Chatbot or AI employee?

One page to decide what your business needs. Cost: $0. Time: 5 minutes. Accounts: none.

The words aren't standardized: some people call anything that answers messages a "chatbot". Here's how we use them. A **chatbot** talks: it answers with what it knows. An **AI employee** talks and also does part of the work, with tools, permissions and someone who supervises it. What changes isn't the brand or the AI model: it's whether it has keys, and who answers for what it does.

Five differences

	Chatbot	AI employee
1. What it does	Answers questions.	Answers and does the task: writes down the order, books the appointment, drafts the reply.
2. Office keys (tools)	None, or only what's written in it.	Connections to what your business uses: calendar, order sheet, email.
3. Permissions	Touches nothing outside the conversation.	Sees and touches only what you give it: the calendar yes, the prices no.
4. Who supervises it (human approval)	No one approves anything, because it doesn't act.	You approve what isn't routine: discounts, big orders, complaints.
5. What happens when it's wrong	A bad answer: a confused customer, or a promise nobody keeps.	A bad action: a double booking, a wrong order. That's why it gets limits and review.

A chatbot is enough if…

- [ ] Almost everything people ask is fixed information: hours, address, prices, directions.
- [ ] After answering, nothing needs to be written down, booked or changed.
- [ ] If someone wants to buy or book, it's fine for them to continue with you.

You need an AI employee if…

- [ ] You copy what comes in by text into your calendar, a spreadsheet or a notebook by hand.
- [ ] Orders or appointments slip through because nobody wrote them down in time.
- [ ] The back-and-forth to set something up eats time every day.

Before you give an AI employee keys

- [ ] You know which tool it needs for each task, and you don't give it more.
- [ ] Each key has its permission: what it can see and what it can change.
- [ ] You wrote down what you decide and how it hands you the case.
- [ ] You check a sample of what it did every week.

How to know you used it right: you ticked the boxes in one of the two lists and you know what you'll try first. If you ticked both, start with a chatbot for the fixed information and add a single key, for the task that costs you the most.

Once you finish, reply **DONE** to the message it came in.

Blackcircuit Labs. Working definitions for this series, not an industry standard. Reviewed: Nov 17, 2026.