major advancements in the office technology industry, an industry that I migrated to some 25 years ago. With the shift from standalone office technology to digital, connected systems coupled with office productivity software, there is no doubt that today's businesses are highly efficient compared to those of the past. Of course, we can debate which industry has delivered more productivity over these 30 years; that would no doubt be a nice discussion for a future article.

Despite all of the gains in productivity delivered by



changes in technology and workflows, why is it that most business processes are still mired in manual tasks? Why is it that, in many workflows, we are asking college-educated workers to copy data from one format to another? Is this really what they went to school to learn?

While there can be no doubt that today's workers are more productive than those of the past, I would contend that most businesses and business processes are still less productive than they could be. Worse yet, businesses are paying individuals to conduct mundane tasks in most business processes instead of paying them to drive real value to their organizations through creativity and innovation.

But no worries; artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are going to fix all these problems, right? There is little doubt that the infusion of AI and machine learning into today's business processes will deliver improvement, however, while these technologies, by any measure, will have a dramatic impact on workflows and the way we conduct business, a lousy business process is lousy. Inserting AI is not going to fix that. So, what should business leaders do? And what about the office technology providers that serve them?

The answer is right in front of us. The subject-matter experts business leaders need are within their organizations. They also happen to come with the institutional knowledge of existing business processes. By the way, they know their business processes are lousy, but they do not want to hurt management's feelings by stating the obvious. They are the perfect resources to tell their organizations what works well versus what does not work at all. Better yet, they also know how they can be more productive and are itching to do so. After all, they are tired of the mundane tasks in their normal days and would like opportunities to be more creative and to drive innovation.

An organization's existing personnel will be all too happy to tell their managers how to remove steps in the process, raise questions about the role of paper, suggest better approval workflows and even directly design their systems so they can be more productive.

And what of office technology providers? Things here are a bit more complicated. While many office technology providers have made great strides in the areas of software and managed network service delivery, there is a significant gap between these skills and the skills required to help customers rearchitect workflows. In addition to the consulting skills needed, there are requirements for personnel with line-of-business application knowledge, workflow modeling and design experience, as well as project and change management. Let's not forget the emerging technologies like AI, machine learning and robotic process automation.

Should office technology providers move in this direction? There is no question that doing so will be challenging and likely require further investment in new personnel and skills. However, providing business workflow-oriented services is the logical next step when considering the software and network management services already resident in most dealership portfolios.

It is also an area that, given the required expertise, can insulate office technology providers from their traditional competitors. Who better to provide office technology hardware than the organization designing business workflows? In an industry where revenue and profits are under continual attack, and organic growth is challenging to come by, building a business optimization practice may just be a core strategy for long-term differentiation. With venture capital money flowing like water into the industry, there is no better time than now to take advantage of such capital and build a new revenue- and profit-producing business with the promise of helping any dealership climb the customer value chain.

Although digital transformation is well underway, the process is slow. While this bodes well for dealers considering adding these capabilities to their existing portfolios, it

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raises the question: Why haven't businesses done this sooner? Considering the huge leaps in technology over the last 30 years, the fact that many business processes are still in the Stone Age is nothing short of stunning.

As has been said, the road was paved with good intentions. The great promise of technology in many respects has been fulfilled, while in the case of business workflow, it has yet to reach its potential.

That said, with the emergence of AI, machine learning and robotic process automation, the time has never been more appropriate for organizations to embark on a systematic transformation of critical business processes.

The efforts of those organizations that have active projects underway are likely to bring them competitive market advantage and emancipate personnel from the doldrums of manual workflows. Those that do not have a plan are ideal targets for office technology providers willing to make the transition to providing business workflow services. Businesses of all shapes and sizes need help with their workflows. So, the question remains: Do you have the skills to be their provider? ■

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