Grainne has over 10 years' experience developing and implementing strategy with a particular focus on using data to improve business outcomes.

Grainne Watson
Automation Director

What the UK's largest automation project can teach organisations about efficiency

Since 2019, Capita has been rolling out the largest automation project in the UK.

Practically, this means that we're putting AI-based solutions in place that will help us to serve our clients better as they handle increased calls, work remotely and support their people.

Automation will increasingly play its own role in organisations and, once the Coronavirus pandemic passes, it will not only help us to deal with disruptions but also provide the foundation for everyday business.

Our **research into the future of work** shows that it's humans, not machines, that will drive this fourth industrial revolution and it's humans – all of us, from the boardroom down – who will benefit from it, in terms of new skills and fewer mundane tasks. This will require training and supporting people as roles shift.

However, we rarely hear any real detail about that. We read about the dry technical triumphs, the hours saved and the productivity gained. But while both are important, they're not the sole reason why any organisation should automate itself. For us, and the thousands of colleagues who we work with, automation is about improving how we do our work and the services we offer to our customers.

It all starts with a plan

About two years ago, we established our Automation Practice, pulling together several disparate project teams into one dedicated unit – then adding further talent. They're a leading-edge collection of individuals, made up of futurologists, developers, customer experience specialists, technical support experts, philosophers and business process innovators.

They were asked to do just one thing: find a way to make automation work. Not for faceless procedures, but for warehouse operatives, directors, customer service reps, finance managers, benefits claimants and pretty much everyone else who contributes to the UK's growth. What they've come back with is something that no other company is offering: a platform that combines our peerless expertise with security, connectivity, leading tech vendors and real-time predictive control that gives an early warning of any bot breakdowns.

When we set out to introduce automation at Capita, we needed to make a compelling business case that promised to deliver value over the long term.

We're not automating a handful of repetitive processes with simple bots but hundreds of thousands of processes, across 177 companies, serving 35 million end users every day. It's a vast undertaking and, while it was planned in more innocent times, our approach remains relevant. This is how we went about getting all our internal stakeholders on board – from CXOs to new starters.

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Senior leadership engagement

Like any major business decision, there were a host of people within Capita who needed to sign off on our automation plans. That meant sitting down with each member of our C-suite, laying out what we wanted to do, why we wanted to do it and what we expected to deliver. We talked about money and resources, but more than that – we needed to show that automation would fundamentally improve our operational delivery, accuracy and compliance. Automation already means that we're processing documents for pension schemes 50% quicker than we used to, for example. We wanted to show that it would delight clients with consistent, quality service. And we discussed how our people would benefit and how we would make sure it worked for them.

It took three months to define the plan and the value proposition, but it meant that there were no unexpected reactions when they were presented to the Executive Committee.

Automation to support people, not replace them

While boosting KPIs was certainly an important consideration in our automation strategy, so was improving our people's working lives. The first priority was to prove that this wasn't about taking jobs. In fact, we've actually created more than 150 roles, as we grew our automation practice from eight to 177 people.

Putting our business brains together

We didn't want our people to just tolerate our automation programme – we wanted them to see the benefits and be enthusiastic about it. So upskilling was a key part of the business case, for managers, their people, and for the automation team.

Another tactic has been to set up a series of company-wide innovation events, during which people from all levels of our business pitch ideas for what could be automated in their area. We were astounded by the variety and strength of their proposals – from streamlining our recruitment processes to extracting VAT data more efficiently. Their suggestions promise higher productivity, more accurate compliance, cost savings, and better customer service.

Rolling out the programme

Our aim with this company-wide automation project is to create better outcomes for our customers and ourselves. But we also want to learn what works and what doesn't, so that we can apply those learnings for everyone.

What we've learned so far:

- You can't automate until you understand the processes and data. If they don't work or are incomplete, your automation won't work

- There's no single technology that delivers universal benefits. It takes a combination of solutions to deliver results

- You don't need to transform entire processes from day one. In many cases, automating one essential step can unlock massive value.

As our people deliver this huge automation project, we're going to report back on it over the next 12 months. Our intention is not to sanitise anything, although, of course, there's some confidential information that we have to keep back.

Our automation story will be told through the words, eyes, thoughts and feelings of the people involved: the team delivering it and those whose jobs will evolve. We want to give you is the clearest idea of the human and technical challenges that automation throws up, and what it takes to overcome them.

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