



RPA DISRUPTING THE BPO INDUSTRY



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 PREFACE | 3

2 INTRODUCTION | 5

3 DISRUPTION OF BPO VALUE CHAIN | 9

4 RPA BOLSTERING PERFORMANCE OF BPO PLAYERS | 13

4.1 RPA Focus Intensity of BPO players | 16

4.2 Case in point – RPA journey of two BPO firms | 18

5 KEY TENETS OF A SUCCESSFUL RPA STRATEGY | 19

6 REFERENCES | 21

1

PREFACE



Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) has been a critical lever of transformation for enterprises across the globe, helping them focus on core processes. For many years now, the BPO industry has been constantly re-inventing itself through innovation and new age technologies. While the BPO industry was earlier viewed as a mere tool for labor and cost arbitrage, it has come a long way to establish itself as a strategic, value-adding, and outcome-driving business partner. Additionally, the industry today is increasingly witnessing a rapid proliferation of newer modern technologies in a bid to achieve higher accuracy, enhanced productivity, and cost efficiencies.

The industry is already at a tipping point where traditional outsourcing is expected to perish and give way to truly modern ways of outsourcing. Perhaps, the most significant innovation in recent times has been around Robotic Process Automation (RPA), which has allowed BPO providers to amplify productivity gains and reduce costs even further. RPA has slowly, albeit steadily, disrupted the BPO industry across the value chain – including both horizontal and industry-specific processes.

To study the impact of RPA on the BPO industry, Zinnov, a management consulting and research firm, has created this whitepaper. It is the first among a series of whitepapers, which discusses the proliferation of RPA across the BPO industry. The subsequent whitepapers will further delve deeper into key processes and use cases.

This whitepaper analyzed 20 of the most prominent BPO firms, studying their RPA-related initiatives. The effort helped identify some of the best practices that a BPO firm can consider before embarking upon its own RPA journey. A BPO player that has adopted modern outsourcing — Outsourcing 2.0 will not only survive but will also be successful in achieving greater results for itself and the client. Hence, the whitepaper clearly lays down the way ahead for BPO firms – **automate or perish**.

2

INTRODUCTION



Since its inception almost three decades back, the BPO industry has played a pivotal role in driving their customers' growth journey by taking on non-core processes and thereby enabling them to focus on core tasks and save costs. However, the BPO industry itself has undergone a massive transformation over the years – be it the transformation of offerings, value proposition, industry dynamics, or technology focus. The industry has progressed on all these fronts. Today, the BPO industry has come a long way and has established itself as a key strategic partner, making direct business impact resulting in tangible benefits.

The transformation journey of BPOs over the last three decades can be studied across six phases of growth and evolution.

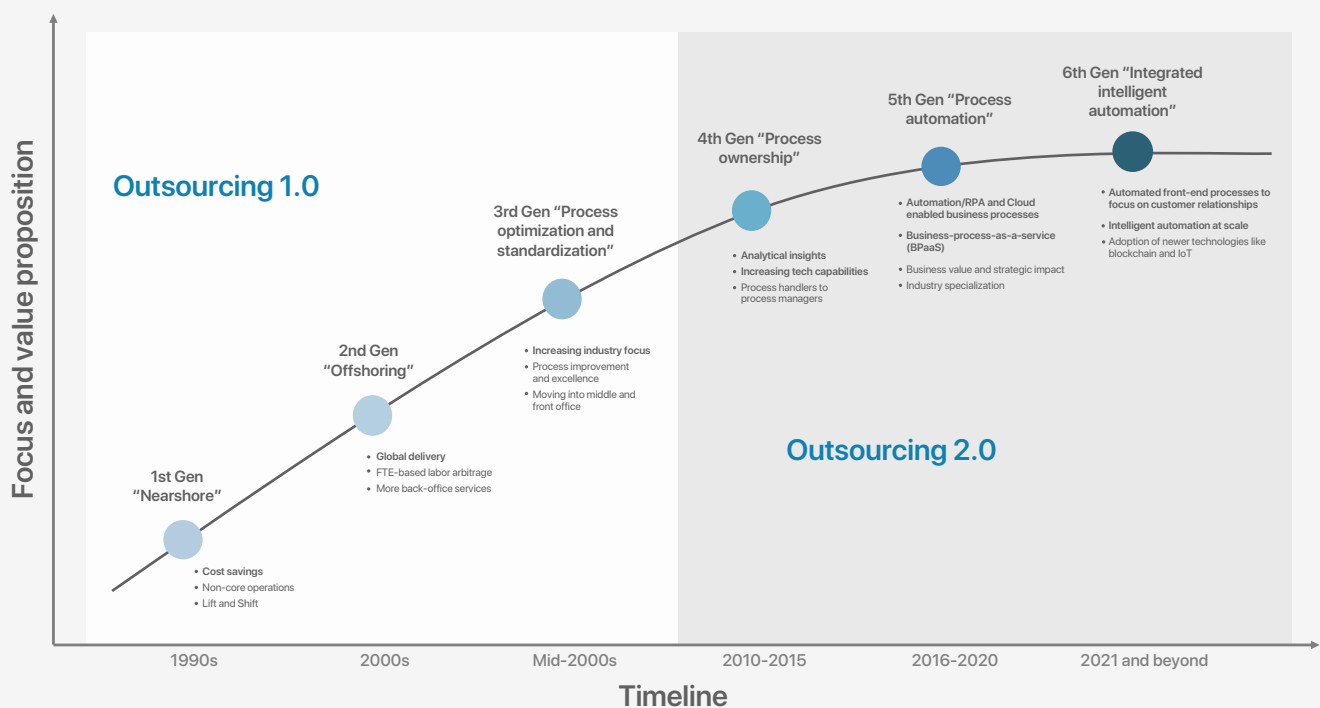


Figure 1: Evolution of BPO industry

The journey of BPO industry began in the 1990s with the initiation of "**Outsourcing 1.0**" – the era of traditional outsourcing. It started with enterprises exploring the potential of **nearshore** firms to carry out non-core processes – such as Human Resources (HR) and Finance & Accounting (F&A) – in order to drive cost savings. With the focus gradually shifting toward global delivery, outsourcing firms soon started to broaden their offerings by serving back-office processes as well. The value proposition was centered around FTE-based labor arbitrage as BPO delivery was moved **offshore** from nearshore. This was followed by the third generation that saw a further overhaul of the BPO industry in terms of new benchmarks, redefined standards, process optimization, and increasing industry focus. Leading BPO firms leveraged **process standardization** methodologies such as lean manufacturing and Six Sigma, to bring in standardization at a large scale across multiple clients.

The fourth generation and beyond witnessed a fundamental shift in the outsourcing philosophy itself where the BPO players evolved from being mere vendors to being true partners for their clients, driving high-value work beyond labor arbitrage. This is called “**Outsourcing 2.0**” – or the era of modern outsourcing. BPO firms started shifting focus from back-office to middle- and front-office functions and became innovative in their service delivery as well. Thus, from process handlers, the BPO industry transformed into **process owners**, taking complete responsibility of vital client processes. The phase also saw the transaction-led, FTE-based model giving way to outcome-based models. Currently, we are in the fifth generation, which began with the rapid proliferation of **cloud-based services** within the BPO industry. This was followed by active adoption of **Robotic Process Automation (RPA)** to help clients automate repetitive, mundane, and FTE-heavy processes to allow the workforce to focus on high-value tasks. RPA is enabling BPO firms and their clients to achieve higher accuracy, enhanced productivity, and cost reduction. Additionally, there is an increasing focus on going beyond basic process automation or RPA to leveraging **Intelligent Automation**, which combines cognitive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Natural Language Processing/Generation, and Computer Vision along with RPA. This helps in further amplifying the outcomes derived from RPA. There is already a significant amount of interest that organizations are showing in Intelligent Automation and this is expected to peak in the next generation. Other modern technologies such as Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain are expected to further augment the next wave of BPO transformation over the coming five years or so.

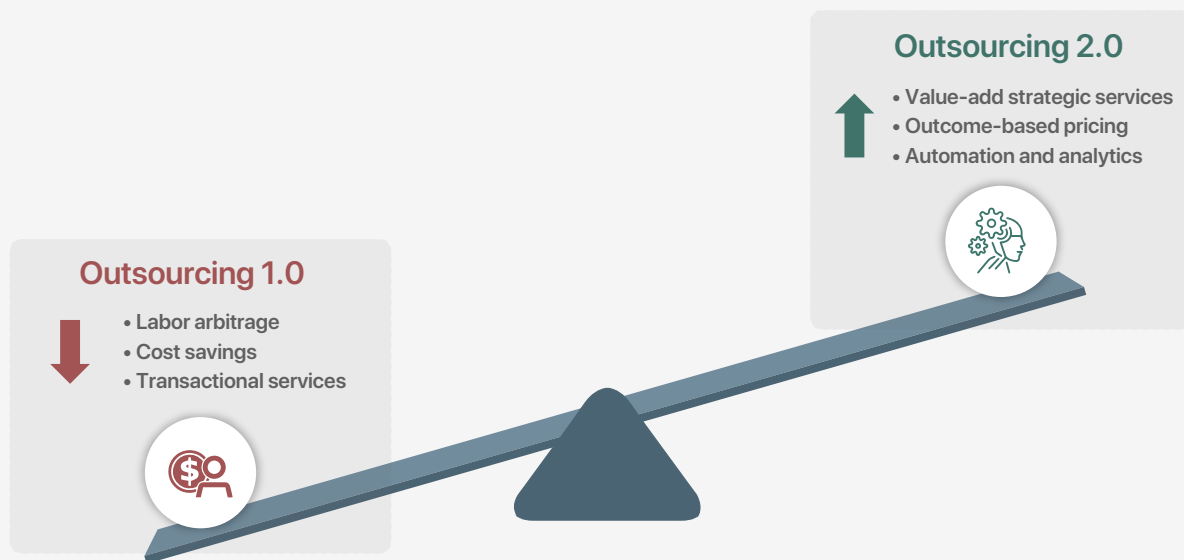


Figure 2: Modern Outsourcing 2.0 has dethroned Traditional Outsourcing 1.0

In summary, the BPO industry has consistently re-invented itself and innovated across generations. There has been a huge focus on leveraging new age technologies to enhance benefits, and RPA/Intelligent Automation has had the most profound impact on the industry. BPO players who can innovate and adopt Outsourcing 2.0 led by RPA are the ones who would not only survive but also thrive and grow financially. The ones that fail to innovate and stick to traditional methods are likely to perish.

So, what is driving this increasing proliferation of RPA in BPO companies?

BPO players are leveraging RPA in order to **gain discounting leverage and competitive edge** by benefitting from higher margins and lower costs. At the same time, with the growing awareness about RPA and Intelligent Automation, often customers are mandating their outsourcing partners to build RPA into the contracts itself, in order to enforce higher margins and improved productivity.

Additionally, several **niche and new outsourcing players** are coming up with RPA as their core value proposition. Such players are positioning themselves as digital transformation partners to customers, thereby taking the association to a whole new level. Technology giants such as Amazon and Microsoft have also forayed into the space with DIY RPA tool kits for easier deployment. Finally, the **growing prominence of RPA platforms** in the market has led to enhanced democratization of RPA. This allows outsourcing firms to leverage their existing, deep expertise. From process-level automation to full-scale, enterprise-wide automation, such RPA platforms possess state-of-the-art methodologies and technological means to help outsourcing firms.

These factors are collectively driving the rapid adoption of RPA, and hence the Outsourcing 2.0 phenomenon.

3

DISRUPTION OF BPO VALUE CHAIN



RPA is disrupting the BPO industry value chain end to end and across both horizontal and industry-specific processes.

Horizontal processes for BPOs are the function-specific processes that are relevant across all industries. These are segmented into three core categories of business support, knowledge support, and IT support. To assess RPA adoption intensity, the report analyzed ~200 RPA deals across BPO players and enterprises over the last four years. Given below is the analysis with respect to the RPA adoption intensity.



Figure 3: RPA adoption across horizontal processes

Within business support, **Finance & Accounting** has undergone maximum automation with ~33% RPA intensity rate. For instance, an Australian Public Sector company leveraged RPA in more than 25 processes across its accounting department, including processes such as maintaining financial journals, managing credit uploads, and processing accounts. This led to savings of 18,000 man-hours annually and a reduction in accounting services-related costs by 15% ¹. **Marketing, Sales, and Support** represent the area that emerged second to F&A, with ~32% RPA intensity rate. A case in point here is that of a Japan-based Life Sciences company, which used RPA to improve its customer engagement process. With the automation of 10+ sales and marketing processes, the firm was able to achieve cost savings of USD 1.57M and reduce man-hours by 3,850 hours².

Another process within business support that has witnessed substantial RPA adoption is Human Resources. However, there remains immense scope for further adoption of RPA as the BPO industry continues to experiment with the technology across other processes. Knowledge support has witnessed low RPA adoption despite high scope for automation. BPO firms need to look beyond data analytics and realize the value that advanced RPA capabilities can add by analyzing large sets of unstructured data. Similarly, RPA has been unable to make much headway into IT support functions besides the primitive use of bots in hotline support services.

Organizations have begun leveraging BPOs for core, **industry-specific processes** as well. Be it collateral management for a bank, material handling for a manufacturer or clinical data management for a life sciences company – all types of processes today are being outsourced.

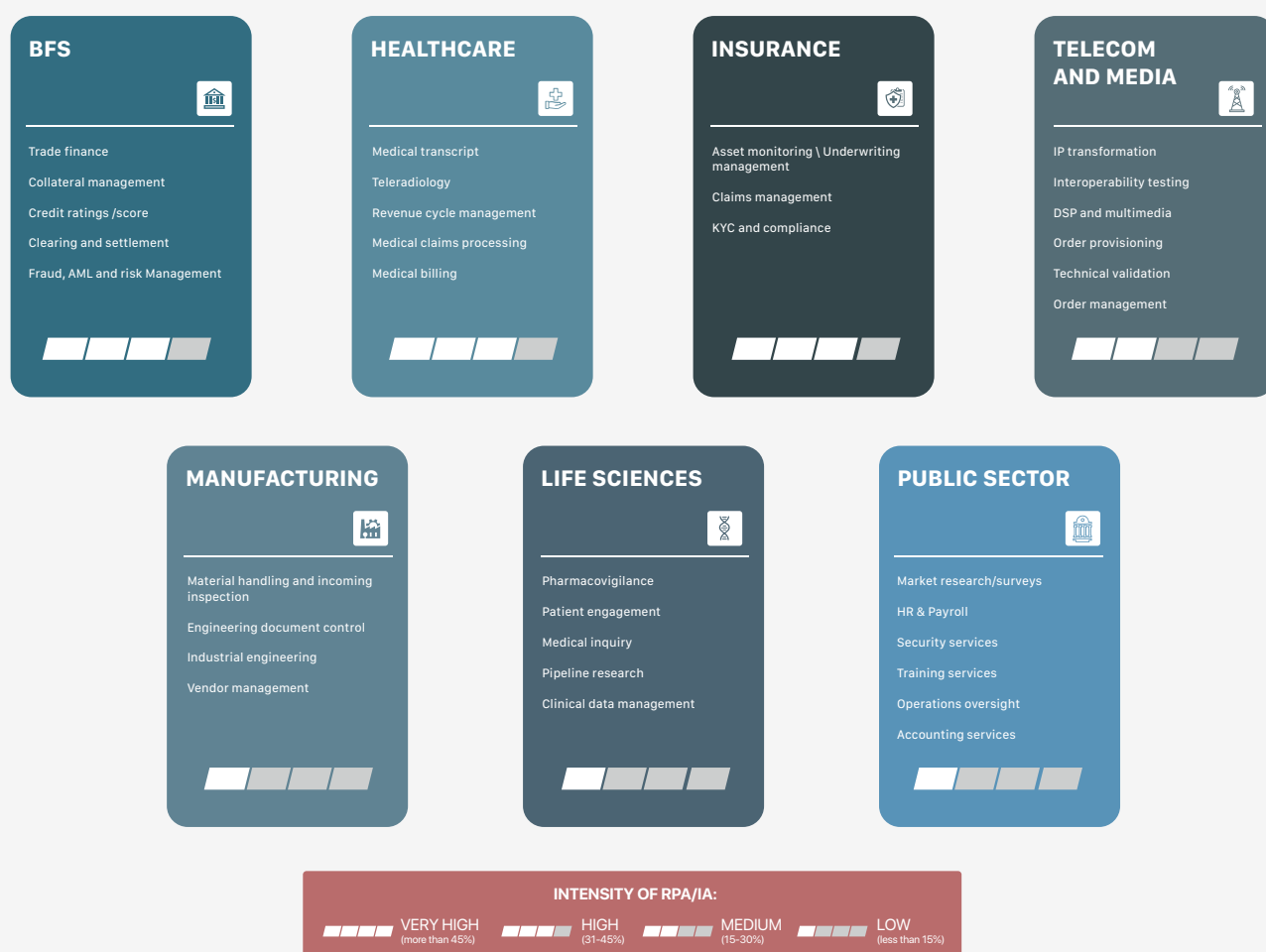


Figure 4: RPA adoption across industry specific processes

Similar analysis on 200 RPA deals revealed that **Banking and Financial Services (BFS)** emerged as the frontrunner in terms of adoption with an RPA intensity rate of close to 35%. RPA has successfully permeated across several domain-specific functions pertaining to multiple segments such as retail banking, commercial banking, and mortgages. For instance, a US bank automated hundreds of repetitive tasks to achieve 51% reduction in service time, and USD 7M income from new revenue streams³.

The second key industry where RPA penetration remains high is **Healthcare**, with RPA intensity rate of ~32%. A case in point is the automation of the claim management process that helped a US-based healthcare provider achieve 65% reduction in claims backlog in a single week and 75% reduction in file processing time⁴. **Insurance** holds the third position with an RPA intensity rate of more than 30%. For instance, a US-based insurance company leveraged RPA for key processes such as member enrollment, commercial claims testing, and healthcare product building. This resulted in a significant reduction in average handling time of member enrolment, going down from 15 minutes to 10 ½ minutes⁵.

While industries such as BFS, Insurance, and Healthcare are leading in the race for RPA adoption for outsourced processes, there are other industries such as Telecom & Media, Manufacturing, Life Sciences, and Public Sector where enterprises have initiated their RPA journeys, but are yet to see its widespread adoption.

In summary, the analysis of both horizontal and industry processes revealed that the uptake of RPA has been very high within the back-office processes. However, there is still potential for further adoption across middle- and front-office functions. With the impending onset of Intelligent Automation, BPOs must initiate their RPA journeys right away and tread carefully on the path to full-scale adoption.

A blurred background image showing a group of business professionals in a meeting. A woman in a dark blazer is pointing upwards with her right hand, while others look on. The image is out of focus, emphasizing the text overlay.

4

RPA BOLSTERING PERFORMANCE OF BPO PLAYERS

Having identified RPA as a launch-pad to achieve higher efficiencies, the majority of BPO players have initiated and accelerated their automation and RPA journeys. To understand the RPA-focused strategies adopted by such BPO players, the whitepaper looked closely at the RPA journey of 20¹ prominent BPO firms. Here, the earliest evidence of focus on RPA could be traced back to as far as 2010. While some of the BPO incumbents were quick to identify RPA as a key focus area, a majority of the BPOs under assessment only began their journeys between 2014 and 2018.

The RPA Focus Intensity of these 20 BPO players was assessed through a comprehensive set of five key parameters:

1. Partnerships with RPA platforms
2. In-house RPA platforms/IPs
3. Acquisition of RPA-capable firms
4. RPA Center of Excellence (CoE)
5. RPA capable talent (including upskilling programs)

Several BPO players have forged strategic and operational **partnerships with major third-party RPA platforms**. Alliances with such specialists help fast-track automation-related efforts, while allowing the BPO players to focus on their core functions and processes. Under the analysis, 15 of the 20 BPO players had such partnerships in place. For instance, both Infosys BPM and Genpact have long-standing alliances with the big three RPA platform companies. Besides, helping explore the application of RPA within internal processes, such partnerships also allow BPO players to optimize and ramp up their existing outsourcing capabilities and deliver automation solutions to customers.



Figure 5: RPA focused strategies adopted by BPO firms

¹20 BPO firms – Accenture BPO, EXL Services, Teleperformance, Genpact, Startek, Paychex, ADP, TTEC, Atento, HGS, WNS, Wipro, Sykes, Firstsource, HCL, DXC Technologies, Conduent, Exela Technologies, Transcosmos, Infosys BPM

In addition to forging partnerships with external specialists, BPO players are also focusing on building in-house automation solutions. In the analysis, it was observed that almost 15 of the 20 BPOs have **developed and deployed internal platforms/IPs** related to automation and RPA. The most apparent benefit of such platforms is that it helps position the BPO firm as an automation solution provider in the eyes of the customer, thus offering better negotiation terms. Exela Smart Office is one such proprietary automation solution by Exela Technologies which helps streamline reception, simplify facility management, and optimize shipping and order fulfillment⁶. Another such example of an in-house platform is FirstSmartomation, from Firstsource, which helps organizations integrate multiple systems and create new interfaces with automation⁷. However, BPOs initiating RPA adoption must consider factors such as ROI, expertise in RPA deployment, and the bandwidth to scale RPA solutions across the organization. This deliberation will favor the option of leveraging the available expertise of external RPA vendors as compared to developing internal capabilities from scratch. Such platforms don't only offer higher technical proficiencies, but they also provide extensive support in countless use cases that can be scaled across the enterprise.

BPO firms are not just developing their internal RPA platforms, but are going a step further and **acquiring RPA-centric companies** to augment their capabilities. Four of the 20 BPO players that were analyzed have adopted this inorganic strategy to either initiate or augment their RPA focus. Sykes acquiring Symphony, an RPA consulting and implementation firm, in October, 2018 for ~USD 70M is one such example where the BPO launched its RPA efforts through a strategic acquisition⁸. This deal catapulted Sykes' reputation as the first call center provider with significant automation capabilities in the form of deep RPA and intelligent automation. Similarly, in a bid to boost its insurance business exposure, EXL acquired a specialized insurance platform provider, LISS Systems in June 2016⁹. Applicable in both life and property segments, LISS possesses capabilities to automate all business processes, from quote to underwriting to issuance.

RPA-centric Center of Excellence (CoE) is the fourth lever of RPA focus assessment. Going a step ahead in their RPA journey, numerous BPO players have set up RPA CoEs either independently or along with RPA platform companies. The analysis revealed that 11 of the 20 BPO players had set up such RPA CoEs to strengthen their automation capabilities. For instance, Accenture set up an RPA CoE in Netherlands in May, 2018, in collaboration with Automation Anywhere¹⁰. This CoE provides end-to-end RPA solutions to clients in the region across industries. This includes RPA awareness workshops, process delivery, implementation, training, support, and vision definition. As a result, more than 200 client business processes have been automated. Another case in point is Wipro's Automation Lab launch in Australia in August, 2019¹¹. The lab was designed to facilitate discussion and demonstration around intelligent automation, as well as provide a technology proof of concept workshop for customers.

The final lever of assessment is related to understanding the **RPA-capable talent and RPA upskilling programs** present within the BPO firms. Overall, close to 50% BPOs were found to have an average of 500 FTEs focused on RPA and automation within the firm. With respect to talent upskilling programs, 4 of the 20 BPO players were found to have extensive RPA focused training and certification programs in place, in order to train and upskill their existing workforce. A case in point is the RPA program launched by HCL in 2013 to train its workforce on automation and RPA¹². Additionally, Accenture BPO claims to have 70,000+ professionals that are trained in automation and intelligent platforms¹³.

4.1 RPA FOCUS INTENSITY OF BPO PLAYERS

After scrutinizing the RPA-focused initiatives of the 20 BPO players across the above five parameters, the analysis was done at an aggregated level to come up with the overall “**RPA Focus Intensity**”². Almost 50% of the 20 players under analysis were found to have medium to high RPA Focus Intensity and were dubbed as “Mavericks”. The other 50% are “Aspirants” and were found to have low to medium RPA Focus Intensity.

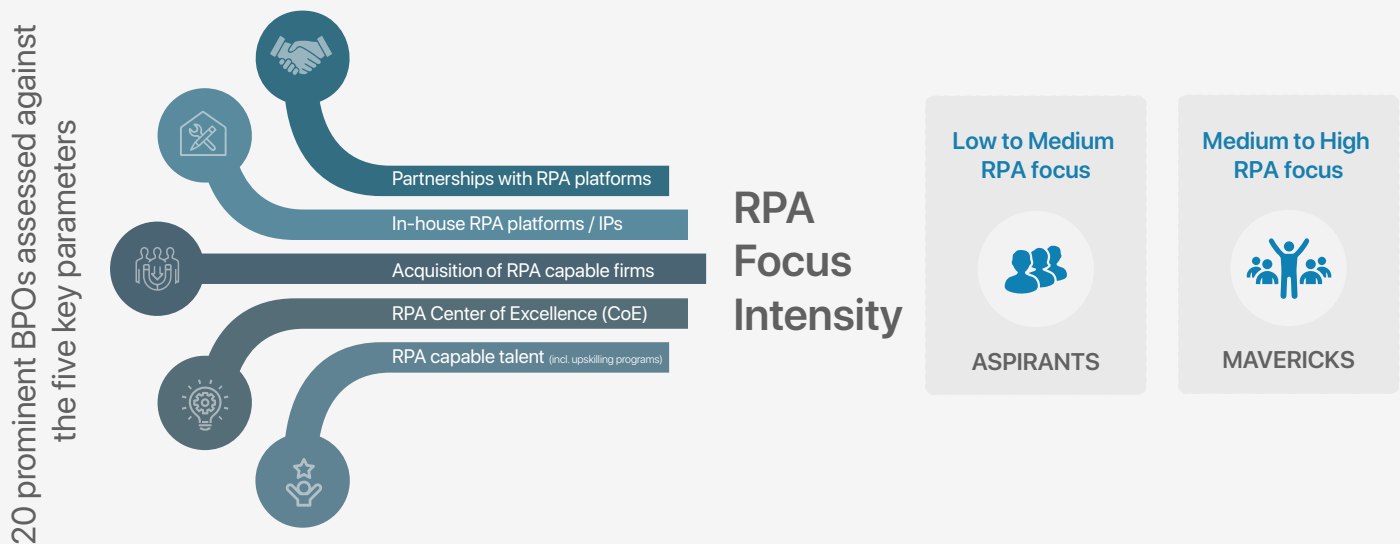
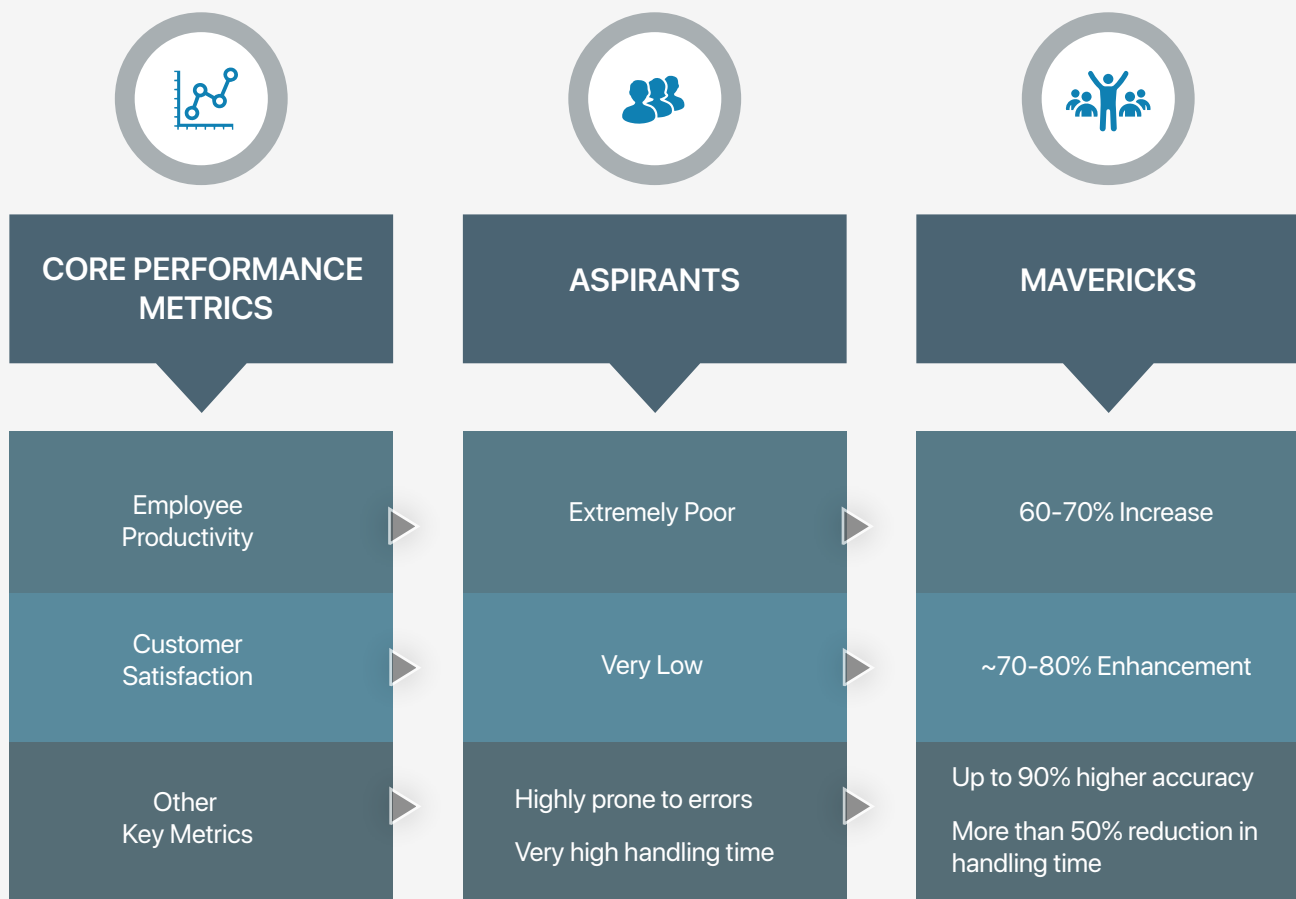


Figure 6: “RPA Focus Intensity” across Aspirants and Mavericks

So how have these Mavericks leveraged their high RPA focus to deliver stronger business outcomes for their clients? To answer this question, a comprehensive set of key outcomes was analyzed: employee productivity rates, customer satisfaction rates, and other operational metrics such as handling time and error rates. For this, we conducted a thorough analysis of more than 120 RPA deals over the last four years across the 20 BPO players. The key objective was to see how the Mavericks have fared vis-à-vis Aspirants when it comes to delivering on key outcomes.

The analysis in Figure 7 highlights the stark difference in the business dynamics faced by Aspirants and Mavericks. The Aspirants struggle to meet client expectations and are plagued with challenges including low employee productivity and low customer satisfaction. Other challenges include high handling time and extremely error-prone processes due to manual work. On the other hand, the Mavericks that have maintained a high RPA Focus Intensity are going above and beyond by delivering high-quality transformational results for clients. They have been able to achieve process efficiencies by reducing the handling time by more than 50% and improving accuracy rates by more than 90%. Overall, this has led to amplification of their employee productivity by 60-70% and in turn boosted their customer satisfaction rates by more than 70%.

²To come up with RPA Focus Intensity, each of the 20 BPO firms under analysis were assessed on the five key parameters of Partnerships, IP/Platforms, Acquisitions, CoE, and Talent. Post analyzing the 20 firms on these parameters, each was assigned an aggregated intensity rating of Low, Medium, and High as its RPA Focus Intensity (which was based on relative ratings). All the BPO firm with a cumulative intensity rating of Medium to High are termed “Mavericks”, and those with Low to Medium ratings are termed “Aspirants”



*analysis based on the study of ~120 RPA deals across 20 BPO players over the last 4 years

Figure 7: Mavericks delivering strong and consistent outcomes by addressing challenges faced by Aspirants

In addition to driving key business outcomes, another interesting point came to light with respect to RPA adoption. Contrary to popular belief that RPA adoption by BPO firms would potentially lead to cannibalization of their traditional FTE-intensive models and eventually lead to de-growth of their revenue, the analysis showed that Mavericks have continued to grow their revenue by more than 10% over the last four years. Even their market capitalization has grown by more than 15% on an average. On the other hand, the revenue and market capitalization growth of the Aspirants has been minimal (in single digits) compared to Mavericks. This clearly iterates the fact that the financial metrics of BPO firms have not dropped owing to their focus on automation and RPA. In fact, these firms have continued to grow both their revenue and market capitalization.

It is therefore imperative for a BPO player today to leverage RPA, brushing aside all fears of adverse effect on financial performance. This would allow the player to drive higher order process efficiencies, cost savings, and enhance customer experience, which are all vital to stay relevant in an intensely competitive ecosystem.

4.2 CASE IN POINT – RPA JOURNEY OF TWO BPO FIRMS

To elucidate the above-mentioned strategies, two contrasting adoption journeys are discussed below. The following accounts of two established BPO players, standing at different stages of RPA maturity, will help create a set of guidelines for a BPO player looking to initiate or scale its RPA journey.

Beginning with an incumbent BPO player that has effectively ramped up its RPA offerings, establishing itself as a key automation enabler for clients. The player initiated its RPA journey in 2012 and leveraged its vast experience across business processes to prioritize the key use cases for automation. To showcase its capabilities to clients, the player launched its proprietary platform in 2016. While the platform possessed commendable capabilities, it lacked technical expertise and had limited coverage across horizontal and industry-specific use cases, which plagued the platform and restricted scalability. To tackle these challenges, the player finally turned to specialist third-party RPA vendor to leverage their expertise and coverage across business processes, coupled with deep RPA capabilities. Such strategic and operational partnerships were extended beyond point solutions to set up joint CoEs with this specialist RPA vendor, which helped ramp up their RPA-centric capabilities. This provided the depth and process expertise to this player in a highly competitive world of outsourcing. To put things in perspective, the player today boasts of having helped transform over 200 client business processes.

In contrast, another BPO player initiated its RPA journey recently in 2016, and since then has tried to step up its adoption. However, the firm lacked a structured process or a multi-faceted strategy. Although the firm was quick to launch its own proprietary RPA platform, it failed to realize the value in forming strategic alliances with specialist third-party RPA vendors. This led to the BPO player being unable to scale its RPA focus beyond a few use cases and having limited coverage on the horizontal and industry-specific processes for RPA. As a result, the player was only able to land per transaction RPA deals for smaller use cases with its clients, instead of larger value-based outsourcing deals. Another way in which this player could have leveraged its RPA capabilities was to go beyond and provide consulting services and professional management services.

The two contrasting RPA journeys above clearly warrant the need for a structured RPA journey coupled with a holistic go-to-market strategy for a modern-day BPO firm to succeed. Automation is no longer a mere growth strategy to be considered – it is a mandated journey that BPO firms must take to sustain and perform in this highly competitive environment.

5

**KEY TENETS OF
A SUCCESSFUL
RPA STRATEGY**



So, the final question is: “What are the key tenets that a BPO player should look at in order to be successful in its RPA journey?” Below are the six such levers that a BPO player can use to develop winning strategies and achieve desired business outcomes.

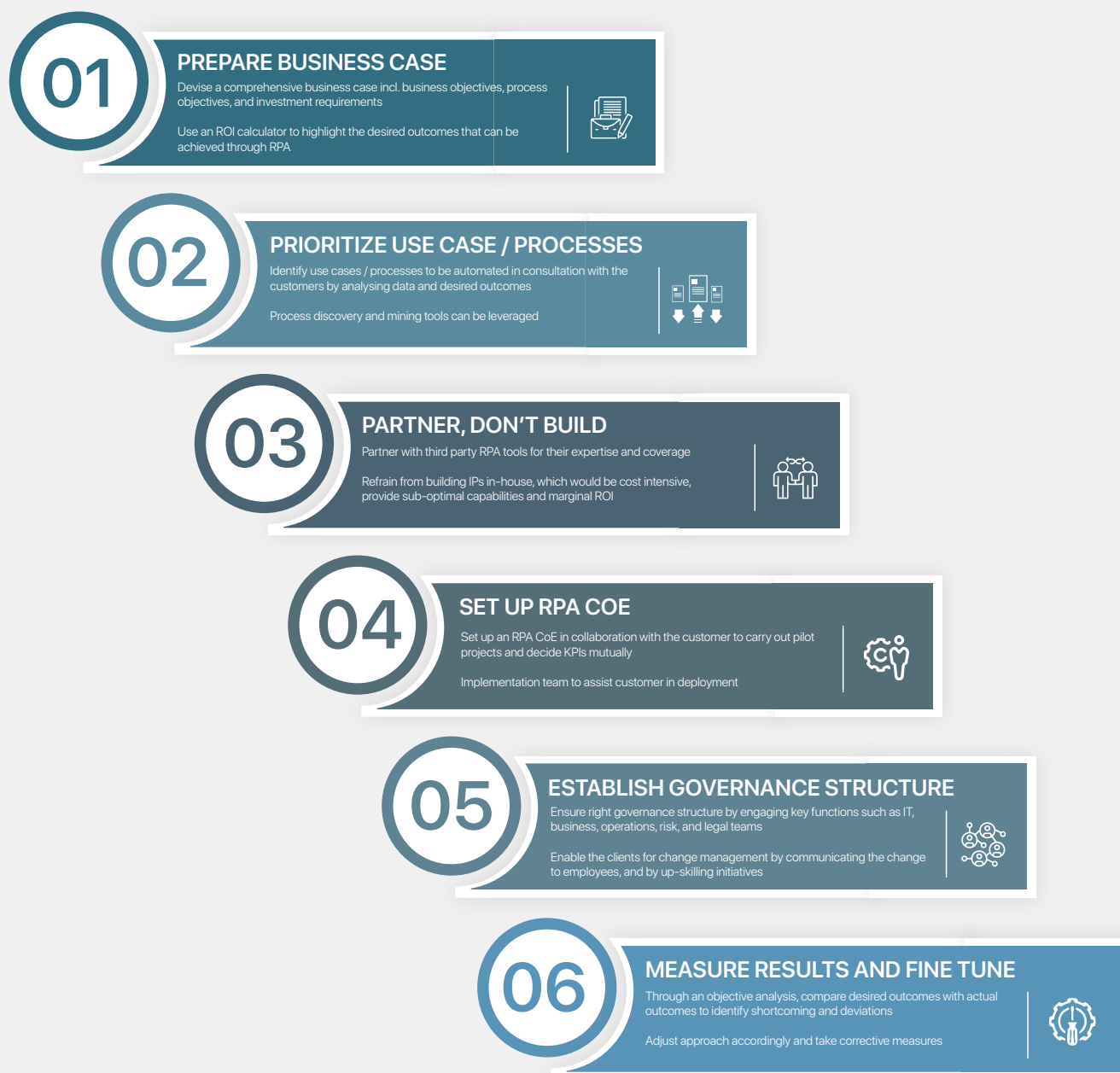


Figure 8: Six levers for successful RPA adoption

In conclusion, the BPO industry is on a groundbreaking transformation journey. With the end of traditional outsourcing, the destiny of modern outsourcing (or Outsourcing 2.0) is intertwined with the capability of BPOs to adapt to technological innovations quickly or face the possibility of getting disrupted. RPA has truly ensconced its position as a key propeller of BPO transformation, thereby making it imperative for the BPO players to ramp up their adoption. This is imperative not only for the BPO players to stay relevant, but also to stay competitive and amplify their business performance.

6

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