

What's the big (data) idea?

Intelligent Process Automation sounds like some fancy, made-up term from a science fiction movie, but it is actually revolutionary.

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Intelligent Process Automation: the name itself is daunting, never mind the acronym – yet another one from the ICT world – of IPA.

But what is it, exactly? And how can it help your business grow?

McKinsey – yes, they of the discredited Gupta/Eskom/Trillian deal – says IPA will be at the core of the next operating model. The technology, the consultancy says, is seeing impressive results; some companies have automated as much as 70% of their tasks, and are, as a result, seeing return on investment in the triple digits – that's in the hundreds.

Monique Williams, Hyland Southern Africa's regional manager, explains eloquently that IPA involves integrating artificial intelligence (AI) and/or machine learning into traditional smart routing workflows.

Put another way, IPA takes smart aspects like data and applies them to a world where human intervention used to be required. Think back to before the industrial revolution – everything was hand-made. And then came machines that could shove out thousands of bolts a minute.

Now, add intelligence gleaned from that to the equation, and you get IPA.

Craig Nel, cloud platform leader: Mobile, BOTs and AI at Oracle Middle East, Africa and Turkey, says the internet revolution increased information scope and reach beyond what was previously thought possible and introduced the knowledge worker to satisfy the thirst for increased productivity in business. Soon, however, it became clear that even knowledge workers had inefficiencies. This was especially apparent in the processing of information residing in disparate systems.

This, Nel says, gave rise to Robotic Process Automation (RPA), where robots interact with systems on behalf of humans, allowing said humans to focus on more important tasks. RPA has streamlined business operations significantly; however, they tend to fail when judgment (a characteristic typically inherent in humans) is required. "IPA makes practical and effective use of cognitive technologies and deep-learning algorithms to enhance the decision-making capabilities of automated, rule-based workflows."

Threat of job losses

Williams adds that IPA also allows for the technology to have the ability, or awareness, to understand the context of the task, or process, being performed. What this

means, she says, is that the technology is able to perform both structured and unstructured tasks, with limited to no human intervention, freeing up employees to spend time on more valuable or challenging work.

But does this mean job losses?

Because we are dealing with automating tasks that are generally – excuse the term – done by blue-collar workers, as with AI, there is a risk that rote jobs may be lost. This is where reskilling comes in – there's no reason why employees cannot be skilled to use more brain power, spending less time on routine, mundane work.

Ryan Falkenberg, co-CEO of AI company CLEVVA, points out that, with the onset of intelligent systems capable of outperforming humans in many areas, the threat of mass job loss is real. "Wherever decisions and actions are guided by known and repeatable formulae, automation technology will increasingly outperform people, rendering them redundant."

However, he notes, this reality will take time to realise.

One reason Falkenberg cites for preventing the spectre of job losses in the new connected world is socio-political – there is increasing pressure to create, not destroy, jobs.