In this course you will:

* Explore what business automation is
* Learn why it matters to your insurance agency
* Understand the basics of business automation
* Be ready to begin automating your processes

This course is designed for:

* Insurance agents in need of streamlining operational functions to drive business growth, particularly marketing, human resources, sales, and finance & accounting
* Insurance agencies looking to develop or improve current business processes

Introduction

If you’re an independent agent or agency owner, it can sometimes be challenging to balance sales goals with operational functions and requirements to support your agency’s growth. For example, when do you find time to conduct marketing activities while acting as your own Human Resources team – busy with applicant processing, interviews & onboarding in hopes you can have new agents ready to be trained for the upcoming enrollment period?

If you’re busy handling financial planning and accounting functions, who is working on the important tasks of analyzing production numbers, creating a strategy for sales, or agent recruitment?

Business automation can help you streamline your processes in just about every area of your insurance agency. However, too many insurance agents are stuck with outdated, manual processes that slow down their entire business.

Because no two insurance agencies have the same business model, BPA will mean different things to different agencies. For some, it will mean automating email follow-ups to clients. For others, it might be an automated workflow process for handling customer service requests on claims or payment issues. The list could go on and on.

While it will mean different things to different agencies, the underlying goal is the same: efficiency. As explained on your screen, BPA is all about streamlining your manual processes.

Business process automation is the use of technology to transform and streamline a manual process so that it becomes most cost-and-time efficient.

Business automation often involves moving paper processes, like completing applications, to a digital system. Instead of relying on manual input from agents to move the process along, the system automatically moves through workflows and drives the user to take action when necessary.

Now, I realize that “streamlining manual processes” is a pretty vague phrase. What does it mean to your insurance agency? What benefits will you see as a result of incorporating automation tools?

Business automation tools can:

* Help reduce the number of errors – think a missing signature on a paper application
* Increase agent productivity – think of inputting client information into a spreadsheet
* Improve your process speed – consider contracting & licensing management
* Ensure processes don’t get overlooked
* Increase your visibility – think of all of the data points you’ll collect by automation and how you can use this data to gain better visibility into your insurance agency.

Obviously, the benefits will vary based on your agency and the processes you currently have or that you choose to automate. But, the point is this: the benefits offered by BPA far outweigh the costs of keeping your manual processes.

Is every process a good candidate for automation? No! How do you know which ones to automate? A good rule of thumb is to consider anything that gets repeated in your agency more than a handful of times.

The litmus test is: does your agency repeat this process regularly with a low degree of variance? If so, then it can be automated.

Here’s a very incomplete list of tasks that you can (and should) automate:

* Client applications & enrollments
* Contracting & licensing
* Agent onboarding & employee management
* Customer service follow-ups
* Email follow-ups & reminders to clients
* Reporting
* Social media posts

In order to implement BPA, you’ll need the right technology. You’ll find there are plenty of tools to choose from. Some are point-and-click, others require more technical knowledge.

Quoting, Enrollments, & Paper Applications  
Automating Applications

Paper applications can be cumbersome. Many people still like having a tangible copy of their enrollment form and the wet-signature that goes along with it. However, paper applications leave room for human error (making an application complete once received by the carrier) and require storage for a minimum of 10-years (per CMS’s guidelines). Frankly, if you don’t have a lock & key on your filing cabinet – you could run the risk of privacy & security issues.

There are many tools to help you automate your quoting and enrollments. Most carrier portals now have fast online applications providing you with several signature options for your clients, ranging from a digital signature (if in-person) to text signatures, email signatures, and voice signatures.

There are also stand-alone platforms that assist with electronic enrollment processing, tools like Connecture, Sunfire, HealthSherpa – just to name a few.

Purchasing a platform to automate your enrollments can be expensive, ranging from $5,000 up to $100,000. That’s a substantial amount of money for automating a single business process.

However, platforms like MedicareCENTER, an innovative proprietary technology from Integrity Marketing Group, offer three enrollment pathways, market research tools, CSG Actuarial for quoting, and a built-in CRM at no cost to insurance agents.

It’s important when you’re searching for an FMO; you consider leveraging their technologies to automate your processes if your upline should support you with quoting & enrollment technology or a CRM at no additional cost.

Agency Management  
Contracting & Licensing

Keeping up with your downline’s contracting and licensing can be overwhelming, especially if you’re trying to manage this data in a spreadsheet or even on paper!

How much time do you spend trying to determine if a license is ready to expire?  
How much time do you spend trying to determine if your agent is contracted with a specific carrier? Or if they’ve completed contracting and been issued a writing number?  
How much time do you spend trying to research their ‘Ready to Sell’ status?

That’s a lot of information in several different reports from several different companies that you would have to compile into another spreadsheet for you to analyze and manage your agency's contracting & licensing details.

Depending on the size of your agency, or the number of licenses and contracts, in many cases, this could be a full-time job (literally) for someone to manage the agent details.

To optimize your workforce, and keep staff from dedicating 40-hours per week managing reporting details that can be automated, consider looking at solutions for agency management software.

Agency Management software is a bit different from a regular CRM. A CRM generally houses data on your clients and prospects, but an agency management system can accommodate both agent details and client details.

An agency management system will allow you:

* Store information on your agents to help make the contracting, licensing, and commission/bonus payout management easier.
  + You can store the demographic information like NPN, DOB, and address;
  + You can add every contract and the status of the contract with multiple carriers;
  + You can connect your ready to sell status and show if the agent has completed their certifications for the specific plan year
  + You can also connect policies to the contract and back to the agent
    - This helps with production report to balance your finances and reconciliation reports but also help you easily monitor the sales of your agents to determine if they qualify for your bonus/incentive programs.

With that said, an agency management tool can be as complex or as simple as you’d like.

Taking an agency management tool a step further, some systems are now integrated automations within their systems, allowing you to set up virtual instructions for activities to happen. I’ll share an example with an agency management system designed to allow administrators to create a ‘workflow’ based on triggers.

Triggers are the behaviors that must happen before the workflow can begin or a step in the workflow can happen.

In this example, we’ll be setting up an automation to send a ‘thank you’ email to a client when an agent in our agency has sold a policy.

To do this, we’ll need to define the trigger. The trigger will be when an agent creates a policy entry to connect to a client. Because we have the policy details, like carrier name and product type, we can customize the communication with ‘tags.’

Because the agency management tool also holds client information, we’re able to add the email address to which we want to send the ‘thank you’ email.

You can generally set timing parameters around the automation as well. Perhaps you don’t want the email to send immediately after adding the policy to your client’s profile. Maybe you want the email to go out 4 hours later or even the next day.

The beauty of automation is that it can be as complex or as simple as you need it or want it to be.

The same type of automation can be created and used for notifying your agents of tasks or reminders. If you set up an automation to notify the agent 7-days before their license expiration date is today’s date, then you’ve created an automated workflow that will send your agent an email a week before their license expires – reminding them to renew and pay their renewal fees.

These are just two simple examples of workflow automation for an agency management system.

There are standard agency management systems, and there are more robust ones that also allow for customization. Additionally, freelancers and programmers are always offering their services for system development and customization of low-code platforms like Quickbase or SalesForce.

With these types of tools, you have the ability to create a system to align with your processes. What you find when you rely on a built-in solution, like AgencyBloc, is that you may find, in some cases, you will have to adapt your processes for a specific task to align with the functionality of the system. This can be something as simple as the ‘order of operations’ for a specific process or as complex as a complete examination of process improvement.

Agent Onboarding & Employee Management

Handling Human Resources related tasks often seem the most daunting and time-consuming when it comes to agency management and operations. HR issues generally require a significant amount of documentation and follow-up.

Think about just the process of agent onboarding.

* First, you advertise/list your agency in an effort to recruit
* Schedule an interview – maybe conduct an over-the-phone interview before you bring them into a virtual meeting or your brick and mortar location
* Have the set interview – take notes, add their resume or other notes to their file
* Review all of the candidates to ensure you’re ready to extend offers for agents to join your agency
* Go back and make notes on whether they accepted; if they did – it’s time to start the onboarding process – handling licensing, contracting, E&O, covering your employee handbook or P&P, conducting compliance & ethics training, product training, and tracking all of it!

Again, this is an example of another 40-hour workweek that can be dedicated to tracking and managing this information.

And this doesn’t even account for other HR-related tasks like payroll administration (if this applies to your agency, of course), approving vacation requests, creating schedules – you get the idea.

This sounds like a big order, but many of these same tasks and processes that are oh so demanding can be solved and automated to help you stay organized, compliant, and keep everything well-documented.

Let’s look at some solutions that already exist to help automate these tools.

When you’re looking at business automation on a budget, shopping around for tools that give you the freedom to customize and develop workflows comes in handy.

Many people find that project management tools like Monday and Asana can be helpful in automating some of these processes.

Both Monday & Asana have the ability to build your own workflows. They have templates readily available and range from marketing activities, customer support tickets, client management to HR-related functions. This makes it easy to plug and play and find the appropriate ‘board’ as they call it – that’s right for you.

If you look to either of those tools, you will find they give you the option to create additional workflows. Just like we mentioned with the previous workflows based on triggers, you can set up similar triggers based on something being added or removed, status changes, date/time, and many other factors. You can build additional steps in your workflow that can send emails, add something, remove something, move something to a different ‘bucket,’ automatically change the status – making things like approving someone’s request for vacation simple – also notifying them once you’ve approved.

You can also use this tool to track timecards if that matches your business model. While most agencies have agents work on a schedule they’ve designed, many brick and mortar locations often have administrative staff who are paid hourly. In those instances, you could bypass purchasing a significant timecard system like ADP and create your own timecard process in an existing automation tool.

Of course, there are downsides in doing that. You will lose some of the benefits of using systems designed specifically for timecards – such as storage of pay/wage details & output of W2s, etc.

Nonetheless, these business automation tools allow you to build upon the existing templates to make your resource allow for attachments and more.

Customer Communications

Customer Service Follow-Ups

Customer service is one of the most important processes we deal with on a daily basis. It’s a requirement to ensure we retain our clients and set the stage for new clients through a strong referral base.

Customer service can also be a full-time job, depending on the size of your book of business and the steps you take to ensure exceptional customer service.

The definition of “customer service” also impacts the amount of time that is invested in this essential business activity.

Think about what customer service means to your agency.

* Is it simply calling the carrier on behalf of the client? If so, what action do you take following this call to the carrier? How do you deliver the information to your client regarding the resolution of the service issue?

How do you track those service-related issues? Do you have a ticket system? Do you monitor the resolutions, especially if it’s an issue that can’t be solved with a simple phone call? How do you stay organized and remember to follow up or log that you’ve completed the task? Certainly, you’re not still using post-it notes or calendar reminders.  
  
How do others in your agency know if they should answer the phone if a client calls in to check on the status?

Based on this version of customer service, it seems like it would be essential to have some type of tool that automated any of the customer service ‘tickets’ to be submitted and assigned to an individual to handle. Taking it a step further, if the status changes, wouldn’t it be ideal if it automatically emailed and notified your client of the status of the ‘ticket’?

That would eliminate the need to send an end-of-day email or quick a phone call, updating them.

* Is customer service about sending regular communications to your clients? Perhaps, emails educating them on additional products that may be a good fit to help them close the coverage gaps they may have? Or reminding them on an upcoming enrollment period and their need to take action?

Based on this definition of service, think about if you had a platform that allowed you to import all of your clients and tag them with their birthdays, plan type, carrier name, renewal date – all of the ‘triggering’ events that you can think of.

Then, based on the ‘trigger’ – what if an email was automatically sent or a letter automatically mailed on your behalf with a template that added the personalized details of the client in the body of the template.

Instead of spending time sending hundreds of renewal letters or taking a day at the post office to mail birthday cards – consider optimizing your customer service communication strategies with an email marketing platform, or, in the event you want to use direct mail, connect with a mail-house offering mail deployments based on the automation you create.

Email marketing has come a long way, and a majority of the platforms allow you to customize your communications and build a campaign that is essentially on auto-pilot. That brings us to our next section, email follow-ups & client reminders.

Email Follow-Ups & Client Reminders

Again, while many agency management tools have workflows that will automatically send communication from the tool itself, there are additional ways you can create a personalized and automated follow-up and client reminder experience.

Email marketing platforms, like MailChimp, while can be free – in their standard packaging – they offer buyer journey automation, or additional campaigns where you can schedule your emails to be deployed at a certain date or time.

Here are a few examples of email follows up that can be automated:

* Set your 30, 60, 90 day follow up reminders once your clients have enrolled in a plan
* Remind clients about mentioning your name to their friends & family

You can create email templates for just about any scenario you can think of. Because you have the ability to build what is known as a segment, you can use specific fields or pieces of information that are specific to your customer and ensure that information is plugged into the template.

A template you would use could look like this:

Dear <Client Name>,  
  
Thank you for enrolling in your <Carrier Name> <Product> plan. I appreciate your business and look forward to working with you in the future.  
  
Now, you can see the placeholders for the client’s name, carrier name, and product name. If you import an email list and include these fields from your agency management tool – you can ensure that these fields, or what is known as ‘tags’ in the email marketing platform, are applied to the appropriate placeholder in the example.

For more information on email marketing campaigns, sign up for our Agent Elevate Email Marketing Course. We walk you through the process of setting up an account, list building and segmentation, understanding what information to include, and much more.

Microsoft Bookings is another great way to automate one appointment setting and scheduling process. You can create a page where your prospects and clients can self-book – it integrates with your Outlook, so you’ll never be double-booked or booked at a time when you may be out of the office. This is incredibly helpful for agents on the go – who are regularly on the road and trying to balance multiple calendars.

Additionally, Bookings can also, on your behalf, send automatic reminders to your clients regarding their appointments based on the times you set – maybe a day before and an hour before the appointment.

Reporting

Reporting is another process that can take a significant amount of time away from your day. There are so many reports to shift through to get you the information you need to make decisions.

For starters, you have your contracting & licensing reports, ready-to-sell reports, your production reports, and your commission statements. That doesn’t even touch on other important financial reports that need to be analyzed for your budget.

With that said, it’s essential to ensure that you eliminate the use of taking spreadsheets and comparing them, saving them, and building pivot table after pivot table. Don’t get me wrong; pivot tables are exceptional for analyzing data and condensing the details for summaries or dashboards. But, at the end of the day, there is a lot of lifting involved in the management of the spreadsheets, and don’t even think about what happens if you didn’t save the worksheet, or heaven forbid, you miss an update to the data!

Finding a tool that will automate your reports and help you manage your data is important.

The Microsoft Suite of products offers you a wide variety of tools extending beyond Outlook, Powerpoint, and Excel. Such tools are Dynamics 365 Finance – which is designed specifically for integrating financials into core processes and automating tasks to boost your productivity. This tool also helps with budgeting and forecasting and gives you holistic reporting and analytics. Probably the most helpful is the streamlined revenue recognition, automated credit & collections or reconciliation reports, and touchless vendor invoicing, which can be used to help payout commissions to downlines or overrides to your managers.

Another powerful Microsoft tool for automating reporting and data is PowerBI. PowerBI is known as ‘data visualization software’ – the BI stands for business intelligence. PowerBI allows you to use multiple data sources to share important business insights – internally – or you can invite individuals from outside of your organization to view the powerful dashboards you create. The great thing about PowerBI is that while it looks intimidating, you can apply the skills you already have from Excel to move from building to analyzing to presenting with less data prep. They also offer free online learning resources and tutorials to help you get started.

Social Media

While we have a section for marketing activities, I wanted to speak to social media posts in a separate section. Why? Because there are so many social media platforms to ‘post on’ that it could be an all-day job, simply posting!

That’s where business automation comes into play.

There are tools, such as HootSuite, which allow you to create a site that connects to all of your social media pages. In one location, you can post to multiple channels – that means, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram – with the click of one button.

Even better, you can schedule for up to 90-days in advance. So, if you take the time to plan your social media strategy and prepare all of the content you plan to use for the next 90-days – you could essentially take one day (the day that you would have previously taken to post one post, for one day through all of your channels) to automate your social media posts for the next 3-months.

That is tangible evidence of true time-savings and the benefits of business automation. Can you imagine all of the time you or your marketing team will get back by investing in a simple tool that allows you to cross-post in one spot?

In addition to posting, you can also interact with individuals who may comment on your posts, message you directly, or mention & tag you.

It really is an all-in-one tool to help you manage all of your social media activities, not just scheduling your posts.

Other Marketing Activities & Lead Management

You’ve probably noticed by now; there seems to be a solution for automating almost every business process you can think of. That’s because small business owners need tools to help them remain productive, profitable, and capable.

We’ve already discussed the ability to automate and schedule your social media and your email marketing. You’re probably wondering what other marketing activities can I automate?

How do you currently get your organic leads into your CRM?

In this final section of business automation examples, let’s explore ways that you can automate the management of your leads.

One of the most popular tools in a marketer's toolbox is a system known as Zapier.

Zapier is the ultimate business partner for automation!

Zapier allows you to connect multiple applications and tools to automate workflows. It’s incredibly simple; Zapier will ask you to pick a trigger that starts your workflow and allows you to add as many steps and actions as you need to complete the process.

One example of how you can use Zapier for your lead management:

Know the instant someone fills out your form by having the details in the form automatically added in your CRM as a lead – you can also have the campaign source pre-populate and take it to the next step of having the lead assigned to one of your agents.

Zapier is known to automate 4,000+ apps in millions of ways.

Another amazing example of lead management is translation services. Because Zapier connects with apps like RingCentral, you can create a Zapier formatter to translate on your behalf.

Some other common marketing tools Zapier connects with include most social media platforms, email marketing platforms, webinar software, and content management tools.

Zapier has done an exceptional job of creating templates for individuals with less of a technical background to easily build out their automations with pre-built workflows.

They also give more tech-savvy users the ability to code and create API paths for those who may be using lead vendors in need of access points into your CRM.

As a small business owner, it’s important to maximize your time to grow and minimize the time you spend on repetitive workflows and operational processes. In addition to saving you time and money on hiring additional staff, business automation also helps support business continuity.

Think about the times that you’ve missed doing someone because you’ve been stuck in a meeting or you were sick! If your process had been automated, it would have happened regardless if you were there to manually complete the task.

You should now feel confident in your ability to identify tasks that you’re ready to automate. Good luck on your journey to successful business automation & continuity.

Congratulations on completing your Agent Elevate course on business automation!