



HOW 'BEING COMFORTABLE WITH BEING UNCOMFORTABLE' HELPED POLARIS TRANSPORTATION EMBRACE TRANSFORMATIVE TECHNOLOGY

Polaris Transportation Group President Dave Cox, referred to the improvised game as “beating the bots.” With the company’s recent transition to automating its document-handling process, some staff members tried to prove that they were quicker than the new technology by “beating” the robotics-based system. The employees had grown so accustomed to doing the work themselves – and felt such ownership of it – that the technology had to prove itself to them.

“They had to be convinced,” said Dave Cox, president of Polaris, a Mississauga, Ontario-based transportation company whose clients largely are based in the U.S. “Once they saw what the technology could do, they began to realize that their jobs had just gotten a lot easier. The robotics were going to do the work, freeing up their own capacity to do new things – to be more creative than they’d ever had the chance to be before. We communicated from the top that this wasn’t about eliminating anyone’s job – it’s here to make you better.

And that had to sink in. A cultural shift takes time. But it was worth it.”

This tidal change in operations occurred a few years ago when it had become clear that Polaris was struggling to keep up with its paperwork – and that the paperwork was consuming an inefficient amount of its workers’ schedules. Turnaround times were slower than the company wanted, and the demands of managing a wide range of documents from a diverse set of clients seemed overwhelming.

Faced with such a challenge, Polaris’ leaders decided the company needed an ambitious and sweeping change to the way it operated. The company adopted intelligent process automation, a type of robotic process automation, to manage the flow of administrative documents. Polaris focused on integrating automation into its customs clearance and order management processes, which were especially demanding and time consuming for employees.

The results were transformative. Polaris now automates approximately 80% of its customs clearance document workflow. Previously, 22 employees contributed to the customs document process – remarkably, there are now only two-and-half to three staff members dedicated to it. The rest shifted from document processing to more consequential customer service work.

“For us, it was about transforming our company from a traditional way of doing business and moving ourselves into a more digital framework, allowing systems to do more of the heavy lifting rather than our people having to intervene for each and every transaction that happened within the organization,” said Dave Brajkovich, Chief Technology Officer. “As we grew over the years, those manual processes had just become unsustainable. We needed new technology to scale up and optimize our processes.”

Such a dramatic transition, however, took time, energy and resources – and it required widespread buy-in from employees accustomed to a certain way of doing things. They needed to learn to embrace the unknown that the new systems and processes represented.

The push forward aligned with a common refrain Cox repeated around Polaris, “Forget what you know right now. What do you want? What can we do to get to a better process?”

“It’s about understanding the opportunities that came out of this – it’s why it’s so important to learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable,” Cox said. “It’s how growth and progress happen.”

Frequent and comprehensive communication with employees was crucial to the Polaris approach to the change, as was involving staff members in the decision-making that guided the transition and ensuring they had a voice in the process.

“From the get-go, we were in front of our employees explaining the need and the purpose for our investment in technology and digitization,” Cox said. “It’s about trust. The more information you put out there and the more people are involved in the process, the more they trust what is happening. Engaging our people, opening up their minds and challenging them to help us create a better process, was critical to being able to reinvent ourselves.”

Pre-digitization, Polaris employees often were consumed with minutia-centered work. It was what they knew and understood and trusted, Brajkovich said. Digitization disrupted that.

“They were used to being stuck in the minutia, and there was comfort there,” Brajkovich said. “It takes time to trust the technology. When it’s introduced, people can get knocked a bit off-kilter. So complete employee engagement, encouraging them and talking to them to dispel the fears that they have, is so important.” Those employees who were tempted “to beat the bots” simply needed that exercise to accept the new normal.

“It was really incumbent upon management to mentor and coach each person through this,” Cox said. “Some people embraced it quickly and loved it. They had never wanted to be stuck in the box that they’d been in. But some people needed a bit more coaxing, and we took it seriously to help them with that.”

A key part of employees learning to embrace the change was showing them the new freedom and opportunities the system would bring them.

“We wanted to show people that they could get out of their shells and have an opportunity

lot of time on when it was a very transactional world that Polaris lived in. The robotics are doing the heavy lifting, so we can have smarter conversations with our customers. We’re building deeper levels of trust with our partners, and we’re serving them better than we ever have.”

Brajkovich said digitization also has created a better work-life balance for Polaris employees, not only liberating them from the mundane but allowing them to rely on systems to keep freight moving “when the lights go out” in the evenings and on weekends. Critically, Polaris also is having more meaningful and productive internal discussions, Cox said.

“We have very different conversations inside Polaris now,” Cox said. “It’s freed us to talk about how we can get our cargo delivered quicker and faster. In the past, we couldn’t necessarily dive into those conversations because we’d be fixated on the day in, day out. We have better conversations now, and the outcome for our customers is an all-around improved product.”

Buoyed by its experience, Polaris has been inspired to continue to take a cutting-edge approach to new technology solutions. In 2019, Polaris launched Northstar Digital Solutions, a company designed to automate and consolidate systems technology through robotic process automation, machine learning and artificial intelligence to allow the skilled transportation workforce to focus on human-to-human connection. The company and Polaris’ in-house Digital Laboratory headline a push to lead the digital transformation charge in transportation.

Cox said Polaris’ success with adopting new technology makes it hungrier and better prepared for future tech-based changes, even if they prove initially disruptive to the company’s established way of doing things. Throughout the company, Polaris employees have seen the value of upending the status quo in pursuit of progress.

“We’re going to stay very aggressive about continuing with our technology advancements,” Cox said.

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“We want to always keep pushing forward and getting better. That’s our way.”

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they hadn’t had before to come up with new ideas,” Brajkovich said. “Instead of having their head down on a keyboard, which they were used to, they could lift their heads up, get out of their comfort zone a bit, and explore their ideas and speak out about them.”

Consequently, digitization has remodeled the way Polaris connects and collaborates with its customers.

“We’ve deepened our relationships with our customers,” Cox said. “We have the freedom now to ask what’s going on in our customers’ world. What are the trends they see for their business? Are they involved in new product lines or launches? Those are the types of important questions we sadly couldn’t spend a