

# Automate Your Small Business Without Paying the AI Tax

## The Small Business AI Automation Field Manual

Build private, low-cost automations with n8n, Ollama, and Open WebUI - no enterprise IT department required.

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Read this first

This manual is for small business owners, solo operators, local service businesses, and technically curious operators who want practical AI automations without signing up for a dozen expensive SaaS subscriptions.

It is not a promise that AI will run your business for you. It is a practical field manual for building a simple automation stack that can handle repetitive work:

- Collecting lead details
- Drafting follow-up messages
- Summarizing customer requests
- Answering questions from business documents
- Sending review requests
- Creating daily summaries
- Routing messages to the right place

The goal is not to replace judgment. The goal is to remove repetitive friction.

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The core idea

Most small businesses do not need a giant AI platform. They need a few reliable workflows:

1. Something happens: a form submission, an email, a missed call, a spreadsheet row, a webhook.
2. n8n catches the event.
3. A local or hosted AI model helps classify, summarize, draft, or extract information.
4. n8n sends the result somewhere useful: email, SMS, CRM, spreadsheet, or task list.
5. A human approves anything risky.

That is the stack:

- n8n: automation brain
- Ollama: local AI model runner
- Open WebUI: friendly local AI interface
- Optional database/storage: Supabase, Postgres, Google Sheets, Airtable, or a simple CSV
- Optional deployment layer: Docker, Coolify, Cloudflare, Tailscale, or a VPS

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Who this is for

This is ideal for:

- Repair shops
- Consultants
- Cleaning companies
- Mobile service businesses
- Real estate teams
- Contractors
- Coaches
- Local professional services
- Small ecommerce operators
- Agencies building repeatable client systems

If your business gets leads, answers the same questions repeatedly, sends reminders, or loses money from slow follow-up, this applies.

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What to automate first

Do not start with the fanciest workflow. Start where money leaks.

Good first automations

- New lead intake summary
- Quote request follow-up
- Missed-call response
- Appointment reminder
- Review request after job completion
- Daily inbox summary
- FAQ assistant for internal documents

Bad first automations

- Fully autonomous sales conversations with no human review
- Legal, tax, medical, or financial advice

- Anything that sends irreversible messages without safeguards
- Anything requiring brittle scraping or ToS violations
- Complex multi-agent systems before basic workflows work

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## Architecture in plain English

Imagine a front desk assistant who never sleeps.

- Forms, calls, emails, and chats arrive.
- n8n receives the information.
- AI reads it and drafts a useful response.
- n8n sends the draft to you or logs it somewhere.
- You approve, edit, or let low-risk messages send automatically.

For example:

text

Website form n8n webhook AI summary email to owner optional customer reply

Or:

text

Completed job row n8n schedule review request email/SMS spreadsheet log

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## Choosing hosted vs self-hosted

Hosted tools are easier

Examples: Zapier, Make, OpenAI, Claude, ChatGPT Teams, hosted n8n.

Pros:

- Fast setup
- Less maintenance
- Easier integrations

Cons:

- Monthly costs add up
- Less control
- Data privacy concerns
- Usage limits

Self-hosted tools are cheaper and more private

Examples: n8n on a VPS, Ollama on a local machine, Open WebUI on a local server.

Pros:

- More control
- Lower long-term costs
- Private/local AI options
- Flexible workflows

Cons:

- Setup effort
- Security responsibility
- Backups and updates matter

Recommended practical approach

Start hybrid:

- Use n8n for orchestration.
- Use a hosted email/SMS provider for delivery.
- Use Ollama locally for non-sensitive drafting and experimentation.
- Use human approval before sending important messages.

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Basic install plan

There are many ways to deploy the stack. The simplest local test is:

1. Install Docker Desktop.
2. Run n8n locally or on a VPS.
3. Install Ollama.
4. Pull a small model.
5. Connect n8n to Ollama with an HTTP Request node.
6. Build one workflow.

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Preview ends here. Full product includes the complete PDF, setup checklist, troubleshooting checklist, prompt pack, and 3 n8n workflow templates.