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HATE IT? AUTOMATE IT!

Thinking and doing robotic process automation and beyond

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Introduction

Picture a greyish office space with rows of desks cluttered with piles of paper and seemingly identical computer screens. Each desk is populated with a creature that brings back childhood memories: a red bobbing bird wearing a characteristic blue top hat. In this case, it does not mimic the motions of a drinking bird; instead, it moves up and down, rhythmically and almost as if in a state of trance, hitting its beak on the enter button of a keyboard. The scene comes from a commercial spot for the global automation software company UiPath (UiPath, 2020b). It places us in an unusually dull office space with appalling interior design. It invites us to put ourselves in the bobbing bird's position – a position where all things digital have gone awry. A narrating voice lets us know that 'digital transformation has failed to take off because it hasn't removed the endless mundane work we all hate'. Suddenly, one of the birds – presumably the one with which we are supposed to identify – stops picking the keyboard and turns its head toward a window where it stares at a real bird, with feathers instead of a top hat. The real bird is seemingly free from the dullness of office work. When the toy bird sees the other bird fly away, it puts on a confident face, as if it had listened to the narrator saying, 'automation can solve that by taking on repetitive tasks for us'. It jumps from the desk and takes off to a future that will help, again with the narrator's words, unleashing its potential.

This scene is one of many digital dramatisations of the future of work where all things 'hated' should be automated. A recently published report on tech trends for 2021 observes that many organisations across the globe are 'dragged down' by organisational debt caused by 'an extensive and expensive set of business processes underpinned by a patchwork of technologies that are often not optimised, lean, connected or consistent' (Burke, 2020). Across the globe, a vast array of companies tackle these challenges by offering systems and platforms for work automation,

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mainly robotic process automation (RPA): a type of software that mimics human users when performing tasks in the graphical user interface of applications. According to recent reports, UiPath is the market-leading RPA platform, closely followed by competitors such as Blue Prism, Automation Anywhere, Workfusion and JIFFY.ai (Ray et al., 2020; SoftwareReviews, 2020). The need for products and services offered by companies in this growing field is often motivated with reference to a future where everything related to work is about to change due to the rapid advancement of automation technologies. This 'automation discourse', as Benanav (2019) labels it, involves dreams of human freedom, often connected to an idea of universal basic income to support what Bastani (2019) has labelled 'fully automated luxury communism', along with nightmares of mass unemployment as a consequence of fully automated 'lights-out' production and manufacturing (Frase, 2016; Ford, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2015). These kinds of ideas about the future of work, and indeed of humankind as such, should be understood as deeply embedded in modern capitalism. The production of such discourse needs to be approached critically as part and parcel of the socioeconomic systems in which automation technologies emerge and are presented as meaningful (Benanav, 2019).

Drawing on an analysis of the value propositions by two platform providers, UiPath and Blue Prism, this chapter unpacks the discursive practices that construct RPA as meaningful (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Parker, 1992). UiPath (which is part-owned by Google Alphabet) and Blue Prism are two world-leading automation platform providers that offer companies across a wide array of sectors robotic support in different forms. Whereas UiPath offers 'a robot for every person' (UiPath, 2021g), Blue Prism presents its offer as 'a digital workforce' for the future (BluePrism, 2021e). Despite the minor differences in how these companies frame their offerings, they both employ a vocabulary that uses words such as change, re-imagination, reinvention, reboot and transformation. These accounts often take the form of evocative stories (Miller, 2007; Goode, 2018) and build on a mixture between technical specifications, future-oriented quotations and headlines, along with animated videos that illustrate work situations with and without RPA. The claims made are often *legitimised* by the continuous reference to the companies' white papers, webinars, case studies, endorsements and success stories from business partners across the globe.

Corporate actors within the field of work automation have adopted similar marketing strategies that revolve around storytelling on their web pages and social media platforms. They often share blog posts, instructional and promotional video clips, white papers, step-by-step guides and reports of different kinds. These materials provide a unique insight into how these companies present their fairly technical platforms to potential customers and how they imagine the future of work, with and without the presence of software robots and automated processes. The marketing materials that form the empirical foundation for this chapter are not only of a promotional or instructional kind. Instead, they rhetorically create value propositions by constructing a symbolic and somewhat imaginary context in which the promoted technologies seem to make perfect sense. That way, they produce a particular kind of knowledge about what work is and can become that is both

situated and transformative. Engaging with discourse production of this kind is particularly important in critical studies of automation, as it can help us unpack built-in classification schemes, hierarchies and cultural assumptions that the system will treat as factual (Potter, 1996). This type of analysis can also help bring imaginaries of automation and human–machine collaborations into a more comprehensive discussion about what automated decision-making could mean and how it could be defined now and in the future.

Thinking and doing RPA

From the early discussions about computerisation and robotic technologies with cognitive capacities, automation technologies have often been discussed in terms of the possible futures of automation and how work tasks, as we know them, can be radically transformed: for good and for bad. The dreams, hopes and fears in response to automation can be traced back to the mid-19th century. They have influenced and inspired social theorists and scholars over the years, not the least as part of critical studies of capitalism. As Benanav (2019) observes, futuristic accounts of automation have emerged and re-emerged in the 1930s, 1950s, 1980s and again in the 2010s with utopian as well as dystopian promises and fears. Current technologies and platforms for work automation, mainly in the form of RPA and, to some extent, data-driven technologies fuelled by artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML), are discussed in ways similar to their historical predecessors, through an interplay between technocratic enthusiasm and critical pessimism (Bowler, 2017). These discussions have often focused on the relationship between automation, jobs and work tasks. Some imagine a future where traditional professions will vanish, while others argue that professions will only be partially automated (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2017).

Researchers have debated the consequences of implementing digital workplace technologies since the 1980s (Grudin, 1994; Bowker et al., 2014). However, the implementation of work automation platforms such as RPA in already fairly complex techno-cultural workplaces is different from other computational support systems, since they are imagined to support people and fully or partially replace them (Manyika et al., 2017). Benanav (2019) distinguishes between automation technologies that 'fully substitute for human labour' and 'labour-augmenting technologies' that augment 'human-productive capacities' rather than replace workers and professionals within a specific job category. He points out that this distinction is a theoretical construct, since it is difficult to apply to real-world situations. As the discussion in this chapter shows, systems for work automation are often associated with multiple and somewhat contradictory expectations. They are believed to foster efficiency, productivity and precision, while at the same time allowing workers and professionals to spend less time on repetitive, rule-based and seemingly tedious work tasks. Workers are, therefore, supposed to invest more time and energy in their core professional practice and fulfil their personal life goals. These promises of automation technologies must be approached critically and understood as saturated with the biases and

values of their makers: a group that often consists of a 'powerful elite of male white Silicon Valley engineers' (Wajcman, 2017: 123). These matters are often overlooked by the proponents of the automation discourse that, as Wajcman points out, avoid

> addressing the extent to which the pursuit of profit, rather than progress, shapes the development of digital technologies on an ongoing basis, and the ways in which these very same technologies are facilitating not less work but more worse jobs.
>
> *(2017: 124)*

These expectations do not emerge in a vacuum but rather result from personal imaginaries, experiences and expectations (Fors et al., 2016; Hornbæk and Hertzum, 2017; Fors et al., 2020). For that reason, 'the expectations, hopes, fears, and promises of new technologies are not set apart from, nor layered on top of scientific and technological practices, but are, rather, formative elements' (Selin, 2008: 1891; see also Urry, 2016). From such a perspective, it becomes clear that work automation platforms must be placed in a 'culture of anticipation' (Panchasi, 2009) rather than understood as a 'solutionist' answer to contemporary socioeconomic challenges (Morozov, 2013). As will be demonstrated in the following discussion, the value propositions of UiPath and Blue Prism are crafted with discursive practices through which their 'solutions' come to make sense. The futuristic and often promissory accounts of work automation rely on an understanding of work as flexible and somewhat malleable. The examples explored in this chapter tend to downplay that automation innovation and implementation are rather complex processes that transform work and work tasks in light of dominant discourses and structures. The following sections unpack some of the value propositions by UiPath and Blue Prism by exploring the envisioned raison d'être of work automation and notions of how they involve human activity.

Digital transformations gone awry

Visitors to UiPath's web pages are greeted by three cute and seemingly happy spherical robots equipped with antennas, bouncy legs and a head-mounted propeller that fit fairly well with their curious eyes looking invitingly at the visitor behind the screen. The robots are accompanied with a text saying 'Hello, we're UiPath. We make software robots, so people don't have to *be* robots' (UiPath, 2021a, original italics). The presence of such robots is supposed to 'help' the company 'show – in a simple, engaging way – how automation can do the work we humans hate, freeing us to do work that's more creative and rewarding' (UiPath, 2021i). The company gives the impression that it is indeed friendly, trustworthy and caring. It wants to take care of people at work by sharing 'knowledge' and offering a 'free global training resource' for RPA practitioners of different kinds, rather than simply selling products and services (UiPath, 2021k). UiPath claims to 'believe in creating a safe, generous, accepting workplace where people can be their authentic, best

selves' (UiPath, 2021k) by allowing people to partake in a 'reboot' of work by using their automation platform. Referring to Bill Gates' vision of having 'a computer on every desk, and in every home', Daniel Dines, CEO at UiPath, envisions an automated future involving 'a robot for every person' (UiPath, 2021k).

Visitors to Blue Prism's web pages encounter a somewhat similar yet slightly more business-oriented visual approach. Under the heading 'Intelligent Automation', they show a looping video in which an animated female office professional stands still and looks into the camera (BluePrism, 2021c). She is smartly dressed in a yellow turtle-neck sweater and black trousers, wearing round yellow glasses that match the shape of her chic and corporate high bun hair. With one hand on her hip, and another on the thigh, she looks confident and professional, but something is missing from the picture: she does not smile. She does not even have a mouth – as if she were unable to speak. The imagery shifts, and the video shows the woman sitting in front of a computer screen, apparently experiencing the numerous apps and windows (email, spreadsheets and chats) as problematic and perhaps even chaotic. She points her finger up – as if she had an actual Eureka moment – and suddenly, the video shows how one of her documents becomes populated with pyramid-shaped robots that hover across the page, scanning and analysing every little detail of the document. The imagery switches again and presents us with the same woman, in the same pose, but this time surrounded by three robots in different colours. Suddenly, her mouth appears, and she puts on a smile to illustrate the accompanying text 'Unify your human and digital workforces. Free people to do great things' (BluePrism, 2021c).

These examples show how both UiPath and Blue Prism frame their automation platforms as invitations not only to transform work as such but also, and perhaps more importantly, to transform professionals and their lives. Mary Tetlow, Vice President of Global Brand Experience at UiPath, discusses these matters while commenting on the bobbing bird commercial spot that opened this chapter. In a backstory published on the company's blog, Tetlow writes:

> Over the years, I've spotted it sitting on office desks around the world. You probably have, too: the little toy bobbing bird. It dips down to take a sip of water, bobs upright, rocks back and forth, then dips down to take another sip. If you set it up right, it will do this again and again, repeating the same task. Day in, day out. It always made me smile, until the day I noticed that many of the people in those offices were doing the exact same thing. Stuck performing the same repetitive work tasks over and over. Day in, day out.
>
> *(Tetlow, 2020)*

Repetitive work tasks, Tetlow argues, result from a digital transformation that has given us more tools, systems and devices than we can use, thus adding complexity to our work lives rather than making them more manageable. By spending time fiddling with software and engaging in repetitive administrative tasks, people are believed to not 'feel productive, become dissatisfied, and lose motivation' (Tetlow, 2020). Systems for work automation are presented as solutions to such problems and

are believed to provide people with an increased level of freedom by transforming work tasks' very nature. Tetlow continues to reflect on the possibilities with these systems, and she emphasises that '[p]eople are capable of so much more when they're empowered to do what humans do best: tackling the big problems'. Doing so, however, is thought of as almost impossible, since we must 'keep track of multiple pieces of technology at the same time' and 'nobody can multitask that well' (Tetlow, 2020). For this reason, UiPath claims that 'RPA is rewriting the story of work'. When software robots do 'repetitive and lower-value work' and 'high-volume tasks', people are 'freed to focus on the things they do best and enjoy more: innovating, collaborating, creating, and interacting with customers' (UiPath, 2021h).

Similar to Blue Prism's ambition to work toward 'intelligent automation', UiPath also offers robots that can engage in work tasks requiring 'cognitive processes' such as text interpretations and the application of 'advanced machine learning models to make complex decisions' (UiPath, 2021h). In order to make these proposals and ideas about work meaningful, the company shares an animated video labelled 'The story of work' in which we are told that work tasks – involving 'to grow things and create things and build things' – are part of human nature and 'what makes us happy' (UiPath, 2019). However, despite that 'people kept getting better at work' and that 'they built better tools to work more efficiently' things did not turn out as desired:

> They built amazing machines to work faster. They built computers to work smarter, but still, they couldn't do enough work because during all that work – to do more work, they had created work. And not the good kind! Not the let's sit around and come up with ideas kind. Not the "I can't wait to get to work so I can jump into a new project" kind. The crap kind! The drudge and data and admin and the damned expense reports. . . . So the humans had to work more at work they didn't like. That made them robotic. That didn't inspire. They had to postpone vacations, they had to miss family dinners, they were pissed!
>
> *(UiPath, 2019)*

The introduction of RPA should 'put the fun back into work' and make people 'waste less time doing the things they hated' so that humans could stop acting like robots and instead start teaching robots how to make people free – 'Work is history. It's time to reboot work' (UiPath, 2019). A similar line of reasoning is present in one of Blue Prism's promotional videos, suggesting that work tasks should match human nature. Under the heading 'Get Work Done with Intelligent Automation', they explain this idea further:

> Today, work means doing many different tasks: reading emails, creating spreadsheets, and even using that irreplaceable twenty year old program. It's a lot of work, and not all of it uses the skills that make us, well, human! Like creativity, critical thinking, and communication. So why not automate those repetitive tasks and focus instead on the high-value great work we are meant to do? With the aid of Blue Prism's'digital workforce' people are supposed to be allowed to

> focus on work tasks that are meaningful and valuable while using their human capacities to focus on what truly matters for them. This involves, however, that new forms of collaboration emerge, and indeed also new work tasks.
>
> *(BluePrism, 2021b)*

These accounts build on an idea that something is fundamentally wrong with contemporary work and workplaces due to a digital transformation that has not lived up to what it promised. Instead of discussing efficiency, profit and potential structural and economic factors behind this state of affairs (in short: capitalism), UiPath and Blue Prism motivate the need for work automation platforms in affective and sociocultural terms. The return on investment in these cases is often described by referring to people becoming happy, content and personally fulfilled by not engaging in specific work tasks: the boring, repetitive and pointless ones. However, rather than simply allowing workers and professionals to do what they believed to do best, implementation of work automation involves a professional transformation through which new and higher valued work tasks should be learned. Automation platforms thus involve more than simply adding 'a digital workforce' or a 'robot for every person'. They also involve and require an organisational restructuring through which a digital transformation that fits better with the imaginaries of our times is done.

Working with unleashed potentials

'What if there was an innovative technology that truly improved productivity and let people focus on things they really enjoy doing or are great at?' UiPath poses this question in one of their promotional videos as a response to the observation that people spend a fair amount of time using technologies and software to deal with 'mundane tasks' and 'work that doesn't bring any value' (UiPath, 2020a). As an alternative to spending hours on such work tasks, the company invites their potential customers to

> [i]magine how much more productive it would be if every employee at your company had their own robot assistant to do the busy work so they could work faster on higher value tasks that make them happier and maximize the impact on your business!
>
> *(UiPath, 2020a)*

As they label the idea, this 'innovative vision for the future of work' is key to understanding how UiPath frames its software offerings. UiPath claims that its RPA platform allows 'companies to automate routine tasks using software robots that emulate humans, so employees spend less time on manual work and more time on activities that leverage their valuable – and uniquely human – skills' (UiPath, 2021b). UiPath describes RPA as a software technology used to create and manage 'software robots that emulate human actions interacting with digital systems and software' (UiPath, 2021k). However, they are believed to do so in a way that goes beyond the imagined limitations of people:

> Just like people, software robots can do things like understand what's on a screen, complete the right keystrokes, navigate systems, identify and extract data, and perform a wide range of defined actions. But software robots can do it faster and more consistently than people, without the need to get up and stretch or take a coffee break.
>
> *(UiPath, 2021k)*

The company claims that its purpose is to '[a]ccelerate human achievement' since they 'see boundless potential in the way we live' and 'believe in using the transformative power of automation to liberate the boundless potential of people' (UiPath, 2021k). Blue Prism presents a similar idea in a futuristic promotional video that puts us right in the middle of an urban digital environment that creates a feeling of what an automated future might hold. 'Welcome to the art of the possible!' says the video's narrator, in which the company presents its 'Intelligent Automation' vision for a 'world propelled by powerful automation technologies'.

Similar to the previous example in this chapter, Blue Prism offers a platform for RPA that becomes 'intelligent' through integration with technologies such as AI and ML that go beyond ruled-based processes and thinking. At the core of this platform lies what they label 'digital workers' – 'super organized, multitasking software robots that work alongside your people to automate and transform business process' (BluePrism, 2021d). In the video, animated vector illustrations of robotic bodies with colourful highlighting of their brains, interconnected and hard-working in front of computer screens represent the digital workforce. The narrator invites potential customers to compare the digital workforce with 'traditional' workers:

> Like humans, digital workers can develop new skills over time, getting smarter and more capable. With AI, Blue Prism digital workers can be trained to take on increasingly complex tasks, manage vast workloads, and make critical decisions to tackle work with greater speed and productivity, becoming a force multiplier in your business.
>
> *(BluePrism, 2021d)*

With Blue Prism's 'digital workforce' assistance, people should be able to avoid engaging in 'Time-consuming tasks that don't necessarily create value. And those tasks don't all use the skills that make us human' (BluePrism, 2021b). The addition of digital workers does not mean that the automated processes should be autonomous, but rather that 'traditional' and 'digital' workers should 'work side-by-side, giving /. . ./ people more time to focus on strategic, meaningful work' (BluePrism, 2021a). This automation platform involves three phases for working with the system: discover, design and deliver. By identifying which business processes to automate and then building the actual workflows, potential users are told that the first steps of implementing the Blue Prism platform 'can seem like a plug-and-play operation'. The instructions seem pretty straightforward: 'Just think about – and

articulate – the steps your people are performing today, and you're set'. In order to move further by 'building a sustainable and scalable digital workforce', however, one must know that such an operation 'takes a long-term delivery strategy and the right tools and technology to make it a reality' (BluePrism, 2021a).

Similarly, the UiPath platform consists of several products that all, in different ways, serve not only at automating enterprises but indeed also to digitally transform them. The software platform consists of five parts that each represents different work tasks related to their software robots. Potential users are invited to use the platform to discover, build, manage, run and engage. Although the software robots are presented as means to take away work tasks, to free up time and to allow people to engage in tasks that resonate with their uniquely human qualities, as described in this chapter's introduction, they do so, interestingly enough, by inviting potential users to new and different work tasks. For instance, the UiPath platform allows users to engage in 'automation discovery' through which they are supposed to learn about their business processes and understand how people in the enterprise work. Such a discovery involves gathering 'automation ideas' from employees across the organisation or visualising automation processes and tasks.

Similar ideas apply to the other areas of UiPath's platform. Employees are invited to not only use robots but indeed also to build them. As the company announces on their web page, 'Everyone can be an automation creator or contributor. Think of the productivity!' (UiPath, 2021j). In addition to creating instances of automation – a practice where employees become, as UiPath has chosen to label it, 'citizen developers' – people across the organisation are allowed to build, engage with and manage robots in different ways. Put differently, they can '[b]uild apps in a snap, deploy with a click, with no coding' (UiPath, 2021j). In UiPath's promotional materials, potential users are constantly invited to see new and different work tasks as opportunities and alternatives to their current work, rather than being liberated from work as such.

It should be clear that implementing an automation platform requires working with that same platform in ways that involve interaction, maintenance and even repair (Jackson, 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The two platforms explored in this chapter include 'intelligent' components and add-ons that are supposed to assist people in handling and working with the automation processes. However, the level of automation or the extent to which artificial intelligence or machine learning drives these processes is relatively unimportant for understanding these platforms and their promises from a critical perspective. More important is how *doing* automation – rather than simply relying on its support – is a question of a far-reaching transformational process or a 'journey', as UiPath labels it. According to UiPath, a successful 'RPA journey' should follow a '3-stage path' to 'make sure you wind up in a great place'. Such a transformational 'journey' is not primarily about writing robotic scripts to manage work tasks. Instead, it involves putting 'more joy in each employee's workday by taking repetitive routine [sic] out of it' through a fundamental organisational transformation toward becoming 'more efficient, agile, and profitable' (UiPath, 2021d).

The trajectory that UiPath has set out for companies to become successful in their RPA implementation starts with proof of concepts 'to get the buzz started'

and to 'test the waters' (UiPath, 2021f). While the first stage aims at finding the 'ripest pipeline opportunities: easy-to-implement automations with high ROI', the second step moves toward the development of 'complex cross-enterprise processes' that involve 'core systems, important functional areas, and key enterprise activities' (UiPath, 2021c). The third and the final step of the automation journey is where the 'dream of "a robot for every person" [will] come true'. This step consists of training 'people on the technology', 'encourage innovation and ideas for projects' and launching 'a citizen developer program that provides technology and training to everyday business users so they can reduce repetitive drudgery in their everyday tasks' (UiPath, 2021e). This final stage is mainly about making people and robots come together by spreading 'robot love' and by helping 'everyone fall in love with their new digital assistant through training and change management' by tapping 'into people's desire to learn how to automate' (UiPath, 2021d). These examples show that implementing a platform for work automation does not only build on and indeed require a particular taxonomy of work tasks. It also requires that the very nature of work – no matter the kind of business or organisation involved – needs to be reimagined and re-constructed.

Re-constructing automated futures

Suppose automation is the solution to an identified problem. One must ask what that very problem consists of, under what circumstances it exists and what happens once it is solved. The previous sections explained that RPA is more than a technology or system for process automation; it is also a sociotechnical prism through which the past, present and future of work are imagined and re-constructed. Most, if not all, readers of this book will likely share the experience of work as not always being particularly meaningful or creative to the extent that it brings out our inherently human qualities. Work tasks come in many forms and flavours, some of which might be considered dull, repetitive and potentially pointless, and others that could be understood as creative and meaningful for some but alien for others. Experiences of work and work tasks depend on perspective and context, but the accounts of RPA explored in this chapter often overlook this state of affairs. Promissory technologies such as RPA thus require discursive practices that create a particular taxonomy of work tasks. Some work tasks are constructed as meaningful and desirable, and others as a pointless reminiscence of previous digital transformations that have gone sour. The claim that some work tasks do not resonate with human nature functions as a lure for the proposal for a fundamental organisational transformation through which all work tasks should be examined and re-evaluated against how an automated future might look. As the earlier discussion has shown, systems for work automation are often defined by constructing a future scenario that requires that the present is redefined or reimagined as problematic in a particular way.

The empirical examples in this chapter show that RPA requires a particular way of understanding work tasks. Some tasks must be regarded as boring (mostly the repetitive ones) and others (mostly the ones involving creativity) need to be positioned

as meaningful. This separation between different work tasks is intriguing, since the RPA offerings involve more than the technologies and systems. They also involve practices through which the domains where these technologies can be implemented are described, defined and – to some extent – invented. Not only do these domains need to be created, but they must also be constructed as problematic, dysfunctional and in need of transformational repair. Such a transformational process – or a rebooting, to use UiPath's words – follows a trajectory marked by particular ideas about creativity and what counts as meaningful work. It follows pretty naturally that a specific understanding of the present is given form by constructing a particular future, but importantly these accounts evade questions of capitalism as the socioeconomic system in which the automation discourse is deeply embedded (see also Spencer, 2018).

As described in this chapter, work automation, regardless of whether it takes place in private or public sectors, involves transforming work tasks inspired by the creative industries. Such a transformation regards design thinking, agile methods, creative workshops and tinkering with scripts and robots as high-level tasks meaningful for people, despite professional roles and experience. However, asking how these ideas play out across different sectors and businesses is appropriate. What happens when the public sector in a particular country with its legislation and administrative tradition, to take an example, becomes structured following principles and ideas from tech companies and the creative industries? When work automation is carried out as a practice rather than implemented as a supportive technology, work tasks are required to gravitate around an axis of design thinking that should be more familiar to people in the creative industries than in, for instance, the public sector. The fact that work automation involves more than simply getting a nifty tool is essential for how interaction and relationships between people and machines – or, as Blue Prism chooses to put it, between traditional and digital workers – are envisioned. Throughout the examples mentioned earlier, the robots have been considered as 'buddies' and friendly little helpers with which people are supposed to establish affective bonds: almost as if they were friends or close colleagues that both assist and become guided by 'traditional' workers.

Concluding remarks

At the outset of this chapter, a commercial spot from UiPath was presented. The video, revolving around an office-bound bobbing bird that decided to break free from the dullness of repetitive administrative tasks, was most likely supposed to bring back childhood memories and act as a playful lure to make people desire something different from their regular work life. Having explored the value propositions by UiPath and Blue Prism, it has become clear that the bobbing bird, by taking off into an automated future, would most likely encounter more than a feeling of being set free. It would also have to rethink work and the potentials of automation. Once it had landed in a new and different work reality, it would also have to start engaging in work tasks that would be different from pecking at the enter button. However, there is no guarantee that the creative and more 'human' work tasks (which might result as challenging even for a bobbing bird) are less

repetitive and mundane than those from which it fled. Even fiddling with robot scripts, mining tasks for automation and sharing automation proof of concepts among colleagues might get boring and monotonous in the long run. Perhaps because, as Spencer (2018: 1) suggests, 'the quest for a more humane work environment – one that supports extended free time while encouraging more intrinsically rewarding work – requires changes in ownership that cede power to workers over the use of technology'. No matter the validity of this suggestion, the examples in this chapter show that the study of automation technologies and their promissory character require a robust research agenda to unmask critical assumptions and potential power relations involved in how the development and implementation of such technologies are envisaged and performed. Such an agenda would consider the socio-technological frameworks or contexts for such technologies and how discursive practices produce those frameworks and contexts.

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