

The must-have management shifts for e-commerce success

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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As businesses seek to build upon the online retail momentum generated over the last few years, what are the management shifts necessary to enable a culture of excellence that drives direct-to-consumer e-commerce success?

Speaking during a panel discussion I moderated at the Ecom Africa conference that took place in Cape Town last month, AutoTrader CEO George Mienie reflected on the company's transformation from a successful print business to a robust online automotive platform that's now 30 times as big.

Dismantling corporate bureaucracy

For the AutoTrader print publication, the internet offered infinite possibilities, but the shift to digital required a structural overhaul of the organisation. "We had to stop acting like a print corporate bureaucracy. We had to flatten a lot of hierarchies and management structures," said Mienie.

The company shifted to open plan offices and Mienie and the rest of the management team moved out of his corner office

and onto the floor, working alongside everyone else.

“We had to change communication within the business. Often bureaucracies are downward communication-type businesses, so we instituted a principle called upward communication.” This policy became a key focus area for AutoTrader and encouraged employees at any level of the business to communicate openly with even the most senior executives.

“You didn’t have to go through management, and systems and processes. You could just communicate,” said Mienie.



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Zama Jugar, partnerships lead at What3words, the creator of a proprietary geocode system used in delivery and navigation, echoed Mienie’s sentiments around the need for leaders to establish open channels of communication so that innovative ideas can surface from anywhere in the organisation.

“Listen to colleagues who may be reporting to you, and keep an open line of communication with them because they often have good ideas and different approaches to doing things. Maintaining that transparency as a leader is really important,” Jugar said.

Scaling up

At e-tailer OneDayOnly, director Laurian Venter recalled a time nine years ago when the daily deals site was just a small startup, renting three desks at an ad agency, with one person working from their parents’ garage on everything from parcel wrapping, to procurement and customer service. “We had to scale massively, continuously,” she said.

Fast forward to the Covid-19 pandemic and the e-commerce boom that resulted, she explained, “it was such a time of rapid growth and rapid change in the business and we had to rush and catch up with what was happening. We had to build solid systems and a solid platform that could handle the traffic, and ensure we had a solid marketing strategy...”

Now, with a head office in Cape Town and two warehouses in the country, OneDayOnly is set for the next stage of growth, having revamped its website to be more customer-focused, shifting to cloud computing and launching a new customer care centre.



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Avoiding silos

Grant Oliver, e-commerce manager at Nestlé South Africa, weighed in on how the food and drink giant has positioned itself for the growing relevance of e-commerce while still ensuring that its e-commerce unit acts in harmony with the rest of the business.

According to Oliver, to exploit the opportunities of digital and e-commerce at a large organisation, you need the buy-in from top management. “They say it takes a village to raise a child, well it takes a whole company to do e-commerce as well,” he said.

He added that e-commerce needs to be “on the agenda” at meetings and should be represented in all departments of the business, including finance, supply chain and customer management, with team members in each area to advocate for it.

“As the maturity of the e-commerce market changes, don't be afraid to change your structure. To prevent solos, e-commerce and digital must be part of conversation,” he said.



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Touching on how to prioritise investment to position a business for accelerated e-commerce growth, Miene said that every e-commerce player must realise that Google is their competitor.

“If you're getting most of your traffic and conversion from Google, you're making yourself vulnerable because that can be taken away from you in an instant if Google decides to enter your niche. The way to combat that is to build a brand,” he said.

Too many businesses are focused on the immediate retail sale, Mienie said, “and unless you're in the background building your brand you put yourself at a vulnerability.”



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Hire attitude

Discussing the talent and skill-sets that are attractive to companies looking to build capabilities and competitiveness in e-commerce space, the panel agreed that while knowledge in software engineering, coding and data analysis are high on the list, it's the softer skills that often lead to the best hires.

“We very often employ people with an incredible attitude and character over skills because many of the skills can be taught. People who have resilience, and who are adaptable, that goes a long way,” said Venter.

Jugar commented, “I'd add creativity and problem-solving - those are two critical things outside of the tech team. Across departments, you need to have people who are ready to solve problems and propose creative solutions. You need to work with people who can think outside the box.”

Oliver weighed in saying that at Nestlé, they look for an entrepreneurial spirit. “It's people who see their job as a small business and want to grow it. People who are not scared to make mistakes, not scared to learn from mistakes and not afraid to manage upwards if it's in the best interest of the customer.”

Watch or listen to my full discussion with the panel up top.

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