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Which tasks are worth automating first, and how to map one before you build

Ideas & Everyday Automations

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Which tasks are worth automating first, and how to map one before you build

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The tasks worth automating are those that are **frequent, predictable, boring and low-risk**: copying data from one place to another, alerting someone when something happens, gathering information into a report. Do not automate a task you do not yet do well by hand, because automation only repeats the mistake, faster. Before opening any tool, **draw the task on paper**.

How to tell a good candidate

Criterion	Ask	Good sign
Frequency	How many times a week do I do it?	Many. Something you do once a year does not pay off.
Rules	Can I explain it to a trainee in five lines?	Yes. If it depends on “feeling” the case, no.
Data	Does it always arrive in the same format?	Yes. Messy inputs break the flow.
Risk	What happens if it fails once?	Little: a late alert. If money is involved, there must be an approval.
Pain	Does anyone complain about it?	Yes. Automate what irritates most, not what is prettiest.

Mapping a task, step by step

1. **The trigger.** What starts it? A form, an e-mail, a time of day, a new order. See **what a webhook is** and **scheduling or cron**.

2. **The inputs.** Where does the data come from and in what format? Which parts can be missing?

3. **The steps,** one by one, in the order you would do them by hand.

4. **The decisions.** Where does the task fork (“if the amount is over…”)? Write the rule out in full.

5. **The output.** What gets done and where (a sheet, an e-mail, a message)?

6. **The exceptions.** What happens when a piece of data is missing, when the service is down, when it arrives twice? Who is told?

7. **The owner.** A named person who looks at it when it fails.

How to start without getting burned

1. **Do it by hand five times,** map in hand, and correct the map.

2. **Start with an alert only.** The first version sends nothing to customers: it messages you, saying what it would have done.

3. **Let it write, but with approval.** See **adding a human approval step**.

4. **Only then let it run alone,** and look at the results every day for the first week.

Every automation is something to maintain.
Credentials that expire, services that change, formats that change. With nobody responsible, in six months it fails in silence.

If you cannot draw the task without using the word “depends”,
split it
: automate the predictable part and leave the rest to a person. For tools, see **what n8n is and what you can automate with it**.

NEED A HAND?

Want to know whether your idea needs a server of its own or whether a scheduled task is enough? Describe it.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- What n8n is, and what you can automate with it →
- Cron jobs: what they are for and how to create one →
- Adding a human approval step to an automation →

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