



DOCUMENT AUTOMATION GUIDE

Offering user-friendly online forms and documents that people can fill out by themselves is one of the most cost-effective methods for making justice accessible.



What is document automation?

Document automation is the creation of documents with an online interface that would typically be filled out by hand and creating questions that are answered by the end user. Document automation can reduce the amount of time, manpower, and cost, while simplifying legal forms for your clients.

Resources:

Sample Projects

- Gavel
 - [Eviction Protection Declaration \(English\)](#)
 - [Eviction Protection Declaration \(Spanish\)](#)
- PatternBuilder
 - [Eviction Protection Declaration](#)
 - [CDC County Risk Checker](#)
 - [Eviction Moratorium Eligibility](#)

Udemy Courses

- [Document Automation \(Gavel\)](#)
- [Document Automation \(Docassemble\)](#)
- [Document Automation \(Documint\)](#)



How to get started with document automation

The document automation process will vary from platform to platform, but it follows the same basic steps:

01

Prepare

- Meet with end-users to learn about their needs
- Collect documents that will be automated
- Determine which document automation platform meets the end-user's needs
- Identify fields that can be filled in via a document automation interview

02

Create

- Create an interview (i.e. "questionnaire") with questions that can easily be answered by a client
- Add variables to your PDF or Word [document template](#)
- Include necessary [business logic](#) based on variables created in the interview

03

Run & Test

- [Run the interview](#), which will populate the form with information collected from the interview
- Have clients test to make sure documents are outputting correctly
- Save any output data if applicable to your organization's needs

For more detailed information, check out our [document preparation guide](#).



How to Pick a Platform

When determining which document automation platform to choose, it's important to consider the needs of both the client and developers and decide on a platform that suits both.

Developer Considerations

- [Repeating items](#)
 - Example: Listing multiple children along with their names and dates of birth
- [Nested repeating items](#)
 - Example: Listing multiple children along with their names, dates of birth, and all previous addresses
- Ability to [integrate interview with document templates](#) in the same platform and automatically mapping fields
- Complexity of [business logic](#)
- Ability to [transform and manipulate variables](#) rather than simply parroting back information
- Whether you need to store data to revise and regenerate or to reuse for other documents
- Ability to log into [portal](#) allowing users to see data which is customized to their access level
- Whether the platform is subject to change in the near future
- [Whether you need to integrate data or generated documents into case/document management systems](#)
- [Reusability of code](#)
- Ability to receive payments



How to Pick a Platform

Client Considerations (based on our experience)

- The volume of documents that need to be automated
- How customized the document automation process needs to be
- Platform integration with another system
- Reusability of data from one interview to another
- Ability to e-file or e-sign
- Whether the user has to pay to integrate the interview with the document
- Cost
- Technical complexity to make updates, depending on who will be maintaining the forms



Coming soon!
A2J Tech's Document Automation
Hosting & Maintenance Service

Document Automation Platform Overviews



PatternBuilder is a no-code document assembly software designed specifically for lawyers. It allows users to create complex legal documents using conditional logic, without writing any code.



Pros

- Ideal for complex workflows and applications
- Ability to create complex applications with or without document automation
- Robust database capabilities
- Ideal product for NetDocuments users

Cons

- Functionality of Patternbuilder is still adjusting to include same functionalities as Afterpattern
- Some integrations are not available anymore (pre-existing in Afterpattern)
- Requires NetDocuments document management system to use

Resources:

- [Resource Library](#)
- [A Guide to Document Automation for Lawyers](#)



Recommended For:

Organizations that already use NetDocuments and want to integrate a document automation software to their ecosystem

Document Automation Platform Overviews



[Docassemble](#) is a free, open-source platform for creating legal forms and documents. The system allows lawyers, courts, and other legal services providers to create dynamic questionnaires to gather information from users and produce documents in PDF, RTF, or DOCX format, which users can download or e-mail.



Pros

- Excellent for complicated [business logic](#)
- [Customizable](#)
- Ability to reuse [code](#)
- Allows for [nested repeating items](#)

Cons

- Steeper learning curve because it requires some coding
- Requires knowledge of YAML, Jinja2, and Python
- Requires configurations to host the platform

Resources:

- [How to Deploy](#)
- [Tutorial](#)
- [Udemy Course on Docassemble](#)



Recommended For:
Organizations with complicated business logic who need a high degree of customizability and have the resources to learn it

Document Automation Platform Overviews



[Gavel](#) is a document assembly & automation platform that allows you to create templates and forms to speed up your document creation. Gavel is also a fully integrated no-code document automation system that is affordable and requires little to no technical background.

Pros

- [Can transform and manipulate variables](#)
- Superior solution for formatting legal documents
- Can [reuse data internally](#)
- Considered one of the most affordable and complete document automation systems

Cons

- Limited [direct integration with case management systems](#)
- No client [portals](#), but currently in development
- Limited ability to add technical enhancements with custom code

Resources:

- [Gavel Learning Center](#)
- [Udemy Course on Gavel](#)
- [Pricing](#)



Recommended For:
Organizations looking for a complete document automation solution that does not require heavy customization or lots of features

Document Automation Platform Overviews



Documint is a document automation software that enables users to generate multiple documents and merge data in minutes without extensive development knowledge.



Pros

- Great [Airtable integration](#)
- Drag and drop, user-friendly interference
- Enhanced Application Programming Interface ("API")
- No-code solution

Cons

- Does not support interview (i.e. "questionnaire") building
- Needs to integrate with a database with data fields
- No direct integration with [case management systems](#)

Resources:

- [Contact](#)
- [Pricing](#)
- [Udemy Course on Documint](#)



Recommended For:

Organizations that have their data stored in Airtable and simply need to output the data into a document or already have interview building software and are looking for document output software

Document Automation Platform Overviews



[Formstack](#) is a three-part platform comprising Formstack Documents, Forms, and Sign, which together facilitate digital workflows, data collection, and document signing. With over 150 product integrations, Formstack offers intuitive form building and professional, mobile-friendly forms for data gathering and document generation.



Pros

- 250+ integrations, including Salesforce
- All-in-one approach, including forms, documents, and getting signatures
- Easy drag-and-drop form builder
- Ability to create your own reusable template questions and question groups for any workflow
- Ability to use Javascript in forms for enhanced complexity

Cons

- Steep learning curve if using Formstack Forms and Formstack Documents to populate documents
- No [repeating items](#) in Formstack Forms
- Can be expensive when needing a large number of document merges

Resources:

- [Formstack Academy](#)
- [Pricing](#)
- [Product Updates](#)



Recommended For:

Organizations that use Salesforce or other platforms partnered with Formstack who want an all-in-one solution for their document automation needs

Document Automation Platform Comparison Chart

	 PatternBuilder™	 docassemble	 gavel	 documint	 formstack
Repeating Items	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Nested Repeating Items	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Interview and Document Integration	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Client Portals	✗	✗	✗	✗	Needs integration
Direct integration with case management systems	✗	✗	Limited – More integrations are forthcoming	✗	✓
Reusability of Code	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Airtable Integration	✓	No – However, you can customize and code the integration	✓	✓	✓
Database Structure	✓	✗	Limited	Needs integration to database	✓
Learning Curve	Low	Steep	Low	Low	Steep
Supports Webhooks	✓	Yes – However, via coding only	✓	✗	✓

OTHER PLATFORMS TO CONSIDER

Document Automation Platform Overviews



[A2J Author](#) is a cloud-based software that focuses on providing document automation for non-profit organizations. This software has a long history of working with legal organizations to create its software, including partnerships with the Law Help Interactive Server, the US District Court of Eastern Missouri, and more – it is currently on its 7th version, which boasts open sourcing. This means anyone can add to the base code on Github. Its pricing varies based on the amount of documents you have, so that is something to take into consideration when deciding whether or not A2J Author is a fit for you.

Rally

[Rally](#) is a document management and document automation platform hosted entirely on the cloud. Rally gives its users an extensive library of contract and corporate templates. Also, on Rally you create, customize, and collaborate with your team on documents as well as negotiate your deals with counter-parties before e-signing them and storing them in an active repository.

Document Automation Platform Overviews



With [Josef Legal](#), you can easily automate the generation of any legal document to eliminate repetitive manual work. Just upload your templates and apply your logic to build the workflow. Josef Legal also provides a document automation software platform with a chatbot interface.



[HotDocs](#) is a document automation software that allows you to control template versions, making it easy for current staff to use and for training new attorneys joining your practice. HotDocs integrates with multiple practice management systems and allows you to set internal and external regulation rules to ensure industry compliance for your documents.



[Plumsail](#) is a software company that provides tools for automating document creation, processing web form submissions, and enhancing workflow automation. It offers several products and services designed to streamline and automate various aspects of document handling and business processes.

Glossary – 1

Airtable Integration

Definition

Some document automation systems can directly or indirectly (via webhooks) connect to Airtable databases allowing these systems to automatically move data back and forth between their databases and interviews.

Business Logic

Definition

Business logic refers to the steps that the document automation platform needs to take to correctly fill out a form. If a user needs to allow clients to produce different documents or different information within those documents based on how they fill out the interview, that is part of the business logic.

API Integrations

Definition

An application programming interface (API) is a way of moving data between different systems (databases, document automation systems, case management systems, etc.). If there is a system has an API integration with another system, it means that those systems have a way of exchanging information.

Case Management System

Definition

Case management systems are platforms designed to aid in the running of a law firm. They can manage things like billing, data storage, appointment scheduling, and much more depending on the platform.

Glossary – 2

Conditional Logic

Definition

Conditional logic is a way to tailor document based on responses to interview questions. For example if a user needs to produce a certain document if a client has children, many document automation platforms allow users to create logic that will allow clients to produce that document if they answer in the interview that they have children. Similarly, if a user needs to include a certain line within the document based on whether the client has a lawyer, many platforms allow for the user to use conditional logic to produce that line in the document.

Screenshots

Conditional logic in a Word Document before running an interview:

```
TO:  {{ Recipient_Party | upper }}, {% if Recipient_HaveAttorney_vesno %}BY AND  
THROUGH THEIR ATTORNEY, {{ Recipient_Attorney | upper }}, {{  
Recipient_AttorneyAddress | upper }}, {{ Recipient_AttorneyCity | upper }}, {{  
Recipient_AttorneyState | upper }}, {{ Recipient_AttorneyZip | upper }}{% endif  
%}{% if Recipient_HaveAttorney_vesno == False %}{{ Recipient_Address | upper  
}}, {{ Recipient_City | upper }}, {{ Recipient_State | upper }}, {{ Recipient_Zip |  
upper }}{% endif %}
```

Conditional logic in a Word Document after answering questions in an interview and outputting the document:

```
TO:  RESPONDENT, BY AND THROUGH THEIR ATTORNEY, ANNA, 720  
MARSHALL AVE, MINNEAPOLIS, MN, 55101
```

Conflict Checks

Definition

Automated conflict of interest checker.

Customizability

Definition

How many variations a user can make to an interview and document template to produce the desired output document. Often used to refer to how complex the conditional logic can be.

Database Integration

Definition

Some document automation platforms have built-in databases so that users don't need to find third-party database tools such as Airtable.

Glossary – 3

Document Output

Definition

Producing a completed form.

Form/Document Integration

Definition

Some document automation systems either only allow users to create an interview or output documents.

Document automation systems that have form/document integration allow users to create an interview AND output documents populated with data from information entered from the interview they created.

Document Template

Definition

A document template is a type of file, like a PDF or Word document, that has placeholders for automatically inserting data from external sources. It can include rules that customize the content based on specific conditions, allowing for the quick creation of personalized documents.

E-file

Definition

Ability to automatically send documents directly to the relevant court.

Full Stack

Definition

Full stack in this context refers to a document automation platform with a “full-set” of features. Typically, this means that a platform has form/document integration, conditional logic, and support for repeating items at the very minimum.

Hard/Custom Code

Definition

Hard/custom code refers to the use of programming languages. These systems allow users to use programming languages either to create an interview or to enhance their existing interview.

Glossary – 4

Interview (i.e. "questionnaire")

Definition

An interview is the questions that clients are asked to gather information that will then populate the form that will be output and eventually used in the legal field. An interview builder is where a user goes to build out an interview to produce their forms. Running an interview refers to entering information in an interview that was built on a document automation platform in order to populate a form.

Screenshots

Blank Gavel interview:

The screenshot shows the 'Questions' tab of the Gavel interview builder. At the top, there are tabs for 'Questions', 'Output Documents', and 'Settings'. On the right, there are buttons for 'Close', 'Save', and 'Run'. Below the tabs, it says 'Page 1 - Client Information' and 'of 1 Client Information'. The main area is titled 'Client Information' and '(1 questions)'. It shows a single question card with the title 'What is your client's name?', a variable name 'Client_Name', and a question type of 'Text'. There are icons for 'Edit' and 'Settings' on the left of the question card. At the bottom, there is an 'Add Question' button.

Gavel interview with a question:

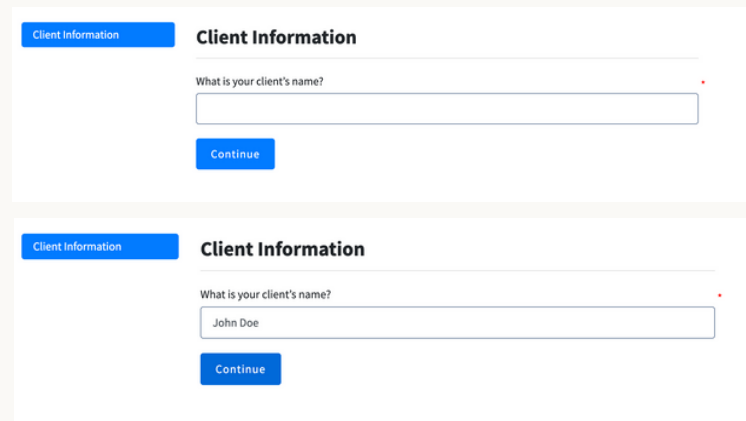
The screenshot shows the 'Questions' tab of the Gavel interview builder. At the top, there are tabs for 'Questions', 'Output Documents', and 'Settings'. On the right, there are buttons for 'Close', 'Save', and 'Run'. Below the tabs, it says 'Page 1 - New Page' and 'of 1 Name the section'. The main area is titled 'New Page' and '(0 questions)'. There is an 'Add Question' button at the top. Below it, there is a list of question types: Text, Text Area, Dropdown, Combobox, Single Select, Multi Select, Y/N, Number, Number (with decimal), Date, Email, File Upload, Repeating item, and Signature.

continued on next page →

Glossary – 4 (cont'd)

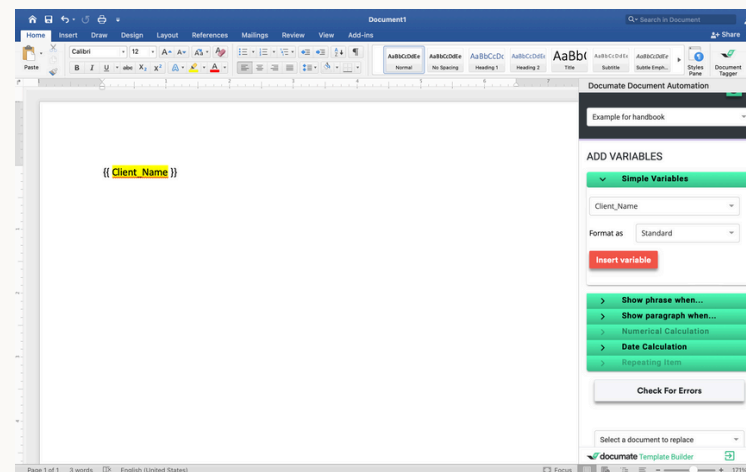
Interview

Gavel interview running:

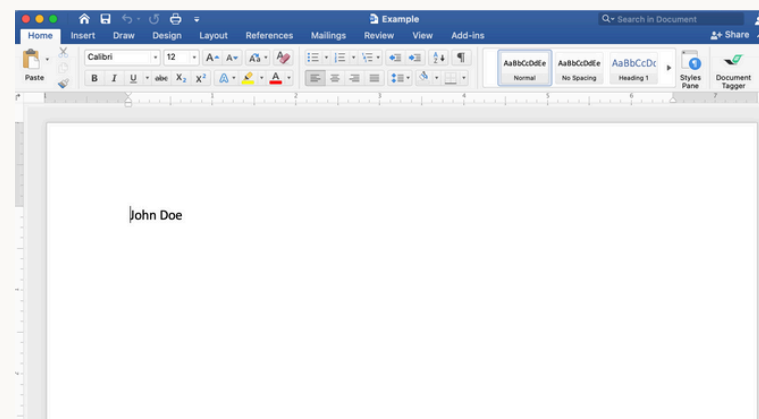


The first screenshot shows the 'Client Information' form with the question 'What is your client's name?' and an empty text input field. A blue 'Continue' button is below the field. The second screenshot shows the same form, but the text input field now contains 'John Doe'.

Document with a variable input from Gavel:



Output document after the interview was run on Gavel:



Glossary – 5

Nested Repeating Items

Definition

Repeating items are fields that need to be added multiple times with multiple subfields and subfields within those subfields.

Example

Listing multiple children along with their names, dates of birth, and all previous addresses.

Relational Database

Definition

A database where the data is grouped into buckets and shares a relationship with other buckets within the database.

Generally, the buckets are able to interact and share a logical connection.

Portal

Definition

Ability to customize people's access level and show them selected data accordingly

Example

You could customize access levels so that an editor can manipulate data while someone with a view-only level of access can only see the data

Repeating Items

Definition

Repeating items are fields that need to be added multiple times with multiple subfields

Screenshot

Listing multiple children along with their names and dates of birth

The screenshot shows a configuration interface for a 'Repeating Item'. At the top, there is a green tab labeled '1' and an 'Edit' icon. The 'Item name' field is set to 'Children'. Below this, there are two checked options: 'Ask an initial question' with the text 'Do the petitioner and respondent have any children together?' and 'Collect items on a single page'. A table below lists the subfields for each item:

Question Title	Variable Name	Question Type	Required	Help	Delete
Child's name	Childs_Name	Text	Required	?	✖
Child's DOB	Childs_DOB	Date	Required	?	✖

At the bottom of the table is a green button labeled '+ add another'.

Glossary – 6

Reusability of Code

Definition

Ability to reuse blocks of code elsewhere in an interview and/or other interviews.

Syntax

Definition

In this context, syntax refers to the rules and structure of a programming language.

Reusability of Data

Definition

Ability to automatically reuse data entered from one interview in another interview.

Example

If the client has already input their average monthly income on one interview, a system may be able to use that information to auto-populate that information into another interview. This way, the client does not need to be asked the same question twice.

Transforming and Manipulating Variables

Definition

Some systems only allow for users to input a value and parrot it back directly onto a Word document. Other systems allow for users to change the variable in some way. Commonly, systems allow users to do calculations with number variables. See definition of value/variable below.

Example

The client inputs all of their sources of monthly income. A system that allows users to transform and manipulate variables will typically allow the user to add up all of the sources of income to get a total monthly income. Similarly, they may be able to add up expenses and subtract them from the gross monthly income to get a net monthly income.

Glossary – 7

Value/Variable

Definition

In document automation, a variable is a name that will be used as a placeholder for a value. The value is the actual piece of information that the client wants the variable to store and eventually put on the output document.

Example

$X = 2 \rightarrow X$ is the variable and 2 is the value

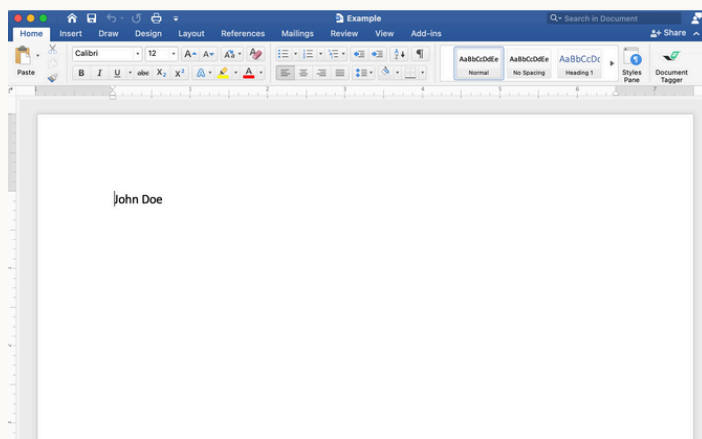
Client_Name = “John Doe” \rightarrow Client_Name is the variable and John Doe is the value

Screenshots

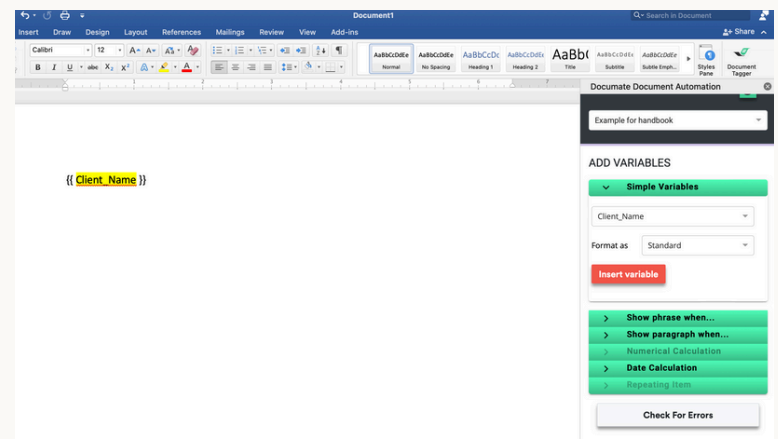
Creating a variable:

The screenshot shows a web-based form editor for a document titled 'Client Information'. The interface includes a sidebar with 'Edit' and 'Settings' options. The main area displays a question titled 'What is your client's name?' with a text input field. Below the input field, there is a 'Variable Name' field containing 'Client_Name' and a 'Question Type' dropdown menu set to 'Text'. A 'Required' checkbox is checked. At the bottom, there is an 'Add Question' button.

Outputting the value entered from the interview onto a Word document:



Inputting the variable onto a Word document:



Glossary – 8

Webhooks

Definition

Webhooks allow different online services to communicate and share data in real-time. When an event happens in one app, it triggers a webhook that sends data to a specified URL of another app, enabling automated workflows and data synchronization across various platforms without the need for constant checking or manual intervention.

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