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Automation as a pragmatic growth path for mid-sized companies

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Across Europe, logistics leaders face mounting pressure: real estate costs are climbing, labour is scarce, and customer expectations continue to rise. This is particularly acute in the UK, where mid-sized companies must pursue growth with slim margins and limited resources. In this environment, every square metre and every working hour matters — inefficiency is not an option.

New Realities in European Supply Chains

The rapid growth of e-commerce has made efficient order fulfilment non-negotiable. Shipment volumes are increasing, and cycle times are getting shorter and shorter. At the same time, warehouse space has become increasingly expensive: space in the south of the UK, near London Heathrow exceeds £185 per sqm and year¹. Structural labour shortages add further complexity. Drivers include Brexit², demographic change³, and the declining appeal of physically demanding jobs coupled with rising qualification requirements. Against this backdrop, the real risk for ambitious companies is not investing in automation but waiting too long to do so.



¹ <https://ecommercenews.eu/warehouse-storage/> <https://ecommercenews.eu/warehouse-storage/>

² <https://www.greenfulfilment.co.uk/brexit-impact-on-uk-logistics>

³ <https://www.forum-verlag.com/fachwissen/zoll-und-export/fachkraeftemangel-logistik/>

Evolution, not Revolution

In the past, for early adopters, automation meant large-scale systems, multi-year projects, and overhauling the entire warehouse operation. Today, however, modular technologies, falling costs, and new financing models make it far more accessible. FORTNA as a designer and integrator partners with suppliers such as Hai Robotics, Geekplus, and AutoStore, to offer modular and scalable solutions that can integrate into existing operations and support long-term growth.

The ideal approach is to treat automation as a journey rather than a one-time project. By following a clear roadmap, organisations can build toward transformational gains over a multi-year horizon, expand ROI in the medium-term, or secure immediate efficiencies. Targeted automation in specific functional areas of your warehouse operations — such as the introduction of robotic picking or a compact AutoStore installation — can deliver measurable gains within months, improving space utilisation and reducing error rates. Choosing modular and scalable systems ensures investments remain flexible, while realistic project planning makes certain that the new technology works seamlessly with existing systems and improves overall performance. Many implementations can now be completed in just six to nine months.

By building on existing structures, automation delivers immediate value and lays the groundwork for sustainable growth and resilience.

Guide for Decision-makers

For logistics leaders, the path forward is clear:

- Analyse current and future potential bottlenecks in line with planned business objectives and regularly review.
- Implement quick wins using small, standardised systems.
- Calculate ROI, as payback often occurs in under two years.
- Adopt a new mindset: automation is not necessarily a mega project but a lever for continuous growth.
- Work with a partner to secure not only smooth integration with your current systems but also alignment with your long-term strategy.

Conclusion

In the UK rising labour costs, post-Brexit workforce shortages and record warehouse rents are accelerating the case for modular automation. The common thread is clear: Mid-sized companies are proving that scalable, modular solutions can strengthen efficiency and enable growth without disrupting daily operations.

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