

Spotlight: Customer Case Study

Inside Waitrose: How RPA is transforming retail





As a leading UK grocer, Waitrose 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.”

The growth in online delivery, convenience stores, and changes in shopping habits has added pressure to the industry and, like other UK supermarkets, Waitrose wanted to optimize operational efficiencies and increase productivity, while addressing unique retailer challenges, including the food and drink supply chain, and providing competitive pricing to consumers. Instead of burdening staff with the repetitive and lower-value tasks required to meet these challenges, Waitrose looked to Blue Prism’s Robotic Process Automation (RPA) platform—that provides automated Digital Workers capable of emulating tasks performed by humans—as a solution. Further, RPA could help the company drive wider, AI-driven, transformation initiatives.

“Blue Prism has enabled the John Lewis Partnership to drive productivity into John Lewis and Waitrose through the use of RPA. The platform has provided a stable, secure automation capability which we have integrated into our application estate to give both our end users and RPA support teams the key Management Information required to maintain, run and grow the operation.”

— CHRISTINA GARRATT, Automation Programme Lead, John Lewis Partnership





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 platform was chosen because of 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 Partnership’s London Headquarters. The CoE was populated with developers from the IT department, who possessed a blended set of IT skills. These existing technical skills helped integrate the maturing operations of the CoE into the wider IT ecosystem. These skills also helped when interfacing with the wider business units about how automation could improve their processes. Waitrose started automating business processes in 2018, following the success of Blue Prism in the John Lewis part of the business in 2017.

Connected-RPA in action

Waitrose was able to scale its RPA program quickly and has seen a positive impact across the business. Currently, there are automated business processes running in Waitrose’s pricing and promotions and supply chain teams. Key processes being transformed include those related to pricing and promotions, business-to-business direct suppliers and supplier delivery scheduling.

PRICING AND PROMOTIONS

Promotions and offers are a big attraction to Waitrose stores for customers across the country. Blue Prism Digital Workers were put in place to help with the thousands of promotions which need to be set up and prepared for delivery on a weekly basis. The Waitrose pricing process follows a rolling cycle of promotions and offer processing every four weeks with an eight-week lead-time. This includes monthly, seasonal or on-demand promotional activity. Promotions are proposed by Waitrose buyers through the Product Control Workbench, an internal lotus



note database. Blue Prism Digital Workers review these proposals, loop through all the promotions, and enter them into the Product Information Catalogue application, an internal Waitrose system. Additional information is also added to the offers, such as location information and a description of the promotions. This data then feeds into the Point of Sale systems and the application which produces the store shelf labels (barker tickets). Based on this information, the barker tickets are printed and sent out to the stores. Finally, Digital Workers report successful barker ticket creation and highlight business referral information to the Waitrose buyers.

Digital Workers delivered approximately 400 hours back to the business, scaled to meet peak demand and consistently and accurately processed these promotions. The hours delivered back to the business mean that the pricing team can focus on planning and forecasting future pricing activities.

BUSINESS TO BUSINESS DIRECT SUPPLIERS

The Waitrose business-to-business option offers a range of customers (including service stations and international supermarkets) Waitrose products. Once the orders from these customers are received, a Digital Worker aggregates the products from each supplier and ascertains whether it meets the minimum order quantity to get a direct order from a supplier. This can be defined in cases, layers or pallets. The cost of direct shipping from a supplier is much less than the handling cost of goods being processed through the Waitrose supply chain and distribution centers. Maximizing direct orders saves cost and decreases lag on customer orders.

Digital Workers delivered significant tangible benefits by giving more than 800 hours back to the business per month. They sped the process of direct ordering which delivered cost savings to the business. When the branches order directly from the suppliers, Waitrose's cost to fulfill products is cut in half because they do not have to receive the goods from the supplier and deliver them to the branch.

SUPPLIER DELIVERY SCHEDULING

Scheduling deliveries to each branch from distribution centers is complex and time consuming. The Blue Prism Digital Workers schedule deliveries, by extracting delivery appointment information from the Waitrose warehouse management system (WMS) and entering them into the logistics system. Blue Prism Digital Workers validate the delivery using a rule set, and then the reason code and arrival or departure time are populated in the input field,

representing a “check in” or a “check out” of a delivery appointment, respectively. This update is then applied to the order. Digital Workers monitor WMS for new schedules, processing them in date/time-received order so that delivery arrivals and departures are entered correctly. They do this by examining and reprioritizing their work queue to ensure that schedules are applied in a timely manner.

Volumes for this process range from 50–90 deliveries per hour. Automating the process has delivered 600 hours back to the business per month and has provided fast, consistent scheduling with the ability to ramp up and down to meet demand.

What’s in Store?

Looking forward, Waitrose views connected-RPA as a means to orchestrate cognitive technologies to further enhance its value. The business is currently looking to add value in three specific areas:

- 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
- Deploying connected-RPA to the cloud to create an on-demand service for wider business units to more easily consume this technology

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



About Blue Prism

Blue Prism’s vision is to provide a Digital Workforce for Every Enterprise. The company’s purpose is to unleash the collaborative potential of humans, operating in harmony with a Digital Workforce, so every enterprise can exceed their business goals and drive meaningful growth, with unmatched speed and agility.

Fortune 500 and public-sector organizations, among customers across 70 commercial sectors, trust Blue Prism’s enterprise-grade connected-RPA platform, which has users in more than 170 countries. By strategically applying Intelligent Automation, these organizations are creating new opportunities and services, while unlocking massive efficiencies that return millions of hours of work back into their business.

Available on-premises, in the cloud, hybrid, or as an integrated SaaS solution, Blue Prism’s Digital Workforce automates ever more complex, end-to-end processes that drive a true digital transformation, collaboratively, at scale and across the entire enterprise.

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