Robotic Process Automation in Supply Chain

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ABSTRACT

All departments across the organization can benefit from implementing automation solutions. One technical method for automating corporate activities is robotic process automation (RPA). RPA is a technology that uses software robots, or "bots," to automate repetitive and rule-based tasks usually performed by humans. These bots mimic human actions like reading emails, processing invoices, entering data, or tracking shipments but they do it faster, with greater accuracy, and 24/7. RPA is a part of digital transformation since it enables businesses to automate procedures, increase accuracy, and free up human resources for strategic work. Supply chain automation uses RPA to make supply chain processes lean and efficient. Supply chain automation tools give companies new ways to cope with uncertainty and keep business processes and products moving. Robotics in supply chain will decrease manual labor, freeing up staff members to concentrate on more crucial tasks and lowering data analysis errors. In this paper, we explore the profound effects of RPA on supply chain logistics.

KEYWORDS: automation, robotic process automation, RPA, supply chain, supply chain management.

INTRODUCTION

Supply chains are networks of companies, resources, and people involved in producing and delivering products. They serve as an essential link between manufacturers and consumers. Vital components of supply chains include retailers, vendors, producers, warehouses, transportation or logistics companies, and distribution centers. Unfortunately, many supply chain tasks are incredibly time-consuming and error-sensitive when done manually, leading to inefficiencies and costly delays. This is where RPA emerges as a game-changer and solves these problems. RPA can take repetitive tasks off your plate so your organization can concentrate on important, human-centric tasks. Unlike traditional automation that requires deep programming, RPA operates at the user interface level, making it easier to deploy and manage. RPA automates routine tasks, ensuring faster, more accurate, and more efficient operations across the supply chain. RPA leverages software robots to perform tasks such as processing orders, updating inventory records, and managing shipments, thereby allowing supply chain teams to focus on more strategic initiatives. Figure 1 provides a definition of robotic process automation [1], while Figure 2 shows some supply chain team [2].

WHAT IS ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION?

Among the various forms of artificial intelligence, RPA stands out for its potential to significantly increase workforce productivity by reducing or eliminating the need to do repetitive tasks manually. Popular applications of RPA include data entry, data reconciliation, spreadsheet manipulation, systems integration, automated data reporting, analytics, email notifications, acquisitions, administrative services, finance, human resources, mission assurance, strategic communications, travel reimbursements, claims processing, and customer outreach and communications. These are just a few examples of the ways RPA is being used to remove the burden of manual, repetitive, and duplicative tasks from public service workers [3].

Robotic process automation is a form of automation software. It is a technology that can automate repetitive, rules-based tasks. Like an Excel macro

operating within a spreadsheet, RPA can record actions performed across a personal computer, access systems, and perform specific tasks for human users. It uses software robots, more commonly called "bots," that mimic basic human-computer interactions. Figure 3 shows the symbol of RPA [4], while Figure 4 shows processes that RPA can automate [5]. Most industries use RPA. The government does too. Due to the repetitive nature of some tasks, the probability of human error increases. One way to eliminate errors is by using RPA.

Robotic process automation solutions fall into three key categories: attended RPA, unattended RPA and hybrid RPA, as shown in Figure 5 [6].

Robotic process automation is a type of software that mimics the activity of a human being in carrying out a task within a process. It is a technology that automates repetitive tasks using software robots. RPA uses a set of automation tools to automate repetitive tasks and manual processes performed electronically. Since RPA can automate tasks that are rule-based, manual, repetitive, and tedious, delivering the highest levels of accuracy and eradicating human errors, it is a seamless fit for the finance industry. Here are some specific examples of what RPA in finance can do [7]:
- Opening emails and joining attachments
- Automatically logging into various applications on the web
- Shifting folders and files
- Copying and pasting
- Completing forms
- Collecting data from databases and the web
- Making calculations
- Connecting to system API
- Extracting structured data from documents
- Gathering stats from social media
- Following if/then decisions and rules

Some of these tasks are displayed in Figure 6 [6].

At its core, robotic process automation (RPA) is a tool designed to mimic rule-based business processes, performing them seamlessly and without fatigue. RPA is a rule-driven method that is limited in its application. The technology functions much like a Microsoft Excel macro; the key difference is in power and reach. It follows set rules, similar to how an Excel macro works, to do things like move files or log into accounts. Growing as a popular solution in finance and accounting, RPA refers to software technology or "software robots" with artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) capabilities. The "software robots" have the ability to learn and complete a high volume of rules-based, repetitive tasks, and business processes. They have the capacity to operate much faster than humans, with

100% precision and reliability, working around the clock.

Finance and human resources are just two examples of departments likely to have many use cases that RPA can help solve. Some examples of good use cases for RPA in finance include processing customer orders, ensuring timely vendor payments, and managing period ending financial close processes. For human resources, some examples include employee onboarding, time tracking, and leave of absence management. Processes where human judgment is needed are not appropriate for RPA since RPA automations rely on clear, consistently applied rules [8].

Along with RPA, one should be aware of both business process automation (BPA) and digital process automation (DPA) – two commonly used automation technologies that robotics process automation can be paired to optimize and streamline a digital transformation. BPA refers to the use of technology to automate complex, multi-step workflows, typically very specific to a company's core business functions. DPA offers dual power by automating processes from end to end, and optimizing common workflows that involve external human interactions (i.e. sales, management). Separately, RPA and AI are quite powerful, but leveraging them together is undoubtedly advantageous to any financial institution. When deployed together, AI is the "brains" behind RPA's bots [9].

ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION IN SUPPLY CHAIN
The supply chain and logistics department is a cornerstone of modern business operations, responsible for managing everything from procurement and inventory management to order fulfillment and shipment tracking. Traditional methods of handling procurement, inventory, and order fulfillment are often slow, error-prone, and costly. In their pursuit of efficiency and smooth workflows, industries are turning to robotic process automation (RPA) as a game-changing element in supply chain logistics. RPA is a software technology that harnesses artificial intelligence and machine learning to simplify monotonous and manual tasks such as entering data, generating reports, and managing inventory. RPA, which uses smart bots to handle monotonous tasks, is altering how organizations handle their supply chains. This technology is taking over routine activities like data entry, tracking orders, and processing invoices. Businesses that implement RPA can automate various aspects of their supply chain operations. This results

in increased efficiency and a reduced need for human intervention [10].

Robotic process automation in supply chain refers to the application of software tools to automate repetitive, rule-based tasks across various stages of supply chain management. RPA is revolutionizing supply chain management by automating mundane and repetitive tasks, allowing businesses to operate faster and with greater accuracy. When applied to supply chain management, RPA offers game-changing potential. From procurement to delivery, bots can streamline operations and improve decision-making. There are many RPA solutions on the market, and not all of them are good for your specific needs. A good starting point for an RPA solution is to look for one that provides you with full scalability and integration capabilities.

APPLICATIONS OF ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION IN SUPPLY CHAIN

The transformative power of RPA is evident in real-world applications across industries, including supply chain management. RPA has numerous applications across the supply chain. Some of the most popular applications include the following [11,12]:

➢ *Order Management:* Order management is the heartbeat of any supply chain. It is a crucial part of the supply chain and is where much of the complexity in supply networks comes in. Here, order management refers to everything related to tracking, capturing, fulfilling, and managing customer orders. It contains many repetitive steps, making it a prime candidate for supply chain automation. RPA can handle complex workflows. With RPA in play, handling orders becomes a breeze. Incorporating RPA into the system automates the entire order processing journey – from double-checking customer details to promptly updating inventory levels and swiftly generating shipping labels. RPA can save time by verifying orders, pulling data from multiple systems, and eliminating duplicate orders, all without human input. Smart bots can work 24/7, ensuring that orders are managed effectively even when workers are not in the office. Order processing automation helps us save time by using bots to handle data entry, track orders, and update customer records. These tools connect with warehouse management systems to check stock levels fast.

➢ *Warehousing:* No matter what product a company sells or in which industry a company belongs, you need warehouses to store products at strategic locations. Managing a large number of products is not an easy job in warehouses. In warehouses,

automation has turned what was once the slow, manual process of locating products into a veritable snap, with finely tuned robots gliding across the floor, fetching items from shelves and delivering them directly to packing stations. Instead of workers literally having to walk miles each day retrieving products, robots handle this busy work in a fraction of the time. This both speeds up order fulfillment and maximizes the use of both warehouse space and personnel. Figure 7 shows a robot used in managing stock in a warehouse [2].

➢ *Invoice Management:* Manual invoice handling can be slow and error-prone. Companies that rely on manual invoice creation often encounter delays, errors, and discrepancies. Invoice management is one of the top use cases for RPA across sectors, and with good reason. Invoicing and payments involve a lot of necessary but tedious steps. Invoicing robots can download invoices, scan or read paper invoices using OCR, capture data from emails, validate invoices, monitor payment deadlines, and streamline invoice acceptance. RPA handles invoice processing much faster than humans. It checks data on invoices, matches them with orders and receipts, and updates our systems. This means fewer delays at distribution centers. Figure 8 shows a robot handling invoices [2].

➢ *Supply and Demand Planning:* Anticipating and reacting to the supply and demand process can be a daunting task especially if you just rely on human labor. Supply and demand planning relies heavily on accurate and timely data. Companies must accurately forecast customer demand and ensure the inventory supply meets the forecast targets. Accuracy is key here. And for accuracy, we need reliable data. Before automation, supply and demand planning was a tedious process. This is where RPA comes in. With smart bots, companies can collect, store, and extract crucial data needed for accurate forecasting. The bot can collect data from anywhere - any system, emails, market intelligence reports, sales teams, vendor data, and so on, to provide the most accurate picture of the current climate.

➢ Shipment Tracking: Automation is used to track shipments in real time. AI and IoT tools help us see where parcels move from our distribution centers to last-mile delivery spots. A logistics provider raised shipment tracking accuracy by 95% using robotic process automation. This helps us fix bottlenecks fast and keep customers happy. Order management becomes faster as we analyze

data and spot delays before they become big problems. Automation improved our shipment tracking accuracy by ninety-five percent.

➤ *Logistics and Transportation:* Shipping the products to the right destination is also a very crucial part of supply chain management. Transportation companies play a critical role in the supply chain. They deliver goods across different links, including material suppliers, manufacturers, retailers, and customers. Logistics and transportation are integral elements of the supply chain, involving the movement and management of goods from suppliers to customers. Efficient tracking and route optimization are crucial for minimizing costs, enhancing delivery speed, and improving overall operational efficiency. Traffic jams, bad weather, and other events that cause unexpected delays no longer need to bring transportation and logistics to a standstill, thanks to automation. RPA simplifies and accelerates the tracking of shipments and management of transportation logistics. RPA bots can automate tasks such as updating shipment statuses or generating tracking reports. Artificial intelligence (AI) enhances route optimization by analyzing a wide range of data to determine the most efficient delivery routes. Companies like UPS have turned logistics into an art form, using smart technology to cut down delivery times and optimize the basics of every trip.

➤ *Predictive Maintenance:* Predictive maintenance is an advanced approach to equipment upkeep that leverages data and technology to anticipate and address potential failures before they occur. Traditionally, maintenance activities were reactive or scheduled at fixed intervals, often leading to unnecessary downtime or unexpected breakdowns. RPA and AI enhance the efficiency of maintenance workflows by automating various tasks associated with maintenance management. RPA can handle administrative tasks such as generating maintenance work orders, tracking inventory of spare parts, and updating maintenance records.

BENEFITS
RPA can greatly improve business process automation, which will increase accuracy, productivity, and efficiency. It automates jobs and frees up human resources to concentrate on more crucial operations. It makes quick data exchange possible, increasing processing effectiveness. By enabling workers to concentrate on more strategic responsibilities, RPA improves job satisfaction and raises employee satisfaction. automation improves transparency. Other benefits of RPA in supply chain include the following [10,13,14]:

➤ *Cost Reduction:* Given all the advantages, robotic process automation is economical because it reduces audit expenses, speeds up process cycle times, gets rid of errors, and increases productivity. By removing errors, speeding up process cycle times, improving productivity, improving decision-making, workforce optimization, and business process scaling, RPA helps reduce operational costs. RPA systems effectively perform tasks, thereby minimizing the likelihood of errors and eliminating the necessity for repetitive human actions. Consequently, this accelerates task completion and lowers costs, as there is no requirement to hire additional team members for task execution. By simplifying audit procedures, robotic process automation can lower audit expenses.

➤ *Customer Service:* Customer service is a critical touchpoint in the supply chain, especially when it comes to post-sale support. RPA helps streamline this area by automating tasks like processing returns and issuing refunds. RPA can help field customer inquiries, solve issues, and educate customers. As a result, your clients will have their problems handled faster, questions answered in a more timely manner, and ultimately, a much-improved customer experience.

➤ *Customer Satisfaction:* Customer satisfaction provides another vital measure of RPA's effectiveness, reflecting improvements in service speed, order accuracy, and communication transparency. RPA revolutionizes customer communication by automating updates through SMS or email. This keeps customers well-informed and reduces the workload on customer service teams. As a result, they can focus on more complex tasks, thereby improving the overall service experience.

➤ *Enhanced Accuracy:* Human errors in data entry and manual processing can lead to major disruptions. RPA eliminates these errors by automating data handling, which ensures consistent and accurate records across the supply chain. It enhances the precision of supply chain operations. By automating tasks prone to human error, like order management and inventory control, it ensures accurate data handling. This 24/7 operational reliability drastically reduces mistakes, creating a more trustworthy and efficient supply chain environment.

➢ *Increased Efficiency:* When it comes to efficiency, RPA is a game-changer. Supply chain managers typically juggle numerous time-consuming tasks. RPA enables businesses to automate time-consuming tasks such as inventory updates, order processing, and demand planning. RPA applications work at a faster rate, cutting down data management time by up to 50%. This significant reduction in workload leads to enhanced overall business efficiency. RPA reduces human labor by using bots to automate operations across several systems and applications, hence improving operational efficiency.

➢ *Increased Visibility:* Limited visibility into supply chain operations hinders decision-making. RPA can collect and process data from various systems, providing real-time insights into supply chain performance. Enhanced visibility helps identify potential issues and take proactive measures.

➢ *Enhanced Decision Making:* RPA can collect and process data to generate predictive insights, helping businesses anticipate future trends. By combining RPA with advanced analytics, organizations can optimize decision-making and identify the best course of action.

➢ *Data Entry:* Data entry is a critical part of supply chain operations, but it is also prone to errors and delays. Supply chains generate massive amounts of data, from purchase orders and invoices to shipping manifests and customs declarations. Manually entering and managing this data is not only tedious but also prone to errors. RPA can automatically extract and input data from invoices, orders, and shipping documents, ensuring that all records are up-to-date and accurate RPA bots can extract data from emails, PDFs, spreadsheets, and web portals, and then validate and input it into the appropriate systems. This ensures that records are accurate, up to date, and accessible across departments.

➢ *Data Analytics:* Data analytics is critical to supply chain automation, as it turns raw data into actionable insights predicting demand, optimizing inventory, and identifying inefficiencies. By analyzing large volumes of data from various sources across the supply chain, companies can identify patterns that can inform decision-making.

➢ *Scalability:* Scalability metrics assess how well RPA adapts to increased workloads or new workflows, demonstrating its ability to grow alongside business needs. RPA is a great solution in supply chain management, and it enables a business to scale up fast. During peak seasons or sudden spikes in demand, businesses can scale their bot workforce easily without significant costs or infrastructure changes. This flexibility is a key advantage in dynamic markets. Because robotic process automation may scale up or down without adding more workers, it improves scalability potential in response to changing volumes.

Some of these benefits are displayed in Figure 9 [13].

CHALLENGES

Finding processes that can be automated is a hurdle in robotic process automation. Not every process can be automated via robotic process automation. Determining which procedures stand to gain from automation is crucial. For software robots to function properly, all tasks must have explicit instructions. Workers have too much information to retain. High costs often stand in the way. Many companies face trouble integrating RPA with their current systems. RPA software is not a way to automate skilled labor out of the job. Other challenges of RPA in supply chain include the following [10,15,16]:

➢ *Implementation Costs*: Technology and infrastructure costs at the onset can be high. The cost of RPA varies depending on the scale and requirements of the organization. Small and medium-sized enterprises might incur expenses ranging from $4,000 to $15,000 for a single bot. Large enterprise organizations may invest up to $20 million for a comprehensive RPA solution comprising up to 500 robots. Such a deployment has the potential to replace over 1,000 employees and yield savings exceeding $100 million.

➢ *Legacy Systems:* Each organization has its own legacy systems, multiple data inputs, and manual processes. The ability to connect significantly dissimilar systems across your supply chain allows you to have more data on hand faster when making executive decisions about forecasting while ensuring your demand planning is accurate. RPA integrates seamlessly with a variety of supply chain management systems, including commercial, off-the-shelf solutions as well as homegrown, custom platforms

➢ *Order Processing Delays*: Order processing often involves manual tasks such as data entry, order verification, and inventory checks, which can lead to delays and errors. RPA can automate the entire order-to-fulfillment process, ensuring that orders are processed quickly and accurately, and reducing lead times.

➤ *Inventory Management Inefficiencies*: Maintaining accurate inventory records can be challenging, particularly when dealing with large volumes of goods. RPA can automatically update inventory systems in real time, ensuring that stock levels are always accurate and that inventory is replenished when needed.

➤ *Shipment Tracking:* Keeping track of shipments and providing timely updates to customers can be a complex task. RPA can automate the tracking of shipments, providing real-time updates and notifying customers of delays or changes in delivery schedules.

➤ *Data Quality:* AI systems depend on good-quality data; bad data can result in poor-quality insights and decisions that are not optimal.

➤ *Data Security*: Data security is another big concern for us. We need to protect sensitive information while using new technology like AI or IoT tools.

➤ *Change Management:* Managing changes is a difficult task for any organization. It requires a lot of time and effort. Changes are needed, but risks linger as we adapt to these challenges in our operations. Organizations need to manage the shift to automated systems with caution to ensure acceptance by employees and reduce resistance. Resistance to change can deter progress, so teams shifting to automation need to receive plenty of advance notice and clear communication about how to execute the plan.

➤ *Regulatory Compliance:* Regulations are constantly changing, making it difficult for companies to keep up. The automation of supply chain processes significantly minimizes the likelihood of mistakes that could jeopardize a company's ability to maintain regulatory compliance and provide detailed audit trails. Systems can track and log every step of product handling so safety and legal standards are met without extra effort. This reduces the risk of compliance issues and fines while also giving companies peace of mind that they're following all the rules. Designed well, automation can also improve compliance in another critical area: the heightening regulatory oversight of environmental and social responsibility in supply chains.

FUTURE OF ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION IN SUPPLY CHAIN

RPA in supply chain automates repetitive tasks like inventory tracking, order processing, and shipment scheduling. As technology continues to evolve, RPA will play an increasingly important role in shaping the future of supply chain management. By embracing these trends, organizations can gain a competitive advantage and drive operational excellence. As the supply chain landscape continues to evolve, RPA will play an increasingly crucial role in shaping the future of logistics. AI and IoT are becoming key players in this space since these technologies help us analyze data more effectively. The future of supply chain management is the increasing fusion of these technologies and RPA. The combination of RPA and AI facilitates seamless coordination between different components of the supply chain. While RPA is great at following rules, combining it with artificial intelligence takes automation to the next level. This blend, often called intelligent automation, allows bots to make decisions, learn from data, and adapt to changing conditions.

In the future, supply chains are expected to become more agile, transparent, and responsive, allowing companies to operate with increasing levels of precision and efficiency. Robotics will continue to take center stage in warehousing, with machines handling a variety of complex tasks—such as sorting, packing, assembling, and distributing products. The rise of autonomous vehicles and drones is a major development that will affect supply chain. These technologies could transform supply chain logistics, making deliveries significantly quicker and more cost-effective.

CONCLUSION

Because automation helps companies do more with less, it can be especially advantageous for curbing the potential effects of rising material costs, limited warehouse space, and fluctuating transportation costs. Automation not only increases the efficiency of supply chains, it creates resilience, allowing companies to pivot in the face of uncertainty to stay ahead of changing market conditions. Automation also helps companies respond to increasingly common supply chain disruptions.

Robotic process automation (RPA) in the supply chain involves using software robots to automate repetitive, rules-based tasks like data entry, order processing, and inventory management. RPA can change how we manage the supply chain. It has the potential to revolutionize supply chain management by automating repetitive tasks, improving accuracy, and driving efficiency. It transforms supply chain management by automating repetitive tasks, reducing errors, and improving overall efficiency. Many companies see RPA as essential for success in this sector.

Although RPA is in the early stages of adoption within supply chain operations, businesses are rapidly

embracing automation to streamline and enhance the efficiency of their supply chains. Organizations that embrace automation now will not only gain operational efficiency but also build a more intelligent and future-ready supply chain ecosystem. Although we will see supply chain disruption for the next several years, we do not need to resign ourselves to defeat. More information about robotic process automation in supply chain can be found in the books [17-19] and a related journal: *Supply Chain Analytics.*

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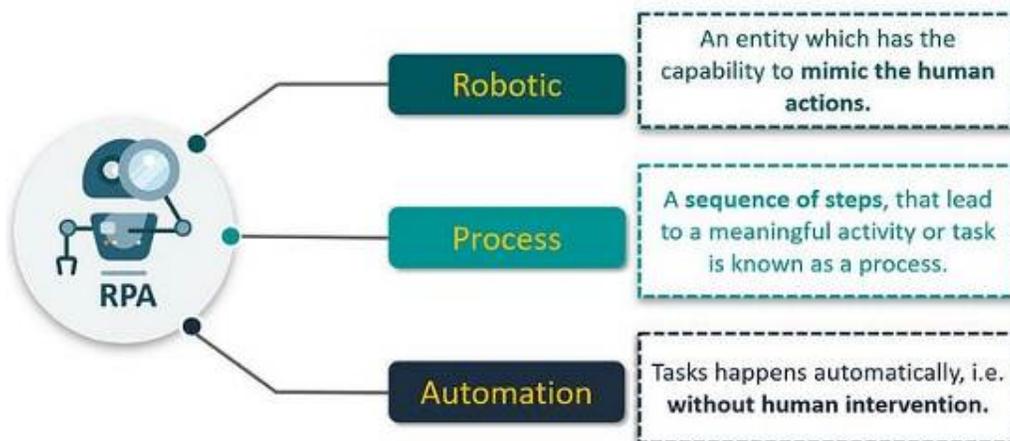[19] Nikola, *Optimizing Operations: Harnessing Robotic Process Automation for Supply Chain Success.* Sunshine, 2023.

Figure 1 A definition of robotic process automation [1].

Figure 2 Supply chain team [2].

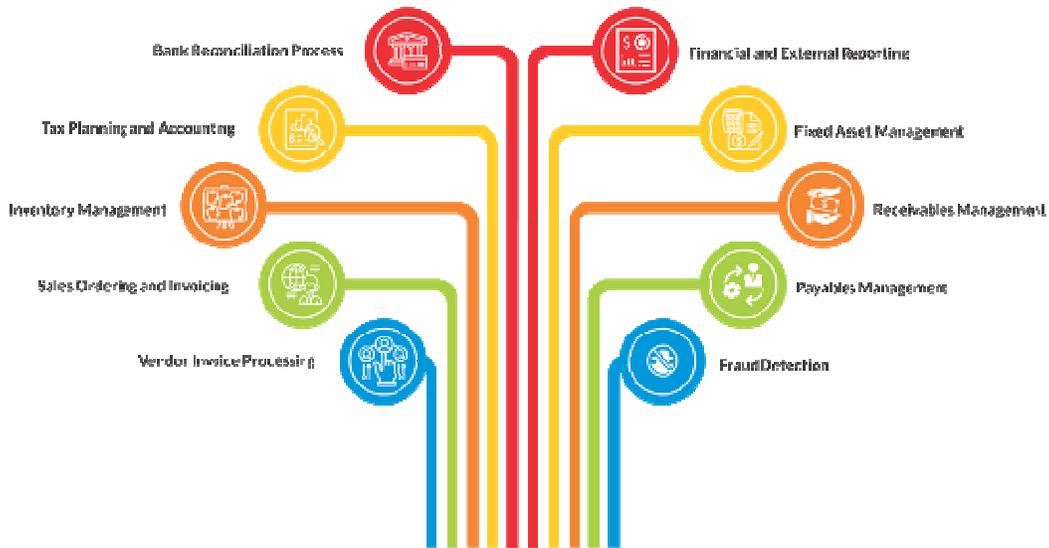**Figure 3 Symbol of RPA [4].**

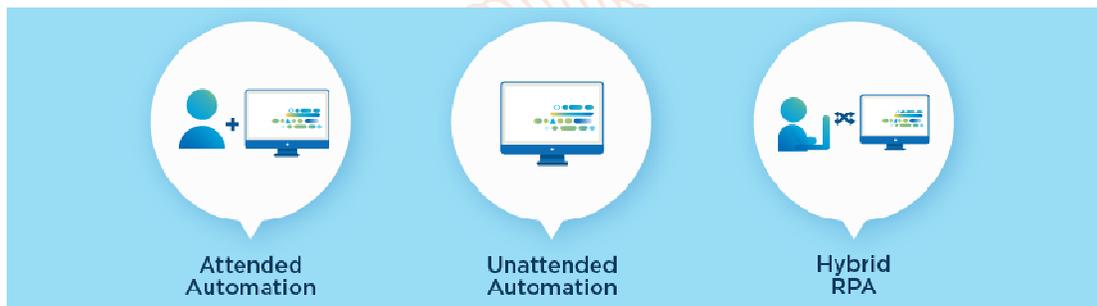**Figure 4 Processes that RPA can automate [5].**

Figure 5 Three key categories of RPA [6].

Figure 6 Some tasks RPA can perform [6].

Figure 7 A robot used in managing stock in a warehouse [2].

Figure 8 A robot handling invoices [2].

Figure 9 Some of these benefits of RPA [13].