



5 Ways AP Automation Can Optimize Change Management

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Many current business models rely on mergers and acquisitions (M&A) to grow and expand profit margins. Healthcare, fast food, car dealerships, manufacturing, distribution, and construction are just a few of the verticals where the majority of company growth comes from an almost constant churn of absorbing new companies to increase revenue and shedding underperforming business units to remain profitable. Each change to the business presents a host of challenges to accounts payable teams as they navigate new accounting and enterprise resource planning systems (ERPs), approval workflows, contracts, vendor pools, and more.

As organizations get larger, these challenges increase correspondingly. According to a Gartner report, "More than 80% of organizations manage change from the top down." While this is an effective strategy for companies with a straightforward vertical structure, companies with more complex decentralized hierarchies, such as those that result from frequent M&A cycles, can struggle with buy-in and adoption of new systems and practices. According to that same report, unsurprisingly, "Sixty-six percent of CHROs (chief human resources officers) are dissatisfied with the speed of change implementation."

When tackling any type of change to company structures or processes, change management sometimes gets pushed to the background in favor of more sought-after topics like cost saving, revenue increase, or resource reallocation. But the bottom line is that without effective change management practices, AP teams will likely struggle with their core responsibility, which is to pay invoices on time. Essential programs like e-invoicing, vendor management, and early pay discounts may also suffer as a result.

66% of CHROs are dissatisfied with the speed of change implementation.

AP automation is critical for managing and enhancing change management practices effectively.

Here are five proven ways your company can leverage AP automation during this process:

1. Centralize Operations
2. Unify Systems
3. Reduce Institutional Knowledge
4. Increase Visibility
5. Employee Experience



1. Centralize Operations

Having a single funnel for your processes is a powerful key to enabling higher AP automation rates. This arrangement also frees up your ability to grow higher-value AP programs. Enterprise companies that employ a shared service center (internally or through business processing outsourcing) have greater control over invoice processing cycle times, auditability, and real-time visibility to drive business decisions such as spend prioritization and supplier segmentation. According to a recent audit at Symbeo, AP departments can take 5–35 days to process an invoice (the Institute of Finance and Management reports that the current average is 9.7 days). Cutting out unnecessary “touchpoints” immediately impacts processing time and cost. Most importantly, future change management becomes more predictable and easier to navigate, given the multiplying positive effects of a centralized operation.

A single funnel is a powerful key to enabling higher AP automation rates.

2. Unify Systems

Growth through M&A inevitably results in synchronizing multiple accounting systems, ERPs, master data, contracts, purchasing, approval workflows, etc. A central, unified automation platform creates consistency and visibility across the enterprise regardless of how many systems are involved. Once master data conforms to the automation, inputs from the new source flow with minimal resistance. This type of unity also links one or more legacy systems to any new or destination systems for recently acquired lines of business.

An effective AP automation system will also facilitate integration in a way that can significantly reduce AP’s reliance on internal IT support. Consistent and stable input and output data can then be distributed to one or more downstream systems. In a recent report by Wrike, “around 37% of projects fail due to lack of clear goals. The absence of clear and precise goals and corresponding documentation can lead to several project management issues.” Working with a trusted AP automation solution provider establishes a unified framework and presents clear goalposts that companies can subsequently use to measure success. Whether outsourcing, insourcing, or leveraging contingent workforce options, a unified system creates the consistency required to support short-term and ongoing changes to your organization.

37% of projects fail due to lack of clear goals.



3. Reduce Institutional Knowledge

One of the most significant challenges to change management in an organization is the overreliance on your staff's ingrained information. So-called "institutional" or "tribal" knowledge creates a slow but steady drag on productivity across all areas of the enterprise. Side effects include aging documentation, personnel turnover, and inefficient training cycles, which only exacerbate issues already present in your change management cycles. And these inefficiencies are notoriously difficult to measure, let alone correct. As explained in this Harvard Business Review article, the first step is to "build an explicit strategy for maintaining institutional memory. Don't assume that it will happen by itself."

One of the most impressive and overlooked results of implementing process automation is the codification of your business decisions. While not every possible scenario can be accounted for, a successfully unified process should strive to accommodate 80% of your inputs, including invoices, master data, approvals, and more. Streamlining your existing AP processes significantly reduces the number of exceptions your team has to deal with and the amount of documentation and training required to manage the overall process, ultimately freeing up your team to work on higher-value tasks and projects.



4. Increase Visibility

Visibility improves decision-making, buy-in, adoption, change management, and production efficiency – it is really the key to everything in your organization. On the other side, according to a recent eBook by Ardent Partners, 31% of AP professionals reported that a lack of visibility into invoices and payment data is consistently one of their top challenges. This was one of the top five driving factors for implementing automation technology the #1 goal of AP teams across the country in 2022. AP automation provides invaluable insights into spend management practices, empowering company leadership to make better-informed decisions. The second-highest priority of AP respondents is to "improve AP reporting and data analytics," the Ardent Partners study finds. Dashboards, reports, and custom report building options are now ubiquitous in modern AP automation solutions. This capability should be a deciding factor when choosing the right solution for your organization.



31% of AP professionals report lack of visibility as one of their top challenges.



5. Employee Experience

The most commonly overlooked benefit that AP automation provides, especially in the context of change management, is increased employee engagement. The end result is that the employee walks away from change management projects with a better overall feeling about their career and role in the organization. The “soft-value” benefits of freeing your team to work on higher-value tasks and projects incentivize them to add to their skills and create growth opportunities for themselves. This change creates space to bring more meaning to the work they perform every day.

The #1 goal for AP teams in 2022:

Implementing AP Automation

The most overlooked benefit of AP automation?

Employee Engagement

Summary

A healthy fear of change management can prevent many classic mistakes while pursuing frequent and necessary M&A activities. However, excessive analysis and a lack of visibility and institutional controls can seriously decrease the value of such activities. Business process automation (BPA), AP automation, purchase to pay, and other process automation technologies can mitigate many of these pain points and future-proof your teams, systems, and knowledge, which advance goals more efficiently and with less stress. It is worthwhile to invest in the right-sized processes to provide the visibility and engagement your AP team needs to succeed.



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Symbeo helps businesses everywhere achieve true AP automation. As an industry leader for over 30 years, we remove the manual invoice processing burden with intelligent OCR and enhanced machine learning solutions that eliminate tedious functions and streamline the P2P ecosystem. In harnessing the power of automation, we create a paperless environment that helps our customers achieve sustainability goals and focus on what matters most.

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About the Author

Joshua Cliburn has been at Symbeo for 18 years. He is an experienced Product, Project, and Account Manager dedicated to building and supporting accounts payable solutions for a wide variety of companies across the enterprise market.

