



Total Workforce, One Future

The orchestration imperative for contingent workforce management

Industry Whitepaper



Introduction

The modern enterprise has two workforces. One is visible, measured, and managed through decades of investment in HR technology. The other - contingent workers, independent contractors, statement-of-work engagements, and staffing agency placements - operate largely in the dark. That blind spot is no longer a manageable inconvenience. It is a structural vulnerability at the heart of enterprise workforce strategy.

Contingent workers now represent 30 to 50 percent of total workforce capacity¹ at many large organisations, yet most enterprises lack a unified system of record for this population, instead a patchwork of VMS, MSP relationships, procurement tools, and spreadsheets tying it all together. The result is not administrative friction, it is a governance failure.

At the same time, the workforce itself is changing. Human employees and contractors are increasingly working alongside AI agents and automation, from copilots embedded in tools to AI-generated code, content and analytics. That doesn't reduce the need for orchestration; it raises the bar. Leaders now have to govern not just who does the work and on what terms, but how human and AI capacity combine safely, ethically and efficiently.

Everest Group's 2026 imperatives for contingent workforce programs point directly at multi-channel orchestration as the next frontier - alongside AI-powered analytics, direct sourcing as a strategic motion, and best-of-breed technology paired with strategic partners to anchor transformation. Gartner and Forrester are naming total workforce management and technology convergence as priority capabilities, not nice-to-haves. The diagnosis across all three is consistent: incremental tweaks to vendor lists or VMS configurations are no longer enough.

The future of contingent workforce management is an orchestration-led operating model - a unified system of record and workflow layer that sits alongside HRIS for the employed workforce, connecting every route to external work, and increasingly AI-enabled work, into one governed, data-rich operating model. Where analysts have named the destination, this paper explores five structural shifts making it inevitable, and outlines the steps to making this an operating reality.

01	The system-of-record gap	No unified data layer for your contingent workforce
02	Fragmentation is the real risk	Disconnected systems create unmanaged exposure
03	Contingent has become structural	Two workforces, but only one has real infrastructure
04	Visibility as the foundation of control	You cannot govern what you cannot see
05	Orchestration is the next evolution	A control tower, not another point solution



Multi-channel orchestration is the future of *contingent workforce excellence*, with AI-powered analytics and execution as core design principles.

Everest Group, 2026 Contingent Workforce research



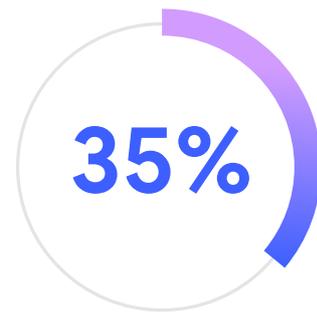
The strategic imperative has changed

For the past two decades, the dominant narrative around contingent workforce management has focused on sourcing: how to access talent faster, how to build direct pipelines, how to reduce agency dependency. The technology market responded with a proliferation of tools: vendor management systems to manage approved suppliers, applicant tracking systems adapted for contract roles, talent marketplaces for independent contractors, and MSP relationships to manage the complexity in between.

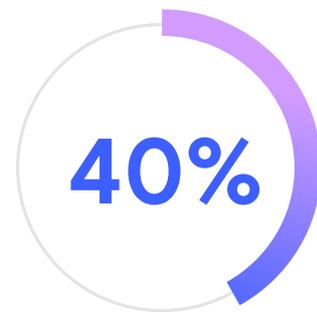
The result is that most large enterprises today manage their contingent workforce not through a system, but through a collection of systems. Each is adequate for its specific purpose. None is capable of providing the unified visibility, governance, and strategic intelligence the contingent workforce now demands.

In Australia, contingent workers now represent over 35% of the national workforce,² a figure that continues to rise. Across Asia Pacific, nearly 50% of organisations use contingent labour to address staffing shortages, and the region accounts for 40% of the global gig economy.³ In the UK, 1.54 million temporary workers and 4.39 million self-employed workers⁴ together represent a substantial share of the workforce operating outside traditional employment structures and outside unified governance frameworks. This is not a staffing trend. This is a structural transformation in how work gets done. And the technology infrastructure that most enterprises use to manage this workforce has not kept pace with the transformation it is supposed to serve.

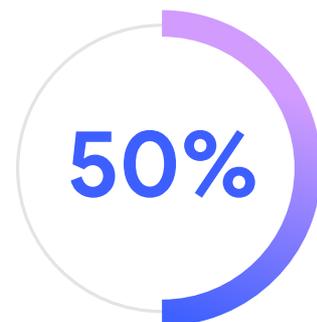
This industry paper is written for HR, people, finance and procurement leaders, and workforce planning executives who are responsible for the contingent workforce in practice and who recognise that the current approach is no longer fit for purpose. Fragmented systems, inconsistent data, and reactive governance are symptoms of an infrastructure problem, not a process problem. What follows is a framework for understanding what has changed, why fragmentation is the core problem, and what a unified contingent workforce platform actually looks like in practice.



over 35% of the national workforce in Australia is contingent workers



of the global gig economy is located in Asia Pacific



of organisations in Asia Pacific use contingent labour to address staffing shortages,



1 The system-of-record gap

You can't control what you can't see

Ask the CHRO of any major enterprise to tell you how many employees are on payroll today, and they can answer within minutes. Ask them how many contingent workers are actively engaged across the organisation right now across all suppliers, geographies, and engagement types and the most honest answer is: we don't know.

This is the system-of-record gap. Organisations have invested billions in HR technology to create a comprehensive, real-time picture of their permanent workforce. Platforms like Workday, SAP SuccessFactors, and Oracle HCM aggregate headcount, compensation, performance, skills, and tenure into a single source of truth. Decisions about hiring, promotion, succession, and organisational design are all made against this data. But for contingent workers who may comprise 30, 40, or even 50 percent of the organisation's functional capacity no equivalent system exists.

The consequences of this gap are not abstract. Without a unified system of record for contingent workers, organisations cannot accurately report total workforce costs. They cannot identify which contractors are approaching compliance thresholds. They cannot make informed decisions about whether to convert contingent roles to permanent positions, or vice versa. They cannot assess the skills available across their total workforce for project planning. They are, in effect, making strategic workforce decisions with half the data.

Ardent Partners' annual 'State of Contingent Workforce Management' research consistently finds that best-in-class organisations, those achieving the highest performance across cost, quality, and speed metrics are distinguished above all by their visibility into contingent workforce data. Yet for the majority, this visibility remains aspirational. Data is siloed across VMS platforms, MSP systems, procurement tools, and staffing agency portals, with no integration layer to unify it.

68% of organisations lack real-time visibility into their contingent workforce (Ardent Partners, 2023)⁵



A workforce you can't measure is a workforce you can't manage. For most organisations, that's exactly what their contingent workforce is.



Christian Clark, CEO & Co-founder, Upplift



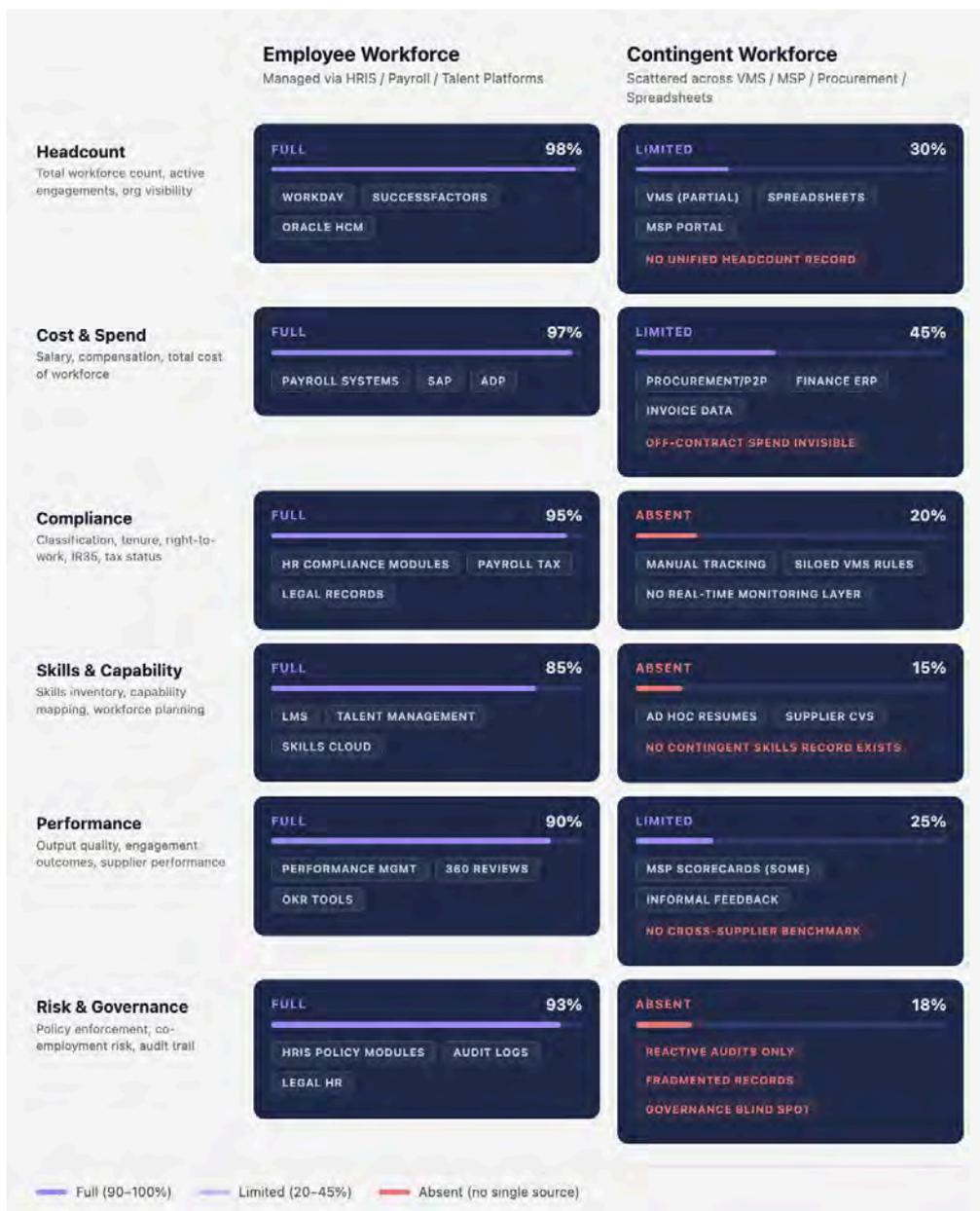
Why existing tools can't fill the gap

The instinctive response to the system-of-record gap is to try to fill it using existing tools. The HRIS can be extended to cover contractors, the VMS can be configured to aggregate across more supplier channels. In practice, these approaches consistently fail, not because the tools are poorly designed, but because they were designed for different purposes.

HRIS platforms are built around the employment relationship. They assume a salary structure, benefits eligibility, a continuous performance record, and a permanent engagement. Contingent workers exist outside these parameters. VMS platforms, meanwhile, are designed to manage approved supplier relationships they do not capture direct sourcing, independent contractors, or statement-of-work engagements that flow through procurement.

What is needed is not an extension of an existing system. It is a purpose-built system of record for the contingent workforce, one that aggregates across all supplier types, all engagement models, and all geographic regions to create the unified visibility that strategic management requires.

Two workforces. Only one has a true system of record.



2 Fragmentation is the real risk

When contingent programs underperform, the conversation often jumps straight to sourcing: better suppliers, sharper rate cards, new marketplaces. But there is a more fundamental risk that rarely gets named directly: the risk of operating a significant workforce segment through a technology architecture that was never designed to work as a system - fragmentation.

Fragmentation shows up in four dimensions:

- **Organisational:** Regions and business units adopt their own models for engaging non-employees, often outside formal programs.
- **Supplier:** Agencies, MSPs, consulting firms and marketplaces run with different terms, workflows and data standards.
- **Technological:** Legacy VMS, HR, local payroll and niche portals coexist without a unifying layer.
- **Process:** Approvals, onboarding checks, rate cards and invoicing routines vary by manager, team or location.

The result, in practice, looks something like this. A large enterprise typically has a vendor management system - Fieldglass, Beeline, or Coupa - sitting alongside or above an MSP relationship, while one or more direct sourcing platforms handle independent contractors separately. A procurement system manages purchase orders for statement-of-work engagements, often with little visibility into what sits beside it. Individual business units maintain their own supplier relationships and onboarding processes outside the formal program. And underneath all of it, Finance has its own view of contractor spend, HR holds partial records, and compliance operates reactively - each function working from a different slice of the same workforce.

On the surface, this looks like flexibility. Underneath, cost leakage hides in off-contract buying, exceptions and ungoverned channels. Compliance risk grows as documentation and policy application vary case by case. Supplier performance is hard to compare because the underlying data is inconsistent.



15-25%

cost overpayment without centralised contingent management (Gartner)⁶

60%+

of enterprises use 5 or more systems to manage contingent workforce (Ardent Partners)⁷

Each was acquired to solve a specific problem, not talk to each other. Collectively, they create a fragmentation architecture that produces compounding risks across four dimensions:

- **Governance risk:** With no central record of who is engaged, on what terms, and for how long, organisations cannot enforce policies consistently. Contractor tenure limits exist on paper but go unmonitored. Right-to-work checks are completed in some channels but not others. Co-employment thresholds are approached without visibility until an audit forces the issue.
- **Financial risk:** Duplicate supplier relationships, inconsistent rate cards, and unmanaged off-contract spend are endemic to fragmented architectures. Gartner estimates that organisations operating without centralised contingent workforce management overpay by 15–25% relative to their addressable market rate. When spend is distributed across dozens of cost centres and multiple procurement channels, optimisation is structurally impossible.
- **Compliance risk:** Tax and employment law compliance for contingent workers is jurisdiction-specific and evolving rapidly. The UK's IR35 reforms, the EU's Platform Work Directive, and equivalent legislation in Australia, Canada, and the United States place the burden of compliance on the engaging organisation - not the worker. Without a unified compliance layer, organisations are exposed to retrospective liabilities that can be substantial.
- **Strategic risk:** Perhaps most significantly, fragmentation prevents strategic workforce planning. When you cannot see your total contingent workforce, you cannot make informed decisions about build vs. buy vs. borrow, total cost optimisation, or skills gap analysis. Workforce strategy becomes guesswork.

The Fragmentation Landscape

Zero unified system of record for contingent workers

The typical enterprise uses 6-10 separate systems to manage its contingent workforce. Each was acquired to solve a specific problem. None were designed to work as a system. The result: fragmented data, inconsistent governance, and a workforce that is strategically invisible.

CORE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS



SUPPORTING SYSTEMS



DATA FLOWS BETWEEN SYSTEMS - FRAGMENTED, MANUAL & INCOMPLETE



3 Contingent has become structural

For years, contingent labour was treated as a pressure valve: a way to handle spikes in demand or bridge permanent hiring gaps. The language reflected that: "supplemental", "temporary", "buffer". That mental model is now out of date.

In many industries, contingent labour represents more than a third of the total workforce, depending on geography and business model. External workers are embedded in critical delivery teams, customer operations and transformation programs, not sitting on the sidelines. Deloitte, SIA and others consistently report that the majority of large organisations plan to maintain or increase their use of non-employee talent over the next several years.

Contingent work has shifted from a tactical staffing tool to a permanent, structural component of enterprise workforce architecture, accelerating significantly in the post-pandemic era.

Right now, most enterprises effectively have two workforces, but only one has real infrastructure.

- Employees get clear processes, robust data and strategic workforce planning, reinforced by decades of HR tech investment.
- Contingent workers sit in an operating model that is still largely tactical, run through a mix of local practices, legacy contracts and manual workarounds.

80%

of executives plan to maintain or increase contingent workforce (Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends)⁸

2x

Growth rate of contingent workforce relative to permanent headcount over past decade⁹



According to Deloitte's Global Human Capital Trends research, the majority of large organisations now regard their contingent workforce as a permanent feature of their operating model.¹⁰ The drivers of this shift are structural and reinforcing:

- **Skill velocity has outpaced internal development cycles.** The pace at which new technical skills become business-critical has accelerated beyond most organisations' ability to hire and train. Contingent specialists provide access to capabilities that would take years to develop internally.
- **Project-based work models require variable capacity.** Enterprise transformation programs, technology implementations, and product development increasingly require surge capacity that cannot be met through permanent hiring.
- **Economic volatility demands workforce flexibility.** The experience of 2020–2022 demonstrated the value and the risk of workforce models dependent on fixed labour costs. Organisations have accelerated contingent adoption partly as a hedge against uncertainty.
- **The talent market itself has changed.** A growing portion of the highest-value talent now actively prefers independent or project-based work. Access to this talent requires engagement models that permanent employment cannot accommodate.

These trends converge on a conclusion that most enterprise workforce planners have not yet fully operationalised: the contingent workforce is no longer a satellite around the permanent workforce. It is a core component of how the organisation delivers its strategy.

From two workforces to three: Employees, externals and AI

There's also a third dimension emerging. AI is increasingly taking its place as another type of "workforce" within the enterprise.

By 2026, AI agents are no longer experimental. They're operational. Autonomous AI can now handle tasks for hours at a time, with capacity doubling every six months. Enterprises are deploying AI agents for customer service triage, code generation, supply chain planning, exception handling and operational diagnostics, often working alongside human employees and external contractors

For many CHROs, CPOs and CIOs, the real challenge is designing operating models where permanent staff, contingent talent and AI systems interact coherently. That reinforces the idea that you need a system of record and orchestration for all non-traditional capacity, people and machines.

Without visibility and governance, "shadow AI" adoption mirrors the chaos of shadow IT and ungoverned contingent hiring: fragmented tools, inconsistent risk management, and no clear accountability when something goes wrong.



4 Visibility as the foundation of control

Real-time visibility into the contingent workforce is not a reporting feature. It is the foundational capability on which everything else depends. Governance, cost optimisation, compliance management and strategic planning all require it. You cannot enforce policies you cannot monitor, benchmark rates you cannot see, or plan for capability you have not inventoried. Visibility is not one of several desirable outcomes. It is the prerequisite for all of them.

Without real-time visibility into contingent work, organisations see a familiar pattern:

- Cost overruns driven by opaque pipelines and weak forecasting
- Compliance risk accumulating through inconsistent checks and undocumented exceptions
- Approval inconsistencies and work-arounds that become the norm rather than the exception.
- Supplier governance challenges with limited ability to compare performance or enforce rate discipline.

What meaningful visibility actually requires

Best-in-class contingent workforce visibility encompasses five dimensions:

- **Workforce inventory.** Who is engaged, in what role, through which channel, at what cost, and for how long - aggregated across all supplier relationships, engagement types and geographies in real time.
- **Financial.** Total contingent spend across all cost centres, benchmarked against market rates and attributed to business unit and function. Forrester estimates that organisations with consolidated spend visibility achieve 12–18% cost reduction within 18 months.¹¹
- **Compliance.** Active monitoring of tenure limits, classification thresholds, right-to-work status and jurisdiction-specific requirements - with automated alerts before thresholds are breached, not after.
- **Performance and quality.** Supplier performance data and worker quality metrics aggregated in a way that supports informed sourcing decisions rather than gut feel or incumbent bias.
- **Skills and capacity.** A dynamic picture of skills available through the contingent workforce, enabling total workforce planning that accounts for permanent and contingent capability together.¹²

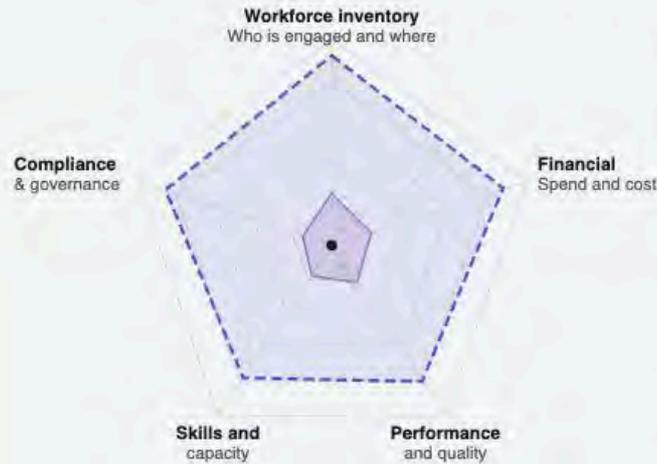
Research by Gartner on workforce analytics maturity consistently finds that organisations at the higher end of the maturity curve, those with comprehensive, real-time workforce data outperform their peers across multiple dimensions: lower total workforce cost, faster time-to-capability, and stronger governance outcomes. The causal logic is not complex: when you can see your workforce clearly, you can make better decisions about it.



The five dimensions of contingent workforce visibility

Comparing fragmented vs. visibility-enabled organisations across the dimensions that underpin governance, cost control, and strategic planning

----- Visibility-enabled organisation ——— Fragmented architecture



COVERAGE BY DIMENSION

Workforce inventory 25% vs 92%



Real-time view of all contingent workers across all suppliers, channels, and geographies. Best-in-class organisations maintain a single, live headcount record.

Financial visibility 20% vs 88%



Total spend consolidated across cost centres, benchmarked against market rates. Forrester estimates 12-18% cost reduction with consolidated spend visibility.

Compliance 15% vs 85%



Continuous monitoring of tenure limits, classification, IR35 status, and right-to-work. Compliance failures cost an average of USD \$14M per incident (EY research).

Performance and quality 22% vs 80%



Supplier quality metrics, worker output data, and engagement outcomes aggregated across all channels to inform sourcing decisions.

Skills and capacity 18% vs 78%



Dynamic skills inventory across both permanent and contingent populations, enabling total workforce planning and faster capability deployment.

The visibility gap = the control gap

Fragmented organisations score an average of 20% across all five dimensions, against 85% for best-in-class. This isn't a reporting gap. It's a governance gap, a cost gap, and a strategic planning gap rolled into one.

● Visibility-enabled organisation ● Fragmented architecture ● Coverage scale: 0-100%



The compliance case is now urgent

For many enterprise leaders, the compliance dimension of visibility is becoming the most pressing near-term driver. The regulatory environment for contingent workers is tightening simultaneously across multiple jurisdictions. The UK's Off-Payroll Working legislation (IR35 reform for the private sector), the EU Platform Work Directive, California's AB5, and equivalent reforms in Australia and Canada all have the same structural effect: they shift the compliance burden onto the engaging organisation, with significant financial and reputational consequences for non-compliance.

Organisations that lack real-time compliance visibility "who is engaged?, how?", and whether the engagement structure is appropriate under current law are operating with material unmonitored risk. According to research by EY, contingent workforce compliance failures cost organisations an average of USD 14 million per incident, including back-tax liabilities, penalties, and remediation costs.¹³ Visibility is not a nice-to-have in this environment. It is risk management.

As AI takes on more work, from screening candidates to generating code drafts, visibility also needs to extend to where automation is used, which decisions it influences, and how its outputs are validated. Without that, you risk "shadow AI" in the same way you currently have shadow contingent labour: ungoverned, unmonitored, and presenting compounding risk over time.

\$14M

Average cost of contingent workforce compliance failure (EY research)¹³

12–18%

Cost reduction achievable with consolidated spend visibility (Forrester Research)¹⁴

3x

faster compliance response for organisations with real-time visibility (Ardent Partners)¹⁵

Why compliance visibility is now board-level

Regulatory pressure has turned contingent workforce compliance from an operational concern into a board-level risk. IR35 reforms, the EU Platform Work Directive, Same Job Same Pay in Australia, US Department of Labor rules and similar initiatives have a common structure: they shift the burden of proof onto the engaging organisation.

Getting this wrong can result in multi-million-dollar back-tax liabilities, penalties and remediation costs per incident. In that context, compliance you can evidence, not just compliance you claim, becomes a decisive differentiator.



5

Orchestration is the next evolution

The four pillars that precede this one have constructed a clear diagnosis. There is a structural gap in contingent workforce infrastructure, defined by fragmentation across tools that were built for other purposes. It has reached strategic significance because contingent work has become a permanent and growing component of enterprise workforce architecture. Closing it requires genuine real-time visibility across the entire contingent population as a non-negotiable foundation.

The natural question is: what does the solution look like?

The answer most enterprises reach instinctively - a better VMS, a more capable MSP, another sourcing marketplace - is the wrong one. It treats a systemic problem as a procurement problem. The issue is not that individual tools are insufficiently capable. It is that no individual tool was designed to manage the contingent workforce as a whole. Fragmentation cannot be fixed by adding more fragments.

What a unified contingent workforce solution actually does

A credible orchestration platform is not a rebranded VMS or an ATS with a contractor module bolted on. It is a purpose-built system that integrates three capability sets that, until now, have only been available as separate tools.

Three capabilities unified in one system

The relationship intelligence of a CRM. Managing a high-performing contingent workforce is fundamentally a relationship management challenge. Talent pipelines need to be built and nurtured. Supplier relationships need to be actively managed against performance data. Contractor networks need to be maintained so that the right people are accessible when a need arises. A unified platform provides a persistent, searchable record of every talent relationship the organisation has built - not just the engagements currently in flight.

The sourcing intelligence of an ATS. Finding and engaging contingent talent requires structured sourcing capability: talent pools, skills-based search, candidate pipelines, engagement workflows and interview coordination. A unified platform brings this natively into the contingent workforce operating model, enabling organisations to build direct talent pipelines that reduce agency dependency and improve time-to-engagement.

The operational control of a VMS. Governing the contingent workforce requires the rigour a vendor management system provides: supplier management, rate card enforcement, statement-of-work management, onboarding workflows, tenure tracking and compliance monitoring. A unified platform embeds this as an integrated part of how every engagement is managed from day one — not a governance layer bolted on retrospectively.



Orchestrated workflows from request to pay-ready

Unification means workflow as much as data architecture. A unified platform standardises and evidences every critical step across the full lifecycle - request, approvals, compliance, onboarding, time capture, invoicing, payments and redeployment - through a consistent, auditable path regardless of where in the organisation a request originates. Workflows are configurable enough to respect local realities, but governed enough to prevent policy drift.

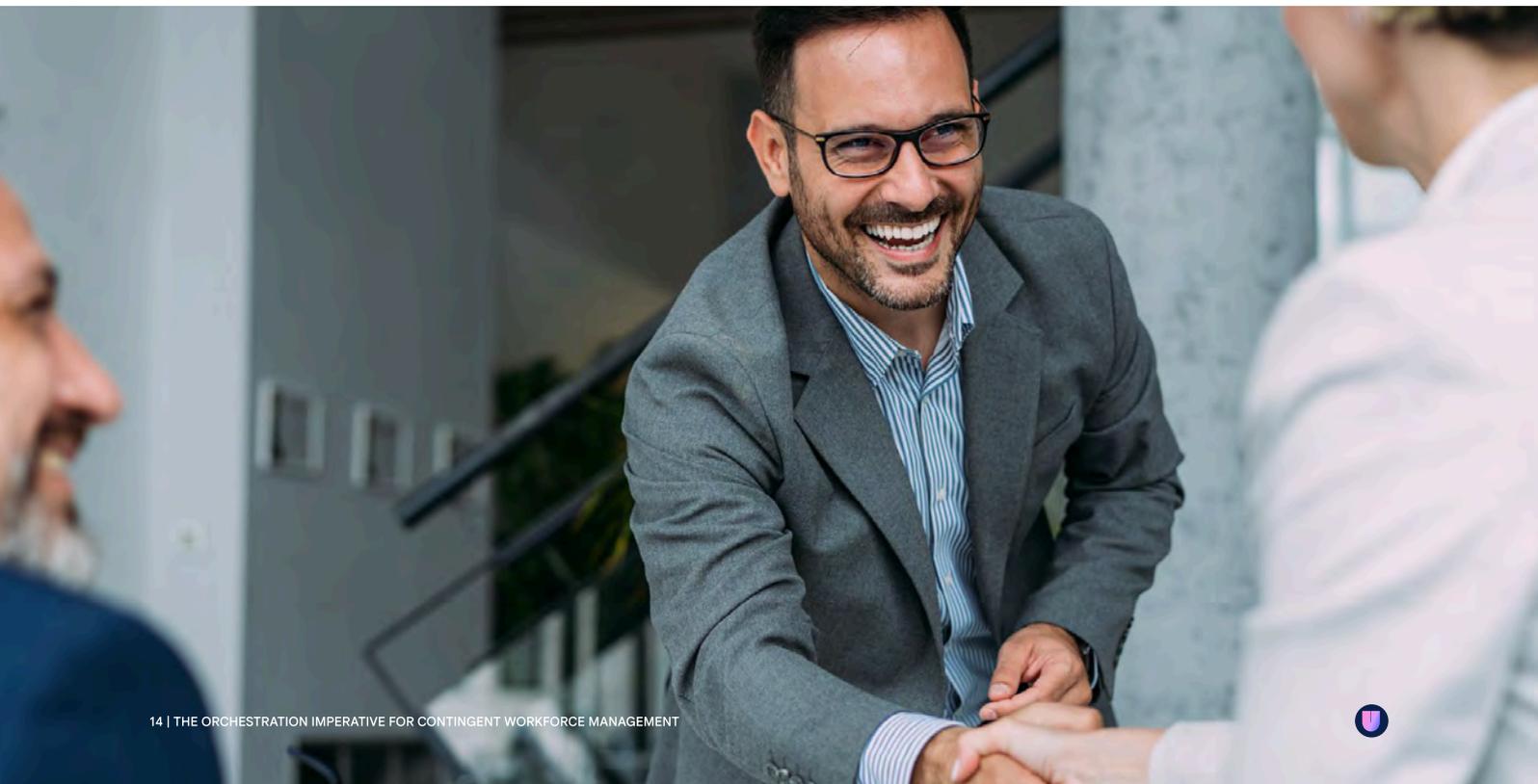
This is also where AI earns its place: drawing on clean, unified data to recommend channels, flag risks and surface optimisation opportunities, with humans in control of the final call.

A system of record for the contingent workforce

The result is an equivalent infrastructure for non-employees that sits alongside HRIS and finance systems - not replacing them, but filling the gap that has always existed. One that enables genuine total workforce planning, real-time spend and compliance visibility, and supplier governance based on evidence rather than relationship.

Why unification changes the outcome

The power of this model is not additive. When relationship intelligence, sourcing capability and operational control share a single data model, sourcing decisions are informed by compliance data, governance is enforced at the point of engagement rather than retrospectively, and supplier performance is instantly available to shape sourcing strategy. The whole becomes significantly more than the sum of its parts.



What consolidation enables that fragmentation cannot

The practical capabilities unlocked by a unified contingent workforce platform represent a step change from what fragmented architectures can achieve, regardless of how well individual tools are configured: A true system of record. For the first time, organisations have a single, authoritative source of truth for their contingent workforce; every worker, every engagement, every supplier relationship, every compliance status, updated in real time and accessible from a single platform.

- **Proactive rather than reactive governance.** Compliance monitoring, tenure tracking, and risk management are embedded in the operational workflow, not handled as a separate process after the fact. Issues surface before they become liabilities.
- **Direct talent pipeline development.** Organisations can build and maintain proprietary talent pools of pre-vetted contractors and contingent specialists; reducing agency dependency, improving time-to-engagement, and lowering per-hire cost over time.
- **Total workforce intelligence.** With all contingent workforce data visible in a unified system, strategic workforce planning can finally reflect the organisation's actual capability, not just the portion that appears in the HRIS.
- **Supplier performance management.** With all supplier data consolidated in one place, organisations can manage supplier relationships based on evidence, quality, compliance, speed, cost rather than inertia or relationship history.

Analyst coverage of workforce technology convergence consistently points in this direction. Gartner has identified total workforce management as a priority capability for enterprise HR technology investment. Forrester's research on workforce technology convergence highlights the movement from discrete tools toward integrated operating platforms. The market is telling organisations what the data has long suggested: **the era of point solutions for contingent workforce management is ending.**



Where leaders go from here

The organisations that will thrive are those that treat non-employee labour as a governed, data-rich component of their workforce strategy, not a peripheral cost line.

Audit your current stack honestly. Map every system that currently touches your contingent workforce - VMS, MSP portals, procurement tools, direct sourcing platforms, compliance tools, spreadsheets. Assess whether the data in these systems is unified, real-time, and actionable, or fragmented, lagged, and incomplete. The gap between where you are and what genuine visibility requires will define the scope of change needed.

Quantify the cost of fragmentation. Estimate your exposure across the four risk dimensions identified in Pillar 2: governance, financial, compliance, and strategic. For most large enterprises, this exercise reveals that the total cost of maintaining a fragmented architecture in overpaid rates, compliance exposure, governance failure, and strategic blind spots significantly exceeds the investment required to replace it.

Evaluate consolidation, not addition. When assessing technology options, apply a new evaluation criterion: does this replace fragmentation with a unified system of record, or does it add another silo? The critical distinction is between platforms built natively for the contingent workforce lifecycle integrating sourcing, relationship management, and operational governance in a single data model and point solutions that solve one problem while compounding the others.

The organisations that will lead on contingent workforce management over the next five years are not those with the most tools. They are those with the clearest picture of their total workforce and the infrastructure to manage it with the same rigour, intelligence, and strategic intention they apply to their permanent employees. That infrastructure is now available. The decision is whether to build it.

About Upplft

Upplft is a unified contingent workforce platform that brings together the best of a CRM, ATS and VMS into a single purpose-built solution. Rather than patching together disparate tools, Upplft gives enterprise organisations one platform to source, engage, manage and govern their entire contingent workforce, with real-time visibility, built-in compliance, and the relationship intelligence needed to build a high-performing external talent ecosystem.

To learn more or request a platform demonstration, visit upplft.com



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Note on Data

Statistics cited in this document represent findings published by the referenced organisations. Where ranges are given (e.g., 38–50% contingent workforce share), these reflect variation across industries and enterprise size as reported in primary research. Readers are encouraged to consult primary sources for full methodological context. All dollar figures are presented in AUD unless otherwise noted.