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### Establishing your global trade management system strategy

**A**utomation has become an essential tool in everyone's global trade toolkit. For many, it is tempting to think of automation as a "cure-all" for woes of non-existent or inefficient processes. However, it is important to think of automation as an enabler, rather than a fix.

Automation enables your global trade program to mitigate the risks of human error, establish consistency in the execution of your trade processes, and enables the visibility required to assess your compliance posture and continually improve your program. Automation does not fix the issues of lacking, insufficient or incorrect data. As the saying goes — garbage in leads to garbage out.

You have to be diligent to thoughtfully and deliberately automate. Don't just automate for the sake of automating. The first step in making this a deliberate process is to develop a systems strategy. The process for developing a systems strategy can be unique to each company, but should include the following elements:

- First, you should start by identifying all systems you reference or use within your import and export processes currently. This might include reference systems that help you research tariff numbers and rulings, basic office tools, such as Microsoft Excel, financial and enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, supply chain partner's tools such as electronic-data-interface (EDI) feeds from your customs broker, or other homegrown tools you go to in order to gather the data elements required to successfully complete an import or export.

- Next, create a matrix or listing of those tools, and identify which processes rely on them, and assess their current performance. Are you getting what you need from them? Is the data reliable? Capture who owns the system and who owns data maintenance in that system, as well as any information on the lifecycle of the system. Is your company planning to replace that system in the next one to three years? You may need to partner with your IT group to accurately assess your current systems.

- Third, your team can identify those areas not currently automated, but which you believe can benefit from automation. It's key to understand volume and risk in each of your manual processes. An example is if you spend hours each day manually keying in Automated Export System (AES) declarations, you would benefit from automating and doing your own self-filing. Make sure that you don't spend thousands of dollars to automate a process that you do once a year.

After you have an idea of what systems you rely on today, how they are working for you today, how they may change in the future, and those processes you are seeking to automate, you should then consider your current global trade metrics. How do you currently assess your performance? Ask yourself, will those metrics still be relevant if we automate this area? Are there any additional metrics you need to add once your environment is more automated?

Additionally, you may want to consider partnering with your corporate audit function to consider whether automation will change current control points, or offer you the opportunity to implement needed control points. You will have an opportunity to change existing processes, and you want to make sure that you consider not just business opportunities, but also audit posture and reliability opportunities.

The next step is to then develop or reconsider your near-term, mid-term and long-term program goals. Consider things such as: Are you looking to build new trade processes in the future? Are you focused on continuous improvement? Are you consolidating silos into a global program?

At the end of this process, you want to make sure that you lay out a plan which supports your goals. It helps to break down the steps to automation against your near-term, mid-term and long-term goals. Remember, automation enables you to achieve your goals — it should not be a goal in and of itself.

Just like any other business strategy, you need to constantly re-evaluate. Since you updated your metrics during your strategy development to reflect improvements from automation, monitor them! You may need to reconsider your strategy if performance does not improve as expected. Regardless of performance, though, you should schedule regular reviews of performance and goals to make sure your systems strategy is still relevant.

Last but not least, make sure you communicate. Share your strategy with your entire team. It is important for your team and your stakeholders to know what goals are in place and how you are working to achieve those goals. And, of course, share your strategy with your management and align it with your overall corporate goals and objectives.

*BPE Global is a consulting and training firm whose mission is to enable companies to succeed in global business. Jennifer Wade is a director at BPE Global and can be reached at [jwade@bpeglobal.com](mailto:jwade@bpeglobal.com).*

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