

The AI Starter Kit for *small business*.

The three tools to start with, what the research actually says they save, and how to get a real win in 30 days. **Every number in here comes from a named study or survey, not a vendor promise.**

01 Start with the honest version.

Most "AI will transform your business" content skips the part you need. Here it is. The productivity gains from AI are real and well measured on specific tasks. But at the company level, most businesses see little bottom-line impact so far. In McKinsey's 2025 survey, 88% of organizations used AI in at least one function, yet only about 6% could attribute a meaningful share of profit to it. Stanford and BetterUp researchers even named the failure mode "**workslop**": AI output that looks fine but is low quality and creates more cleanup than it saves.

The gap is not the technology. It is how the work gets set up. That is the whole point of this kit: pick the right tool, aim it at one real task, and measure it, instead of buying ten tools and hoping.

02 What AI actually saves: the evidence.

Two kinds of evidence matter. Controlled experiments tell you what genuinely changed. Surveys tell you what people report in the real world. Here is both, honestly.

CONTROLLED STUDIES · THE GOLD STANDARD

- **Professional writing:** people using ChatGPT finished tasks about 40% faster with 18% higher quality ratings. Noy & Zhang, Science, 2023 · ~450 professionals
- **Customer support:** agents with an AI assistant resolved about 14% more issues per hour; the least experienced staff gained around 34%. Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond, QJE, 2025 · ~5,000 agents
- **Software work:** developers using an AI coding assistant completed a task about 56% faster. Peng et al., 2023
- **Consulting-style tasks:** consultants using GPT-4 did about 12% more tasks, 25% faster, at 40% higher quality, on work within the AI's range. Dell'Acqua et al., Harvard / BCG, 2023 · 758 consultants

REAL-WORLD REPORTS · THE RANGE

- **The most conservative rigorous estimate:** about 2.2 hours saved per 40-hour week. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2025
- **Small business owners and managers:** an average of 5.6 hours a week; 7.2 for managers. Business.com Small Business AI Outlook, 2026
- **22% of small business leaders** report saving 6 to 10 hours a week. Tech.co · ~300 SMB Leaders
- **Marketing teams:** 11 to 13 hours a week. ZoomInfo, 2025; ActiveCampaign · 1,000 marketers, 2025

The honest caveat. These numbers measure categories of work, not your exact workflow. And the spread is real: from about 2 hours to 13 hours a week. What decides where you land is usage intensity and how well the workflow is built. Daily users with a well set up task land high. People who tried AI once land low. That is why the method on page 3 matters more than the tool.

03 The 3 tools to start with.

For almost every small business, the starting engine is one of three general AI assistants. They are close enough in quality that on most everyday work you would not feel the difference. **Pick one and go deep rather than sampling all three.** An important truth from the research: for business use, the model matters less than the system you build around it. A well-aimed tool beats a "better" model used aimlessly.

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Two quick decisions. If your business runs on Microsoft 365, also look at Copilot, which sits inside Word, Excel, and Outlook. And if you handle sensitive data (patient information, client financials, anything regulated), do not paste it into a consumer chatbot: use an enterprise plan with proper data terms, or a self-hosted model. More on this on page 3.

Model versions move every month. As of mid-2026 the current flagships are GPT-5.5, Claude Opus 4.8 and Sonnet 5, and Gemini 3.1 Pro. The right move is to check the provider's current page rather than chase version numbers.

04 3 tools that make the engine useful.

The assistant drafts and answers. These three turn that into work that happens on its own.

a

Automation: Zapier or Make.

Connects your tools so a finished job triggers the review request, or a new lead triggers the follow-up, without you clicking. This is where "AI drafts it" becomes "it just happens."

b

Meeting capture: Fathom or similar.

Turns every call into notes and an action list automatically. Free tiers are usually enough to start.

c

One specialist tool for your single biggest weekly pain.

A customer-response or chat tool, or a content tool like Canva's AI, depending on where your week actually leaks. Add this only after the first workflow is working.

05 The method: a real win in 30 days.

This is the part that separates results from "we tried AI." It is built to beat workslop and tool sprawl.

1

Pick one workflow.

The single task that eats the most of your week. One, not five.

2

Measure the before.

Time yourself on it for a week and write the number down. You cannot prove a saving you never baselined.

3

Build it once, properly.

Set up the tool for that one task with clear instructions and real examples. This is the step most people skip, and it is why their results land at the bottom of the range.

4

Keep a human in the loop.

Review the output before it goes out. The most common and most successful setup is simple: AI does the work, a person checks the key decisions.

5

Measure the after, then expand.

Only add the next workflow once the first one is clearly saving time.

Why this order: Gartner found roughly 31% of AI tools bought by small businesses went unused within 90 days. The businesses that get returns start narrow, measure, and earn the next step. The ones that do not buy a stack and stall.

06 Two guardrails, non-negotiable.

GUARDRAIL 1**Verify before it ships.**

AI is confident even when it is wrong. The researchers behind the writing study note that real-world gains are smaller precisely because you have to fact-check and prompt well. Never publish, send, or file AI output unchecked. Verification is not optional overhead. It is the job.

GUARDRAIL 2**Protect your data.**

Closed consumer assistants send your prompts to the provider. That is fine for a blog draft. It is not fine for patient records, unreleased financials, or regulated material. For anything sensitive, use an enterprise plan with a data-processing agreement, or an open model you host yourself, so the data stays in your walls.

07 If you are in life sciences or a regulated field.

Using AI to identify and tier KOLs, profile HCPs, and build medical-affairs plans is now established practice, with human validation and compliance controls built in. Be aware that, unlike the studies on page 1, the evidence here is largely industry practice and vendor-reported rather than independent trials, so treat time-saving claims as directional. And data handling matters more here than anywhere: keep sensitive and regulated information out of consumer tools.

08 Where these numbers come from.

Noy, S. & Zhang, W. (2023). Experimental evidence on the productivity effects of generative artificial intelligence. Science.

Brynjolfsson, E., Li, D. & Raymond, L. (2025). Generative AI at Work. Quarterly Journal of Economics.

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Business.com (2026). Small Business AI Outlook survey.

Tech.co (2025). AI productivity survey of small and mid-sized business leaders.

ActiveCampaign / Talker Research (2025). 13 Hours Back Each Week.

ZoomInfo (2025). Marketing AI productivity data.

McKinsey & Company (2025). The State of AI.

Stanford Social Media Lab & BetterUp (2025). Research on "workslop."

Gartner (2025). Small business AI tool utilization.

Zapier (2025). State of Agentic AI survey.

Model landscape and pricing: Artificial Analysis and provider documentation, mid-2026.

Every figure above is a range from an independent study or a named survey, not a guarantee. Your result depends on which workflow you choose and how well it is built. **The only number that ultimately matters is the one you measure in your own business.**

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