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DIGITIZING “NON-DIGITAL” NICHEs: EXPERT TAGIROV ON HOW TO RESTRUCTURE MARKETING AND SALES IN TRADITIONAL MANUFACTURING

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ABSTRACT

This expert article examines the specific challenges of digitizing marketing and sales in traditional manufacturing and “non-digital” niches, where commercial processes have historically relied on manual work and individualized customer interactions. The author proposes an analytical approach to identifying revenue leakage points and selecting areas for digitalization through a sequential framework: “process → data → diagnostics → technology → financial outcome.” The article demonstrates that optimizing individual stages of the sales process can affect conversion rates, response times, average transaction value, customer acquisition costs, and sales cycle length. The article also examines the limitations of digital transformation and the conditions under which it is economically justified.

Keywords: Business Digitalization, Traditional Manufacturing, Non-Digital Niches, Marketing, Sales, Sales Management, Revenue Growth, Business Process Optimization, Sales Funnel, CRM, Digital Transformation.

1 INTRODUCTION

In traditional manufacturing, complex products are often sold through manual processes involving customized orders, consultations, calculations, and lengthy approval processes. Against the backdrop of changing customer behavior and the growing importance of digital channels, this model is becoming increasingly vulnerable: customers expect a prompt response, clear information, and convenient interaction even before engaging with a sales representative. This issue is particularly relevant to owners and executives of manufacturing companies operating in complex and highly competitive niches. For them, the digitalization of marketing and sales serves as a tool for identifying revenue leakage points, improving the efficiency of commercial processes, and creating the conditions for sustainable growth.

1.1 Why Traditional Manufacturing Must Change Its Sales Model

For manufacturers of custom furniture, metal structures, equipment, engineering systems, windows and doors, specialized packaging, and other complex products, the sales manager is the central link in the sales process—the person who handles the customer inquiry, prepares the quotation, conducts negotiations, and closes the deal. However, this model remains economically viable only as long as demand volumes are relatively low. As competition increases, its key weakness becomes the dependence of revenue on the number of manual operations: each new inquiry requires additional employee time, while an increase in the volume of inquiries significantly increases the workload on the same

process. At the same time, the customer journey is becoming faster. Before speaking with a sales representative, a prospective buyer will typically have already researched several manufacturers and may already have formed preliminary requirements for the offer. A company that responds slowly, fails to provide the necessary information, or forces the customer to go through several unnecessary steps before receiving a quotation loses part of the demand before the sales process even begins. This is particularly significant in complex manufacturing, where long sales cycles and high order values make each lost opportunity substantially more costly than in the mass-market segment.

At the same time, the level of digital maturity across businesses remains uneven. According to Eurostat, in 2025, 71% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the EU reached a basic level of digital intensity, compared with 96% of large enterprises. CRM systems were used by 25% of small enterprises compared with 65% of large enterprises, ERP systems by 41% compared with 89%, and BI tools by 11% compared with 69%. This gap reflects differences primarily in the ability to systematically manage customers, processes, and data.

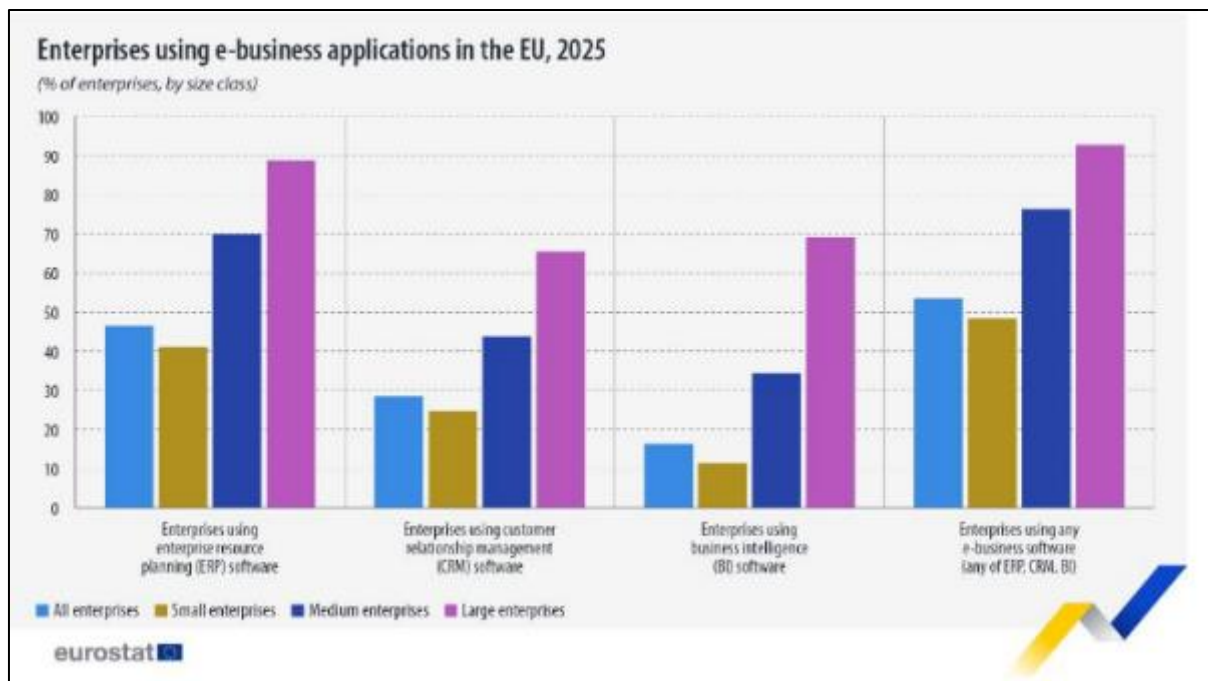


Figure 1: Use of Digital Business Systems by Small, Medium-Sized, and Large Enterprises in the EU in 2025

For a small manufacturing business, this has a direct commercial consequence: a manager may see the number of inquiries and the resulting revenue but not understand exactly where the loss occurs between the two. How many inquiries went unanswered in a timely manner? How many customers received a quotation but were not contacted again? At what stage do negotiations most often come to an end? Until these metrics are measured, the company is effectively managing results after the fact.

Therefore, the first task of digital transformation is to make the limitations of the existing sales model visible. Only then can a company determine which processes should be automated, which data should be collected, and where digital tools can actually increase the throughput of the commercial system. In complex sales, revenue is lost gradually—at transitions between stages where the customer stops moving forward. At the initial stage, this may be a delayed response to an inquiry or a lost lead; after the initial contact, insufficient qualification; after the preparation of a proposal, the absence of systematic follow-up; and during negotiations, deals that stall without a clear reason or next step.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the reasons for customer attrition are often not differentiated. If a rejection is simply recorded as “the customer did not purchase,” it is impossible to determine what is actually limiting sales: price, timelines, product specifications, transaction terms, or a competitor’s actions. As a result, the company sees the overall conversion rate but not the economics of individual losses.

Accordingly, diagnostics should begin with the sequence: lead → contact → qualification → proposal → negotiation → deal. For each transition, it is important to determine the volume of drop-off, the duration of the stage, and the reason for the stoppage. This makes it possible to identify where the revenue shortfall actually occurs and which part of the process has the greatest potential for improvement. Only after such diagnostics does it make sense to choose an approach to changing the process—from introducing new procedures to implementing automation.

2 FROM DIGITAL TOOLS TO REVENUE GROWTH: WHAT THE RIGHT TRANSFORMATION SHOULD LOOK LIKE

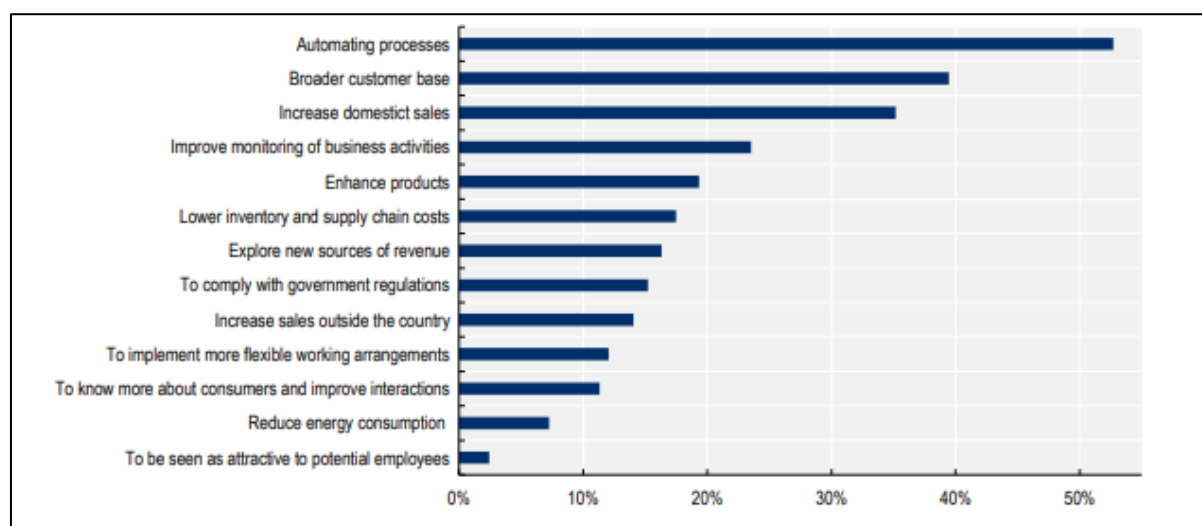
It is important to understand that the digitalization of sales has economic value only when it begins with an analysis of the process and ends with a measurable change in financial results. Therefore, the working logic should be structured sequentially: process → data → diagnostics → technology → financial outcome. First, it is necessary to determine how the sales process actually works and where losses occur; then data is collected for each stage; after that, the bottleneck is identified and its cost is assessed. Only on this basis should a technology be selected—automation of inquiry processing, lead routing, sales funnel analytics, digital communications, or another tool.

The key criterion for selection is the potential contribution to Revenue Growth. If the problem is related to response time, its impact on conversion should be assessed; if the company's ability to work with existing demand is underdeveloped, the focus should be on average transaction value or repeat sales; if sales are too costly, the focus should be on customer acquisition costs; and if deals take too long, the focus should be on sales cycle length. This approach makes it possible to compare different initiatives within a unified economic framework: which change in a given metric has the potential to generate the greatest increase in revenue at comparable costs.

A hypothetical example illustrates the mechanics. Suppose a manufacturing company receives 100 qualified inquiries per month, the current conversion rate to closed deals is 10%, and the average transaction value is \$8,000. Revenue is therefore \$80,000. If process optimization increases the conversion rate to 13% while the volume of inquiries and average transaction value remain unchanged, monthly revenue will amount to \$104,000—an increase of \$24,000, or 30%. This illustrative calculation demonstrates that a digital tool should be evaluated based on the stage of the sales funnel it can influence and the financial impact of that change.

3 WHY DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OFTEN FAILS — AND HOW TO REDUCE THE RISKS

The main mistake in digital transformation is starting with the selection of a technology without first assessing whether the underlying process is ready. If sales processes are chaotic, automation will merely reinforce the existing logic; if data is entered inconsistently, analytics will create a false sense of accuracy; if a CRM system is implemented without introducing new operating procedures, it will remain nothing more than an electronic customer database.



Source: OECD D4SME Survey.

Figure 2: Perceived Benefits of Digital Adoption

There is also a measurable dimension to this problem. According to a 2025 OECD study, the main barriers to digitalization identified by SMEs were the cost of maintaining software, cited by 40% of respondents; insufficient time for training, cited by 39%; and the cost of equipment, cited by 32%. At the same time, only 6% of respondents identified employee resistance as a barrier. This is an important signal: the primary risk is often not people's unwillingness to change their habits, but rather the company's underestimation of the costs of implementation and subsequent operation.

Finally, there is a limit to the economic viability of automation. In complex and customized sales, automating every customer interaction can undermine the customer experience if it displaces expert dialogue. Therefore, the professional

task is to clearly distinguish which operations should be standardized, which should be automated, and which should remain manual because they are precisely where commercial value is created.

Digitalization becomes a growth tool for traditional manufacturing when it begins with an analysis of the customer journey and sales processes and is aimed at eliminating specific points of revenue loss. For companies operating in “non-digital” niches, the ability to identify these constraints, measure their economic impact, and restructure processes to drive revenue growth provides the foundation for sustainable development.

4 CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that digitalization of sales in traditional manufacturing must begin with diagnosing processes and identifying revenue leakage points rather than selecting technologies. Applying the sequential framework "process → data → diagnostics → technology → financial outcome" enables companies to transform digital tools from a cost item into a measurable driver of revenue growth. This study will benefit business owners and executives in improving operational efficiency while providing a methodological foundation for digital transformation of traditional industries, paving the way for sustainable economic development.

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