The HCLTech Trends and Insights podcast

Nick Ismail
Hello everyone and welcome to the HCLTech Trends and Insights podcast. Today, I'm joined by Rohit Kumar, Associate Vice President, AI and Analytics. Digital Business Services at HCLTech and we're discussing the evolving role of RPA in autonomous enterprise based on the recently released whitepaper that Rohit authored. Rohit, before we dive into the questions, how are you and why did you feel that this topic was important to write on?

Rohit Kumar
Hi Nicholas. Yes. So I'm doing good and you know the reason I decided so RPA is one of those really exciting opportunities where there's a huge potential for agent to come into play right and we at HCLTech have been seeing a lot of traction in that area. So, but there are also a lot of uncertainties and you know there is lack of clarity which you know about how you execute on RPA and combine it with agents. So that is the reason why after you know giving talks at a few with a few customers, I think it triggered the idea that you we should document our best practices, our thinking and the future.

Nick Ismail
Yeah, great. So let's start with the challenges of traditional RPA. Why is it struggling to deliver value of scale?

Rohit Kumar
So you know the the traditional RPA right. The main reason it struggles to deliver value at scale is that it tries to combine two very different things. One is the robotic process component and the intelligent decision making component. Okay. So what happened is let me explain right. A typical RPA bot might be designed to automate a task such as interviewing, so that is a straightforward process right, you copy the email content you click send in your time. However, figuring out who to send those invites requires intelligence. So a layer of reasoning based on rules maybe data, maybe heuristics. So what happened with traditional RPA is that it tried to handle both the execution and the cognition and that's where it began to fold. So the real strength of RPA is automating repetitive task, rule-based actions, but not necessarily in making decisions. And in a way RPA was waiting for its perfect match right is that is the agentic layer capable of reasoning and adaptation. So now with the emergence of agentic intelligence, autonomous agents, the missing piece is finally arrived. The other challenge. I would say, is scaling of RPA right. So what happened is

whenever the processes were standardized within an organization RPA did scale but that was not the case in reality, right and real world processes are really standardized. So take for example, a global company that's handling customer complaints. So one customer might call the support center, another might be emailing, the other might be posting on social media, so the more variability there is in the process. The higher the fragility and more brittleness which is what made RPA bots, you know, very difficult to scale and the other aspect that comes around this is maintenance overhead. So what happened is that, you know, studies have shown based on some things I was reading recently that 30 to 50 percent of RPA budgets were spent not on innovation but simply on maintenance. So what happened is that this brittleness, these false alarms? These, you know when the RPA bots used to deal with a new situation like a new input box, a UI change, it used to cause exception. As a result, you know, companies started to spend a lot of their time and effort on maintenance and this was a surprise to them. Right, they thought that while we'll do RPA bots, it will work. So I think in summary, if I would say right that traditional RPA excels at repetitive, rule-based work, but it lacks the adaptive intelligence to handle real world variability and complexity. So that is the brittleness. I would say the reason why RPA is struggle to scale.

Nick Ismail
And in the age of Generative and Agentic AI how is RPA reinventing itself with this adaptive intelligent capability?

Rohit Kumar
Yeah, so I think RPA is undergoing a very interesting transformation. You know it has enormous potential. I already mentioned about how generative and Agentic AI can act as that decision making or cognition engine. But you know the way to look at RPA is not about RPA or agentic. It is really about the combination of the two. So you know RPA bots that all the investments company have already done. In terms of RPA, I think that they can be reused and repurposed. So imagine RPA bots being reimagined as tools and these tools can now be provided to agents, the intelligent agents and so on. So for example, consider a traditional RPA bot that used to click, you know that used to click on an email and copy and paste its content, a simple rule-based action. Now the same bot can be exposed as a tool and make accessible to an agent. So perhaps you know something using the Model Context Protocol and MCP server that that various RPA bots that have been programmed. Okay, they can actually now be looked as tools and the and the LLM the ChatGPT of your of your choice can basically decide okay, which tool do I use? So imagine a system. Now you can prompt an LLM simply saying hey, can you please summarize my reports in the RPA bot that you built where the agent can figure out. Okay. I need to call the email bot or I call. I need to invoke the copy and paste action. So those things happen for you. But it's now the

brain has shifted to the agent. So that is how I think RPA is reinventing itself in this new world. Here ah. And so this agentic RPA promises more autonomy, more intelligence.

Nick Ismail
What new opportunities does that open in the enterprises when they're looking to transform things like customer and employee experiences?

Rohit Kumar
So I think see when you think of more automation. Right. Agentic RPA opens up. The way to think about it is two buckets right, one is customer experience, the other is employee experience right. So previously many customer facing processes right like that were two variable and knowledge intensive. You know you could now go and automate those. So for example, like for customers, one huge opportunity that I see is that speed and responsiveness. So processes that used to take days or hours can be completed in minutes with AI in the loop. For example, bank using intelligent agents for loan processing can cut approval type from anywhere from 12 hours to 30 minutes. You know like a 90 percent drop right. This means customers get answers on the same day dramatically that improves satisfaction. In these are for example insurance you can think of AI-enabled automation that can instantly extract information from accident photos, from emails and from forms. Right to process claims. There have been case studies that have shown that insurance carriers have seen and achieved an 80 percent automation of first notice of loss claims. So the reduced operational overhead and better responsiveness to the customer is one aspect right for employees. You know, Agentic RPA has a potential to elevate their daily work. Okay, so by off you know so what what exactly it means that all the drudgery that comes with monotonous activities. I mean, that is where the RPA can really enhance that part. It can act as a smart assistant. If you notice that many times in your dented job you ten to do a lot of repetitive things, which is where you know RPA can do the copy pasting for you the moving, moving of items from one fold little, the that's obvious ones. But you know like data entry, basic analysis form, filling right. So all of these aspects RPA can really elevate the person in the company so that they can focus more on what matters right being empathetic to customers being able to understand their problems, being able to spend time with them, talk to them. So I think one example that comes to my mind is know which I had built in a different organization was like a legal Copilot right. So this can, for example, interpret questions in natural language, retrieve answers from a complex regulatory database field edges, could query it by voice and get instant insights reducing the document drafting time by 90 percent. So those are elements of you know where. Agentic RPA you know from an employee perspective and what I talked about earlier from a customer service customer experience perspective. I think Agentic RPA also makes it easier to deliver consistent service and knowledge across the organization. There's another

frustration that you know customers have. Right, they get the company at a better day and they get a better service versus in some cases they might. Some people you know may find a level of you know uncertainty about the company now this RPA by integrating their standard operating procedures right agentic RPA, the agent can really do a lot more, for example, like issuing a refund right. So there is a let's say there's an internal process about issuing a refund and a certain number of questions need to be asked. That's an example where you know the consistency can come in. Maybe there is a standard process the company has in terms of you know dealing with frat transactions. That is where and you know the standardization can come in. Right, people get a much horizontal consistent view. So you know these kind of things have already started showing results in various organizations and there has been some cases some amazing numbers like a 100 x reduction in manual efforts. While you know in some cases you know there is much higher and know net promoter score like NPS surveys, I've shown that so so there are measurable outcomes that have happened because of you know this infusion of RPA with the in that in that experience journey.

Nick Ismail
Yeah. And following on from what you were talking about with the standardization of decision making when agents take on more decision making, what questions should business leaders be asking, or what should they consider before heavily investing in Agent AI and RPA or Agentic RPA?

Rohit Kumar
A very good question there. Right. See if I think about it. When we embark on this journey right first of all important to set expectations, you know, and why say realistic expectations because it kind of gives room for this to really scale and to penetrate because you know, a lot of times I've seen that you have extremely high expectations that you just plug this in and it will automate 80 percent or 90 percent. And then you find that ROI takes is taking time, then you completely give up, so just wanted to kind of start with that you expectation. Setting. The other is what problem are we trying to solve? You know the traditional question which often gets missed in all of this because you know, easy to get caught up in the AI hype. Right, okay know, like leaders should clarify the business outcome. And often the RPA journey starts with the IT team. IT understandable be so because it's a technology, it's it's a complex technology, but businesses need to be a part of that journey. Okay, without that, it's almost a few things you are guaranteed to ensure failure is when business is not part of those conversations, they are not setting the outcomes and they we are not doing proper discovery about their day-to-day processes. Right, what do they really do? We? You know technologists can come in and just assume a lot of things right. Oh yeah, this is just a

refund, are you but when you actually start looking into the complexities of their job, you realize that all the edge cases you never thought about are something that's there in their head or sitting in an so. Then the second question is you know, mandatory to just just a sanity check. Right, are we automating a broken or a suboptimal process a lot of times? You know, automation is asked. I'll give you a small example that in case of interviews right, let's say you're not short listing candidates really well right and you, you decide that you know what, I have an AI bot that can conduct interviews, you know, like a screening, so that is your automation plan. But before that the process is broken because you never shortlisted. So you're just you're dealing with a situation that oh, I've got so many candidates. I need to get interviews done. So let me now do interviews of you know, let me scale up my my interview, you know, interviewing capacity, right, that's that's a broken and a sub optimal process that you are just trying to accelerate if anything. So that's another aspect to keep in mind. The third thing that you know how will we maintain oversight and control over the action so observability right. It's easy to, you know, once you deploy something like this, you will, you know, it's out of sight, out of mind, you know what the agent did. What actions did to do certain industries are very regulated? Is the AI hallucinating? Is it actually generating rejecting candidates based on some bias? Is it doing things that you're not aware of so that can become very quickly forgotten if you don't have the checks and balances. Upfront the you know in the monitoring and alerting mechanism. And you know obviously one other thing that's important in the agent world of RPA which was not true for RPA itself, is that when you empower these agents with powerful tools that could maybe run some commands, delete some files you know like, do things that are that can be consequential. You've got to be extra careful. So one solution, of course, is that anything super critical like delete or send an email or XYZ. You need to have, you know, first of all, very high accuracy. If you are going to completely get human out of the loop, but at least make sure that you have a process of escalation, you have a process of, you know, a design that allows this. And lastly last two things I'll talk about. I mean one is the ethical and you know, risk that comes with autonomous bots. And all because obviously you know you will have people who would get accepted, rejected. You know things may may happen where people may feel like they are unfairly treated right. So all the PR that comes along with autonomous what something to think about. But I think most companies are able to fairly do a good job, at least in my experience. I think the other part that the leadership needs to factor in is ongoing training and maintenance. So. Even in the agent world even though you're using an an Open AI chatbot, but see that that model is also changing. That model is also updating, so you cannot assume that ok, i just plugged it in. I don't need to do any verification. I don't need to do any validation, so this continuous training and maintenance is something you need to factor as part of your of your cycle.

Nick Ismail
Yeah. And you mentioned identifying the business outcome as probably the first step in embedding these capabilities. How should organizations think about return on investment and long-term value from these autonomous investments? What? What's the step-by-step approach to achieve ROI? And how should they measure or define success?

Rohit Kumar
Yes so you know so this is a very good question and it's something that tends to be on the top of the mind given the excitement around AI as well as know certain reports and concerns that may have come across. But I personally feel AI has tremendous value but tremendous business value and there are ways to approach that. So if I were to, one useful framework that you know you can follow is you can categorize you know your automation ROI into three buckets. Right, you can look at operational ROI, you can look at experimental ROI and you can look at strategic. So if you look at operational or ROI, this covers your tangible efficiency. Gains. Right, metrics that you include like time save increased throughput. You know direct cost reduction. For example, the number of hours manual hours so work that were eliminated per month. Right. How much faster is a task completed now? Right cycle time reduction. A simple measure might be persona saved into hour. Lee cost those kind of things. So if a support process handled for example 1 thousand tickets a month, okay can automation now allow each ticket to be resolved in five minutes? You know faster. Right, those, those are what I mean by operational ROI. Now when you think about EXP experiential ROI right it is about what is the experience and what is the benefit that your stakeholders get right through this. So this metrics here could include like customer satisfaction Scots right, are customers happier because of a services faster and more accurate right net, promoter score right, customer retention rates, internal processes, employee satisfaction and engagement scores. So these elements capture what know what you can call as experience ROI. For instance, if you're automating a TED staff like reducing employee burnout right, you might see a rise in NPS or a lower turnover in that department. So depending on on how you you know you execute on you design your automation, you need to be measuring your experience as well right. And the last one that I would put is strategic ROI okay. So this is about long-term transformative value that automation brings to the business. So this includes metrics like improved rigidity right. How fast can we adapt to a process now? Increased innovation capacity okay, risk reduction right. So for a company I remember in in the insurance side. The one of the benefit for automation was that okay, could they launch more insurance products to the market? Could they adapt faster because market. Because because the world we live in is changing fairly quickly, there are new kinds of frauds emerging new kind of risks that are coming across ecommerce fraud, digital fraud? You know those you know deep fake fraud. So can

you launch new products faster? Can you launch new vaccines faster if you look at from a healthcare perspective? So those are elements that you know you would. From a strategic from another element of strategic from an employee point of use, talent retention right that are you able? Are employees staying longer? Are they moving into newer higher skilled roles? Is automation making their old runt work job right into something more interesting? So so these are ways you know you can. So to put it this way in a practice organization should clear goals. Upfront, set clear, goes upfront. If the goal is A to improve customer support baseline the current resolution time. So there's another thing that organizations don't put the effort to when they start the journey, they don't baseline the current and as a result, what happens is that down the lane when people start asking you know where is the ROI for this particular you know automation? Then the baseline doesn't really exist right so that is. So you have to take in time to you know, baseline it. You have to do as much as you can maybe an A test if possible. So you want to make sure that you're able to measure it. Measure the ROI in a more scientific and in a less disputed manner. And another thing to consider is time Verizon right. So some automation investments have imaged paybacks right, others will take a little longer, which I already mentioned from a strategic ROI, you know tends to be a little longer. So you may not see a drastic cost saving sets in one month, but that does not mean that you gave up on that. You kind of keep keep hashing through all the know until the time you know that the automation you picked is is important to the company. I think there is always going to be. Returns but you keep keep you conquering one thing at all. So there are a lot of metrics that can go on and on about different metrics that are involved, but but I think some of them are also covered in the white paper. Yeah. Sure and finally looking forward what impacts do you think Agent RPA will have on the Enterprise and its ability to adapt a change. Yes, so see. The one of the most compelling advantages right for Agentic RPA is how it increases the organization's. Ability to adapt to change, which is what you ask me, and in some sense the world is changing dramatically with us. Right. I mean, if I look at the way the world has evolved just 50 years or not too long back, did we get the Internet not too long back? Just probably 30-40 years back? We got social media. You know so so if you look at the evolution of stuff that we are dealing with is a rapid change. We are also living in an economy in a climate where globalization, localization, all of those things are getting redefined as we speak. So I think you know it's almost becoming a necessity for organizations to have this tooling so that they become. You know, there's always this, you know, amazing. This is saying right that humans are very adaptable and that's why they survive. So the one that is most adaptable will. Survive, you know, the longest right. So from that perspective you know it does help at a high level. But aristocratic RPA systems can adapt to new inputs new situations without explicit reprogramming. So one could argue Right that okay, you know I can write some code for this. I give me the business logic, that's how it has been traditionally done. But what agentic RPA systems is

that you have. You have an SOP, you don't have to go and code it up as a software. You can pretty much pass that. So as an input right to your agentic RPA system. And then it can basically orchestrate and function. So now if suppose you want to add a new SLA, your SOP that, hey, you know I'm seeing a lot of devas in my claims. Let me, you know add this one more clause right. So those things you can do without having to completely reprogram go through, you know, a new transformation or new installation and all that. So that I think IT allows this. Another thing is agentic RPA from a change perspective is that it enables faster responses to a market, a fast moving market which I was talking about. So in legacy RPA you know making a change would mean weeks and so on. But in the, in the Agentic RPA world right. What will happen is the RPA implementations would basically as the example being that you can now prompt your way using Prompt Engine generating and you know like customizing the and just going back and asking the Agent to evolve and and do remember that the models that you're using behind the scenes for the Agent RPA are also changing fairly fast. They're getting powerful almost every other month, so the last three months we have three years we have seen the kind of increase in their models capabilities so that. So if you are sitting on top of those models, your ability to to adapt to change. Take take Multimode Input right. You can take. Images let's say you're somebody who's on the field right their ability to take a picture of the item they're repairing, then getting the insights from that. All of those things you can now, you know, enable in your organization fairly quickly. You don't have to go through very large development or integration cycles, so I think you know what I would say that my if I would to summarize it right agenttic RPA makes organizations more adaptable right. When something big does require change the process, updating the automation is faster and easier. Often it is a matter of updating a model or swapping mod use. The result is that operations are robust against disruption and the other benefit in the environment is that it becomes instead of adaptability being a threat right that hey you now it becomes a competitive advantage right to your organization you become more of, you know. I guess, a killer in your market right that you are the ones who can quickly adapt and release new things along the way.

Nick Ismail

Yeah. Rohit thank you so much for running us through that and all your insights and time for those who are interested in taking a deeper dive into the topic. You can click on the link to the whitepaper in the article below.