

Building Your Digital Future

SQLI
DIGITAL
EXPERIENCE

What does digital transformation look like for a B2B merchant? SQLI looks at the changing B2B landscape and the key steps to a successful digital transformation

The need for digital transformation

Your legacy platform is too slow. You've sweat the asset for the last five years, but it has become impossible to manage. While your business has grown, you've put sticking plasters on some of the issues - but they're no longer holding everything together.

Now, teams are working in silos, simple tasks are being duplicated by different departments, customers are asking to pay online and that's before you consider the product data that's not being managed properly.

Sound familiar? If so, you're not alone. These are just some of the common pain points facing online B2B merchants today when it comes to their digital systems and infrastructure.

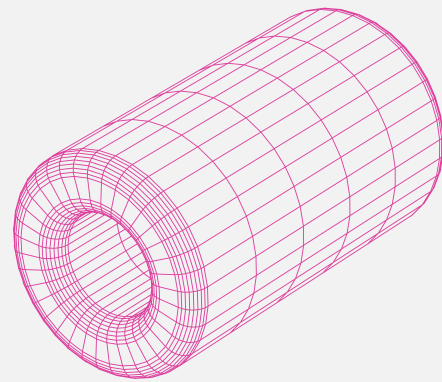
However, the B2B industry is hitting a pivotal moment. With buyers increasingly looking at online channels to

compare prices and purchase products, B2B brands are realising the value of investing in their digital systems to give their customers what they expect - seamless omnichannel experiences, incorporating easy online transactions.

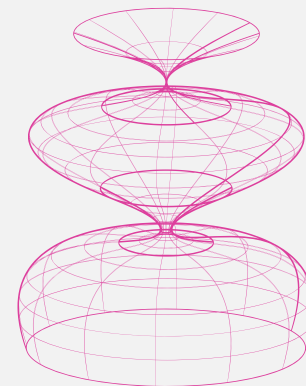
In fact, there's never been a better time for B2B merchants to future-proof their businesses, with [Gartner](#) predicting that 80 per cent of global B2B sales interactions will occur via digital channels by 2025 - as more buyers look for seller-free sales experiences.

What is the correct path for your business needs?

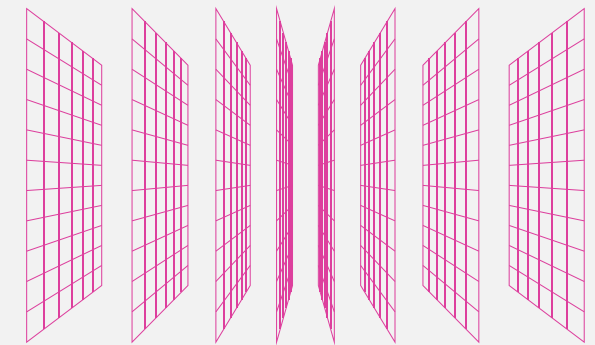
Today, digital transformation has come to mean more than just technological improvement. It can mean a change of mindset throughout the business as you modernise and update your working practices. When it comes to the architecture itself, it takes many different guises:



With components built into one **single codebase**, an all-in-one solution is seen as a lower technology investment, although this is not always the case.



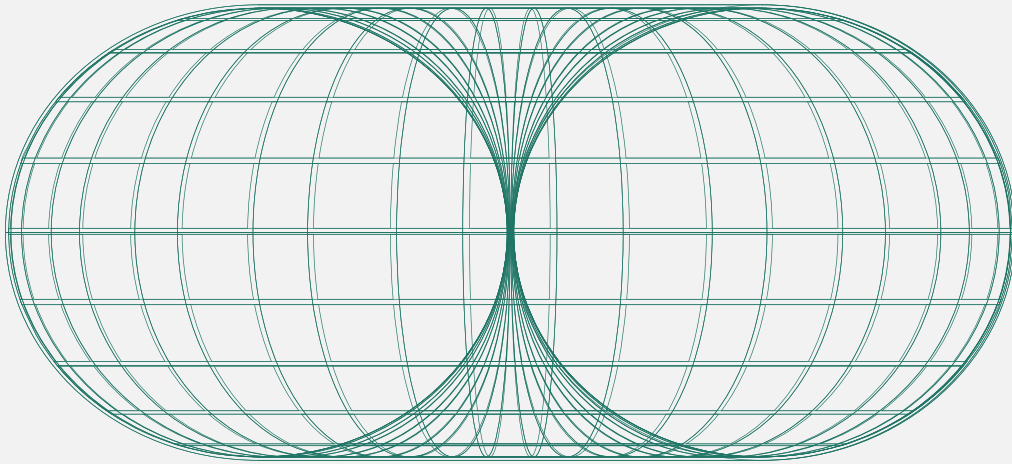
Headless architecture separates the customer-facing layer (frontends) from the commerce engine (backend), enabling independent changes and customisation without impacting each other or the overall infrastructure. With this separation, platform development and content creation are streamlined.



Composable architecture breaks down the solution into smaller parts, allowing much more of a “buffet” approach to technology, where a business selects best-of-breed commerce components to create a custom application and future-proof their business even further. Composable is based on MACH technologies – Microservices, API-First, Cloud-native and Headless.

Of course, what a business might need are some tech add-ons or new integrations. Maybe you just don't know how to make the most of the platform you already have?

Why choosing the right partner is important



A good digital agency is more than just the folks putting the nuts and bolts of your technology together.

It is there to make sure you reach the correct decision when embarking on a digital journey, ensuring your choices fit your needs and future plans from the very start of the process

Your specialist partner is also your guide throughout the process. They will help you set realistic budget requirements and timings, suggest integrations or components, support you in your data management goals, can help reposition your place in the market and provide aftercare - with experts continually considering changing market conditions and what this means to your own needs now and in the future.

Digital transformation today is a continuous process that goes beyond mere technological expertise and knowledge. It's crucial to understand that while some individual projects will finish, the digital journey is continuous.

The speed of technological and market change and how your competition reacts to it mean continuous improvement should no longer be looked at as a negative – but a necessity.

This is why choosing the right digital agency has never been more important.

In this report, SQLI will give you an insight into what to expect from your digital journey and share the thoughts and wisdom of some of our experts along the way.

Pre- Discovery

“Talk to agencies you’re considering partnering with as early as possible. Too many brands come to us with a rigid set of requirements for the project, when we could better advise them, help them push the boundaries of what is possible and realise their vision far better if we are there at the very beginning.”

Pete Youell, SQLI Group CTO

Having the answers to the right questions

For many digital agencies, B2B brands coming equipped with the answers to key questions on first contact is essential. What type of project do they want delivered? What does success look like to them? What integrations do they want? What's their timeframe and budget?

However, meeting a good agency early in the process can help you get a much better understanding of what you are taking on, enable the project to run more efficiently and realistically and more importantly, steer the process and your transformation in ways you may not have even considered.

Remember, your partner is the expert and has guided many brands through similar projects. If you are a B2B brand looking for a replatform incorporating Click & Collect for example, your chosen partner will know all the common sticking points, the timings needed with product data transferal and what is expected from your internal teams.

Then, there's the expertise of markets, cultural differences, cross border requirements and logistics – having these discussions early on can paint a very different picture of what you really need and the direction you should take.

Pete Youell SQLI's Group CTO, said: "We find we are often brought in far too late in the conversation. Bringing us in early at the inception, means we can help with market analysis, the vision, the concept and help you push the boundaries to make it a true digital transformation rather than just a technology project, that will benefit you for years to come."



Pete Youell
SQLI Group CTO

Pete continued: “We put the customer right at the centre of the project and we're going to build and scope this project as a digital experience for exactly what they need. That's the right way of doing it. What happens far too often, is it's a case of ‘here's a platform, can you make it do this, this and this?’

“Instead, it should be about the customer and building a brilliant solution or developing exactly what they need.

“It's why SQLI today is supporting so many B2B brands on a composable journey. We are building the solution around them, not the other way around. Then, it's about continually adding, improving and tweaking to ensure they never get to a point again when their platform has become impossible to manage.”

Successful transformation projects often hinge on the commitment and collaboration of the leadership team.

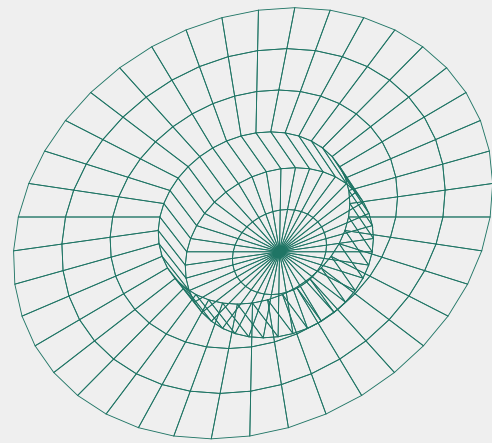
The greater the involvement of individuals in key roles, such as those responsible for transformation, the higher the likelihood of the project succeeding.

Pete Youell said: “For any development, especially with the complexity of a B2B project, we need all the teams fully-invested and able to commit the time and brainpower to support it.

“We have the processes, the knowledge, the people. But ultimately, we need the input from the business.

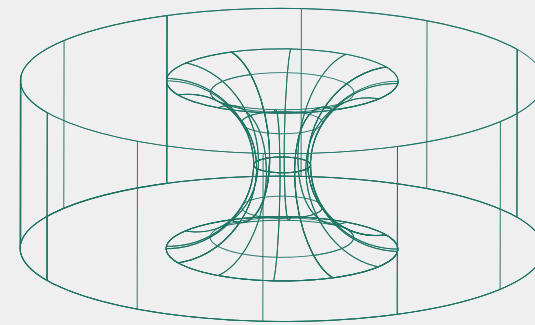
“I don't think some businesses appreciate the amount of change that a project can drive throughout the entire company, and some will suddenly sit up a month into it and realise they are making all these decisions for the marketing team and actually, marketing should be brought into the equation to make some decisions themselves.”

Before you approach a partner, ask yourself the following three questions:



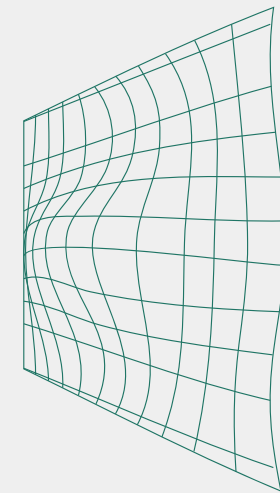
Are all areas of the business aligned on the goals of the project?

Have you had the buy-in from all the stakeholders? Are you all on the same page about what a project of this size really entails?



Do you have the internal capacity to support the project?

Will the marketing team have time to set up new images and videos? Are you aware of how much data your data engineers will need to move and how long this is likely to take?



Do you have the right budget in mind?

Where did the number come from? Is the number a top number from the board, or a realistic number of what the project will cost?

If you can answer these questions, it's time to start discussions with your digital partners.

Case Study

Bridgestone driving forward with omnichannel solution



When the world's leading rubber tire producer wanted a more dynamic digital offering, it turned to SQLI for support.

A global brand present in more than 150 countries, Bridgestone wanted to get to the next level in terms of online technology to maintain its leading European market position.

Bridgestone needed its customers to easily find available products, be able to order quickly and offer them extensive self-service functionality. The business also wanted to provide Bridgestone staff with the tools to deliver personalised customer experiences.

To meet these goals and more, SQLI implemented an omnichannel B2B solution on SAP Commerce Cloud, with SAP ERP integration.

The first roll-out was in Spain and Portugal, with other European countries following. The platform improved the customer experience and gave the company a high-performing, scalable solution with an intuitive design that seamlessly adapted to all devices.

A spokesman for Bridgestone said: "This new state-of-the-art commerce platform is one of the cornerstones in our ongoing efforts to enhance omnichannel customer support. Our primary goal is to deliver a seamless and impactful support system that will ultimately drive tyre sales."



The Discovery

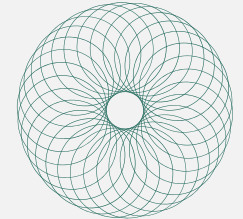
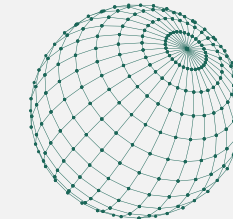
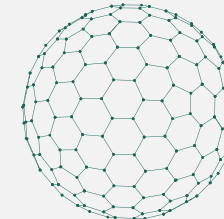
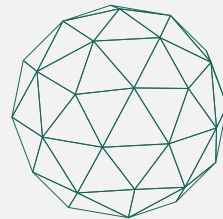
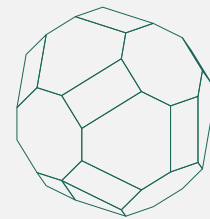
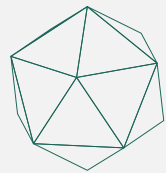
“Assessing and fixing your buyer journey is crucial to your project success. We understand the complexities of the buyer journey across multiple touch points and the importance of enabling a sustainable brand experience through people, process and tech.”

Rachel Smith, SQLI's UK & ME Managing Director

Understanding your place in the market

Where are you now, where do you want to be, what do your buyers want and need, and how do you stand out from the competition? These are just some of the questions that will come up in the discovery process.

After choosing the partner for your project, the first phase involves an in-depth period of discovery. It's an opportunity to get to know the business and determine what the customer needs, not just from a technological and digital point of view, but strategically. This process is very different from agency to agency and project to project, but can look something like this:



Understanding

The initial phase involves introductions, site visits, and experience and technical workshops to understand the business, buyer journeys, identify pain points, and discuss departmental success criteria through open and honest dialogue.

Analysing

Where do you sit in the marketplace? What do your competitors look like? What do your buyers need? Analysing the industry and landscape is a crucial ingredient to the overall success of the project and often overlooked.

Inspiring

What are the partner's insights and suggestions? What projects have they completed before that are similar and might be relevant here? What third party integrations or components make sense for this project?

Introducing

Do you know your Algolia from your Klevu? As part of some projects, a number of third-party integrations – such as search or payment solutions – may be suggested.

Creating

The design and UX teams will collaborate with the client to define the customer journey, experience principles, graphics, photography, typography, tone of voice and customer psychology. This informs how the page design, functionality and brand come together enabling the creative team to develop concept pages and wireframe layouts.

Aligning

After the discovery phase, the agency will produce a 'solution' document outlining technical, functional, and non-functional project requirements. This ensures a shared understanding of timelines, deliverables, future phases, and fixed costs. The project progresses in phases, allowing continuous improvement to ensure its success.



Rachel Smith

SQLI's UK & ME Managing Director

Rachel Smith said: "B2B is an ever-evolving landscape where buyers now demand more than just traditional, transactional exchanges. Instead, they want experiences comparable to the streamlined and personalised journey offered by B2C brands."

With an increasing number of buyers initiating their journeys online, the need for businesses to adapt has become imperative.

Rachel continued: "Our approach is centred on empowering businesses to meet and exceed these buyer expectations. We specialise in designing customer journeys that align with today's B2B demands, and understand that the journey doesn't start with the transaction but encompasses the entire spectrum from initial engagement to post-purchase interactions.

"Our methodology involves a meticulous evaluation of your current 'as is' experience. This assessment forms the foundation for crafting a forward-thinking 'to be' experience that integrates people, processes, data, and technology.

"We want to eradicate the inefficiencies and fragmentation that is inherent in traditional B2B journeys and enhance every touchpoint in the customer journey. Our goal is to propel B2B businesses towards a future where customer journeys reflect the seamless, intuitive experiences that are now the standard in today's digital world."

Project Development

“What happens during the development phase can often seem like a box-ticking exercise if you have the discovery right. But it’s much more than just coding. It’s about knowing how you’re going to translate all of this work to your customer, so they can be successful afterwards.”

- Matt O’Daly, SQLI’s UK Delivery Director

Creating your digital future

Whether you're re-platforming to an all-in-one solution, going headless or composable, or improving what you already have, the development process has many different elements to it – from the way the developers work, to how they test, review, and manage the project.

Get the discovery right and it should be plain sailing, right? Not quite. There's a lot more to it than just putting the building blocks of your project together.

It's important to match the right developers and team with the customer. It's about matching personalities and skill sets and ensuring the team in place not only delivers the project but sets up the customer for success in the future.

Is the development being documented correctly so anyone developing the site in the future can jump in and understand the processes?

Will the customer be able to use all the features when it goes live? Who needs to be trained?

Businesses should also be aware that very few projects will be completely straight forward, despite the best of intentions and a seamless discovery period. In a B2B re-platform project, for instance, the functionality may be split across five or six different platforms. These all worked 20 years ago, but now the challenge is to unpick them and give them a new lease of life.



Matt O'Daly
SQLI's UK Delivery Director

Matt O'Daly said: "A lot of the sticking points in the development phase tend to be operational, not functional.

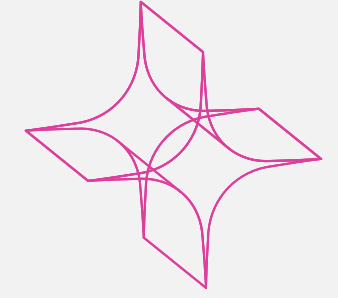
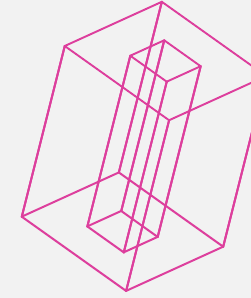
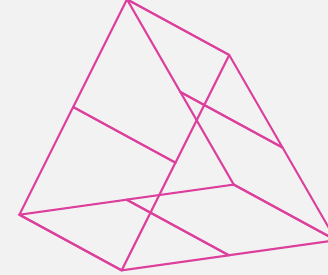
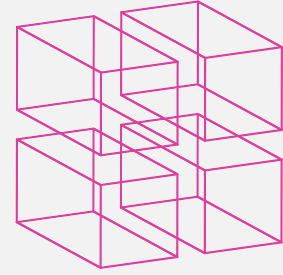
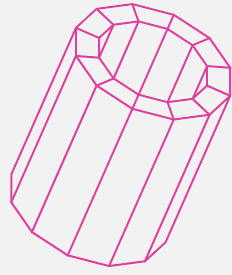
"The business might have someone who does an export of orders every week into an Excel spreadsheet and run a report off it. But it wasn't picked up in the discovery. It gets to a point in the build, and someone will say 'how do I do my order export every week?' and nobody's thought about how that data is collected or what data they need and how this is going to be incorporated into the build.

"We often find with B2B companies, the project team are focused on the functionality, but forget they need to bring a major operational stakeholder with them from the customer side into the process.

"My advice is to involve a person or group of people who know all of the operation inside out and back-to-front from the start, because if you don't, you might end up missing things which can cause chaos in the end.

"For us as an agency, it's about keeping our eyes and ears open and making sure we continually ask the right questions about how their business works so we don't miss things. It means we often end up with an untold amount of knowledge and insight on our customers, that we can then use to help them in future planning and strategy."

Although there's often overlap and project-specific dependencies, here's what you can expect:



Development

The development stage of the project itself is usually broken into 'sprint' cycles. Most customers have a fixed cost, fixed scope, and fixed timescale, which have now been agreed upon.

As well as daily calls between the project manager and client, there are retrospective demos after each sprint and discussions with the wider team, to determine successes and any issues, so lessons can be learnt and rectified before the next sprint.

Page Design

Once the client has selected their favoured concept design, given feedback, and made changes, the creative team will begin joining the concept and wireframes together and designing the pages agreed upon during the discovery phase.

These will be completed in small batches, before being presented back for review.

When all the pages have been designed, there will be a final presentation of all the designs, from mobile to desktop.

As soon as the client is satisfied, these will be handed to the development team to begin.

Project Manager

The project manager sits between the client and development team – ensuring the process runs smoothly. They will usually have been involved in sections of the discovery phase and will follow the customer relationship through until the end of the project.

They draw up the sprint plans based on the development specifications and ensure the teams have everything they need for delivery.

During development, the project manager will have daily calls with the team to check progress and understand blockers, to maintain momentum.

User Acceptance Testing

When the developers have done their part, it's time to test.

During discovery, it will be decided what the user acceptance testing will look like. Do you want to carry it out in-house, or engage an external test house?

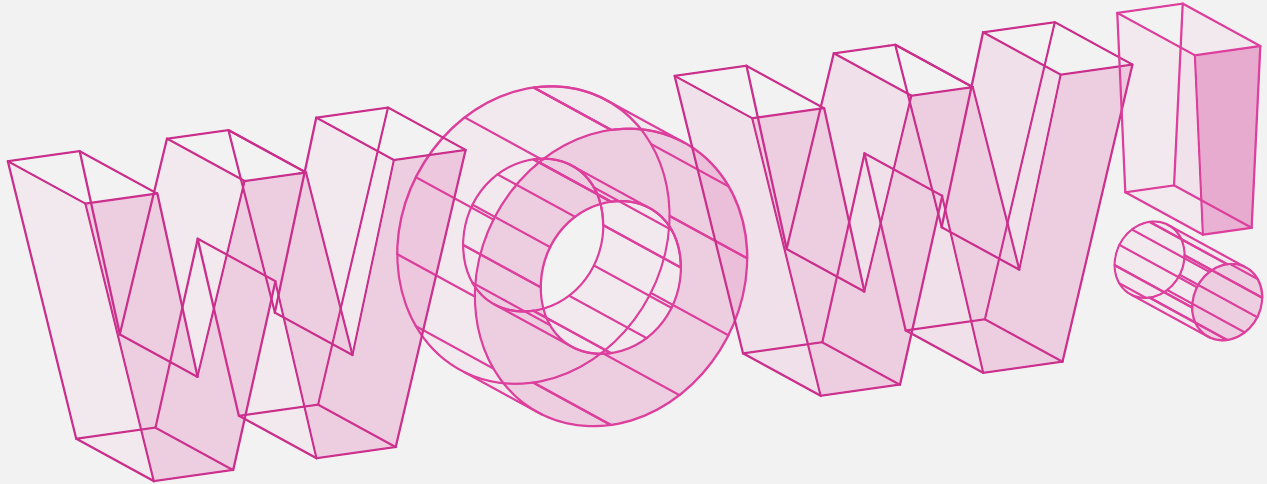
It can be a time-laborious job and a huge drain on resources, so it's important to understand this early in the process and have a plan in place.

Go Live

When all parties are satisfied, a go-live date is agreed on and a code freeze takes place where no further development takes place.

A minute-by-minute go-live plan, covering every action that is needed and by whom is put together – which can also include the customer who might oversee some areas the agency can't access.

The go-live process will often take place in the early hours of the morning to ensure limited disruption to the business.



Matt O'Daly said: "After launching the new site, users often have a '**wow**' moment as they realise how outdated their processes were and how much more efficiently, they can now complete tasks.


"I hear it all the time. Once they adapt to the new system, the speed at which they can operate is a game-changer, allowing them to focus on new business challenges.

"Going live is just the beginning of the digital transformation journey. We're committed to helping our customers maximise their solutions and avoid any future tech hiccups. It's all about staying ahead of the game and setting up everything for success."

Case Study

Working at the Sharp end of digital transformation

SHARP

A close-up photograph of a Sharp printer's control panel. The panel features a color touchscreen displaying a user interface with several large, colorful icons: 'CLOUD PORTAL' (red), 'Easy Copy' (green), 'Easy Scan' (orange), and 'Easy Fax' (blue). At the top of the screen, there are smaller icons for 'Easy Copy', 'Easy Scan', 'HDD File Restore', and 'Sharp OS'. The time '10:15 AM' is displayed in the top right corner. Below the main icons, there are smaller icons for 'Toner Quantity', 'Operation Guide', 'Printer Display Mode', 'Settings', and 'Total Counts'. The printer itself is a dark grey color.

Electronics giant Sharp Electronics Europe turned to SQLI when it came to overhauling its B2B commerce platform and future-proofing the business.

The multi-year project included replacing its legacy platform, Intershop, with a new digital solution built on Adobe Commerce to serve both Sharp's indirect and direct sales channel business, including its IT services business, print business and solar energy business across 19 countries.

With SQLI delivering the design, build and support for the new platform and phase one now completed, the partnership involves expanding across all of Sharp's European markets and channels.

The commerce project has been described as the 'next step' in a multi-million-euro modernisation programme of Sharp's customer-facing digital platforms, with the aim of transforming the customer life-cycle experience.

Jason Cort, director of product planning and marketing at Sharp, said: "We needed to update our systems to not only work for our customers today, but also for the future. Adopting digital technologies will boost our competitiveness and improve efficiency across Europe, but more importantly, will transform our customer experiences across the board.

"The Adobe platform will deliver a more consumer-orientated user experience, which is the benchmark today, and very important to our B2B customers.

"We also have the ability to scale-up as and when the business requires. Having a robust, flexible foundation like Adobe Commerce will help us keep pace with any market changes and accelerate our growth in the future."

Service Support & Growth

“It’s about building lasting relationships that go beyond a single project. We want to be part of our customers’ teams and part of the decision-making process. Working in this way gives both the customer and SQLI, a much richer experience. It means we can understand the pain points better and work together to solve them more efficiently.”

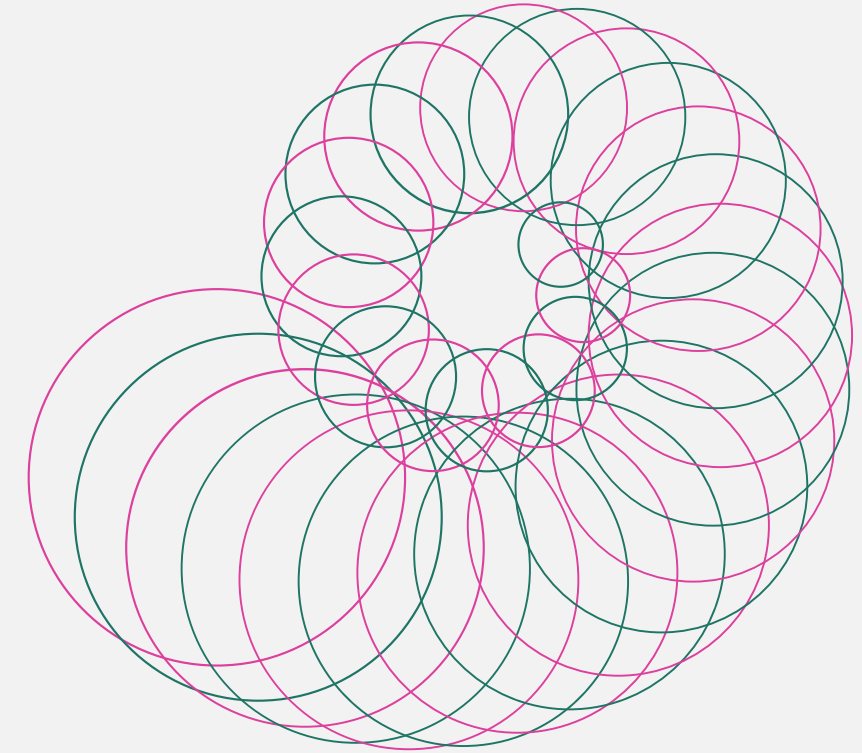
- Matt O’Daly, SQLI’s UK Delivery Director

Digital transformation never ends

Let's take a new site launch as an example. It has gone live, but what next?

During the discovery and development phases, conversations will take place about what happens after the site launch. How are you going to run the site? What happens when you need upgrades, or the site goes down? Who's your go-to person for issues that arise?

Different teams can keep your platforms ticking over and ensure they're maintained and improved upon over the short and long term.



Hypercare

Hyper Care teams can offer short bursts of intense support after launch. It can be a chaotic period when a brand goes live, with extra traffic and sales, logistical issues, or new methods of working, often making things complicated behind the scenes.

To give clients peace of mind, agencies can ensure the site is continually monitored for bugs and be on hand to ensure the change-over runs smoothly.

Matt O'Daly said: "After launch, rather than a hard-stop from our end, we have people in place to support you for all eventualities so you can stay focused. Planning ahead helps us allocate the right resources, whether it's for front-end, back-end, or platform training for the time needed. What we want to avoid is launching the site and losing all that valuable knowledge if developers move on to other projects."

BAU: 24/7 Business as Usual Support

After the Hyper Care period, the role of the BAU team is to manage the day-to-day operations of the business. Usually, a small team of dedicated developers or resources, oversee the sites, and they can be on the project anywhere from six months to a year. They make sure the sites are stable, but might suggest new features that could be added, while acting as a brand's sounding board.

For many digital businesses, the 24/7 care and test teams offer the ultimate insurance - and are the underlying foundation of the support and services operation.

They will provide continued monitoring, with automated tests and scripts running against the site - and ensuring experts are on call for your business if needed and the right people alerted if any tests fail.

Continual Improvement

With B2B brands often going through different phases of development that can last many months or years, the client management team is in place to keep their long-term vision and future plans on track.

As businesses often lack the necessary resources, the team will be your eyes and ears, an extension of your company. They can suggest upgrades, while keeping everyone informed of how this might affect other modules or plans.

More than this, is the strategic advice they can provide, often thinking out of the box, helping to stretch the imagination of the brand and the innovation that could be explored, connecting it back to the overall project aims and goals.

For the client management team, it's a case of 'what can we add to this development to make it even better. Is there new tech, or features that haven't been considered, that could really help future-proof the business further?'

How can SQLI support your business needs?

To some online retailers and businesses, digital transformation means improving their technology to better suit their needs.

However, at SQLI we believe it means so much more than this.

Collaboration and open dialogue are the cornerstones of our philosophy, helping to create long-lasting relationships.

Our teams of designers and technical experts get under the skin of the digital businesses they work with, to truly understand what makes them tick and help them make the most of their solutions and business goals.

Analysing market positioning, enables us to help brands strategise better and build the right solution and continually improve it for their needs.

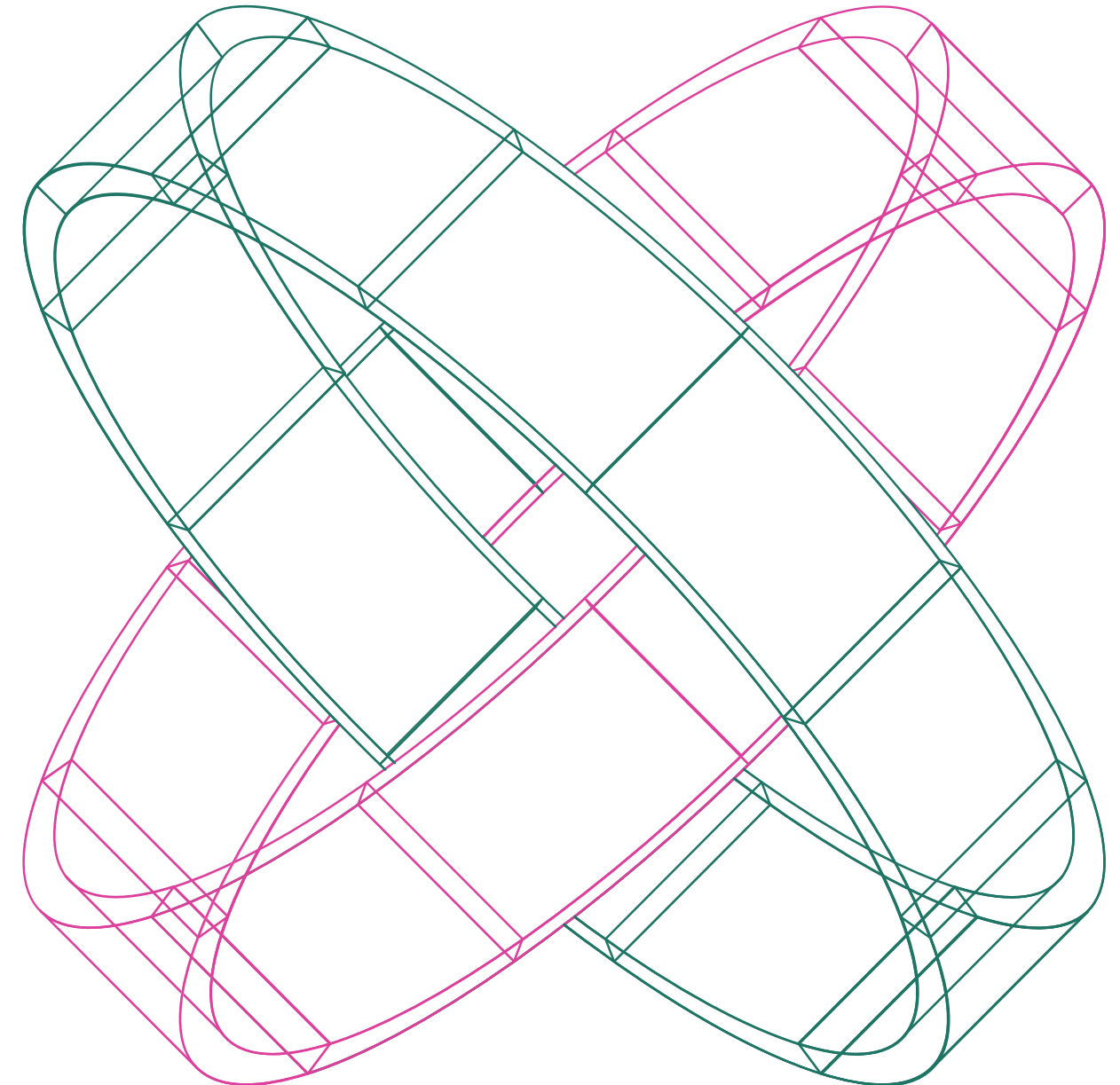
Highlighting the need for continuous improvement early on, leaves businesses in no doubt that we are in it for the long haul and will work with them to ensure they are always one step ahead of their competition.

SQLI has built digital stores, B2B and D2C solutions, and apps, for some of the biggest businesses across

the globe, including Sharp, Airbus, Nespresso, L'Oreal, Carlsberg, Fortnum & Mason, Diesel, Miele, and Adidas, to name a few.

We work with and partner with multiple platform providers and digital experts, including Adobe, SAP, Spryker, Salesforce and more, ensuring we remain impartial and fully invested in providing the best solution for each individual business and its challenges.

SQLI has more than 2,200 employees in 13 countries across Europe and the Middle East, with 1,000+ experts in technologies and digital solutions. These include dedicated teams of hundreds of developers and experts in service centres in France, Mauritius, and Morocco, with the delivery capacity to provide 69,000 days each year and 24/7 support, making SQLI one of the biggest and most experienced digital agencies covering these regions.



SQLI DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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