

# Driving the Retail Transition From Trends to Action for SMEs

## EEN Webinar | 16 April 2026 | Recap

How can retail SMEs turn major global trends into concrete, actionable strategies? This was the central question of the webinar *“Driving the Retail Transition: From Trends to Action for SMEs”*, organised by the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) on April 16, 2026.

Bringing together contributions from the European Commission, OECD, Politecnico di Milano and EuroCommerce, the session offered a comprehensive overview of how the **digital and green transitions are reshaping the retail sector across Europe**, and what this means in practice for small businesses.

### A key sector for Europe’s economy and communities

Retail is not just an economic sector—it is a fundamental pillar of European society. With **5.5 million companies and nearly 30 million employees**, it contributes **11.5% of EU value added** and serves millions of consumers every day.

At the same time, the sector is almost entirely made up of SMEs. These businesses—often micro-enterprises deeply rooted in local communities—play a crucial role in maintaining the vitality of cities, towns and rural areas.

However, their importance is not matched by their capacity to respond to change. Many SMEs are facing increasing difficulties in adapting to the rapid transformations affecting the sector.

### Between transformation and pressure: the challenges for SMEs

Speakers highlighted a clear paradox: while the retail sector as a whole is growing, **SMEs are losing ground** in terms of market share, employment and value added.

This is happening in a context of profound structural change. The rise of large retail chains and global online platforms is intensifying competition, while regulatory complexity and administrative burdens continue to weigh heavily on smaller businesses.

At the same time, SMEs are expected to navigate two major transitions—digital and green—often without sufficient resources, skills or strategic support.

### Digital and green transitions: opportunities within reach

Despite these challenges, the webinar also highlighted encouraging signals.

Digital adoption among retail SMEs has accelerated significantly over the past decade. The use of e-commerce has nearly doubled, and cloud technologies are becoming increasingly widespread. Even more notably, the adoption of artificial



intelligence is growing rapidly, supported by the availability of accessible and low-cost tools.

Importantly, digitalisation is not just a trend—it delivers tangible results. Retailers with an online presence show **significantly higher productivity**, confirming that investing in digital tools can directly strengthen competitiveness.

On the environmental side, the sector has already made substantial progress, with emissions decreasing by **43% over the past 15 years**. This shift is driven not only by regulation, but also by changing consumer expectations and rising energy costs.

However, both transitions remain uneven, and many SMEs still struggle to move from awareness to concrete action.

### **The role of policy: towards simplification and support**

A key message from the European Commission is the need to **make the regulatory environment more accessible for SMEs**.

Efforts are underway to simplify legislation, reduce administrative burdens and strengthen the Single Market through the “One Europe, One Market” approach. At the same time, initiatives such as the Revitalised Retail strategy aim to support SMEs in embracing the twin transition.

Yet, as highlighted during the discussion, policy support is still fragmented. Many existing instruments are not sufficiently tailored to the specific needs of small retailers, and there is a growing concern about the continuity of funding as recovery programmes come to an end.

### **Rethinking retail: innovation, experience and new models**

The transformation of retail is not simply a story of decline, but rather one of **reconfiguration**.

Physical stores are evolving into spaces focused on experience, relationships and community engagement. At the same time, retailers are investing in new strategies, including partnerships, platform-based models and omnichannel integration.

The Italian case offers a clear example of this transition. Despite structural challenges such as declining real wages and a reduction in the number of stores, leading retailers are significantly increasing their investment in digital innovation, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence, data management and customer experience.

### **Looking ahead: knowledge, tools and collaboration**

The OECD will continue to support this transformation through a structured programme of research and knowledge-sharing activities. Upcoming outputs include reports on artificial intelligence in retail, national and city-level case studies, and a policy toolkit aimed at providing concrete guidance for decision-makers.

At the same time, organisations such as EuroCommerce are working to ensure that the voice of retail SMEs is represented at European level, advocating for better regulation, improved access to finance and stronger support for skills development.

### **From trends to action**

The webinar concluded with a clear message: **retail SMEs are essential to Europe's economic resilience and social cohesion**, but they cannot face this transition alone.

Bridging the gap between trends and action requires coordinated efforts—combining policy support, practical tools, knowledge exchange and strong local engagement.

In this context, the Enterprise Europe Network plays a key role in supporting SMEs on the ground, helping them navigate complexity, access opportunities and turn transformation into growth.

### **Webinar material:**

[Click here to access the webinar recording.](#)

[DG GROW Driving the retail transition workshop](#)

[Local Retail, Global Trends – OECD Presentation](#)

[Polimi Osservatorio Innovation Retail compressed](#)

[EUROCOMMERCE Driving Retail Transition compressed](#)