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CUSTOM-BUILT APPS FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS

How to achieve long-term business goals with tailor-made business process automation apps

Executive Summary

Business process management provides organisations with an opportunity to optimise resources and work smarter, making the enterprise leaner, more productive and more profitable.

With 79% of companies saying that BPM is either significant (45%) or imperative (34%) for the success of their business[1], process improvement is top of mind in today's commercial landscape. But, some organisations struggle to identify the best digital tools for putting their BPM strategies into motion.

When processes are powered by the right technology, they can support enterprise-wide process optimisation, running the gamut from simple, departmental processes to more complex, cross-functional processes that impact the entire value chain. But with all the technology choices available in the business process automation ecosystem, choosing the best digital approach can feel like an overwhelming task.

Key Issues

● **What are business processes and how can they be improved?**

● **How does automation accelerate business transformation and optimisation?**

● **Why are companies using applications to power their business processes?**

● **Which app procurement approach is best: buying off-the-shelf or tailor-made?**

Towards process excellence

Editing the wrong document version or struggling to collect data from another department are common stumbling blocks in today's workplace. While these are not insurmountable problems on their own, these small obstacles and delays can add up to create significant business challenges – such as low productivity levels and negative customer experiences.

Fortunately, these roadblocks can be resolved through sound business process automation (BPA) strategies that are supported by innovative technology solutions.

What is BPA – and how do apps add value?

Every business process can be broken into a sequence of steps that lead from a trigger event towards an operational goal. When a customer submits a website enquiry, for example, this sets a specific customer service or sales conversion process into motion – a process that could be refined for optimal efficiency and a more successful outcome.

> **By streamlining and automating business processes, organisations can react more swiftly to new demands while unlocking the full potential of their human resources and keeping their business models competitive.**

Key focus areas for BPA include:

1.   Reducing redundancies and bottlenecks

To ensure that work is not repeated or held up due to miscommunication, it's important to assign roles and responsibilities for every process step. This prompts the right people to act at the right time. BPA software solutions such as business process applications can also help to integrate different data systems and make it possible to collaborate on work in real-time, so that everyone works on the most current version, using up-to-date information.

2.   Automating time-consuming manual tasks

When employees are printing and photocopying documents, keeping separate paper-based records or entering data manually into spreadsheets, this not only slows processes down but also creates an opportunity for error to creep in. Automation plays a valuable role in process transformation, because it optimises resources and reduces dependence on human intervention – boosting accuracy and speed, while allowing staff to focus on more innovative, strategic projects.

3.   Ensuring continual improvement

When processes are powered by business process applications, it's easier to track performance and progress, because the software does all the hard work for team leaders, flagging potential problems and providing them

only the key data they need. This allows these managers to oversee more processes, more accurately. They're also armed with the data they need to analyse processes over time, identifying areas for continual improvement.

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Tools for change

Many enterprises choose to support their business processes with BPA software applications that automate some or all their process steps. They also create automated workflow management solutions, which:

● Orchestrate the entire process (or sequence of processes)

● Prompt employees to complete tasks when it is their responsibility to do so

● Track progress so it is easy to pinpoint problem areas and address these.

When developed well, these process automation-focused apps can run on users' desktops, laptops, on premises or in the cloud, and on mobile devices, allowing employees to maintain their productivity levels beyond the traditional confines of the office and working hours.

Some business process apps that have been configured for mobile devices allow staff to collaborate on documents, access real-time data, complete forms and contracts, and make informed decisions when they are out in the field or visiting a client. This dramatically increases operational efficiency and helps to enhance the customer experience.

Not all business process apps are created equal

The global business process management market was worth USD 6.96 billion in 2016; and this is forecast to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 13.52%, reaching USD 14.89 billion by 2021 [2].

In a landscape this size, the amount of choice can be overwhelming for many companies. When selecting the best BPA apps, there are a number of factors that need to be considered, including the nature of the organisation's business processes, its IT budget and expertise, the number of users involved and so forth.

One important decision that companies need to make is whether they will invest in pre-packaged applications that are ready to run or work with a service provider to custom-build their own applications to suit their exact specifications.

Put simply: it's a choice between **buying** or **building**.

[2]https://www.reuters.com/brandfeatures/venture-capital/article?id=4462

Buying off-the-shelf apps: are the compromises worth it?

Out-the-box business apps are pre-packaged and ready to run, which means they can be deployed quickly. Their functionality has typically been designed to suit the generic needs of an industry or facilitate a common business process. This commercialised approach tends to drive down the set-up costs of this type of solution – which can be good news for cash-conscious companies like start-ups and SMEs.

However, because off-the-shelf apps are designed for a mass market, they come with static features and functionality, which creates gaps between what the app can do and what the business needs it to do. This often results in the company adapting its business processes to suit the software, rather than letting business needs dictate the solution. In other words: off-the-shelf may mean shelving some process improvement steps.

Sometimes, to bridge this divide, staff must complete portions of the process manually. This seems to fight against the key automation goals of cutting complexity, streamlining work and eliminating manual tasks. There may also be an added staff training expense, as the organisation brings staff around to new ways of working. Off-the-shelf apps often come with a wide range of features, many of which may not be required by the company. While the business could grow to use some of this functionality in time, the user experience will be cluttered with redundant features, which could hamper productivity.

Despite these drawbacks, the fast access to business process applications and lower set-up fees that off-the-shelf applications offer can be an attractive option for some companies. But it's important for these organisations to understand that a quick-fix solution may be more costly than a custom-built solution in the long run.

Most off-the-shelf solutions won't be a perfect fit, won't be fully customisable and will therefore require companies to "app-hop" in search of better features.

Each time the company switches to a new system they pay the price of set-up times, migration and retraining staff, not to mention portraying a sense of managerial inconsistency and causing employees the frustration of changing app time and again.

For a growing business like an SME or start-up, it's essential to ask whether "good enough" will be satisfactory in a year or two as needs evolve. Vendors do upgrade their off-the-shelf apps, but new features may not be available as fast as needed. Will this result in the company investing in more apps to bridge these gaps, incurring further costs?

Custom-built apps: let your processes shape the solution

When a company wants apps that streamline and support business processes from the ground up, a custom-built app built on a low- or no-code platform is often the natural solution.

This approach offers a wide range of benefits:

● **No need to compromise**
Each app can be designed to automate and streamline specific business processes, rather than having to adjust these processes to suit a pre-configured solution. Custom-built apps are therefore ideal for companies that have invested time and skills in the business process and now need the apps to put their plans into action.

● **Evolves with the business**
With custom apps, companies can continue to add in new features as process requirements change. Using insights gained on the job, employees can guide the app's functionality to ensure continual process improvement and maximum efficiency. In this way, processes are not only getting leaner and smarter, but they're also keeping ahead of competitors, because they work in a way that no other apps on the market do.

● **Reduce "app-hopping" to zero**
Because the company can easily update and evolve the solution, there is no need to jump from app to app in search of new features. This saves the time and costs associated with migrating from one solution or platform to the next. With custom apps you spend once and you spend well.

● Higher long-term value

The custom approach may cost more upfront, but it can offer greater returns on the investment over time compared to buying an inflexible product. With the custom route, training costs are lower because the features designed around processes are likely to be more intuitive to staff. Users can also have a say in the app design process, which means valuable functional input from real-life users and minimal training when the solution goes live. And with less app-hopping and more functionality to support unique process evolution and optimisation goals, the value of this approach keeps increasing.

● Flexible and scalable

Designing and deploying custom apps may take a little longer than rolling out a boxed solution, but once the app is in place, future versions and new functionality can be added easily, quickly and at minimal costs – if the app has been built with no-code technology, companies can even be trained to make the changes themselves. This provides companies with a more agile and scalable business process automation solution, which can adapt quickly to new opportunities and challenges.

● User-friendly

When an app is designed specifically for an organisation or line of business, the company controls the user experience to ensure maximum usability and efficiency. Only necessary features are included, and these can be easily removed or updated as user requirements change.

Building a homogenous digital portfolio

When companies use pre-configured apps to power a range of processes across the enterprise, they are likely to end up with assets from multiple vendors. This means that solution interfaces, settings and terminology will differ, which can be disorientating for users. Despite integration between apps from different vendors being possible via API or third-party integration software, often translation of the data is needed to match the terminology of different apps, meaning users may struggle to seamlessly share data and knowledge or collaborate efficiently on cross-functional projects.

Breaking down silos

Custom-built apps, on the other hand, support a more cohesive approach to business process optimisation. Because it is being empowered to design its own apps, the organisation can develop a homogenous portfolio of digital assets to ensure seamless integration and a more consistent and productive user experience across all solutions.

This helps to:

● Minimise staff training costs

● Break down departmental data silos for better integrated processes and less redundancy

● Increase process efficiency, accuracy and success

● Ensure all solutions are aligned in support of broader organisational goals

Recommendations

So, how do you go about building a standardised portfolio of BPA apps that all work in harmony? Here are three recommendations.

1.   Land and expand

Start small with a manageable selection of your business processes to digitise and automate. Begin with your routine, paper-heavy or spreadsheet-based work, as these tasks are straightforward to transform, with immediately tangible benefits. Once you have understood how it works, select more processes to automate and gradually expand your digital portfolio.

2.   Be process-centric

Even when you start simple, be sure to begin well by building the app around your process rather than opting for a quick-fix approach and adjusting your process to suit a pre-packaged solution. Analysing your processes in preparation for automation also presents an excellent occasion to re-evaluate the succession of steps and refine them, creating smarter and more efficient processes to digitise – automating an inefficient process will not lead to optimisation. Begin with the essential steps, digitise and automate them - you can add features and functions to support continual process improvement at later stages.

3.   Partner with an expert

Velocity's Packages are designed to help medium-sized companies and upward get started with custom-built apps, following the "land and expand" approach. Velocity will work closely with you to:

● Critically analyse and refine your processes making them smarter and more efficient

● Build tailored solutions that match your precise process needs

● Train and enable your team to customise the platform in-house to accommodate future developments in your processes

● Support you on your journey towards true business optimisation

● Guide you in establishing a Centre of Excellence within your company that will enable you to roll out more apps in the future following a proven methodology with a degree of autonomy

● For companies looking to push the boundaries of innovation, make recommendations about and integrate your processes with emerging technology such as AI, software robotics and IoT.

Final thoughts

Many businesses are looking for apps that meet their requirements cost-efficiently. This makes sense and can work for small companies and start-ups as a first step to experimenting with digital apps. But for the more mature company, it is essential to look beyond short-term benefits like low set-up costs and immediate software access and consider investing in tailor-made apps that provide higher value and give rise to a longer-term optimization initiative.

By investing in apps that meet your exact current needs, yet also offer the flexibility to be easily updated to meet future requirements, your business will be better positioned to advance at the pace of technological change and evolving customer expectations. This is much more valuable over time than boxing your business in with inflexible, generic solutions.

For assistance with making the right automation app choice for your organisation or to work with a vendor that can provide you with custom-designed and built solutions, contact Velocity. We've helped clients navigate this journey many times before.

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