WEBCON®

LOW-CODE, BUT BETTER.

Why a low-code platform is the ideal supplement to your company's **ERP System**

During my 12-year-long career in the ERP Industry, I have had an opportunity to gain deep insight into the ERP market for mid-sized companies and corporations, and also into how these companies run their business based on ERP and beyond. In the last few years, in which the newest technological developments have seen Industry 4.0 and digital transformation spreading quickly, I had the honor of meeting and working with many experts in these fields. If I had to sum up the key findings based on my experience into just one sentence, it would be: ERP is not enough!

This sentence has many consequences – it changes the way that both software vendors and service companies should look at their ERP solutions, along with the internal IT departments across all industries. It forces them to expand their technology stack in order to keep pace with the challenges arising for their business. In this article, I will describe how companies can overcome many of the challenges created by digitization through enabling the digital transformation of their processes – from auxiliary tasks to mission critical business processes – outside of their ERP system. However, rather than introducing you to a world of numerous 'best of breed' solutions, I would like to show how a huge part of business process automation, outside and alongside ERP, can be done with the use of just one enterprise-level low-code tool –WEBCON Business Process Suite.

Philipp **Erdkönig**

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WEBCON

ERP Systems are good at supporting the core processes that keep your company running. But to be successful, it is necessary to deliver applications that help you drive innovation in your business.

Lots of companies treat their ERP System as the centerpiece, or as ERP vendors often call it, the backbone, of their company's processes. And most of the ERP systems do a great job supporting the core processes, especially those that are legally required and regulated by law, such as the inventory count, posting invoices, bookkeeping, payroll and the use of a company's most crucial resources – employees, tools, machinery or materials. However, these are not all the processes that keep a company running, and definitely not the processes that make your business run better than your competitor's. Especially given that your competitor is likely running the same or a similar ERP system, containing almost identical process logic – guided by the law and regulations.

Recent years have taught companies that, in order to be better than their competition, they have to be able to digitalize the processes that make their products and services special, that help them to stand out on the market. The challenge is that these are the processes the company performs differently to their competitors, or that the competitors do not do at all, and therefore no ERP system on the market supports these processes.

They also learned that, in order to be successful, they have to be able to innovate, either by enhancing their products and services, or by creating new ones using the power of digitization. Let us take, as an example, one of WEBCON's customers in the fashion industry, who uses the automated processing of feedback on the current collection from the moment it arrives at the stores, in order to quickly react in an ever-changing fast fashion market.
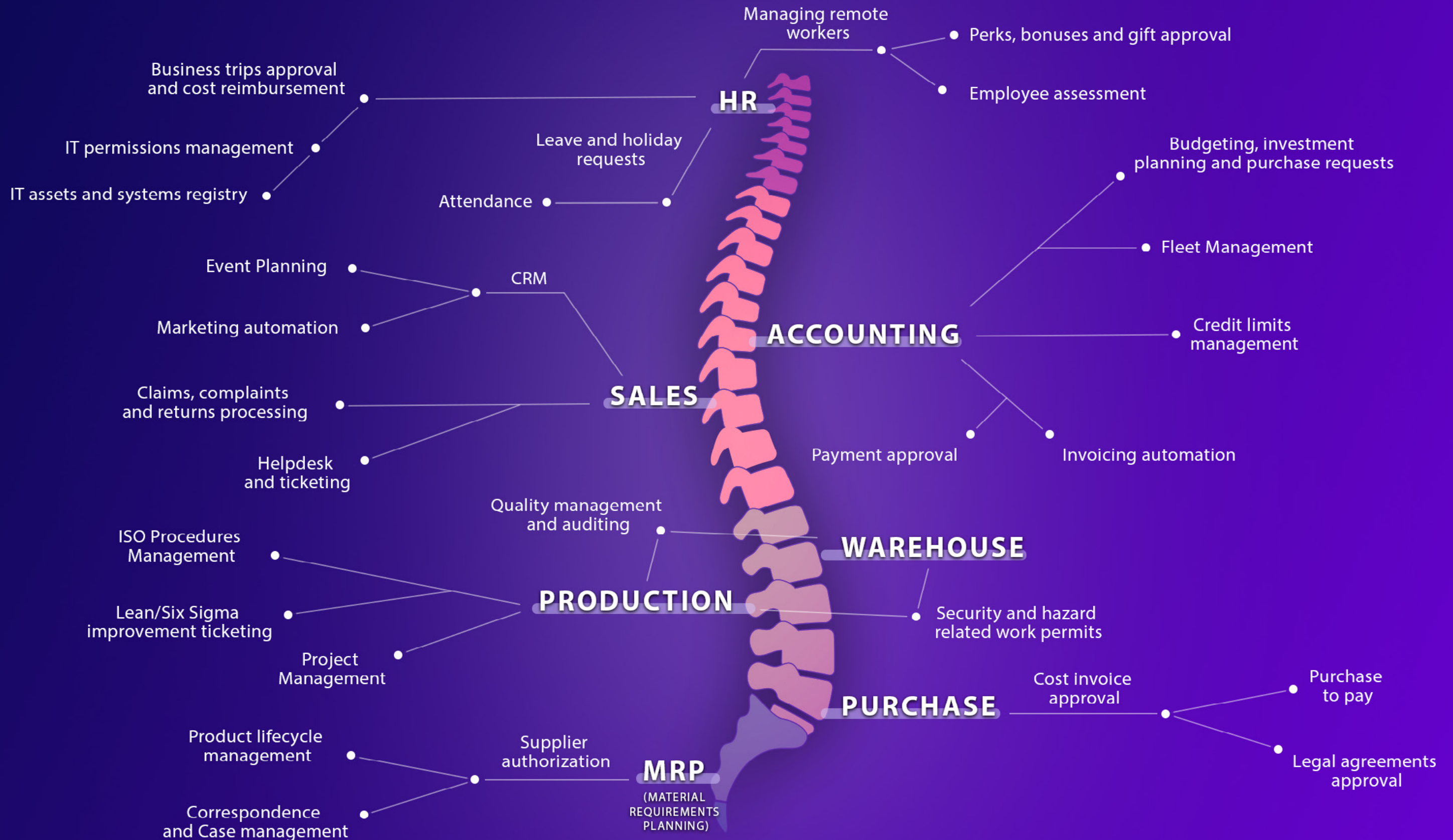
So while it is absolutely necessary to have a strong backbone, and ERP systems are perfectly suited to this role, i.e. for those processes that keep your company running and make sure everything is recorded and reported according to the law, companies also need to look at how they can differentiate themselves from the competition and use the power of innovation to become market leaders.

In order to make this innovation happen, they need a complex nervous system that is just as reliable as the backbone, but can grow quickly in any direction – wherever a new limb might be needed to handle new ways of doing business. This needs a system that keeps all the limbs connected throughout different types of processes.

WEBCON BPS has the ideal DNA to let you grow such a nervous system, or a system of new and flexible business processes, all over your company. And, of course, it will communicate with your backbone to make sure that your core processes are given all the information necessary to fulfill all the legal and organizational requirements.

ERP backbone with a neural network of BPS processes around it

HR
- Business trips approval and cost reimbursement
- IT permissions management
- IT assets and systems registry
- Leave and holiday requests
- Attendance
- Managing remote workers
- Perks, bonuses and gift approval
- Employee assessment

SALES
- Event Planning
- Marketing automation
- CRM
- Claims, complaints and returns processing
- Helpdesk and ticketing

ACCOUNTING
- Budgeting, investment planning and purchase requests
- Fleet Management
- Credit limits management
- Payment approval
- Invoicing automation

PRODUCTION
- Quality management and auditing
- ISO Procedures Management
- Lean/Six Sigma improvement ticketing
- Project Management

WAREHOUSE
- Security and hazard related work permits

PURCHASE
- Cost invoice approval
- Purchase to pay
- Legal agreements approval

MRP
(MATERIAL REQUIREMENTS PLANNING)
- Supplier authorization
- Product lifecycle management
- Correspondence and Case management

ERP SYSTEMS

ERP systems are not designed to be platforms for creating the bespoke applications you need today

Up till a few years ago, companies invested a lot into the customization and extension of their ERP solutions, and some still are. However, the wind is now changing: with fewer customers willing to invest enormous sums into growing their ERP monoliths, vendors have had to change their strategies. That is why most of today's ERP products enable their network of partners to develop modules or add-ons for the ERP system to serve the special needs of single industries, with standard solutions at affordable prices. Advanced APIs and SDKs are there to enable the growth of bespoke solutions around the core of ERP, allowing its customization beyond the configuration options that the ERP vendor thought of and implemented in their product. However, ERP systems still do not really offer tools that make it easy to create new applications, and therefore automate additional processes for single companies that are running the ERP. As a result, customization that goes beyond configuration usually means coding. And this means that ERP development requires professional developers that know not only how to build an application, but also how to use the ERP's programming interface to have the application communicate with it.

The problem is that such professionals are hard to find, and their services usually cost a lot of money. And even if you are lucky to have them available in-house, they always seem to be kept busy with troubleshooting and keeping the ERP running, not really having the time to handle the additional workload of creating new applications. In order to get digitization projects done, you simply have to find a way around that.

WEBCON BPS has been developed for the single purpose of enabling the quick and easy development of powerful business applications that help companies digitalize all kinds of business processes. On top of that, it is low-code, so it does not require writing any code in a programming language, meaning that applications can be built by people who have very limited knowledge about the ERP's API, and can focus instead on the business logic and user experience. As they do not have to code at all, it is much easier for you to find them, and so much easier to keep them on the team.
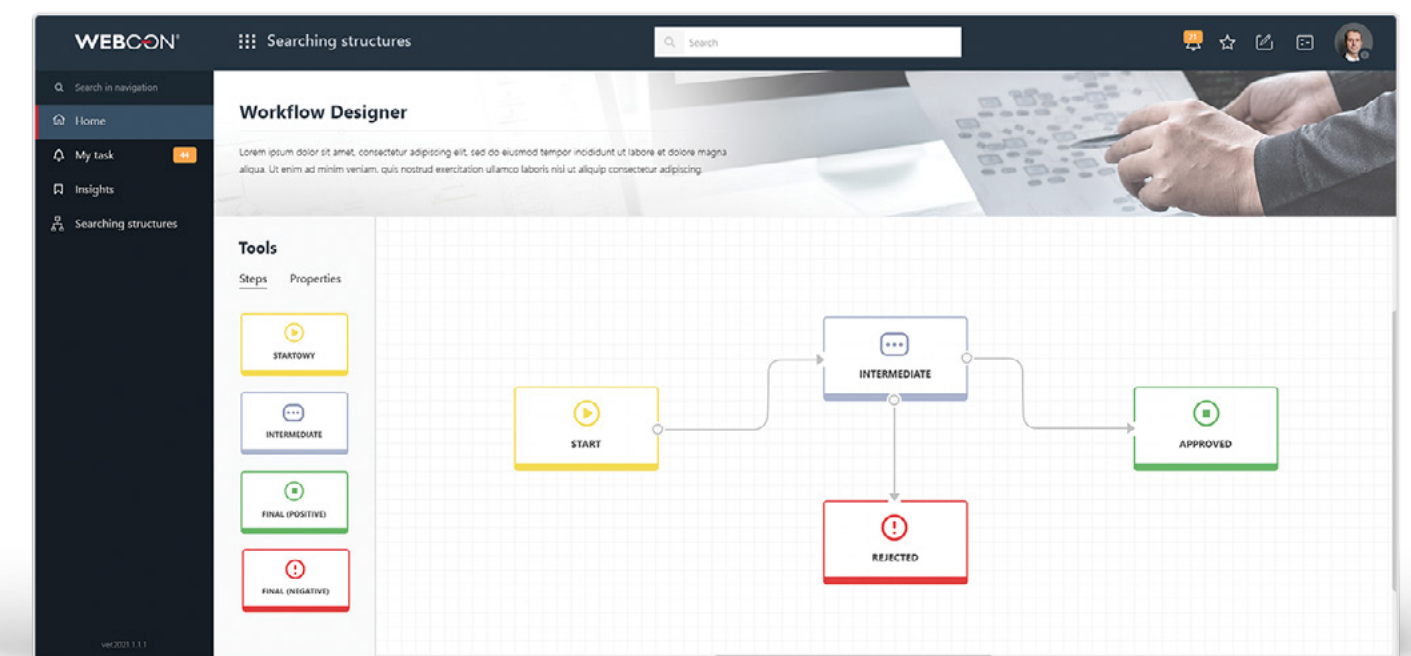
If there is a need, such a newly created application can be integrated into your ERP system, and thereby extend its processes. You can use the ERP either as a starting point, for such things as a credit scoring process for newly registered customers, or you make your ERP a data source for your application, which then gives you, for example, a list of possible vendors for an item when creating a purchase request. The ERP can also be treated as a target system for the result of the processes you run in WEBCON BPS, e.g. by creating a purchase order in the ERP based on data from an accepted purchase order request. Whatever your scenario, you need professional ERP developers only for the purpose of ensuring your new, bespoke application communicates with the ERP (which is something you have to do no matter how you create the application itself), keeping their engagement in the project at a very low level. Everybody wins.

And if ERP integration is not an issue, e.g. for an application that supports the publishing of new marketing content, you can run these applications completely independently from your ERP – but alongside all the other applications, in a single digital workspace.

This does not mean that WEBCON encourages its use as a citizen development platform, where every employee can become a developer and create his or her own applications – my colleagues have published numerous materials on why citizen development is a very good idea that does not deliver long term.

Instead, WEBCON BPS enables IT departments to effectively collaborate with their colleagues from 'business' departments, to *together* deliver high-performance, bespoke business applications. We call it a *citizen assisted development* and we have proved it is the way to digitalize business processes to boost a company's performance and innovativeness.

I confidently use the word 'proved' because this is not a theoretical idea our marketing department came up with, but feedback from our customers' IT departments and business stakeholders. They treat WEBCON BPS as a toolbox they can use to enable the growth and innovation of their businesses. We even created a group called WEBCON Superheroes, because that reflected their perception of their role within their organizations.

ERP SYSTEMS

ERP systems are not designed to cope with sudden changes

I deliberately avoided writing that ERP systems are not flexible, because at least the ones based on new technologies are, to some extent at least. In ERP terms, flexibility means the ability to adapt processes to your company's organizational structure and, even later, to integrate the companies you acquire into this organizational structure, making it possible to roll out existing processes to the new organization. It also means the possibility to integrate an automation solution with your new sales force, or plug in a new Webshop as an additional sales channel.

However, when it comes to the change of existing processes and applications, there is a lot of technological debt and dependencies that have to be taken into consideration. This complexity often leads to delayed delivery – or worse, the decision not to develop new solutions at all and to live with the old process or – in the worst-case scenario – running a new version of the process in a parallel world of Excel, Word and Outlook.

When developing WEBCON BPS, we accounted for the fact that ongoing change is one of the inevitable characteristics of any IT project. That's why we equip you with technology that allows for virtually any kind of change to your applications at any time. The Instant Change Technology™ in WEBCON BPS is so exceptional that we even put a trademark on it. It helps you embrace changes with the confidence that whatever comes, you will deal with it in time.

- If an internal procedure or legal requirement has changed, and the board lets you know that you need to be compliant from next Monday? No problem, just adapt the ruleset or forms of your application, maybe add new steps and roles and make those changes effective – instantly, without any grandfathering, restarting already running processes or running two process versions in parallel. And, of course, with full auditability and traceability.

- You are in a workshop with the HR department that had asked you to digitize the onboarding process. During the presentation of the application you have built already, they find out that an important step is missing? Ask them to take a coffee break and by the time they get back to the room you can show them that the missing process is already there – and not 'there' on the flowchart, but actually 'there' in the application – they can start testing instantly!

Your ability to quickly adapt to new requirements and to solve business stakeholders' problems quickly makes users love the applications you deliver for them, and this builds invaluable trust and rapport between you. And we are extremely happy contribute to this success with WEBCON BPS.

And just to address a potential elephant in the room: you can carry out these changes directly 'on production' or, if the protocol requires, your changes can be delivered through a staged deployment cycle in a development, test and production environment. The smart software logistic in WEBCON BPS helps you with that as well.
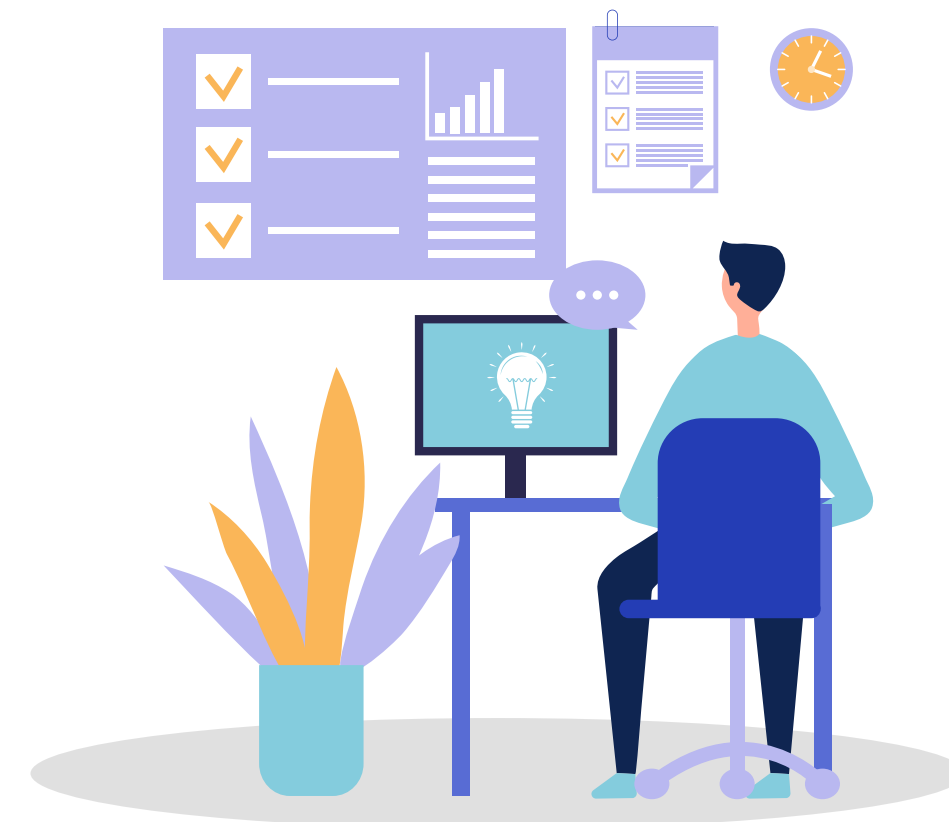
User Adoption is key to the success of any digitization strategy

In order to have all your employees on board as your company moves towards the new digital era, you need to make sure that the applications they are supposed to use deliver great user experience. Sadly, most ERP Systems fail to do so. Even if the vendors put a lot of thought in their UX, and also the development of mobile apps, it is still:

- unacceptably complicated for the guys in the warehouse to navigate through payroll to plan their holidays within the ERP's HR module;

- a struggle for the drivers of your trucks to register important fleet management information within an interface containing all the possible information on their truck from the past two years;

- a demanding exercise for highly skilled employees of the departments for which ERP should be a natural habitat to perform simple, repetitive tasks.

They all get lost in user interfaces that are best described in two words: information overload. Of course, ERPs offer all the nice UI features that allow you to hide fields and create user-specific interfaces, but the truth is that, outside of sales pitches, these are hardly used. There are simply too many dependencies in an ERP system, which makes it nearly impossible to identify which information is necessary for which user, in which state of all the different business objects.
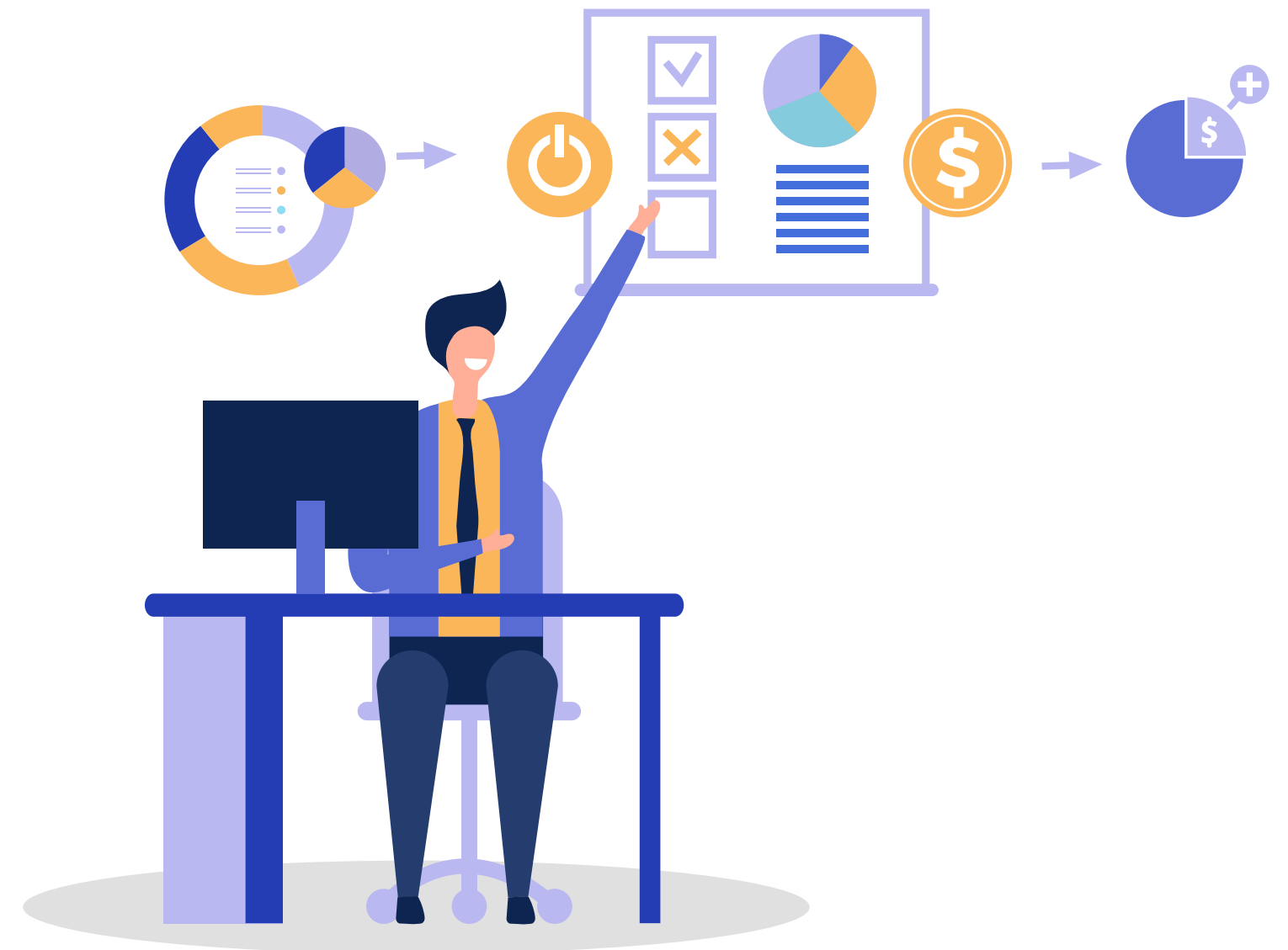
Many companies try to solve such issues by buying extensions to their ERP, or by building bespoke applications that focus on one certain problem at a time. With user interfaces better suited to a particular task or scenario, they seem to solve the problem, but in many cases this is a dead-end street. As the number of these "best of breed solutions" grows, it usually becomes a nightmare for both newly on-boarded and seasoned employees to keep track of the UX and business logic of all the applications they have to use – each comes from a different parish. Soon they find themselves in a spot where it is not only hard for the end-users to navigate, but also where all the additional solutions required to tackle the issues overwhelms their IT department and places significant strain on their CAPEX and OPEX budgets.

All the examples given above are essential in light of the truism: if you want to successfully digitalize processes, you have to win the acceptance of the affected employees for the new tools. The easier the tool, the less the user frustration and the higher the user adoption.

With WEBCON BPS, applications become a lot easier for everyone to use – the user is only presented with the information and input options necessary at the given step of a process, and everything is presented on a clearly laid out form.
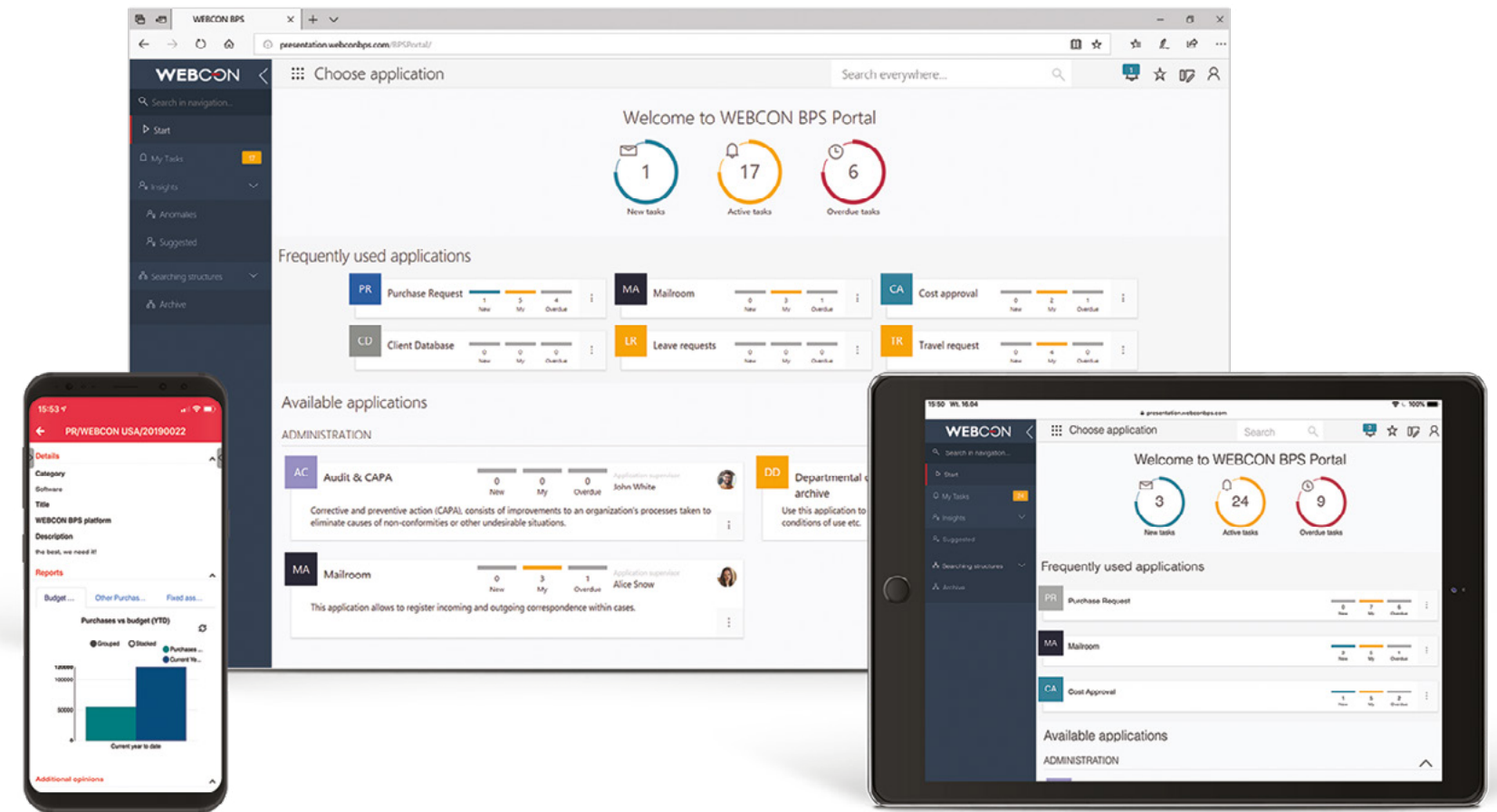
This type of user-specific (or better – role-specific) customization is not against the product, but exactly what the product is designed for. Moreover, every form always has a similar structure to any other, so no matter whether you want to report the current mileage and fuel consumption or plan your week off, you will see the same, familiar design and instinctively know what to do.

In order to keep the input of huge amounts of information simple, you can have users go through longer forms following a page by page wizard concept, which does not overwhelm the user, even if the process requires the input of large amounts of information. And if the user misses something or inputs invalid data, then immediate and easily understandable feedback helps him finish the job. WEBCON BPS delivers positive feedback too, letting you know that you have completed your task successfully.

That makes a huge difference when compared to so many of the ERP systems out there – designed on the assumption that humans do not make mistakes, and so not prepared to handle them neatly, let alone deliver positive feedback.

The best proof of the usability of applications delivered in WEBCON BPS is the fact that there is no noteworthy end-user training necessary. For ERP users, on the other hand, there is an entire training-industry. This is more important than you initially realize – think about the cadence of application delivery you are aiming for, let's say being able to go live with one new application a month (while not even close to what our clients are regularly managing), and training upwards of, say, 5000 users (again, not even close to the largest WEBCON BPS installations) on how to use it… Just let that sink in.
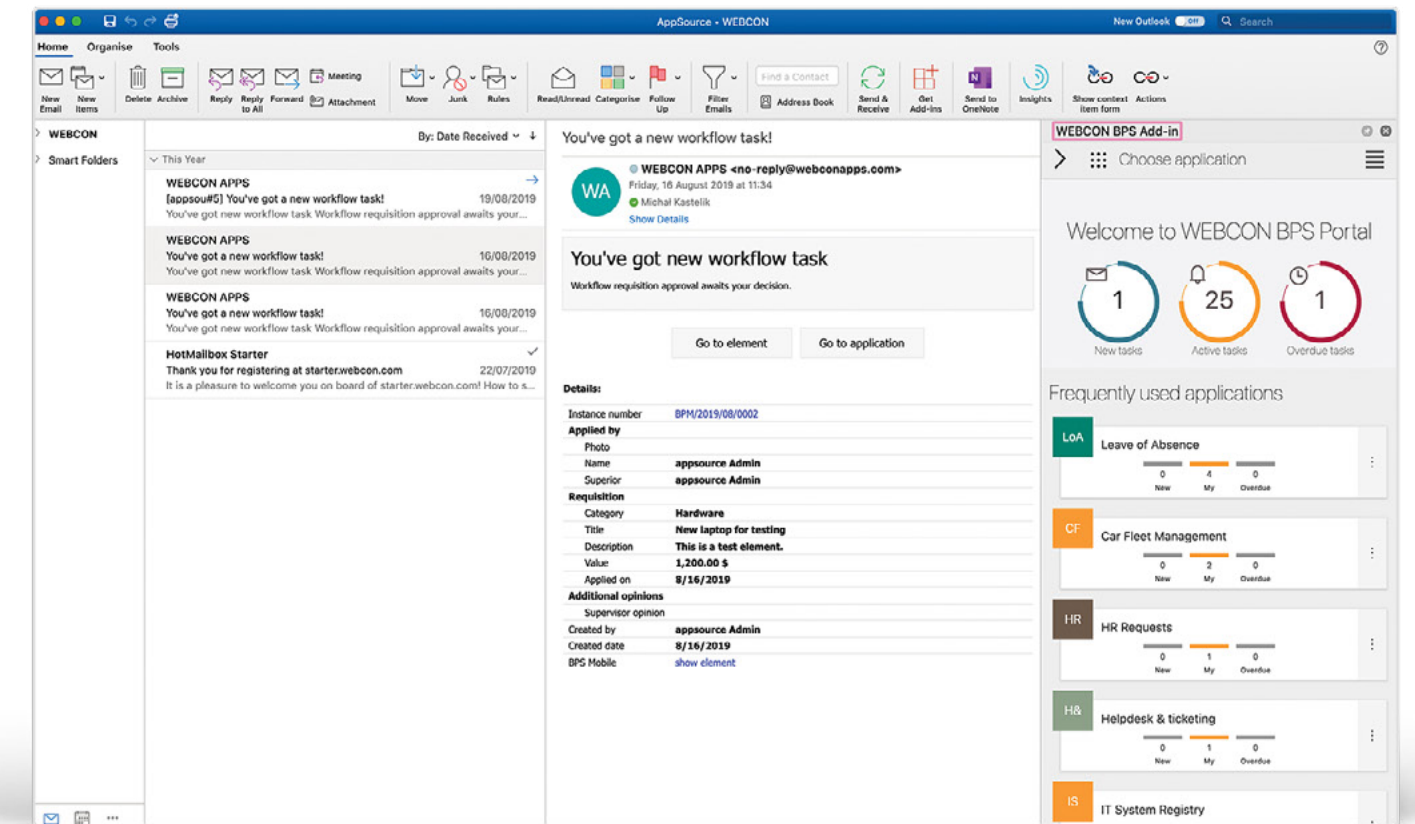
ERP forces users to go to one place – WEBCON BPS lets you do your work from wherever you are at the moment

In order to use the functionality of your ERP, to get detailed information from your ERP or input data into it, you are usually forced to open the ERP application. WEBCON BPS does not force you to start up its portal every time you want to use it. WEBCON BPS applications are available everywhere – and that does not just mean that you can use it in the browser of any PC, tablet or phone, or that there are apps available for iOS and Android. Besides these options, you can surface WEBCON BPS applications within the Microsoft Office environment that most of your employees are accustomed to.
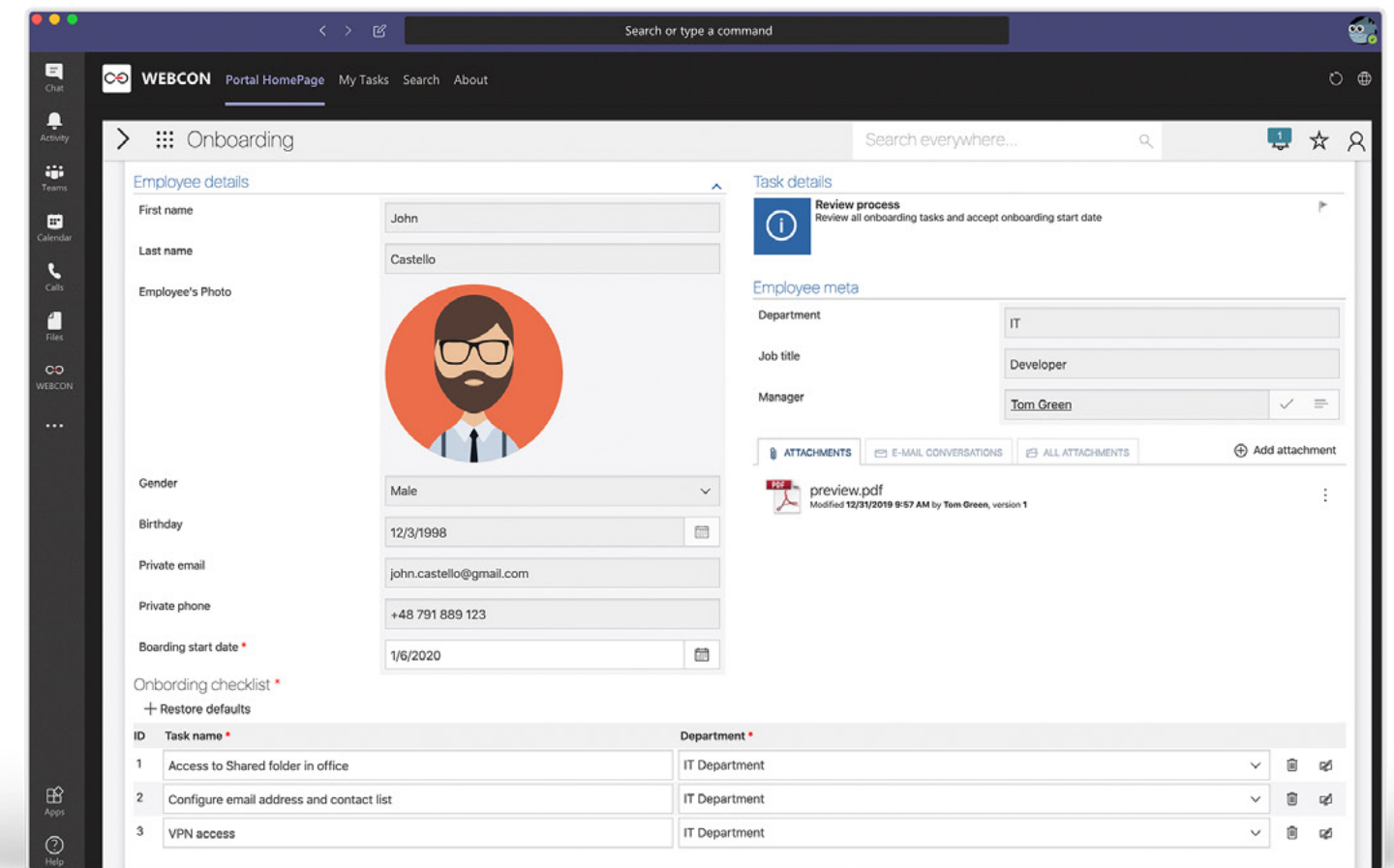
The Outlook Add-in not only allows you to start new processes based on incoming emails, but also to search for any kind of information that might be needed while drafting an email, and also dragging and dropping attachments from a case file to an email message and vice versa. You can also browse through your assigned tasks and complete them without ever having to leave Outlook. What is more, if an email has been sent out of a process or has been automatically attached to a process, the plugin will detect the correspondent process instance and display it contextually – so there is no more need to search for information.

WEBCON BPS for Microsoft Teams allows you to put your WEBCON BPS Applications and Dashboards in Teams – which means that you do not have to leave Teams to use these applications.
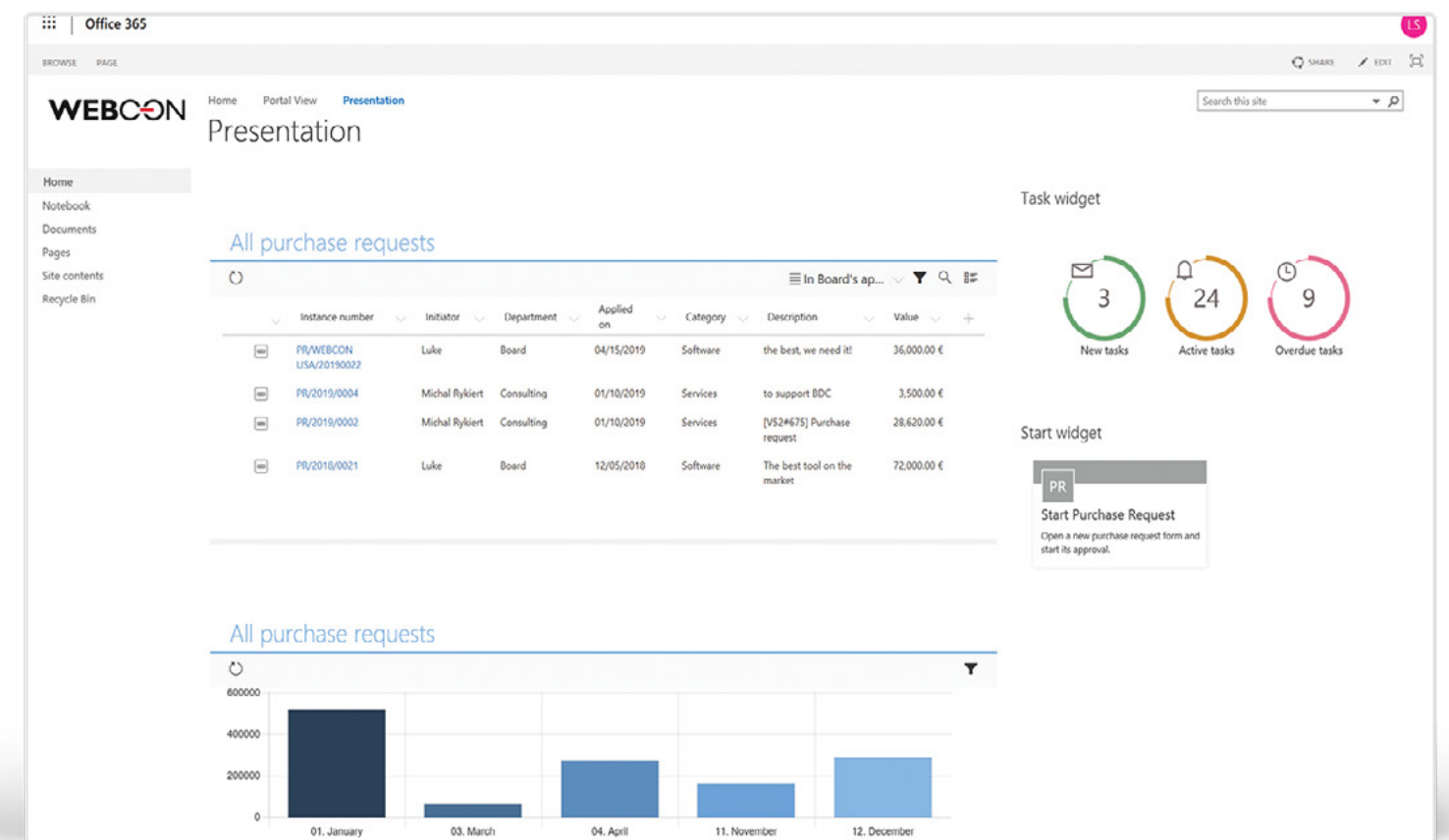
You can also lift collaboration within your teams to a new level – Extend channels by reports as a base for your discussions, display task overviews and let your team keep track of the current workload.

Share documents or forms from any process run in WEBCON BPS and let your team exchange information on them in the chat – Some of our customers use it, for example, during onboarding processes, where every new-joiner not only has access to all necessary documents and forms required for his start, but can also ask at questions to his mentor or colleagues from the HR, IT and other departments at any time.

WEBCON BPS is a SharePoint native solution – good news if your company is using SharePoint to manage its documents. And, of course, we are not just talking the on-Premise Version, but also SharePoint Online, where you will find all key functionalities of WEBCON BPS embedded in your SharePoint Sites – modern and classic.

WEBCON BPS makes it very easy to start and contribute to business processes for all employees of the company. As opposed to an ERP, you no longer have to open a centralized application in order to input or obtain data, or just click an "OK" button. Just stay in your always-on Microsoft office application and work from there – or your phone, or your browser of course.

Why a low-code platform is the ideal supplement to your company's ERP System

ERP and WEBCON BPS – Joined forces for your company's digital future

As pointed out in this article, ERP systems have a lot of strengths, and their place in a company's IT environment goes without saying. Every company needs a strong backbone that makes sure that the company's resources are allocated efficiently and that financial results and taxes are calculated and reported properly. However, a strong backbone of basic business processes can never grow into all departments and support processes all over a company – in the past, many companies have tried to do that and come up against certain limitations, as well as incredibly high spending on numerous change requests, yet in many cases they still failed to reach their aim of digitalizing processes all over the company.

In order to succeed in their digital transformation, companies need to give their process backbone a companion – a highly flexible nervous system with the ability to grow and adapt to constant changes. The WEBCON BPS platform has the perfect DNA and impressive track record of growing applications and processes all over our clients' companies. And it always stays in steady contact with their ERP System – whether for information exchange or for handing over processes in one direction or the other.

It has never been so easy to incorporate all the company's employees, departments and processes in a network enabling uninterrupted information flow.

Thanks for reading!

If you'd like to learn more, check out webcon.com, where you can find documents, videos, testimonials, case studies, and an online trial.

There's even a downloadable Express edition of our product you can install and use for free – in production – and never expires.

Click the button below to contact us and arrange to see a demo of WEBCON BPS in action.

We look forward to your virtual visit.

Let's talk!