imageAPI

DIGITAL PROCESS AUTOMATION:

THE DEFINITIVE PLAYBOOK FOR EMPOWERING PEOPLE AND TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATIONS

Proven tools, real-world examples, and actionable steps from digital experts and government agencies.

THE DEFINITIVE PLAYBOOK FOR DIGITAL PROCESS AUTOMATION

Introduction

If digital content and processes have become crucial to your organization, you're not alone.

When COVID-19 abruptly turned the world upside down, the much discussed—but variably implemented—digital initiatives flipped with it. For all who were slowly testing digital waters before 2020, the effects of the pandemic quickly threw them into the deep end. Think: remote workforces, unprecedented expectations for online access to services and information, and tight budgets amid a global pandemic.

In its May 2020 report, The COVID-19 Crisis Will Accelerate Enterprise Automation Plans, Forrester put it this way: "The COVID-19 health crisis is on everybody's mind. Once it passes—which it eventually will—one of its lasting legacies will be a renewed focus on automation.

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>
> *- Forrester Research*

Digital transformation is a true pivot from paper to electronic, manual to automated that changes entire processes and organizations. In our current reality, while no agency leader needs convincing that digital is necessary to enable work, getting there can feel overwhelming for even the most seasoned professional.

When the game changes, it's time for a new playbook. In this definitive guide, we'll dive into proven tools, real-world examples, and actionable steps for going digital—from expert leaders getting digital right.

Digital Processes are the Gamechangers

Let's start by getting perfectly clear on one critical truth: digitizing content is an important—and necessary—start, but digital process automation is the efficiency-seeking, guided rocket that changes everything. Implementing digital processes and automation is the foundation for empowering people to do their best work and transforming into a highly productive, digital organization. Here's why:

Paper-based processes are expensive, inefficient, security risks even when staff is working on-site. In all circumstances, and especially during the recent shift to remote work, paper is an obstacle to productivity. When dependent on paper, workflows are time-consuming and usually generate frustrating experiences for staff and customers.

Digitized content and automated processes are far more convenient and result in the kind of experiences people have come to expect in today's world. Automated, digital processes also reduce operational costs while increasing productivity, efficiency, and security.

Getting started and being successful requires a strategic approach that starts small and delivers increasingly big results.

Start Small to Win Big

According to IDC, worldwide spending on digital transformation technologies and services is forecasted to reach $1.97 trillion in 2022. Effectively determining where and how to make these investments is critical and complicated.

There's clear evidence that adoption is faster, and the potential for success greater, when digital initiatives begin with small, manageable projects. Smaller projects are more likely to produce clear and measurable results. They can serve as learning exercises and building blocks for future projects.

Starting small means less disruption to people and organizations, and it's a smart way to generate wider internal buy-in and support—establishing a solid business case and securing the needed resources for additional initiatives.

The Value Digital Process Automation Adds

Digital process automation, or DPA, is digitization of tasks in a business process and sometimes end-to-end processes. Automated, digital processes improve operational efficiencies by weeding out waste in manual, paper-based workflows. When processes are optimized, service delivery is faster, more consistent and accurate because delays and errors are eliminated. When digital process automation is enabled, document management technology and services become exponentially more powerful.

Content-centric processes are ideal candidates for automation. When these processes are automated effectively, in a way that can be continually improved and scaled, the result is measurable improvements to productivity, as well as significant cost savings.

Here's one specific example of a digital workflow process that we recently built for a client:

A request is made for an official government document as part of a Freedom of Information Act filing. The responding individual inputs a request, assigns a case number, then routes the request to the appropriate offices for necessary approvals. The approved digital documents are securely stored in a centralized archive, retrievable for printing and redaction as needed. Processing and routing are managed by the workflow automation platform, eliminating error-prone manual tasks like batching, splitting, filing, and indexing.

By building lean, digital workflow processes like this, the value can be seen in the results:

- Increased productivity–get more done
- Improved customer experience–convenience, faster service delivery, etc.
- Time savings–less waste, less delays, time spent on other tasks
- Greater, and easier, collaboration–secure distribution and sharing
- Better security and stronger compliance–more control over information
- Fewer errors–increased quality, consistency, accuracy

Assess and Prioritize Automation Opportunities

To determine the true potential of your agency's processes, first identify content-centric processes and tasks and then evaluate where opportunities for digitization exist. There are usually very clear areas where small changes will go a long way, delivering the best return on investment.

A PROVEN APPROACH

A PROVEN, FIVE-STEP APPROACH

Idenitfy clear goals
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When determining which processes to automate, think about your organizational goals. What do you want to achieve? A shorter process for sharing information internally? Quicker response times? Operational cost savings?

Explore and pinpoint the needs of the people affected by and managing the processes. This can be both employees and the public your agency serves. Include these people in the process, if possible, from the beginning.

Break down the processes (steps, inputs and outputs, key people, flow)
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This is where you dig into the process and understand process inputs and outputs, who is involved in each step, and how each action affects others.

Ask questions like:

• What are the different ways people currently accomplish the tasks?
• Where are user pain points in the current way people accomplish the task?
• What metrics will best indicate if automation is working?

Create business rules and logic
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In this stage, develop if/then scenarios to understand business rules and logic that should be part of your process automation. For example, should missed deadlines for required approvals trigger action, such as secondary routing or notifications? This is an area where automation can often result in significant improvements.

Visually map the process
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The process map is a tool that graphically shows the inputs, actions, and outputs of a process in a clear, step-by-step map. Visually mapping out all processes in a workflow helps identify tasks suitable for automation.

Process maps make sense because pictures tell better, clearer stories, and they make it easier to pinpoint specific areas that need changes, such as bottlenecks and delays.

Identify how the process can improve
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Use your process maps to evaluate where additional efficiency gains and cost savings can be had. Are there repetitive and predictable actions that can be automated? Are there points in the process that could create bottlenecks?

This stage is the time to make processes simple and intuitive for all. This encourages people to embrace the change that automation brings and ensures the benefits of cost savings, efficiency, and better service delivery long-term.

REAL-WORLD TRANSFORMATION

REAL-WORLD TRANSFORMATION: A LOOK AT THE STEPS IN ACTION FOR A FLORIDA STATE AGENCY

When it comes to achieving the real-life benefits of digital transformation, Forrester puts it simply: "As organizations undertake digital transformation efforts, an important realization emerges: process matters." In early 2019, a state agency in Florida, began a digital process automation initiative for its procurement processes.

The initiative focused on automating procurement workflows in its vendor bid system, affecting departments throughout the agency. Key leadership driving the process included state-level executives, as well as the agency's procurement director.

The Process Problem:

The agency's vendor bid system involves a multi-step approval process requiring document review and sign-off by at least five internal departments. When approvers request edits, it can send the document back to the procurement department and re-start the entire process. The workflows may involve a primary document, as well as supporting documents, and signatures are required at each step.

Tracking progress through paper-dependent workflows is time-consuming and difficult to manage. The biggest challenge is accountability. Approvers often lacked a sense of urgency, causing delays and stalling the process completely—with negative effects agency-wide. As a result, the procurement team spent an inordinate amount of time following up with approvers to keep the documents moving through the process.

To solve the problem with digital process automation, the agency followed our five-step proven approach:

Idenitfy clear goals
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The team began by defining the process at a high-level, asking and answering:

- What is the purpose of the process?
- What are the expected agency-wide benefits of automation? (e.g., efficiency gains, cost savings)
- What is the process flow? (a visual flow chart mapped out)
- Where is the process breakdown, and how can it be improved?

Break down the processes
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Next, the team named and described each step and its purpose, identifying:

Inputs and outputs. These are the actions that need to happen in each step of the workflow. For example, a director-level signature is required to approve and begin moving a purchase request forward. Then, what is the next step, chief of staff approval?

Key people and resources. Throughout the flow, who must review and approve the document? The team even considered backup approvers in cases when the primary approver may not be available for an extended period, and it would be necessary for a backup to step in to keep the process moving forward effectively. For example, a division director's signature is required, but if approval is not secured over a pre-determined time period, it may be redirected to a backup approver to keep the process moving.

Flow. All possible flows were considered. For example, if the division director does not approve and sign to move to the next stage—if there are questions or concerns—what is the next action? The document may be routed back to the procurement department with comments or requested changes. At each stage in the workflow, there may also be special requirements or restrictions such as an electronic signature, restricted supporting documentation that cannot be edited based on department or level, or required deadlines for completion of an action.

Create business rules and logic
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This is where the agency's project team ran through the process and considered all possible scenarios and how the process might change based on each scenario. For example, an approval deadline is set for three business days, what are the next steps once the deadline passes? In the process automation implementation, there may be triggers that notify the requestor, procurement, or a secondary approver.

Visually map the process

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Once all the previous steps were completed, they mapped out each process in visual flow charts. This is one of the most critical steps. Think: a picture is worth a thousand words. A clear process map can save an immeasurable amount of time, money, and resources.

By involving a diverse group of stakeholders from throughout the organization in the process mapping stage, people felt empowered. Everyone had input, and it connected the team. Through the exercise, they better understood the pain and frustration of the manual processes not only from their personal perspectives, but others' as well. The results were more empathy, understanding, and a greater likelihood of creating a solution that benefits all.

Identify how the process can improve

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After documenting everything, the project team reviewed the visual process map and analyzed the details to identify bottlenecks. The goal was to not just digitize the process, but make it better.

A PROVEN TOOL: THE IMPACT EFFORT MATRIX

In our experience helping hundreds of organizations, we've found the most effective tool to answer the question of where to start is by using an impact effort matrix. This is a simple process that assesses the level of effort required compared to the potential impact or benefits.

The result is a visual representation of where to invest resources. Each of the workflow candidates falls into one of four categories:

1. Quick Wins: The clearest return on effort.
2. Major/ Foundational Projects: Long-term return but may be complex and time- and resource-consuming to execute.
3. Fill-ins: Don't require significant effort nor benefit.
4. Time Wasters: Time-consuming efforts with little benefit that should be avoided.

An impact vs. effort analysis helps you quickly identify which processes to tackle first, as well as the ones you should ignore. Here's how you develop your impact effort matrix:

Level of Effort (Horizontal Axis) Determine and plot how much time, money, resources, and capacity will be needed to achieve the desired outcome.

Level of Impact (Vertical Axis) Ask and indicate how much value or impact the outcomes will have on business.

The result is a simple 2×2 matrix, with each paper-based process you are considering digitizing categorized into one of four quadrants for an easy-to-assess representation of your priorities in four categories.
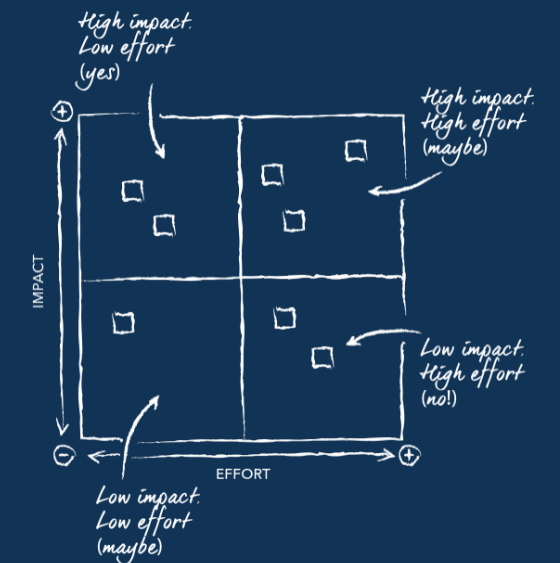
By focusing your effort on a healthy distribution of Quick Wins and Major/ Foundational processes, you set your overall digital transformation up for success.

We've found this to be a great alignment exercise to conduct with stakeholders. Inviting key decision makers to participate in identifying and discussing priorities and plotting organizational processes on the matrix generates early support. Remember to consider efficiencies, cost savings, and other stakeholders, like employees and customers, when determining impact.

BRINGING ON AN EXPERT

ASSESS AND CHOOSE THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY SOLUTION

Once you map out a process based with our proven five-step approach, you'll have a clear roadmap for beginning your digital process automation initiative. You'll know if your workflows will require automated notifications, digital signatures, electronic forms, and digitized document distribution and publication.

The next thing to consider will be whether your current technology can support your needs. If not, you'll need to identify solutions that do.

What do you need technology to do to help you successfully digitize and automate processes? Digitizing content and processes can be a challenge for any organization, especially when volumes fluctuate frequently and new steps may

be added regularly. Intelligent cloud-based technology, especially when deployed in a SaaS model, can help.

Cloud-based capture and content management technology, like Image API's Axiom Pro, help reduce the limitations of paper and manual processes through features that enable workflow automations, such as:

- Configurable workflows
- Role-based security
- Real-time task notifications
- In-app Redactions & Annotations
- Digital distribution and fulfillment
- Digital signatures
- Scheduled content retention management, based on record purge policies or compliance mandates

Bringing on an Expert

A key decision in your workflow automation plan is whether to manage it internally or bring on the expertise of a technology and services partner. Base your decision on factors such as internal resources, budget, timeline, goals, and size of the project. Also, be clear about the long-term impacts of the investment and your expectations around the return on that investment.

Most organizations lack the equipment, technology, and expertise to execute a major content digitization and workflow automation project. Image API has a proven track record of low-risk, high success partnership.

We also offer business process optimization (BPO) services, including digital mailroom, document and payment processing, as well highly secure scanning and data capture services.

WE'RE READY TO HELP

With 25 years of experience, Image API's intelligent content management technology and business services help reduce the burden of paper to automate workflows. No matter where you are on your digital journey, we're on a mission to fundamentally change the way you work–with the power and speed of digital.

We'd love to share our experience, results and technology with you.

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Get in touch today to let us help you develop your personalized playbook to lead your organization's digital transformation.

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