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# Envisioning the future of supply chain talent

A vision and key shifts for success

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## Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving supply chain landscape, the development of talent is crucial for achieving operational success. As automation and artificial intelligence (AI) reshape the industry, the demand for a skilled workforce that can adapt to new technologies and processes has never been more pressing. Organizations must prioritize not only optimizing their supply chains and using their data effectively but also nurturing their talent to maintain a competitive edge. To excel in this dynamic environment, companies need a dual strategy for the future of supply chain talent and the cultural and operational shifts necessary to realize that vision.

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On August 21, 2025, Ernst & Young LLP (EY US) and the Consumer Brands Association (CBA) brought together industry leaders at the Chief Supply Chain Officer (CSCO) Exchange to tackle these critical challenges. Our discussions centered on crafting a vision for the future of supply chain talent and identifying the essential shifts needed to achieve that vision.

This edition of the Supply Chain Exchange Debrief summarizes the key insights from our conversations and provides strategies for navigating the evolving landscape.

## A vision and framework for the future of supply chain talent

Organizations must redefine their talent strategies to meet the demands of a complex and dynamic environment. The future of supply chain talent hinges on several key competencies that foster collaboration, adaptability and innovation.

# The future of supply chain talent will be anchored on six key characteristics

## ■ End-to-end expertise

To thrive in the future, supply chain personnel must transcend functional silos and embrace a systems-thinking approach. This requires a deep understanding of the connections between procurement, manufacturing, logistics and customer service.

For instance, a representative of a global consumer products manufacturer shared that the company has shifted its hiring strategy from prioritizing deep functional skills to seeking broader capabilities such as network analysis and cross-organization communication.

## ■ Digital fluency

In an era likely to be defined by data, proficiency in AI, analytics, and digital tools is no longer optional; it is essential. Supply chain talent must leverage these technologies to enhance visibility, improve forecasting, and inform decision-making.

A representative of a prominent US dairy cooperative emphasized the importance of a digital mindset and critical thinking. The coop has partnered with technical schools to develop training programs that equip employees with the skills to navigate the digital landscape.

## ■ Resilience & agility

If volatility becomes the new norm, supply chain personnel must be adept at pivoting quickly and thriving in ambiguity. A leader at a global consumer products company shared that changes on the company's manufacturing floor often create a divide among employees, with half embracing change and half resisting it. By implementing scenario planning and hybrid scheduling, the company bridged this gap, fostering a more adaptable workforce capable of responding to shifting demands.



## ■ Innovation

Cultivating a culture of innovation requires that organizations encourage open communication and empower employees to challenge the status quo. A leader at a major US food and beverage maker shared their observation that many younger employees are good at overcoming challenges. By putting newer and more tenured employees together in small groups, the company unlocked creativity and fostered collaboration, breaking down silos and driving innovative solutions.

## ■ Productivity

Achieving productivity gains requires a dual focus on technology and human-centered process innovation. The dairy coop's supply chain executive highlighted the importance of using automation to reduce human tasks and enhance visibility. The coop also implemented annual feedback sessions to boost employee engagement, recognizing that investing in talent is as critical as investing in automation.

## ■ Human-centered leadership

Effective leadership takes emotional intelligence, empathy, and inclusive communication. Leaders should adopt a coaching approach rather than a command-and-control style. The dairy cooperative's representative shared that the coop holds structured listening sessions and emphasized one-on-one feedback to address gaps in front-line leadership, fostering a supportive environment for employee growth and development.

# Cultural shifts needed to achieve the vision

To implement a successful supply chain talent strategy, organizations must embrace both cultural and operational shifts and tailor them to meet the distinct future needs of tenured and emerging talent. As the industry evolves, fostering an environment that encourages innovation, collaboration and adaptability will be essential. Adjusting for the unique characteristics of each talent group can help companies create a cohesive workforce that thrives in an increasingly complex landscape.

Participants highlighted several cultural shifts critical to implementing a good supply chain talent strategy. In office settings, junior employees and interns are increasingly seeking time with senior leaders and participating in strategic meetings, which enhances their visibility and engagement. Younger employees may thrive with empowerment; when given a challenge, they often find innovative solutions.

Dimension	Tenured talent	Emerging talent
Mindset	From seeking stability to embracing ambiguity and innovation	Seek empowerment and develop comfort with change.
Communication	From transactional to structured listening and feedback	Seek structured conversations and cross-functional access.
Collaboration	From siloed functions to cross-functional teamwork	Network across functions to accelerate learning.
Leadership style	From command and control to coaching and inclusivity	Seek leaders who listen, mentor, and challenge.

Similarly, production employees must raise their voices for better visibility and feedback. There is a critical need for one-on-one feedback, as many operators have expressed a gap in communication with supervisors. Talks between employees and supervisors at the anniversary of the employee's hiring date has yielded positive results, fostering a culture of open dialogue.

Simplifying processes is essential for automation to be effective, requiring knowledgeable workers who can rethink tasks and optimize their time. However, implementing these changes presents challenges. On the manufacturing floor, shifts can elicit split reactions – 50% of employees may embrace change and the other half may resist. In response, some leaders shared, companies are developing hybrid schedules that provide visibility and flexibility, allowing employees to exchange shifts as needed.

Resistance to digital tools, particularly from older employees, remains a hurdle. For instance, a proposal to automate product moisture measurement faced pushback from operators at one organization. Organizations have invested considerable time in ensuring these tools are user-friendly and people-centric. Companies are prioritizing ease of use in tool deployment, facilitating smoother transitions and greater acceptance among staff.

In addition, leadership style must shift from a traditional command-and-control approach to one that emphasizes coaching and inclusiveness. For tenured employees, this transformation can mean fostering an atmosphere where leaders listen to, mentor and challenge their teams. Such an approach not only empowers seasoned personnel but also leverages their extensive experience to drive innovation and efficiency.

Emerging talent, on the other hand, may seek leaders who prioritize collaboration and open communication. Workers thrive in environments where their voice is heard and their ideas are valued. By cultivating a leadership style that embraces these principles, organizations can bridge the gap between tenured and emerging talent, which can help create a cohesive and motivated workforce.

To implement this cultural shift, some organizations have invested in leadership development programs that emphasize emotional intelligence, active listening and inclusive practices, their representatives said. By equipping leaders with the skills to foster a supportive environment, companies may enhance employee engagement, drive performance and ultimately achieve greater success in their supply chain operations.

# Operational shifts needed to achieve the vision

To implement a supply chain talent strategy that caters to tenured and emerging talent alike, organizations must embrace several critical operational shifts.

Tenured employees should focus on expanding their digital skills and acquiring end-to-end knowledge of supply chain processes. This evolution is essential for adapting to the increasingly technology-driven landscape. Meanwhile, emerging talent must strike a balance between acquiring functional expertise and developing broader competencies enabling them to navigate various roles within the supply chain effectively.

Dimension	Tenured talent	Emerging talent
Skill sets	Expand digital skills and end-to-end knowledge.	Balance deep functional knowledge with broader expertise.
Recruitment	From functional depth to broader experience	Seek curiosity, agility and digital fluency.
Learning and development	Adapt to online formats and reskilling programs.	Prefer short bursts, digital learning and stretch assignments.
Work preferences	From fixed schedules to hybrid models	Seek flexibility and autonomy.

Participants also shared that organizations need to shift their recruitment focus from purely functional depth to a broader experience that emphasizes curiosity, agility and digital fluency. Job candidates who demonstrate these qualities are better equipped to thrive in a fast-paced environment and contribute to innovative solutions.

Participants highlighted the importance of implementing “connected worker” technology, which helps employees monitor their performance while gaining insights into upstream and downstream operations. The participants said this technology not only enhances individual accountability but also fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

The need to eliminate burdensome tasks – i.e., “to dehassle” work – was emphasized by the majority of attendees. For instance, one organization installed cameras on its production line, automating processes and allowing for quicker issue detection and resolution. This innovation not only streamlined operations but also reduced the cleanup burden on employees, enhancing overall productivity, attendees said.

Eliminating burdensome tasks, i.e., “dehassling,” can streamline operations and boost productivity.

## Navigating change

Transitioning to a future-ready supply chain workforce requires careful management. The gap between tenured and emerging talent – shaped by age, experience and adaptability – can be bridged with the right approach. Key takeaways include:

- **Avoid alienation:** Empathetic change management is essential. While resistance is natural, thoughtful engagement can convert skeptics into advocates.
- **Dehassle first:** Streamlining technology reduces friction, accelerating adoption.
- **Flexibility is strategic:** Offering flexible work arrangements can provide a competitive edge.
- **Culture matters:** Visibility, access, and inclusive leadership aren’t perks, they’re expectations.

Organizations that embrace these principles may not only retain top talent but also foster innovation, resilience and productivity. The future of supply chain talent hinges on mindset, culture and leadership, not just skills.



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