inbound logistics

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One key step to finding answers to any logistics, supply chain, or technology challenge is knowing the right questions to ask.

Inbound Logistics assembled a team of supply chain and logistics technology leaders, and asked for their perspectives on the important logistics challenges and opportunities impacting your business.

More importantly, these logistics thought leaders can give you guidance when considering improvements to your business processes.

Thought Leaders

Find the Data You've Been Looking For

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Q: Why do companies struggle to get good data?

A: It's no secret that data is the foundation for a world-class logistics strategy. It's also no secret how to find the right data, yet many companies struggle to find the data they've been looking for. Companies have a lot of data, but not the data they can use effectively.

The common issue I hear from logistics managers is they don't trust their data. This is because the data isn't clean. Without clean data, it's impossible to develop or deploy a sound strategy or accurately diagnose issues.

Q: What obstacles prevent getting good data?

A: Two hurdles hinder getting good data you can trust: sheer volume and variety. When dealing with logistics data, a company may have thousands of trading partners, with each one creating data per their own standard.

Then throw in the mix the fact that many of the shipments are tendered to the carrier by hand (using a handwritten bill of lading). When a vendor handwrites a bill of lading for a shipment that is destined for you, the carrier must manually enter in the handwritten bill of lading before the data can be transmitted to you.

Keeping this type of data clean and standardized requires a very sophisticated system built to understand how the data is being created (through multiple manual steps).

Many companies and logistics firms use systems that generate their shipments as the repository for this data. The issue with this situation is that these systems are built to work with one partner—the company that is using them, and not the thousands of partners that are creating the data. These systems also can't capture transactions that did not originate from their environment. Without complete data, the data cannot be trusted.

Q: How can I get good data?

A: To get good data you can trust, look for a wholistic logistics solution that starts with visibility tools. Is order information integrated with shipment and tracking information? Is this integrated with the freight invoice? A clean, standardized dataset is your foundation to diagnose issues accurately. Fancy analytics won't solve anything if it doesn't start with clean data.

Q: What's the payback for investing in good data?

A: The payback for investing in good data and the right visibility services and analytics tools can be almost immediate. We see many shippers throttle their own strategies to fit their current systems. Once you have data, it's easy to make the business case internally to make the strategic changes that are revealed in the data.

Put the Factory To Work: Vendor Shipment Booking
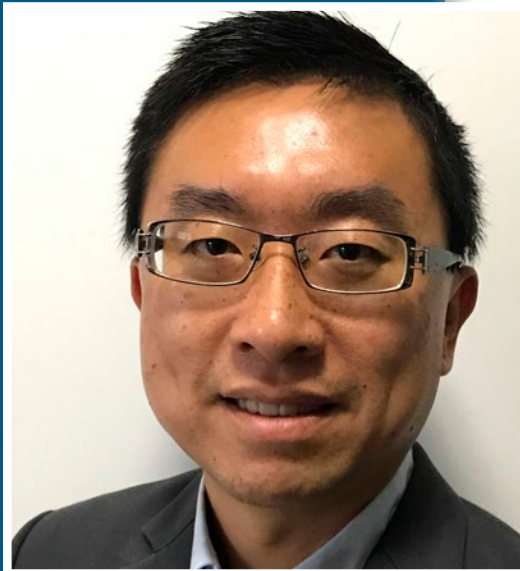
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Q: *What are the biggest issues facing supply chain executives in 2018?*

A: When we said 2017 was one of the most disruptive years for global supply chains in recent years, thanks to natural disasters, geopolitical conflicts, and regulatory upheaval, we couldn't have foreseen the twists and turns that would take shape in 2018. The ongoing talk about tariffs and trade wars doesn't make being a supply chain executive any easier, but these things remain abstract concerns for the present. In reality, supply chain executives are still worried about tracking their shipments crisscrossing the globe to ensure they will deliver getting their goods to the customer on time.

Digitally transforming the supply chain to create end-to-end visibility helps alleviate many of these concerns. Making data-driven decisions early in the product lifecycle, rather than reacting to problems after they occur, will put your supply chain on the path towards sustained growth.

One piece of the puzzle that is often missing is the ability to manage delays in the supply chain from the very beginning. Shipping delays are costly and can have ripple effects on the entire supply chain, putting a company into a downward spiral and greatly reducing the chances of sustained growth.

Q: *How can companies work with their factories to avoid shipping delays?*

A: Facilitating clear communication between vendors and factories is a necessary step in creating an agile, fast-moving supply chain. Typically, vendors communicate shipment information to the logistics service providers (LSP), who then create the booking—a time-consuming task that can lead to delays and errors, with negative effects.

Revolving this issue through the most cost-effective and efficient manner is solved by equipping the factory with digital tools to complete the shipment booking, rather than the LSP. This gives the vendor complete visibility into which PO line items are ready, so they can provide accurate and required information regarding the shipment, such as carton sizes and other related data.

Q: *How does vendor shipment booking technology help companies manage their supply chains?*

A: Technology that integrates the purchase order data directly with the LSP, through a centralized cloud platform, improves both speed to market and compliance. Combined with material order visibility, order collaboration, production tracking, and shipment preparation, vendor shipment booking is the next logical step in streamlining the supply chain process for speed.

Supply chain executives should understand that moving the work down to the factory level doesn't negate their control over the supply chain. Instead, this technology enhances visibility and rebalances the workload, letting each piece of the puzzle work in harmony with others in a transparent manner, with all data accessible to those who require it.

Vendor shipment booking takes sourcing teams from 'shared visibility' to 'shared collaboration', so all teams are working towards the common goals of on-time delivery.

With more uncertainty ahead for global companies, gaining visibility and control over all aspects of the supply chain has never been more important.