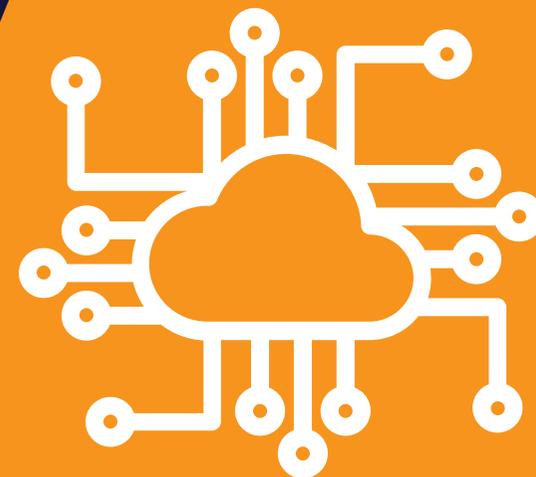


How do I use tech to get my business back on track?

As the coronavirus pandemic has made painfully clear, technology is the foundation for every modern business. During the lockdown, digital systems have provided the invaluable ability for SMEs to remain in contact with employees and customers – albeit imperfectly. At a time when many businesses are struggling economically, technology also offers a financial lifeline, allowing companies to operate faster, cheaper and more efficiently. In this guide, we have collected expert advice for actions you can take today to help implement technology in your business, so you can get back on track.



The situation



When the pandemic forced the country into lockdown, entire businesses rapidly moved from in-person to online. Although tech evangelists have long been advising us to adopt digital, online and cloud tools for everyday business operations, it was coronavirus that turned these from efficiency-boosting options into downright necessities.

As well as enabling continuity of operations, the move online has also been powered by consumer demand. Customers, concerned for their health, are increasingly turning to online shopping when they need or want something, and businesses without a presence online are missing out.

However, it's never too late – now is the perfect time to rethink your company's tech. There is a huge, thriving marketplace of digital solutions for businesses that are designed to be easy to set up and use. Many services even automate repetitive, time-consuming tasks, freeing you and your employees to focus on activities that really generate value for the business.



Who's helping?



Darren Upson

VP for small business at Soldo

Darren Upson is the VP for Small Business at Soldo. Darren has over 20 years' experience helping B2B businesses grow. Prior to joining Soldo, he was responsible for increasing the Xero subscriber base in the UK from 83,000 to over 250,000 subscribers as revenues quadrupled in under three years. In his current role, Darren is responsible for scaling the Soldo SMB customer base across Europe.



Tessa Clark

Co-founder of OLIO

Tessa Clark is a Cambridge and Stanford University Business graduate, former managing director of Dyson's e-commerce and now co-founder of OLIO, the community sharing app. She has worked in both B2B and B2C environments guiding startups and established organisations, and is passionate about sustainability, the circular economy and zero waste and believes in businesses that combine profit with purpose.



Liron Smadja

Director of local marketing and global expansion at Fiverr

Liron Smadja is a marketing expert with experience across the global technology ecosystem. He has in-depth knowledge of growing innovative businesses from the ground up. He's currently Director Global Expansion Marketing at Fiverr.



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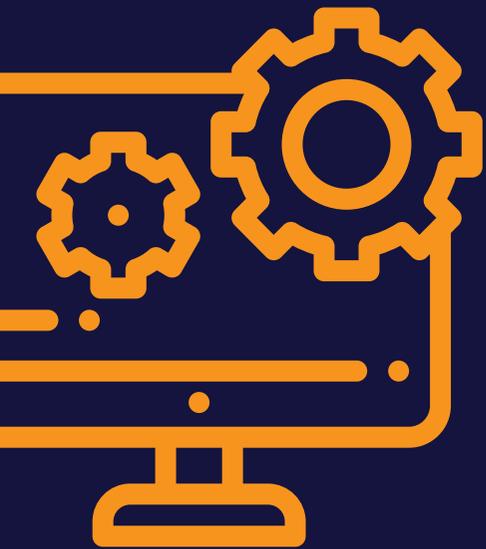
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How do I use tech to get my business back on track?



Chapter 1:

Using tech to develop a lean operation



Over time, businesses accumulate outdated processes, costs, and technologies. While it's often possible to sustain a little bit of extra fat, times of crisis are also an opportunity to strip things down to the bare necessities. When you do, you'll find that a lean, well organised SME is a force to be reckoned with. The ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances and seize on new opportunities before larger competitors will be key for SMEs as the recovery begins.

Determine your focus

The first step toward building a leaner organisation is to identify the company's focus and what work creates value. While every business should do this periodically, the radical changes to the landscape recently mean that every business should be doing this right now. Consider which elements of the business are no longer appropriate and which may have become more important. Once you have identified the core of your business, it is simpler to strip away excess. Some non-value creating processes will be necessary to keep clients satisfied and projects moving smoothly, but others may simply be leftovers that you've accumulated over time.

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Consider which elements of the business are no longer appropriate and which may have become more important.



Use data to identify opportunities and inefficiencies

Your business already accumulates tonnes of data and putting it into perspective should make it simple to spot. According to Darren: “The success of modern businesses often comes down to accumulating and managing solid data. Without accurate numbers, it’s harder to cut waste, budget accurately and make informed big-picture decisions.” Putting this into practice doesn’t need to be complicated, you can start by looking at your monthly expenses ordered from largest to smallest, and asking whether there are cheaper alternatives for any of the high-cost items – or whether any can be cut altogether.

Automate tedious tasks

Tessa says: “You may feel absolutely swamped doing all the small tasks that are essential to keep the lights on, but if you take a moment to step back, you can recognise that many of them are repetitive tasks that could easily be automated. Automation has a critical role to play in small businesses as they enable you to

swap out low value repetitive activities with much higher value activities such as developing the company strategy, products, or spending time with customers.”

Make the most of technology

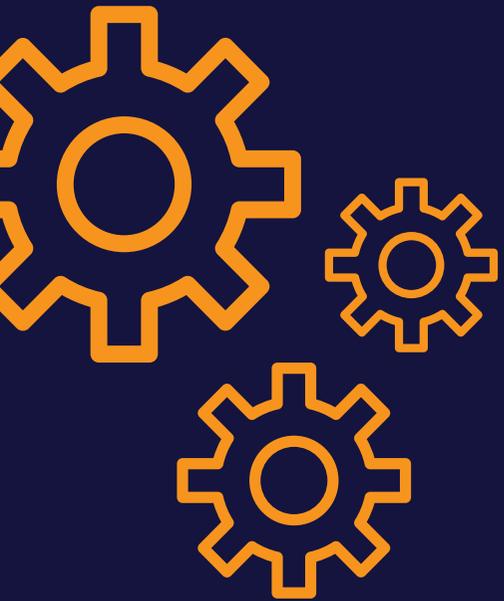
At the end of the day, it’s humans that run your business, not technology, so you need to ensure that any tools and services you implement have robust processes to back them up. Darren recommends that businesses ensure staff are up to speed with how the technology works. If the platform is there but it’s not being used properly, it won’t be making your business lean. This means investing some time in training. If you don’t have cash to invest, there are plenty of free resources on the internet.



Lean business checklist

- Understand what areas of the business generate value
- Collate your data in one place so it’s easy to review
- Use data to identify areas to cut
- Identify repetitive tasks that are easy to automate such as filing expenses, managing stock, and engaging customers with special offers
- Train staff to make the most of technology

Chapter 2: Choosing technology for your workplace



In a hasty effort to keep the business running early on in the lockdown, most of us turned to the technology products we saw. Now, as things have settled somewhat and we recognise that this is the new normal, it's time to revisit the tools we have chosen and consider whether they're truly fit for purpose. However, with so many platforms, apps, and services to choose from, identifying the right technology for your business's needs can feel overwhelming. Let's look at some common questions.

With a lot on my plate, is it really the time to adopt new tech?

As Tessa says: "Adopting new technology can be a little bit like getting married or having kids – there's never a good time to do it, but at some point you just need to crack on and make it happen. The time invested in scoping your requirements, researching the options available, selecting a provider and then implementing in the business can feel like precious time expended that you just can't afford. However, it's worth bearing in mind that whilst it can feel like it's taking you two steps backwards, the reality is that well-implemented technology will almost certainly take you at least ten steps forward."

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What needs my attention first?

You don't need to overhaul your entire business at once, according to Darren, but instead, identify the pain points or opportunities to cut unnecessary expense or effort. "Decide which areas of the business could benefit most. Ask yourself where the most time and money could be saved and look for products and services with a small learning curve so the team can get to grips quickly." Are you out of pocket spending on clients? Consider investing in client relationship management software. Are you stuck with excess stock? Consider inventory management software.

What about communication tech?

Reach out to the team to see what they like and dislike about the current system. While video-call software may have worked as a quick fix for everything early in the pandemic, it may now be worth adopting additional tools to make complex collaboration more efficient. Try online task managers, time trackers, and collaborative document editing software – many offer free trials.

Liron notes that the risk with remote working is that people become disconnected and lose the serendipity of the office environment that helps keep lines of communication strong. "Just think how many times bumping into someone in the kitchen has led to the birth of a new project or a critical course correction. All employers will need to make sure their employees and freelancers feel like they have strong lines of communication for questions and feedback."

Isn't new technology expensive?

The latest technology certainly can be expensive, but in the competitive business technology market, there are plenty of affordable and free options. Consider the time and effort that technology could save you, and weigh that against the price tag. It's also important to maximise your use of the technology you already have. If you pay for Microsoft Office, for instance, you have access to the video-calling and business chat app Teams at no additional cost.



Small savings add up

Small, seemingly inconsequential administrative tasks can add up quickly. Darren offers the example of expenses: "If your employees are manually submitting expense reports and receipts, this uses up a huge amount of company time. Research we conducted in 2019 found that the average employee spends 20 minutes per week submitting expense claims. This is equivalent – across the UK SME community as a whole – to more than 1.4m hours per week, or 189,146 working days. Although I've used business expense management as an example, the principle of automation and tech adoption holds true across every section of the business. It will save time by offering a more efficient alternative to the old process, and free up employee time and energy to direct toward more important tasks."

Chapter 3:

Selling online: what to consider



Selling online is a great way to continue to reach customers while distancing regulations and health concerns limit footfall to your physical store. For many SMEs, creating an online shop has been a perennial to-do list item, but now is the perfect time to finally check it off. As Liron says: “It’s likely that business won’t be returning to the old in-person standard for quite some time. Think strategically for the short, medium, and long-term. Adapting effectively now could ensure your success for years – if not decades – to come.”

1. Do your homework

Research costs nothing, so get online and start looking at what platforms are available, what goods are popular online, and how they’re priced. Work out where you want online selling to fit in your business plan. Be prepared to learn by making mistakes. Liron says: “You likely won’t get everything right first time. But, like anything in business, you need to adapt, change, and course correct as you go.”

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2. Choosing a channel

You don't need programming expertise to set up an online store – there are dozens of ecommerce platforms and website-building services that do all the heavy lifting. Finding the right one for your business depends on the type of business you run, but all SMEs should start by asking:

- What services are your competition using?
- What comes up when you search for your product and location online?
- What fees do you have to pay to sell with each service? Is it a flat rate?
- How do they handle payment processing? Do you need to handle these yourself?

Depending on how much you want to pay and how much control you hope to maintain over your ecommerce store, you should be able to narrow down your options.

3. Calling in support

Liron reminds SME leaders that they don't have to move their operation online all by themselves. He says: "It's a good idea to reach out to your professional networks to ask for advice and tips on getting started, and you'll find digital resources and video content can prove incredibly useful. Consider how much of your own time you should spend trying to figure out something you've never done before. If you feel it's a useful skill to have in the long run, then invest the time to learn – there are great videos on YouTube. But if you just need to get set up quickly, hiring freelancers to help could be the best route."

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4. Learn a little bit about online marketing

If you're new to ecommerce, it's worth investing a bit of time to learn the ropes. Online marketplaces are inundated with newcomers making rookie mistakes at the moment due to coronavirus, so presenting yourself professionally is a major differentiator. Similarly, some savvy online marketing can go a long way to attracting clicks in a crowded market – try Google's free [Digital Garage](#) courses and [Semrush's digital marketing courses](#) to get an edge.



5. Try social selling

According to Liron, social selling consists of finding potential customers and establishing a rapport with them using digital platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook. He adds that while social selling is a relatively new addition to the sales funnel, it's becoming increasingly widespread as it can deliver great results. According to Hootsuite, 78 per cent of salespeople engaged in social selling are outselling their peers who are not. To learn more, check out HubSpot's [free guide to social selling](#). Meanwhile, social sites like Instagram are continuing to make it easier to sell directly on the site, so by staying savvy you could beat competitors to market.

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Online selling checklist

- Know where online selling fits in your business plan
- Choose the right platform for your products
- Be aware of the fine print – know how much you're paying the platform
- Prepare the resources you'll use to send out products
- Create your online storefront, brand it to match your business
- Inform customers about the new online store on your website and social media
- Review your numbers, see what's working and what isn't
- Adjust and adapt your plans accordingly

Chapter 4:

Social media and virtual events



We've covered selling online, but there's more to ecommerce than setting up shop and hoping for the best. You need to get the attention of prospective customers and guide them toward your products, and the best ways to do that are through social media and virtual events.

Liron believes that virtual events are becoming increasingly common since lockdown started. And even though restrictions are starting to lift, their popularity will likely continue whilst large gatherings of people are not possible. Video conferencing tools are a simple way of talking to large numbers of people from the comfort of home.

However, an online sales strategy is an ongoing process, not a one-off. Liron continues: "You also need to think about how these events are powering your sales funnel. One event in isolation won't do much – but when used as part of a broader strategy that includes social content, mail outs, direct messages and more, they can super-charge your lead generation and down-funnel sales. This strategic approach need not be too complicated, the important thing is to focus on doing what you're good at."

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Online presence checklist

People will want to find your business online, especially during the lockdown.

Every modern business needs:

-  A website with information and a way of contacting the business
-  A google business profile
-  At least one account on a relevant social media platform, ideally multiple

Beyond the necessities, businesses can also consider:

-  More extensive, interactive social accounts
-  Interacting with online reviewers
-  A video presence
-  An email newsletter
-  Personalised offers for dedicated customers

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This strategic approach need not be too complicated, the important thing is to focus on doing what you're good at.





Chapter 5: Digital skills: upskilling employees for a new reality



The exact nature of the near future remains unclear, but technology and online work are clearly the way forward. This shift may feel intimidating, but there are plenty of resources to help you and your staff get up to speed.

Using online resources

You and your employees aren't the only ones looking to learn more about where technology fits in the business, and that's why there is a profusion of online resources available – many for free or at little cost. During the lockdown in particular, and going forward, many tech platforms and tools have been hosting online seminars for beginners to cater to this virtual crowd. Giving your staff the time to develop their skill set is a small investment in the short term that will quickly pay dividends.

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Sharing internal expertise

There's also a completely free option that many businesses overlook: your employees may already have significant experience that they can share within the company. Internal training sessions can be tailored to fit the needs of the moment – in our case, adapting to coronavirus – and delivered at short notice. Video conferencing makes it easy to guide a session remotely, while screen-sharing is ideal for demonstrating how to use software in real-time

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Freelancers

Full-time staff are going to be your top priority in the immediate term, notes Liron, but as the workspace moves forward, you may find it becomes much easier to branch out into other areas by hiring digital freelancers instead of new staff. “This can keep you agile in a fast-moving world and allow you to test new revenue streams without breaking the bank on new full-time hires. Digital freelancers are also very used to working remotely as they were doing it as a matter of course well before the coronavirus crisis. So for them, the ‘new normal’ is just, well, normal.”

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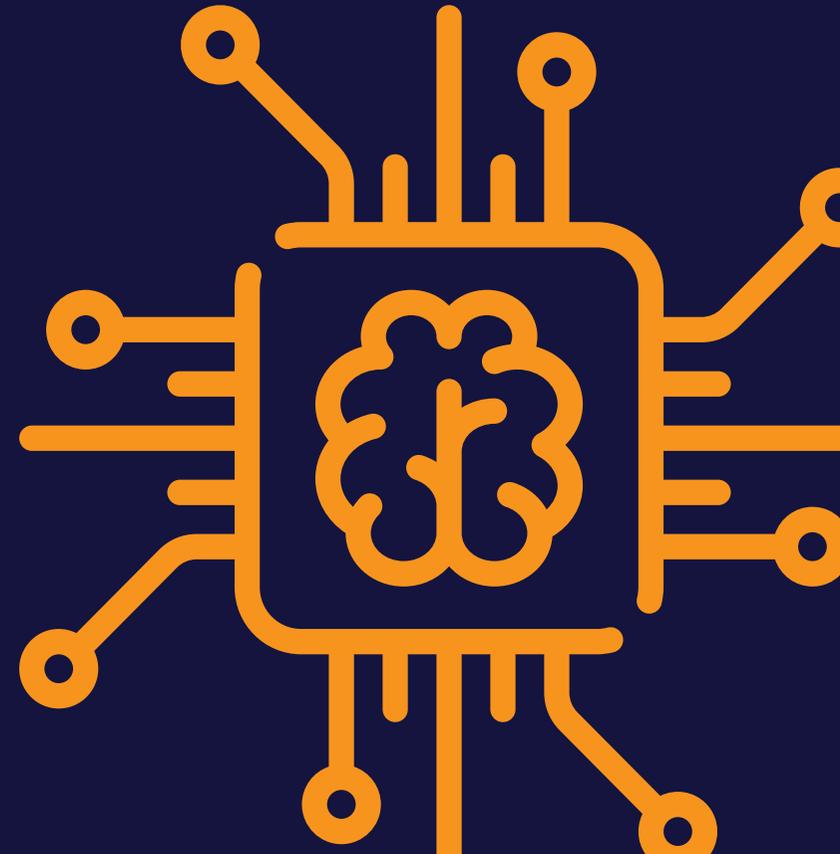
Preparing for the future



As technology continues to advance at a rapid pace, SMEs will have access to an ever more extensive world of technological solutions to regular business problems. You are in the driver's seat when it comes to using technology as a force to survive, rebuild, and grow beyond the current circumstances.

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Whatever your objective, whether it is achieving rapid, scalable growth or just spending less time on paperwork, there is a good chance that business technology could help.



About Be the Business



Be the Business is a small, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to boosting productivity among UK businesses.

We're doing it by helping leaders of small to mid-sized firms do what you do best: improve, innovate and inspire.

In response to the coronavirus outbreak, we created Rebuild. It provides free expert advice on recovery tactics, stories from your peers and access to like-minded people to bounce your ideas off.

Business leaders told us they need practical support in six priority areas – so that's what we've done. In each topic section on Rebuild you'll get a range of articles, videos, guides (like the one you've just read) and other accessible support. Start with the topic that meets your company's challenges and remember, it's the small steady steps that are going to count.

Subscribe to our fortnightly Rebuild newsletter and you'll be sure to get all our content first, including more guides like this one.

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