



PineyWoods

AUTOMATION

# 12 Hours a Week

The manual tasks quietly costing small businesses the most - and what it takes to get the hours back.

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### The work that eats your week isn't the work you remember

Ask most owners where their week went and they'll tell you about the big things. The proposal that ran long. The hire who fell through. The customer who needed talking down on Friday afternoon. Those moments are vivid, and they feel like the job.

They're usually not what took the time.

The time goes somewhere quieter. It goes to the half-dozen small tasks nobody ever decided to do - they just accreted. Someone copies numbers out of one system and types them into another. Someone checks whether the thing that was supposed to ship actually shipped. Someone rebuilds the same report every Monday because the system won't quite produce it the way the boss likes to see it. None of these is hard. None of them takes long on its own. That's exactly why they're invisible. A task that takes four minutes doesn't feel like a problem. Forty of them in a week is a full afternoon you'll never get a meeting about.

We called this paper *12 Hours a Week* because twelve is roughly what we tend to find when we sit with a small team and actually count. We want to be straight with you about that number. It isn't a statistic, and we didn't get it from a study. It's a rough, honest average from the businesses we've worked with. Your real number might be eight. It might be twenty. The point of the figure isn't the precision - it's the scale. The hidden busywork in a normal 10-to-200-person business is almost always measured in hours per week, not minutes. And because it's spread across people and days and tools, almost nobody sees the total until they add it up.

This paper is about finding that total in your own business, understanding what's actually causing it, and knowing what it takes to get the time back. Some of what we describe you'll be able to fix yourself. Some of it is the kind of thing we do for a living. Either way, you'll come out knowing where your week is leaking - which is worth something on its own.

# The five time-sinks in almost every small business

We've watched a lot of small businesses work, across very different industries, and the same handful of leaks show up almost everywhere. The labels change - what a clinic calls intake, an agency calls onboarding - but the shape is the same. Here are the five we see most.

**Re-keying data between tools.** This is the big one, and the most common. Information arrives in one place and has to live in another, so a person becomes the bridge. An order comes in by email and gets typed into the system that actually fulfills it. A lead fills out a form on the website and someone copies their details into the CRM. An invoice arrives as a PDF and the line items get hand-entered into the accounting software. The work isn't thinking; it's transcription. And because the human eye wanders, it's also where a surprising share of your errors are born - a transposed number, a misread address, a zero that became a nine.

**Follow-ups that depend on someone remembering.** Most businesses run on a long tail of "I'll circle back." The quote that needs a nudge if the customer goes quiet. The invoice that's three days past due. The patient who never rebooked. None of these is hard to send. The hard part is remembering to send it, at the right time, every single time, across dozens of open threads. So they live in someone's head and on sticky notes, and the ones that fall through the cracks fall silently. You rarely find out about the follow-up that didn't go out. You just don't get the reply.

**Status-chasing.** A lot of a manager's week is spent answering one question in a dozen forms: where does this stand? Did the part ship? Is the permit approved? Has the client signed? Did we hear back from the lab? The information exists - it's just scattered across inboxes, a couple of systems, and three people's memories. So someone goes around (in person or over chat) collecting it, assembling a picture that's complete and current for about an hour before it's stale again. It feels like managing. It's mostly fetching.

**Reporting that gets rebuilt by hand.** Almost every business has at least one report somebody assembles manually on a schedule. The Monday sales numbers. The weekly hours. The month-end summary for the owner. Typically it means exporting data from one or two systems, pasting it into a spreadsheet, cleaning it up, fixing the formatting, and sending it around. The numbers were all sitting in the systems the whole time. The hours went into ferrying them into a shape a person can read.

**Scheduling and coordination.** The back-and-forth of getting two or more people's time to line up eats more of the week than anyone budgets for. The "does Tuesday work, no, how about Thursday" email chain. Booking the appointment, confirming it, reminding about it, and dealing with the no-show or the reschedule. Lining up a crew, a customer, and a window of availability. Each instance is small. Multiply it by every appointment, every job, every meeting, and it's one of the quietest big costs in the building.

You'll notice none of these is a strategic failing. They're not signs anyone is doing a bad job. They're the natural exhaust of running a real business with more than one tool and more than a couple of people - which is to say, every business eventually grows into them.

# How to spot them in your own week

The five sinks are easy to nod along to and surprisingly hard to see in your own building, because they're disguised as "just how we do it." Here are the tells.

**The 5pm export.** Somebody, at a predictable time, pulls a file out of one system so they can put its contents into another. The end-of-day CSV. The report they download and email. The spreadsheet that gets exported every Friday. Any time a file is being moved from one tool to another by hand, on a schedule, you're watching data that wants to flow being carried in a bucket.

**The swivel chair.** Watch how someone sits when they do a routine task. If they've got two windows open and they're reading from one while typing into the other - eyes left, type right, eyes left, type right - that physical swivel between two screens is re-keying in its purest form. The person has become the connection between two systems that don't talk to each other.

**The standing reminder.** Look for the recurring calendar alert, the daily alarm, the note stuck to the monitor that's been there so long it's gone invisible. "Check overdue invoices." "Send the Monday report." "Follow up with anyone who hasn't replied." A standing reminder is a person doing a computer's job - remembering to do the same thing on a schedule. The reminder itself is the confession.

**The Monday rebuild.** Find the report or the summary that someone reconstructs from scratch on a regular cadence. Same inputs, same steps, same output, every week, by hand. If you can predict exactly what someone will be doing at nine on Monday morning because they do it every Monday, that's a task with a shape - and a shape is the thing that can be handed off.

**The question that gets asked all day.** If the same question - where's my order, what's the status, did we get it yet - comes in over and over, and a person answers each one by going and looking, that's status-chasing in its retail form. The answer exists. It's just not anywhere the person asking can reach it themselves.

The common thread, and the single most useful thing to look for, is sameness. The tasks worth getting back are the ones that have the same shape every time. Same steps, same source, same destination, same decision. That sameness is what makes them tedious for a person - and it's exactly what makes them a candidate for getting handled automatically. The worksheet at the end of this paper is built around spotting it.

## Before and after, in real terms

It's one thing to name the leaks and another to picture them fixed. Here's what the change tends to look like for three of the five. The numbers are illustrative - modest, real-world-shaped figures from the kind of work we do, not promises. Yours will differ.

**Re-keying orders.** *Before:* an order arrives by email, and someone opens it, reads it, and types the details into the system that fulfills it. A couple of minutes each, plus the occasional cleanup when a

number gets fat-fingered and the wrong thing ships. In a business doing a few dozen of these a day, that's an hour or two of someone's day spent transcribing, and a small but steady trickle of errors. *After:* the details are read off the order and dropped into the system automatically, with a person glancing at anything the process flags as unusual rather than typing every line. The hour comes back. The error trickle mostly stops, and the mistakes it does catch get caught before they ship, not after a customer calls. That part is worth as much as the time - more on why it's harder to price later.

**Status-chasing.** *Before:* a manager spends a chunk of every day assembling the answer to "where do things stand" - pinging people, checking two systems, holding the picture together in their head. *After:* that picture assembles itself in one place that's always current, so the question gets answered by glancing at a screen instead of interrupting three people. The time saved is real, but the quieter win is that the interruptions stop. The people who used to get pinged for status get a chunk of their own focus back too - a cost that never showed up in anyone's count because it was scattered across everyone.

**The Monday report.** *Before:* someone spends the first hour or two of Monday exporting, pasting, cleaning, and formatting the same report they built last Monday. *After:* the report builds itself on schedule and lands where it's supposed to, in the shape the owner likes to read it, and the person who used to assemble it spends ten minutes giving it a sanity check instead of two hours making it. They start their week doing the job they were actually hired for.

Notice what these have in common. Nothing dramatic happened. No one's job disappeared. A tedious, low-value task shrank to a quick human check, and the time and attention it used to swallow went back to the people and the work that needed it. That's the whole game. It's rarely a single big save. It's a handful of small, boring tasks that stop quietly costing you - and that add up to real hours back every week.

## The simple math that gets a yes

If you want to get a budget - or even just your own attention - pointed at one of these, "it'll save us a bunch of time" won't do it. Leadership acts on numbers. The good news is the number is easy to build, and you don't need anything you don't already have.

Start with honest hours. Not remembered hours - memory rounds up, especially for tasks we dislike. For a few days, have whoever does the task jot down how long it actually takes and how often it happens. (The worksheet at the back is for exactly this.) Add it up to a real, written-down figure for a typical week. Say it comes to an hour a day - five hours a week.

Now put a cost on the hour. Not the bare wage. The loaded cost - the wage plus the payroll taxes, benefits, software seats, and overhead that ride along with every hour of someone's time. For most small businesses that loaded number is meaningfully higher than the hourly wage. Your bookkeeper can give you a real one, but even a rough multiplier on the wage gets you into the right neighborhood.

Then the arithmetic is just:

## hours per week × loaded hourly cost × weeks worked per year

That's the annual cost of the task, in dollars, sitting in plain sight. Plug in your own three numbers and you'll have a figure for one leak. Do it for your top two or three and you'll have a number for the lot.

We're deliberately not printing a total here, because a made-up total is worth nothing. The figure that moves people is the one built from your hours, your loaded cost, your year. When you put it that way - "this task is costing us roughly this many dollars a year, every year, and it's the kind of task that doesn't need a person doing it" - you've turned a vague annoyance into a line item. Line items get decisions.

Two more kinds of value belong in the conversation, even though they're harder to price. The first is fewer errors: when a number stops being hand-typed, the transposed digits and wrong-address shipments mostly stop too, and a mistake caught early is far cheaper than one caught by an angry customer. The second is speed: a lead answered in five minutes instead of five hours is likelier to close. You usually can't put a clean dollar figure on either, so don't pretend to - but name them. They're real, your team feels them, and they're often what tips a good-on-paper project into clearly worth doing.

## What stays human

It would be easy to read this far and conclude the goal is to automate everything that moves. It isn't, and we'd talk you out of it if you tried.

The tasks worth handing off are the ones with the same shape every time - same steps, same decision, no judgment. The moment real judgment enters, a person should stay in the seat. Deciding whether to extend credit to a shaky account. Reading the tone of an unhappy customer and choosing how to make it right. Weighing whether to take on a job that's a stretch for the crew. These aren't slow because of bad tools; they're deliberate because they deserve a person's attention. Speeding them up wouldn't be a win.

The same goes for relationships. The check-in call that keeps a client close. The thank-you that means something because a real person noticed. The conversation where someone needs to feel heard before they need to be solved. A business is held together by these, and the quiet irony is that clearing away the busywork is what gives your people the time to do more of them. The point of getting the small stuff off their plate was never to make the business more mechanical. It was to give the humans back the hours to do the human parts well.

So when we look at a business, we're not hunting for everything a machine could technically do - only the narrow set of tasks that are genuinely better off automated, with the judgment and the relationships left where they belong. If a task needs a person to think or to care, it stays human.

# How this actually goes

If any of this is landing, here's the honest shape of what fixing it looks like, so there are no surprises.

It starts small. We don't begin with a platform or a year-long plan. We find the one or two leaks where the math is clearest and the work is most repetitive, and we start there. One task done well beats ten done halfway, and an early win you can feel is worth more than a roadmap you can't.

It's built into what you already use. We don't hand you a new system to learn and a login to forget. The fix lives inside the tools your team already works in, so the output shows up where the work already happens - in the inbox, the CRM, the spreadsheet you already open. The best version of this is the one your team barely notices, because all it did was make the annoying part stop.

And it gets handed off. The goal isn't to make you dependent on us; it's to hand you something your team runs without us. We set it up, we stay long enough to make sure it holds in real conditions, we write down how it works on one plain page, and we make sure a specific person owns it. Then we get out of the way. A fix that only works while a consultant is hovering isn't a fix - it's a subscription. We'd rather build the kind that earns its keep after we're gone.

None of this takes long. The work we're describing is measured in weeks, and most of what we build is live in around 45 days. You don't need to overhaul anything or bet the business. You're plugging a few specific leaks, one at a time, in the building you already have.

## The next step is small (and free)

If you've recognized your own week anywhere in here, the next step is easy.

Book a thirty-minute call. We'll talk through where your time is actually going and which one or two leaks are worth plugging first. You'll leave with a clear, plain-English read on it - what's worth doing, what isn't worth doing yet, and roughly what it would take - whether or not you ever work with us. No pressure, and no pitch you have to sit through. If we're not the right fit, we'll tell you, and you'll still walk away with a better map of your own week than you came in with. Useful either way.

When you're ready, call us at **512.234.5665**.

# Appendix: The 20-minute time audit

You can't fix a leak you can't see. This worksheet is how you find yours. It takes about twenty minutes of attention, spread across a few normal working days, and it's the single most useful thing you can do before changing anything.

**How to run it.** For the next three to five working days, keep this sheet somewhere handy - taped to the monitor, or open in a tab. Every time you (or someone on your team) does a small, repetitive task, add a line. Don't tidy as you go and don't judge it; just catch it. You're looking for the little stuff that happens on autopilot.

**For each task, log:**

- **Task** - what it is, in a few words
- **Who does it** - the person or role
- **How often** - times per day, or per week
- **Minutes each time** - be honest; time it once if you're not sure
- **Same shape every time?** - check the box if it's the same steps, same source, same destination, every single time

Task	Who does it	How often	Minutes each	Same shape?
				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
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				<input type="checkbox"/>
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				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>

Task	Who does it	How often	Minutes each	Same shape?
				[ ]

**Now add it up.**

For each row, multiply *minutes each time* x *how many times per week* to get that task's weekly minutes. Then total them.

- Total weekly minutes across all rows: \_\_\_\_\_
- Divide by 60 for weekly hours: \_\_\_\_\_

That's your number. Compare it to twelve. Most people are surprised which side of it they land on.

**Then circle your top three.**

Look only at the rows where you checked *same shape every time*. Among those, circle the three with the highest weekly minutes:

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Those three are your best candidates - the most time, the least judgment, the easiest to hand off. If you bring that short list to a call with us, it's exactly where we'd start.