

20 AI workflows for small business

Real tasks, the tool category that handles each, and the time it gives back. Every item passes one test: it must save more money than it costs.

How to use this list. Don't install twenty tools. Pick the three workflows where you lose the most hours this week, run those for a month, then measure. The math that matters: **(hours saved per month) × (your hourly value) – (subscription price)**. If the result isn't at least 3× the price, skip it.

Written for owners and operators of businesses with 1–50 people. Prices change; treat every figure as a shape, and re-check before you buy.

Admin & back office

01 Meeting notes that write themselves. An AI notetaker joins the call, produces the summary and the action list. Notetaker category · saves ~20 min per call · \$10–30/user/mo, or ~\$1 per meeting pay-as-you-go.

02 Follow-up emails from the transcript. Same recording, different output: a client-ready recap in your voice. Same tool, second use · saves ~15 min per call.

03 Inbox triage. A filter-with-a-brain that sorts, labels, and drafts replies for the routine 60% of mail. Email AI category · saves ~3 h/week · check it can run on your existing mailbox.

04 Contract and invoice reading. Ask one question in plain language: "what are the payment terms and the cancellation clause?" Document AI · saves the lawyer's first pass · never a replacement for real review on big contracts.

05 Quote and proposal drafts. Turn a call summary plus your price list into a first-draft proposal. Writing AI + a template · saves ~45 min per quote.

Sales & marketing

06 One idea, five formats. Write or record once; generate the post, the email, the script, and the newsletter section. Repurposing AI · saves ~2 h per piece.

07 Product descriptions at volume. Feed a sheet of SKUs, get consistent descriptions that follow your voice guide. Bulk writing · saves ~10 min per product.

08 Ad variants for testing. Ten headline variants in the time it took to write one — the win is the test, not the copy. Copy AI · saves ~1 h per campaign.

09 Review replies. Draft answers to every review in your tone; a human approves before sending. Writing AI · fast, and it stops the "we forgot to answer" problem.

10 Customer-question mining. Cluster the last 500 support messages into the ten questions you should answer on your site. Analysis AI · one afternoon, then it pays for months of content.

Operations & money

11 Receipt and expense sorting. Photograph receipts; get categorised entries ready for your bookkeeper. OCR + AI categorisation · saves ~2 h/month per busy card · keep the human check on anything unusual.

12 Month-end narrative. Turn the numbers into a plain-language summary of what moved and why. Analysis AI · saves ~2 h/month · you still own the decisions.

13 Supplier price comparison. Paste three quotes, ask for the true cost after shipping and terms. Document AI · saves ~30 min per negotiation.

14 Shift and rota drafting. Constraints in, a first-draft rota out, then you adjust. Scheduling AI · saves ~1 h per week · works best under 30 staff.

15 Supplier and client onboarding packets. One questionnaire generates the personalised paperwork. Documents + templates · saves ~40 min per new account.

Support & knowledge

16 A first-line answer agent. Trained on your docs, it deflects the repetitive questions. Support AI · pays back per deflected ticket · always leave a human escape hatch.

17 Your own SOP library. Every recurring task gets a one-page procedure, generated from a recording of you doing it once. Docs AI · the compounding item on this list · onboarding gets shorter forever.

18 Onboarding buddy. A knowledge assistant that answers "how do we do X here?" from your own documents. Retrieval AI · saves ~2 h per new hire in week one.

19 Meeting-free status update. Written updates collected and summarised into a daily brief. Summarisation · kills one recurring meeting · the real saving is the calendar, not the typing.

20 The quarterly tool audit. The workflow about workflows: list every subscription, compute the payback, cancel what fails. A spreadsheet and 20 minutes · usually funds everything else on this list.

Where to start tomorrow

Pick **one** from each section: the biggest time sink in admin, the one in sales, and #20. Run them for four weeks, then redo the math. That's the whole method — no tool subscription required to begin.

AI Shortlist — every Tuesday: 3 AI tools that pay for themselves, with the payback math.
Subscribe free: <https://ai-shortlist.beehiiv.com/subscribe> · <https://ai.dailyk.live>