



# **The Early Adopter Effect**

## European SME Export Report



# Foreword



Bert Nappier,  
*President FedEx Express  
Europe & TNT CEO*

“We live in interesting times. The world is closer and more connected than ever. Digital transformation is disrupting established ways of doing things and creating new and more advanced capabilities. The rate of change is exceptional and is only getting faster. The possibilities are endless.

With all of this change comes opportunity. Opportunity for doing things smarter, better, more efficiently, and more ambitiously. As is so often the case, it is small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which are so often taking a leading role and seizing these opportunities with both hands, harnessing innovation, and using it to access the world.

The 2019 FedEx SME Export Report proves once again that SMEs are at the forefront of growth and international expansion, with SMEs tapping into a rich seam of opportunity that lies in overseas markets.

And they are doing it against a backdrop of uncertainty. Europe – and the wider world – is undergoing major and long-lasting political and economic shifts. But this isn't holding back SME owners who are embracing this brave new world with enthusiasm, grit, and guile.

As always, innovation is key. One of our top areas of focus in this year's report is on emerging technology and specifically whether SMEs are Early Adopters and how this is affecting business. The results – which illuminate a clear link between being an Early Adopter and business and export growth – serve as a strong reminder to us all about the power of innovation and of doing things differently.

Unsurprisingly then, despite the transitional times in which we live, optimism for the future is extremely high among the European SME community, with an abundance of confidence for the year ahead.”

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Harris Interactive carried out 4,570 online interviews with senior executives in SMEs which export, in eight European markets between February and March 2019. Interviews were conducted with a representative mix of company sizes: micro (1-9 full-time employees), small (10-49 full-time employees) and medium (50-249 full-time employees). The sample size was approximately 500 respondents per market, with the exception of the UK, where the sample size was 1,000 respondents.

# SME Export Report

## Key themes and findings



### Exporting is good for business

Average export revenue in exporting SMEs now stands at

**€1.63** million per annum  
accounting for **69%** of total revenue

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### European SMEs are exporting further afield than before, aided by supply chain improvements

The proportion of SMEs surveyed that export to markets outside Europe has increased

from **53%** to **58%** since 2017

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### Exporting SMEs which adopt new technologies such as AI, blockchain and cryptocurrencies are reaping the rewards

They have significantly higher revenue and tend to be larger companies

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### Supply chain improvements are the key reason SMEs anticipate an increase in revenues from exports to markets outside Europe



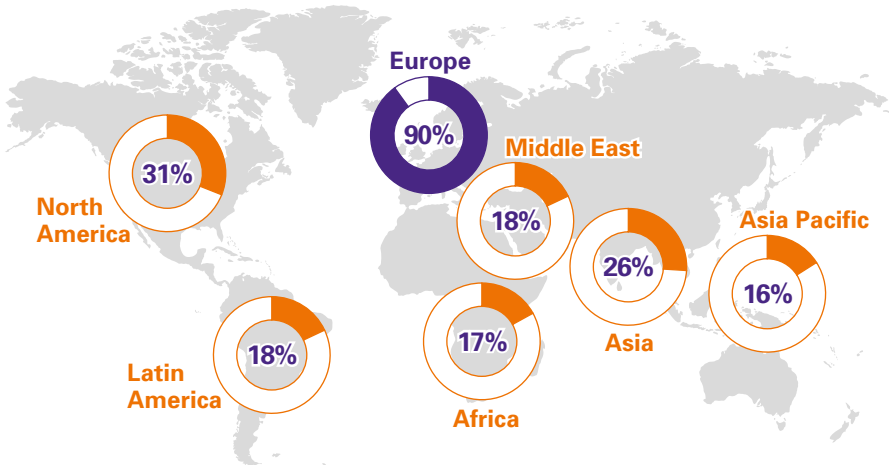
# SME exporting trends

Since the last FedEx SME Export report in 2017, SME exporting activity has increased markedly, particularly to markets outside Europe

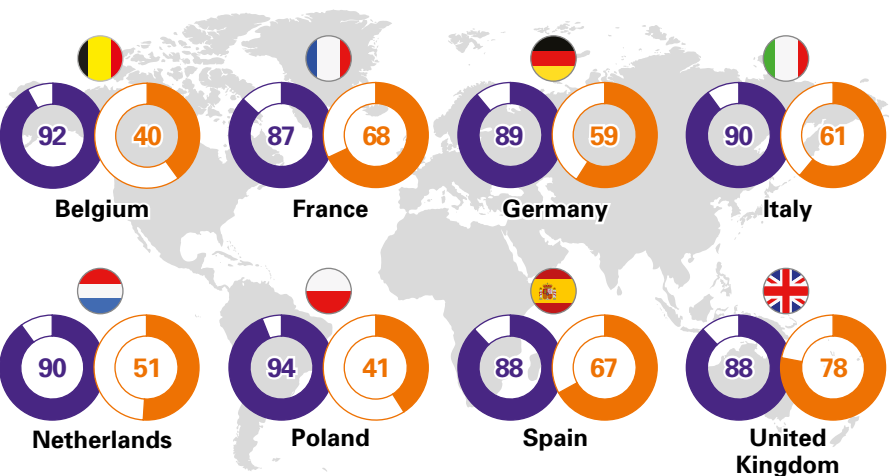
The trend is towards exporting further and further afield – with North America, Latin America and Asia Pacific experiencing the highest level of export growth. Six in ten (58%) European exporting SMEs now export to markets outside Europe, an increase of 5%.

Importantly, the link between exporting success and revenue is growing ever stronger. Across the region, export revenue now accounts for 69% of total revenue among exporting SMEs, up from 65% in 2017.

## Where European SMEs export to



## Top export markets by country



Intercontinental regions goods are exported to      % to Other European Markets      % to Markets outside Europe

6 in 10

European exporting SMEs export to markets outside Europe

Export revenue accounts for

69%

of total revenue among exporting SMEs



Bert Nappier, President FedEx Express Europe & TNT CEO says:

“European SMEs are going from strength to strength on the international stage. They’re becoming more and more ambitious in terms of which markets they do business in – and are reaping the rewards as they do so.”

# Exports driving revenue growth

Revenue generated from exports has increased significantly since 2017. Across Europe, average export revenue per SME now stands at €1.63 million per annum, accounting for 69% of total revenue. This is an increase from 65% in 2017.

## MOUNTING OPTIMISM

SMEs are now even more confident that export revenues will continue to grow in the next 12 months. Overall, 42% of European exporting SMEs anticipate an increase in exports to other European markets while 40% anticipate an increase to markets outside of Europe.

The key reasons SMEs give for being confident in future export potential are:

- 1 New products coming to market
- 2 Improvements to supply chains
- 3 An increase in e-commerce sales
- 4 An increase in workforce productivity
- 5 Plans to expand into new international markets

## BUT NOT WITHOUT CHALLENGES

While optimism among the European SME community remains high, exporting SMEs are also reporting a number of business challenges.

The most frequently cited are:

- 1 A decreased demand for goods (reported by 37% of SMEs)
- 2 Currency fluctuations (31%)
- 3 Lack of available skilled staff (27%)
- 4 Issues due to the impact of Brexit (23%)
- 5 Difficulties in accessing financial support (21%)

Currency fluctuations are a particular concern for European SMEs which export with half (51%) saying it has an important impact on import/export decisions and costs. **The average exporting SME lost €115k due to currency fluctuations last year.**

# 42%

of European exporting SMEs anticipate an increase in exports to other European markets

# 40%

anticipate an increase to markets outside Europe



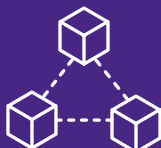
## OVER A QUARTER



of SMEs  
are using AI

## OVER A FIFTH

are using  
Blockchain



## OVER A FIFTH

are using  
Cryptocurrencies



# The Early Adopter Effect – SMEs and technology adoption

One of the main areas of focus for this year's SME Export Report is about SMEs' approach to new technology, and crucially, what impact this is having.

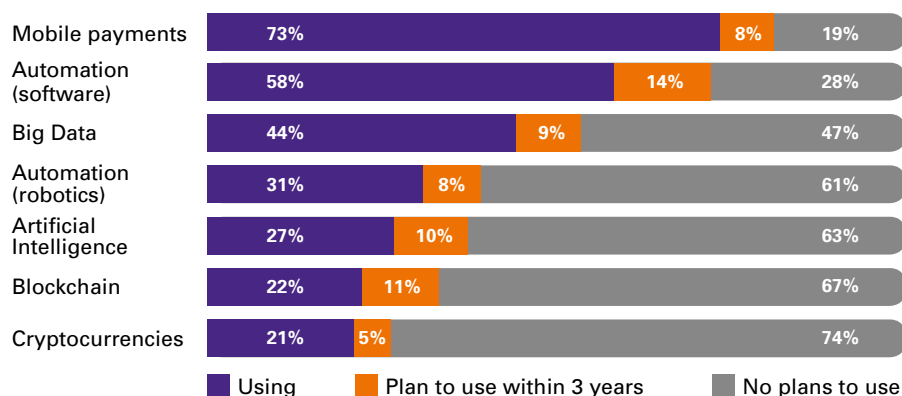
## WHICH TECHNOLOGY SMEs TURN TO, AND WHY

Overall, the most common reasons for using new technologies are to increase efficiencies and help SMEs to reach new customers or new suppliers. Here's a further breakdown of new technologies and why exporting SMEs adopt them:

	Mobile payments	Software automation	Big Data / Analytics	Robotics automation	Artificial Intelligence	Blockchain	Cryptocurrencies
Increase efficiencies	65%	61%	45%	36%	69%	59%	39%
Help us to reach new customers	44%	12%	14%	15%	15%	11%	6%
Help us to reach new suppliers	42%	9%	9%	10%	7%	18%	5%
Enhance our offer to customers	37%	19%	28%	16%	23%	21%	6%
Aid business planning	18%	22%	35%	19%	37%	28%	15%

## EMERGING TECH ADOPTION

The SME Export Report also asked SMEs which emerging technology they are using, and which they plan to in the future:



While previous "emerging technologies" such as mobile payments and automation (software) are now relatively well-established, newer technologies are being used by a surprisingly high number of exporting SMEs:

- Over a quarter are now using AI
- Over a fifth are using blockchain
- Over a fifth are using cryptocurrencies





# The Early Adopter Effect

Let's take a closer look at how exporting SMEs' use of emerging technologies such as AI, blockchain and cryptocurrencies is making an impact.

Not only are these Early Adopter SMEs more likely to have higher revenue, they're significantly more likely to be achieving international success too. Not only are a relatively high proportion of exporting European SMEs already using the latest technology such as AI, blockchain and cryptocurrencies, these Early Adopters are harnessing it to power growth.

## More than just buzzwords – six facts about Early Adopter SMEs which export

**6  
FACTS**

**1**

**They are much more likely to export to markets outside Europe**

**2**

**They are much more likely to see the trend for exporting outside of Europe continuing to grow in future**

**3**

**Export revenue accounts for a higher share of total revenue for Early Adopters (72% versus 67% for Later Adopters)**

**4**

**They are much more likely to cite bringing new products to market, market expansion and supply chain improvements as export revenue drivers**

**5**

**They're much less likely to be concerned by decreasing demand for their products and accessing finance**

**6**

**The digital economy (particularly e-commerce) is a more significant contributor to overall revenue for Early Adopters**

### **Bert Nappier, President FedEx Express Europe & TNT CEO says:**

"Blockchain, AI and cryptocurrencies are exciting technologies so it's fantastic to see that SMEs are not only experimenting with and using them, but that there's a strong link between adoption and growth. The message is clear – being an Early Adopter can do wonders for business."

# SME Export Report

## Additional findings



### **E-commerce is king**

SME revenue is progressively driven by the digital economy and e-commerce in particular. E-commerce now accounts for 31 % of all revenue for exporting SMEs, up from 27% in 2017

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### **The power of social**

Social commerce is seen as a particularly fertile growth area with three-quarters (75%) of European SMEs which export expecting to see an increase in this area

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### **The Sharing Economy**

The Sharing Economy has revolutionised the business world in recent years. To date, the Sharing Economy is something only a small number (6%) of exporting SMEs are tapping into, however nearly a third of SMEs plan to do so in the next two-three years

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### **Supply Chain automation**

SMEs which export are very positive about the potential of greater supply chain automation with 60% agreeing that they will benefit from this in the next two-three years. In terms of current use, on average SMEs estimate that around a sixth of their current supply chain is automated for incoming goods and services and believe this will rise to 23% by 2020



# European summary – innovation is key



Bert Nappier,  
*President FedEx Express Europe  
& TNT CEO*

“The FedEx SME Export Report 2019 demonstrates a clear link between innovation, international ambition and growth. While the global landscape is evolving, exporting SMEs are showing an eagerness to keep pace and are gaining a competitive advantage as a result.

It's no surprise to see the importance of an increase in exports, particularly given the evermore sophisticated supply chains that are making international trade even easier. It's also great to see that exporting is increasingly integral to SME growth strategies.

That's not to say there aren't challenges to be addressed in a fast-changing world. While confidence remains high, there are a number of issues facing SMEs, some of which (such as currency fluctuations) are having a notable impact. Nevertheless, the resilience of SMEs is something to behold, and confidence in the future remains high.

The power of The Early Adopter Effect is well worth considering. The link between being an Early Adopter and competitive advantage is compelling and sends a strong message to us all about the value of disruption and innovation.”



# Spotlight on Belgium

Overall, Belgian exporting SMEs are exporting more now than in 2017. Nine in ten (92%) export to other European markets which is relatively stable, however 40% now export to markets outside Europe, an increase of 9%.

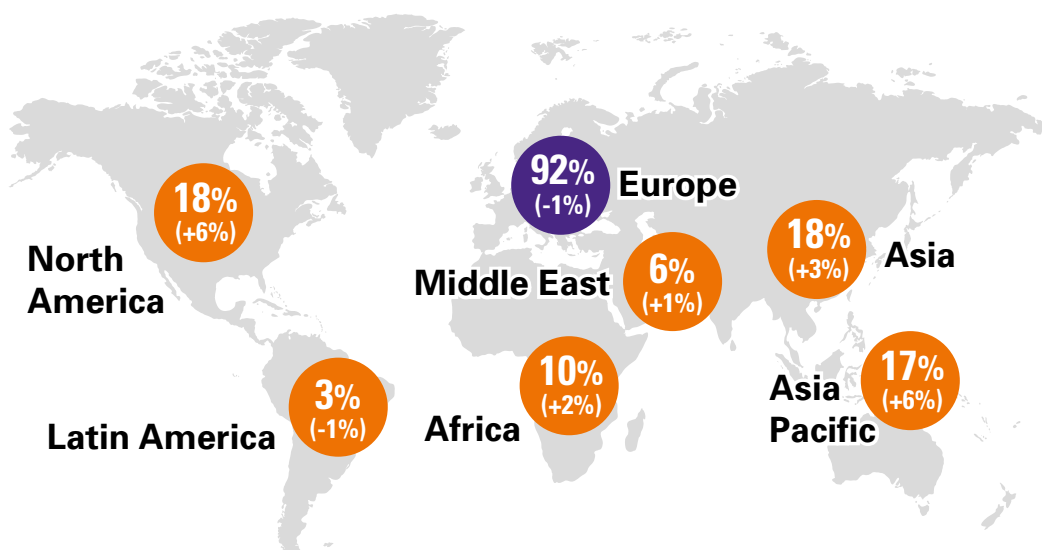
This uplift is driven in particular by increases in North America, Asia Pacific and Asia. North America (18%) and Asia (18%) are now the top non-European export destinations followed closely by Asia Pacific (17%). There is growing confidence that export revenue will continue to increase in the next 12 months.



## The top five challenges facing Belgian SMEs which export

- 1 Decreased demand for goods
- 2 Lack of available skilled staff
- 3 Currency fluctuations
- 4 Difficulties accessing financial support
- 5 Issues due to impact of Brexit

## Belgian SME exports to other markets



(Bracketed figure shows change from 2017 study)

## Summary

Other European markets = **92%**  
(-1%)

Markets outside Europe = **40%**  
(+9%)



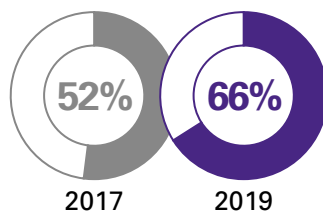


## The Early Adopter Effect

- Early Adopter SMEs in Belgium have significantly higher revenue, are larger companies (more medium sized) and are more likely to predict employee growth than Later Adopter SMEs
- 48% of Early Adopter SMEs export to markets outside Europe
- Export revenue accounts for a higher share of total revenue for Early Adopters, compared with Later Adopters

## Revenue generated by exports

Exports are now responsible for 66% of a typical exporting SME's total revenue, up from 52% in 2017



Average export revenues of Belgian SMEs

Other European markets

c.€0.5 million

Markets outside Europe

c.€1.0 million

**Erik Uljee, Vice President  
Ground Operations Benelux,  
FedEx Express says:**

"With e-commerce accounting for 25% of all revenue for Belgian exporting SMEs, it's clear that the latter have been effectively adopting emerging innovations as a crucial way to grow their business. We see that Belgian entrepreneurs are reaping the benefits with a significant increase in export revenues."

To find out more about FedEx solutions, you can visit [fedex.com/nl-be](https://fedex.com/nl-be), call Customer Services on **02 752 75 75** or email [belgium@fedex.com](mailto:belgium@fedex.com)



