



Market Insight Report Reprint

Work-Relay's work management approach to process automation

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The company sits at the intersection of the process automation technology and project management technology markets. Work-Relay's project management approach to process automation focuses on overcoming common points of failure that typically disrupt and destabilize mission-critical work.

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Introduction

This report updates our coverage initiation report on Work-Relay, in which we noted that enterprises use several technologies to automate a broad range of business processes and workforce activities. Among them are digital automation platforms (DAPs) and robotic process automation (RPA) technologies that are equipped with capabilities to model, design, develop and run various types of process automations used in business and IT operations.

Some processes, though, require custom design because they are uniquely complex or nuanced in some way – for example, in product development or civil infrastructure provisioning. These types of processes require project management skills and technology to be properly designed and efficiently managed. Work-Relay offers a platform that combines process automation and project management technology to help overcome many of the frequent and common points of failure that can disrupt the success of these initiatives.

THE TAKE

Work-Relay sits at the intersection of the process automation technology and project management technology markets. Most vendors that offer automation technology do not include project management tools to organize the effort needed to automate processes. Likewise, most project management tools lack workflow orchestration tooling, and are unsuitable as automation platforms. In an effort to create competitive advantage, enterprises try to do things differently than their rivals, or they do different things that customers recognize as superior. This usually requires custom processes, such as when developing new products or building out infrastructure to serve new geographic markets. These types of processes need both automation and project management capabilities to control the resources required to create and automate custom processes on time and within budget. Work-Relay offers a unified platform to do just that.

Context

Chicago-based Work-Relay got its start in 2013 as a consultancy helping a health science firm automate tasks and manage concurrent projects of clinical trial processes. Its founders have experience with building complex yet intuitive Salesforce applications designed for users with a minimal understanding of Salesforce. As they learned from building Salesforce applications for their clients, they developed their own rapid application development and deployment platform, and realized that process automation needed to be managed with the same project management discipline used for virtually all other IT initiatives.

However, few business process management (BPM) platforms, or other workflow orchestration software, had sufficient project management capabilities. That platform continues to evolve. Work-Relay brings together elements of process automation and project management in a common platform. The vendor now employs a staff of 27, many of which are developers based in Eastern Europe. It remains self-funded, but Work-Relay is currently considering a series A round from undisclosed investors, and has also been approached for acquisition.

Strategy

The founders of Work-Relay realized that the way most enterprises actually manage work is fragmented, and the tools used to do so are disconnected and operate independently. These can include different project management and process management software, and potentially several other resource, work, task and case management tools. The company's experience and market findings drove it to develop what it believes to be a more complete and integrated work management platform for recurring projects.

Most modern DAPs include collaboration capabilities to allow business analysts and process developers to work together to model, develop, deploy and adapt process automations. However, DAPs lack the specific tooling needed to manage automation projects, such as the ability to schedule tasks, track dates against schedule, report task and project status, assign resources, and resolve project issues. Without such controls, automation projects can fail.

Over the past few years, Work-Relay has learned from its customer experiences and has identified 111 'surprises, obstacles and barriers' – or SOBs – that create common points of failure and can disrupt and destabilize mission-critical work. Among them are things like unavailable and limited information, or poor information to execute tasks; excessive lag times; excessive work times; knowledge deficiency; worker limitations; insufficient process design; lack of consistency and standardization; and inadequate responses to managing complexity. Work-Relay has incorporated these lessons learned from fresh from the field, real-world knowledge into its automation platform.

Products

The Work-Relay platform, which is Salesforce-native, is comprised of four components. The Design Console is used to model structured and unstructured (i.e., collaborations, activity streams, cases) workflows. It builds and deploys workflows and process automations. It includes a Form builder and a Kanban Board builder, both of which can be used to build customized user interfaces. The User Console is where developers and process stakeholders manage, prioritize and execute their work. It performs much of the project management functionality of the platform.

Third, the Management Consoles provide a holistic view of the work being done across the organization. They are prebuilt, real-time dashboards designed for various managerial roles and personas. Examples include a Progress Scorecard that is designed for operational managers, a Planning Dashboard that services the needs of department managers, and a Resource Dashboard that helps control resource utilization. A variety of senior management, project managers, and other higher-level executives also have access to a Risk Dashboard, Portfolio Management Dashboards, and Gantt charts for project progress visualization. The fourth component is an Operational System of Record (OSR) that collects all the data related to work done, being done, and to be done. The OSR provides the basis for the management consoles as well as metrics and analytics.

Use cases and customers

The best way to understand how Work-Relay differentiates in the automation market is to examine the use cases it is applied to. Most automation platforms address typical business processes such as procure to pay, order to cash, and a range of onboarding and approval processes.

The typical use cases for Work-Relay are different, and include automations for things like product installation processes for projects associated with fiber networks, packaged software development, and solar panel arrays; service provisioning and delivery use cases like those for finance and insurance services, marketing, and clinical trials; and mass customization of physical goods, such as designer rugs and food packaging. Work-Relay is also used to automate internal operations such as product development, vendor onboarding and various auditing tasks.

The company reports having 21 paying customers. Among them are a global restaurant chain, a large health service provider, telecommunications companies, global consumer packaged goods companies, and a home improvement 'big box' retailer. One marquee customer (a global provider of food and confectionaries) uses Work-Relay to manage new product development, and handle requests for new product packaging, which can be comprised of any combination or 5,000+ packaging/product materials that it uses for its products.

Competition

Few software providers on the market have the same combination of automation and project management features. An exception, however, is Quickbase. Spun off of Intuit in 2016, it developed a low-code development platform that now has similar capabilities to Work-Relay. Quickbase is targeting enterprises with complex project-based kinds of operational process automations, and specifically those in vertical markets that include real estate, construction, industrial manufacturing and public sector infrastructure.

Other alternatives to Work-Relay can come from both the DAP, RPA and the software development project management markets. Most DAP vendors are equipped with collaboration capabilities. Likely DAP rivals to Work-Relay include Appian, Camunda, Catalytic, FireStart, Microsoft, Nintex, Pega, PMG, Workato and Zapier. Potential RPA rivals include Automation Anywhere, Blue Prism and UiPath.

Software development project management platforms may present more direct competition to Work-Relay. They include Atlassian and its Trello offering, Monday.com, Wrike, ClickUp and maybe even Smartsheet. However, these platforms lack awareness of the various interdependencies outside of the application logic typical of many complex enterprise automation projects. A potential outlier rival to Work-Relay may be found in Kintone. It offers an all-in-one workplace platform that allows collaborative teams to build, share and automate custom processes.

Other enterprise architecture and work management technology may also serve as viable substitutes to Work-Relay. Among them are various EAM (enterprise architecture management) software from the likes of Software AG, iGrafx and Avolution. Another alternative work management platform like that offered by Planview also offers similar capabilities to Work-Relay.

SWOT Analysis

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <p>Work-Relay has learned valuable lessons in working with its growing number of customers on how to overcome common pain points associated with managing automation projects. Interest in the platform is growing and customers, especially those that run Salesforce, report significant benefits to its unique capabilities.</p>	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <p>With market interest rising in tools like those from Work-Relay, expectations about evolving capabilities and product futures will also rise. Work-Relay will need additional skills and resources to keep pace and maintain a competitive stance against what will likely be a growing crop of new market entrants.</p>
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>Anything that could be done to improve the productivity of automation initiatives and accelerate their time to value will be sought after by enterprises. Managing automation projects with professional project management techniques is gaining interest.</p>	<p>THREATS</p> <p>Vendors in the low-code application development market that also have process automation tools are beginning to see the value of equipping their platforms with capabilities that enable automation project management.</p>

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