Why Inbound Supply Chains Keep Breaking & How to Fix Them

Two supply chain leaders on the problems that follow every shipment through the door.

2026

FOURKITES

The Setup

Bob Stewart spent 30 years in global supply chain, most recently as Chief Supply Chain Officer, North America, for one of the world's largest QSR networks.

Tim Scott has held senior supply chain roles across CPG and grocery retail and wholesale, including Chief Supply Chain Officer at a major U.S. and Canadian grocery chain.

Between them, they've managed billions in spend and thousands of supplier relationships. They've also spent decades watching the same inbound supply chain problems show up at every company — problems that burn labor hours, inflate inventory costs, and erode customer experience in ways that rarely trace back to a single root cause. **We wanted to know why it keeps happening.**

The Rescheduling Problem

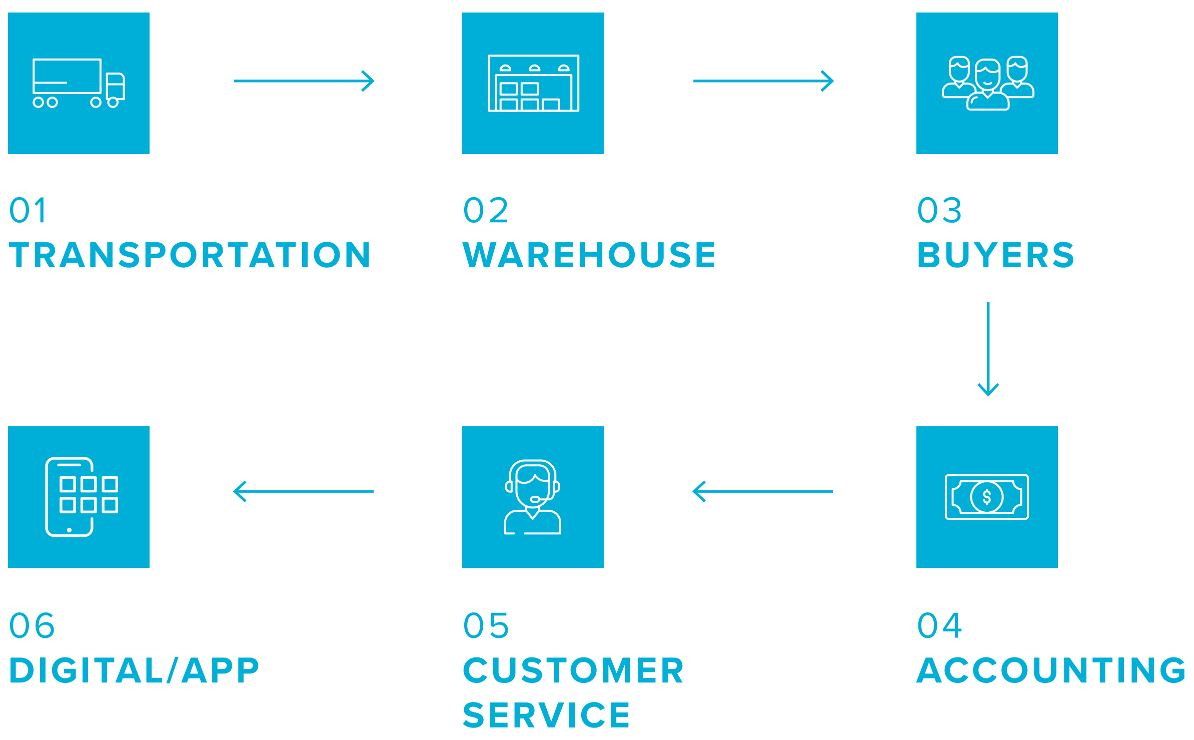
You've got the original appointment, and then you've got all the subsequent updates. The pickup was delayed, so the appointment needs to be adjusted. Something happened in transit — adjusted again. The driver ran out of hours and can't make the window. Adjusted again. There's a lot more interaction there than most people realize."

TIM SCOTT

Your dock doors are full. Your appointment times are full. You've got a labor plan to unload that trailer. And, despite all the emails, texts and instant messages, the ones that are often last to know are the ones that need to know first."

BOB STEWART

One delayed pickup can set off three or four rounds of rescheduling before a shipment arrives. Each round means someone is calling or emailing the carrier, someone else is ateams waiting on that freight are replanning their day. It adds up fast.



Six Departments, One Transaction

When what shows up at the dock doesn't match what's in the system, the resolution ends up touching almost every function in the building. The warehouse team documents what they see. The buyer — who's usually the only person authorized to amend the PO — makes the edit. Accounting reconciles and issues a short payment if needed. And if something slips through, customer service tends to be the team that hears about it first, often from a store manager or a customer who noticed before anyone else did.

That last step has gotten harder in a digital world.

"Transportation starts it. Then you've got the physical goods, the paperwork, and the original PO in the system. That triangulation of accuracy very often requires escalation. And the people on the front line aren't empowered to make the adjustments — because there are financial adjustments, accounts payable, working capital."

TIM SCOTT

"In the past, if a retailer or QSR was out of something, there was verbal communication — sorry, we're out. Would you you like to try something else? Today, with so many mobile orders, if your app doesn't reflect that you are out, and the customer shows up expecting the product to be there, it becomes a major satisfaction issue. The stakes are higher in the digital world."

BOB STEWART

The Foundation Is Still Fractured

"As crazy as it is for me to say in 2026, there are still significantly sized retailers and suppliers that don't have a core foundation in trading advance shipping notices (ASNs)."

TIM SCOTT

The conversation about AI-driven supply chains assumes a digital baseline that, in a lot of trading relationships, still doesn't exist. Tim described a world where data goes from paper to digital and back, where trading partners hold back because they're worried about exposing how they operate — sometimes for legal reasons, sometimes competitive, sometimes just instinct. Bob framed the long-term risk plainly.

Bob: "If you're not leveraging the digital environment that's out there, can you really survive going forward? It feels like to me that ability for those that are lagging to stay competitive is really shrinking."

Tim: "It'll make them even less attractive in an M&A environment due to the work to establish digital trading where it does not already exist."

The QBR as Operating System

You need a way to surface which partners are generating the most manual work and turn those patterns into commitments. When we asked Bob and Tim how they managed supplier performance, both came back to the same thing: quarterly business reviews with their most strategic partners. What made them work had less to do with the structure and more to do with how willing both sides were to be honest.

"We spent time on the wins. But the most critical part was the defects — where we had the data to measure deficiencies. We'd talk about the impacts, the learnings, how we worked through them. And with a true strategic partner, it's important to acknowledge the cause. But it's more important to commit to each other that the next time we meet, it'll be a different set of defects."

"Every supplier brings their own DNA. Some deliver with a high degree of technology, and some deliver with a high degree of individuals hand-sorting product as it comes across the line. You have to acknowledge those differences. But you also have to work with them on where they need to invest to stay relevant."

"They're going to tell you your response time could be quicker. Or that your payments are dragging — you're no longer paying at the agreed-to terms. As a supply chain leader, you may not have that within arm's reach. But it's really important to your partner."

Where to Start

Bob on ROI:

“Don’t get hung up initially on assigning an ROI, and if you don’t hit that ROI, don’t walk away from the investment. Think of it as continuous improvement. There’s no end date — it continues to evolve.”

Tim on where to start:

“There are highly transactional, non-value-added elements in almost every department. Repopulating a form — a claims form, an inventory adjustment form — that’s low-hanging fruit for automation. You need stage gates to validate data at each step, an audit trail so you can verify what the system did, accuracy checks before anything touches inventory or accounting. You build confidence through proof. And that confidence turns into commitment — within the automated teams, across internal departments, and between the external parties on either end.”

“Let’s start small. Let’s take those minutes we save every hour and celebrate them. Over time, those minutes become hours. And those hours become less time away from your family. They give you time to explore other things, expand your curiosity as an operator. And personally — they give people who are struggling for balance a chance to collect themselves, recharge, and approach their next shift with a larger bounce in their step.”

TIM SCOTT

TALK TO FOURKITES ABOUT INBOUND OPERATIONS.