

Retail leaders harness automation to future-proof workforce

By [Jerry Wallis](#)

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Retailers have faced unprecedented challenges over the past couple of years. The pandemic has accelerated the growth of online retail sales by [two to five times](#) the pre-Covid rate, forcing many retailers to rapidly expand or strengthen their online presence. This shift in buying behavior is irreversible.



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By way of validation, a recent [Deloitte report](#), looking at the industry's 2022 outlook, found that sector leaders were expanding their digital capabilities and making their workforce future-ready.

Facing a new era of retail, many businesses have had to quickly adjust, and those that are thriving are doing so with the help of intelligent automation (IA). In fact, in the Deloitte report, 82% of sector leaders said “automation wherever possible will be a high priority” and 67% of all respondents cited e-commerce and online shopping as areas for [top investment](#).

Amid a pandemic and changing market demands, different segments of the retail sector have varied in their performance, with those that are agile and innovative gaining the most ground. Intelligent automation and digital workforces have played a critical role in providing the agility and resilience necessary to prosper in an uncertain and changing market.

Transformation driven by digital workers

While digital transformation has long been a strategic priority for retailers, with many beginning their transformation initiatives as long as 10 years ago, updating systems can involve large amounts of development resources and can become risky and expensive to achieve scale. Creating a new systems' roadmap or even updating existing ones demands substantial planning and IT resources.

This is where digital labour can have a major impact. Instead of having to overhaul a myriad of legacy technologies and systems, businesses can utilise digital workers to serve as the integration of virtualisation layer allowing legacy infrastructure to play its part in digital and online operations.

Their ability to enable a digital interaction with legacy systems allows for a simple, no-code approach to automation, enabling businesses to develop and put in place automated processes very quickly. Retailers effectively develop the architecture they need over top of their legacy technology instead of replacing it.



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Reinvent customer experience

The customer contact centre is another area that has been under immense pressure because of the pandemic. Initially, retailers had to transition their entire call centre staff to a remote working model in a matter of days. Many were also dealing with significant fluctuations in customer contacts due to the surge in online transactions. To compound this issue, moving into this year, [70%](#) of retail executives reported that employee shortages are predicted to negatively impact growth.

Intelligent automation has not only enabled the transition to digital by easing the burden on contact centre staff, but it has also helped retail organisations mitigate their employment gaps.

Critically, IA has allowed retail businesses to continue to deliver seamless customer experience, which 96% of consumers now expect, throughout volatile times. Digital workers enhance customer experience by dealing with standard, process-driven activities. This has enabled agents to spend more quality time with customers, giving them the support and attention they need. There is no doubt that digital workers have provided vital operational support as retailers have dealt with increased online demand.

Many of the changes that occurred within contact centre operations as a result of the pandemic are unlikely to reverse. Retailers will continue to deploy a more flexible customer service function – with teams working remotely and coming together for certain activities where it is helpful to be together, such as training, reviews and planning.

Intelligent automation with intention

Everyone agrees that the events of the last two years have led retailers to view digital labour as a strategic resource. Many retailers that were at the early stages of their automation journeys had previously seen digital workers as a tactical tool to address specific pain points in individual processes or provide a measure of operational efficiency in specific areas of the business.

This type of automation, while delivering some valuable results, does not allow retailers to benefit from the true power of digital labour. It prevents automation at scale, restricting its impact to limited areas within the organisation.

The pandemic has opened many retailers' eyes to the transformational potential of intelligent automation. They are now recognising its ability to empower organisations to completely reimagine their operating and resourcing models as well as

the way they engage with customers. This realisation is being felt across all areas of retail businesses, from the board and executive levels, right down through to the call centre staff.

Retailers have become more resilient and agile in their operations over recent years. This newfound willingness to innovate quickly is set to remain long after the pandemic, fostering business operating models across the sector. Make no mistake that as retailers continue to drive transformation and deliver on both tactical and strategic goals, the increase in the use of digital labour in retail will continue to accelerate.

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