

## Ep. 54 Robotic Process Automation

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Welcome to the federal tech podcast. My name is John Gilroy and I will be your moderator. Our guest today is Brian Veiny, Vice President corporate development events agency growth at a company called Aon and we will be diving into robotic process automation in a few moments. But first, I would be remiss if I didn't say where we're recording this. We're recording this in Monk's Barbecue in lovely downtown Percival Virginia. So Brian after this interview, you'll be enjoying some food. What are you gonna jump in on?

01:06

So I went to school in North Carolina? Ah yes, I am a little biased towards the pulled pork. But I heard a rumor I heard a rumor that the burnt ends were the way to go. So if they allow for the combo, I might have to try some burnt ends. Definitely some pulled pork can't go wrong. Brisket

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is a very casual place where you can do anyway. It's so casual. It's got a Christmas tree made out of empty whiskey bottles. So it's pretty flexible.

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I've heard the tab is open. So maybe we can maybe we can try everything on the venue but well, we'll have to say,

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okay, okay, well, there are a lot of people listening and they hear the name of the company Aon, and you can go the website@aon.us. But perhaps you can give us maybe a thumbnail explanation of how the company kind of came together.

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Sure. So if you were to talk to almost any Aon employee 18 months ago, we would have been part of four separate companies so Aon originally started as Artland consulting, we were we were a woman owned small business founded in 2011. It was acquired by our current CEO Sonny Thing in 2018. And he really wanted to grow the company into a pure high end services firm that kind of competed to the mid tier in 2020, we took an investment from enlightenment capital, and that really set the foundation for growth. And then we made a number of acquisitions in the subsequent year and a half. So we acquired Selkie consulting, in 2021, we branded to Aon. And then in the spring, we're actually early, early, late winter of 2022, we acquired MTS out of Huntsville, and then Merrick which is a small firm out of Maryland. So when you kind of look, at the end, what those companies did in Artland was very strong in OSD growing footprint in the army, a lot of data. And using data to to empower our customers to get insights into the programs or processes or organizations. Selkie had a very strong financial management background with a growing capability in robotic process automation, or RPA. MTS out of Huntsville, their focus was on NASA. So that got us into the civilian footprint. And they did



a lot in engineering, data science, resource development, and those kinds of things merits a little bit more of a niche firm software as a service type of work that focuses really on elearning. Training and those kinds of concepts. So end to end AR is really positioned themselves to focus on those big government processes, that you see a lot of the challenges that our customers have. So think acquisition, think business and financial management, operations, engineering, logistics, right? Those are the those are those core processes that you see it a lot of agencies, especially in DOD, and NASA, and those make excellent candidates for digital transformation, especially around data analytics and RPA.

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Mr. Singh was his first name again, Sunny, Sunny, saying, you know, I think what he's doing, he's acting like LeBron James. He's putting together a dream team. Yes, he's went this forward, this center this guy in this garden, and put together the best players in order to really serve the government better. And I went to your website, and I saw the the different focuses, you have a very, very strong it's, it is a dream team of people who are very good in particular areas, but all together all four. But what is this? One plus one plus one equals six or something, put them all together? They they're more dynamic together? I think?

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I think so. And it's about really positioning ourselves now compete against the larger firms that have big names in this industry in Avon is a new name, right? We've taken a number of steps over the year to really get our name out there, show the value that we can provide as the client. I think when you look at some of the success that we've had over the year, it's been able, we've been successful because we were able to take elements from each of the four companies and put them together to devise solutions develop new capabilities for our clients, especially around data analytics, especially around RPA that have been very helpful to address some of their challenge. just

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I want to dive into RPA in a little bit, but I want to get to a silly story. I have specialized facility stories. So my wife is a system principal, this little school. And the person who did the payroll, couldn't do the payroll a weekend. And she went in on Sunday, and she had the payroll because guess what, those teachers want to get their paychecks. I mean, she would have some unhappy teachers have to get their paychecks this paycheck. Yeah, the morale would be terrible. Okay, so let's take that and apply that to a young man in Alaska who's working for the Air Force and has two kids and they want their paycheck I mean, so we can talk about robotic process automation and and how smart these people are and about a Westie anopheles. But the bottom line is that you got to make your customer happy, and the customer may be an airman in remote part of Alaska who needs that check. And then robotic process automation can enable that candidate.

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Absolutely. And, you know, you make up a good term with customer, right at the end of the day. Yes, maybe we are implementing RPA with a specific agency. But really the customer is much broader than that. You know, you talk about the airmen, the warfighter, I mean, millions potentially of people that might be impacted by some of the transactions that RPA can essentially automate. So payroll, financial logistics, a lot of those processes that have some low impact work that you can automate, those are ripe candidates for automation.



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If you are listening to this, and you're about to go down to see a baseball game downtown, it's 100 degrees outside, and you want to review something, there is an article at a e y o n.us. And it's written by a guy named Mark Hogan Miller. It's a fantastic article. I mean, it's summarizes so many things. He doesn't I mean, this guy is really smart. He, he talks about low code approach, he talks about data scientists and adding value and he talks about morale. I mean, you know, it's nice to be technical. But that's really what it's all about, isn't it, the customer or the end user. And so I go back and read this article, again, because it summarizes so many the concerns people have with this automation.

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Yes, morale is boosted when the individual gets their paycheck. But I think morale is also boosted when things like automation, just allow people to do their jobs, when you can automate some of the low impact work that allows maybe an analyst to spend his or her time actually doing the analysis that he or she needs to do for their job. I think that's where you see the positive impact. I think that's where it boosts morale, we had a situation down at the army where they were doing some, some status of funds reporting. And an individual had to go into a number of databases to pull data. And it took them It took them hours, right, and there was three different analysts, I would say it probably took them a day and a half collectively just do this report. So they would only do it once a month just because of them pulling the data was just so tedious. Well, through automation, we were able to reduce that to two minutes. And they can now do these reporting daily. And it can actually allow them to do be the analyst that they needed to be where they can improve their forecasting, improve their reporting to leadership, improved the briefing that they needed to pull together, whether it was to bigger army or someone and someone in the organization that could actually do their job. And I think that's pretty important. From a morale perspective, that you're you're focused on the high value work by automating the low value work.

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Well, we're here in a barbecue place in a little town in Virginia. And I'm sure that if I invited 50 CIOs from the federal government out here, on a Saturday, we had some barbecue and sitting outside and talking to everything else. I'm sure if I listened to the conversation, I would hear words like zero trust, machine learning and robotic process automation. So maybe for the sake of our listeners, you can define robotic process automation, and we'll talk about how it's applied.

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Yeah, I mean, I think so I was, I was thinking about this question, actually, before we got here. And one thing I find so fascinating about the time that we're in, is that when you look at some of the words that you just mentioned, zero trust machine learning, robotic process automation, right. You go to any of the thought leaders on this, they almost seem to have different definitions on it. I think that shows just maybe how new some of this is. I think it just shows how exciting this industry can be. I think there's a lot that we're learning when it comes to some of these technologies. I mean, RPA is still a relatively small market, although I think it's, you know, an area for growth. But when I when I look at robotic process automation, to me, it's automating the low impact to focus on the high impact. And I know I've said that already, but it's taking the mundane, repetitive processes



that employees are forced to do as part of their day to day job taking that out of the equation, so that they can use their time and their skill sets to focus on the things that are more relevant to driving I think improvements to driving more efficiency within the organization.

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So Brian, let's say agency listens to this interview. And then they go to Federal News Network and they see your your logo there. or, and they go to an event and they see maybe your booth or something and walk up to you. So what's what's the first step? I mean, they call you up and you come out and talk with them. I mean, where do they start even looking at RPA?

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So good question. I don't, I don't know that it's it's that much different than some of the challenges you see today, when it comes to anything technical, right? Whether it's data analytics, whether it's software implementation, systems, implementation, you know, things dealing with data, a lot of our customers, the first thing they want to know is results, right benefits, what are they going to get out of what I'm going to pay for. That's, that's pretty important. And they always look for use cases and various case studies and various successes that I think we've you know, we've been able to show with some of our customers to prove that I think they're making the right decision. The challenge with rpa, unlike things like business intelligence, or data analytics, it's not necessarily visual, I can go into a customer, I can show a dashboard, I can show business intelligence capabilities, and you can wow on the spot, you're getting a nice graphics, you can show them designs, you can show them how their data is being manipulated to into a to a visual RPA is very, very difficult to do, there's a very big educational process that we've had to have with a lot of our clients explaining what the process is, now explaining what the benefits are going to be. And showing them typically through some examples to show what the real benefits are. The beauty of RPA is that because it's kind of a low code, no code solution, you can build some of these robots pretty quickly, and show the benefits to a customer pretty quickly. So prototyping is not so much of a challenge, you can do it and show the benefit of the customer. And then you want to make them the believers, right, once they become your advocate, you hope to have that avalanche effect, right, build a robot, show some success, build on top of that robot, have more success, continue to build efficiencies, build more customers within your cost customer. And that's kind of what you hope to see. But I will say the number one challenge that we have with all of this is that educational piece that you were just asking about. And so it's persistence, it's being able to show them some prototypes, because it's very tough to visualize until one of the analysts shows how their process has been automated. And then they see themselves the time benefit that they can get through that automation.

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from a human perspective, if my agency is looking at robotic process automation, I mean, you may have this emotional that robot, take my job, I gotta, I'm scared. So is this a fear that people have things? Or do they say, Well, finally, I don't have to do the drudgery I can, I can concentrate on the important stuff. And what's the typical reaction?

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It's the latter, I think. I think that fear always exists with people. Anytime you talk digital transformation, or anytime you talk about introducing technology, to display information, shared data writer do or report any of those things? I think analysts tend to have that fear that hey, are they actually coming for the work that I'm supposed to do day in and day out? The answer here is no. What we're trying to do is have you focused on the analysis that you're actually supposed to be doing, whether you're an acquisition analyst or procurement analyst, logistics analyst, financial analyst, but most of your day is filled with tedious tasks of putting data into a spreadsheet, putting data into a report, pulling data from various systems, we can automate all that. And that can be done for you so that when you're asked for data calls, when you're asked to do analysis, when you're asked to build reports, you can now spend your time on that, and highlight your expertise as the analyst. So that your brief and your leadership on the on the right thing. So once they see that, I think that's that aha moment where they realize, yeah, they're not coming for my role. They're trying to basically support my role. I think a good way to describe it really is, you know, you're bringing capacity and you're bringing expertise to that person without scaling manpower. And you're basically allowing that person to be the analyst that they're hired to be without having to do the various tedious things that they don't want to do as part of their job.

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When you start introducing bots into an environment this is adds complexity doesn't

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always does always does especially like like any technology, there's always challenges that you need to consider. One thing that's interesting about RPA is that it also needs to access systems like humans do. So when you when you think about things from a security perspective, and you're beginning to see this now, especially in government, on how to account for robots and rpa, and being able to access other systems. These are all the kinds of things that you need to account for, like any kind of software, you want to make sure that you have some governance that it's not getting out of control. You want to make sure that you're making the right investments. A lot of this is now you're now beginning to see a lot of this come out from the government in terms of direction recommendation policies to help avoid some of these challenges. A

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e y o n dot U S, I went there. And there was a press release with 200 new hires. What's going on with you guys? I mean, how do you keep track of that?

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Yeah, so we just had a very big win down at NASA, I was through our JV mm technologies, very large contracts, really highlighting the financial capabilities that we have. But another good example of a program that is that is ripe for what we push. And that's digital transformation. There's always a need to have more data, there's always a need to analyze data. Business intelligence, always need to improve and automate processes. And so we hope that we can use this this new win, which is a huge win for us the largest that we've had as an organization to be able to advance some of our digital transformation capabilities.

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It sounds like sunny strategy, won the basketball game.



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It's still going and you know, yeah. I mean, I think the NASA win was it was it was a great indication of, of what he did, bringing the companies together and highlighting the various strengths, right. In that particular case, you highlighted the strengths of three different companies in that bid. And so the recipe for success, I think, continues. And we're continuing to grow and very excited about the future.

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Go back to Mark Hogan Miller's article, he, he talks about one of the main benefits of robotic process automation is reducing errors. And he says, Look, it can reduce errors for paychecks, it can reduce errors for getting parts. And imagine NASA could be a whole wide range of things that reduces errors. And if there's any place that needs error reduction is going to be NASA would think,

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yeah, and that's, that's the great thing about automation. And I go back to the examples of some of the analysts that are building their own reports and pulling data from various systems, every time there's that transaction, there's an opportunity for an error. We did a similar robot down at the Marine Corps where basically they were comparing transactions in a logistic system to those in a financial system. And they were able to accurately compare over 100,000 transactions to make sure that the data was accurate, very, very tough to do with an individual that a robot could do it very quickly. So I think the benefits that you see in error reduction is one of the one of the prime benefits that you get from RPA.

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This is Mike Begley, from Appian listened to Episode 53, of federal tech podcast to learn how process automation can help the federal government with compliance and cybersecurity just wrote down three words waste, fraud, and abuse. That's what's needed to waste fraud and risk comparing systems effectively in mundane tasks. And you know, there's a lot of money being lost in the civilian sector in this area. And so maybe that's the application of comparing datasets to see where the weaknesses where the where the errors

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in the system is a little bit open toward towards waste, fraud or abuse when you have data scattered across various systems. But now when you have the technology that can pull this data, aggregate this data and perform some reporting, it helps minimize some of the errors and transaction, or in this particular case, you know, you know, fraudulent or mountain,

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you know, Brian, I've been doing this for many years, I remember back 20 years ago, 25 years ago, I talked about Pentium processors, and 46 and 386, and all kinds of things and a lot of things renew. And after a while standards got developed. And then we had wireless networks, eight oh 2.11, then standards got to develop their standards now four, zero trust. Are there any standards in the work here for robotic process automation.



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So the federal government is beginning to pay attention to this, especially as you get some momentum. And GSA now has an RPA community of practice. I think it's a good reference to go to you can find it on the GSA website where you can go to digital.gov, which has a bunch of communities related to it, but one of them being RPA. And in that they talk they have a guide book that talks about, you know, practices and processes and potential policies to make sure that agencies are implementing RPA correctly, they are able to, I think, bust some myths that they have about rpa, which I think is pretty relevant. So you go back to that, that customer apprehension and being able to break into various customers and kind of get their buy in into RPA. There's a number of myths that I think that GSA dispels, and of course, just with the Community of Practice, right, that should only continue to grow and promote RPA across the federal government. From a security standpoint, you're also beginning to see some standards as well. So I think there's an effort now to stand not not standardized, but I think implement best practices and approaches for agencies that are willing to pursue RPA to help them make sure that they implemented appropriately.

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I have a friend of mine who owns a company in the aerospace industry, and he works on a lot of standards and compliance for wiring harnesses. And he tells me that standards are like toothbrushes. Everyone wants to use their own. No one wants to use anyone else's standard, they want to comply with that. So I think we're just in the incipient stages here. And I would imagine next five to seven years, it's gonna be a point where there is actually, maybe the Community of Practice will come up with some best practices, and also some standards, because it really has to be some kind of a commonality between systems with Rob, because it's just so complex, I

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think so and this will all continue to evolve. And like any technology will, it will only improve. The challenge that I think you see is everyone's, everyone's needs are different, all the use cases are different. And so you want to be able to provide agencies the flexibility to use rpa, to address their problems, while still accounting for the important things that can help control RPA implementations such as governance, security, and the other necessary controls to make sure that they're implemented appropriately. So I'm convinced and I think GSA does this very well, especially when they look at it from a government wide perspective, that they can come to a good list of standards or recommendations to ensure that any RPA program regardless of size, because it's very scalable, is implemented appropriately across the various federal agencies

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way before you were born. I suspect there was a movie released called 2001, A Space Odyssey. And what we learned there was that sometimes rabbits, robots always nice, they can do bad things. And there's a there's a negative side to robotic automation to I'm sure people look at and go, Well, you know, it's not as flexible, and it's very complex. And it just will just magnify whatever problems are there. I mean, you can hear the objections coming. So is that objections, but just know, Brian, you understand? It's just whatever's there, it's gonna make it worse.



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I'm gonna pivot away from RPA. Right now look, what you're seeing now, what's been all over the media, especially with Chappie, Jett GPT. If you go on to social media, if you go on to Twitter, it is just filled with posts and opinions about you know, AI and chat GPT and some of this technology, there's always going to be naysayers, there's always going to be promoters. But I think people need to certainly overlook, you know, there's always challenges, right. And that's why you have a lot of smart people working on this, to address those challenges, I think you need to look at the long term benefits from a lot of this, and focus on what those benefits can be and try to get to those outcomes. You know, certainly with rpa, and robots, there's going to be similar challenges, you know, thankfully, it's not as challenging as like machine learning, or AI or some of the other things that you have. But there are going to be challenges. And I mentioned earlier, you talked about governance and making sure that agencies are implementing RPA correctly, it's software. So if you develop it poorly, you're going to get a bad robot. And so there are it's like data where it was sealed, saying bad data in bad data out, it's kind of the same thing. Bad, Bad Robot, you're not going to get I think the process execute and automated just like you want it to. And so there are a number of challenges AI, and we're always working to address those challenges. And so I I have no doubt that the benefits from all of this will far outweigh some of the costs of these challenges.

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Earlier in the interview, I facetiously referred to a bunch of CIOs in a barbecue place and listening to the conversation, they talk about zero trust, I would imagine that RPA would be one enabler zero. I mean, it would allow an agency to use zero trust because Jesse would speed up processes wouldn't as good could be a tool for zero trust.

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When you look at all this technology, you can't look at it in a vacuum. Right? I mean, RPA relies on data security relies on data, AI relies on data, or are, you know, an RPA is the foundation for some of that. And so I think a lot of this technology can enable the other technology. It's just making sure you find out the right points of enablement, and making sure they work together.

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Yeah, it looks like just from my technological view, with the proliferation of data pollution, a hybrid systems mean, the the only way that we're gonna accomplish this task, and that's five years to automate something because it's a perfect storm. There's a lack of talent out there. People can't hire IT people. There's a drastic increase in the amount of petabytes of data coming in. And oh, by the way, people working remotely, the complexity just gets to be overwhelming. It has to be automated somehow business.

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Absolutely. And when you look at government, government is a very policy process and procedure driven entity, every department, every agency, they're driven by a set of rules, and policies on how they're supposed to execute their mission. Within all of that there's a number of systems there's a ton of data that all needs to be collected and analyzed to essentially execute their mission. RPA has a big role in all of that and what I what I Like about RPA is that it can get down to the analyst level, right? It's non invasive. It doesn't require you to



change a lot of your process. You can layer over your process to get access to the systems and the data that you need. And then you can scale from there. So I think it's an excellent tool that accounts for the growing use of data, the growing use of systems in our government, and really allows folks to work within those policies and their processes to do their job

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and make their job more efficient while using less resources and focus on the high value activities like analysis. But we're running out of time here. Unfortunately, you've been listening to the federal tech podcast with John Gilroy. I'd like to thank my guest, Brian veiny. Vice President corporate development and Defense Agency growth at AON

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