

# Automated intelligence

## Transforming South Africa's FMCG retail landscape

As many grocery and consumable goods retailers countrywide kick off the new financial year, attention naturally turns to streamlining operations for the 12 months ahead to maintain their competitive edge. Automation is an enduring key enabler of operational efficiency in FMCG retail and wholesale stores, and with technology advancements accelerating at breakneck speed, it's incumbent on decision-makers to take stock of the best available options for their business needs.

### Three trends in focus

Three pivotal trends are likely to shape the retail automation landscape this year: the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into retail operations, the expansion of intelligent e-commerce platforms, and the widescale adoption of AI-driven automated retail technologies. Understanding these trends and their applications is essential to making the best use of these tools.

A study by Creedence Research suggests that the integration of AI into retail operations is rapidly changing the industry by enhancing customer experiences and streamlining already-automated processes.

Just two years ago, the South African AI in retail market was valued at approximately US\$31.42m



Advances in artificial intelligence and automation technologies point to a future in which robots will play an increasingly important role for retailers, both in the warehouse and at the point of sale. Graphic & caption: <https://altaviawatch.com/>

(±R572m) and is projected to escalate to US\$281.91m (±R5.129b) by 2032, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 27.53%.

"In the next five years, AI is poised to transform retail automation by further integrating



Neil Gouveia

predictive analytics, enhanced personalisation, and autonomous decision-making," says Neil Gouveia, Director (Africa) for global retail technology giant Zebra Technologies.

"For example, as AI technologies evolve, retailers can expect more sophisticated demand forecasting, which will allow for more precise inventory management," Gouveia explains.

"Moreover, AI-driven customer and operational insights will enable highly personalised shopping experiences and efficient operations, increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The integration of AI with Internet of Things (IoT) devices and robotics will

likely also lead to more dynamic and responsive retail environments, reshaping how frontline workers interact with technology."

At the same time, e-commerce in South Africa is experiencing robust growth. Accelerated by the Covid-19



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pandemic and the resulting social and economic changes, projections indicate that the e-commerce market will have almost doubled in size this year since 2020.

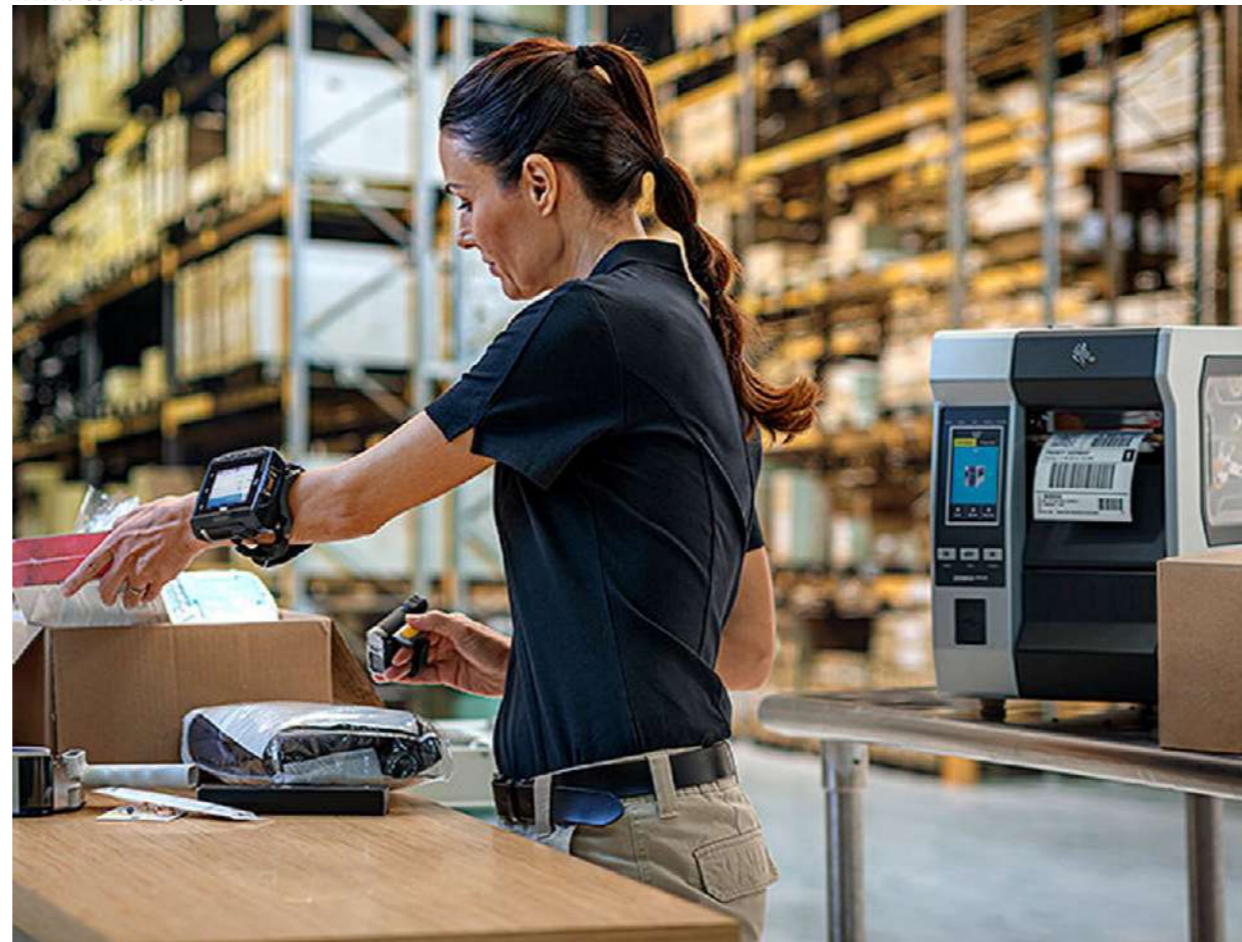
This expansion is driven by consumers' increasing reliance on online platforms such as Takealot, Zando and Kalahari.com, and as a result, local companies are enhancing their digital infrastructure. For instance, Reuters reports that Pargo, a South African click-and-collect service, is addressing its last-mile delivery expansion challenges by establishing over 4000 pickup points.

Automated retail technologies will increasingly give stores a competitive advantage. Tools such as self-checkout kiosks, smart shelves, and IoT devices are being implemented to improve operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. These technologies enable real-time inventory tracking and reduce the need for manual interventions, allowing retailers to focus more on strategic initiatives.

The adoption of such automated solutions is indicative of the sector's commitment to embracing innovation to meet evolving consumer expectations.

Let's take a closer look at some of these trends, and their associated technologies, and the possibilities they hold in store for South African retailers and wholesalers.

www.zebra.com/



**Globally, retailers are adopting intelligent automation to streamline processes that reduce reliance on manual labour, one of the biggest bottlenecks when it comes to in-store operations.**

### The case for intelligent automation

Intelligent, AI-driven automation is reshaping operations across stores, distribution centres, warehousing, and supply chains. This transformation is driven by the need for efficiency, accuracy, and, most poignantly, enhanced personalised customer experiences.

**Speeding up the queue.** Globally, retailers are adopting intelligent automation to streamline processes that reduce reliance on manual labour, one of the biggest bottlenecks when it comes to in-store operations.

This shift is evident in various facets of retail operations, such as self-checkout systems that reduce wait times and ensuring real-time price updates.



Hanno Labuschagne

However, self-checkout has not gained traction in South Africa, due to consumer resistance, and concerns about theft, job losses and customer experience. Running both systems in tandem may be the answer, but it remains to be seen how this plays out.

A report in MyBroadband by Hanno Labuschagne on 7 February 2025 tested the system at one of Shoprite's Uniq stores, which has implemented self-checkout at all of its 20 branches. The system uses RFID (radio frequency identification) technology rather than barcodes and was found to be efficient and easy to use.





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**Data analytics.** “Intelligent automation solutions can reduce manual errors, accelerate decision-making, and help ensure real-time visibility into operations, enabling retailers to manage stock levels accurately, minimise waste, and improve overall efficiency,” says Gouveia. “By leveraging advanced data analytics and machine learning algorithms, our solutions optimise inventory management, better engage staff, and elevate the customer experience.”

**Warehouse automation.** This is expected to gain considerable momentum in 2025, driven by online retail sales, cost optimisation, supply chain resilience and improved customer satisfaction. A recent case study published in Supply Chain Junction illustrates how The Foschini Group’s (TFG) Riverfields Distribution Centre in Johannesburg employs extendable conveyors and RFID tunnels for auto-receiving inbound stock, integrating directly with its Manhattan Warehouse Management System to allocate stock more efficiently.

### Supply chain optimisation through blockchain

According to [www.oracle.com/za](http://www.oracle.com/za), blockchain technology is gaining traction as a means to optimise supply chains by enhancing transparency and traceability. Using a decentralised ledger that records every transaction, blockchain provides an immutable history of a product’s journey from origin to consumer. This transparency is crucial for ensuring product authenticity and quality.



BH Bikes automated its warehouse to streamline order preparation. [www.mecalux.com/](http://www.mecalux.com/)

For example, using blockchain, smart contracts automatically carry out predefined actions when specific conditions are met, reducing disputes and enhancing efficiency in supply chain processes.

The real value of blockchain, however, is unlocked when combined with AI. This allows for analysis of vast amounts of data, predicting issues such as equipment failures and optimising processes based on real-time information; a synergy that leads to more resilient and responsive supply chains.

In one example from [www.instrumentation.co.za](http://www.instrumentation.co.za), Mr Price Group, in collaboration with Beckhoff Automation, incorporated advanced AI-driven blockchain control systems to manage its complex warehouse logistics more efficiently. The company

manages a state-of-the-art distribution centre, covering 60 000m<sup>2</sup>, and is among the largest automated retail facilities in Africa.

Zebra Technologies’ intelligent automation and asset visibility solutions also help to tackle supply chain complexities by providing end-to-end visibility and real-time data analytics.

“By integrating AI with supply chain management, retailers can anticipate disruptions, manage risks more effectively, and ensure a seamless flow of goods from suppliers to customers,” says Gouveia.

“This integration enhances operational resilience and improves the agility of the supply chain, allowing for quick adaptations to market changes, reduced inventory holding and improved logistics.”

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## Simplifying payment systems

As automation technologies advance, so does their integration with payment systems. Contactless payment methods, digital wallets, and innovative smartphone and Point of Sale (POS) applications are at the forefront of this transformation, reshaping how transactions are conducted across the nation.

According to Shopify, one of the world's largest automated retail platforms, contactless payments have gained significant traction, particularly with the integration of Near Field Communication (NFC) technology.

This advancement allows consumers to complete transactions swiftly by tapping their NFC-enabled cards or devices near POS terminals. The process involves encrypted data exchange between the card's RFID tag and the terminal, ensuring both speed and security. Major financial institutions in South Africa have adopted this technology, facilitating a seamless payment experience for users.

Zebra's Gouveia concurs. He says ...

“One of the most significant innovations in inventory tracking has been the implementation of RFID, which offers precise, real-time inventory visibility.”

“While not a new technology, RFID is now being more widely adopted as costs to implement it have significantly decreased, delivering a solid return on investment that justifies its implementation.”

Like NFC, digital wallets have become increasingly popular in South Africa, offering a convenient

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alternative to traditional payment methods. These mobile applications enable users to store their bank card information securely on smartphones or wearable devices, allowing for quick and contactless payments.

Platforms such as Samsung Pay have been leading this charge in South Africa. Samsung Pay not only supports bank cards but also integrates loyalty cards and prepaid vouchers, effectively turning a user's device into a comprehensive digital wallet.

The adoption of global digital payment solutions like Apple Pay and Google Pay is also on the rise. These platforms use NFC to facilitate secure transactions, allowing users to make payments by simply tapping their devices at compatible terminals.

The convenience and security offered by these services have contributed to their growing popularity among South African consumers.

Likewise, QR code-based payments have emerged as a versatile solution, especially among small businesses and informal vendors. An explainer published by RocketNet, details how applications like SnapScan and Zapper let customers scan

a merchant's QR code using their smartphone, linking directly to their bank account or digital wallet to complete the transaction. This method is particularly advantageous in settings where traditional POS systems are impractical, promoting financial inclusion and cashless transactions.

The integration of these various RFID technology-based payment systems extends beyond contactless cards to encompass various payment devices, including smartphones and wearables. The embedded RFID tags in these devices allow users to perform transactions effortlessly, enhancing the overall payment experience. This technological advancement aligns with the global shift towards more secure and efficient payment methods.

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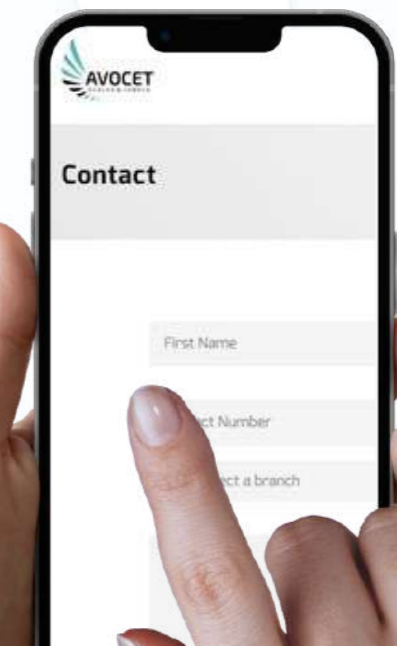
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## Automating loyalty

One retail area that has seen tremendous growth in the adoption of AI-driven automation is loyalty programmes. Discovery, for example, exemplifies this trend through its Vitality rewards programme, automating numerous processes in Vitality that enable real-time data processing and personalised customer interactions.



Nadira Misthry,

Nadira Misthry, Discovery Vitality's Chief Information Officer, noted on CIO.com, an online platform providing peer insights and business strategy for enterprise CIOs and business technology, that "this technological integration has streamlined operations

and significantly improved the customer experience" for Discovery and Vitality customers.

Similarly, Nedbank's collaboration with Comarch to enhance its Greenbacks loyalty programme showcases the impact of automation. By integrating with Comarch's Loyalty Marketing Platform, Nedbank was able to tailor its offerings to the unique South African market, addressing specific security requirements and customer preferences. Not only did it result in enriching the programme's features, but also bolstered customer engagement and satisfaction.

According to Businesswire, the South African loyalty market is poised for significant growth, with projections estimating it will reach US\$511.2 million by 2029.

www.apexloyalty.com/



## AI-driven automation behind the scenes

According to www.payspace.com, the prevalence of AI-driven automation reaches beyond customer-facing applications. In payroll systems, AI can be used to automate data entry by extracting information from various sources such as time and attendance records, employee databases, and tax documents. Automation reduces errors associated with manual data input and accelerates payroll processing. AI can identify new employee engagements within a given period, streamlining the onboarding process and ensuring timely salary disbursements.

This expansion is driven by a data-centric approach, where automation plays a crucial role in analysing customer behaviour and preferences. By automating data collection and analysis, retailers can gain deeper insights into consumer patterns, enabling the development of more effective loyalty strategies.

Automation also facilitates the seamless integration of mobile platforms into loyalty programmes. Convenience retailer FreshStop's Rewards app automates the accrual of cashback rewards, providing customers with instant incentives for real-time purchase decisions. The app's automated features have also streamlined reward redemption processes, contributing to increased customer loyalty.

AI-driven payroll solutions can also integrate seamlessly with other business systems, such as time and attendance platforms, to provide a cohesive and efficient workflow. AI enhances the accuracy of time and attendance management by automating the tracking of employee hours and analysing attendance (www.clappia.com/). AI-powered systems can use biometric data and geofencing to verify employee presence, ensuring that clock-ins occur within designated areas.

This approach minimises errors, ensures accountability, and simplifies payroll processes by providing accurate data on work hours, overtime, and leave balances. Additionally, AI can detect anomalies in attendance, enabling managers to address issues promptly and maintain operational efficiency.



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In a hyper-competitive retail environment, businesses must continuously adapt to meet consumer expectations for personalisation, convenience, and seamless online-to-offline experiences. Retail automation has emerged as a key solution for companies aiming to streamline operations, enhance customer engagement, and improve overall efficiency. Collage & caption: <https://ogmento.io/>

### The personalisation of the shopping experience era

Importantly, AI integration with POS systems analyses customer purchase histories to offer personalised product recommendations, enhancing the shopping experience and potentially increasing sales. AI-enhanced systems can accurately predict demand trends, allowing retailers to optimise inventory levels and reduce waste. By automating routine tasks such as data entry and inventory tracking, AI allows retail staff to focus more on customer service and strategic activities.

### The competitive advantage of intelligent retail automation

"Intelligent retail automation gives retailers and wholesalers significant advantages, including increased accuracy in order fulfilment, reduced operational costs, and enhanced customer experiences," Gouveia explains.

"It streamlines supply chain processes, ensuring timely delivery and minimising human error. By leveraging AI, retailers can also gain insights into consumer preferences, optimise product assortments, and personalise marketing strategies, all of which contribute to a more efficient and responsive retail environment."

### Overcoming local challenges

Despite the obvious advantages, implementing AI-driven retail automation in South Africa faces three primary challenges: inadequate digital infrastructure, regulatory complexities, and the potential exacerbation of existing social and digital divides.

The country's digital infrastructure is insufficient to support widespread AI adoption. AI systems demand robust computing power and stable, high-speed internet connectivity. Many regions in South Africa, particularly rural areas, experience limited internet access and frequent power outages. These deficiencies hinder the deployment and efficiency of AI technologies in retail settings.



Dr Dawie de Wet

Dr Dawie de Wet, Group CEO of satellite engineering company Q-KON, believes that automation without connection is a manual operation. His company provides a high availability satellite network connectivity service called Twoobii to the retail, financial, enterprise and government sectors.

"Twoobii solves the connectivity requirement, either as a primary connection service or as a back-up service to fibre," says de Wet. "With 99.95% uptime assured, retail operations can then optimise and drive supply chain efficiencies using the most advanced cloud and AI solutions platforms."

AI applications require continuous data processing and real-time analytics, which are challenging to maintain without reliable infrastructure. This situation is further complicated by the high costs associated with upgrading existing systems to meet AI requirements.

Another challenge that faces South African retailers looking to inject AI into their automate systems is the country's regulatory environment, although this is not unique to South Africa, being the equivalent to the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) imposes strict guidelines on data usage, storage, and cross-border transfers. While these regulations are essential for protecting consumer privacy, they can complicate the implementation of AI systems that rely on large datasets, often sourced internationally.

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Compliance with POPIA requires retailers to establish robust data management practices, which can be resource-intensive and may deter many smaller enterprises from adopting AI solutions. The lack of specific AI regulations also creates uncertainty, making it difficult for businesses to navigate the legal landscape effectively.

Thirdly, there is a risk that AI-driven automation could widen existing social and digital divides. Urban areas, with better access to technology and internet services, are more likely to benefit from AI advancements, while rural communities may be left further behind.

This disparity can lead to unequal economic opportunities and exacerbate social inequalities.

<https://theconversation.com/>



Moreover, the integration of AI in retail may result in job displacement, disproportionately affecting low-skilled workers who are less likely to have access to retraining programmes. Addressing this

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challenge requires deliberate efforts to promote digital inclusion, such as investing in infrastructure development in underserved areas and implementing policies that support workforce reskilling.

To overcome some of these challenges, Gouveia suggests that businesses should consider factors such as integration capabilities, scalability, data security, and employee training and change management. "It's essential to choose solutions that can grow with the business and integrate with existing systems," he says. "Additionally, ensuring robust data protection measures and providing adequate training for staff are crucial for successful implementation and adoption of intelligent automation technologies."

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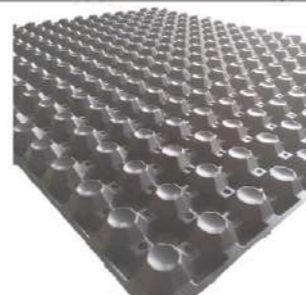


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## Entering a new landscape

### AI-driven automation is set to transform the status quo

AI-driven automation is transforming South Africa's retail sector, offering enhanced efficiency, customer experience, and streamlined operations. Retailers are leveraging the power of AI for predictive analytics, personalised recommendations, and real-time inventory management, driving the shift toward data-driven decision-making. AI is the power, data is the new treasure, and blockchain is the key to unlocking deep visibility into patterns, trends and insights. Customer-facing and backend operations alike benefit from automation driven by AI.

The rapid adoption of AI, however, is not without challenges. South Africa's inadequate digital infrastructure, regulatory complexities, and socio-economic disparities pose significant hurdles. Connec-

tivity issues, compliance with POPIA, and potential job displacement require careful navigation.

Despite these challenges, AI-driven automation presents immense opportunities for South African retailers willing to embrace innovation. On its own, automation is primarily about accumulating data across various platforms, giving retailers a better understanding of customer choices and preferences, stock inventory holdings and logistics, payment methods and loyalty programmes.

By investing in digital infrastructure, regulatory compliance strategies, and workforce reskilling, businesses can harness AI's potential to create a more agile and customer-centric retail environment.

As AI continues to evolve, its integration with IoT, robotics, and blockchain will further shape the retail landscape, ensuring businesses remain competitive in an increasingly digital marketplace.

The key to success lies in strategic adoption, seamless integration, and a commitment to balancing efficiency with inclusivity in South Africa's retail and wholesale future. **SR**



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Guy Lerner, writer and photographer, writes across diverse topics in business, technology, and retail, including consumer technology, telecommunications software, user experience technology, security, and power systems. He has worked with multinational companies in South Africa and Australia and is currently based in Cape Town. Guy holds a B.Sc. Honours degree from the University of Witwatersrand). Contact Wilkins Ross Communications ([www.wilkinsrossglobal.com](http://www.wilkinsrossglobal.com)) or [guy@wilkinsross.co.za](mailto:guy@wilkinsross.co.za).

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