Revolutionising workforces through the use of robots

Government Business (*GB*) talks to Keith Stagner, CEO and founder of T-Impact, about the role of technology in the coronavirus recovery and the future of robots in public services

***GB*: Council budgets were already stretched to sometimes unmanageable lengths before the coronavirus pandemic. What role does technology have to play in recovery of services?**

***KS*:** According to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy, most public services have become more efficient – doing more with less. This has been achieved by limiting staff pay increases and prompting workers to be more productive. But this strategy is approaching – or has already reached – its limit. Public services will in many cases now struggle to sustain the efficiencies that they have made.

Local government staff account for roughly half of all spending by councils as many services are labour intensive. Recruitment and retention problems are growing. Councils need to attract young talent and make better use of experienced staff.

Technology can increase staff productivity, automating much of the mundane work which staff hate, freeing them to focus on improving services and an increase in higher value productivity. Technology also creates a more interesting and exciting workplace, enabling councils to attract the talent they need to continue improving and streamlining services.

Technology also allows greater levels of connectivity improving information flows and supporting more intelligent decision making. For instance, through the better targeting of limited resources, sharing intelligence across agencies. New technology (RPA) also allows greater agility in implementing technology reducing the time from requirement to delivery.

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***GB*: In your experience, how can digital transformation projects help local authorities and the wider public sector improve the experience and engagement of citizens?**

***KS*:** Digital Transformation projects can help councils engage residents by delivering services in ways they expect. Most residents want to interact with councils via the devices and channels they are most comfortable with. They want access when it is convenient for them and in the language they are comfortable with.

It would be far too expensive to build these capabilities into every one of the IT systems that local councils use. These capabilities can be delivered by newer technology, which can extend the council's existing IT systems but without the cost and effort of changing them.

We designed a solution for a council in the north of England, which processes documents in 45 different languages, delivered in hardcopy, by email or uploaded and entering extracted data into their existing IT system. This solution automates the work previously performed by 10 agency staff.

We are implementing a self-service for a home county council which allows residents to access services 24 hours a day via any device, social media platform or the website. We expect to reduce contact centre costs by 35 per cent.

Neither of these solutions required any changes to their existing IT systems. RPA slows the flexibility for linking systems around residents' 'circles of need' rather the being constrained by specific IT systems.

***GB*: Moving forward, organisations will once again be expected to produce greater output at significantly reduced costs. What can robots do for local government?**

***KS*:** Robots can help councils improve residents experience, reduce operating costs and improve service quality. These aren't mutually exclusive; we expect to deliver all three in every project.

Council staff work with old technologies which are not integrated. The number of specialist IT systems are growing and expensive integrations are deferred. Council staff spend significant time entering data manually to keep these IT systems working, often entering the same data multiple times in different IT systems. This is a waste of their talent and makes recruitment even more challenging.

Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are able to process data received by councils and update the IT systems automatically, without expensive integration.

Robots are reducing operating costs by automating tasks previously performed by agency staff work. Automating mundane work, freeing council staff to focus on higher value activities.

One Home County council had been trying to recruit specialist environment services staff for five years. We were able to automate much of the electronic data processing and filing their existing staff perform, eliminating the need to fill the unfilled positions.

RPA provides low cost opportunities to incorporate external agencies as part of the local councils services, eliminating unreliable and expensive manual interventions.

RPA allows services to be scaled at lower cost and enables local councils to turn off services quickly when no longer needed.

Robots can also reduce costs and increase accuracy when migrating data between IT systems. Robots use the existing user interfaces to ensure data, as a human would – ensuring all the same validation checks are performed.

_GB_: Where do most local government organisations start when looking to implement robotics?

_KS_: Robots almost always add value in Revenue & Benefits, Housing, Finance and Contact Centres. We find that environmental services and licencing can also generate great returns. We have been working with Cadence Innova, industry leaders in a Private Sector Licencing (PSL) programmes, to design Robotic application processing and enforcement. PSL can generate millions of pounds of revenue for local councils and robot automation enables this to be achieved with an minimal increase in operating costs.

Social care, education and health are areas of highest spend. We have automated several back office functions in social care, reducing the manual handling of information around safeguarding activities. We believe local councils can achieve much more in these areas.

We offer a one-day workshop to assess the 10 best Robot automation ideas for councils, producing a business case and implementation plan for the best three. This is really popular with councils, who understand the potential but aren't sure where to start.

Any area where a council has a large team performing repetitive tasks is a good candidate to consider, especially where there are large numbers of agency staff or where mistakes can have expensive repercussions.

_GB_: Moving towards 2021, why is now the time to embrace new technologies and practices?

_KS_: Councils will have prodigious demand when the current furlough arrangements end. New responsibilities for monitoring social distancing across both commercial and public space will further stretch council staff.

In the medium term, an ageing population and rising costs in health and care will place further pressure on every aspect of councils and healthcare system.

Councils that aren't working to solve these challenges today will struggle to meet these unprecedented demands. There is very little time to prepare and councils need to start work now to make best use of innovation such as Robots & AI before it is too late. ■

T-Impact is a UK-based digital transformation consultancy firm focusing on the potential of BPMS, AI and RPA to revolutionise workforces across the globe.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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