How Integrations Work, in 10 Minutes

A short, plain-language guide to what actually happens when two business systems "talk," why some connections hold up for years and others break in a week, and one AI quick win you can try this afternoon.

Talk to a specialist

Why this matters

Most growing companies run on five to fifteen systems: a store, an inventory or MRP system, accounting, shipping, and a handful of spreadsheets in between. Every time someone copies an order, a stock count, or an invoice from one screen to another, that is an integration done by hand.

An integration does that copying for you, the same way every time. Done well, nobody thinks about it. Done badly, it quietly creates the very mess it was meant to remove.

1. Something starts it: the trigger

Every integration begins with an event: a new order, a shipped package, a finished production run, a new bill. The system either announces the event the moment it happens (a webhook) or the integration checks on a schedule (polling, for example every five minutes).

Webhooks are fast. Polling is steady and easy to recover. Good integrations often use both: the webhook for speed and a scheduled check that catches anything the webhook

missed.

2. Data has to change shape: mapping

Systems rarely describe the same thing the same way. One calls it a SKU, another an item code. One stores tax per line, another per order. One knows a customer by email, another by an ID.

Mapping is the set of rules that translates one into the other: which field goes where, how units convert, what happens when a value is missing. Most integration problems live here, in the small rules nobody wrote down.

3. One system owns each answer: the system of record

For every piece of data, one system has to be the boss. Stock levels usually live in the inventory system. Prices often live in the store. Inventory value belongs in accounting.

When two systems both think they own the same number, they overwrite each other and the numbers drift. Deciding ownership up front is the cheapest fix you will ever make.

4. Things will go wrong: errors and retries

APIs time out, a product gets deleted, a customer types an address that will not validate. A good integration expects this. It retries what is temporary, stops on what is not, and never creates a duplicate when it tries again.

The test of an integration is not the day it works. It is the day something unexpected arrives, and whether a person hears about it in minutes or finds out at month end.

5. Someone has to watch it: monitoring

Integrations are not set-and-forget. Platforms change their APIs, your team adds a new product type, a carrier changes a code. Monitoring means alerts when something fails, a log you can search, and a person who fixes it.

If no one owns the integration after it goes live, it is only a matter of time before it becomes the spreadsheet again.

Built-in connector, automation tool, or custom build?

Use the built-in connector when it covers what you need. It is the cheapest and simplest option.

Automation tools (Zapier, Make) work well for light, low-volume tasks where a missed step is not costly.

A custom integration earns its keep when the rules are yours alone, the volume is high, or a mistake touches revenue, inventory, or the books.

AI quick win: find the mismatches before they cost you

Before connecting two systems, you need to know where they disagree. AI is very good at this first pass.

Export your product list from two systems (for example your store and your inventory system), with SKU, name, and unit only. Leave out customers, prices, and anything personal. Paste both lists into your AI assistant with this prompt:

> Here are two product lists from two systems. Compare them by SKU. List: (1) SKUs that appear in only one list, (2) SKUs whose names or units differ between the lists, and (3) likely duplicates, like the same product under two SKUs. Show the results as a table, and do not invent data that is not in the lists.

In a few minutes you get a cleanup list that usually takes someone a day by hand, and you will know exactly which mismatches would have broken an integration.

Keep it to product data. Never paste customer names, emails, addresses, Amazon buyer data, or passwords into a chat. In IBM's 2026 Cost of a Data Breach Report, shadow AI was involved in 43% of the breaches IBM studied.

Want the integration itself built and run for you? We design, build, and run custom integrations with the rules and monitoring that keep them working. See how our integrations work, or describe your setup.

DataAutomation, Inc. | dataautomation.com | sales@dataautomation.com | (706) 705-9061

Audited every year.

Deloitte and Amazon SP-API audits in 2026. PwC and Amazon SP-API in 2025. Shadow AI was involved in 43% of the breaches IBM studied for its 2026 report; we keep your data out of it. And if something we run goes wrong, we own the fix.

See the latest AI incidents

See our audits