

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of two incandescent light bulbs. The bulb in the foreground is a vibrant purple and is in sharp focus, showing its glass base and the internal filament structure. The bulb in the background is a warm orange color and is slightly out of focus. Both bulbs are resting on a highly reflective, metallic surface that creates clear reflections of the bulbs and each other. The lighting is soft, highlighting the smooth curves of the glass.

infor | Columbus®

Point of view:

Unified commerce for manufacturers

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Why this point of view exists

B2B eCommerce is undergoing a structural shift in both scale and behaviour. It is no longer a secondary channel or a supporting capability; it is becoming the primary engine of growth.

The numbers bear this out. Global B2B eCommerce is expected to reach \$36 trillion by 2026 and to approach \$62 trillion by 2031, with sustained double-digit growth. It is already several times larger than B2C by transaction value, and in absolute terms that gap keeps growing — though with both markets compounding at broadly similar rates, the relative gap is no longer clearly set to widen.

12%

12% of US B2B sales were transacted digitally in 2024, a share projected to reach roughly 14% by 2028

Digital has become the default way of selling, though not yet of buying. Around 85% of B2B organisations now operate digital storefronts or self-service portals. More than half generate new product revenue digitally, and a growing share of aftermarket revenue runs through e-commerce. Buying itself still runs largely through email and telephone: only around 12% of US B2B sales were transacted digitally in 2024, a share projected to reach roughly 14% by 2028. The direction of travel is not in doubt, but digital is not yet the default way B2B buyers place orders.

This shift is not only about channels; it is about behaviour. Buyers increasingly research, compare, and decide independently before they engage with sales, and nearly 90% now use generative AI tools during discovery and evaluation. They expect instant answers, relevant recommendations, and frictionless interaction from the first touchpoint.

Most B2B organisations are not structured to meet those expectations. Demand now enters the business through many paths: EDI, email, PDFs, customer portals, APIs, marketplaces, sales representatives, service interactions, and increasingly AI-driven agents. Yet these flows are still handled by fragmented systems, channel-specific logic, and disconnected processes.

The result is friction on both sides. Internally it shows up as manual work, inconsistency, and rework; externally as slow response times, pricing and data discrepancies, and a poor buying experience.

The cost is measurable: SiriusDecisions found that companies with documented, transparent buying processes shorten their sales cycles by an average of 30%.

Unified commerce exists to close this gap. It is not about adding more digital channels. It is about enabling the organisation to act as one company, regardless of how, where, or by whom demand is initiated. It turns digital from a fragmented layer into a coherent operating model, capable of supporting both human and AI-driven buying journeys at scale.

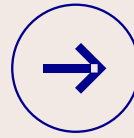
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¹Market size: US International Trade Administration, "eCommerce Sales & Size Forecast" (global B2B eCommerce valued at USD 36 trillion by 2026, 14.5% CAGR). 2031 figure: Mordor Intelligence, "B2B E-commerce Market" (USD 36.86 trillion in 2026 growing at a 10.84% CAGR to USD 61.66 trillion by 2031). The two studies use different scope definitions, notably on marketplace GMV and cross-border conversion, so the figures are indicative rather than directly comparable.
²Digital share of US B2B sales: approximately 12% transacted digitally in 2024, projected to reach 14.3% by 2028 (International Trade Administration; Elogic Commerce, 2026).
³SiriusDecisions, cited in published summaries of B2B buying-process research. The finding relates to documented and transparent buying processes, not to digital buying experience as such.



The core problem B2B organisations face



Most B2B commerce models were never deliberately designed. They evolved around ERP-centric processes optimised for control and execution, not for how modern B2B buying actually happens.

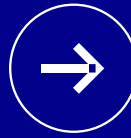
Today's B2B reality is defined by complexity:

- **Buying is multi-stakeholder.** Decisions involve procurement, finance, operations, and leadership, each with different priorities and information needs
- **The journey is non-linear.** Buyers move back and forth between research, vendor comparison, internal alignment, and negotiation
- **Sales cycles are long.** Configuration, pricing, and contract reviews extend timelines and introduce risk
- **Internal processes slow deals.** Pricing approvals, legal reviews, and risk checks create friction and delay
- **Procurement adds operational burden.** RFPs and tender processes require extensive documentation and cross-team coordination
- **Sales is now hybrid.** Buyers expect self-service alongside expert guidance from sales
- **Information complexity is exploding.** Teams must manage product data, pricing models, contracts, and insights across multiple systems
- **Lifetime value outweighs the initial deal.** Service, renewals, and long-term relationships drive the majority of revenue
- **Adaptation is slow.** Responding to changing customer needs and to new technology is hardest precisely where it spans several internal functions and the systems behind them

In most organisations, these realities are handled through fragmented systems and inconsistent processes. Different channels and roles operate with different rules for pricing, availability, and fulfilment, and alignment happens after the fact through manual effort.



“As organisations introduce more automation and AI, these weaknesses become harder to hide. AI does not resolve fragmentation; unless it is allowed to operate across functions and systems, it accelerates it.”



What unified commerce means in a B2B context



Unified Commerce in B2B is best understood as an operating model rather than a technology initiative.

Unified Commerce is an operating model that unifies systems, processes, and roles across the full commercial lifecycle, allowing the organisation to respond to demand through one coherent commercial engine, regardless of entry point.

This represents a clear shift in perspective:

- From managing channels to managing end-to-end flows
- From implementing tools to designing an operating model
- From fixing errors after execution to governing decisions by design

The goal is operational coherence, not channel perfection.

What this means in practice

In a B2B context, unification is achieved across four dimensions:

- **Systems:** ERP, commerce, OMS, PIM, CRM, pricing, and integration platforms operate as a coordinated landscape with clear responsibilities (record, orchestration, intelligence), not as isolated solutions
- **Processes:** Quote-to-order, order-to-cash, fulfilment, returns, replenishment, and service follow consistent logic, regardless of whether demand originates from a sales rep, portal, EDI, or AI agent
- **Roles:** Sales, customer service, operations, partners, and digital channels work from the same commercial truth, with shared visibility into product data, pricing, availability, and order status
- **Demand entry points:** EDI, email/PDF, portals, APIs, marketplaces, service events, and AI agents are normalised into one intake and orchestration flow

A simple example

An order received via email, a cart submitted through a portal, and a replenishment triggered by an AI agent should all:

- Resolve the same customer context and entitlements
- Apply the same contract pricing and discount logic
- Validate against the same product, availability, and credit rules
- Be orchestrated through the same order management flow
- Provide the same visibility to sales, service, and the customer

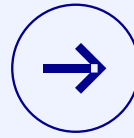
If any of these differ by channel or role, the organisation is not operating in a unified way.

Core capabilities required

To enable this, organisations typically need to establish:

- A clearly defined ERP backbone (system of record for finance, inventory, invoicing and credit, decoupled from real-time decisioning and channel interaction)
- A single pricing authority (contracts, tiers, rebates, approvals)
- A governed product model (PIM with variants, compatibility, lifecycle)
- A central order orchestration layer (OMS as control tower)
- A consistent customer model (accounts, hierarchies, entitlements)
- A connected service and aftermarket view (installed base, service history, warranty and contract entitlements) so that customer service and aftermarket operate on the same commercial truth as sales
- Event-driven integration to synchronise decisions between ERP, commerce, and orchestration layers in real time





Design principles

- **Orchestrate before you optimise:** Unify flows before adding channel-specific enhancements
- **Standardise decisions, not experiences:** Allow channel flexibility on top of shared rules
- **Make exceptions explicit:** Design for controlled deviation, not hidden workarounds
- **Decouple execution from engagement:** ERP executes, orchestration layers decide

Why this matters now

As AI agents begin to participate directly in buying and order processing, inconsistency becomes a scaling risk. Unified Commerce ensures that whether a human or a machine initiates demand, the business responds with the same logic, controls, and outcomes. Seen this way, Unified Commerce is not merely an evolution of B2B commerce; it is the foundation on which the next generation of automation depends.

From the field: Why we describe this as an operating model

"When this is framed as a channel strategy, the conversation keeps returning to storefronts, campaigns and launch plans. Every action point lands on the digital team, which owns none of the constraints that actually bind. Change the word to operating model and the questions change: who may approve a customer-specific price, where does the product data a sales engineer trusts actually live, and what happens to an EDI order at eleven at night that does not match a contract line. Those questions belong to pricing, master data and supply chain, which is why those are the people who need to be in the room. That is the difference the word makes: a channel conversation produces a roadmap for a website, an operating model conversation produces decisions about authority, ownership and data."

Dan Andersson

GTM & Solution Director
Digital Commerce
Columbus





Business value unlocked by unified commerce



When unified commerce is implemented as an operating model, the impact is both tangible and measurable.

However, this value does not exist in isolation. It is part of a broader foundation required for AI-driven digital maturity.

The foundation for AI-driven digital maturity

Leading B2B organisations are converging around five interconnected capabilities:

- **Data:** The fuel that makes AI work. Unified, clean, and governed data across systems eliminates silos and enables reliable automation. Yet only a minority of organisations consider their data quality to be truly strong
- **Brand:** Trust, transparency, and ease of doing business become critical differentiators. In an AI-driven buying environment, reputation and reliability directly influence selection and conversion
- **Unified Commerce:** The operational engine. It connects ERP, PIM, CRM, and commerce into a real-time ecosystem, ensuring that decisions are consistent and executable across all channels and roles
- **Customer centricity:** Organisations that align around customer needs, not internal structures, outperform significantly in both revenue growth and profitability. AI acts as an amplifier of this capability
- **People:** Teams must be enabled to work alongside AI. This means combining human expertise with AI-driven insights and automation, not replacing it

Governance holds the five together, and it works best kept deliberately minimal: a small set of enterprise rules that are genuinely enforced, rather than a heavy framework teams learn to route around. These capabilities are not independent. Unified Commerce sits at the centre, translating data, brand, and customer strategy into executable commercial processes, while enabling people and AI to operate effectively.

Tangible business impact

Operational efficiency improves as manual work, re-keying, and exception handling are reduced. Errors in pricing and order processing decrease, lowering overall cost-to-serve.

Revenue and margin protection improve through consistent application of contract pricing across all channels and roles. Disputes decrease and quote-to-order cycles accelerate.

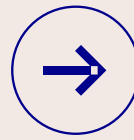
Scalability increases as the organisation can grow volumes, channels, and partners without a linear increase in headcount or complexity.

AI readiness is established by creating a stable foundation where automation reduces friction instead of amplifying it. Humans can focus on exceptions, relationships, and value creation.

Strategic implication

Digital maturity is no longer a differentiator; it is the baseline. Organisations that win are those that combine strong foundations with operational coherence, allowing them to scale both human and AI-driven commerce.





Core B2B use cases enabled



Unified Commerce enables a set of practical, high-impact B2B use cases that reduce friction, protect margin, and scale operations.

- **Unified order intake:** Orders from EDI, email, PDFs, portals, APIs, and AI agents are normalised into a single intake flow. Documents are interpreted, customer context resolved, and orders validated against pricing, availability, credit, and compliance rules before orchestration. This eliminates re-keying, reduces errors, and accelerates processing times
- **Pricing and contract enforcement:** A single pricing authority applies customer-specific agreements, tiers, rebates, and approvals consistently across all channels and roles. Real-time validation prevents margin leakage, while exception workflows ensure governance without slowing deals
- **Hybrid sales enablement:** Sales and digital operate on the same truth. Shared carts, negotiated pricing, guided selling, and real-time order status allow reps and buyers to collaborate seamlessly across channels. Sales shifts from processing orders to advising and closing
- **Spare parts and long-tail commerce:** Structured product data (variants, compatibility, installed base) enables accurate identification, substitution, and recommendations. Availability and lifecycle logic support service scenarios, reducing downtime and increasing aftermarket revenue
- **Service-driven commerce:** Service events (maintenance, faults, inspections) trigger commercial actions such as replenishment, replacements, and upgrades. Integration with installed base and contracts enables proactive and automated fulfilment
- **Returns, claims, and after-sales orchestration:** Returns, warranty claims, and credits follow a unified process with clear rules, approvals, and visibility. This reduces cycle times, improves recovery, and enhances customer trust
- **Credit, risk, and compliance control:** Orders are checked against credit limits, export controls, and contractual constraints in real time, with managed exception paths. This balances speed with risk management

- **Partner and channel integration:** Distributors, resellers, and marketplaces interact via APIs on the same commercial logic for pricing, assortments, and order status, enabling scalable partner ecosystems without duplicating processes
- **Replenishment and subscription models:** Contract-based replenishment, standing orders, and usage-driven models are automated through the same orchestration layer, supporting predictable revenue and reduced manual effort

Together, these use cases demonstrate how Unified Commerce standardises decisions while allowing flexible engagement, creating a consistent, scalable commercial engine across the enterprise.

Two client estates, one commercial logic

Two Columbus' clients illustrate the use cases above from opposite ends of the same problem. Both are manufacturers whose commercial reality is spare parts, aftermarket and a long service relationship, which is precisely the setting chapter 5 describes.

Normet: decisions first, portal second

Normet is a global manufacturer and distributor of machines for underground mining and tunnelling. The starting point was a strongly manual sales and order process with no online route to spare parts at all — and the reason was not a missing portal. Three decisions did not exist in any form a channel could reuse: how a part is identified, what price a given customer is entitled to, and how an order is handled once it is placed. Columbus resolved those first, on a MACH-based architecture for selected markets, with commercetools as the commercial engine and a master data system, a pricing master and a parts catalogue established alongside it; product data was subsequently taken into Akeneo. Only then did the MVP spare parts portal follow, and it followed quickly, because building it was largely a matter of exposing decisions that already existed. That is the unified point of the case rather than the portal itself: the same product, pricing and order logic now stands behind whichever route a parts order arrives through, and each further channel or market inherits it instead of re-implementing it.



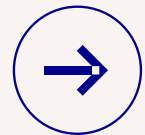
“As organisations introduce more automation and AI, these weaknesses become harder to hide. AI does not resolve fragmentation; unless it is allowed to operate across functions and systems, it accelerates it.”

normet



Read the full case





**Toyota Material Handling Europe:
one commercial logic across brands and markets**

Toyota Material Handling Europe manufactures and distributes trucks, forklifts, spare parts and accessories in more than 42 countries under four brands: Toyota, BT, Raymond and Cesab. The company has been a Columbus client since 2013, with Columbus responsible for the global operation of the ERP platform. From 2016 the work extended into a B2B commerce solution and customer portal covering trucks, spare parts and accessories for several customer groups, dealers and internal users, a merged corporate website and commerce solution, an advanced 3D-based configurator, and a new integration platform. The multi-brand, multi-market shape of that estate is the practical argument for standardising decisions while allowing engagement to differ.

“Nice people, good project management, no overpromising, stay in budget, creative ideas, never give up. Fantastic achievement both in Evolve and regarding My Toyota!”

— Axel Wahle, Sponsor, Director Marketing & Digital Business, Toyota Material Handling.

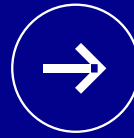
TOYOTA

MATERIAL HANDLING



Read the full case





Implications for the operating model



Unified Commerce requires a structural shift in ownership, governance, and collaboration, away from channel silos and towards end-to-end commercial flow ownership.

Responsibility moves from individual channels to cross-functional value streams such as quote-to-order, order-to-cash, and service-to-revenue. Local optimisation gives way to enterprise coherence. Manual correction is replaced by governed automation.

What changes in practice

Flow ownership over channel ownership

- Appoint accountable owners for core commercial flows (e.g., Order Intake, Pricing & Contracts, Fulfilment, Returns)
- Define KPIs at the flow level (cycle time, accuracy, cost-to-serve, margin leakage)

Central governance of commercial rules

- Establish a single authority for pricing, contracts, and entitlements
- Define clear policies for approvals, exceptions, and overrides
- Ensure rules are codified and executable across all channels

Shared data and decision models

- One customer model (accounts, hierarchies, roles, entitlements)
- One product model (variants, compatibility, lifecycle)
- One order model (status, events, visibility)

Role evolution

- Sales shifts from order processing to advisory and deal orchestration
- Customer service moves from case handling to exception management and proactive support
- Operations focuses on flow optimisation and continuous improvement
- IT shifts from system delivery to platform enablement and governance

Exception-first design

- Design standard flows for the majority of volume
- Make exceptions explicit, traceable, and governed
- Use automation to handle standard cases and surface exceptions to humans

Performance management aligned to outcomes

- Measure success on end-to-end metrics (order cycle time, first-time-right rate, margin integrity)
- Reduce reliance on channel-specific metrics that incentivise local optimisation

Operating model enablers

- Cross-functional squads aligned to commercial flows
- Clear RACI across sales, service, operations, finance, and IT
- Data governance for pricing, product, and customer domains
- Continuous improvement loops driven by operational telemetry

In this model, sales, service, operations, IT, and finance work from the same commercial truth, with clear rules for how decisions are made and executed, enabling speed without sacrificing control.

From the field: What happens when ownership moves to the flow

"To reach a state of unified commerce at the speed required by the market, two overarching conditions need to be in place – ① leadership that is convinced, decisive and enduring, and ② processes that are swift and cross-functional. Most B2B companies are lacking in these regards, hampering and suboptimizing their otherwise great organizations, much to the frustration of both employees, partners, customers, and owners. But with these two conditions fulfilled, results can be found quickly by running several tracks of implementation in parallel, covering primary processes for e.g. online marketing & sales,

order processing & fulfilment, customer service & maintenance, across internal functions, geographic regions, customer segments, and products & services. This combined with changes to concentration and distribution of competence, alongside an uptake of new technology, enables not only meeting expectations but also keeping a competitive edge.

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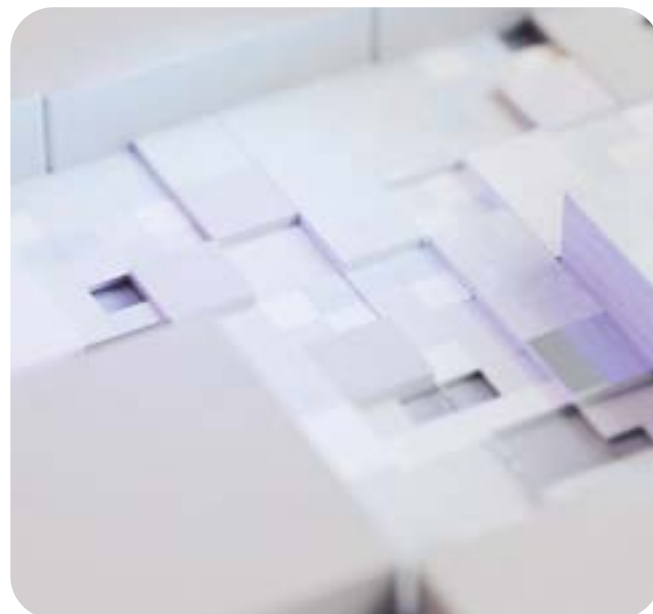




Technology principles that support unified commerce



Unified commerce is enabled by technology, but not defined by a specific stack. The goal is a coherent, role-based architecture where each component has a clear responsibility and decisions are made once, then reused everywhere.



ERP: Remains the system of record and financial backbone. It governs master data integrity, accounting, invoicing, and core transactions, but is decoupled from real-time decisioning and customer interaction.

- **Responsibilities:** financial posting, invoicing, credit master, inventory truth
- **Principle:** record and execute, not orchestrate

Commerce platforms: Act as orchestration and engagement layers, not just storefronts. They manage accounts, entitlements, carts, and APIs, enabling consistent interaction across portals, sales tools, and partners.

- **Responsibilities:** account context, entitlements, session state, APIs/headless delivery
- **Principle:** engage and orchestrate across channels

PIM (Product Information Management): Becomes strategic infrastructure for managing complex assortments, variants, compatibility, and spare parts.

- **Responsibilities:** product model, attributes, relationships, lifecycle, enrichment
- **Principle:** one governed product truth for all channels and roles

OMS (Order Management System): Functions as the control tower for order orchestration, sourcing, fulfilment, splits, and exception handling.

- **Responsibilities:** order lifecycle, routing, allocation, status, exceptions
- **Principle:** decide and orchestrate once, execute everywhere

Pricing & promotion services: Centralise contract pricing, tiers, rebates, and approvals as a reusable service across all entry points.

- **Responsibilities:** price calculation, validation, approvals, auditability
- **Principle:** single pricing authority to protect margin

Customer & account services: Unify accounts, hierarchies, roles, and entitlements across systems.

- **Responsibilities:** account structures, permissions, contract linkage
- **Principle:** consistent customer context across all interactions

Integration & data platform: Provides event-driven, API-first connectivity to synchronise decisions in real time and avoid point-to-point fragility.

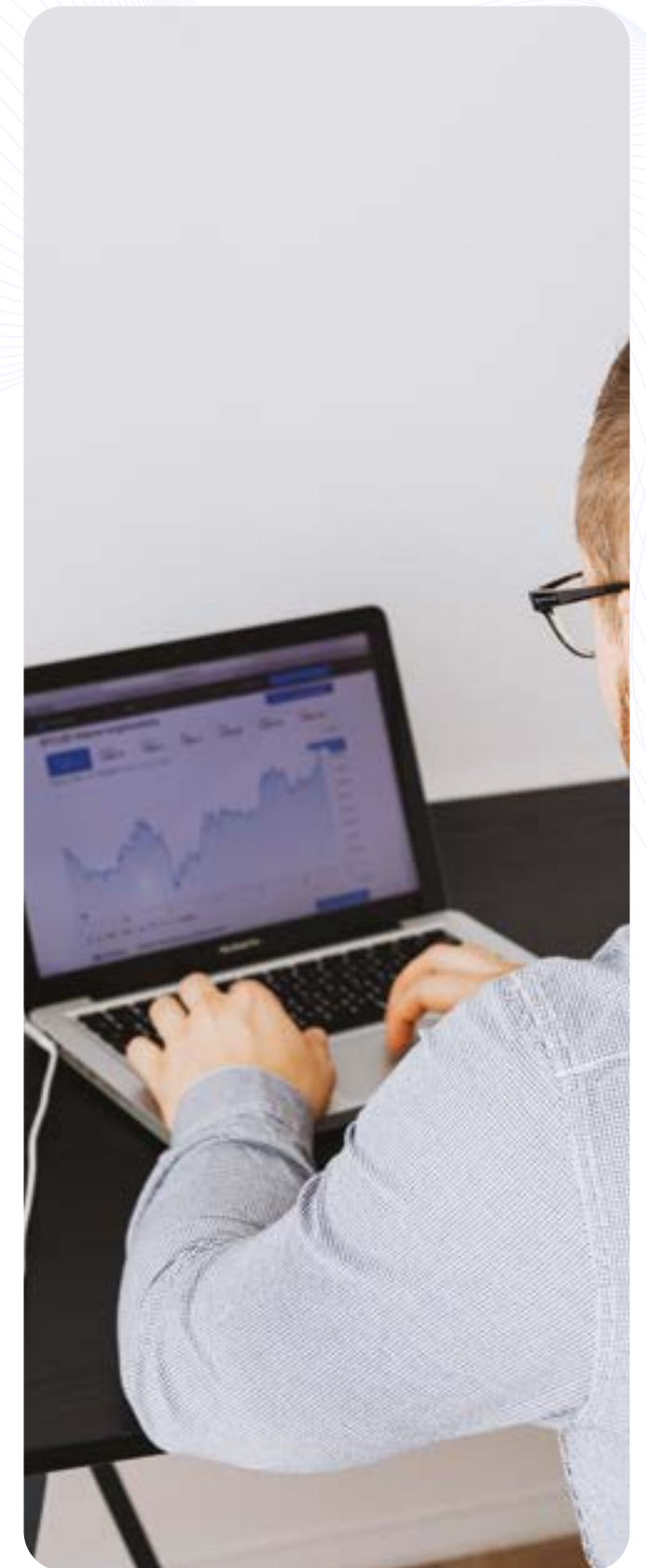
- **Responsibilities:** events, APIs, data pipelines, canonical models
- **Principle:** real-time, decoupled, and scalable

Data & analytics layer: Captures operational telemetry and commercial performance across flows.

- **Responsibilities:** monitoring, KPIs, insights, optimisation loops
- **Principle:** measure end-to-end, not by channel

AI and automation layer: Sits on top of unified foundations, where agents execute tasks and humans govern outcomes.

- **Responsibilities:** document parsing (email/PDF), intent detection, recommendations, exception handling, copilots for sales and service
- **Principle:** automate the standard, elevate the human



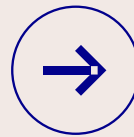


Architectural design principles

- Separation of concerns: Distinguish clearly between systems of record, orchestration, and engagement
- API-first and event-driven: Enable real-time decisions and interoperability with partners and agents
- Composable, not fragmented: Modular components with shared models and governance
- Reuse over duplication: Pricing, product, and order logic exposed as services, not reimplemented per channel
- Observability by design: End-to-end visibility of orders, decisions, and exceptions
- Contract-first interfaces: Stable, versioned APIs, so a component can be replaced without renegotiating every integration around it
- Permissioning and auditability built in: Entitlements, approval rights and audit trails designed once at the decision layer, not reimplemented per channel
- Minimal governance, actually enforced: A short set of enterprise rules with named owners, in preference to a framework wide enough to be worked around

In practice, this architecture ensures that whether demand is initiated by a sales rep, a portal, an EDI message, or an AI agent, the same decisions are applied and the same processes are executed, consistently, in real time, and at scale.



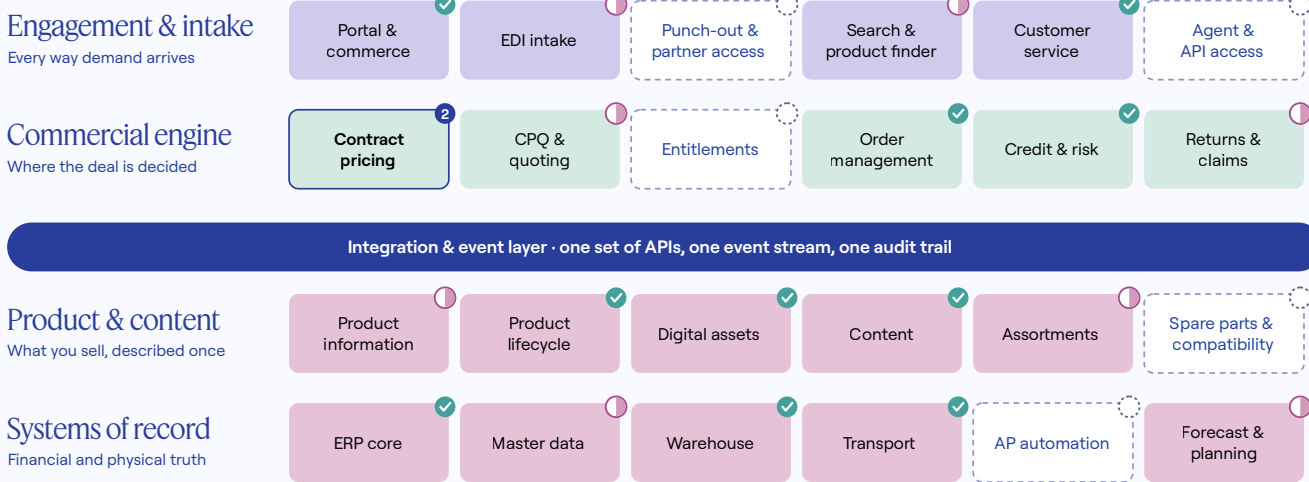


Choosing the right vendors for identified capabilities



Vendor selection is where a Unified Commerce programme is most often won or lost. The temptation is to start from the market: shortlist the platforms everyone recognises, run a demo cycle, and work backwards to what the business needs. The result is a stack that is individually strong and collectively incoherent. The alternative is to start from the capabilities the operating model requires, and to treat vendor choice as the last step in that reasoning rather than the first.

ILLUSTRATIVE CAPABILITY ASSESSMENT



✓ Covered 1 Covered badly ○ Not covered 2 Claimed by two systems

The shortlist is built against the gaps, not the categories

Start from capabilities, not product categories

Before any vendor is approached, map the capabilities the business actually needs: contract pricing and approvals, entitlements and account hierarchies, product data and compatibility rules, order orchestration, credit and compliance checks, returns and claims, service-driven replenishment. Then establish which of them are already covered, which are covered badly, and which do not exist at all. That map is what a shortlist should be built against. It also prevents the most expensive mistake in B2B commerce, which is buying two systems that both claim to own pricing.

Evaluate against business priorities

Assess each vendor's capabilities against business value, dependencies, and strategic direction rather than against a feature matrix. A capability that unlocks a high-volume flow such as order intake is worth more than one that improves a marginal channel, and a capability that several others depend on has to be sequenced early whatever its individual business case. Aligning vendor solutions with the target operating model, rather than with the current one, is what makes each vendor contribute to long-term success instead of hardening today's constraints.

Mapping capabilities against business priorities in this way ensures the right partnerships are established, rather than the most familiar ones.

Test for integration and one commercial truth

In B2B the integration test is stricter than in B2C, because the same customer arrives through EDI, a portal, a representative, and increasingly an agent, and expects identical terms each time. A vendor must demonstrate real-time synchronisation with the systems that already hold the truth, typically ERP, CRM, PIM and the pricing service, and must be able to expose a single view of customer, entitlement, inventory and order status. Ask for that as a working integration against your own data, not as a reference architecture diagram.





Choose vendors that endorse a composable architecture

Favour vendors whose products are cloud-native, API-first, and designed to sit as one component in a layered landscape rather than to become the landscape. Composability is what allows a single component to be updated, or replaced, without disturbing the rest of the estate, and it is what allows the business to absorb peak volumes and enter new markets or channels without a re-platforming programme. A vendor that requires its own version of pricing, product or customer data to function is telling you something important about how the next five years will go.

Questions worth putting to every shortlisted vendor

- Which of our mapped capabilities does this product own outright, which does it merely surface, and which does it expect another system to provide?
- How does it consume our contract pricing and entitlements in real time, and what happens when the pricing service is unavailable?
- What is exposed through APIs and events, what is only available through the user interface, and how is that gap expected to close?
- How are exceptions surfaced and governed, and can an approval threshold be changed without a release?
- What does an agent or an external system have to do to transact against it, and how is that access controlled and audited?
- If we replaced this component in three years, what would we have to rebuild, and what would we keep?

Mapping capabilities against business priorities in this way ensures the right partnerships are established, rather than the most familiar ones. It also gives the programme a defensible answer to the question every steering group eventually asks, which is why this vendor and not the other one.



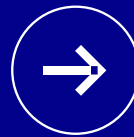
From the field: What clients actually ask in a selection process

"Buyers almost never open with a capability. They open with a product name, usually two or three, because a board member has heard of one and a competitor has implemented another. The first meeting is about platforms, the second is about licence models, and the capability question tends to arrive only when someone asks how contract pricing will actually reach the order — and by then a shortlist already exists, built on categories rather than on what the business needs to be able to do. The reframing is worth doing anyway, because it changes the answer more often than people expect. When a shortlist is rebuilt around capabilities,

product data governance and pricing logic usually turn out to sit with different vendors than the storefront, and the platform that looked strongest on a feature grid can end up owning the smallest part of the solution. That is not a theoretical point: it is the difference between buying one suite that has to be bent into shape and assembling three components that each do what they are good at."

Ludvig Bergander
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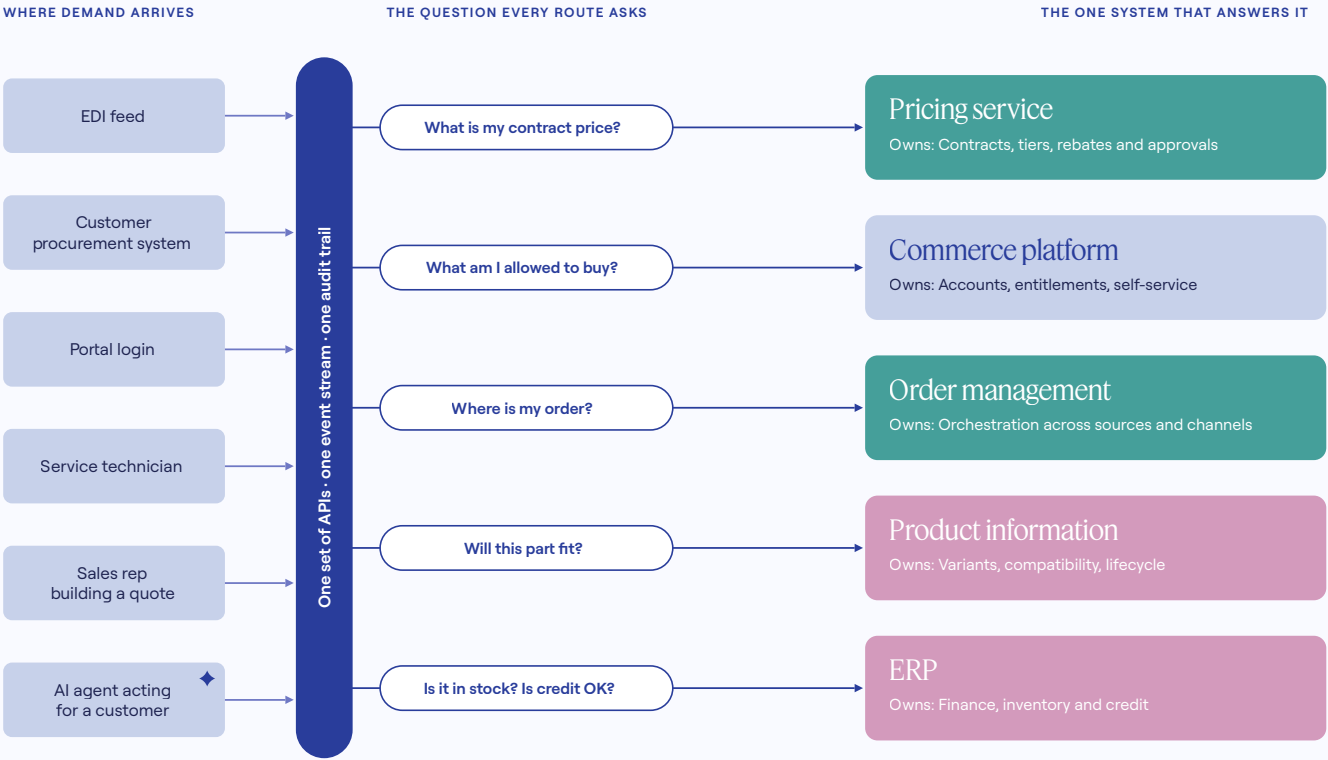




Future-proofed architecture for B2B



Future-proofing an architecture is less about picking durable technology than about arranging it so that individual parts can change without the whole having to. For B2B organisations the requirement is adaptability, scalability, and resilience across every route demand takes into the business, whether that is EDI, a portal, an API, a representative, a service event, or an AI agent acting on a customer's behalf.



Decide where each capability lives

Determining where each piece of functionality resides is the foundational architectural decision, and in B2B it is rarely obvious. Commerce platforms manage engagement and self-service. The OMS orchestrates fulfilment across sources and channels. PIM governs the product model, including variants, compatibility and lifecycle. The pricing service owns contracts, tiers, rebates and approvals. ERP remains the source of truth for finance, inventory and credit. The number and type of solutions will depend on your size, strategy and ambition, but the rule holds regardless: each capability has exactly one owner, and every other system consumes it.

The changing roles of core systems in B2B

The boundaries between commerce platform, order management and ERP are moving, and in B2B they are moving for different reasons than in retail. There is no point of sale to absorb the transaction; instead the same order can originate from an EDI feed, a customer's procurement system, a portal login, a service technician, a sales representative building a quote, or an agent acting on a customer's behalf. Every one of those entry points needs the same contract price, the same entitlement check and the same availability answer. The architectural question is therefore not which system is the best place to shop, but which system holds the commercial transaction while it is still open.

That matters because a B2B transaction is rarely a single event. It begins as a request or a quote, survives approval steps, becomes a contracted order, and then generates call-offs, part shipments, returns and service events for months afterwards. Whichever system owns that lifecycle becomes the de facto centre of the estate, so the decision deserves to be made deliberately rather than inherited from whichever platform was implemented first.

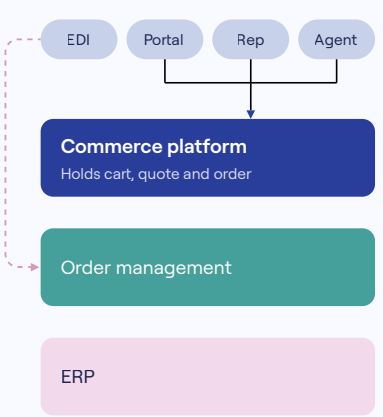




Where the cart and the quote should live

Three arrangements are viable, and the right one depends on how complex the commercial logic is and how much of the order lifecycle happens after the order is placed.

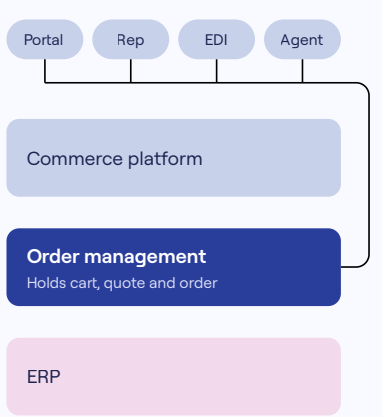
Commerce-led



STRONGEST WHEN
Most demand arrives digitally and the post-order flow is simple

WATCH FOR
EDI and call-offs that never touch a storefront still land on the platform

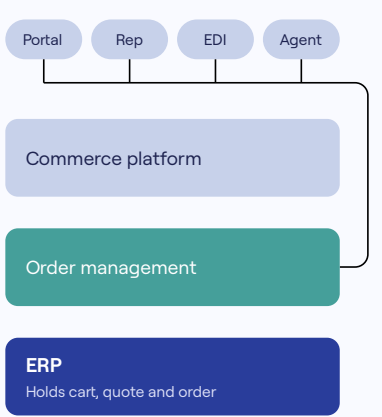
OMS-led



STRONGEST WHEN
Split shipments, multiple sources, returns and service-driven demand

WATCH FOR
A genuine orchestration capability to build and own

ERP-led

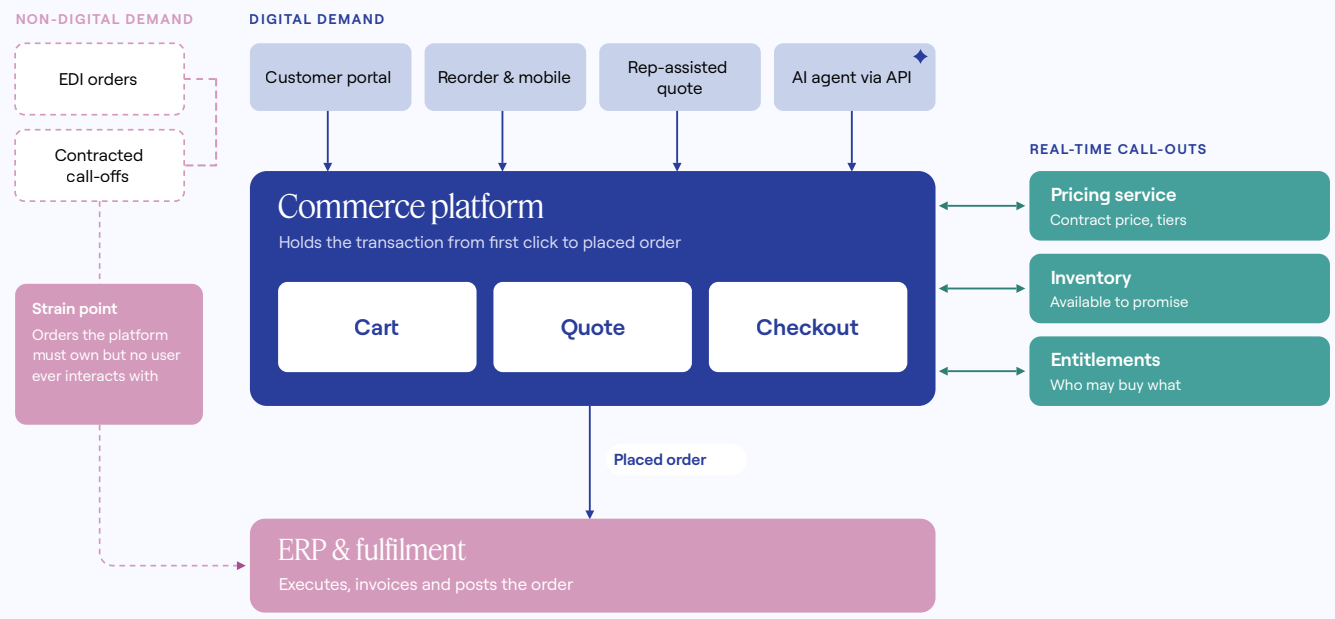


STRONGEST WHEN
Stable products and a limited number of routes to market

WATCH FOR
Tempo: every new channel or agent becomes a change to the ERP

Commerce-led: Strongest when self-service is the growth engine

The commerce platform holds the cart, the quote and the checkout, and calls out to pricing, inventory and entitlements in real time. This keeps the digital experience fast to change and gives the clearest path to genuine self-service for reordering, configuration and quote requests. It works best where the majority of demand arrives through digital channels and where the post-order flow is comparatively simple. It becomes strained when a large share of orders arrive as EDI or as long-running contracted call-offs that never touch a storefront, because the platform ends up owning transactions it never sees a user interact with.



STRONGEST WHEN
Most demand arrives through digital channels and the post-order flow is comparatively simple. The clearest path to genuine self-service for reordering, configuration and quote requests.

BECOMES STRAINED WHEN
A large share of orders arrives as EDI or long-running contracted call-offs, and a second pricing truth starts to form inside the platform.

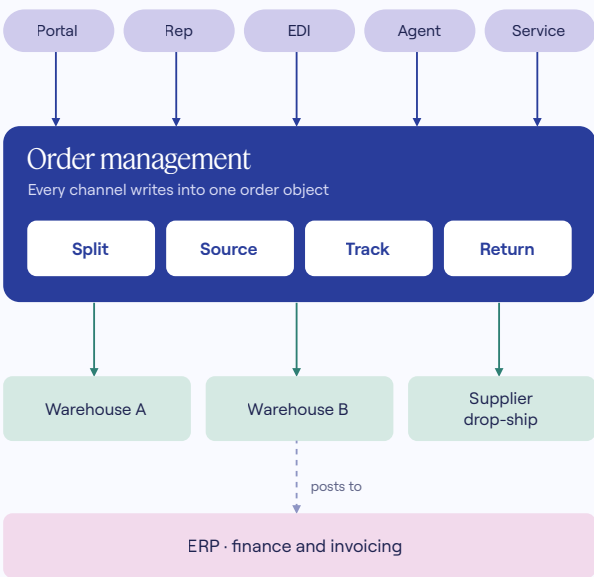
"Future-proofing an architecture is less about picking durable technology than about arranging it so that individual parts can change without the whole having to."



OMS-led: strongest when the order lives on after checkout

An order management layer holds the commercial transaction and every channel writes into it, which means an order started by a representative can be completed in a portal, and a call-off against a framework agreement is the same object as a web order. This is the arrangement that copes best with split shipments, multiple sourcing locations, partial deliveries, returns and service-driven demand, and it gives one place to answer the question customers ask most often, which is where the order actually is. The cost is a genuine orchestration capability to build and own, so it is hard to justify unless fulfilment complexity is real.

OMS-led



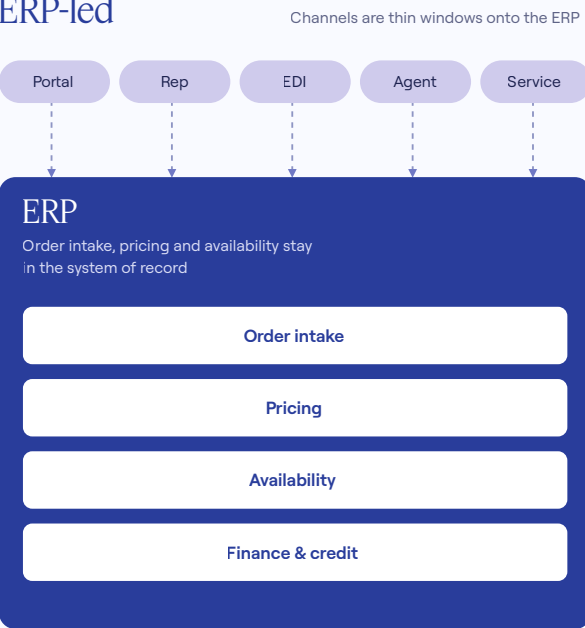
WHAT IT BUYS YOU

A call-off, a rep's order and a web order are the same object — and one place answers the question customers ask most: where is my order?

ERP-led: strongest when the order is inseparable from the record

Order intake, pricing and availability stay in the system of record, and channels are thin windows onto it. This produces a single unambiguous commercial truth and the least integration, which is why it remains common and why it often works well for organisations with stable products and a limited number of routes to market. Its limit is tempo: the moment channel and agent requirements start driving changes to the ERP, the layer that should change least is being asked to change most, and the delivery cost of every new channel rises accordingly.

ERP-led



THE TRADE-OFF

One unambiguous commercial truth and the least integration — until channel and agent needs start driving changes to the layer built to change least.

Handling contract pricing, rebates and approvals

Where retail worries about promotions being consistent across channels, B2B worries about entitlement being consistent across relationships. The same article can carry a list price, a customer-specific contract price, a volume tier, a project price agreed for a single tender and a rebate settled retrospectively, and all of them have to resolve identically whether the buyer is looking at a portal, sending an EDI order, calling a representative or letting an agent reorder automatically.

That argues for one pricing service that owns contracts, tiers, rebates and approval thresholds, consumed in real time by every channel rather than replicated into each of them. Two design decisions decide whether it holds. The first is what happens when the pricing service is unavailable, because a channel that silently falls back to list price does more commercial damage than a channel that declines to quote. The second is whether an approval threshold can be changed without a release, since a rule that requires a deployment will be worked around locally within a quarter. Rebates deserve explicit attention: they are calculated after the fact but they shape what the customer believes the price to be, so the effective price needs to be visible to the people and systems negotiating on it.

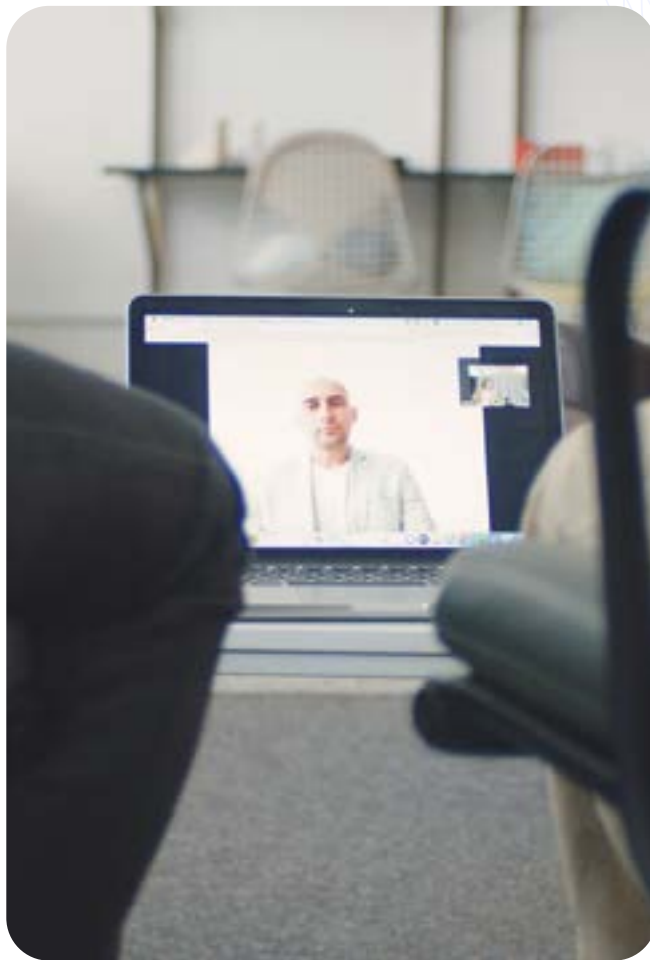
One suite or composable components

A single platform covering commerce, order management and pricing removes integration work and gives synchronised data by construction, which is a legitimate answer for organisations whose commercial logic fits inside what the suite assumes. Composable components win where the logic does not fit, which in B2B is common: contract pricing, configurable products, entitlement and long-running order lifecycles are exactly the areas where standard functionality tends to be bent into shape. The choice does not have to be made once for the whole estate. What has to be decided once, and written down, is where each capability's boundary sits and which system owns the truth behind it. Estates fail not because they combined suite and composable components, but because two systems both believed they owned the price.

Design in layers

A composable estate is best organised as distinct layers, each with a clear responsibility:

- Frontend solutions, covering the portals, apps, representative-facing tools and partner interfaces through which people and systems engage
- A digital experience composition and API layer, connecting those frontends to business components through API-first delivery
- Cross-channel business components, holding carts, quotes, promotions, catalogue, accounts and orders once, for reuse by every channel
- An integration platform and data layer, consolidating and synchronising backend systems through events rather than point-to-point links
- Backend solutions as the system of record, where ERP, WMS, PIM, CRM and authentication execute and hold the truth





Layers move at different speeds

The point of separating them is that they have genuinely different lifespans. Frontend solutions turn over every one to three years and should be treated as changeable by design; business components sit on a two-to-five year horizon and are where differentiation accumulates; backend systems of record are five-year-plus commitments and should be chosen for stability, not for novelty. Trouble arrives when the tempo of one layer is imposed on another, most commonly when a frontend requirement drives a change to a system of record.

What a layered architecture buys you

- Agility, because a decoupled frontend can be improved continuously without backend disruption
- Scalability, because modular components can absorb new channels, partners and volumes as they arrive
- Lower total cost of ownership, because updates are focused on single layers instead of triggering full-stack overhauls
- Resilience, because systems of record stay unaffected by changes to customer-facing solutions
- Consistency, because unified data and shared decisions produce the same answer through every route into the business

“Estates fail not because they combined suite and composable components, but because two systems both believed they owned the price.”



The ERP question in B2B

ERP remains the backbone, and modern ERP is becoming more composable, designed to fit the processes it genuinely owns rather than to absorb everything around them. The productive pattern is innovation by standardisation: keep the core standard, then optimise the processes on top of it through process mining, automation and AI. What ERP should not be asked to do is make real-time commercial decisions for channels and agents; that belongs to the orchestration and pricing layers, which is precisely the separation set out in the technology principles above.

An architecture designed this way is what makes the rest of this document executable. It lets the business change its channels quickly, its commercial logic deliberately, and its systems of record rarely, which is the only arrangement that survives both a five-year technology cycle and the arrival of agents that expect to transact directly against it.

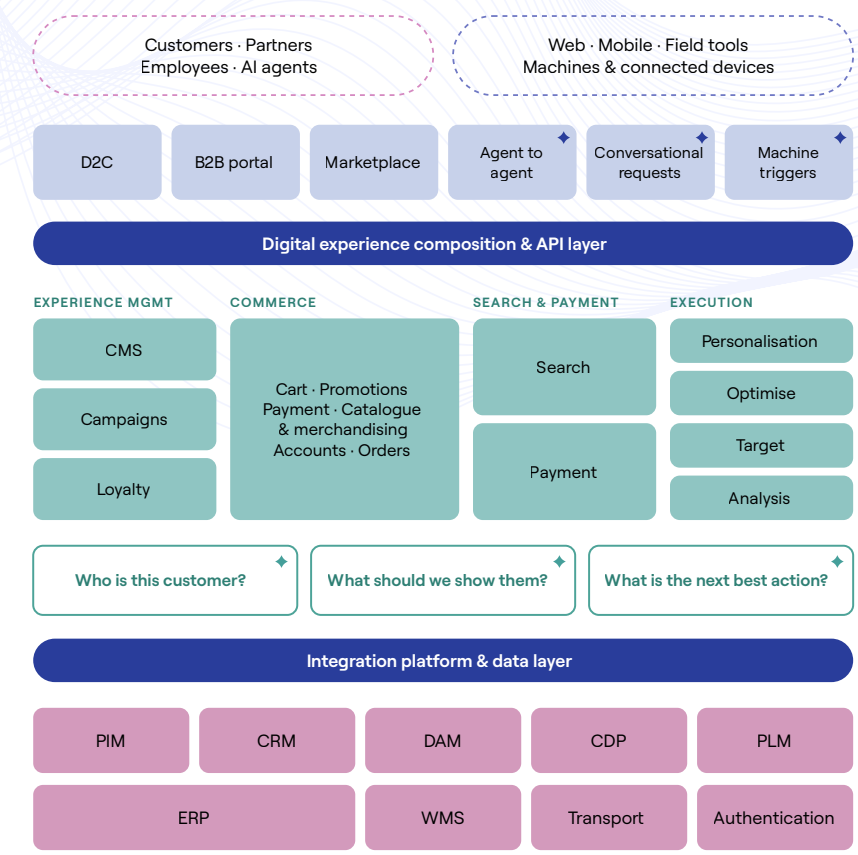
Who and where
Customers, partners,
employees and agents

Experience &
agent interface
AI adapts in real time

Business
components
AI influences the
experience but does not
own the data or logic

Decision layer
Where AI becomes actionable:
raw data turns into decisions

Backend solutions
AI improves data quality.
This is where the facts
live — not duplicated or
hard-wired into channels



1 Innovation
Continuously
1–3 years

2 Differentiation
Switch if needed
2–5 years

3 System of record
Stability
5+ years

◆ AI-enabled touchpoint or decision

Each layer moves at its own speed; no layer imposes its tempo on another





Unified commerce as a prerequisite for autonomous and agentic commerce



Two related shifts are now under way. Agentic commerce is where AI agents act on behalf of buyers and sellers: they interpret intent, compare suppliers, configure products, place orders, and handle what follows. Autonomous commerce goes further. The commercial process itself runs without a person in the loop for standard volume, with replenishment, pricing, and fulfilment decisions taken by the system against agreed rules, and people involved only where judgement is genuinely required.

The distinction matters. Agentic commerce changes who conducts the interaction; autonomous commerce changes who makes the decision and acts on it. Most organisations will meet the first well before they are ready for the second, and both place the same demand on the business: decisions must be consistent, explainable, and available in real time, whether the counterparty is a buyer, a partner, or a machine.

What this means for B2B organisations

The task shifts from serving buyers directly to enabling machine-to-business interaction at scale, and then to letting parts of the commercial process run on their own. Four conditions have to hold:

- Decisions on pricing, availability, and contract terms must be consistent and machine-readable, not held in a rep's judgement or a spreadsheet
- Processes must be real-time and reachable through APIs rather than screens
- Product, customer, and order data must be structured, governed, and reliable enough to act on
- Exceptions must be defined explicitly, with clear thresholds for when a human takes over

Without these conditions, agents cannot operate reliably, and autonomy cannot safely be granted for anything beyond the trivial.

The risk without unified commerce

Where commerce is fragmented, automation does not repair the fragmentation. It industrialises it.

- Inconsistent pricing produces incorrect or rejected orders, now at machine speed and machine volume
- Fragmented product data leads to wrong configurations, failed installations, and returns
- Disconnected processes create delays and failed fulfilment that nobody owns
- Without orchestration, there is no single place to observe, control, or stop what the agents are doing

The outcome is not scaled value but scaled inefficiency, with far less time to catch it.

The opportunity with unified commerce

Where the commercial engine is unified, agents become a genuine extension of it, and selective autonomy becomes safe to grant:

- **Order intake is automated:** emails, PDFs, and API requests are interpreted and converted into validated orders
- **Pricing is enforced as the order is created:** contracts and rules apply in the same way to every interaction, human or machine
- **Replenishment becomes proactive:** orders are triggered by usage, contract terms, or predictive signals rather than by a reminder
- **Customer service is augmented:** agents handle standard queries, status updates, and routine resolution
- **Sales is elevated:** teams concentrate on complex deals, relationships, and long-term value





A shift in control and scale

Both shifts change the arithmetic of commerce. The volume of interactions rises sharply while the tolerance for inconsistency falls close to zero, and mistakes are no longer caught by the person who would once have keyed in the order.

This is why governance belongs in the design rather than in the clean-up. Unified Commerce is where the rules live: what an agent may decide, what it must escalate, which limits apply, and how each decision is recorded and audited. It ensures that whether demand comes from a person, a partner, or a machine, the business responds with the same logic, the same controls, and the same outcome.

Unified commerce is therefore not simply an enabler of autonomous and agentic commerce. It is the control layer that makes either of them viable, governable, and commercially safe.

"A year ago the question was what we could do with AI. Now it is who signs off the outcome."

Rob Watson, Principal Advisor —
Digital Commerce, United Kingdom



From the field:

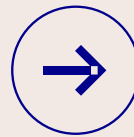
AI accountability changes what clients ask of the foundations

"A year ago the question was what we could do with AI. Now it is who signs off the outcome. The moment an initiative has to produce a governed result rather than a demonstration, the questions turn away from the model and towards the estate underneath it: which price is the agent allowed to quote, on whose authority, and can we show afterwards why it quoted that one. What is usually missing is not intelligence, it is evidence. The pricing rules exist in three places and disagree, the product data is good enough for a human who knows the catalogue but not for a system that does not, and nobody can reconstruct

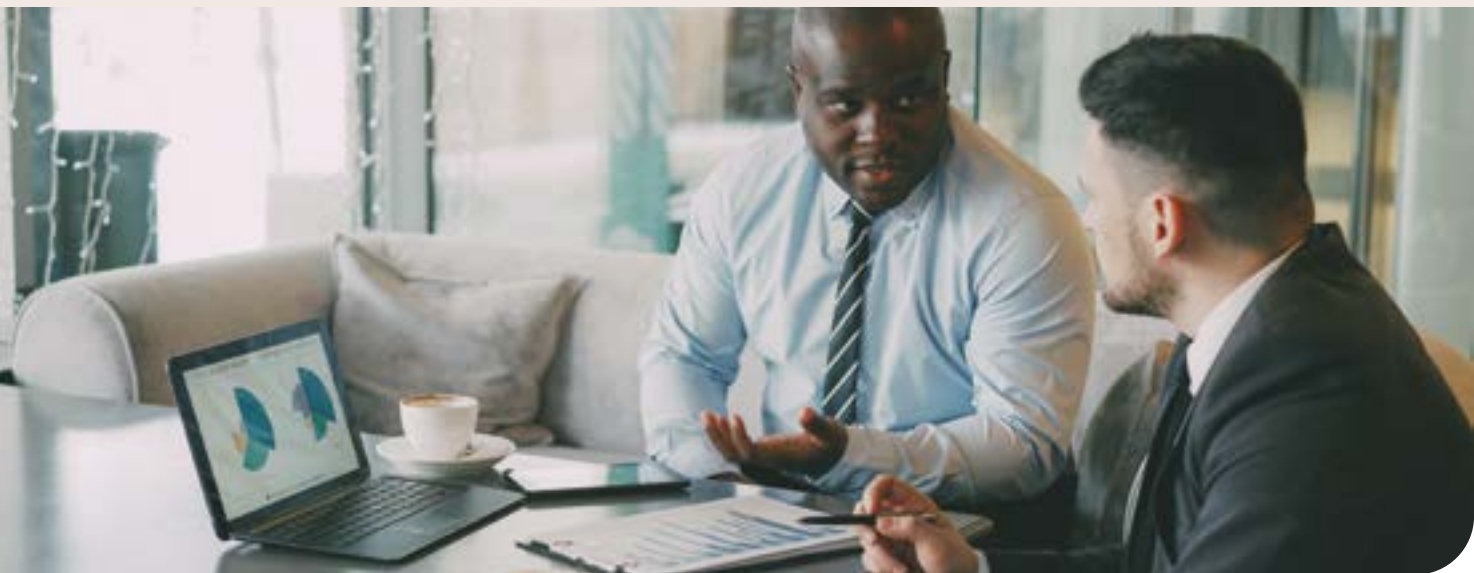
why a particular order was treated as an exception. That is the point at which consistency, exception handling and audit stop being architecture words and become the condition for getting approval to go live at all."

Rob Watson
Principal Advisor
Digital Commerce
Columbus





Leadership agenda for the next 12–24 months



The competitive advantage is not the platform; it is the customer value the platform lets you deliver, and that is where this agenda starts. To move forward, B2B leaders should focus on six priorities, each with clear outcomes and initial actions.

1

Reframe unified commerce as an operating model, not a channel initiative

Outcome:
Executive alignment and funding anchored in business value (cost-to-serve, margin, cycle time)

Actions:
Establish a cross-functional steering group (COO/CIO/CCO), define target flows (quote-to-order, order-to-cash), and set flow-level KPIs

2

Map real demand entry points and commercial flows

Outcome:
Transparency on how orders actually enter and move through the business

Actions:
Inventory all entry points (EDI, email/PDF, portals, APIs, partners, service, AI), map current-state flows, quantify volumes, errors, and cycle times, identify top friction points

3

Clarify where pricing, product, and order truth truly lives

Outcome:
Single sources of truth with clear ownership and governance

Actions:
Define ownership for pricing (contracts/tiers/approvals), product (PIM model, variants, lifecycle), and orders (OMS), remove duplications, codify rules as services

5

Build solid foundations before scaling AI agents

Outcome:
Safe, scalable automation that reduces cost and improves experience

Actions:
Standardise data models, expose APIs, implement event-driven flows, pilot AI for document parsing (email/PDF) and exception handling, define governance for human-in-the-loop

4

Invest in orchestration before channel optimisation

Outcome:
One consistent decisioning layer reused across all channels and roles, built because a customer journey requires it rather than because the stack is due for renewal

Actions:
Implement/strengthen OMS and pricing services, introduce API-first integration, standardise intake and validation, decouple ERP from real-time decisions and orders (OMS), remove duplications, codify rules as services

6

Organise to win and build the skills for what comes next

Outcome:
Behaviour and ways of working change alongside the technology, so that the strategy agreed is the strategy that lands

Actions:
Prioritise the behavioural changes that address named customer-journey pain points, name accountable owners across sales, service and operations, invest in role-based skills for the new flows, and govern the change as a standing agenda item rather than a delivery workstream governance for human-in-the-loop



Execution approach

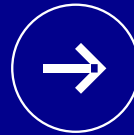
- Start with high-impact flows (e.g., order intake or pricing validation) to prove value quickly
- Deliver in increments (90–120 day cycles) with measurable outcomes
- Design for reuse so each capability (pricing, PIM, OMS) serves multiple channels
- Embed change management across sales, service, and operations

Success measures

- Reduction in cost-to-serve and manual touchpoints
- Improvement in first-time-right order rate
- Shorter order cycle times and faster deal closure
- Reduction in margin leakage and pricing disputes
- Increased share of orders processed through unified flows
- Improved ease of buying as customers experience it, measured through self-service adoption and repeat order rate
- Growth in revenue captured through digital and self-service channels

This agenda turns unified commerce from a concept into an executable programme, grounded in business outcomes and scalable over time.





How we approach it at Columbus



A unified commerce programme rarely fails on technology. It fails in the gap between the strategy that was agreed and the change that actually lands, and that gap is wide: roughly 70% of strategies do not deliver their intended outcomes.

70%

~70% of strategies do not deliver their intended outcomes (McKinsey / Harvard Business Review)

Business-first, technology-enabled

We start with the commercial ambition rather than the platform. Four questions frame every engagement: what the winning ambition is, quantified and realistic; where to play, meaning the right mix of channels and markets; how to win, expressed as customer journeys and the capabilities behind them; and how to scale, across people, business, technology and the fundamentals underneath. Technology choices follow those answers. They do not lead them.

Four lenses on every engagement

We assess through four lenses, because change that lands in only one of them does not hold. The people lens asks whether customers experience the organisation as a digital partner across the channels they actually use. The business lens asks how the organisation will operate differently to create value. The data and technology lens asks whether data can be created, processed, secured and exchanged at a sensible cost to serve. The fourth covers the fundamental capabilities that have to exist before any of the above can be delivered at all. Change management runs through all four rather than sitting beside them: systems follow people, not the other way around, and the prioritised shifts in behaviour are what turn any of these lenses into a result.

From strategy to execution

We treat transformation as a cycle rather than a project, and we cover all four stages of it as a single partner. Clients enter wherever they are: some at the framing of the ambition, others when the platform work is already under way.

- **Define (Digital commerce strategy)** — assess where you are, align leadership on a shared vision and business model, and turn priorities into an actionable roadmap and business case
- **Prepare** — select on the basis of the ambition: the platform and partner choices that follow from it, and Unified Commerce readiness so that you show up in AI-driven discovery through visibility, prompts and inclusion
- **Execute** — commerce, OMS, PIM and DAM, making your data trusted and comparable through structured, enriched and scalable product data
- **Evolve** — value creation and scale: continuous innovation and optimisation, the support model that sustains it, and agentic capability enabling AI to transact with you through APIs, exposed capabilities and agent-led execution

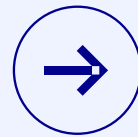
The value of running all four with one partner is continuity: the decisions taken when the ambition is framed still hold when agents start transacting against them.

We start from where you are

Ambition has to be calibrated against maturity. On the five-level maturity ladder Litium introduced in Nordic Digital Commerce in B2B 2023, 5% of organisations are getting ready, 37% are crawling, 30% walking, 16% running and 12% flying as leaders. The direction of travel since then is clear from the same survey series: by the 2025 edition, 83% of Nordic B2B companies were trading through digital channels and 28% of transactions ran through them. Knowing honestly which of those describes you is what makes the next step realistic, and the step beyond walking has far less to do with technology than with change management, organisation and data. You cannot run before you walk, but you can move through the stages considerably faster when you know what the next one requires.

83%

~83% of Nordic B2B companies were trading through digital channels by 2025



The advisory services behind this

Depending on where you are in that journey, we bring one or more of the following:

- Digital commerce strategy, clarifying the vision, aligning stakeholders and identifying the priority initiatives that make up the roadmap
- Preparation for transformation, using structured facilitation, process optimisation and proven practice to get the best out of the executive sponsor, product owner and project team before delivery starts
- Platform and vendor selection, from evaluating providers to negotiating contracts and optimising service delivery
- Business case development, setting measurable goals and KPIs tied to business objectives so that each initiative is grounded in results
- Audit of the current state across user experience, conversion, loyalty, site speed, search, merchandising and organisation, benchmarked against best practice
- Technical due diligence on platforms, integrations and scalability, to surface risk and confirm the technology can carry the ambition
- Unlocking the AI potential in your data, from segmentation and predictive insight through to AI-driven automation, where the data quality supports it
- Advisory by the hour, giving rapid access to senior expertise to solve a specific problem or validate a direction



28%

~28% of transactions ran through digital channels in Nordic B2B by 2025



Discover why a proper eCommerce strategy is the foundation of unified commerce success



What this looks like in practice

Normet moved a manual sales and order process onto a MACH-based estate, with an MVP spare parts portal as the first realised step. Toyota Material Handling has run a B2B commerce solution and customer portal across four brands and more than 42 countries, on a platform Columbus has operated since 2013.

The same approach holds well beyond manufacturing. Cambridge University Press & Assessment unified global eCommerce operations across markets, replacing fragmented legacy systems with a scalable cloud platform that handles multiple languages, currencies and complex product catalogues. Phoenix Group aligned twelve European countries behind a single data-driven commerce strategy, and came away with a prioritised roadmap,

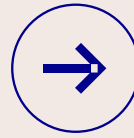
an impact and effort analysis, and a three-to-five year outlook to guide digital investment. Both began as advisory engagements rather than implementations, which is usually where this work starts.

Behind those engagements is a global advisory team working across the UK, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Germany and the US, with backgrounds spanning retail and distribution, fashion, manufacturing, life science and media. We have supported hundreds of businesses over the past decade across commerce, PIM, data and AI, customer experience and ERP, and we remain deliberately tool agnostic, with experience of all the major digital commerce platforms. The operating model comes first, and the technology follows it.



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS & ASSESSMENT

normet



How Columbus' partners contribute to specific parts of the solution



The architecture described is deliberately expressed as responsibilities rather than products, and that ordering holds. What follows is not a recommended stack. It describes, for the partners Columbus works with most often in B2B, which responsibility each one genuinely owns, which responsibility it should not be asked to carry, and what a replacement would cost.



Infor: The system of record

Infor carries the record layer: ERP for finance, inventory and credit, together with warehouse and transport management, planning, product lifecycle and the Infor OS platform for master data governance. It should not be asked to own real-time channel decisions, contract pricing for agents, or the surface an external system transacts against, which is the boundary chapter 7 draws around ERP. Columbus and Infor already run a joint Unified Commerce position and a joint offer, and Columbus is the largest global Infor M3 alliance partner.



Akeneo: The governed product model

Akeneo carries the product model — variants, compatibility, relationships, lifecycle and enrichment — which is the capability that decides whether spare parts and long-tail commerce work at all. It does not price, orchestrate or transact. Normet has signed with Akeneo as its future PIM platform, so the capability is proven in exactly the manufacturing and aftermarket setting chapter 5 describes.



commercetools: The commercial engine

commercetools carries account context, entitlements, carts, quotes and order capture, exposed as APIs so that the same logic serves a portal, a representative and a machine. It does not hold financial truth and should not be asked to become the system of record. Normet's MACH-based estate is built on commercetools, which is the closest available evidence of the pattern this document argues for: a decoupled commercial engine sitting above a stable ERP core.

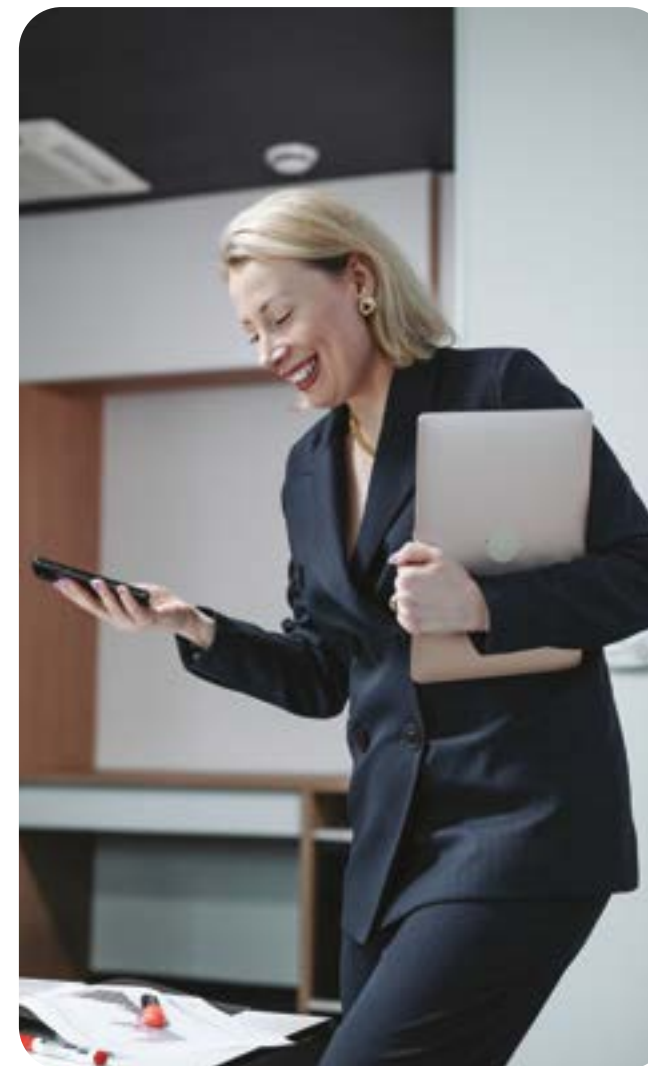


Shopify: Fast, replaceable engagement

Shopify carries the engagement layer where speed to a selling surface matters more than depth of commercial logic, including its B2B capabilities. Its role in this architecture depends on pricing, product and order decisions living elsewhere, which is what makes it replaceable without disturbing the layers underneath. Columbus announced a global partnership with Shopify in December 2024 with the explicit aim of delivering scalable Unified Commerce solutions.

The two (commercetools & Shopify) are not mutually exclusive. Either can carry a complete solution on its own, and in a multi-brand estate they often work side by side: commercetools behind the partner and dealer portal, where entitlements, contract pricing and quote logic are the hard part, and Shopify behind the brand shops, where speed to a selling surface and merchandising matter more than commercial depth. What makes the split safe rather than fragmenting is that both consume the same pricing, product and order services underneath, so the choice stays a question of engagement layer and never becomes two competing versions of the commercial truth.

Read together, these four occupy different layers rather than competing for the same one, and each is replaceable at the pace chapter 9 sets out: engagement in one to three years, business components in two to five, systems of record over a longer horizon.



"The future of B2B commerce does not belong to the most digital organisations, but to the most coherent ones."

A row of perfume bottles on a shelf, with a bokeh background of warm, out-of-focus lights. The bottles are clear glass with gold-colored caps. The focus is sharp on the bottle in the foreground, while the others and the background are blurred.

B2B commerce is entering a new chapter, and manufacturers that connect the whole picture will be ready to lead it.

Unified commerce brings together the systems, data, people and processes that keep your business moving — helping you regain control, scale efficiently and protect margins while creating the foundation for an agent-driven future.

Connect the business. Strengthen the foundation. Be ready for what's next.

About Columbus

Columbus is a global IT services and consulting company with more than 2,000 employees serving 5,000+ customers worldwide. Columbus helps ambitious companies transform, maximize and futureproof their business digitally.

We are specialised within the industries retail, distribution, food and manufacturing. We offer a comprehensive solution portfolio with deep industry knowledge, extensive technology expertise and profound customer insight. Columbus has offices and partners all over the world and we can deliver our solutions and services locally – on a global scale.

www.columbusglobal.com

The logo for Columbus, featuring the word "Columbus" in a white, serif typeface with a registered trademark symbol (®) at the end.

About Infor

Infor is a global leader in business cloud software solutions for companies in specific industry markets. The company develops comprehensive industry suites in the cloud, prioritizing user experience, utilizing data science, and ensuring seamless integration with existing systems.

With more than 65,000 organizations worldwide, Infor is trusted to help navigate market disruptions and drive digital transformation across businesses.

www.infor.com

The logo for Infor, featuring the word "infor" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif typeface with a registered trademark symbol (®) at the end.