



Vectorstock image: Robotic Process Automation.

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Using robotic process automation at UNV

Through its digital transformation, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is enabling the use of software robotics. This is intended to help with routine, repetitive tasks and increase data quality and efficiency of data entry in the assignment and contract management of UN Volunteers. We are using UiPath technology to achieve increased compliance, consistency and productivity through robotic automation.

In today's work culture, workload has increased tenfold and organizations facing workforce shortages and complexity of business processes feel pressure to improve. Will UNV be able to achieve greater productivity with the use of software robotics, as staff increasingly get nervous about automation?

In 2020, UNV fielded 7,639 onsite UN Volunteers in 2020, administering thousands of new recruitments and contract renewals over the course of the year.

Using UiPath, a market leader in software robotics, UNV introduced robotic automation for volunteer assignment management in Atlas, an enterprise resource planning application. This optimizes and automates the generation of Personnel Action Forms (PAF), normally prepared manually to document contract details and aid UN Volunteers in applying for permits, visas and bank accounts in their countries of assignment. Prior to automation, generating a PAF would take five minutes per transaction, resulting in many such documents only being prepared upon request.

To date, 10,071 personnel action forms have been generated via robot and shared with volunteers upon issuance or extension of their contracts.

“ Does this mean that robots will replace the people doing this work today? Not really. Robotic automation is freeing up staff for interaction with candidates and volunteers and responding to questions requiring human attention. --Mirela Zukanovic, Programme Associate, Volunteer Solutions Section

UNV has also implemented robotic process automation for financial reports on project transactions and budget/fund balances, as well as account activity analyses, for example. The time to manually generate one report for one project is around five minutes.

“ To maintain full and accurate financial business intelligence for the organization, we generate 200 reports per week; a feat that would normally require about 66 hours of staff time. --Frederic LeMaistre, Chief, Information and Communications Technology Unit

UNV launched two more robotic processes at the end of 2020: one to inactivate positions after separation or recruitment cancellation and the other to enter contract extensions.

The position inactivation robot has a 99 per cent accuracy rate, saving 48 hours in data entry time from November 2020 to February 2021. Due to its cumbersome data entry and staff being occupied with ongoing volunteer and assignment management, this process was not consistently performed before. Annual clean-up exercises were ineffective, causing complaints from various host entities struggling to keep their data consistent and clean.

The contract extension robot has a 69 per cent accuracy rate, largely due to the complexity of the process. It has enabled a time saving of 128 hours from November 2020 to February 2021, but does require human intervention to troubleshoot exceptions and resolve them

manually, after fixing errors in data entry through other integrated applications.

To date, software robotics in volunteer management have delivered the equivalent of 125 (8-hour) person days, working in the background around the clock and with minimal supervision. All robot actions are tracked through daily reports and exceptions highlighted to administration and technical staff for troubleshooting.

Going forward, UNV is developing business intelligence reports to consolidate statistics and enable data visualization for use by all parts of the organization.



Source: UNV Power BI reports, sample of statistics for the Personnel Action Form robot (under development). ©UNV, 2021

With the development of the Unified Volunteer Platform, our new volunteer recruitment and assignment management application, the organization will continue its quest for more automation to drive a new wave of productivity and efficiency gains, freeing staff to do more meaningful and interesting work in the future. The organization will also need to face and address questions and challenges around creating a culture of transparency and fairness in the use of automation and robots, and how they will complement the work of the staff.

We are grateful to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) for its support to UNV's Digital Transformation project, which has enabled our innovative pathway.

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