THE TIMBER BARRON

Empowering a New Way of Working

Timber Barron:

Harnessing Robert the robot for staff retention



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AT A GLANCE

When Timber Barron employed a robot, it wasn't a cost cutting exercise. Instead, it was an opportunity focused squarely on improving life for existing – human – employees.

less than five days
build and demonstrate the robot

Three sprints
of two weeks each

24/7
we have a bot

nine staff
the company has

SUMMARY/RESULTS

- Timber Barron has harnessed a digital worker robot, named Robert, as a staff retention and employee experience tool, removing manual, repetitive data entry and freeing staff up for more enjoyable, higher value work.
- Using Quanton's Lean Agile Robotic Implementation (LARI®) methodology we were able to build and demonstrate the robot in less than five days.
- *Timber Barron says "Our team have embraced Robert as part of the team and he's enabling them to do the more enjoyable, value-add, decision making part of their jobs and everyone is constantly looking towards what else they can off-load and automate as part of our continuous improvement philosophy."*
- Due to the immediate success and return recognised, Timber Barron identified further processes for automation and Robert was enhanced to take on more work.
- Timber Barron plans to extend the use of bots beyond its own business to its wider business group.

ABOUT TIMBER BARRON



Timber Barron is an Auckland-based global bulk building material exporting company providing New Zealand timber and building products into the Pacific Islands. Specialising in materials such as timber, cement, steel and plywood, for construction, the company has nine staff, with a focus on providing value-add wherever possible.

BACKGROUND –

When Robert joined Timber Barron in 2022, it took some staff several weeks to work out he was a robot. They'd been told he was working remotely and that they should just email him.

Robert had 'joined' Timber Barron not as a cost cutting exercise but as a way to assist in removing tedious, repetitive manual data entry from staff, freeing the small team up to focus on more value add opportunities like converting sales.

The company had developed a custom production system to process invoices – from receiving invoices in PDF format via email, extracting data and validating against packing sheets to data capture. But the system required a lot of manual data entry of all sales and orders and had no integration capabilities.



Daniel Ludlam

Daniel Ludlam, Timber Barron Managing Director, explains: **"We have a great team of staff who have been with us for quite a long time. They have built up skill sets and knowledge specific to our business, but what we found was that we had a lot of staff doing menial data entry tasks instead of actually making decisions based on the data they were imputing.**

"They were spending more of their time imputing data than actually looking at it, analysing it and decision making," Ludlam says.

Ludlam was keen to find a way to automate the process and make his team's lives more enjoyable.

With the company in the middle of a new ERP software implementation it was keen for a system which would also continue to be useful with the new ERP system.

"We wanted to get our current legacy piece of software working better for the team until we could implement the new system. Once we stood the bot up and got it working and taking pressure off, we wanted to look at implementing it into our new system so the team still had the same basic interaction, rather than going to a new ERP and having to go back to data entry," Ludlam says.



Agile robots, Agile methodology



Timber Barron called on Quanton, New Zealand's leading practitioners of Automation and leaders in providing digital transformation services, to assist.

Initially Quanton was engaged to automate one sales order process, starting with building a minimum viable product using their Lean Agile Robotic Implementation (LARI®) methodology.

"The main focus for the automation project was to speed up the sales order process to free up sales staff to concentrate on generating more sales," Ursula Riemer, Quanton Strategic Engagement Director says.

"Processing of orders was taking up a massive amount of time from sales staff and Timber Barron was concerned they would lose staff due to them having to do boring and mundane data entry as a large part of their jobs.

"So automation was implemented as part of their staff retention strategy," she adds.

Ludlam, as the product owner, worked closely with Quanton's developers to define user stories and prioritise functionality.

A team of Timber Barron staff were heavily involved through the development and testing phase, Ludlam says. That included them outlining what tasks they didn't think were value add for them.

"We had the team involved from the beginning planning stages, telling us what tasks they didn't think they should be doing."

Riemer says the LARI® approach was an important factor in the project's success.

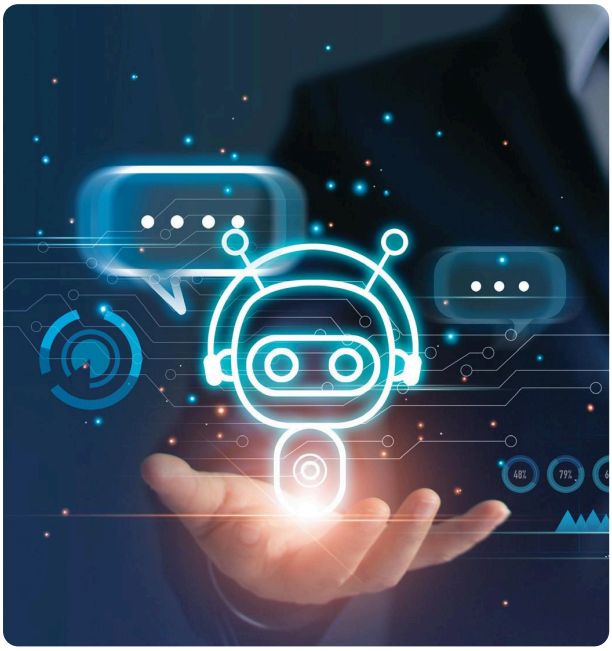
"We started on Monday and by Friday we had the first demo of the robot to Timber Barron," she says.

"We didn't say we were going to charge thousands of dollars to do discovery and up-front work to create design documents and PDDs. It was a truly Agile approach – we put our automation specialists in front of the client from day one and everything (document generation) happened in parallel, so it was a really quick turn over of code and we did demos every week. Fail early but succeed fast is our motto," Riemer says.



Ludlam says the LARI® Agile approach of setting small goals and sprints enabled the company to prove first of all that the technology could work and that the team would be comfortable with it, before working through other ways to utilise and extend the technology.

> **"It was a case of we have a bot 24/7, we're running it four hours a day, so what else can we be giving this bot to do to take pressure off the team?"**



Three sprints
of two weeks each

four hours
a day

Three sprints of two weeks each were used to deploy Robert. Timber Barron saw immediate benefits from using the bot and the pilot was signed off into being a fully integrated part of how the business operates.

"Basically, anything that someone can do on a computer that is a repeatable task is what Robert is doing," Ludlam says. "So all our data entry, putting stock into the system, dispatching stock, invoicing customers – all of that is done by Robert.

"We have our bot trained to handle any touchpoint with our computer software."

FROM SMALL SEEDS...

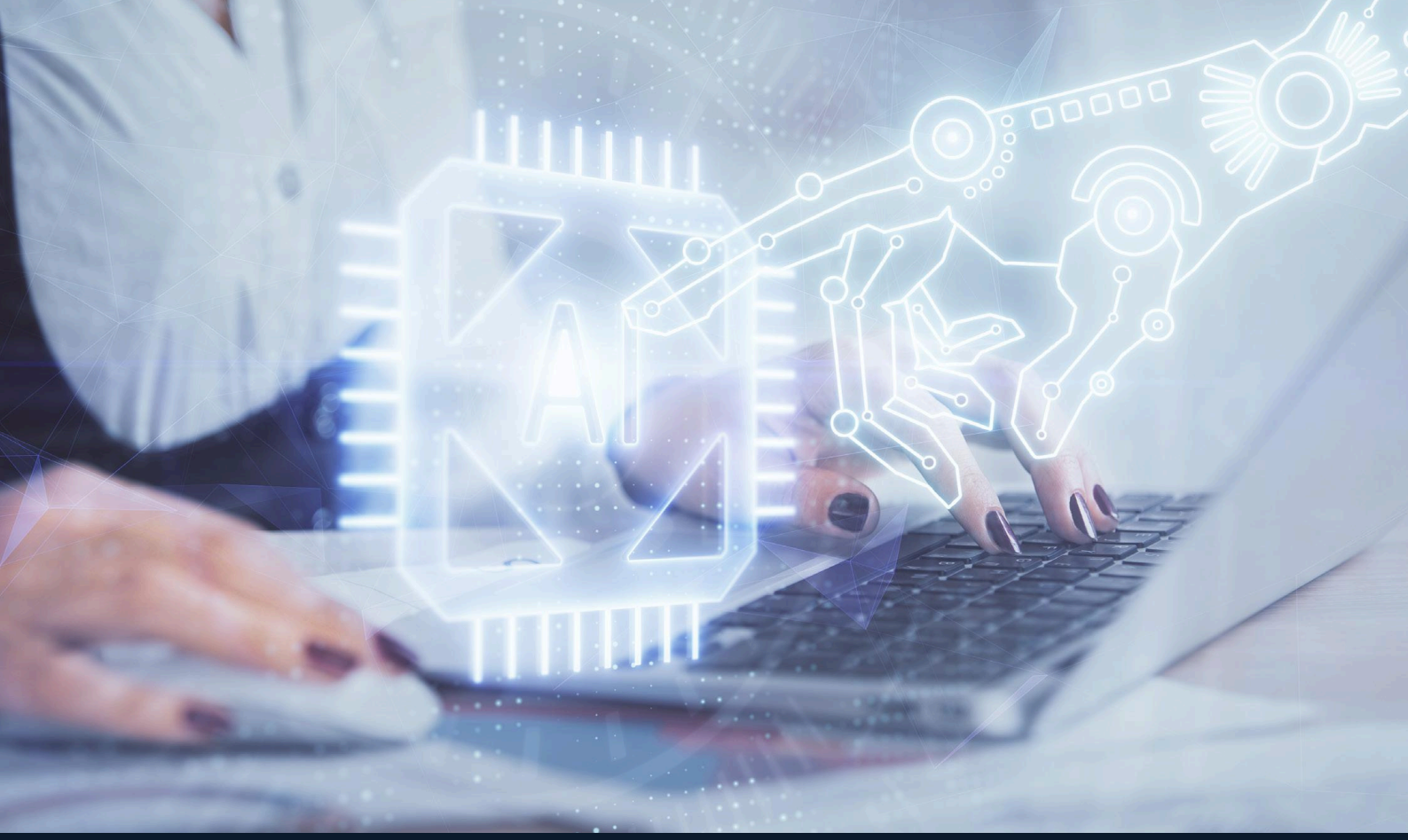
Then a staff member left. For Timber Barron it was an opportunity to further extend Robert.

The team came together and said 'what can we get Robert to do there that means we don't have to replace this staff member'? It was an opportunity, Ludlam says, for the team to redistribute workloads, handing off more of their own repeatable work to Robert, and taking on the higher-level work of the person who was leaving.

"We have seen tangible results from that," he says.

It's not just Timber Barron who will reap the benefits.

With three operating companies in its group – and more than 80 staff across the group – Ludlam says he's looking at how to alleviate pressure across the board for repeatable tasks across the wider group as well.



> **“We are always trying to look to do things differently - to understand what the needs of our teams are and ultimately trying to create better outcomes for them through the use of automation and technology.**

“We’re starting at the top level in our export business, which is a professional services business, more than anything. But across our other business, it’s taking those learnings and seeing how we can implement it into our manufacturing sites so we can be ahead of the curve.

“We’re always looking for the most cost-effective value-add processes we can. They’re not always easy to find, but when you find someone like Quanton who you can work with who is providing that, the options are really limitless.”

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Date of publication October 2022.

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