WILL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE GET RID OF THE 'BORING' IT SERVICE MANAGEMENT TASKS?

In this Run and Reinvent podcast, I'm joined by Doug Hynes, head of sales engineering for North America for Fusion Global Business Solutions, a BMC partner, to chat about the future of IT Service Management and the role of artificial intelligence in the service management field. Below is a condensed transcript of our conversation.

Allison Cramer: Tell us about your background at Fusion.

Doug Hynes: I'm the North American head of Sales Engineering straddling business and technology, listening to my customers' pains and dreams of where they want to take IT as a business, and helping them through the products, processes, and the roles their people should be in to get to those dreams.

Allison: Everybody wants to work with the person who can make their dreams come true. How have those aspirations and visions of themselves, how has that changed for your customers over time?

Doug: Everybody starts with wanting to sit down and kind of have a, I hate to call it a complaint session, but nobody ever calls IT to say, "Congratulations, thank you." Everybody calls IT whenever you have a problem. So, it all started probably with we need to have a process. We don't have a process. We just do things, either pen and paper, spreadsheets, email. We need to take that to the next level.

And then a couple years go by. People say, "Okay, we've got a process down. We have people who are process owners. We need to be more efficient in how we work, the inner workings of IT." So, we take that to probably the more intermediate, and start providing value back to the business by taking those processes and making more efficient and start providing more of what the business is asking IT to do, not just IT getting their house in order, if you will.

Allison: Have you noticed over the past few years that people are relying more on maybe more self-service, like how do I help myself better versus engaging with a person? Or even using, when they do want to talk to a person, looking more towards using bots than having an actual human being on the other end?

Doug: It has. And I think, really, we have a lot of the consumer-based electronics to thank for that. So, whether you're talking Android or iOS, or even Microsoft with their mobile capabilities, people have become tech savvy in a sense. And we definitely have seen that roll through the generations. People don't necessarily need to call the IT help desk for everything anymore. They have a level of understanding of how technology should be working from their personal lives. So, being able to follow an FAQ that the company provides, or utilize some natural language processing through artificial intelligence, being able to just generally ask a question like you would Google. People are starting to look for that private-life experience in their corporate life.

Allison: What do you think the role of AI is for IT? So, where can it help, and where can't it?

Doug: The role for AI is to aid in a better customer experience, to aid in data quality, and to aid in getting rid of the rote, or let's just call it boring, day-to-day tasks. Something that it follows a natural process. We do it the same way every time. And we don't necessarily have to have to have a human interaction to see it from start to finish anymore.

We have a number of different automation things in the background that can handle that. It's really a question of what is the front end to the customer, and is it a rich user experience for them using AI to get it through to the automation? And then that repeatability from how the customer interacts to how it's resolved, that's the data quality side of things. Making sure that it is handled in the same fashion and gets the result that the user is looking for. That's where AI has really started to fill in in the IT world.

Allison: The relationship between AI and automation, do you feel like one precipitates the other? Like you have to have a lot of automated processes before you can utilize AI? Or what's the relationship there?

Doug: Not at all. I think it really starts with, what is your outcome? What is this something that you are trying to fulfill? And then you work backwards. You start to say to yourself okay, this is where we want to get something like a password reset. So, when I talk to my customers, that's generally the first thing that comes up. How do we get that type of request off of my service desk, or off of my IT security help desk? How do we just get that handled without human interaction?

We know that the end goal is to have the user's password reset. How do we put the automation in the center of that, in between the user and the outcome? That's where we start to have that discussion is at the outcome first. Then we look at what exists in the center now. Is there a process? Is there not a process? Are there dreams of a process, if you will? And then fill in the gaps. That's where AI kind of fits.

Allison: What are some of the other thing that you have to be aware of in order to appropriately

utilize AI?

Doug: The people who appropriately use AI and not fall into we bought this software, or we bought this service, and it's sitting on the shelf because we don't know how to properly implement it is a little bit of homework. If you are trying to use AI for self-service, you need to have processes and outcomes defined when a customer asks for something.

Regardless of how we use the natural language processing to determine what it is, do we have an outcome for them? Do we have a way of getting them what they're asking for, whether they're asking for something from technology, you know, a new phone or new application to be installed on their system, or something like requesting a day off, do we have that process? And if we don't, well, we need to define it.

And if it's not necessarily a process they're looking for and it's just like a self-help article, we need to have the knowledge base up inside our system. So, making sure that we have potential answers, be it textual-based, video-based, or service request-base available to our customers prior to utilizing AI is probably one of the biggest hurdles that customer sometimes don't think about.

Allison: What kind of resistance do you see from organizations when they're trying to move towards using more AI?

Doug: You always get the, "Is it going to replace us?" Any time you talk about robotics or artificial intelligence, you have people worried about that. But in the end, I really think that while we do have a system that helps process things faster, efficiently, however you want to phrase it, you're still going to have to have people who can take care of those robots, and make sure that if the process gets stuck there are people who are trained to unstick it.

I don't think that everything can be solved with automation and AI either. Getting people out of the 'I'm used to calling so-and-so day in and day out whenever I have a problem' and getting them used to using that self-help and using that AI is definitely a cultural change. There's sometimes that relationship to the person that you're used to sending an email to or to having a phone call with changes if it's not easy to change hearts and minds.

So, I see the fear there, but I think once a customer has a positive experience with using a self-service, using AI, or whatever the case may be, it starts to change their mind, at least somewhat. I'm not going say it's going to change it for all time, but at least it starts thinking okay, this isn't as bad as I thought it was going to be.

Allison: What are some of the big new trends you see on the horizon?

Doug: The new trends besides just the idea of AI is using it in niche ways. One of the ways we talk – one of the things we talked about earlier was data quality. So, using AI to help the service desk when they do take phone calls or emails, categorize things properly, so later on when people are doing reporting or they're doing capacity decisions or hiring decisions, we can say, "What are the areas where we're lacking in knowledge?" Or, "What are our hot areas?"

And the reason we have that, the data quality, is because we used the AI engine on the background to help us categorize things in the proper fashion. So, it's not just a service request now. Now we're looking at how do we look at our business as a whole and making sure that we understand things in a more repeatable and a more efficient fashion.