The Evolution of Automation and What It Means for the Integration Industry

The professional AV industry will lose relevance if integrators can't offer better control and automation solutions than those consumers already get on their own. Industry professionals must "up their game" on all levels to provide a more consistent, easy-to-use, reliable, and robust user experience.

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Automation is no longer a technology only integrators and AV experts know about. With popular automation products like Amazon Echo and Google Home, customers already know many of the capabilities of this technology.

Despite consumers' ability to install many automation solutions on their own, there are still opportunities for integrators to thrive in automation.

To provide a bit more information about the demand for automation and what it means for integrators, Steve Greenblatt of Control Concepts, an audiovisual control system solutions

provider specializing in control programming, software development, and specialty services for audiovisual systems in boardrooms, conference rooms, and classrooms, shares his insight in the follow Q&A:

Last year, 2016, seemed like a significant year for automation. Emergence of "no-programming" solutions in the custom market and popularity of mainstream products like Amazon Echo and Google Home really have people thinking about automation. How would you summarize what we learned about automation in 2016?

The "no-programming" solutions are nothing new. These concepts were present before I started my company 20 years ago. The motivation is to simplify the process of getting a project done and tackle one of the biggest hurdles, which is defining the scope of work or more simply "how the system should function."

Most of the programming cost goes into time spent understanding what the users' need and defining functionality that supports the system design. Today, manufacturers are offering pre-developed, configured solutions or systems such as Crestron's AV Framework or AMX's Rapid Project Maker. These offerings accomplish the challenge of providing a functional system with low investment, effort, and risk.

Putting myself in the shoes of a consumer, user, or technology manager, I would seek a proven, easy to use system, with little effort and investment that accomplishes my goals.

This approach allows technology, control, and automation to be used in more places than previously possible. It also provides the ability to independently make basic functionality adjustments, system modifications, and device changes as the system evolves.

With the impact of mobile apps, Amazon Echo, and Google Home, the average person has much more exposure to the world of AV and automation than ever before. I've been saying for a while that we are no longer "pushing" technology to our audience. Rather, our audience is now challenging us to keep up with their needs and expectations which have been shaped through today's technology environment.

Essentially, the professional AV industry will lose relevance if we can't offer better solutions than those they already get on their own. We must "up our game" on all levels to provide a more consistent, easy-to-use, reliable, and robust user experience. This stems from user interface design and operation to functionality and intelligence to the ability to address needs and solve problems that add value and improve productivity or quality of life.

Onto 2017, how do you hope and think automation will evolve?

I see the trend toward increased demand for automation continuing. We live in an impatient world where devices are expected to be smart and make our lives easier. This is apparent in the talk about driverless cars, touchless user interfaces and voice control, and the world of IoT (Internet of Things) where devices interact natively and everything is connected. Automation is a necessary part of our lives and society is now used to the benefits it provides.

I see opportunities for our industry to get involved in processing the data that our systems can collect and providing valuable reports, identifying trends, and starting to get involved in predictable behavior for our systems. The intelligence that we can get from analyzing and utilizing the data will be significant.

Do you want to be called a programmer, a software developer or something else and why?

I look at the title of programmer and software developer being two different roles. A programmer creates the user interface and functionality of a system by programming the components to communicate with each other.

A software developer creates software that has a specified application that is not dependent on a particular platform. It satisfies a need, solves a problem, or provides functionality that was not previously available.

In essence, we are a solutions provider. We help our clients clarify what they need and then we provide a solution that helps them work more effectively and efficiently.

How will automation adapt to the need for high-volume applications (a corporate campus with hundreds of meeting rooms needing automation across the campus)?

One of the solutions for high-volume applications is the "no programming required" approach where rooms can be delivered quickly, consistently, and in a standard way. Another approach is to develop a customized configurable model where different room variations become part of a master programmed solution.

This "master solution" can be configured to meet the needs of a large number of room types as long as they stay within the model. The custom configurable approach provides ease of support, maintenance, modifications, and upgradeability while also providing a solution that is specific the user and provides the customization aligns with the way their organization or enterprise conducts business and utilizes technology.

Do you see a future for automation-as-a-service? Why or why not?

I think there is a future for providing a service model that supports ongoing support, maintenance, and upgradeability as well as monitoring and diagnostics for a monthly fee versus an upfront cost. Systems would essentially lease their programming rather than buy it. This would also include ongoing support for Technology Managers who needing to support their users.

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