CEP Magazine – October 2019
There's danger in the data: Jump-starting the automation conversation

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Many policies require periodic audits for compliance, which can be a daunting task for the compliance or audit team. Many businesses find their focus is shifting toward automating the routine audits and optimizing current processes. We have all heard how automation will save money, time, and the day. However, the foundations that are necessary for automation to be structurally sound are often not mentioned or are merely glossed over. It is paramount to implement automation correctly the first time around, because bad implementations are costly, waste time, and adversely affect credibility.

For automation to be as effective as it is promised to be in the sales pitches, five basic questions must be answered. These five questions are not a catch-all or guarantee that nothing will go wrong. Each question listed below should get the conversation started with the IT and/or business systems teams before embarking on the automation journey of a lifetime. The questions will help break down silos between departments and allow them to work together as a team. Remember, each company is different, so there is no one-size-fits-all answer to the questions.

Question #1: Data integrity

A common saying goes: "A computer is only as smart as its programmer." This applies to automation as well, where automation is only as good as the data available. The first step to effectively implement automation within your processes is to ensure your data is accurate, current, complete, and uncorrupted. This is not an easy task, especially if there are multiple points of data entry into a system and data processing within the system. Successful automation requires data integrity checks to be part of standard processing, ensuring that the appropriate parties are notified in case of data integrity failures. The more points of data entry and data processing, the more chances of data corruption and even data loss.

Example

A power outage caused the network to shut down completely and without warning. This was the middle of a workday, when all operations were in full swing. The power outage caused a glitch in a shipment that was in the middle of being processed. The data for this shipment is now inaccurate, incomplete, and possibly corrupted. The whole shipment could've been lost in the system. Did the design of the automated process integrate data integrity checks? Are the appropriate teams notified when data may be corrupted? Do the appropriate teams know which processes are affected? Is there a recovery plan that includes integrity checks?

Possible answer: In the automation design process, incorporate a recovery plan as well as data backup processes.

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