

2022 RESEARCH REPORT

RETHINKING ECOMMERCE

Overcoming pain points and challenges for a business fit for the digital future

In partnership with



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Executive Summary

uccessful business both today and in the future is powered by ecommerce. In the fallout from global events like Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, ecommerce operations in all sectors have experienced rapid growth. According to a study by McKinsey, businesses have condensed three to four years of digital transformation into a matter of weeks in direct response to the pandemic. But the transformation of ecommerce has not stopped there.

The pace of change is continuing, with new technologies – from NFTs to the metaverse – set to cause more upheaval. However, despite the increased investment into ecommerce operations seen in recent years, many businesses in both B2B and B2C sectors are still not set up for success. Despite the accelerated investment into ecommerce operations — many businesses in both B2B and B2C are still not set up for success.

In this research, we interviewed 200 senior ecommerce leaders from retail/wholesale, manufacturing, publishing/ media, membership sites, and B2B services sectors. We asked how their organisation has fared through this phase of accelerated digitalisation and how prepared they are for the future. We look at what technology challenges they have faced, whether they have amassed technical debt during this time, if the changes they have made are sustainable, and whether they are seeing results from their efforts. As B2B and B2C businesses evaluate their investments in ecommerce

solutions and make plans to incorporate future technologies and innovations, we want to know if today's ecommerce leaders feel their business is fit for the digital future.

The research indicates that despite the high levels of investment in ecommerce solutions over the past two years, businesses overall are not deriving optimal value or benefits from their technology. To improve their ecommerce performance and their ability to react to fluctuating user preferences and any other potential global shocks, realising value from their technology investments will be critical for businesses. To do this successfully, companies need to take a more user-centric approach, improve their data analytics strategy, and evaluate the flexibility of their underlying infrastructure.

Key Findings From The Report

Impact on ROI From ecommerce Investments

36%

Percentage of ecommerce leaders who feel the ecommerce tools and services they invested in at the outset of the pandemic are delivering 'a lot' of ROI

Concerns of Technical Debt From ecommerce Investments

88%

Respondents who are concerned about their ecommerce investments creating technical debt, and what the impact of that debt would be on their business in the future

Priorities Placed on Performance Monitoring

31%

fail to check the performance of their ecommerce operations within a three month window 36%

fail to only check security within that time frame

Lack of Agility Impacting Progress

72%

Respondents who are very or somewhat frustrated at the speed with which they can make changes to their current ecommerce platform

Spending on ecommerce Tools and Solutions

68%

Spending on ecommerce tools and solutions within the B2B services market was higher than in other sectors we surveyed, with an above average net increase in spending The Impact of Technology Failings on Customer Experience



experienced significant downtime of their ecommerce operations in the last two years.



the majority said this downtime was due to an unplanned spike in demand.



also experienced performance issues, such as slow loading or a site crash, due to an unplanned spike.

The Evolution of ecommerce

n In recent years, two significant events have caused UK businesses to make swift, business-critical adaptations in order to survive this period of upheaval. In reality, this shift was just the acceleration of the continued digital evolution of ecommerce. The shock of the impact from external events has shown the importance of targeted investment in robust ecommerce operations to ensure they can withstand the upheaval. To find out how well businesses have been

able to mature and adapt during this time, we asked respondents about the impact of both Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic on their ecommerce operations, and what investment strategies they followed in adapting to the new business landscape.

ADAPTING TO BREXIT

The UK's departure from the EU has had a major impact on the ecommerce industry. Nearly all (97%) respondents said Brexit has



The Impact of Brexit



created ecommerce operational challenges for their organisation, with almost two thirds stating those challenges were significant. The UK's deal with the EU came into effect on 1 January, 2022 requiring businesses to follow updated rules for importing and exporting to and from the EU. Any business that trades internationally had to adjust to changes in VAT laws, customs charges, and border checks. The regulations also impact supply chain and fulfilment processes and require many businesses to adjust their accounting procedures to handle multiple tax regions and associated costs.

The number of B2B services companies that increased their spending on ecommerce tools and solutions in the last two years was higher than the average at 68%.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

At the start of the pandemic, governments across the world ordered bricks-and-mortar stores to close, prompting many to move to an ecommerce model or strengthen an existing online strategy.

Our research showed that almost half of all the companies asked (48%) said their spending on ecommerce tools and solutions increased in the last two years, with an

48%

of respondents increased their spending on ecommerce tools and solutions in the last two years

28%

The average increase in spending on ecommerce tools and solutions

average increase in spending of 28%. The number of B2B services companies that increased their spending on ecommerce tools and solutions in the last two years was higher than the average at 68%.

This indicates that the B2B market had to evolve more quickly in recent years and that this digital shift is here to stay; recent research by Wunderman Thompson found that 49% of all B2B purchasing is now conducted via digital channels. User preferences have also shifted data from McKinsey shows that more than three quarters of B2B buyers now say they prefer digital or remote interactions when purchasing rather than face-to-face. There's no doubt that both B2B and B2C buyer preferences had been leaning towards digital channels pre-pandemic, led particularly by younger generations of purchasers. Events of the last two years have simply accelerated and solidified the shift, as older demographics have also been driven to adopt similar buying habits.

INVESTMENT IN ECOMMERCE NOT DELIVERING EXPECTED RETURNS

While businesses ramped up spending to support digital sales and purchasing, many ecommerce leaders feel their investments have not delivered the level of return or benefits they had expected. A shortfall in ROI can often stem from a hasty implementation process coupled with a lack of user experience testing to assess if a new feature or implementation was truly needed by customers. When asked, only 36% of respondents surveyed said they felt that the tools and services they had invested in to support ecommerce operations at the outset of the pandemic have delivered 'a lot' of ROI.

However, despite not yet fully realising ROI, the research showed that ecommerce leaders still plan to invest further in their ecommerce operations to achieve their ecommerce priorities.

Impact on ROI from ecommerce Investments



Despite not yet fully realising ROI, the research showed that ecommerce leaders still plan to invest further in their ecommerce operations.

To maximise ROI, companies must be more strategic in where they spend their money. With a digital strategy that is wholly customer-centric, a business can direct investment into tools and services that create a truly successful omnichannel experience. Users want a unified experience across all digital platforms, from branding to payment options to search functions. The next step for any company looking to improve and invest in its ecommerce operation is to consider how to consolidate tools and services to eliminate any roadblocks in the user journey or disjointed experiences across digital channels, and to ensure internal IT and development teams can adapt quickly to market changes and shifting user preferences.

Organisations ecommerce Investment Priorities



Please rank each of the following in terms of how big a priority they are for your organisation in the next 12 months:

* For membership sites such as gyms or subscription businesses, this figure was 90%.

Adapting to the Digital Shift

s we've explored, the evolution of ecommerce happened at pace. At Box UK, one of the issues we've seen emerge as a result of this speed is a build up of technical debt. Increasingly, our clients are coming to us because compromises or shortcuts made in order to deliver updates more quickly when needed have turned into blockers

to further change. These underlying issues impact ecommerce performance, experience, security, and scalability.

Overall, 88% of respondents in our research said they were concerned about their ecommerce investments creating technical debt, and what the impact of that debt would be



Concerns of Technical Debt From ecommerce Investments

How concerned are you about your ecommerce investments creating technical debt that will impact your ability to be more agile and innovative in the future?



on their ability to be more agile and innovative in the future.

It can be easy to amass technical debt during a period of change or as a kneejerk reaction to unexpected events. Our research shows that ecommerce leaders understand the risks of technical debt, and at the same time, many feel that their current ecommerce infrastructure will become outdated within the next two and a half years.

2.5 years

Average timescale that your current ecommerce infrastructure will become outdated

A lot can happen in the digital sphere in 2.5 years. We are already seeing advanced developments emerging in digital payments, such as cryptocurrencies and NFTs, and predictions of a new digital economy, often called Overall, 88% of respondents in our research said they were concerned about their ecommerce investments creating technical debt, and what the impact of that debt would be on their ability to be more agile and innovative in the future.

the <u>metaverse</u>. In a fast-moving sector such as ecommerce, businesses need to take an iterative approach to digital transformation to minimise risk of technical debt. By adopting a strategy of continual improvement where teams make small changes often, businesses can strike a balance between updating the backlog of IT while simultaneously introducing new features - rather than having a multi-year development roadmap that dates rapidly.

Businesses that can make incremental changes quickly will have the flexibility and agility to adapt to change in real time, placing them in a marketleading position.

Stability and Resilience Challenges

ur research also looked at how ecommerce businesses are coping with fluctuations in demand, such as during peak traffic and high transaction periods, and whether their infrastructure is stable and resilient enough to handle such shifts.

The results show the impact of technical debt among ecommerce businesses. Without the ability to autoscale in line with demand and cope with unexpected surges in traffic, businesses are experiencing costly downtime. More than half (51%) surveyed said their ecommerce operations experienced significant downtime (defined as more than 30 minutes) in the last two years, and the majority (92%) said this downtime was due to an unplanned spike in demand. More than half (52%) also **10%** Average loss in revenue suffered by businesses due to downtime and website performance

experienced performance issues, such as slow loading or a site crash, due to an unplanned spike (92%).

Businesses that were unable to handle spikes in traffic lost revenue as a result. Respondents said their organisation had lost an average of 10% in revenue due to downtime and website performance issues in the last two years. A 10% loss is a considerable amount—a business might be able to absorb it as a one-off event,

The Hidden Costs of Downtime and Performance Issues



in their ecommerce operations in the last two years

COUNTERING THE THREAT OF CYBERSECURITY ATTACKS

Alongside performance, security remains a top concern for ecommerce leaders. Our research reveals that 82% of businesses surveyed have seen or experienced an increase in the number of security threats within the last two years. The financial and reputational damage caused by breaches such as a data hack, a cloned website or a ransomware attack are too severe to risk. Companies are spending more on a mix of in-house and outsourced solutions to bolster protection - 78% of respondents said they have increased spending on security tools to be managed in-house, and two thirds (66%) have outsourced some security management to a hosting provider.

When deciding where to direct investment in cybersecurity, consider where external information security expertise can offer the most value to your organisation. For example, a critical task where outsourcing could be more beneficial than in-house management is monitoring your assets. External security experts will have no bias towards your code or platform, enabling them to take a more objective view of your environment. With state-of-the art monitoring tools and regular penetration tests built into your development plan, outsourced security specialists can potentially spot vulnerabilities that in-house teams might easily overlook.

82%

The increased number of security threats experienced by businesses surveyed in twithin the last two years

but such a consistent revenue dip is not sustainable over time. To maximise revenue and reduce performance issues and downtime, ecommerce organisations need agile hosting solutions that can autoscale whenever there is an uptick in traffic to mitigate any potential issues.

A 'HEAD IN THE SAND' APPROACH

Given that our research found most respondents are already experiencing downtime and performance issues, it was surprising to discover that nearly three quarters (72%) are confident they can cope with unexpected demand fluctuations and spikes in traffic at short notice. This figure indicates that leaders might be ignoring or are unwilling to acknowledge a problem. The results also suggest that some businesses are unaware they are experiencing ecommerce performance issues and downtime because they lack data and visibility across their stack.

To cut downtime and eliminate performance issues, businesses need to focus on capacity planning, performance monitoring and health-checking of their digital channels. When problems occur, whether it is within the ecommerce platform, the CMS or with the hosting, teams need the right tools at their disposal to identify and resolve the issue fast.

The Impact of Technology Failings on Customer Experience

s investment in ecommerce tools and solutions remains high, we wanted to find out what that spend means for improving experience and whether companies are placing a high enough priority on meeting customer expectations. While advances in digital technology are driving the ability to build exceptional experiences, failings in technology can equally have a negative impact and force customers elsewhere.

As our earlier findings show, ecommerce leaders are seeking to prioritise customer experience through creating connected omnichannel experiences and personalisation. Enhancing the customer experience also requires companies to be able to respond quickly to market changes and consumer preferences. Consider a business that wishes to As our earlier findings show, ecommerce leaders are seeking to prioritise customer experience through creating connected omnichannel experiences and personalisation.

expand into a new market or geography. To move swiftly, it needs to be able to add new countries to its site easily and ensure an excellent user experience in that location. Content must be localised, including products presented in the correct currency, accurate and appropriate translation, and having all local tax rules integrated into the payment function.

However, our research reveals that 90% of respondents find it challenging to deploy new ecommerce technologies simultaneously and simply across geographical locations. Businesses are missing out on opportunities due to

Ecommerce Solutions Hampering Geographical Expansion

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

'Deploying new ecommerce technologies simultaneously and simply across numerous geographical locations is a challenge'.









and powering business growth

THE CHALLENGE

To rapidly implement a fully integrated enterprise ecommerce platform that would provide a seamless customer experience and support the launch of OKdo's new global technology business. The new platform needed to encompass seven country sites in six languages, each providing an online shop selling over 5,000 products.

THE SOLUTION

Box UK selected WordPress VIP, the enterprise WordPress and WooCommerce offering from Automattic, as the underlying development platform for OKdo.com. Box UK identified Oracle's NetSuite as the best solution for OKdo's ERP and integrated it with WooCommerce, including mapping information on OKdo's extensive product catalogue, for each regional variation of the site. Throughout development, the team

kept users at the heart of all decision-making with design workshops focused on creative ideation and iteration, hands-on prototyping, and usability testing. This approach ensured that the solutions produced were driven by real-world user needs, motivations, and contexts of use.

THE RESULT

OKdo was able to launch its multi-site, multi-language, and multi-currency ecommerce system to its B2C audience just eight months after kick-off, meaning this new business unit has been able to start generating revenue without delay. The business has gained international recognition from leading awards body the Communicator Awards, which gave the site an Award of Distinction in its 'Shopping for Websites' category.



Organisations Integration Priorities



Which of the following integrations do you plan to have in place in the next twelve months?

These results demonstrate a commitment among leaders to continually enhance the customer experience and to ensure that internal business workflows do not cause delays or obstacles.

the limitations of their current ecommerce solutions that cannot automatically deploy in new locations or be easily amended. The bottom line is that if your systems are not fit for purpose, you will struggle or even fail.

ENHANCING USER EXPERIENCE THROUGH INTEGRATIONS

Being able to easily integrate new features into your ecommerce offering is key to improving customer experience. Our research shows that ecommerce leaders are planning to add a range of integrations within the next twelve months.

These results demonstrate a commitment among leaders to continually enhance the customer experience and to ensure that internal business workflows - such as tax and compliance processes - do not cause delays or obstacles. The challenge will be ensuring that these capabilities are integrated effectively. To maximise ROI and evaluate the success of an integration, companies need to have the tools and strategy in place in advance, to be able to accurately measure its impact on the business.

For example, 42% of respondents are planning to invest in marketing and

transactional email service providers and 41% in SEO. These companies will need to consider how much weight to put on the success of each integration and what KPIs they will use to measure success. They must also ensure their investments align with user preferences. Do their customers respond to marketing emails? Is their target demographic active on social media? What are the trends in social commerce for their industry? If their customers are more inclined to buy through social media, then investing in email marketing might not deliver the same returns that it would for another business with a different target market.

BENEFITS OF A MODULAR APPROACH

Companies often find that their lack of agility holds them back when it comes to enhancing their ecommerce offering. 72% of ecommerce leaders said they were frustrated by the speed they can make changes to their existing ecommerce platform, such as adding new functionality or integrating with third-party services.

When asked if they feel their ecommerce platform allows them to respond to the needs of the business in the timescale it



When asked if they feel their ecommerce platform allows them to respond to the needs of the business in the timescale it wants, a third (33%) of ecommerce leaders said their ecommerce platform only allows them to make changes 'somewhat quickly'.

Adopting a modular approach is the ideal starting point for any digital strategy. Yet, our research reveals that under half (46%) of respondents are currently taking a modular approach to ecommerce development. However, it seems most companies are starting to recognise the benefits of a modular system, as 51% said they are planning to adopt a modular approach within the next two years.

72%

of respondents were very or somewhat frustrated at the speed with which they can make changes to their existing ecommerce platform

46%

of respondents are taking a modular approach to ecommerce development

Fortunately, moving to a modular system doesn't mean that you have to fully re-platform. A business can incrementally chip away at its monolithic system by retiring sunset parts, introducing microservices, and using a popular operating system that can be easily integrated with its existing stack. By iteratively modernising the underlying technology, businesses can increase their development speeds, roll out new features faster and maintain a competitive edge.

Ability to Gather Data and Insights

he final part of our research investigates the extent to which companies are currently able to gain actionable insights from their online presence.

As previously discussed, an ecommerce business cannot assess performance or ROI unless they have the right tools in place to measure it. The majority (74%) of respondents said their current ecommerce infrastructure and applications make it easy for them to extract data and insights. While this result is positive, leaders need to consider whether they can derive further value from their data. A company that is only using baselevel analytics could benefit from a more comprehensive solution that sheds light on individual user journeys, patterns, or trends, or even ROI on a specific page. Data is a powerful asset, and it is worth investigating what more you can do with your data and how you can apply business intelligence to inform change.



Organisations Approach to Performing Health Checks

How do you conduct 'health checks' for each of the following elements of your ecommerce operations?

Buying decisions are increasingly made in today's digital world based on a seamless and intuitive customer experience across every touch point.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH CHECKS

Regular health checks across a platform are a key method of getting valuable insights into ecommerce performance. About a third of respondents (36%) conduct weekly health checks of performance, while a similar number (34%) prefer to test monthly.

For most businesses, a weekly performance health check is sufficient, as is a monthly security check, assuming the company also has external monitoring in place. Still, almost a third (31%) of respondents said they only check ecommerce performance every three months or longer, and 36% only check security every three months or longer. The results suggest most businesses could improve the regularity of their health checks.

When it comes to user experience (UX), companies must check this daily. The results indicate there is much room for improvement with 76% of ecommerce businesses not even performing weekly checks. The lack of UX testing is putting businesses at risk of disappointing customers with poor experience. Businesses need to evaluate how their site responds in different situations. For example, what happens when a customer wants a product that is out of stock? How does your site react and act to increase conversion? Daily UX testing can reveal blind spots that once rectified can increase revenue. Without answers to these questions, businesses run the risk of losing customers and market share to more savvy competitors. In the evolving world of ecommerce, this can happen quickly. Many customers are transient and loyalty is less of a factor. Buying decisions are increasingly made in today's digital world based on a seamless and intuitive customer experience across every touch point.

STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN IN-HOUSE AND OUTSOURCED EXPERTISE

We also asked respondents how they conduct their health checks for each element of their ecommerce operation.

The results for performance and security testing were on par with our expectations; in-house performance testing is sufficient and security testing is best done as a mix of in-house and outsourced services. However, UX testing is best done externally as it requires specific expertise. A fresh,



unbiased view will provide insights that an in-house team already familiar with the experience could miss.

When gathering data, businesses also need to understand the behaviour of customers that choose not to buy from them and who instead prefer to visit a competitor site. This is another area where it is more beneficial to tap into external expertise. Consultants and partner organisations can also support businesses in understanding what's next in their sector through trend and user preference analysis. User behaviour is constantly evolving, such as how people search for products and services, how they discuss, review, and recommend a business, and the impact of social media influencers. The next step for ecommerce leaders is to move beyond thinking of omnichannel as just a website. They need to consolidate their business across all channels to ensure a consistent and targeted user experience.



Organisations Regularity of Performing Health Checks

How do you conduct 'health checks' for each of the following elements of your ecommerce operations?

Conclusion A Foundation for Business Success

commerce has faced unprecedented challenges in recent years resulting in accelerated transformation that few were prepared for. As leaders take stock and set out future development plans, this research report has clearly identified a need for businesses to place their customers at the centre of their enterprise ecommerce strategy. A user-centric approach involves understanding buyer behaviour, including user journeys and needs, as well as trends in consumer preferences and market shifts.

Creating exceptional user experiences also requires prioritising ecommerce performance as well as a strategy for testing and measuring ROI. Adopting appropriate analytics tools that deliver actionable business intelligence ensures you can make informed decisions, often in real time. Additionally, any tools or solutions must be user-friendly to enable internal IT and development teams to understand the data, respond, and make changes quickly.

When your online channels are a key source of revenue for your organisation, you need to have complete confidence in their longterm performance, security and adaptability. Creating exceptional user experiences also requires prioritising ecommerce performance as well as a strategy for testing and measuring ROI. Adopting appropriate analytics tools that deliver actionable business intelligence ensures you can make informed decisions, often in real time.

That's why at Box UK we create bespoke solutions that deliver business outcomes by putting users at the centre of our technology and services. We architect for maximum stability, availability, speed, and mobile responsiveness, delivering solutions that can cope with high levels of usage, as well as surges in traffic and transactions.

The key outcome of recent years for ecommerce has been the importance of adaptability in the face of rapid change. As the digital economy continues to evolve, now is the time to ensure your business has agility to respond, grow and thrive. At Box UK, our team of technology experts keep ahead of the curve when it comes to technology innovations and trends, to ensure our clients can continue thriving in an ever-shifting digital landscape.

Methodology

his research was commissioned by Box UK and WordPress VIP and conducted by independent research company, Coleman Parkes. Fieldwork was conducted in March and April 2022. Respondents consist of 200 decision makers for their businesses'

ecommerce operations at companies with a £10m + revenue. Respondents were equally spread across the following sectors: Retail/wholesale, manufacturing, publishing/media, membership sites (e.g. gym, caravan / car club, subscription businesses), business-to-business services.



200 Respondents From The Following Sectors

Minimum Revenue of Companies Involved

£10 Million +



BOX UK

Box UK provides expert ecommerce bespoke development services, for fast, scalable, and integrated platforms. Partnering with industry-leading solution providers and leveraging development expertise built up over more than twenty years, Box UK has a track record of delivering large-scale digital platforms that underpin high-traffic, high-transaction ecommerce offerings across the globe. Our developers specialise in complex multilingual and multisite installations, integrating key back-office components such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), tax engines and thirdparty logistics to manage the full enterprise ecommerce lifecycle and ensure a seamless experience that scales as your business grows.

Blue chip organisations around the world across B2B and B2C, from airlines to car manufacturers, international banks to global charities, choose to trust us with the execution of their digital strategies, from the development of enterprise-level custom software platforms to the delivery of award-winning multi-channel experiences. If you would like an effective, compelling ecommerce solution, talk to us.

Wvip

WORDPRESS VIP

WordPress VIP is the agile content platform that empowers marketers to build content both faster and smarter so they can drive more growth. Our customers—from Salesforce to Slack to The New York Post—are some of the world's biggest enterprises, iconic brands using content to create powerful and high-performing digital experiences for customers.

We empower content and development teams with the flexibility and ubiquity of

WordPress—the agile CMS that powers more than 40% of the web—while ensuring the security and reliability organisations need to operate at enterprise scale. From product catalogue management to promotions to checkouts, Wordpress VIP's out-of-the-box commerce features and thousands of readybuilt, customisable templates make creating great ecommerce experiences easy. If you'd like to find out how WordPress VIP can drive business growth for your organisation, get in touch today to arrange a demo.



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