Deep Science Publishing, 2026
https://doi.org/10.70593/978-93-7185-126-8_8

Chapter 8: Intelligent Automation and Self-Optimizing Workflow

8.1. Introduction

Although often treated as a synonym for Robotic Process Automation (RPA), Automation is more accurately viewed as an umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of techniques for automating repetitive tasks. Intelligent Automation (IA) increases process efficiency across all business functions by combining several innovative technologies, including RPA and other low-code or no-code solutions that require little to no programming skills. It involves integrating intelligent solutions that require a certain degree of automation for development and integration (e.g., machine learning, interaction with RPA), and can incorporate decision support tools. Unlike some earlier definitions, IA does not require that the process be completely hands-free. In addition to facilitating the automation of transactional work—offloading data entry and other digital tasks, as well as executing straight-through processing—IA also provides a framework for enabling traditional back-office process owners to extend their responsibility into the automation domain. By automating routine tasks, employees can focus on working with customers and carrying out their core responsibilities. Furthermore, these technology patterns are maturing rapidly, with new entrants and innovations emerging faster than users can evaluate and pilot them.

IA also offers clients an opportunity to adopt a more strategic approach to using automation across the enterprise. Instead of merely speeding up individual processes, clients can explore end-to-end automation across the customer journey (sales, marketing, operations, service), product life cycle (development, manufacturing, sales), value chain (procurement, logistics, finance), or the entire enterprise.

8.1.1. Background and Significance

Intelligent Automation (IA) enhances traditional automation with technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), natural-language processing, sensor networks, and computer-vision systems. It includes Intelligent Process Automation, which automates high-complexity business processes, supports human workers with cognitive assistance, or enables human-free operation. IA offers operational benefits, including faster processing, reduced costs, better-quality output, and heightened resilience with reduced exposure to workforce fluctuation. The possible return on investment has spurred interest in a wide range of applications, from business process management and IT operations to manufacturing, supply chain management, healthcare, and public administration. The growing complexity and dynamism of products, markets, and production ecosystems further increase interest in IA.

A key barrier to IA adoption is insufficient organizational learning, making it harder for organizations to adapt IA solutions and serving as a deterrent to investment. Self-optimizing workflows that continuously improve the performance of IA systems can mitigate this barrier. These workflows leverage knowledge and experience collected during IA operations through evaluation and feedback loops, allowing them to adjust execution parameters and decision models in near real time. Coarse-grained self-optimization revises workflows and related AI models frequently—e.g., weekly or monthly—while fine-grained self-optimization supports day-to-day amplitude tuning based, for example, on weather forecasts. The concepts behind such self-optimizing workflows, the feedback loops they employ, the metrics required for evaluation, and established architectural patterns for self-optimization are therefore briefly reviewed.

Equation 1: Intelligent Automation Learning Equation

$$At + 1 = At + \alpha(Rt - At)A_{t+1} = A_t + \alpha(R_t - A_t)At + 1 = At + \alpha(Rt - At)$$

This represents how an automated system improves over time:

- AtA_tAt: current automation performance
- RtR_tRt: real-world result or feedback
- α\alphaα: learning rate

8.1.2. Research design

The analysis draws on expert interviews, case studies, and observations of projects involving Intelligent Automation in different industries and sectors. It identifies concepts, mechanisms, and framework patterns for self-optimizing workflows that can significantly improve the effectiveness of service delivery and operation support through feedback loops, a rich set of metrics, and adaptive architecture with the evaluation and update cycle decisively supporting the Autonomic Computing agenda. Within such systems, the solutions provided by human beings and machines, as well as the very combination of these two sources, are handled cooperatively and holistically either through intelligent compositional mechanisms or through intelligent orchestration and dynamic service discovery.

The identified concepts, mechanisms, and architectural framework patterns supporting Intelligent Automation and self-optimizing workflows can significantly enhance enterprise process automation efforts in addressing increased operation complexity and supporting emerging developments such as Industry 4.0. They are also applicable in many other domains, including manufacturing and logistics, healthcare, public administration, and the public services of smart cities.

8.2. Foundations of Intelligent Automation

Intelligent Automation comprises industrialized automation of repetitive processes, is the collective implementation of the technologies Machine Learning (ML), Natural Language Processing (NLP), cognitive computing, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Deep Learning (DL) applied across an enterprise for maximum gain. Intelligent Automation combines traditional Business Process Management (BPM) capabilities with a combination of disruptive technologies, including distributed ledger technologies, Multi-Experience, Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence and Branchless and Cashless Business Models. It is based on a combination of business and technology best practices, together with business maturity / technology usage models, and serves to unlock the full potential of internal business functions. Intelligent Automation has grown in breadth and scope for process, people, knowledge, product and customer management. At its core are robotic process automation capabilities and supporting business process management functions, visual workflow management, externalization management, process mining and process discovery, embedded analytics, no-code / low-code development, knowledge bases, case management and business rule management.

Diving deeper, Intelligent Automation combines the industrialized automation of repetitive processes with the horizon-expanding implementation of AI enabling technologies for learning, decision making, natural language understanding and visual perception delivered at speed, at scale, and with full governance. The scale of end-to-end technology adoption that goes beyond process-oriented RPA echoes the trajectory that the global-brands industry followed in its journey toward the electrification of the motor car, a product that arrived at speed, at scale and with full government support and oversight. To unlock this collection of deep AI technologies for enterprise use requires the advent of infrastructures such as those represented by the Metaverse; yet, to enable the deployment of such infrastructures requires a rapid and high-quality business model and process cloud foundation.

8.2.1. Definitions and scope

Intelligent Automation (IA) combines robotic process automation and artificial intelligence to design and execute business processes with little or no human intervention. Key aspects of IA are the capabilities to learn from experience and to self-optimize, enabling processes to become faster, cheaper, better, and easier over time. Self-optimizing workflows are often understood as feedback loops that enable processes to automatically adapt to changing operating environments, requests from consuming processes, and detection of defects or inefficiencies.

Intelligent Automation applies especially to processes whose sequence of steps can be modeled explicitly and whose actions are usually executed according to predefined rules. Enterprise process automation, manufacturing and logistics, and healthcare and public administration are among the application domains. End-to-end business and engineering processes span wide-ranging workflows that pool capabilities from various functional areas or organizational units.

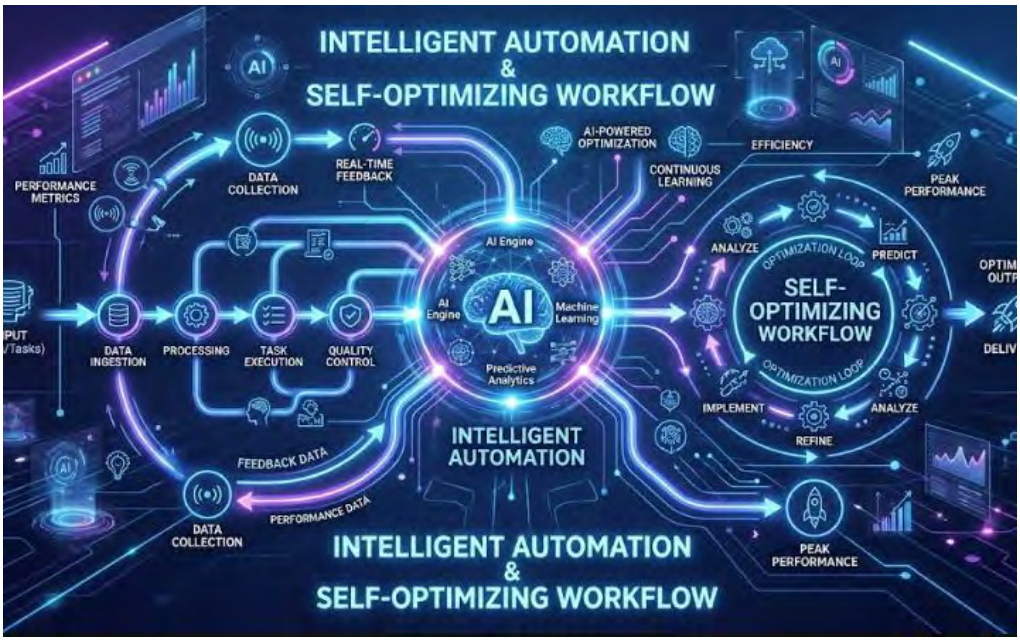

Fig 8.1: Intelligent Automation and Self-Optimizing Workflow

8.2.2. Core technologies

Data governance, risk, and compliance management are key enablers of Intelligent Process Automation (IPA) and Intelligent Automation (IA). For an IPA and IA ecosystem to be sustainable, organizations must build the required data and analytics governance capabilities or use cloud-based services that provide these capabilities out of the box. New players are introducing data risk services into the market and defining novel approaches for providing data risk in hybrid multicloud environments. Further advancements in system observability, which enables observability across the stack and across multicloud environments, are influencing the way large organizations approach risk management, allowing companies to adopt decentralized data risk management approaches. A sustainable IPA will be unable to optimize without investor signalling capabilities (reporting, risk communication, investor decision support tools) that provide information for the dynamic team of investors that support businesses, or with support governance and control functions that facilitate risk-taking decisions and the creation of long-term shareholder value.

A continual ethical gap between the design of a service or product and its broad availability and adoption means that ethical risks continue to emerge during and after implementation. Risk analysis must therefore remain an open-ended business process. Trust is at the core of ethics, yet it needs empirical evidence to substantiated conclusions and risk decisions. Implicit guarantees that data, systems, and services are safe will not suffice and the future of all businesses will depend on managing risk in the APAC region. Internal and external auditors, assurance practitioners, and compliance professionals are using AI for assurance. Such usage includes automating complex routinized tasks commonly conducted in teams, and the human auditors completing the rest of the audit faster and with a lower level of mistakes.

8.2.3. Data governance and ethics

On a pragmatic level, responsible data governance is vital for both public trust and societal welfare. Although related to the ethical design of intelligent systems, the practical implementation of ethical principles and guidelines within a company's data governance is considered essential. Various external ethical codes have been developed, particularly for AI development. Moreover, a preliminary review of the existing literature in data governance indicates a growing awareness of fairness, accountability, and transparency. Even though these developments are promising, there is still a long way to go. The design, implementation, and day-by-day execution of ethical principles is still lacking, especially in the main area associated with the capabilities of intelligent automation—namely, technology-enabled processes.

The recommendations that directly address the data governance of intelligent automation are summarized as follows: 1. Data governance structures need to be strengthened for all emerging technologies; 2. Data related to paedophilia, terrorism, religious hatred, and any other societal issue threatening the fabric of society need to be removed from the Internet; 3. Digital infrastructures must be built and managed under a model to support individuals rather than businesses; 4. New data-access models must be established; 5. Business-led and research-led partnerships must be developed for sharing data sets; and 6. Ethical principles provided by various agencies, such as the European Commission and the OECD, should be married into a unified approach for public administration.

8.3. Self-Optimizing Workflows: Concepts and Mechanisms

Machine Learning (ML) is capable of translating the raw inputs of real-world processes into information, provided that sufficient training data are available. Self-optimizing workflows exploit this capability by embedding the ability to collect training data and the ability to create, approve, deploy, and test trained ML models directly in business processes. These automated feedback loops require neither prior model design nor special ML competence. The resulting ML-enhanced workflows are always optimized, and their optimization can be made continuous, enabling response to changes in the external environment.

One of the central tenets of Intelligent Automation is that automation should not merely replace human labor but also improve the quality of processes and services. Operational excellence aims at quality and efficiency; service-oriented architectures focus on improving customer service; Lean emphasizes eliminating waste in all its forms; Traditional Six Sigma projects seek to improve process capability. Many organizations strive to continuously improve their products and services. The final aspect, however, has remained a daunting challenge. Self-optimizing workflows provide a pragmatic mechanism for continuous improvement in production and service delivery processes.

Equation 2: Workflow Efficiency Optimization Equation

$$E = \sum i = 1n(Vi \cdot Pi)C + TE = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(V_i \cdot P_i)}{C + T} E = C + T \sum i = 1n(Vi \cdot Pi)$$

This models overall workflow efficiency:

- ViV_iVi: value of task iii
- PiP_iPi: probability of successful automation
- CCC: operational cost
- TTT: time consumed

8.3.1. Feedback loops and continuous improvement

Feedback loops are common in cybernetic systems—especially those affecting the real world—indeed, they are one of the main heuristics used to design such systems (see [26, 28]). In decision-making, however, feedback often arrives only after the fact, and when recalibrating operational routines, the task of integrating feedback from every decision also becomes infeasible. Automated decisions are being implemented more and more frequently, generating a demand for corresponding feedback processes. The availability and affordability of sensors able to measure not only external but also internal data about systems are rapidly increasing. Incorporating feedback on automated decisions enables continuously improving automated generations of such decisions, leading to self-improving automation in general.

Continuous improvement realized through analysis of feedback on automated decisions can be applied in two different ways. It can be applied directly if the decision-making mechanisms themselves are exposed to feedback and iteratively refined, or indirectly through the employment of such feedback on operational business processes that utilize the decisions produced. The former creates a higher-level cybernetic structure than the standard cybernetic system; the higher-level structure observes how well the system performs and modifies it on-the-fly, similarly to how surrogate objectives coordinate the architecture of multi-agent systems and relative-performances of the individual agents. The latter is more common and resembles the traditional Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle of business process optimization but with the emphasis on the Check and Act phases, where preestablished decisions are merely routes to follow and therefore part of the business process infrastructure (not the ad-hoc content)—even though they could be monitored and evaluated as well. In both cases feedback must be analyzed and enabled at all levels of granularity, using suitable objectives, measurements and patterns.

8.3.2. Metrics and measurement

Measuring Self-Optimizing Workflows through Metrics and Measurement

Effectively measuring the self-optimization of an autonomous workflow remains unresolved. Several supported information systems or process optimization systems provide some sample measures. Typical resource and expert behavior measures, reflected in conventional utilization and behavior anomaly discovery models, work well when feedback cycles are not too short. Further benefits from self-optimization can be drawn if the optimization cycle is more agile than the operational cycle. The true impact of self-optimization just-in-time is thus measured via the deviation of long-term fulfilled measurable aspects of provided quality versus non-self-optimizing variants of service.

Service time or offered quality elasticity in terms of business demand or failure prediction accuracy changes can even provide additional benefits.

Learning models helping automate expert allocations to expert-demanding cases provide a further measure of optimization. Empirical checks ensure the proven quality of such measures. Convergence speed of the algorithms delivering these metrics reveals their interpretation as a condensed self-optimization step cycle and even enables strategic decision support through prioritized shifts across resource bottleneck constraints. This prioritization approach needs non-traditional cross-area expertise sharing for high-leverage cross-departments, as external dependent process areas usually neither have authority nor always interest to change their process area behavior despite contractual obligations.

8.3.3. Architecture patterns for self-optimization

Self-optimizing applications are web-based services, characterized by extensive data collection and analytics capabilities. They analyze behavioral data of diverse user groups and continuously improve through such analysis, automated music or movie recommendations such as those by YouTube and Netflix being prime examples. In such cases, self-optimization leads to a more personalized user experience. Such modules can also adapt content delivery based on browsing preferences or news events as with the Google homepage, whose display layout changes or that shows different textual elements based on collective user search behavior or trending topics, leading to potentially increased click-through rates and revenue. In effect, a multitude of data is generated, and with it comes the challenge of extracting value from the data, facilitating a self-optimizing architecture.

Adapting internal enterprise processes for similar self-optimization has attracted interest only in the past few years; such a shift allows the underlying business processes to refine themselves based on user behavior through online feedback loops. A conventional business process refers to a company’s core operations those that are central to its own success but also internal or external requirements. These business processes can be optimized through performance measurements with respect to time, cost, errors, and user satisfaction and through a selective examination of process-related feedback data such as error descriptions and user complaints. A limited set of such enterprise feedback data, expressed as a matrix, drives business-process self-strengthening, thinning, and building. By enabling business processes to incorporate enterprise feedback and thereby refine themselves, companies can potentially enhance internal operations, improve customer satisfaction and loyalty, and increase revenue and profit.

8.4. Architectural Frameworks for Intelligent Automation

Intelligent automation frameworks encompass several elements, such as modular structure design and enterprise service management. Modular design allows for the creation of abstract building blocks that can be adjusted to perform a particular function and scaled to accommodate current demands. Defining widely accepted interfaces promotes interoperability and simplifies service integration. Management platforms store service descriptions, log service execution history, and support option comparison based on associated costs and performance data. Service orchestration tools convert a use case into parallel or sequential service sequences that can be executed by middleware solutions. Architectures orchestrate the installation and updates of on-premises or cloud infrastructure according to service needs.

Additional architectural patterns boost the self-optimizing abilities of Intelligent Automation solutions, promote the reuse of AI models and address the hyperautomation challenge. Continuous integration and continuous delivery pipelines help test and deploy AI models; natural language processing technologies enable voice- and chat-based human-computer interaction; and the integration of low-code or no-code development platforms non-expert users to develop automation workflows and AI models.

8.4.1. Modular design and service orchestration

Service-oriented architecture (SOA) remains a widely used paradigm for digital system design. It promotes modularity and reuse of software components, aligns development efforts with business capabilities, and supports orchestration of automated services for business processes. In IA, SOA principles and technologies are extended to encompass all types of resources—people, machines, and software agents—over which an enterprise has operational control. A configurable orchestration engine coordinates these resources, using business process models rather than hard-coded sequences of execution.

Fig 8.2: Modular design and service orchestration

Microservices are an increasingly popular SOA implementation approach. Each microservice encapsulates a specific business function and is designed to be independently developed, deployed, and maintained. Although the development and operational overhead is greater than with monolithic designs, microservices are often viewed as the long-term answer to meeting the demands of ever-changing user needs. IA takes a similar approach to physical components by treating sensing and automation devices as individual modules that can be replaced, upgraded, or added independently of other modules in the self-optimizing loop architecture. Together with a serverless cloud computing model, such modular designs can also support burst processing and handling of unexpected events.

8.4.2. AI integration and model management

Self-optimizing workflows capitalize on feedback loops to gauge performance and distill structured information from the monitored environment. The metrics derived from relative compared with absolute performance are a driver of continuous improvement and learning. By feeding information back into the workflow, it can change based on previous performance, which helps discover parameterizations and optimizations that improve effectiveness and efficiency.

In principle, self-optimizing workflows can be supported by any mechanism capable of altering the execution or resource assignment of a previous execution. Nevertheless, certain architecture patterns offer particular advantages. For instance, feedback mechanisms can monitor both external context and the workflow traces themselves, including their execution metadata. The monitored information is then stored in a structure that helps identify areas for improvement and, ultimately, discover how the workflow can be executed in a self-optimizing manner.

8.4.3. Human–machine collaboration interfaces

The complementary and yet conflicting qualities of human and machine intelligence cast this interface design as particularly critical. Humans excel with vague, incomplete or misleading information, whilst they struggle with highly structured information needed for precise task execution. For example, workers can manage disparate data inputs efficiently whilst machines have natural strengths with highly precisely structured data. Furthermore, when initiating action, vague task prompts are often preferable for human use. And, because so many teams span domains of knowledge, represent team networks as collaborative webs (and not as a hierarchy) to facilitate talent discovery and knowledge sharing.

Advances in augmented intelligence challenge traditional binary views of human and machine intelligence juxtaposed as purely complementary competitors. The two form an interdependent trifecta of complementary and fungible roles. Tasks that can be defined precisely enough can be fully automated; those requiring complete capability and the ability to handle intrinsic and extrinsic ambiguity should be performed by humans; and those requiring both sets of capabilities but not at the same time should be supported by the other party acting in an augmented intelligence role.

For example, currently image recognition tasks are shifting from human to machine. The remaining traditionally non-automatable step, interpreting and acting on these images, is now being supported with augmented intelligence to guide lower-precision task execution. For traffic-sign recognition, displaying signs visually on screen for carry out detection and identification eliminates miss-defining signs; relaying the detected label verbal through earphones accelerates decision response times. A speedup occurs with trained workers, because despite purposely scrambling many signs, their rich training experience quickly allows recognizing and correlating visual picture with label.

8.5. Case Studies and Applications

Intelligent Automation has wide-ranging applications across sectors and domains. In enterprise process automation, it can reduce costs, improve service levels, and mitigate operational risk by deploying intelligent algorithms and integrated automation frameworks at enterprise scale. Applications in manufacturing and logistics include end-to-end automation of supply chain functions, enabling real-time responsiveness and improved customer service levels while reducing inventory levels. In healthcare and public administration, intelligent automation improves service quality and compliance with ethical and regulatory guidelines.

Intelligent Automation has emerged as an industry megatrend. The four largest consulting firms have dedicated units with thousands of staff, and IT infrastructure and application management service providers, business process outsourcing companies, pureplay robotic process automation vendors, and information vendors have all committed to investment. When combined with the exponential growth of generative AI, the opportunity to optimize and automate complex business processes and applications becomes real.

Equation 3: Self-Optimization Feedback Loop Equation

$$Wt + 1 = Wt + \beta \nabla F(Wt) W_{t+1} = W_t + \beta \nabla F(W_t) Wt + 1 = Wt + \beta \nabla F(Wt)$$

This captures continuous workflow improvement:

- WtW_tWt: current workflow state
- ∇F(Wt)\nabla F(W_t)∇F(Wt): gradient of performance (direction of improvement)
- β\betaβ: optimization rate

8.5.1. Enterprise process automation

Self-optimal enterprise processes integrate cognitive capabilities to instantiate a workflow-execution system that operates unattended, with no human intervention. Execution-layer infrastructures, migrated to the cloud, are increasingly combined with a broad array of business-model-oriented services and third-party-sourced cloud software suites from ERP, CRM, and HRM solution providers. Deployed in a modular design that orchestrates on-demand service execution, these infrastructures dynamically support a production scenario for a specific enterprise process. Intelligent software agents communicate internally over a broadband Internet network and externally with customers, suppliers, and other business partners.

All process-execution tasks are performed without human intervention, such as cleansing and validating customers' payment card information, processing large numbers of customer call records, cross-validating data among different transaction databases, monitoring the status of supplier delivery schedules, and batch-updating files in an enterprise's accounting system. Emerging self-optimizing capabilities based on feedback loops further enhance automation support, continuously up-to-date performance metrics stored in a data model, and new requirements detected by monitoring processes' business environments.

8.5.2. Manufacturing and logistics

In manufacturing and logistics, Intelligent Automation combines digital robots, software tools and networked equipment to execute process steps and make decisions, underpinned by data infrastructure and interoperable services. Data-driven self-optimizing workflows interact with the physical environment to increase productivity and efficiency across the entire enterprise.

In the manufacturing context, Intelligent Automation extends Digital Process Automation by integrating Process Orchestration with advanced sensory and actuating devices connected to the Internet of Things (IoT). The automation of an individual process step can involve augmented or virtual reality, Natural Language Processing (NLP) or Computer Vision technology to trigger a robot or external service, but these components belong to the domain of Digital Process Automation. Unlike in a traditional industrial automation setup, the decision-making components—and robots on the factory floor—are integrated into an enterprise-level environment and interconnected as a single cohesive mechanism for production execution and delivery scheduling. The Digital Twin of the Factory is a shared representation formed by the enterprise-wide data infrastructure and models that govern the Intelligent Automation architecture.

Fig 8.3: Manufacturing and logistics

8.5.3. Healthcare and public administration

Intelligent Automation is poised to significantly enhance the efficiency and quality of services in healthcare and public administration. In healthcare, automation can help alleviate overload situations in hospitals by creating an operating theater schedule that ensures limited human resources provide the best possible service to patients. For public administration, AI techniques can automatically process income tax declarations, isolating the few cases that require more advanced processing.

In both settings, process automation must be coupled with intelligent supervision information systems that optimally allocate limited resources and guidelines to direct human–machine collaboration. Indeed, the integration of intelligent automation to fully or partially automate enterprise processes only delivers the expected results when the resulting workflows include supervision information systems that direct the activity of humans and intelligent agents. Constructing these supervision information systems in a structured way and ensuring that they are consistent with the orchestrated human–machine collaboration is not trivial.

8.6. Conclusion

Intelligent Automation (IA) is an approach to leveraging various forms of automation, digital augmentation technologies, and artificial intelligence for business and process optimization. Enterprise process automation, with a particular focus on self-optimizing workflows, represents an important application area for Intelligent Automation. A self-optimizing workflow is one that continuously monitors operational performance metrics, analyzes feedback loops, and employs corrective measures to improve performance. Self-optimizing workflows require a closed-loop architecture capable of continuously measuring, analyzing, and learning from metrics within the context of the larger workflow ecosystem. Continuous improvement and performance monitoring, which have long been standard practice in manufacturing, can similarly be applied to workflows.

Emerging case studies on enterprise process automation and industry evidence on self-optimization—including in manufacturing and logistics—are gathering momentum. Many enterprises are beginning to build out an Intelligent Automation technology ecosystem that incorporates modular design principles, service orchestration implemented with Microservices and Business Process Management, composite solutions enabled by advanced Artificial Intelligence, and Human–Machine Collaboration Interfaces. Such concepts are beginning to operate in practice, albeit in isolated instances.

8.6.1. Emerging Trends

Intelligent automation is still evolving from a narrow focus on enterprise process automation into a more general layer of self-optimizing workflow management, supported by an increasingly richer ecosystem of software technologies. Self-optimizing workflows employ closed feedback loops to continuously monitor and refine their operation, enabling the automatic adaptation of execution paths and resource allocation to changing environments and requirements. An Intelligent Automation ecosystem enables closed feedback loops to be added to all kinds of enterprise and operational services interlinked by service-orchestration workflows.

Enterprise processes operate in a fixed sequence driven by a dedicated BPM engine or workflow scheduler. Orchestration workflows, in contrast, exploit the idea of service orchestration to coupled modular components that can be combined and recombined on demand. Interactions between the components are statically defined but dynamically executed: the data-exchange paths can follow different tracks on different computation runs, based on the data characteristics. The constituent components may include analytical services powered by AI or other algorithmic technologies. These provide the modelling needed to analyze data and make predictions; they may be predictive models, classification models, or even what-if simulators..

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