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# Bridging the gap between Retail and SME Banking



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### About us

A global non-profit organization, established in 1971 by banks and insurance companies, Qorus facilitates networking between decision-makers. It provides quality insights to help banks and insurance companies make the right decisions to foster innovation and drive their transformation. 120 financial groups in 133 countries are Qorus members.

Headquartered in Paris. Offices in London, Brussels, Andorra, Milan, Stockholm, Bratislava, Warsaw, Moscow, Istanbul, Beirut, Dubai, Tokyo, Singapore, Sydney and Montreal.

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Engine by Starling is the SaaS platform behind Britain's first digital bank, Starling. Engine's cloud-native technology enables banks and legacy institutions worldwide to modernise their infrastructure and deliver exceptional digital experiences for customers and employees.

Beyond core ledger capabilities, and built on endlessly-scalable foundations, Engine offers a flexible, API-first platform, providing the functionality needed to run a bank end-to-end. Engine continues to redefine what's possible in modern core banking. Built on a foundation of full data transparency, Engine gives banks a powerful advantage to innovate rapidly and ensure sustainable growth.

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# Foreword

**Across jurisdictions and economic cycles, one constant endures: the vitality of the global economy is underpinned by the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector. Representing around 90% of enterprises worldwide, SMEs are a principal engine of employment, innovation, and local resilience. Yet, for all their collective scale, they remain often underserved, most acutely at the smaller and micro end of the spectrum.**

This is not a new observation, but it is an increasingly urgent one. Over time, a structural service gap has emerged between retail and SME banking – one that reflects not only legacy operating models, but also deeply embedded assumptions about cost-to-serve, risk, and customer value. Retail banking has benefitted from rapid innovation cycles and platform scalability; corporate banking, by contrast, has justified investment through high-touch, high-margin bespoke solutions. Medium, and particularly smaller and micro-SMEs, however, have too often occupied an ambiguous middle ground, subject to legacy segmentation models that neither reflect their sector, growth trajectory or operational realities – or meet their evolving expectations.

The result is a misalignment of service design and customer needs. Smaller SMEs are frequently channelled into retail frameworks that lack the flexibility their businesses require, while being denied access to the adaptability and advisory depth afforded to larger businesses. In effect, they are often asked to operate with corporate-level complexity, but without the corresponding institutional support. This tension lies at the heart of the service gap.

Encouragingly, this status quo is neither fixed nor defensible. According to insights at our Leaders Roundtable in Dubai, the global landscape is set for a rapid transformation that will demand a fundamental shift in perspective. That shift is already underway. In markets such as France, new entrants including Qonto, alongside international challengers like Revolut, are redefining expectations – demonstrating that SME clients will respond decisively to propositions that are purpose-built, intuitive, and responsive.

The strategic implication is clear. Success in SME banking cannot be anchored to static models or inherited segmentation.

Rather, it requires the deliberate preservation of optionality, underpinned by operating models that are sufficiently flexible to adapt as customer needs and competitive dynamics evolve. Banks must be able to serve SME and retail segments both distinctly and, where appropriate, in an integrated manner, without compromising the integrity of either.

This calls for a reimagined blueprint – one that prioritises differentiation, scalability, and long-term growth. It must enable expansion into adjacent products, sectors and customer cohorts, while remaining grounded in a coherent strategic vision.

In our view, three imperatives will define success: First, achieving clarity of positioning through granular and dynamic segmentation. The SME segment is not 'one size fits all', and approaches must reflect the diversity of needs across sectors and maturity levels.

Second, delivering a genuinely differentiated customer experience by combining seamless, digital-first onboarding with targeted human engagement at critical moments of need.

Third, investing in a future-ready operating model, anchored by a unified and resilient data architecture. Such a foundation is essential not only for efficiency, but for enabling responsiveness, innovation, and sustained competitive advantage.

The opportunity is substantial, but so too is the challenge. Bridging the long-standing divide between retail and SME banking will require both strategic conviction and operational discipline. Those institutions that succeed will not only capture growth, but will play a defining role in supporting the next generation of enterprise.



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