Spotlight: Customer Case Study

Inside John Lewis – How RPA is transforming retail
The rise of pure online retailers has added pressure to the industry and, like any large company, John Lewis wanted to optimize operational efficiencies and increase productivity – while addressing unique retailer challenges, which include streamlining work volume peaks and providing competitive pricing to consumers. Instead of burdening staff with the repetitive and lower-value tasks required to meet these challenges, John Lewis looked to Robotic Process Automation (RPA)—a platform that provides automated, digital workers to emulate tasks performed by humans—as a solution. Further, RPA could help the company drive wider, AI-driven, transformation initiatives too.

Driving connected-RPA forward

To ensure that stakeholders across the business embraced the concept of RPA, and to address any apprehension of automation and its impact on jobs, the company communicated that RPA would bring “better jobs, better performance and better pay”. Blue Prism’s connected-RPA was chosen as the platform that could deliver these benefits due to its proven track record of operating and scaling well in highly demanding, enterprise environments.

To manage the delivery of connected-RPA, a Center of Excellence (CoE), was created within John Lewis’ London Headquarters. The CoE was populated with developers from John Lewis’ IT department who possessed a blended set of IT skills. These existing technical skills were deemed as beneficial to integrating the maturing operations of the CoE– and also helped when interfacing with the wider business units about automation and how to improve their processes. John Lewis started automating business processes in 2017 – initially with proof of values, then moved quickly to pilots, which were put into production in the live environment.

As a leading UK retailer, John Lewis stays ahead by delivering a company-wide, vision for Blue Prism’s connected-RPA.

The John Lewis Partnership is the UK’s largest employee-owned business— and the parent company of two cherished retail brands: John Lewis & Partners, for high-end retail products, and Waitrose & Partners, for premium groceries. The company has 50 John Lewis & Partners shops and 344 Waitrose & Partners shops across the UK, along with johnlewis.com and waitrose.com – all of which are owned in Trust by its 83,900 employee “partners”.

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**Connected-RPA in action**

John Lewis was able to scale their RPA program quickly and have seen a positive impact across their business. Currently, there are over 40 automated business processes running across John Lewis’ contact center, online, merchandising and buying operations, Waitrose’s supply chain, group human resources and finance operations. Key processes being transformed relate to checks for fraudulent orders, price match requests from customers and returned goods.

**FRAUD DETECTION**

Globally, the retail industry loses billions of dollars each year due to fraudulent ordering. It is imperative that retailers check any orders deemed suspicious, and they must do this quickly. John Lewis addressed this issue by automating their “held order” process. This process involves investigating customer orders that have been held due to suspicion of fraud. If there’s a recommendation to challenge the order, a case is created in Salesforce where a Blue Prism Digital Worker performs a series of cross-checks on the order, via various internal and external systems. This activity is performed before cancelling, proceeding or referring the order for human participation.

Automating this process has liberated staff to focus on more valuable tasks that include iterating the fraud detection scoring models and researching the fraud detection market for the latest strategies and tools. These fraud prevention measures are having a positive impact on customer satisfaction, trust and commitment.

*During the Christmas 2018 Black Friday week, 10 Digital Workers performed forensic fraud checks on approximately 20,000 orders, which has saved around 100 days of equivalent human resource.*
PRICE MATCH

John Lewis is proud of all the products sold under the John Lewis & Partners name, because each one is developed to bring customers the best quality and value. And to ensure John Lewis offers the most competitive prices, they regularly benchmark all these products against others in the market. If customers do find the same product for sale at a lower price at a UK mainland high street competitor, either in-store or online and sold with the same service conditions, customers can make a price match request.

Performing these checks was monotonous work for partners. With Blue Prism’s connected-RPA, the pre and post-sale process is now entirely managed by Digital Workers. The customer completes the web form on the John Lewis & Partners website, creating a Salesforce case, the case is then reviewed using information from a third party, product price comparison provider. The customer is emailed back a response of the case outcome and after checking the price guarantee – the case is closed.

Automating this process frees up staff so they can seek ways to improve the business exceptions that connected-RPA can’t deal with – such as prices from retailers that aren’t currently on existing lists, or dealing with the complex or high priority customer requests.

The improved performance was compelling. During the Christmas 2018 Black Friday week, five digital workers processed nearly 15,000 never knowingly undersold queries – which saved 62 days of equivalent human resource.
RETURNED GOODS

Time is of the essence when restocking returned products so that they can be resold. John Lewis uses connected-RPA to automate and accelerate the inter-branch transfer process that handles returned products. The process triages returned goods that enter the distribution center or branch, and utilizing previous returns information/branch preferences, allocates the stock to an appropriate selling location and raises the relevant documentation for the transfer. It performs this process swiftly to minimize the markdown.

Decisions are made from a number of flags associated with the relationship between the branch and the product, which the Digital Worker calculates. To get “perfect” returned stock ready for selling fast, it’s either identified as being able to be sold in the branch it was returned to, and if not, an inter-branch transfer is created for the item’s return to the distribution center.

Streamlining these processes with connected-RPA prevents writing-off stock and reduces handling and transit costs – while generating more revenue.

SUSTAINING CONNECTED-RPA

With a small automation team, John Lewis wanted to continue meeting the anticipated, growing demand for automation and reduce automation adoption barriers, but it became quickly apparent that there were emerging threats to achieving this.

“As we scaled our RPA service by working with more departments and automating more business processes, we quickly encountered growing pains. We faced increasing business demands for operational support and management information, which due to the unstructured nature of these complex requests and time constraints, impacted delivery timescales – making the situation unsustainable.”

— ALEC SUTHERLAND, Partner & Automation Technical Lead (RPA)
It was clear that the CoE needed to enable the wider business to self-serve on operations and management information, so they could quickly ascertain the status of their processes and then gain previously unknown insights – and ensure continual improvement. The solution was to adopt DevOps values and philosophies and power these with a connected-RPA ecosystem through learning and automating the team’s activities, and integrating these with the wider IT landscape.

This would address the negative spiral by reducing friction with the business, supporting the delivery lifecycle and creating positive feedback loops - providing new ideas for the company’s connected-RPA ecosystem.

To achieve these goals, John Lewis created an innovative application by integrating Splunk and Slack into its connected-RPA ecosystem. This provides defined communication channels allowing developers to focus on development in Blue Prism and the ability for the wider business to self-serve on operations and management information. The platform also enables analytics to be performed on automated business processes, which provides more opportunities for their continuous improvement. These benefits have enabled the automation team to scale and expand its activities to meet the growing business appetite.

“Connected-RPA, coupled with DevOps, has created a safe system of work. This has enabled the RPA delivery team to independently develop, test and deploy code quickly, safely, securely and reliably, while allowing the business to find answers to their questions and insights quickly – through the self serve and automated solutions.”

— ALEC SUTHERLAND,
Partner & Automation Technical Lead (RPA)
What’s in store

Looking forward, John Lewis views connected-RPA as providing means to orchestrate cognitive technologies to further enhance its value. Areas being considered are how to architect integration with “chatbots” to streamline certain areas of customer care – leaving the human touch for more complex, value add interactions. Process data mining to identify other areas for automation and automation monitoring is another activity currently being explored. Deploying connected-RPA to the cloud is also being considered to create an on-demand service for wider business units to more easily consume this technology.

Ultimately, by integrating Blue Prism’s connected-RPA to other technologies, John Lewis has created a high performing, empowered ecosystem – driven by a team that’s highly efficient, productive - with a focus on continuous improvement. Scaling connected-RPA across the business has driven better outcomes by creating better jobs and generating greater value. Those productivity savings and human capacity are being reinvested back into the John Lewis Partnership to deliver better customer experiences.

About Blue Prism

In this digital era where start-ups are constantly disrupting markets, only the most agile and innovative enterprises survive and thrive. At Blue Prism, we pioneered Robotic Process Automation (RPA), emerging as the trusted and secure intelligent automation choice for the Fortune 500 and public-sector market. Now we bring you connected-RPA supported by the Digital Exchange (DX) app store – marrying internal entrepreneurship with the power of crowdsourced innovation.

More than 1,000 major enterprise customers leverage Blue Prism’s digital workforce, empowering their people to automate billions of transactions while returning hundreds of millions of hours of work back to the business.

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