ICC United Kingdom

In partnership with

DTT DIGITAL TRADE TESTBED

Are you ready to trade digitally?

Five steps to grow your exports and trade smarter

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Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade

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Why digital trade matters

International trade offers UK businesses opportunities to reach new customers, enter new markets and grow. Whether you manufacture machinery, make specialist products or send small consignments overseas, the way businesses trade is changing.



New digital tools can help you find opportunities, respond to customers and manage international shipments more efficiently. Customers, freight providers, banks and authorities increasingly need accurate information they can trust and share electronically. Getting this right can help you win business, reduce costs and become more competitive.

You don't need to have everything in place to get started.

You don't need to be a technology expert or replace your existing systems either. Start with a real business opportunity, identify what could work better and take practical steps towards improvement.

Why get ready?

Exporting can open the door to new customers, greater growth and stronger business performance. ONS research found that UK exporters were, on average, 28.5% more productive than non-exporters, after accounting for observed business differences.[1]

Meanwhile, reported AI use among UK businesses rose from 9% in 2023 to 30% in 2026, and 29% among businesses with fewer than 10 employees, showing how quickly businesses of all sizes are adopting new tools.[2]

But digital trade depends on reliable information and the people using it. Not every customer, bank or freight provider can work digitally yet. This guide will help you identify where to start, involve the right partners and test improvements that deliver value.

Digital trade in practice

Burnley-based engineering manufacturer **Fort Vale**, which exports around 90% of its products worldwide, participated in a UK–Singapore digital trade shipment involving specialist valves. By replacing paper-based shipping processes with digital documentation, the project demonstrated opportunities to reduce administration, improve security and lower the risk of delays when serving overseas customers. **The shipment was reported to have cut paperwork by more than 85%.**[3,4]



Five practical steps to help your business grow internationally

Whether you're preparing for your first overseas sale or already exporting regularly, these five steps will help you identify opportunities, improve how your business trades and prepare for what's next.

YOUR FIVE STEPS		WHAT THEY MEAN FOR YOUR BUSINESS
01	**Find the opportunity**	Find new customers, markets and partners to grow your exports.
02	**Make your business easy to trust**	Give customers and trading partners confidence to work with you.
03	**Get your data ready**	Get your business and product information right, ready to use again and again.
04	**Make your trade flow**	Reduce paperwork, errors and delays so you can trade more efficiently.
05	**Innovate to compete**	Use new tools and smarter ways of working to stand out, grow and compete.

Your quick readiness check

01 Find the opportunity

- [ ] We know which customers, markets or partners we want to develop.

02 Make your business easy to trust

- [ ] We can confirm our own business details and those of key trading partners.
- [ ] We protect trade information with appropriate access controls and secure sharing.

03 Get your data ready

- [ ] We keep accurate product and customer information in a reliable place.
- [ ] We know who is responsible for keeping important trade information up to date.

04 Make your trade flow

- [ ] We can describe the journey from order to payment for one shipment.
- [ ] We know where information is copied, delayed or corrected.
- [ ] We have asked key partners which digital documents or formats they can accept.

05 Innovate to compete

- [ ] We can name one problem to fix and how we will measure success.
- [ ] We have someone responsible for improving how we trade, with the support to make changes.
- [ ] The people involved in our orders and shipments help identify what could work better.

Where should you start?



New to exporting?

Start by identifying a market, customer or opportunity.

Already exporting?

Look at where information is repeated, delayed or corrected.

Ready to innovate?

Explore a practical improvement with a willing trading partner.

You don't need to tackle everything at once. Use the five steps to understand what your business needs, then choose where to begin.

01

Find the opportunity

Find the right markets, customers and partners to grow your trade.

Digital readiness should serve a commercial goal. You might want to win a new overseas customer, make repeat orders easier, improve reliability or reduce the cost of serving a market.

What to do

- [ ] Write down one market, customer group or trading relationship you want to develop.
- [ ] Ask what makes it difficult to trade with that market today: paperwork, payments, delivery, customs or finding partners.
- [ ] Check what export advice, market information and introductions are available through the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (BIST) and your local Chamber of Commerce.
- [ ] Consider how new overseas customers will find your business and what information will help them choose you.
- [ ] Choose one real order or potential transaction to use throughout this guide.

Your outcome

One clear commercial opportunity and the main trade obstacle standing in its way.

02

Make your business easy to trust

Be clear about who you are, know who you are trading with and check that your partners can use the same digital approach.

Banks, customers, suppliers and customs agents need accurate details about the businesses involved. A brand name, delivery address and legal buyer may be different. Getting these details right helps avoid confusion and repeated checks, while credible product information and secure processes can give customers and partners confidence to do business with you.

Accurate documents, sensible access controls and secure sharing help others rely on what you send. Digital processes are only useful if the relevant partners can participate. Trust also means knowing that important trade information is genuine. For example, can your customer or bank confirm who issued an invoice, purchase order or certificate, whether it is still valid and whether the sender is authorised to act? Agree how important information and unexpected changes will be checked.

02

What to do

- [ ] Check your legal business name, registered address, company number and VAT/EORI details where applicable.
- [ ] Record the legal names and relevant registration details of your main customers and suppliers.
- [ ] Keep the buyer, invoice recipient and delivery destination distinct where they differ.
- [ ] Check who is authorised to act for your business and what your customs agent or forwarder submits on your behalf.
- [ ] Check who can view or change sensitive trade records; use strong passwords, multi-factor authentication and secure sharing where appropriate.
- [ ] Ask your partners and bank whether they can accept electronic documents for this trade route.

Your outcome

Consistent identity information and confidence about who is involved in each transaction.

A note on electronic documents

An everyday electronic invoice or PDF is different from certain trade documents, such as an electronic bill of lading, that can carry legal rights over goods. The UK Electronic Trade Documents Act 2023 allows qualifying electronic trade documents to have the same legal effect as paper versions, provided specific legal requirements are met. Check that your trading partners, banks and relevant overseas authorities can accept the proposed approach.[5]

03

Get your data ready

Get important information right at source so it can be used again and again.

Think "capture once, check carefully, reuse many times". Accurate information about your products, customers and transactions, including specifications, certificates and traceability details where relevant, underpins invoices, packing lists, customs entries and payments. You can begin with a well-managed spreadsheet or existing software if that is what works for your business.

Digital trade in practice

UK fruit importer Melon & Co changed how it managed customs entries, using digital tools to reduce its reliance on traditional intermediaries. ICC United Kingdom's *Seizing the moment* report estimated annual savings of approximately **£174,000 — equivalent to 10–15% of the company's annual pre-tax profit**. It demonstrates how improving everyday trade processes can have a meaningful impact on business costs and profitability.[6]

Good product information also makes it easier to respond to customer enquiries, demonstrate compliance with buyer requirements and enter new markets.

03

What to do

- [ ] Create or update a master product list: description, commodity code, origin, weight, unit value and any required licences or certificates.
- [ ] Check commodity codes and applicable rules using the UK Trade Tariff or qualified advice.
- [ ] Maintain one reliable list of customers and suppliers.
- [ ] Agree who updates each list and how changes are checked.
- [ ] Give someone clear responsibility for checking changes and correcting errors, even if this is part of an existing role.
- [ ] Stop copying critical details from old emails and outdated documents.

Your outcome

Information that is accurate, consistent and easier to reuse across your trade documents.

04

Make your trade flow

Start with the friction, and use tools as needed to reduce repeated work.

Choose one recent shipment and follow it from quote to payment. A physical shipment depends on information moving between the exporter, customer, freight provider, customs agent and bank. Note who does each step, which documents are used and where information is re-entered, chased or corrected. Look for improvements in your current accounting, order-management or document systems before purchasing something new.

The same product and shipment details may be needed for an invoice, packing list, freight booking and customs declaration. Keeping that information consistent can reduce repeated entry, corrections and avoidable delays. The objective is to make the information supporting goods trade more reliable and easier to reuse, not simply to replace paper documents with PDFs.

Check that it works for everyone involved

Before choosing a digital approach, ask:

- Who creates the information?
- Who needs it next?
- Can they check it and use it without typing it in again?
- Will it work with the systems they already use?

If a partner cannot accept a digital approach yet, you can still improve your own information and processes. Record what is preventing the change and seek advice from your forwarder, bank or relevant trade support organisation. Avoid investing in technology that your trading partners cannot use. Different organisations do not need the same software, but they must be able to receive, check and use the information. Some barriers may depend on customers, banks, carriers or government authorities rather than your business alone.[7]

04



Explore what TradeTech could offer your business

Specialist digital trade solutions can help connect systems, exchange electronic documents and make international trading processes simpler and more efficient. The ICC United Kingdom TradeTech Directory provides a useful starting point for exploring available technologies and providers.

Start with a clear business need and consider whether a solution will work with your existing systems and trading partners, what it will cost and the value it could deliver. The Directory is a resource for exploring options, rather than a recommendation of any particular supplier.

04

What to do

- [ ] Map one transaction: quote → order → invoice → packing → transport → customs → delivery → payment.
- [ ] Mark hand-offs between your business, customer, forwarder, customs agent and bank.
- [ ] Identify the biggest delay, error or repeated entry.
- [ ] Check whether existing systems can create consistent invoices, packing lists or shared records.
- [ ] Ask partners what formats they use and whether a small change would help information flow.
- [ ] Identify one willing trading partner with whom you could safely test a change.
- [ ] Estimate today's time, cost or error rate so you have a baseline.

Your outcome

One clearly defined bottleneck and a practical improvement that can reduce errors and repeated work, support more reliable deliveries, protect margins and help you handle more orders without unnecessary administration.

The UK Government reports that its digital trade corridor pilots on active trade routes show potential to save time, cut paperwork and reduce document-related delays; outcomes depend on the process and partners involved.[8]

05

Innovate to compete

Test a new way of working, prove its value and scale what helps your business.

Innovation does not have to mean a major new platform. It could mean producing documents from reliable data, exchanging an accepted electronic trade document or making shipment information easier to share. The best first project is small enough to test safely and linked to a clear commercial benefit.

What could we do differently that would make customers more likely to choose us?

Innovation is not just about doing the same work faster. Responding quickly to overseas enquiries, providing reliable product information, meeting customer requirements and offering better visibility of orders and deliveries can make your business easier to work with. New digital tools, including AI, can help businesses build these capabilities without large specialist teams.

Explore AI-assisted research to identify export markets, examine customer requirements or prepare multilingual product information; use reliable product data to generate consistent invoices and supporting trade documents; or use existing business software to automate repetitive activities and share information more effectively with trading partners. These are opportunities to explore, not automatic improvements: important commercial information and regulatory requirements still need appropriate human verification.

Being able to show that you manage information reliably and can work digitally with partners may help build confidence with prospective customers. Test, prove and scale: measure your starting point, demonstrate the value of an improvement and assess it before making substantial investment.

05

What to do

- [ ] Choose one improvement for one shipment, customer or partner.
- [ ] Agree the measure of success: preparation time, errors, costs, delays or time to payment.
- [ ] Check any legal, security, customer or banking requirements before using electronic documents.
- [ ] Run the trial with your partner, keeping an agreed fallback process.
- [ ] Compare the result with your baseline and capture what you learned.
- [ ] Record what the trial shows about your readiness, including any remaining security, data or partner gaps.
- [ ] Before expanding, check that the improvement works reliably for repeat orders, that partners can continue using it and that the costs and benefits still make sense for more customers or shipments.

Your outcome

One practical innovation to test, a clear measure of its commercial value and an understanding of how it could help your business compete or grow.

Your one-page action plan

Opportunity or customer we want to support:

What we will test first:

The one trade problem we want to fix:

How we will measure success:

What business benefit are we aiming for?

For example: new overseas customers or markets; better profitability; more reliable deliveries; reduced administration; or greater confidence with trading partners.

Who will lead this improvement, who needs to be involved, and when will we start?

People or partners we need to involve:

How we will protect and check the information:

What's next?

Every business starts somewhere



Use your action plan to identify one opportunity or improvement worth exploring, involve the right people and take a practical first step. Focus on what could help your business grow, improve profitability or trade more effectively, and build on what works.

The **Digital Trade Accelerator** is a capability-building programme being developed by the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade in partnership with Teesside University and ICC United Kingdom. It will help UK businesses understand how emerging technologies, trusted digital information and smarter ways of working could help them find overseas opportunities, reduce unnecessary costs and trade internationally more easily.

The programme could include practical demonstrations, peer learning, guidance and tools, readiness support and connections to digital trade expertise.

Help shape practical support for digital trade

We're designing the programme now. Register your interest and tell us where you would value support.

Follow this link or scan the QR code to complete the form.

Where to get help

Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (BIST)

Export advice, market guidance and business support through Business.gov.uk. Contact the Export Support Service for practical advice, or access free webinars and training through the Business Academy. Guidance on electronic trade documents is also available, along with government research on how SMEs and intermediaries use electronic trade documents and how their adoption can be supported. Ask about support from BIST International Trade Advisers.

ICC United Kingdom

Explore digital trade resources and the TradeTech Directory to understand available technologies and providers. Consider solutions based on your business needs, costs and compatibility with trading partners, rather than any particular supplier.

Teesside University Digital Trade Testbed (DTT)

Explore opportunities to learn about, demonstrate and test new digital trade approaches. Find out more and enquire.

ICC Digital Standards Initiative

The Digital Trade Navigator offers practical guidance, learning resources and information about digital trade standards.

ICC Academy

Training and professional development covering international trade, trade finance and digital trade.

HMRC UK Trade Tariff

Check commodity codes, duties and taxes and understand requirements for moving goods across borders.

Your local Chamber of Commerce

Practical export support, documentation services, business introductions and access to international networks. Find your local Chamber.

Your freight forwarder, customs agent and bank

Discuss the information and documents needed for your shipments, accepted digital formats and opportunities to improve existing processes.

Jargon buster

AI (artificial intelligence) — Technology that can analyse information, generate content and help automate tasks. Important outputs should still be checked.

Commodity code — A number used to classify goods for customs purposes and help determine applicable duties and rules.

Country of origin — The country where goods are considered to have been made or produced under the relevant origin rules. This is not necessarily the country they are shipped from.

Customs declaration (or customs entry) — Information submitted to customs authorities about goods being imported or exported.

Digital trade — Using digital information, documents and systems to help businesses trade internationally.

Digital trade corridor — An international trade route where businesses and partners test or use digital processes to exchange trade information.

Electronic trade document — A trade document created, held or exchanged electronically. Certain documents can have the same legal effect as paper under specific legal requirements; an ordinary PDF does not automatically qualify.

EORI (Economic Operators Registration and Identification) — A registration number used to identify businesses for relevant customs activities.

Freight forwarder / customs agent — A freight forwarder helps arrange the movement of goods. A customs agent helps prepare and submit customs declarations.

Master product list — A reliable, up-to-date record of important product details used across orders, invoices, shipping and customs documents.

Multi-factor authentication (MFA) — An extra security check when accessing a system, such as confirming a login using an authentication app or code.

Packing list — A document describing the contents of a shipment, including quantities, packages and often weights.

TradeTech — Technology designed to help businesses manage and improve international trade processes, such as documents, shipping, customs and trade finance.

Traceability — The ability to track a product's origin, history or movement using reliable records.

VAT (Value Added Tax) — A tax on goods and services, relevant to invoicing and certain import and export requirements.

About the partners

ICC United Kingdom

ICC is the world's largest business organisation representing 45 million companies with 1 billion employees in over 170 countries. The International Chamber of Commerce is the only business organisation with UN Observer Status and acts as a leading voice for business at the UN, G7, G20, World Trade Organization and other major international institutions. ICC United Kingdom is the representative voice for ICC in the UK and provides a mechanism for UK industry to engage effectively in shaping international policy, standards and rules. We are the leading voice on digital trade ecosystems, and Co-Chair the B2B Cluster for the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda.

Teesside University Digital Trade Testbed (DTT)

A £3.5 million research and innovation facility at Teesside International Airport, led by Teesside University in partnership with Tees Valley Combined Authority, ICC United Kingdom and the International Centre for Digital Trade and Innovation. The Testbed brings businesses, government and technology providers together to develop, demonstrate and test practical digital trade solutions, helping make international trade simpler, more efficient and better connected.

Evidence and sources

1 Office for National Statistics (14 August 2025), "Trade and productivity in British firms: 2005 to 2022": https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/productivitymeasures/articles/tradeandproductivityinbritishfirms/2005to2022. The 28.5% estimate compares exporters of goods and/or services with non-exporters after controlling for observable characteristics; it is an association rather than proof of causation.

2 Office for National Statistics (8 October 2026), "Business insights and impact on the UK economy": https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/businessservices/bulletins/businessinsightsandimpactontheukeconomy/8october2026. The AI measure concerns UK business adoption generally, not digital trade specifically.

3 UK Government (2023), "World's first fully digitalised goods shipment sent from Burnley in billion pound Brexit boost for British businesses": https://www.gov.uk/government/news/worlds-first-fully-digitalised-goods-shipment-sent-from-burnley-in-billion-pound-brexit-boost-for-british-businesses

4 British Chamber of Commerce Singapore (2023), "BritCham supports the world's first entirely digitalised cross-border movement of goods": https://www.britcham.org.sg/news/britcham-supports-worlds-first-digitalised-cross-border-movement-of-goods (Member login required)

5 Electronic Trade Documents Act 2023: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/38/contents

6 ICC United Kingdom (2024), Seizing the moment: Unleashing the potential of trade digitalisation: https://iccwbo.uk/seizing-the-moment-report/

7 UK Government (2026), Electronic trade documents: small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) exporter research: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/electronic-trade-documents-small-and-medium-sized-enterprises-smes-exporter-research. This research identifies trading-partner acceptance, international recognition, incompatible systems and practical implementation barriers affecting SME adoption.

8 UK Government, Digital Trade Corridors programme (6 July 2026): https://www.gov.uk/guidance/digital-trade-corridors-programme

#WeAreICC

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