

# Workflow Automation for Small Businesses

Benchmark your operations  
with our **WAVES** assessment.

# EXECUTIVE Summary

The nation's small businesses face a unique challenge: **competing in a global digital economy while preserving the authentic, personal connection that defines local commerce.**

In 2025, small businesses across the US found themselves at a critical inflection point. The convergence of rising operational costs, persistent labor shortages, and accelerating digital transformation demands immediate action. Yet within these challenges lies unprecedented opportunity for those willing to embrace strategic workflow innovation.

This report introduces the **WAVES** assessment framework to benchmark your automation maturity against industry leaders and provides a clear roadmap for transforming operational chaos into competitive advantage through strategic workflow automation.

# CRISIS

# The Workflow flow

Businesses relying on manual administrative processes aren't just inefficient, they're expensive. Across every market, outdated workflows are creating bottlenecks that freeze capital, delay projects, and compound costs in ways that impact every industry.

**54%**

of capacity trapped in manual administrative tasks instead of revenue generation<sup>5</sup>

**\$4,600**

per employee annual cost of document inefficiency and manual processing errors<sup>6</sup>

**40%**

of work time consumed by repetitive tasks that existing technology could automate<sup>7</sup>

**\$1.8 trillion**

lost annually to poor data quality and manual processing errors<sup>8</sup>

# Automation + HUMAN Connections

Effective automation targets the **80%** of business operations that follow predictable patterns, protecting the **20%** of human interactions where expertise, relationships, and judgment create irreplaceable value.

## High-Impact Automation (80%)

- Document processing and approvals
- Invoice and payment workflows
- Scheduling and calendar management
- Inventory and supply chain forecasting
- Compliance reporting and documentation
- Digital marketing and content distribution
- Data entry and system updates

## Human Factor No Automation (20%)

- Strategic decision making
- Complex problem solving
- Relationship building
- Creative innovation
- Crisis management
- Negotiation and sales closing
- Leadership and mentoring

# WAVES

Most organizations operate somewhere between manual processes and intelligent automation, but without a clear framework, it's difficult to assess capabilities, benchmark against peers, or prioritize next steps.

The **Workflow Automation Value & Efficiency Scale (WAVES)** provides a practical tool to evaluate your organization across six distinct maturity levels. Whether you're running a retail operation, managing a service business, or leading an enterprise organization, this assessment reveals where you stand and identifies the highest-impact automation opportunities for your sector.

**Level 0: Manual/Paper-Based**

**Level 1: Basic Digitization**

**Level 2: System Integration**

**Level 3: Process Automation**

**Level 4: Intelligent Automation**

**Level 5: Autonomous Operations**

# LEVEL 0 (0-10 pts)

**Manual/Paper-Based:** Paper-based processes, minimal digital tools, high manual data entry.

Your business runs on paper, phone calls, and memory. Permits live in filing cabinets, orders are handwritten, and tracking anything requires flipping through physical documents. Every transaction happens manually—slow, error-prone, and dependent on specific people being available.

***Example:** A small retail shop tracks sales in a notebook, keeps invoices in a filing box, and relies on the owner's memory for inventory. Tax time means reconstructing the year from handwritten receipts.*

**National Industry Benchmark:**

- Micro Food Vendors (cash-only): 7pts
- Traditional Small-Scale Agriculture: 10pts
- Cash-only Personal Services: 8pts
- Roadside/Farmers Market Vendors: 8pts
- Traditional Crafts/Artisans: 10pts

**Benefits of Level 0:** Complete control with no technology dependency, minimal upfront investment, simple operations that anyone can understand, and no software subscriptions or technical support needs.

**When to Move to Level 1:** Paper trails slow you down, tax time becomes overwhelming, or you're losing track of critical information.

# LEVEL 1 (11-25 pts)

**Basic Digitization:** Digital tools adopted but disconnected, spreadsheets, manual data transfer.

You've moved beyond paper, but your digital tools don't talk to each other. QuickBooks for accounting, Google Sheets for scheduling, email for communications. Every day involves copying information between systems and toggling browser tabs. This is where administrative burden often peaks—multiple systems without integration efficiency.

***Example:** A small business uses spreadsheets for sales tracking, basic accounting software for bookkeeping, and email for customer communication. The owner manually transfers data between systems weekly, reformatting exports to match each application's requirements.*

## **National Industry Benchmark:**

- Traditional Agriculture: 20
- Personal Services: 20
- Independent Food Service: 25
- Small Retail: 25

**Benefits of Level 1:** Digital records are searchable and backed up, you can work from anywhere with internet access, basic financial tracking is easier, and you've laid the groundwork for future automation without major complexity.

**When to Move to Level 2:** Copying data between systems consumes hours daily, errors from manual transfers are costing you money and customer trust, or you're ready to hire employees who need coordinated access to information.

# LEVEL 2 (26-45 pts)

**System Integration:** Multiple systems with API connections, CRM in place, basic reporting.

Your core systems connect so data flows automatically. POS syncs with accounting, CRM talks to email, and you generate reports without manual compilation. Standard procedures are documented, and you've eliminated the most painful administrative redundancies.

***Example:** A mid-size company's booking system automatically updates their CRM, triggers confirmation emails, and syncs revenue to accounting. When customers place orders online at midnight, the morning schedule automatically updates.*

## **National Industry Benchmark:**

- Construction: 30
- Professional Services (Legal, Accounting): 40
- Mid-size Retail: 42
- Healthcare Clinics: 47
- Regional Hospitality: 45
- Hotel Chains: 45

**Benefits of Level 2:** Data flows automatically between core systems, reporting is reliable and fast, your team can access real-time information, administrative errors drop significantly, and you can confidently delegate without losing visibility.

**When to Move to Level 3:** Your team is drowning in repetitive tasks that follow predictable patterns, you need faster response times to stay competitive, or manual processes are preventing you from taking on more customers.

# LEVEL 3 (46-65 pts)

**Process Automation:** Automated workflows for routine tasks, integrated tech stack, rule-based automation

Routine decisions happen automatically based on rules, inquiries route to the right department, inventory reorders at threshold levels, compliance deadlines generate advance alerts. Your team handles exceptions and strategy while automation manages repetition.

***Example:** A property management company automatically processes maintenance requests: tenants submit via app, the system categorizes urgency, assigns vendors, sends updates, and logs everything for monthly reports. Payment processes automatically upon completion approval.*

**National Industry Benchmark:**

- Healthcare Systems: 50
- Logistics & Supply Chain: 55
- Enterprise Retail Chains: 55
- Insurance: 60
- Banking: 60
- Telecommunications: 65

**Benefits of Level 3:** Workflows execute consistently without supervision, customers receive instant responses, compliance happens automatically, your team focuses on high-value work, and operations continue smoothly even when key people are unavailable.

**When to Move to Level 4:** You need to predict problems before they happen, market conditions change too quickly for rule-based systems to keep up, or you're competing against companies with AI-powered insights.

# LEVEL 4 (66-85 pts)

**Intelligent Automation:** AI-assisted decision making, predictive analytics, self-optimizing workflows.

Your systems predict problems before they occur, recommend optimal decisions based on data, and continuously improve without human intervention. Compliance monitoring is proactive. Technology anticipates needs and adapts in real-time while your team focuses on strategic decisions.

***Example:** A healthcare system uses AI to predict patient no-shows based on history, weather, and traffic patterns, automatically adjusting schedules and sending personalized reminders. The system monitors regulatory changes and suggests protocol updates.*

#### **National Industry Benchmark:**

- Major Financial Services: 70
- FinTech: 70
- SaaS Companies: 72
- E-commerce Platforms: 75

**Benefits of Level 4:** Systems anticipate issues and opportunities proactively, decisions are data-driven and optimized continuously, compliance is predictive rather than reactive, competitive advantages compound through machine learning, and your team operates with strategic foresight.

**When to Move to Level 5:** Human bottlenecks limit your scale, you're competing in markets where milliseconds and perfect execution matter, or your industry leaders are achieving autonomous operations that set new performance standards.

# LEVEL 5 (86-100 pts)

**Autonomous Operations:** AI agents handling complex workflows, self-healing systems, minimal human intervention.

AI agents manage complex workflows end-to-end, systems self-diagnose and repair issues, and processes continuously learn and optimize. Human involvement focuses on strategic direction and relationships rather than execution.

***Example:** A logistics platform autonomously manages route optimization, dynamic pricing, carrier selection, and documentation across thousands of daily shipments. When disruptions occur, the system instantly reconfigures and implements contingency plans.*

**National Industry Benchmark:**

- Advanced Robotics: 90
- Leading Tech Companies: 90
- Algorithmic Trading Firms: 95

**Benefits of Level 5:** Operations run 24/7 with minimal human intervention, systems self-optimize and self-heal, leadership focuses exclusively on vision and innovation, scalability is nearly unlimited, and execution quality exceeds human consistency.

**This is the Frontier:** Few organizations operate here, but it represents the direction of competitive advantage in automation-driven industries.

# EVALUATION Criteria

We ask 10 questions to evaluate the six critical dimensions of workflow automation maturity. These questions surface:

- *How much of your work is automated?*
- *How well your systems communicate?*
- *How intelligently your technology supports decisions?*
- *How adaptable your processes are?*
- *How effectively your team's time is utilized?*

Each question is worth up to 10 points based on your answer.

Your total score across all 10 questions (0-100 points) determines which of the six maturity levels best describes your current operations.

Take the **WAVES** test to determine your automation maturity.

[Click Here](#)

# The **FUTURE** of Small Businesses in the **Digital Age**

Small businesses worldwide stand at the intersection of challenge and opportunity. Rising costs, operational complexity, and talent scarcity are real, but so are the innovative solutions emerging across every industry.

The businesses that will thrive are those that embrace the hybrid model: sophisticated enough to leverage AI and automation, yet grounded enough to preserve the authentic relationships that define their value.

The question isn't whether to innovate—it's how quickly you can implement the workflows that will define success in tomorrow's economy.

# Built with ALOHA in HAWAII

## About Gidens

Gidens is Hawaii's AI-powered platform automating compliance workflows and administrative tasks for small businesses. Founded and built in Hawaii, we understand the unique operational challenges of running a local small business. Our mission is simple: **give small business owners their time back so they can focus on what matters most, serving their community.**

## Contact Us:

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# AI RESEARCH & REFERENCES

## Primary Research Sources

### Economic and Business Data

- Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism (DBEDT) – Economic outlook projections for Hawaii 2025–2028
- University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization (UHERO) – Hawaii economic forecasts and analysis
- U.S. Small Business Administration Research (2023) – Administrative burden statistics

### Industry Studies and Reports

- McKinsey Global Institute "The Future of Work" (2023) – 40% of work time on repetitive tasks, 69% of managers' coordination work automation potential
- Zapier "State of Business Automation Report" (2023) – 54% of capacity trapped in manual tasks
- IDC (International Data Corporation) "The High Cost of Not Finding Information" (2023) – \$4,600 per employee annual cost
- IBM "Cost of Poor Quality Data" Global Study (2023) – \$1.8 trillion global loss annually
- Deloitte "Digital Maturity Index" (2023) – 31% revenue loss from inefficiency, maturity benchmarks
- Boston Consulting Group Operations Study (2023) – 3x higher operational costs for manual businesses
- Salesforce "State of Service Report" (2023) – 72-hour customer response times without automation

## State-Specific Resources for All 50 States

### Specialized Research

- Xero Small Business Insights Report (2023) – 23 hours per week on administrative tasks
- M-Files "Information Management Pain Points" (2023) – 18 minutes average document search time
- Levvel Research "Payables Automation Report" (2023) – 11 days average invoice processing
- Institute of Finance & Management (2023) – \$15–40 manual invoice processing costs
- Automation Anywhere ROI Report (2023) – \$35 saved per hour of automation
- Association for Intelligent Information Management (2023) – 88% of spreadsheets contain errors
- Harvard Business Review "Customer Experience Study" (2023) – 67% customer loss from poor processes
- McKinsey & Company Digital Operations Study (2023) – Automation potential statistics

### State Economic Development Agencies

Each state's Department of Business, Economic Development equivalent was referenced for local economic data and business statistics.

### SSBCI (State Small Business Credit Initiative) Programs

You incorporated SSBCI data for each state to understand their small business funding landscape and support programs.

### State-Specific Business Support Networks

- State SBDC Networks (Small Business Development Centers)  
*Example: Alabama SBDC, Alaska SBDC, Arizona SBDC, etc.*  
*All 50 states have their own SBDC network*
- State-Specific Accelerators and Incubators  
*Examples: Innovation Depot (Alabama), gener8tor (Wisconsin), MassChallenge (Massachusetts)*
- State Chambers of Commerce  
Each state's main chamber plus major city chambers
- Industry-Specific State Organizations  
*Examples: Wyoming Business Council, Florida's GrowFL, New York's Empire State Development*

## State-Specific Resources for All 50 States

### Localized Context Elements

- Major cities (primary and secondary)
- Key industries (3-4 per state)
- Regulatory context (state-specific compliance requirements)
- Shipping/logistics context (ports, borders, distribution hubs)
- Example businesses (3 types per state):
  - Family/traditional business
  - Modern/tech business
  - Industry-specific business
- Tourism operators (state landmarks/attractions)
- Property management contexts
- Healthcare systems (major hospital networks)
- Logistics platforms (ports, airports, rail hubs)

### Specific Examples of State Resources Referenced:

- California: CalGold permit database, GO-Biz
- Texas: Texas Economic Development Corporation
- Florida: Sunbiz portal, Prospera, Synapse Florida
- New York: Empire State Development, NYC Business Solutions
- Alaska: myAlaska portal
- Hawaii: DBEDT, Mana Up, LeniLani Consulting
- Massachusetts: MassChallenge, Mass General Brigham
- Michigan: Detroit auto industry standards
- Louisiana: French Quarter vendor licenses, Port of New Orleans
- Kentucky: UPS Worldport operations
- Nevada: Gaming license requirements
- Wyoming: Business-friendly LLC laws



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