

A life-centric approach to growth

# Commerce without compromise

How South African companies can thrive  
amid disruption and rapidly increasing  
competition







Commerce in South Africa is a diverse blend of the traditional with the futuristic, spanning spaza shops to modern retail stores to online platforms. Each of these formats offers unique opportunities that are ripe for the taking, yet it's no secret that the path to success is lined with obstacles, including the entry of global commerce leaders. This begs the question: How can South African companies rise above and seize the future?

Turning our attention to both global and local leaders in commerce could provide valuable cues. These companies have not only successfully navigated the maze of constantly changing and challenging business environments, but also have set new benchmarks for innovation, adaptability and customer-centricity.

South African enterprises should take a leaf out of these leaders' book. Combining the time-tested strategies of these bellwethers with tailor-made approaches that fit local nuances will help them secure a competitive edge in a rapidly evolving landscape.

It's time to make some fundamental changes.

It's time to write a new playbook.

It's time to reinvent.

# A peek at the global commerce landscape

Even with all that executives juggle, CEOs ranked commerce a top-three priority last year,<sup>1</sup> and leaders believe that it is crucial to their growth strategy.<sup>2</sup> It's no wonder. Every industry and commerce model has been impacted. Customer behaviours are changing fast. Online and offline channels are merging. Traditional models are being disrupted. And digital commerce has come of age—it's ubiquitous.

Globally, 94% of consumers use digital commerce for purchases.<sup>3</sup> And we expect 1 billion new digital consumers to emerge in eight fast-growing markets over the next decade.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the global B2B digital commerce market is booming at 18.3% CAGR.<sup>5</sup>

There is, without a doubt, opportunity in commerce.

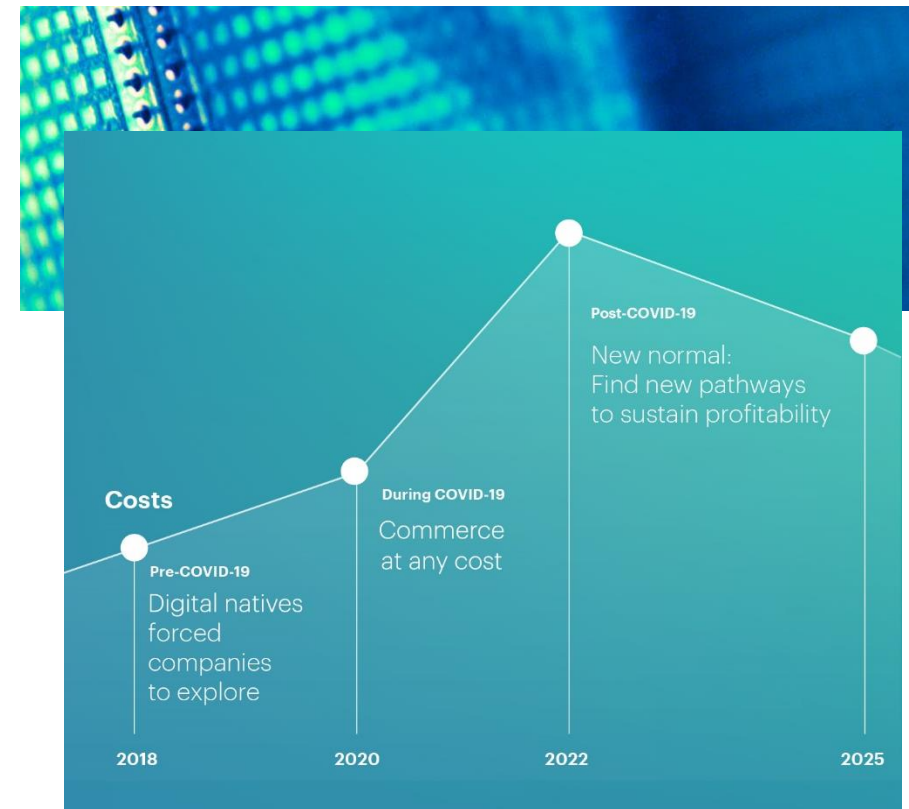
Opportunity for companies to differentiate themselves and drive growth. Opportunity for investors to back ventures with a strategic vision. Opportunity for employees to do meaningful work that impacts lives. And opportunity for customers to have personalized, [life-centric experiences](#).

But opportunity comes with complexity. The rapid and ongoing changes across customers, markets, channels and business models—and within enterprises themselves— have a multiplier effect on the intricacies of commerce operations. A hyper-competitive landscape, the rising costs of inputs and operations, and supply chain issues further compound the challenge of attaining profitable, sustainable growth.

The answer? It's more nuanced than blindly chasing channels and pursuing consumers at all costs to grab wallet share. More channels don't automatically lead to more customers; it often means that companies are spending more to sell to the same people.

*“Sometimes it's getting caught up with a shiny object that doesn't add value and making investments in the wrong things.”*

— Retail executive





# Seizing the South Africa opportunity

South Africa's digital population grew significantly during the last decade on the back of a surge in mobile usage. In 2023, almost 44 million people were connected to the internet, up from 25 million in 2013.<sup>6</sup> This rapid growth in the country's internet-connected population has funnelled into a corresponding increase in ecommerce users—by 2027, their number is projected to swell to 37.9 million.<sup>6</sup>

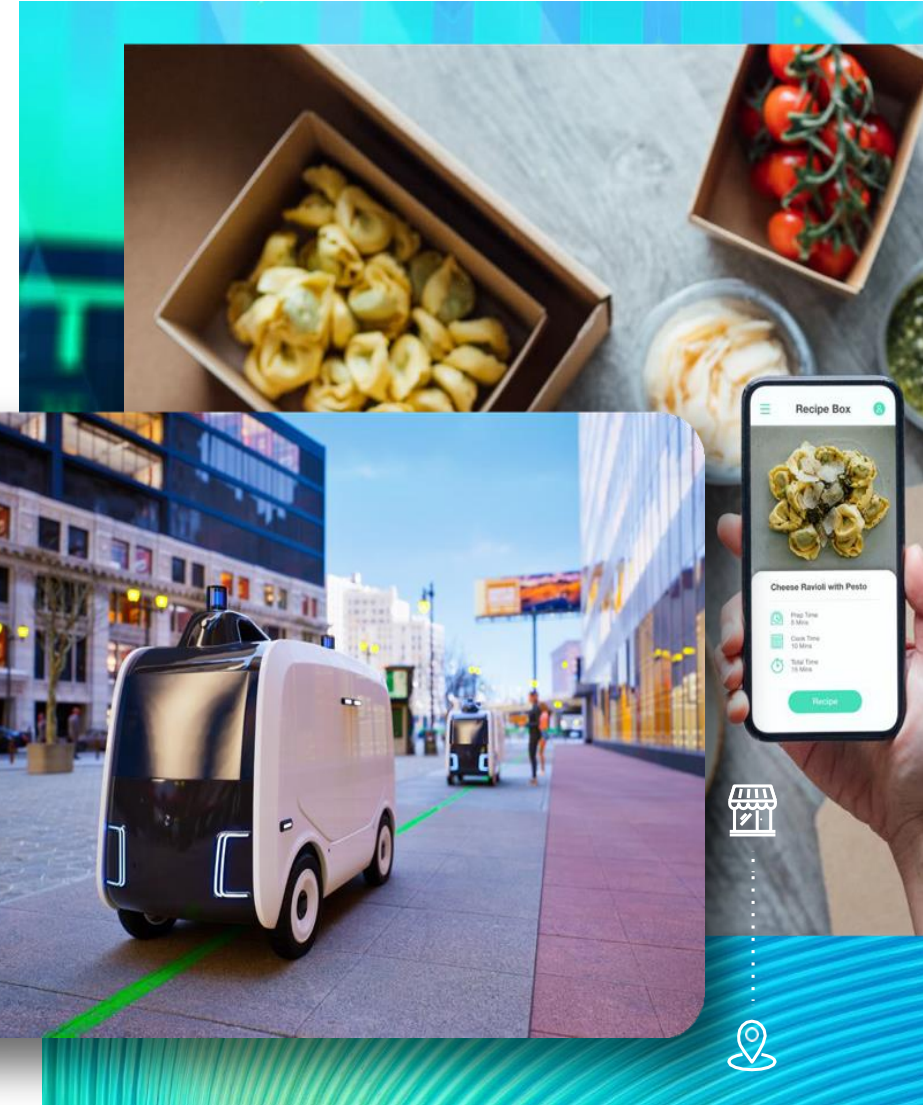
Supermarket chains such as Shoprite, Pick 'n' Pay, Woolworths and Spar account for the lion's share of retail sales in South Africa, but ecommerce is fast infiltrating shoppers' consciousness. Online sales are estimated to account for 5.7% of the retail market in 2027, tripling from 1.9% before the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Consumers are increasingly gravitating towards online shopping, particularly for groceries—Shoprite's Checkers Sixty60 service, for example, recorded a 63.1% increase in sales for the six months ended December 2023.<sup>8</sup> With over eight in 10 South Africans owning smartphones, mobile commerce is emerging as the channel of choice for online shopping.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, ecommerce in South Africa is likely to exceed R400 billion in value by 2025, driven by more than a billion annual transactions.<sup>9</sup>

This shift online is creating opportunities for the entire ecosystem, from employment growth in warehouses and logistics to rapid development of financial technologies and digital payments. The seamless integration of financial services into ecommerce enhances customer experience, boosts conversion rates and fosters trust, while providing companies with valuable insights and scalability.

But the road to commerce glory will face its own set of obstacles. The cost of doing business is increasing as companies are compelled to grapple with ad hoc systems, legacy technology, skills gaps and poor infrastructure. Meanwhile, global ecommerce companies with a wealth of know-how are rapidly intensifying competition. The influx of best-in-class global players into the South African market is reshaping industry dynamics, posing a challenge for local companies across the board.

**Can South African companies deliver the goods?**



# Executives seem confident. But how strong are their plans?

To understand executives' perspectives on commerce and how they execute their strategy, we surveyed 1,300 global C-suite leaders and decision-makers spanning 12 industries and 16 countries. Seventy-five of these companies were based in South Africa.

What we learned underscores a fundamental issue: 95% of South African leaders (vs 83% globally) think that commerce is growing faster than they can adapt. This shared feeling of falling behind affirms how difficult it is to keep up with the pace of change.

Even so, executives are overwhelmingly confident that their company is doing everything to be where customers are and to compete in the future. Yet these efforts are costly.

While 100% of South African executives (95% globally) think they've made the right investments in commerce, we found only a small group—just 20% of companies globally—that is winning by managing commerce profitably and realising other positive business outcomes.

These executives' strong confidence surprised us. It may reflect that they assess their commerce business channel by channel rather than as an integrated capability that needs ongoing reinvention. After all, the high cost of commerce doesn't come from one channel. It comes from the lack of integration across them.

It's also possible that the high level of confidence emanates from the short-term gains accrued lately at the expense of a long-term strategy.

This report shines a light on the companies around the world that do commerce differently. These Champions lead in revenue, profitability and non-financial outcomes, delivering value for the business and its stakeholders.

They know how to do commerce without compromise.

## Confidence

99%

of South African executives say their company has the right monetisation model in place

100%

believe they've made the right investments to compete in the future

92%

think their organisation's commerce capabilities are better than their digital-born competitors'

## Costs

Roughly 1 in 2

South African executives say attracting customers at the right cost is their biggest challenge

1 in 4

say high employee costs is a top profitability challenge for their company

2 in 3

say they have favoured short-term gains over long-term profits in the past two years

# Meet the global Champions

Analysis of our global survey data revealed three distinct groups of companies: Champions, Coasters and Compromisers. The analysis compared companies' performance across seven non-financial commerce outcomes: commerce experience, business partner and vendor experience, conversion rates, customer satisfaction, Net Promoter Score®, competitiveness with digital disruptors and competitiveness with industry peers.

## Compromisers (25%) are losing

They are pouring money into commerce, chasing the latest shiny object without achieving outcomes. They operate reactively, out of touch with customers' lives and hampered by their own organisational structures.

## Coasters (55%) are hanging in

They are getting by on business as usual. Although some are finding limited success getting to know their customers as people, change is slow thanks to leadership, cultural and organisational resistance.

## Champions (20%) are winning

They have it all—satisfied customers and satisfying commerce outcomes. It's because they are life-centric and fully committed to reinventing the business to reach new performance frontiers.

Champions outperform Compromisers in both revenue growth and profitability

**85%** more revenue growth

**31%** more profitability

Data from 2022





# What Champions do differently

Our research into global commerce leaders reveals some fundamental similarities in the way they go about building a profitable business. This is what South African companies can learn from the Champions.

## Champions are bold

They are realists who aren't stuck in industry orthodoxies. They know that a changing environment demands that they transform their business. Not in an isolated way, but in holistic fashion across the entire commerce function.

Our analysis found that these companies focus on and invest in getting their commerce fundamentals right. They are digital-first and put their energy towards building for the long term, not chasing the latest trends.

Champions have reached the highest levels of maturity across commerce fundamentals, including customer experience, technology innovation, operational excellence and talent and organisation. But Champions don't stop there.

Their work is never done—they know that commerce is too dynamic to stand still for long. Ongoing assessment, evaluation and continuous improvement are all part of their organisational DNA.

They test and experiment continuously, quickly scaling ideas that work and deprioritising the ones that don't. With a strong and well-defined value proposition, they build moats around their business.

Take Amazon, which is set to enter the South African market. Operating at startup speed, the ecommerce behemoth strategically enters fast-growing markets. Whether it's convenience, vast selections or one-day delivery, the company quickly identifies its *raison d'etre* and simply outexecutes rivals. From strategic partnerships in retail and distribution to acquisitions in key markets like India and China, it leaves no stone unturned in strengthening its ecosystem and leveraging local insights.<sup>10</sup>

*“We began redefining our customer experience, with a dual focus on designing the next-generation customer journey while also leveraging digital transformation and digital channels to improve efficiency.”*

— Telecommunications executive

# Champions outperform their peers with more mature commerce fundamentals

## Experience

### Compromisers

Product- and channel-centric focus.

### Coasters

A focus on customers as buyers with static personas that erodes relevance.

### Champions

Strong understanding of customers as multifaceted individuals who constantly evolve in response to unpredictable life forces.

## Technology innovation

Disparate technology platforms incapable of integrating data across channels.

Inability to realise the full value of technology investments or leapfrog peers with tech savvy.

Endless curiosity about emerging technologies and investment in composable architectures and data frameworks.

## Operational excellence

Siloed and costly operations that can't flex with change.

Limited ability to integrate operations with leading practices and use analytics for insights.

Data-driven, AI-powered operations that consistently deliver the right quality, agility and cost structures at scale through centers of excellence.

## Talent and organisation

Significant skills gaps across the workforce.

More focus on efficiency than on developing the workforce.

Relentless commitment to upskilling the workforce and preparing the business for the future.



# The journey to becoming a Champion

Becoming a Champion requires continuous reinvention. It should be grounded in a key premise: Simplify how commerce works to improve profitability and experiences. In our work with companies across industries and models, we see three typical paths:

## The experience and technology journey

Many companies start their journey by prioritising technology investments that drive better experiences over operational and talent investments. Consensus companies, where collaboration and buy-in decisions occur across multiple leaders, often choose this path. For them, evolving their operations, talent and organisation can be so complex that attempting the journey is often too daunting. However, these companies must eventually invest in this journey or they're likely to end up with technologies they can't optimise due to fragmented structures and ways of working.

## The operational and talent journey

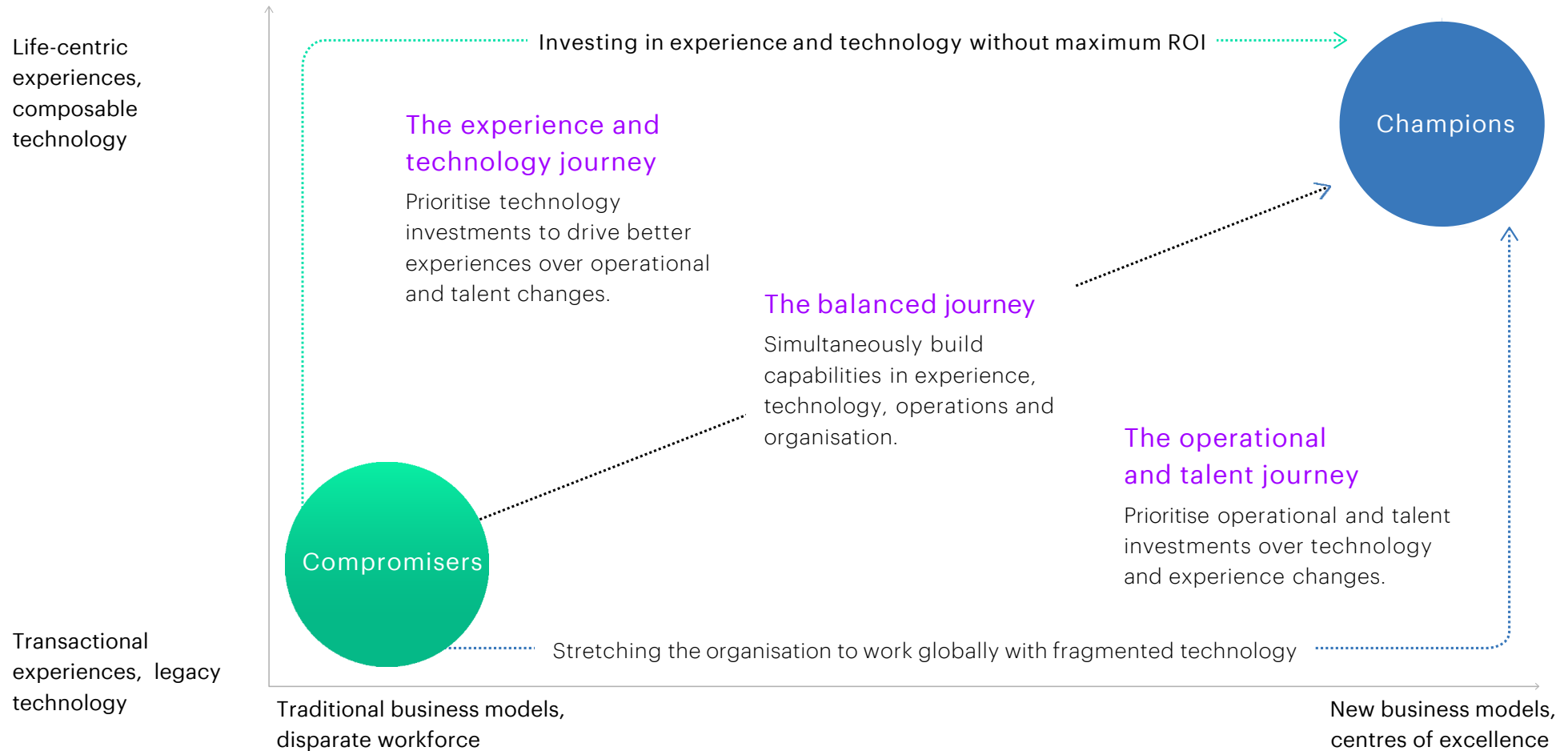
Some companies prioritise operational and talent change over technology and experience investments. Those with command-and-control management structures and cultures often choose this path of creating centres of excellence and new business models. The strong focus on the human elements of change creates expressly human challenges—such as resource redundancies or resistance to change. These companies ultimately should invest in technology and experience, or they risk not having the digital foundation they need to operate and connect with customers effectively.

## The balanced journey

The most measured and optimised, this journey positions companies to reach their full potential as Champions. Here, companies simultaneously build capabilities in experience, technology, operations and talent—without breaking the bank. This takes vision, time and appropriate resources. Evolving from an organisation where commerce isn't at the core of the agenda to a commerce Champion takes strong CEO sponsorship and clear alignment and involvement across the entire C-suite.



# Different journeys to win in commerce





# Champions focus on four fundamentals

These journeys vary based on factors like leadership, strategic priorities, internal complexity, competitive dynamics, budgets and culture. But no matter how the journey plays out, it's key to balance investments across the fundamentals. [Here's what to prioritise across each of the four fundamentals.](#)

01.

Experience:  
Be human first

See people before customers—and have the courage to improve their commerce experiences.

02.

Technology innovation:  
Live in tomorrow

Solve for relevance by designing delightful commerce experiences supported by investments in emerging technologies.

03.

Operational excellence:  
Build a brick house

Simplify for clarity by reinventing the commerce foundation, focusing on the business, not on chasing channels.

04.

Talent and organisation:  
Stay hungry for great

Scale for growth with a relentless commitment to continually reinventing the commerce organisation.

# 01. Experience: Be human first

See people before customers—and have the courage to improve their commerce experiences

## Ensure commerce is truly human

Commerce is innately human. Digital can make it feel even more human by creating buying experiences that are in sync with the rhythm of people's lives.

This is possible by bringing human-to-human relationships to the forefront with hybrid human-digital interactions. It could be anything from texting with human advisors to livestreaming product demos.

Think of this as the next evolution of social commerce that takes human-digital interactions that happen with influencers to the next level. The goal? Make every buying journey “social.” Generative artificial intelligence offers exciting possibilities here. For example, by training generative AI tools on influencers' advice and voices, we can tailor a more personalised and interesting shopping journey. And that translates to platform stickiness.

## Close the loop for more insight

South African companies expect high levels of disruption when it comes to meeting customer expectations (64%) and building trust (41%). Hence, understanding people in the full context of their lives with closed loop data analysis—which continually feeds customer insights back into experience design and offers a 360-degree view of customer journey and behaviours—must be prioritised.

Doing this will require adding integration layers on top of siloed technology architectures so that disparate systems can share data. And the organisation should be structured in a way that it can act quickly on the insights.

## Make commerce experiences brand experiences

Trust is currency in today's world, and brands play a critical role in building trust between people and companies. It's important to understand how to be authentic, relevant, accessible and aligned with who customers are and how they live. To build future brand equity, [companies must transform how brand performance and marketing is done](#). Providing a convenient and positive customer experience—such as seamless last-mile delivery—that leaves a lasting impression and builds trust with customers is key.

After all, commerce is where people get to know brands.

# 65%

Champions are 65% more likely than Compromisers to say they are excellent at managing customer experience.

*“We have invested heavily in gathering customer insights over the past two years, moving beyond simple demographic data to understanding what drives each individual customer. While we are still focusing on features rather than emotional benefits, we are actively working towards closing that gap through further investment.”*

— Consumer Packaged Goods executive



# Reimagining online customer experiences

A premium player in retail realised Covid-19 would have a significant impact on their business, and that there was a need to rapidly pivot their focus to online in sync with shifting consumer needs.

They defined their online growth ambition and designed a transformation blueprint. A roadmap was outlined, highlighting priority initiatives to fundamentally reimagine the brand and product experience.

The retailer placed focus on:

- Launching new online services and expanding their channels to include click-and-collect and on-demand shopping methods
- Enhancing user experience (UX) journeys to create a seamless shopping experience
- Evolving the customer care experience
- Expanding and optimising fulfilment and last-mile services through partnerships and in-house innovation
- Enhancing data and technology capabilities to test personalised online services and features that will drive growth during Covid-19

With a clear goal in place, the retailer saw a significant increase in the contribution of digital channels to its overall revenue, while also launching innovative solutions and fulfilment modes.



# 02. Technology innovation: Live in tomorrow

Solve for relevance by designing delightful commerce experiences supported by emerging technologies

## Compose your commerce future

To thrive in a “commerce everywhere” environment, companies must tailor experiences on platforms, enhanced channels and emergent places. This becomes possible by trading legacy architectures and “buy and customise” approaches for a common technology architecture that can be easily composed across different experience channels. This composable commerce approach delivers life-centric customer experiences across physical and digital storefronts, brings new experiences to market faster, supports data-driven ways of working and responds quickly to changing business requirements.

## Create a strong digital core

Ninety-three percent of the South African C-suite leaders we surveyed said they had ad hoc technology systems, implemented at different points in time. And as many as 96% felt their technology architecture was legacy and fragmented.

With commerce operations turning increasingly complex, a solid digital foundation that allows free flow of information is table stakes. South African companies need to sharpen their focus in this area, ensuring that they invest in the right technology and infrastructure for future success.

Use the power of cloud, data and AI to create a single source of truth across the commerce organisation, boosting growth and return on investments in people, processes and technologies. A shared digital core makes it possible to break down organisational silos thanks to real-time data collection, analysis and sharing. It can also improve insights and accuracy, speeding commerce expansion to increase margins and optimise markets and channels.

## Get on board with artificial intelligence

Generative AI is one type of AI technology. It’s unique because it can learn, interact with humans in their language and create new things. But it’s time to get past the buzz and get busy. Explore the most promising commerce use cases in areas like pricing elasticity, merchandising, content production, customer service, demand planning and marketing performance. Get comfortable with the fact that this technology will continue to evolve rapidly. New possibilities are just around the corner, so stay close to the latest advancements.

# 51%

Champions are 51% more likely than Compromisers to invest in AI to optimise their business processes and differentiate customer experiences.

*“We use AI and advanced technology right now. The expectation is that it will be even higher in terms of investments—that we’ll develop more and more of that in the future.”*

— Consumer Packaged Goods executive



# Digitising core business for scale

A multinational Fast Moving Consumer Goods company in Africa embarked on an eB2B development initiative, aimed at modernising processes for partners and customers continent-wide. Leveraging insights from their B2B ecommerce platform, the company devised a roadmap to enhance service experiences.

Through extensive user research involving employees, partners, suppliers, retailers, wholesalers and stakeholders, the team identified and tackled ordering challenges, ensuring improved adoption rates, operational efficiency and reduced training costs.

By embedding service and engagement strategies into ecommerce design, the company supported customers throughout their purchase journey, including offering human-to-human facilitated in-field support.

Within a 15-month timeframe, the platform was launched successfully across multiple markets.

The enthusiastic market adoption is evidenced by the high gross merchandise value (GMV) flowing through the digital ecosystem as of Q4 of 2023. The platform's popularity continues to grow, marked by substantial week-on-week growth in customer adoption and order volumes.

This transformative initiative not only streamlined ordering processes but also unveiled new revenue opportunities for the company, marking a substantial advancement in revenue generation and customer value enhancement.

This is testament to how you can solve for relevance by designing satisfying commerce experiences supported by emerging technologies.

Implementing a digital platform provides not just transactional benefits but also valuable data insights that can drive sales optimisation and targeted customer engagement, leading to improved business processes and time savings.



# 03. Operational excellence: Build a brick house

Simplify for clarity by reinventing the commerce foundation, focusing on the business, not on chasing channels

## Be deliberate about the operating model

Legacy operating models don't support the speed, quality and commercial excellence needed to manage complexity and compete at the speed of change. Improve performance by designing an operating model that clearly aligns key responsibilities with distinct parts of the organisation. For example, one part of the organisation should set action standards, overseeing playbooks and governance while others are responsible for execution excellence and commercial excellence.

## Double down on automation

Automation is an excellent and cost-effective tool for improving productivity and cutting complexity. This is particularly true in commerce where companies are managing multiple markets, languages, channels, product categories and different periods of high demand. Yet many commerce organisations still work with manual processes. Once they reduce fragmentation, they can use automation to transform performance speed and consistency. Automation efforts also support humans by freeing up their time to focus on more strategic and satisfying work.

## Leverage centres of excellence

Companies need new ways to improve operational performance without sacrificing speed to market. Reducing reliance on legacy systems and manual processes that cause duplication and lack of standardisation is non-negotiable. A commerce "centres of excellence" strategy takes advantage of industrialised human-machine services that offer higher quality, the latest technologies and capacity that can flex with demand. Centres of excellence should be strategically located to provide execution muscle in key regions, which in turn sets up the ability to respond to local market nuances and offers access to the right talent to support specialisation.

52%

Champions are 52% more likely than Compromisers to say they have clarity on who's responsible for driving commerce in their company.

*"We take the savings from digitalisation, automation and self-service purchasing, and we reinvest that into building a stronger and closer relationship with our customers. We don't want to lose that face-to-face connection."*

— Global Beverage executive



# The best of both worlds in operations

There are many ways to create efficiencies to drive investment back into the business. **BBVA**, a Spanish multinational financial services company, zeroed in on improving intelligent operational excellence in commerce. The key objective? Balancing efficiency and global reach with agility and local market nuance.

The company evolved to a **global intelligent operating model, creating truly data-driven commerce operations**. BBVA has made huge leaps in industrialisation, automation and reusability—all of which are improving global standardisation and closing maturity gaps across different countries.

At the same time, the new operating model has the flexibility to share best practices across campaigns, segments and countries to accelerate local customer value and business impact.

*“We work to bring the age of opportunities to everyone. We’ve made a deliberate effort to align our digital sales and customer acquisition strategy with our brand purpose. Everything we do is about being there in the moments that matter in our customers’ lives. This starts with a strong, data-driven approach to understand them as people, not patterns.”*

— **Carlos Pérez**  
Global Head of Marketing and  
Digital Sales, BBVA



# 04. Talent and organisation: Stay hungry for great

Scale for growth with a relentless commitment to continually reinventing the commerce organisation

## Set people up for success

Changes to the organisation, technologies, operations and processes aren't enough. People are the touchstone. It's essential to build and develop workforce capabilities through reskilling and new skilling initiatives that help the business generate value.

For example, introduce new ways of working with the latest technology—ensuring your people are equipped with future-ready skills, while contributing to the success of the organisation. Help people understand what success looks like by giving them the tools they need for everyday tasks and advising them on an engaging career path.

## Connect humans and generative AI

People are anticipating how generative AI will impact their work. Assuage their fears by helping them see how the technology can improve their performance and offer creative, innovative ways to do their work. Cultivate an open environment that facilitates learning so that people can grow comfortable working alongside generative AI.

## Redraw the boundaries

Companies can't afford to be observers—or even fast followers—when it comes to the hottest commerce business models. There is a cost associated with not taking action. That's why it's important to set benchmarks and goals for your organisation, while infusing the culture with the spirit of continuous improvement. There should always be a push to get better—even among Champions. Action is everything. Doing this means continuously tracking and assessing the viability of new business and monetisation models.

17%

Champions are 17% more likely than Compromisers to continually reskill their workforce.

*"It's not just my team or myself who need to embrace this new mindset, but the entire organisation. It's not an easy process because it involves changing habits and ingrained ways of thinking."*

— Global beverage executive

# Giving employees what they need—to be future-ready

The technology division of a large South African Consumer Goods & Services retailer has embarked on an ambitious journey to attract and retain top talent by investing in training, fostering a vibrant workplace culture and harnessing novel technologies.<sup>11</sup>

With a focus on innovation, the tech division has spearheaded ground-breaking initiatives including a rewards programme, cashier-less stores and a leading delivery app.

Recognising the scarcity of tech skills in the market, the division initiated a comprehensive talent development programme in 2017.

By investing in local talent development, the company has positioned itself as an attractive employer for young tech enthusiasts, transforming its image from a traditional retail giant to a digital innovation hub.

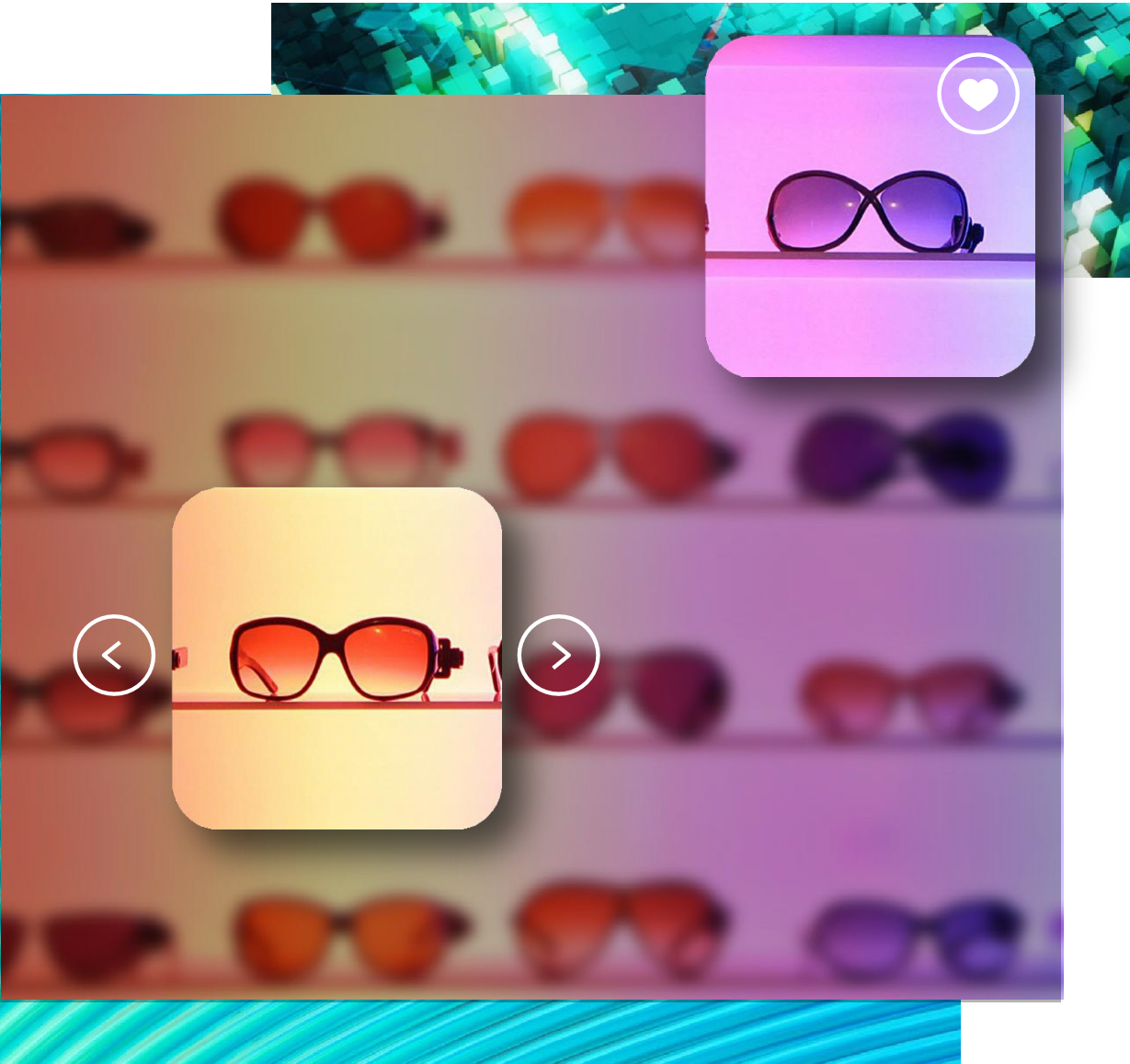
Through innovative AI tools such as ChatGPT, predictive modelling, computer vision and machine learning, it has improved efficiencies and customer experience.

Moreover, the company has adapted its working environment to cater to the values and preferences of a younger, tech-savvy workforce, emphasising growth opportunities, experimentation and an agile work culture.

They disrupted the market by aggressively targeting acquisitions and cornering key market talent. It wasn't only about the talent.

This hybrid approach, coupled with a focus on emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, underscores the company's commitment to staying ahead in the ever-evolving retail landscape while creating a dynamic and fulfilling workplace for its employees.





# The choice to change is yours

The days when commerce was simple are long gone—if they ever actually existed. The reality today is that commerce is complex. It's dynamic. It's disruptive. And it's competitive.

In this environment, companies have a choice to make—one that is potentially existential. Will they keep chasing the latest shiny object? Will they keep clinging to business as usual?

South African companies face difficult choices. To do well in the coming years, they'll need to see opportunity in complexity, and invest in the organisation they need to excel in a rapidly growing, rapidly changing market.



# Author

## Local



**Mushambi Mutuma**  
Sales & Commerce Lead, Africa  
Accenture Song



**Sheetal Patel**  
Retail Lead, Africa  
Accenture Strategy and Consulting



**Tebogo Legodi**  
Commerce Strategy Lead, Africa  
Accenture Song



**Mayuri Naik**  
Research Lead, Africa  
Accenture Research

## Global



**Fabio Vacirca**  
Commerce Global Lead  
Accenture Song



**Rajat Agarwal**  
Commerce Industry Lead,  
Accenture Song



**Juliana Azuero**  
Global Commerce Research Lead,  
Accenture Research



**Jose Goncalves**  
Commerce Lead – Europe,  
Accenture Song

## Contributors

**Joshua B. Bellin**  
Global Thought Leadership Research Lead, Boston, USA  
Accenture Research

**Abhigyan Chand**  
Research Manager, India  
Accenture Research, Editorial

**Ravi Advani**  
Specialist, India  
Accenture Research, Song

**Corbin Lazier**  
Senior Analyst, Tampa, USA  
Accenture Research, Survey

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**Regina F. Maruca**  
**Neil Asherson**  
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## About the research

Accenture Song and Accenture Research conducted a survey of 1,300 senior executives across 12 industries and 16 countries to understand their approach to commerce and strategies for achieving sustained growth in times of constant change. Fieldwork was conducted between March and May 2023. To deepen the understanding of our survey findings, Accenture also conducted 16 expert interviews at a global level from April to June 2023.

## Index scoring approach

To identify Champions and Compromisers in our overall sample, we used index scoring methodology. Each respondent was assigned a score between 0 and 100 based on their responses to a specific set of survey questions about non-financial commerce outcomes. From that score, we separated the top 20% of performers (Champions) and the bottom 25% of performers (Compromisers). We used a 5-point Likert Scale for most questions; thus, respondents were assigned a score of 1 if the top-two points on the Likert Scale were selected. Otherwise, respondents were assigned a score of 0. Two out of the seven questions used a 3-point Likert scale, and thus only the top point was assigned a score of 1. The question scores were then summed and normalized to produce a final score between 0–100 for each respondent.



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