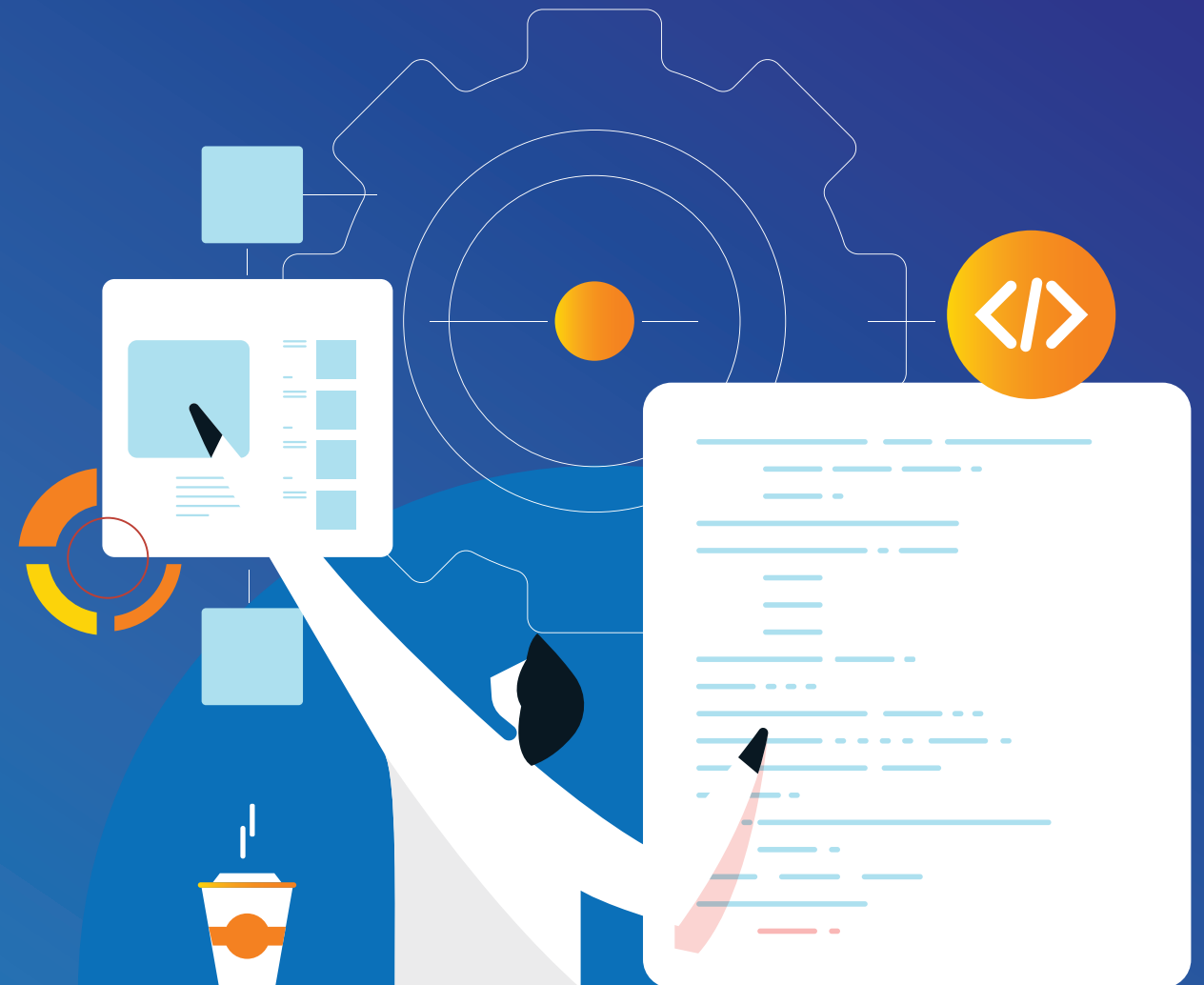Point of View

Sustaining Automation

by **Swati Kamat**

Businesses today have a defined IT automation strategy and have tackled the initial challenges of automation using various change management techniques. Automation of manual and repetitive tasks have been achieved for operational efficiencies. Organizations have addressed uncertainties over the right technology, staff resistance due to job insecurity and general reluctance due to the business complexity. These are no more the primary reasons to get automation programs on its knees.

Over the next few years, scope of automation will evolve from discrete tasks to automating knowledge work using cognitive and analytical abilities on continuous basis. The objective is not limited to operational efficiencies, but to prevent disruptions, self-heal or device a new way of doing business. Scaling and sustaining automation are the impending asks.

Sustaining automation can be compared to a weight loss journey for an individual. Once a target weight or desired milestone is achieved in a highly focused and governed environment, sustaining the same over a longer period of time is the next big challenge. It requires a different strategy and mindset. Typically, 50% of the time, an individual goes back to older self if there are no changes made to lifestyle fundamentally. Sustenance requires a lot of commitment and discipline.

Sustaining automation over a longer period will mean internalizing it in the way business is run. Each process – old or new across the enterprise needs to be involved in the automation scope. Senior management and CXOs look at automaton as a compliance criterion. Expectations are for a proactive and bottom up approach than a top down one. The end goal is not to just save on time and effort, but also to create automation mindset. For this, it will be important to look at more robust strategies and frameworks, which will enable, promote and sustain automation.

One crucial aspect under consideration for automation for any organization in the current scenario, is the presence of multi-vendor and/or multi tools in landscape. Typically, IT infra setup is with one vendor, while application support is spread across vendors. In this case, automation takes a vendor-specific approach and vendors gets to propose tools and technologies best suited to their respective portfolio. This scenario can lead to knowledge

silos, as well as restrict end-to-end automation. Hence, it is crucial to take decisions at enterprise level and across portfolios in accordance with organization's vision, priorities and policies.

Establishing and institutionalizing a Central Automation Team (CAT) goes a long way for sustaining automation in the enterprise and serves as an indicator of management commitment to make automation initiatives long term and extensive.

Research Director at Gartner Paul Delory says "IT shops often think they can buy automation — all they need to do is pick the right tool but there is no tool that will devise your automation strategy for you, or deal with the policy and organizational implications of an automation project. To appoint an automation architect is to recognize that automation has become its own discipline within the enterprise IT organization."

The CAT team consisting of automation architects, with a complete focus on all automation opportunities – small or big, impacts automation strategy positively. Laying guiding principles, high level architectures, recommending tools and creating awareness on automation vision/mission, centrally, proves more beneficial for sustaining automation. Most of the time, lack of a central automation team, or not having right visibility for such team makes automation enthusiasm a lacklustre.

Some of the key activities this team can drive are:

- Define automation lifecycle framework and eligibility criteria
- Provide automation index, benchmarks and set automation targets
- Define process/best practices for due diligence, tool legislation, production roll out and support
- Promote collaboration between core IT and business owners
- Explore opportunities for optimization, guide/review teams with lower automation adoption
- Automate governance and reporting dashboards across various automation products/tools

A well-structured tool legislation framework by the CAT team can ensure delicate balance of innovation vs regulation which is important strategy of tool legislation. Process and regulations can aid addressing complexities of multivendor/multi tool scenario. They are the key decision makers in tool selection, getting in vendor neutral outlook. They can influence rejection of / access to / usage of tools, which is most crucial to avoid waste, promote reuse and ensure standardization.

A flexible tool policy needs to go more open source at the beginning, or at the start of innovation, and then guiding teams for appropriate tool for production rollouts is demand of current times. Focus should be on having to give creative freedom to automation enthusiast, Application owners, IT owners and at the same time regulate, and cross pollinate to take all teams along. IT and business teams collaboration is critical for a smooth automation journey. Automation program could land in jeopardy if tool owners and business owners' priorities are not aligned. While IT owners focus on return on cost, business owners want to automate anything and everything irrespective of margins/cost of doing it. They would want to automate to innovate, automate to change customer experience leading to conflicting view of priorities. CAT team can streamline the process and get key stakeholders on board to common ground. This aspect goes a long way in improving an organization's culture.

We spoke about how the end goal drives automation agenda bottom-up. This will mean creating healthy competition across portfolios or teams by measuring their current state and journey map against common scale. Defining automation maturity index aids in uniformly evaluating systems/portfolios against a well-defined common measurement scale. CAT team can define maturity framework which can be used by application or business owners for evaluation of their portfolios and set realistic automation targets. View of this index across departments in the organization would help identify pattern and initiate discussion on the possible improvement steps.

Finally, and rather most importantly, is to incentivize achievements and work. Rewards, recognition and visibility go a long way in promoting and driving automation bottom-up. Sharing success stories on the benefits accrued from automation creates awareness and helps inspire an automation-pro mindset. These initiatives also indicate how serious is an organization about adopting, imbibing and making automation a discipline.

Conclusion

For an enterprise to sustain its progress in the automation space, will require a combination of commitment from management and the right mindset of staff. A focused central automation team with accountability for automation can do wonders to change the mindset and imbibe automation as a culture. In summary, this team can enable staff with skills and tools, empower them with the right process and framework to take progressive next steps and bridge the silos. While positive changes are happening, it will be also be important to celebrate and acknowledge results, since that is also an important factor of behavioral change.

Author Profile

Swati Kamat

Senior Specialist - Consulting, LTI

Swati is 19+ years experienced management professional who has extensively worked on project management across domains driving agile based projects and critical organizational initiatives . She is passionate about learning new things and democratizing technology. She holds various certifications - TOGAF, PMP, AWS Cloud practitioner and NCFM and brings in rich experience of technology, architecture, transition, release management, product lifecycle management, Sales enablement etc.

Thanks to Snehal.Katariya@lntinfotech.com and Divyasree.vankamamidi@lntinfotech.com for their contribution towards this POV.