

« IT IS ALWAYS A MATTER OF TEAMWORK BETWEEN MAN AND MACHINE »

New forms of automation have an increasingly important role to play in the digital age. Swiss Post Solutions offers its customers intelligent automation solutions in document processing. Jörg Vollmer explains how and why.



SPS boss Jörg Vollmer is married with two grown-up sons, both studying. He lives in Zürich and likes skiing.

Why does SPS rely on artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic process automation (RPA)?

We do this because document management is an area in large corporations which is particularly ripe for the digital transformation. We rely on artificial intelligence and robotic process automation as growth factors. The aim is not to find alternative ways of doing what we have always been doing but to embrace new solutions to generate revenue for the Post and SPS.

The 2017–2020 Strategy calls for courage to take risks. Do robots pose a threat to the core business of the Post or do they present an opportunity?

Nothing can stand in the way of progress. 20 years ago nobody would have dreamed that satnav systems would now be fitted as standard in cars. Smartphones have only been around for 10 years. Another 10 years from now, driverless cars will be the norm. Personally, I see robots as far more of an opportunity than a risk. Last autumn, for example, we completed a project for a well-known major bank in Switzerland. The bank receives 40 million documents a

year, such as applications to open accounts, notifications of change of address, correspondence about loans, etc., all of which used to be processed manually on paper and then scanned. We have turned the process on its head: we scan the incoming post, extract the relevant data from the documents using OCR (optical character recognition) and send them electronically to the person responsible for processing the information. This is an opportunity which we would never have gained without the know-how which we have developed.

So AI and RPA are becoming key technologies for SPS?

Definitely. In future there will be no pushing of paper to and fro or sending of emails. The future lies in extracting the content of unstructured documents with the aid of AI and saving the data. Self-learning software now "understands" 80 to 85 percent of the content of non-standardized letters and emails. Then RPA comes into the equation. It can take care of repetitive administrative tasks, such as entering data or running checks. Putting it simply, we use AI to take data out of the documents and RPA to automate structured transaction processes. We have been doing very well thus far and are proud to say that SPS is out in front in the international field.

Can you give us some concrete examples of projects in which AI and RPA are used?

One prime example is the processing of claims at insurance companies. Incidents can be reported by post, email, Internet and also increasingly via social media. We can use AI to read these notifications through all channels and then to classify and process the claims. If a claim for less than 500 Swiss francs is made for hail damage, for example, the system can check whether it actually hailed on the day in question. If so, it gives the green light for the compensation payment. Claims involving higher amounts are still referred to staff for the final decision. It is important to underline the fact that the software doesn't replace the people but it is always a matter of teamwork between man and machine.

How do the customers benefit from the new developments?

They are investing in AI and RPA for various reasons, primarily because of the exponential saving of time in that processes which used to take days can now be completed in a short time. Then there is the aspect of quality, as seen in the fact that robots do not make errors unless they have been incorrectly programmed. This aspect is particularly important for compliance because every change can be traced in the protocols. And finally there are also the cost savings.

You took over the management of the new Corporate Account Organization (CAO) two months ago. What are the aims of the Post for this organization?

The greatest challenge for the Post is to keep profits at the same levels as today. This means having to increase our efficiency on the cost side and thinking about how we can bring in more sales revenue. Starting from this position has made us aware that we are not concentrating enough on our Swiss key accounts. The CAO is on a mission to change this situation and aims to offer our 40 biggest clients solutions which are integrated even more effectively across divisions in order to tap the full potential for growth.



What is your personal perception of the changes at group level?

Basically, I see changes as something positive. It is the only way we can go forward and develop. Sometimes I have the feeling that we are not getting things done fast enough, but since I took over as manager at SPS two-and-a-half years ago, a lot of progress has already been made and this fills me with confidence for the future.