St. Joseph County AI Task Force Meeting Summary – August 14th, 2024

Automation with JotForms and Workflow Tools:

The task force spent a considerable amount of time discussing how to harness the power of automation to streamline county operations. One of the standout tools mentioned was **JotForms**— a versatile platform that not only allows for the creation of forms but also facilitates the automation of workflows behind those forms.

The conversation began with an example of how JotForms has already been implemented in neighboring Van Buren county. Previously, handling something as simple as a tax bill address change required multiple steps: a phone call, manual data entry, and coordination with local units who also needed updates. Now, with JotForms, this entire process is automated. Residents simply fill out a form online, and the system takes care of the rest. The form automatically identifies the jurisdiction based on the parcel number, sends notifications to the appropriate local units, updates the tax database, and even sends a confirmation email to the resident—all without requiring manual intervention.

The task force was particularly impressed with JotForms' ability to integrate with tools like **Zapier** and **Make**. These tools act as middlemen, connecting JotForms with other software systems that the county uses, such as the tax database. This integration allows data to flow seamlessly from one system to another, ensuring that all relevant parties have access to the information they need without additional manual steps. The potential for these tools to save time and reduce errors was clear, with the discussion highlighting that even simple automations could lead to hundreds of hours saved each year.

Joey AI - The St. Joseph County Chatbot:

The launch of **Joey AI**, the county's chatbot, was another major focus of the meeting. Joey AI is designed to assist residents by answering common questions and providing information without the need for them to call county offices directly. The task force discussed the readiness of Joey AI for public launch, with a general agreement that it was time to roll out the chatbot, even if it still has some kinks to work out.

Joey AI has been trained on a wealth of information from the county's website and other sources, allowing it to answer a wide range of questions. The task force recognized that while Joey might not be perfect right out of the gate, its performance could be improved over time based on real-world interactions and feedback from residents. They emphasized the importance of launching Joey AI as a "prototype," making it clear to users that it is still in a testing phase and encouraging them to report any issues or inaccuracies.

The goal is for Joey AI to significantly reduce the number of routine phone calls that county offices receive. For example, instead of calling the office to find out how to obtain a dog license or change the name on a deed, residents can ask Joey AI and get an instant, accurate response. The chatbot is also designed to provide additional information or direct users to the appropriate office if it doesn't have the answer readily available.

The task force discussed the potential of creating department-specific versions of Joey AI, which could be trained on more detailed information relevant to specific county services. This would allow each department to have a tailored chatbot that could answer more nuanced questions, further reducing the workload on county staff.

Other Key Topics:

1. **AI-Powered Blog Generation:** The meeting touched on a fascinating use of AI in content creation—specifically, generating blogs. The AI was used to create high-quality, engaging blog posts for the county's communication efforts. For instance, by feeding the AI with basic information about local events or county projects, it could produce a well-written blog in minutes. This capability not only saves time but also ensures that the content is consistently professional and engaging.

   One member shared how they had used the AI to generate multiple blog posts about a vacation rental, covering topics from local wildlife to the history of a small dam on the property. The AI's ability to write in a conversational tone and format the content attractively was highlighted as a key advantage, especially for small teams that need to produce a lot of content quickly.

   The discussion suggested that this tool could be incredibly valuable for the county's public relations efforts, particularly in generating content for social media, newsletters, and the county website. By automating these tasks, staff could focus on more strategic work while still maintaining a steady flow of communication with the public.

2. **AI in Legal and Administrative Tasks:** The task force also discussed how AI is being used to streamline legal and administrative tasks within the county. One example was the use of AI to draft resolutions. Traditionally, drafting a resolution could take hours as it required careful wording and multiple revisions to ensure accuracy and compliance. Now, AI can generate a draft in minutes, which staff can then review and tweak as needed. This shift from manual drafting to AI-assisted drafting is saving significant amounts of time, allowing county employees to focus on other important tasks.

   Another area where AI is making a big impact is in the condensing of legal descriptions from deeds. This task, which involves reducing lengthy legal language into a concise format suitable for tax records, used to be time-consuming and prone to errors. With AI, the process is much faster and more accurate, freeing up staff to handle other responsibilities.

3. **Integration and Future Potential:** The task force looked ahead to the future of AI in county operations, discussing how current tools and practices could evolve. The concept of **agentic AI**—AI that not only provides information but also takes action based on that information—was introduced. The vision is for AI to eventually handle tasks like fetching documents, processing payments, and interacting with multiple software systems to complete complex workflows. For instance, in the future, residents might be able to simply ask Joey AI to retrieve a specific document, pay a fee, and have the document delivered electronically, all within a single conversation.

The integration of AI with automation tools like JotForms and workflow software was seen as the next logical step. By combining these technologies, the county could automate even more processes, reducing the need for manual intervention and increasing efficiency across the board. The task force recognized that while these advancements might still be a few years away, the groundwork being laid now would be critical in achieving these goals.

Conclusion:

The August 14 meeting of the St. Joseph County AI Task Force was a productive session that underscored the county's commitment to innovation and efficiency. Through the use of tools like JotForms, Zapier, and Joey AI, the county is not only improving its operations but also preparing for a future where AI plays an even more central role in government services. The discussions were forward-looking, practical, and grounded in the real-world needs of the county, setting the stage for continued progress in the months and years to come.

AI and automation technologies the Task Force is currently exploring:

- ChatGPT & Claude: AI digital assistants
- ChatBase: Joey AI & departmental chatbots
- TurboScribe & Otter AI: AI meeting transcription services
- Jotforms: Online forms and workflow automation
- Zapier/Make/PowerAutomate: workflow automation