THE AUTOMATION CONUNDRUM: OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

In September 2021, a survey of Public Sector organisations was commissioned by Spherica and Workato to understand whether automation is a priority to resolve the challenges created by the rapid digitalisation driven by the pandemic.
RESOLVING PAIN POINTS TO AID RECOVERY

Process automation is one of the hottest topics in boardrooms because of the opportunities automation brings to aid recovery, help counter cybersecurity risks and facilitate better ways of working in new, hybrid environments. However, although automation is on the roadmap for many public bodies, few have actually invested and many do not have an automation strategy in place. So why is investment not more forthcoming?

This research was commissioned by Spherica, an innovative Automation-first IT Managed Service provider, and Workato, a leading Integration Platform as a Service (iPaaS) vendor. The aim is to understand more about the technology pain points public sector organisations are facing and to understand the barriers to investment in the automation solutions that can resolve them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 79% of public bodies have seen their digital transformations accelerate since the beginning of the pandemic, but automation has only been adopted by 16%, with a further 49% likely to invest within the next year.

- A further 16% have an automation strategy that is yet to be implemented, while 33% have automation on the roadmap but no strategy. Only 7% don’t have automation on the roadmap.

- Reporting and employee management are the most consistently challenging manual processes. However, employee management is also one of the most automated processes in the public sector, with 14% having already implemented automation for employee management tasks.

- The common pain points across the public sector include siloed systems and processes, platform and data sprawl, and the challenge of legacy systems. Lack of skills is also a significant challenge, which may be a symptom of the rapid digitalisation organisations have faced over the last 18 months.

- Awareness of the different automation technologies available is low, with over half unaware of any of the automation technologies referenced, demonstrating the need for better communication of the benefits and differences between the solutions available.

- Integration Platform as a Service (iPaaS) and Intelligent Process Automation (IPA) are the technologies being considered most.

49% are likely to invest in automation technology within the next year
SHORT-TERM INVESTMENT FOR LONG-TERM GAIN

It will come as no surprise that the research found 79% of respondents say that the pandemic accelerated their digital transformation strategies. 65% state that manual processes are a challenge, while less than a fifth have invested in automation to resolve these. Although there is clearly an appetite for automation, the findings show that the main barrier to change is budget constraints.

The research highlights how public bodies are facing challenges in securing the short-term investment that will enable them to transform their operations and reduce ongoing costs. In order to address this, it’s evident that there is a need to be clearer about the benefits of the automation technologies available and to help define the right automation strategy for each individual organisation.

HAS COVID-19 ACCELERATED OR DELAYED DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN YOUR ORGANISATION?

- Delayed it: 2%
- Don’t know: 7%
- Unchanged: 12%
- Accelerated it: 79%

DO MANUAL PROCESSES CREATE CHALLENGES WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION?

- Don’t know: 5%
- No: 30%
- Yes: 65%

65% of responders cite that manual processes create challenges within their organisations.
PROCESS AUTOMATION OPTIMISES DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION INVESTMENT

The findings of this research demonstrate that there are common technology and process pain points impacting public sector organisations.

The top five challenges across the public sector are siloed platforms (63%), lack of technical skills (63%), siloed processes (61%), platform and data sprawl (60%), and legacy systems (56%).

Siloed platforms are the most impactful on both the business and individual teams, and this is likely a result of the rapid implementation of new technology and cloud platforms to deal with the immediate challenges created by the lockdown.

Many organisations had to respond at speed, without the usual due-diligence, planning and strategy for implementing new technology. This has created a proliferation of platforms that aren’t connected and which many employees may not be fully versed in using. These issues will impact the effectiveness of the digital transformations organisations have undertaken in response to the pandemic and they may well also open businesses up to greater security risks.

System integration and process automation can quickly resolve these issues to optimise technology investments and free up time for staff to upskill and realise the benefits of the technology.

63% state siloed platforms create challenges for their organisation and their team
AUTOMATION ADOPTION IS NOT MOVING AT PACE

Automation adoption, although accelerating, is not moving at the pace required to reduce the impact of these common pain points. To counter the lack of pace in investment, there’s an urgent need for thought-leaders in the IT sector to simplify the complex topic of automation and help public sector bodies to understand the long-term benefits of the short-term investment.

The most common manual processes causing challenges within public sector organisations are reporting (51%), employee management (47%), such as onboarding and offboarding, and contract management (47%). Although manual employee management processes rank number two in terms of pain points, it is also the area that has the highest level of automation adoption (14%).

Reporting and employee management are the most common manual processes that consume valuable resources

THINKING SPECIFICALLY ABOUT YOUR TEAM, WHICH PROCESSES ARE HIGHLY MANUAL AND CONSUME VALUABLE RESOURCES?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>No impact</th>
<th>Mild</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Servere</th>
<th>N/A already automated</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hardware requests</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<td>28%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contract management</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<td>19%</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employee management tasks</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
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0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
WHAT HAS PREVENTED YOU FROM IMPROVING THESE PROCESSES TO DATE?

- **Other, 10%**
- **Not a business priority, 23%**
- **Complexity of the task, 13%**
- **Cost/budget constraints, 38%**
- **Lack of technical skills, 10%**

Cost and budget constraints (38%) are the main barrier to improving these processes, but a lack of technical skills is also a considerable barrier (23%), followed by the complexity of the task. This highlights a lack of understanding about the benefits, potential efficiencies and cost savings that can be made by automating common manual processes.
AUTOMATION IS A PRIORITY TO SOLVE THESE CHALLENGES

The good news is that more than half of survey respondents say automation is a priority to solve process pain points, while 16% have already invested in automation and 49% are likely to invest in the next year. This is a positive sign that decision makers understand the opportunities automation delivers.

IS AUTOMATION A PRIORITY TO SOLVE ANY OF THESE CHALLENGES?

Yes 51%
Not sure 23%
No 26%

IN THE NEXT YEAR, HOW LIKELY IS YOUR ORGANISATION TO INVEST IN AUTOMATION SOLUTIONS TO REDUCE YOUR PROCESS PAIN POINTS?

Extremely likely, 23%
Quite likely, 26%
Not very likely, 19%
Already made/making significant investments, 16%
Don't know, 16%
THE RIGHT AUTOMATION STRATEGY TRANSFORMS WAYS OF WORKING

28% of survey respondents are either early adopters or have recently implemented an automation strategy. However, a third of respondents (33%) say that automation is on the roadmap but they don’t yet have a strategy, while a further 16% have a strategy but have not yet implemented it. This shows the huge appetite for automation but also highlights the need for public sector bodies to move forward faster in defining their strategy and securing investment.

WHAT STAGE IS YOUR ORGANISATION AT IN ITS AUTOMATION STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT?

- Mature/early adopter, 12%
- Recently implemented an automation strategy, 16%
- It’s on the roadmap but don’t yet have a strategy, 33%
- Automation is not on the roadmap yet, 7%
- Have a strategy but not yet implemented, 16%
- Don’t know, 16%
WE NEED TO SIMPLIFY THE COMPLEX TOPIC OF AUTOMATION

One of the reasons that investment is not more forthcoming may the general lack of awareness and understanding of the automation technologies available. More than 50% of respondents are unaware of any of the automation technologies referenced in the survey.

Robotic Process Automation (RPA) is the most recognised (24% awareness) while hyperautomation is the least (65% not aware). Integration Platform as a Service (21%), Enterprise Information Portal (23%) and Intelligent Process Automation (23%) are technologies being considered by more than 20% of the public sector organisations that responded.

These findings illustrate the need for organisations to find a trusted technology partner to simplify the complexity of the options available and to help develop an effective, tailored automation strategy. This will avoid the risk of costly investment in the wrong solution.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING AUTOMATION SOLUTIONS ARE YOU AWARE OF AND/OR CONSIDERING?

- **Already Implementing**
- **Considering**
- **Aware of**
- **Not aware of**

![Bar Chart](chart.png)
CONCLUSION

The findings within this report demonstrate that the public sector is at the precipice of significant change, driven by a desire for automation. However, more understanding is needed to secure budgets and ensure the right automation strategy is implemented.

Facing ever-tightening budgets and greater expectations for the availability of digital services for citizens, the public sector would benefit significantly from process automation but must prioritise getting the strategy right. The best place to start is to look at the processes that most impact citizens, whether that’s consumers or employees, and then look at how technology can resolve these process pain points.

Steve Jennings, Managing Director and Co-Founder of Spherica, explains,

“Many organisations we’ve spoken to in recent years have considered automation as a future stage in their digital transformation journey. However, we advocate strongly for the need to combine a process automation strategy with digital transformation programmes to optimise the benefits of the technology investments being made and to ensure that the IT strategy is aligned with the long-term goals of the organisation.

The pandemic has pushed the topic of automation further up boardroom agendas, but there is further work to be done to reach the point where decision-makers are in no doubt about how far the benefits outstrip the short-term investment required.

Automation will prove a saviour in post-Covid recovery, but only if it is better understood, strategically planned and the right strategy is implemented.”

This research was commissioned in collaboration with Public Sector Executive, the leading independent news brand for the UK Public Sector, accessing its survey pool of Public Sector organisations.
THE AUTOMATION CONVERSATION PODCAST

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