

Pipeline

Knowledge Is Power

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Profiles in Automation

by Tim Young

Automation is a tricky topic for some. It's necessary, beyond question, and allows manufacturers and personnel from countless market segments (and for the sake of disambiguation, we are of course focusing on telecommunications) to streamline resources and maximize assets while, theoretically, providing top end services to customers of all stripes. On the other hand, automation is touchy in all fields because, in the short run anyway, it eliminates jobs and (it can be argued) increases complexity.

So what's the value of automation in the telecom world? Where is automation being utilized to its best effect? What are the potential benefits and problems associated with automation? In order to get a better look at the issue, we spoke to three OSS vendors about automation and how it affects the overall telecom picture. Here's what they had to say. It comes down to three major benefits of automation.

Tribold and the Efficient System.

First, we spoke to Simon Muderack, CEO of Tribold. The Product Management enterprise software provider has a considerable degree of first-hand experience with automation. Muderack asserts that automation is indeed important, for one thing, when it comes to reducing overhead. "If you look at the work in which we are involved at Telstra, those guys are looking to strip out 14,000 people from within their organization," says Muderack, with regards to the Australian telecom giant whose employees number around 50,000. "A large part of that is driven by automation and consolidation in the back office."

A reduction of some 30% of a workforce and its related overhead is reason enough to increase OSS and BSS automation, but the needs of Telstra go beyond that. "They're also looking to achieve a 75% reduction in time to market", which can, of course, be aided by automation. Other major companies could theoretically see equally impressive reductions in size through automation, one imagines, because of the sheer number of processes currently involved in their models. "We're working with one tier 1 in the UK that has 155 billing systems", says Muderack.

So how much room for consolidation is there within these organizations? "If you look at what we're doing with Telstra, they have roughly 250 employees who deal

with new product data and inputting product data. Quite simply, they're data entry people. Since there is so much complexity in the data, they also have to be highly skilled people" says Muderack. Can automation be an adequate replacement for these skilled employees? "If you look at the car industry 30 years ago," he continues, "you had pretty highly paid people screwing accelerator pedals into the floorpans of automobiles." That has obviously changed, and has been beneficial to the industry as a whole.

Muderack does recognize that there is a limit to what automation can or should do. "There are some areas that cannot be completely automated. There are certain high-end enterprise services that must be delivered in an ad hoc fashion," he says. "If you wanted a fiber connection between London and Singapore, you're never going to have that delivered in an automated fulfillment fashion. You want that type of connection for a very specific purpose and want a certain level of customer service and you're going to get that."

Muderack also asserts that for a certain demographics, automation is very much the order of the day. "If you look at my family, no one under the age of 21 wants to talk to a customer service representatives or shop assistants" says Muderack. "They want to play around with things and add services as they like. They want to do things on a per-usage basis." Indeed, for a generation that has grown up with less and less human interaction associated with the purchase and use of goods and services, customer service from an actual human can be more of a pain than a benefit.

Axiom and the Customizable System

Jason Grant, head of Pre-sales at Axiom about the lessons Axiom has learned about the key benefits of automation. Grant says that, for Axiom, automation has been key in introducing the concept of componentization, and its eventual product, Axiom's Active Catalog.

The central question with automation, as Grant poses it is "Why do people want to automate?" His answer? "The utopia is to cut out the middleman." Essentially, as my services become more complex, they become more expensive to deliver and no one wants to pay more. "The idea of automation is important because then customers can self-construct a service based on their needs," Grant says. "That's an extremely dangerous idea, and one that has SPs running scared every time you mention it."

However, Grant believes this model is far from impossible, and points to a slightly different industry for the sake of reference. With regards to allowing customers to customize service, "It's like going on the Dell website to purchase a computer. You can select your base model and drag and drop features in." On that site and in Grant's ideal, the system won't allow you to drag and drop incompatible features. The customer would only be able to configure services the back end could deliver. "You don't want a mishmash. You can't allow the customer to design a submarine that can fly at 50,000 feet or an airplane that can go underwater. There have to be guides and control."

So there is some reason for caution? Only as it relates to the framework that must be in place before automation is attempted. "Unless automation is tightly guarded and well controlled with a well understood system, it's not going to be successful," Grant says. "Provided you have those conditions in place, there's no reason to shy away from automation. It is going to be instrumental in next-gen services."

Intelliden and the Flexible System.

Finally, we spoke to Rahul Sachdev, VP of Marketing for Intelliden who asserts that one of the most essential reasons for automation within the OSS space has to do with the nature of the network. "Convergence is only occurring superficially," says Sachdev. "When you get down to the network, it's incredibly disconnected. The question is, why is that? Shouldn't convergence go all the way down to the network. One reason why it's been hard for the rest of OSS to be integrated and automated is that convergence on the network layer has never taken place."

That being the case, "The network itself is siloed and fragmented. It's not a monolithic component. There are many, many moving parts." Sachdev is certainly right in recognizing that the mishmash of elements comprising the network makes it much less of a pipe and much more of a loose confederation of elements. He draws our attention to a fairly interesting site called Internet Traffic Report (www.internettrafficreport.com) which monitors packet loss worldwide. As I write this, the worldwide level of data flow is listed as at 78, meaning that 22% of packets are lost along the way.

Sachdev is well aware of potential pitfalls in the realm of automation. "Automation in the literal sense assumes that you are aware of all the tasks and activities that you need to perform that have some level of inefficiency associated with them" says Sachdev. "I believe that will not always be the case."

Sachdev also touches on one of the most essential rules when dealing with automation. "Don't do dumb things efficiently. Do smart things efficiently." Any system is no more intelligent than the information it is given, and if systems are not approached with a modicum of business logic and care, little is gained.

Furthermore, Sachdev points to a major lesson that should have been learned from years ago. "When MCI launched its 'Friends and Family' plan, AT&T literally couldn't change its billing system to accommodate a competitive plan. It would have taken months. MCI played a beautiful card, and AT&T couldn't answer. What happens when a Google plays that card now?" Indeed, an inflexible system can be a true liability. Automation can be the key to meeting the demands of a rapidly changing market and help the AT&T's of the world be ready to meet future demands in kind.

Ultimately, automation is a potentially dangerous, but exciting field rife with possibilities for SPs and consumers alike. With proper care and guidance, the future looks mighty bright, and mighty automated.

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