

UK's Digital Trade
Corridors Programme:

UK-Europe

Trade Digitalisation Pilots.



Department for
Business & Trade



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Introduction

from document-based to
data-driven trade

Trade digitalisation is not simply about adopting digital tools; **it requires a sustained structural shift** in how trade is organised and executed. The Digital Trade Corridors programme provides practical, real-world evidence from live trade lanes to support the transition from document-based workflows to paperless, data-driven trade.

The Digital Trade Corridor (DTC) programme is a multi-year UK Government initiative designed to test how digitalised trade processes can work in practice on real trade routes between the UK and other markets, starting with Germany and France. The first pilot phase took place between January and March 2026 and involved two businesses (an exporter and an importer) running live digitalised shipments. Final results suggest that using digital processes reduce delays caused by errors, paper-based document handling while improving the reliability of trade data.

Executive Summary

Historically, international trade has been built around the movement of paper documents. These documents circulate across multiple parties, with copies saved for each different leg, often repeating the same information in different formats and languages. The result is duplication, rekeying (re-entering the same information more than once), and more chances for delays or errors. Trade digitalisation tackles this by replacing paper-heavy processes with secure electronic workflows and structured data exchanges.

The Digital Trade Corridors (DTC) programme demonstrates how data driven trade can cut friction and improve supply chain efficiency. Legal reforms such as the UK Electronic Trade Documents Act 2023 provide an important foundation by giving electronic trade documents (ETDs) legal recognition, but legal enablement alone is not enough to drive change in day-to-day practices. The use of digital technology enables a pathway to measurable efficiencies in the cross-

border trading process by overcoming bottlenecks that can otherwise occur when digitalised processes and systems are absent, and friction persists. The DTC programme therefore uses pilot evidence to demonstrate how ETDs can reduce operational friction at the border.

Despite the potential for employing end-to-end digital trade solutions, the gap between legal enablement and operational adoption remains significant. In practice, many firms still operate hybrid processes: digital-by-default in parts, but manual in others, with PDFs, email chains, rework, and printing still common.

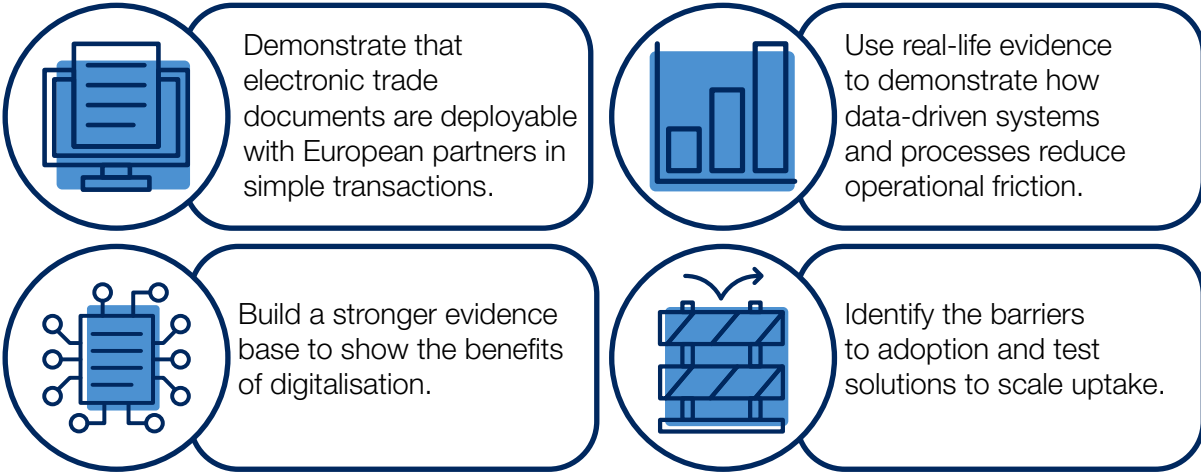
For that reason, this report focuses less on abstract digital ambition and more on applied operational learning – what works, what does not, and where barriers persist. These findings matter not only for corridor efficiency, but also for business competitiveness, resilience, and export growth.



Project Objectives

The DTC programme is a UK Government- sponsored initiative running live shipments that digitalise commercial trade documents between the UK and European markets, starting with Germany and France, to make trade faster, cheaper, and more secure. The initial focus is on foundational pilots to test what works in real-world settings, with scope and complexity increasing progressively over the lifecycle of the programme.

More specifically, the project aimed to:





Trade with Europe

France and Germany

Trade between the United Kingdom, France, and Germany is among the most strategically important in Europe. These corridors support high-value sectors including advanced manufacturing, automotive, machinery, pharmaceuticals, food, and specialist retail. They are mature, fast-moving and commercially significant corridors, but that does not mean they are frictionless.

In practice, many cross-border trade processes still rely on fragmented administrative workflows. Information is often created in separate systems, shared by email, converted into PDFs, and sometimes printed for border or intermediary use. A missing document, an email lag, or a version-control issue can disrupt onward logistics and increase handling costs disproportionately. For businesses moving goods frequently, those inefficiencies add cost and delay. For SMEs, they can be a serious barrier to entering or expanding in overseas markets.

The importance of these corridors lies not only in the volume of trade they support, but in the different operating conditions they represent. The UK–France corridor is generally shaped by proximity, speed, and frequent Channel crossings, where even small administrative holdups can quickly disrupt food supply chains, retail distribution, and short-cycle manufacturing. The UK–Germany corridor is more commonly associated with industrial integration and high-value manufacturing, where predictability, traceability, and coordination are critical across complex multi-stage supply chains. Components, finished goods, and compliance data may move across borders several times, meaning that rework is costly and disruptions can quickly ripple through production and delivery schedules.

Despite these differences, both corridors share the same structural challenge: trade is still too often slowed by how information moves rather than how goods move. The ICC Digital Standards Initiative analysis highlights that international trade remains highly document-intensive and fragmented across multiple actors, systems, and standards, limiting interoperability and increasing administrative friction. (https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/standtoolkit22_e.pdf)

Trade digitalisation matters here because it offers a practical way to reduce administrative friction. By replacing document-heavy workflows with structured, shared, and more auditable digital processes, trade digitalisation can improve speed, accuracy, and confidence across the supply chain. In corridors where timing, compliance, and coordination are commercially critical, those gains are not marginal — they can determine whether trade is smooth, resilient, and scalable.



Where friction persists in practice

The friction most frequently observed in international trade is administrative rather than physical. Goods can often move quickly once processes are aligned. The challenge is ensuring that the right data, in the right form, reaches the right party at the right time. WTO, OECD, and ICC trade facilitation analysis consistently identifies documentation processes, fragmented information exchange, and interoperability challenges as major drivers of trade cost and delay.

 Repeated data entry across invoices, spreadsheets, transport forms, and customs-related submissions.

 Email-led communication that creates version-control issues and weak auditability.

 Manual checking and rework where counterparties discover errors late in the process.

 Fragmented visibility, with no shared source of truth for the shipment file.

 Hybrid processes in which digital files still have to be printed for customs or border interactions.

 Workflow incompatibilities between new digital platforms and existing spreadsheet-based operating models.

These frictions are not trivial. They affect cycle time, error rates, labour allocation, confidence in compliance, and the ability of smaller firms to scale export activity. They also help explain why a corridor may appear advanced at a policy level while still feeling manual at the level of day-to-day business operations.



The role of trade digitalisation in a European corridor setting

Trade digitalisation can address these frictions by replacing fragmented document exchange with more structured and collaborative data flows. In practical terms, that means creating a shared working environment in which trade documents can be created, reviewed, stored, and validated with greater visibility and less duplication.

In a corridor setting such as UK–France or UK–Germany, the value of digitalisation is most evident where it can deliver three things at once: **improved speed, improved accuracy, and improved confidence**. Speed comes from reducing repeated handling and communication loops. Accuracy comes from enabling earlier detection of errors and a clearer audit trail. Confidence comes from knowing that all parties are working from the same information base.

That does not mean every friction disappears immediately. A digital platform cannot, on its own, remove external paper requirements or force every intermediary to operate in the same way. But it can provide the foundation for a more efficient operating model and reveal exactly where remaining barriers sit.

The following case studies illustrate how trade digitalisation, supported through the Boex platform, can improve speed, accuracy, and coordination across live cross-border trade processes, while also revealing where wider ecosystem barriers remain.

Case Studies: Impact of Digital Trade

Shipment time:

There is no actual change in time required for the physical shipment of goods, but what was highlighted is that there is reduction of the risk of delays is a significant benefit.

Estimated reduction of administration time per shipment

50%

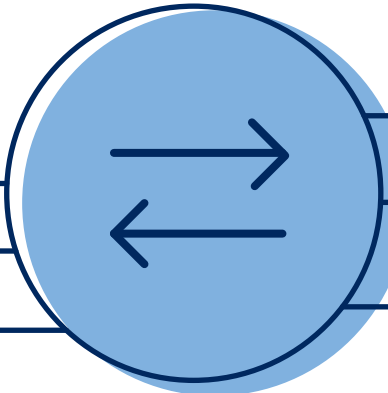
for **UniSim** as all the documents are agreed and signed off by both parties before the goods are shipped

Risk remains in the system for **Ramsden** as they depend on the timely delivery of sanitary and traceability certificates that is out of their direct control which causes delays

20% of the time



(system interoperability with certification providers will overcome this issue once there is digital acceptance)



Productivity:

UniSim:



reduction of paper documents

Ramsden:



reduction of paper documents

Administrative costs:

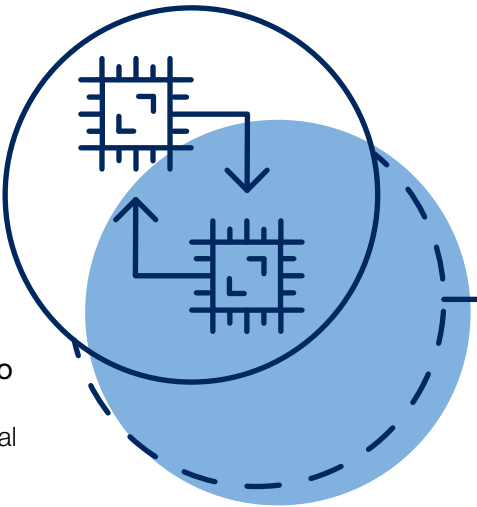
UniSim:

Bunsiness G&A cost savings of

2%

Ramsden:

None yet as Excel files are still required by Freight Forwarders and some customers, and these need to be sent via email (additional interoperability with Freight Forwarder transport management systems will enable digital end-to-end trading)





UniSim and the efficiency case for SME digital workflows

Business profile:

UniSim is a UK-based SME developing advanced healthcare training technologies. It designs high-fidelity simulation systems that combine virtual reality (VR) and haptic feedback to support medical and dental training, used by healthcare providers, universities and training institutions across the UK. Operating in a high-value, innovation-driven sector, UniSim is also active in cross-border trade, regularly moving specialised equipment and components between the UK and European partners. This makes it a strong example of an SME well placed and motivated to adopt digital trade processes.



Before moving to digital processes, UniSim managed shipments using a small set of core documents (purchase order, invoice, picking list and delivery note), shared partly on paper and partly via PDF and email. With much of the team working remotely and limited access to printers, producing this documentation created unnecessary effort. UniSim estimated around one hour of staff time per shipment, plus around one hour preparing documents, with additional time lost to checking and rework. End-to-end processing typically took around 5 days, and border waiting time was around two hours. The shipment itself was straightforward, but the administrative workflow was slower and more manual than it needed to be.

After moving the workflow onto the Boex platform, all documents for the shipment were shared and reviewed in one place. While customs-facing printouts were still required at the final stage, the platform substantially improved coordination and document quality during preparation. There was an 90% reduction in paper documents produced, and trade documents were jointly checked, eliminating errors and reducing delays. UniSim identified time savings of around four hours per shipment (approx. 50% reduction of administration processing time per shipment) alongside an estimated a cost saving of

around £100 based on a labour rate of £25 per hour, representing a 2% reduction of all General and Administrative expenses.

By providing a single platform for all stakeholders, Boex improved data accuracy and reduced errors caused by conflicting paperwork – issues that can otherwise lead to shipment delays ranging from weeks to even months. Digitising trade documents also removed the need for printing, streamlining processes and better supporting a largely remote team to work more efficiently.

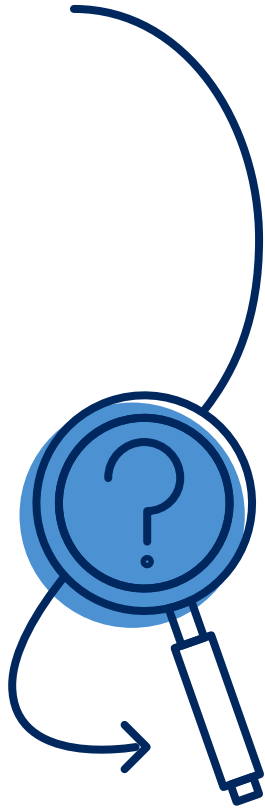
The value of this case goes beyond the headline saving. Reducing processing time by around four hours per shipment minimises disruption, reduces rework and improves predictability - benefits that quickly add up for SMEs trading regularly. In practice, UniSim’s pilot demonstrates how shared digital workflows can reduce process friction, enable joint document checks and deliver consistent time saving to deliver around four hours of time savings per shipment.



Ramsden and the complexity of regulated trade

Business profile:

Ramsden International is a UK exporter supplying British grocery and consumer products to international retailers and distributors, with established trade flows across Europe.



As an exporter, Ramsden provides an important contrast to UniSim. While its internal processes were relatively efficient, 30–60 minutes of staff time per shipment, with 10–20 minutes spent preparing documents and communication largely managed via email — the biggest burden sat elsewhere. The company highlighted sanitary controls and traceability requirements as the primary sources of friction, with key sanitary documents still needing to be presented in paper form at the Border Control Post, alongside associated certification costs.

This provides an important insight: even where internal processes are streamlined, external requirements can still drive delays and costs. Ramsden reported an end-to-end processing time of around 7 working days, showing that the wider trade journey can remain slow despite relatively efficient internal administration.

During implementation of a shared digital trading environment, Ramsden found that while document volumes decreased, the process did not automatically become simpler due to issues of interoperability with counterparties’ systems. At that time, the platform could not handle Excel files in the way freight forwarders required, leading to additional steps and manual workarounds. This shifted where effort was required, adding a further 10–20 minutes per trade through extra communication and file handling.

Although this limited immediate financial savings , the issue has been resolved resulting in a 50% reduction in paper documents handling.

Ramsden identified clear longer-term value in the platform as a single point of communication, a shared repository for shipment documentation, and an easier way for partners and third parties to retrieve records. The business also noted potential value from digital trade instruments, such as a bill of exchange, for credit-based trading relationships.

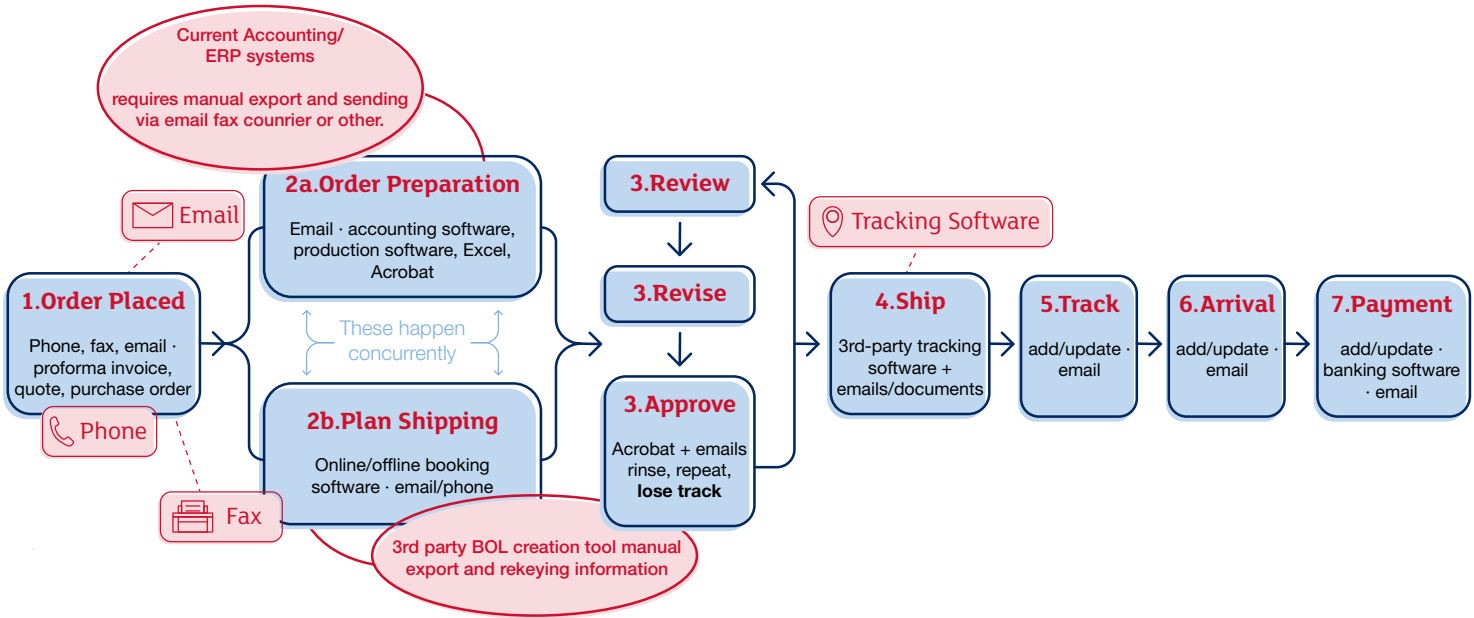
While the single platform reduced errors and omissions, helping to lower the risk of delay, Ramsden noted that risks remain where they depend on the timely provisions of sanitary and traceability certificates. These processes sit outside their direct control and result in delays in around 20% of cases. Greater interoperability with certifications providers alongside wider digital acceptance is expected to address this issue.

Overall, Ramsden’s pilot highlights a more nuanced picture: in a regulated food and retail context, digitalisation can reduce document burden and improve visibility, but the full benefit depends on fit with existing workflows, freight forwarder requirements, and ongoing paper-based SPS controls. Where counterparties still require fixed formats (for example, Excel tables for .csv export), some legacy processes have to remain, limiting the efficiency gains that fully digital workflows can deliver.

The Boex Process

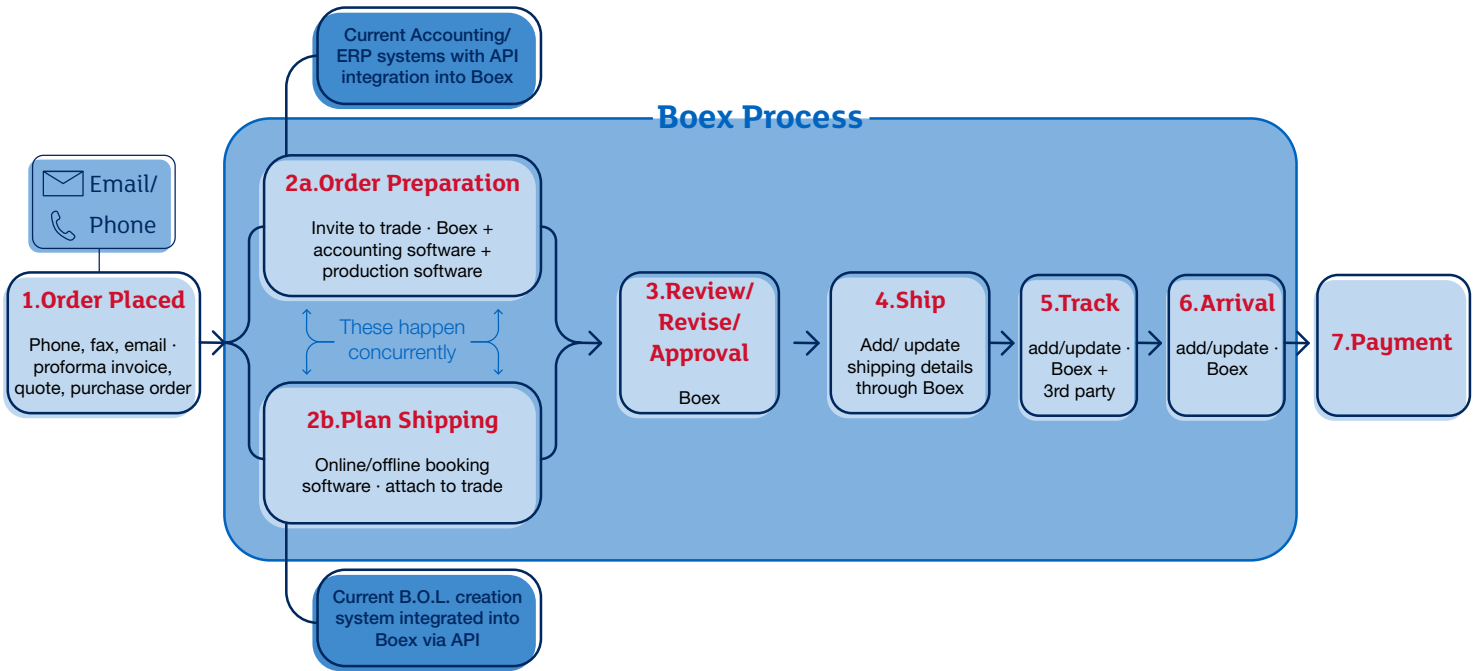
Pre-Boex process

Many tools. Many handoffs. No single source of truth.



After Boex

One shared trade record. Fewer handoffs. Clear status.



Key Findings

The practical evidence from the pilots, combined with the characteristics of the two corridors, supports a number of cross-cutting findings.

1. Trade friction is often administrative rather than physical

In both corridor contexts, the movement of goods is only one part of the trade process. The movement of information is equally important, and often less efficient. Repeated data entry, late-stage checking, fragmented document exchange, and format conversion all contribute to avoidable delay. Trade digitalisation therefore creates value by improving information flow, not merely by digitising individual documents.

2. SMEs can benefit from process simplification

The UniSim case is especially important in this regard. A saving of 4 hours on a shipment may appear modest at first glance from a macroeconomic perspective, but at firm level it is highly material resulting in a 2% reduction of all G&A costs for the business.. SMEs often operate with thinner teams, less specialist customs capacity, and less tolerance for rework. Time saved can be redirected to customer service, sales, compliance quality, or additional trading activity.

3. Interoperability is a critical scaling issue

Ramsden’s experience demonstrates that digitalisation does not automatically produce simplicity. If freight forwarders, buyers, or other actors still depend on spreadsheet workflows or specific file formats, and if the new platform does not fit neatly into that operating model, friction can temporarily increase. This is not a reason to avoid trade digitalisation. It is a reminder that corridor-level value depends on technical and operational fit across participants and that interoperability is a key component in streamlining trade. The Boex platform uses APIs to ensure interoperability which will become more common as more companies adopt digital trade. Evolution of the digital ecosystem will mean less friction experienced by all parties.

4. Regulation and market acceptance can determine the outer limit of benefit

Where sanitary documents, attestations, or customs-facing files must still exist in paper or in narrow accepted formats, the full benefit of digital workflows remains constrained. In such cases, businesses can still benefit from better preparation, traceability, and internal coordination, but they cannot fully remove duplicated handling. This highlights the importance of regulator engagement and intermediary readiness.

5. Adoption is as much a change-management challenge as a technology challenge

The evidence aligns with wider trade digitalisation experience: the barriers are rarely purely technical. Businesses need practical onboarding, clear process redesign, and confidence that the new workflow will reduce risk rather than introduce new uncertainty. Public-sector actors also play an important role in signalling what forms of digital evidence and documentation are acceptable.

6. Limitations of the findings

- Sample size of 2 SMEs in particular sectors so the findings are indicative of potential progress but are *not generalisable*
- Data (appears) to be self reported so that’s subject to subjectivity, biases and human error and again, and may not be generalisable to every SME who might qualify for a DTC
- If we haven’t got comparative data from SMEs not on a DTC but in the same sector, it’s hard to discern the specific additionality of the DTC on SMEs compared to large businesses but we can make some assumptions based on existing evidence.

Sector implications

for the UK–France and UK–Germany corridors

The two corridors contain several sectors in which trade digitalisation is likely to be especially valuable.

1. Food, retail, and SPS-intensive trade

Perishable and regulated flows depend on speed, accuracy, and certification quality. The Ramsden case suggests that this is an important issue for digital corridor development as goods have to be destroyed when receiving customs reject veterinary certifications, mainly due to documentary errors, which typically occur in approximately 20% of their shipments. Benefits can be very large if regulator-facing and intermediary-facing constraints are reduced, because the current burden is high and persistent.

2. Specialist SME exports

The broader lesson from UniSim is that trade digitalisation should not be viewed solely as a tool for large-scale trade corridors or major corporates. Specialist SME exporters often face disproportionately high fixed administrative burdens. Reducing those burdens can unlock market participation and make exporting to Europe more commercially viable.

Indicative process improvements

and corridor-level implications

The findings are only based on 2 case studies and are therefore not generalisable. However they do provide a potential indication for several types of impacts.

- Administrative labour savings where document creation, checking, and communication are consolidated.
- Lower error-related delay where counterparties can validate information earlier in the process.
- Reduced communication overhead through a single shared working environment.
- Improved auditability and retrieval of shipment records for later reference or dispute resolution.
- Higher confidence for SMEs entering or expanding cross-border trade activity.

At corridor scale, these process improvements matter because they accumulate. Even when the savings on a single shipment are modest, repeated across many SME shipments they can translate into meaningful productivity gains. More importantly, the reduction in uncertainty may encourage firms to trade more often, add new routes, or engage with more complex product categories than they otherwise would.

Recommendations

The findings in this report suggest that enabling fully digitalised trade processes requires coordinated changes across the trading ecosystem rather than individual action by any one group alone. The recommendations below therefore focus on the practical conditions needed for businesses to move from hybrid, document heavy workflows to more consistent, trusted and scalable digital operations.

Prioritise shared data flows over standalone document digitalisation.

- The findings show that friction arises mainly from how information moves between parties, not simply from the existence of paper. A more digital trading ecosystem therefore needs structured, reusable data that can move across commercial, logistics and compliance processes without repeated re-entry or conversion.

Create a shared source of truth for shipment information across the trade journey.

- Both case studies point to the value of having documents and data reviewed, stored, and retrieved in one place. A shared working environment reduces version-control problems, improves auditability, and allows errors to be identified earlier before they disrupt movement.

Design digital processes around real operational workflows, including legacy handoffs and exceptions.

- Ramsden's experience shows that digitalisation does not automatically simplify trade if counterparties still rely on spreadsheets, fixed file types or manual steps. To enable full transition, digital processes must accommodate the realities of existing trade operations while reducing, rather than merely relocating, manual work.

Improve interoperability between businesses, intermediaries, and compliance touchpoints.

- The report identifies interoperability as a critical scaling issue. Businesses can only move to fully digitalised processes when freight forwarders, buyers, customs actors and certification processes can receive, use and pass on the same information without creating new workarounds.

Target remaining paper-dependent points in the process that limit end-to-end digitalisation.

- The pilots show that hybrid processes persist where customs-facing, sanitary or traceability requirements still depend on paper or narrow accepted formats. If these points are not addressed, businesses may improve preparation internally but will still be unable to realise the full efficiency gains of a digitalised end-to-end workflow.

Make the digital transition accessible for SMEs with limited operational capacity.

- The report shows that SMEs can benefit from process simplification, but they also have less time and specialist resource to absorb complex change. Transition towards fully digitalised processes therefore must be practical, low friction and accompanied with targeted guidance, technical assistance and be clearly connected to day-to-day business value if adoption is to scale.

Treat digitalisation as a process redesign and change-management task, not only a technology deployment.

- The evidence in this report suggests that adoption barriers are rarely purely technical. Businesses need confidence, onboarding and clear redesign of roles and tasks so that the new digitalised ways of working are seen as lower risk, more reliable and easier to sustain.

Use live corridor implementation to identify where ecosystem friction remains.

- A key lesson from the pilots is that live shipments reveal constraints that are not visible in principle or in policy alone. Continued practical implementation helps show whether friction sits in internal workflows, intermediary requirements, regulatory interfaces or handoffs between them.

Build towards a trusted ecosystem in digitalised systems and process become the normal way of working.

- The overall lesson is that businesses will be more likely to move away from hybrid processes when digital documents become consistently accepted by intermediaries and regulatory authorities across the whole corridor, not just inside one firm or platform. Trust, consistency and shared acceptance across the ecosystem are what ultimately allow digitalised processes to become scalable, routine and commercially viable.



Conclusion

The pilots show that trade digitalisation can save businesses time, cut paperwork and reduce the risk of delays caused by document errors. Building a supportive ecosystem and improving the conditions for behavioural change within the business community will fully unlock the benefits of trade digitalisation.

The pilot evidence used in this report does not suggest that trade digitalisation is a universal or immediate cure for every source of trade friction. However, it does show that measurable gains are already possible, especially where businesses are dealing with fragmented workflows, rework, and communication overhead. It also shows that the hard part of scale is not simply building digital tools, but ensuring that they fit with commercial practice, intermediary requirements, and regulatory expectations.

A successful digital trade corridor will not be defined by a single platform or a single policy announcement. It will be defined by whether exporters, importers, logistics providers, and authorities can move trusted data with greater speed, confidence, and consistency than they do today. That is the practical opportunity this report identifies.



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