

Automating small tasks in accounting

Today's finance function is looking to automate, but this drive may cover a variety of processes because the all-round concept of automation includes robotic process automation, artificial intelligence, machine learning and computer vision, as well as tasks set up in Excel using a macro writer. This article explores three main principles for automating small tasks in accounting.

It is no news that large companies use tailored, configurable and complicated accounting systems, enterprise resource planning systems and robotised scripts that process large amounts of data and make the manual involvement of a human accountant unnecessary. And most of those apps and platforms come with built-in tools for producing standardised reports and doing repetitive tasks.

While automating small tasks does not replace traditional information technologies and ready-made solutions, it eliminates many weaknesses and accelerates the company's internal processes, something that implementing the big technological solution has been unable to achieve. The three main principles for automating small tasks in accounting are focusing on activities that add more value, using tools to drive efficiencies, and creating independent automation solutions.

Focusing on activities that add more value

Automating small tasks can solve a number of efficiency problems – CEOs should focus on apps that offer a wide range of functionalities that will add the highest possible value. PwC's Finance Effectiveness Benchmark Report 2017¹ revealed that automation of financial accounting and bookkeeping and process improvements could reduce work by up to 46%, including the time and cost of preparing invoices, management reports, general accounts and budgets. Tools available to the company, such as office apps or text editor cloud services, can help set up templates for accounting reports and statements. And setting up a programme or script for automatic input from a data chart (e.g. Google Apps Scripts for Google Docs cloud services) can provide a tailored solution for automated report production. This allows financial professionals to focus activities that add more value, such as analysis, instead of activities that involve preparing large numbers of uniform documents. The same result can also be achieved in other business processes, such as customer service, supply chain management and sales.

Using tools to drive efficiencies

Automation alone neither cuts costs nor improves performance – we need to change how employees use functional tools and how the company handles financial processing. Many of the tasks that can be automated are activities that staff do not normally want to do, such as gathering and inputting data or producing a number of uniform reports. Those are also tasks that can actually see human performance improved through automating small tasks, e.g. by introducing predictable algorithms, common data aggregation forms or surveys, structured data sets with easy analytical options that help make decisions and free up time for activities that are better paid and more interesting, as well as adding more value.

Creating independent automation solutions

To launch a successful small task automation project, the company should review its organisational structure and let its teams experiment and develop solutions. We need to define our priorities and find solutions to tasks suitable for automation that will provide significant time savings in accounting.

Automation of small tasks performs well at the level of particular processes or tasks.

Traditional technologies are associated with big automation – projects implementing enterprise systems. Automation of small tasks is faster and cheaper and can efficiently function on a smaller scale, incorporating elements of technologies such as robotic process automation and big data analytics. Automation of small tasks can make certain processes more productive by 80-100% (the top of the range representing transition to a contactless solution without human involvement).

¹ https://www.pwc.com/us/en/services/consulting/finance/finance-effectiveness-benchmark-study.html?utm_campaign=sbpwc&utm_medium=site&utm_source=articletext