Retail PlanIT

Closing the Visibility Gap

A practical guide for merchandising and planning leaders

Executive summary

Retailers in the £75m–£250m turnover range often reach a point where spreadsheet-led planning no longer scales, yet a full ERP transformation still feels disproportionate in cost, risk, and operational disruption. **The result is a visibility gap:** the business has more data than it can use effectively, planning teams spend too much time reconciling numbers, and forecasts are not trusted enough to drive confident decisions.

This guide outlines **five practical steps** that improve forecasting, stock visibility, assortment decisions, and planning productivity without requiring a wholesale replacement of existing systems. The focus is not on adding another reporting layer; it is on improving the quality, consistency, and timeliness of the information that planners, merchants, and finance teams use to make decisions.

What this guide is and is not

This guide is:

- ✔ A practical planning and visibility improvement framework
- ✔ A discussion document for merchandising and planning leaders
- ✔ A guide to improving decision-making without large-scale transformation

This guide is not:

- ✘ A recommendation to replace core ERP systems
- ✘ A software vendor comparison
- ✘ A detailed implementation plan

Why this matters now

In our recent piece on **Escaping the 'Missing Middle'**, we looked at why so many growing retailers find themselves stuck between two uncomfortable options: carrying on with spreadsheets that are starting to buckle, or committing to an ERP transformation that carries real financial and operational risk. Neither feels right, because neither is.

"The problem is rarely a shortage of data. It's a lack of confidence in the data, and the time and tools to turn it into decisions before the window closes."

Across many mid-sized retail organisations, the same patterns appear repeatedly:

- Sales, stock, intake and financial plans exist in different spreadsheets or systems and are reconciled manually.
- Teams spend significant time checking whether numbers match instead of analysing what they mean.
- Reporting is strong on historical performance but weak on forward-looking visibility.
- Stock can be high in aggregate while availability is poor at SKU or location level.
- Planning leaders are held accountable for decisions that depend on fragmented or inconsistent data.

Industry research points to the scale of the problem. **A substantial share of merchandising data is estimated to contain inaccuracies**, a large portion of merchant time is spent on manual work, and much of the technology already available to retailers is underused because teams lack the time or confidence to use it effectively.

The visibility gap

Most retailers have invested in systems, reports and processes over time. Yet many still struggle to answer relatively simple questions:

- Which forecasts can we trust?
- Where are stock risks emerging?
- Which categories are underperforming?
- What decisions do we need to make now rather than next month?

The challenge is not simply access to information. It is the ability to connect information across teams, interpret it quickly and act on it before opportunities or risks become embedded in the trading cycle.

Closing the visibility gap requires a shift from fragmented reporting towards connected planning.

Step 1: Establish a single source of truth

Current challenge

"We're still running critical planning on spreadsheets."

Most retailers do not deliberately choose spreadsheets as a strategic planning platform. They become essential because they are flexible, familiar and inexpensive. Over time, however, spreadsheets often evolve into the primary mechanism for sales planning, stock forecasting, intake management and range planning.

As the business grows, spreadsheets become harder to govern and harder to trust. Versions diverge. Someone updates one file but not another. A formula breaks quietly and nobody notices until a season is already committed. The issue isn't that spreadsheets exist. It's that decisions with real margin consequences are being made on data that may or may not be right.

The first step isn't to eliminate spreadsheets entirely. It's to make sure the decisions that matter are grounded in a single, consistent version of the numbers that the whole team is working from.

~33%

of the data merchants use is estimated to contain inaccuracies or errors. Every planning decision built on top of that carries the same risk.

BCG, 2025

What to do:

- Identify the planning datasets that materially affect revenue, margin, stock and cash.
- Define one authoritative source for each dataset.
- Clarify ownership and accountability for data quality.
- Introduce version control and refresh standards.
- Continue using spreadsheets for analysis where useful, but not as the primary source of truth.

What success looks like:

- Merchandising, buying, finance and supply chain teams work from the same numbers.
- Discussions shift from “which report is correct?” to “what action should we take?”
- Confidence in planning decisions improves.
- Time spent validating reports decreases significantly.

Step 2: Improve forward visibility

Current challenge

"We can only see what has happened, not what is coming."

Most retail reporting is genuinely good at explaining yesterday. It can tell you what sold, where it sold and at what margin. What it can't do is tell you what's likely to happen next week or next month, and that's where commercial opportunities are missed.

Planning teams need to be able to see forward stock positions, intake commitments, forecast demand and open-to-buy headroom before these things become urgent problems. The shift is from asking "what happened?" to asking "what's likely to happen, and do we need to act now?"

This doesn't require a complete system overhaul. It requires a planning environment where forecasts are live, visible and connected to the decisions that affect them, so the team can get ahead of problems rather than scramble to contain them.

40%

of merchants' time is currently spent on manual tasks that could be automated, leaving little capacity for the forward planning that matters most.

BCG, 2025

What to do:

- Create a rolling forward view of demand, inventory, intake and financial plans.
- Refresh forecasts on a regular cadence.
- Surface exceptions and risks automatically.
- Connect forecast changes to the operational decisions that influence them.

What success looks like:

- Earlier visibility of emerging risks.
- Improved forecast confidence.
- Faster response to changing demand patterns.
- Reduced reliance on reactive decision-making.

Step 3: Connect sales, stock and intake planning

Current challenge

"Inventory is high, but availability is still poor."

One of the most frustrating patterns in retail planning is appearing overstocked at a total level while customers can't find the lines that actually sell. The business has tied up too much capital in the wrong places and not enough in the right ones. It looks like a stock problem. In reality, it's a planning problem.

This typically happens because buying, merchandising, supply chain and finance are each working from slightly different assumptions. No single team is making a bad decision. They're just not making decisions together, and those small differences compound over a season.

When demand forecasts, inventory positions, intake plans and financial targets exist within a single connected process, the business can make better calls earlier: where to hold stock, where to bring intake forward and where to pull back before the problem is locked in.

20–30%

of retail operating expenses are accounted for by inventory holding costs, a direct consequence of stock sitting in the wrong place at the wrong time.

WorldMetrics, Merchandising Industry Statistics, 2026

What to do:

- Connect demand forecasts, inventory positions and intake plans.
- Create shared visibility across planning functions.
- Make trade-offs explicit and measurable.
- Review planning assumptions collaboratively.

What success looks like:

- Earlier identification of overstock and stock-out risks.
- More accurate inventory allocation.
- Better alignment between commercial and operational priorities.
- Faster course correction when plans move off target.

Step 4: Improve confidence in range decisions

Current challenge

"I'm accountable for the numbers, but I don't trust them."

Planning leaders are regularly held accountable for decisions that depend on fragmented or inconsistent information. When the underlying data is unreliable, even experienced merchants struggle to make confident calls on range performance, product productivity or category profitability. The numbers say one thing. The instinct says another. Neither feels trustworthy enough to act on decisively.

Better assortment planning starts with confidence in what you're looking at. That means item-level visibility that's accurate, current and accessible without hours of manual work. When planners can trust the data, the decisions follow more naturally: which SKUs are underperforming, where the range has become unnecessarily duplicated, which lines need protecting and which can go.

The goal isn't to replace merchant judgement with a system. It's to give merchants the clarity they need to exercise that judgement well, and to stand behind it when the numbers are questioned.

43%

of merchants say analytical outputs aren't sufficiently tailored to their needs, which limits how much value they can get from the data they already have.

BCG, 2025

What to do:

- Provide item-level visibility across sales, stock, margin and forecast data.
- Standardise reporting and performance metrics.
- Eliminate duplicated calculations and conflicting reports.
- Enable self-service analysis without manual extraction.

What success looks like:

- Faster identification of underperforming products.
- Improved range optimisation decisions.
- Greater confidence in assortment reviews.
- Reduced reliance on instinct alone.

Step 5: Give planners their time back

Current challenge

"We need to do more without increasing headcount."

The pressure on planning teams in high-growth retailers is consistent: headcount doesn't grow at the same pace as business complexity. More SKUs, more channels, more data, more reporting requirements, with roughly the same number of people to handle all of it.

The consequence is that skilled, experienced planners spend a significant portion of their week doing things that technology should handle. Cleaning data. Chasing versions. Reconciling numbers across different files. Producing reports that nobody quite believes. None of this creates commercial value. All of it crowds out the thinking that does.

The real test of good planning technology isn't how many features it has but how much time it gives back to the people using it, and whether they spend that time making better trading decisions.

~10 hours

per week is estimated to be reclaimable by merchant teams through better use of automation across forecasting, reporting and routine data management.

BCG, 2025

What to do:

- Automate data consolidation and reporting.
- Focus reporting on exceptions rather than information overload.
- Reduce manual forecast maintenance.
- Remove repetitive reconciliation activities.

What success looks like:

- Less time spent maintaining data.
- More time spent analysing performance.
- Faster decision-making cycles.
- Greater planning productivity without increasing headcount.

Putting the five steps together

Step	Primary Challenge	Key action	Desired outcome
Step 1	Conflicting data and spreadsheet dependency	Establish a single source	Trusted planning information
Step 2	Reactive reporting	Create a rolling-forward view & forecast better	Forward-looking visibility
Step 3	Disconnected planning processes	Connect sales, stock and intake planning	Better inventory and intake decisions
Step 4	Low confidence in range decisions	Improve confidence in range decisions	Clearer assortment optimisation
Step 5	Excessive manual effort	Give planners their time back	More time for commercial planning

Where this leaves you

Better planning doesn't require starting from scratch.

The retailers who close the visibility gap aren't necessarily the ones with the largest technology budgets. They're the ones who stopped treating planning as a data problem and started treating it as a decision-making problem, then made sure their teams had the right tools to do that job well.

For growing retailers, there's a sensible path between spreadsheet dependency and ERP transformation. It's not a compromise. It's a more practical route to the same destination.

When these foundations are in place, planning becomes less reactive, decisions become more confident, and the business is better positioned to respond to change before it impacts performance.

Want to see what forward visibility looks like for your team?

Get in touch

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