The Portal People
integrated ebusiness

Preparing for the Agent Age:
Why Boring Data Matters More Than AI

Knowledge Series

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AI agents are getting a lot of attention in UK B2B eCommerce right now.
Sales bots, autonomous ordering, systems that can act on behalf of a
business rather than just respond. The demos are impressive, the headlines
are loud, and the pressure to "do something with AI" is very real.

But for most UK B2B organisations, the real blocker to using AI agents isn't
intelligence, ambition, or even technology choice. It's something far more
mundane: data.

This article isn't about selling AI, and it isn't a how-to guide. It's an awareness
piece aimed at helping B2B teams level their thinking, understand what
actually needs fixing first, and work out how much time they really have to
prepare.

Key Takeaways

- AI agents won't work reliably without clean, structured product, pricing
  and customer data
- Most B2B teams get more immediate value from automation before
  they attempt autonomous agents
- "Agent-ready" usually means boring improvements: data ownership,
  consistency, and predictable workflows
- You don't need to be ready tomorrow, but being unprepared by 2027–
  2030 will start to hurt
- The best preparation is quiet: reduce duplication, remove friction, and
  make data trustworthy

What People Mean by "The Agent Age"

When people talk about the "agent age", they usually mean software that can do more than answer questions. An agent can check stock, validate pricing, place orders, raise documents, or trigger workflows without a human clicking every button.

In B2B terms, this might eventually look like:

- An agent reordering stock within agreed limits
- An agent validating whether a customer is entitled to buy a product
- An agent converting emails, spreadsheets or messages into structured orders

That future isn't imaginary. But it's also not something most businesses are realistically ready for yet.

The Uncomfortable Truth: AI Fails Before It Starts

Most AI initiatives fail long before the AI becomes the problem.

They fail because:

- Product data is inconsistent or incomplete
- Images are missing, duplicated or stored in the wrong places
- Pricing logic lives in people's heads or spreadsheets
- Customer entitlements aren't clearly defined
- Different systems disagree on what is "correct"

Humans work around these issues every day. Software does not. AI agents amplify the problem because they depend entirely on structured, trustworthy data.

The Boring Data Problem (and Why It Matters)

In real B2B implementations, most of the hard work is not front-end design or clever automation. It's normalising data so that machines can rely on it.

This includes things like:

- Consistent product codes and variants
- Clear units of measure
- Accurate stock positions
- Reliable pricing rules
- Accessible, correctly linked product images

This work is slow, unglamorous, and often underestimated. But without it, automation stalls and AI becomes unreliable.

Why Automation Comes Before Agents

There's a natural order to all of this.

Before you can trust an agent to act, you need to trust your workflows. Before you can trust workflows, you need clean inputs and predictable outputs.

This is why many businesses see more immediate value from automation than from AI:

- Reshaping incoming orders into a consistent structure
- Validating data before it enters core systems
- Reducing manual handling and re-keying

Automation creates the stable ground that agents will eventually stand on.

So How Urgent Is This, Really?

One of the most common questions is timing. Are businesses already late? Is this a one-year problem, a two-year problem, or something closer to 2030?

A realistic view looks like this:

Now to the next 12 months

Most AI agent solutions are still experimental. Businesses that are fixing data quality, simplifying workflows and improving integration are doing exactly the right thing.

The next 2–3 years

This is when pressure increases. Larger customers start assuming structured data. Manual exceptions become costly. Automation becomes expected rather than impressive.

By the end of the decade

Businesses that haven't addressed core data and workflow issues will feel constrained. Not obsolete, but slower, more expensive to run, and harder to integrate.

You don't need to be ready for AI agents tomorrow. But by the end of the decade, not being prepared will hurt.

What "Agent-Ready" Actually Means (Without the Jargon)

Being agent-ready does not mean deploying AI everywhere.

It means:

- You know where your source-of-truth data lives
- Your product data is structured and complete
- Your pricing rules are explicit, not tribal knowledge
- Your workflows are predictable and observable
- Your systems can talk to each other reliably

If those foundations are in place, adding AI later is far less risky.

A Calm Way to Start Preparing

Preparation doesn't require a big transformation programme.

For many B2B organisations, the most useful steps are:

- Audit where product data actually lives
- Identify where humans are compensating for system gaps
- Reduce duplication between ERP, ecommerce and spreadsheets
- Introduce automation where it removes friction, not control

None of this is about chasing trends. It's about making the business easier to run.

Conclusion: Prepare Quietly, Not Hastily

The agent age will arrive gradually, not overnight.

Businesses that succeed won't be the ones that rushed to adopt AI first. They'll be the ones that quietly fixed their data, simplified their workflows, and built systems that software can trust.

Preparing for that future isn't about being futuristic. It's about doing the boring work well and giving yourself options when the time is right.