

Where to Start With AI Automation

The one place to automate first - and the mistake that sinks most projects. A practical guide by Simon Weiner, AS Consulting.

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Where Small Businesses Should Start With AI Automation



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The best place for a small business to start with AI automation is lead handling - answering enquiries, following up, and booking - because that is the high-volume, low-judgement work where revenue quietly leaks. Automate one painful, repetitive task there, measure it, then add the next. Small and measured beats one big system every time.

Where should a small business start?

Start with the work that is high-volume and low-judgement. If a task happens constantly and barely needs your opinion to get right, it is a candidate for automation. If it is rare, or it needs your judgement every single time, leave it for later - it will only make a fragile first project.

For almost every small business the first task that fits is lead handling. Not because it is exciting, but because it is where leads leak. Most enquiries sit unanswered for hours while someone is on a job or asleep, and the business that replies first usually wins the work. Fixing response speed does not chase new leads - it recovers revenue you are already losing.

The test is simple: find a task that happens many times a day, follows the same rough steps each time, and ends in money. That is almost always where to point your first automation, and it is almost always somewhere in how you handle incoming enquiries.

Why lead handling before anything else?

Three reasons. It is constant, so a small improvement compounds every single day rather than once a quarter. It is largely rule-based - acknowledge, qualify, follow up, book - so it automates cleanly without needing a human decision on each one. And it sits directly on revenue, so the result shows up in won jobs, not vanity metrics you cannot bank.

Speed is the lever that makes it pay. A fresh enquiry answered in minutes converts far better than the same enquiry answered tomorrow morning. Automating just the instant acknowledgement and a single timed follow-up - before you touch anything else in the business - is often the highest-return change a small operator can make.

What is the mistake that kills most projects?

Building one big, impressive system that tries to do everything at once. It looks good in a meeting and demos beautifully, but a single sprawling automation breaks silently, cannot be debugged piece by piece, and gets abandoned the first time it misfires in front of a customer.

The projects that survive are the opposite: a few small steps that each do one job you can check with your own eyes. When one step breaks - and one eventually will - you can see exactly which one and fix it in minutes, instead of switching off the whole thing because you no longer trust any of it. The rule is simple: do not automate the demo, automate the follow-up.

How do you actually start?

A practical sequence that works for most small businesses:

- 1 Pick the single most painful, repetitive task in your lead flow - usually that nobody replies to new enquiries fast enough.
- 2 Automate only that one step: acknowledge every new enquiry instantly and trigger one timed follow-up.
- 3 Measure it for two weeks - response time, reply rate, jobs booked.
- 4 Once it is proven and you trust it, add the next small step. Then the next.

Each step earns its place by doing one checkable job. You are never more than one step away from understanding exactly what your automation is doing, which is what keeps you in control as it grows.

What this looks like in practice

Consider a two-van plumbing firm that gets most of its enquiries by web form and missed call. Before automation, replies depended on whoever was free, so many enquiries waited until evening - and a good share had already booked someone else by then. The owner automated exactly one step: every new enquiry gets an instant acknowledgement and a single follow-up two hours later if there is no reply.

Nothing else changed. But because every lead now gets answered within minutes, more of them convert, and the owner can see at a glance whether the step is working. Only once it was proven did they add a second step - a short question capturing the job type - measured on its own and trusted before anything else changed. That is the whole pattern: one narrow task, measured, trusted, then extended.

What does it cost to run?

The real cost is not money, it is attention - and the right first step costs very little of it. A single, narrow automation that does one job is easy to watch: you can tell in seconds whether enquiries are being answered. The expensive option is the sprawling system nobody can read, because the hidden cost is the hours lost when it fails quietly and you do not notice until customers do.

Set against the leads it recovers, a narrow lead-handling automation usually removes a cost rather than adding one. The slow replies you have now are not free - they are losing jobs every week - so the honest comparison is not automation versus nothing, but automation versus the quiet, uncounted cost of carrying on as you are.

By the numbers: In our own work, a recurring task that used to take thirty days now takes a single day with automation - a thirtyfold time saving on one workflow.

Frequently asked questions

Should I start with a chatbot on my website?

Usually not first. A chatbot is visible, but the bigger leak is slow follow-up on the enquiries you already get. Fix response speed before adding new front doors.

Do I need expensive tools to begin?

No. The first win is almost always a small, single-purpose automation on lead handling - start narrow, prove it, then expand.

How do I know it is working?

Measure one thing: how fast new enquiries get a reply, and how many turn into booked jobs. If those move, it is working.

What if it breaks?

That is exactly why you build small, checkable steps instead of one big system - when something breaks you can see which step and fix it.

How soon will I see results?

The first step can be live in days and measured within two weeks; lead-response improvements tend to show up fastest.

What should I automate second?

Whatever is now your biggest remaining repetitive task - often qualifying or booking. Add it only once the first step is trusted.

Is my business too small for this?

Almost certainly not. Smaller businesses often gain the most, because the owner's time is the scarcest resource of all.

If this is useful and you want to go further, the [full written walkthrough](#) sets out each step in order, a [short video version](#) makes the same case in a couple of minutes, and [AS Consulting](#) works with small businesses to choose and build that first automation. **Automate smarter.**