



Hive

Supply Chain Leaders 2026: Takeaways Deck



14-15th May, De Vere Beaumont Estate, Windsor

Welcome to the Retail Hive Supply Chain Leaders 2026 Wrap-Up



Supply chain and retail leaders gathered to discuss what is actually happening behind the scenes as businesses navigate rising operational complexity, margin pressure and changing customer expectations.

Across the sessions, the conversation repeatedly returned to the same core challenges: fragmented visibility, forecasting volatility, rising fulfilment costs and the growing pressure to balance convenience with profitability. AI generated strong interest, but discussions stayed notably practical and grounded in operational realities.

This wrap-up captures the strongest takeaways, recurring themes and useful operator insight shared across the event.

A note from Ed Lawson

Director of Retail Content, The Retail Hive

Thank you for contributing openly and practically. The value of these sessions comes from leaders sharing what is actually happening inside their organisations, not just what their strategies intend to achieve.

Use these takeaways as working prompts. Test them against your own reality. The Retail Hive will continue curating operator insight to help retail teams move faster and with greater clarity.



What does returns excellence look like in 2026?

Highlights:

- Customers now expect some level of paid returns, but they expect clarity, choice and convenience alongside it.
- Ease consistently outranked speed as the most important factor in the returns journey.
- Retailers are increasingly using returns journeys to drive store footfall, upsell opportunities and loyalty.
- Data-led segmentation is becoming more common, with VIP customers, serial returners and guest checkouts all treated differently.
- Poor communication causes more frustration than slower refund timelines, especially when cross-border consolidation creates delays.

Try This:

Audit your returns communication journey from homepage to refund confirmation and identify every point where uncertainty creates unnecessary customer frustration.

Headline:

Returns are no longer a “free service” problem. They’re a customer segmentation and communication strategy.

Building sustainable product loops

Highlights:

- Retailers are realising old stock, damaged goods and returns are no longer waste problems, they're commercial opportunities.
- Brands are increasingly balancing sustainability goals against margin protection and brand reputation concerns.
- Luxury and premium retailers remain cautious about uncontrolled liquidation channels damaging perceived value.
- AI and technology are helping with grading, assessment and routing, but scalability remains the major blocker.
- Vinted, eBay and resale marketplaces are no longer peripheral, they're actively reshaping customer expectations and competitive dynamics.

Try This:

Map every possible “next life” route for returned or unsold inventory before it reaches landfill, even if some routes are currently manual or low scale.

Headline:

Brand strength is becoming protection against algorithmic commoditisation

Removing the pain of post-customs compliance - and reducing costly errors

Highlights:

- Many businesses still rely on fragmented systems, spreadsheets and even physical paperwork for critical customs processes.
- Retailers are realising customs can no longer sit purely within finance or logistics, it now affects wider commercial strategy.
- Broker sprawl is creating visibility problems, inconsistent standards and duplicated risk across supply chains.
- Businesses are increasingly preparing for stricter HMRC scrutiny and recognising audit readiness as a long-term investment.
- The biggest operational shift is moving from reactive customs management to proactive governance and ownership.

Try This:

Document every customs touchpoint, owner and broker relationship across your operation and identify where accountability currently disappears.

Headline:

Customs compliance is becoming one of the biggest operational risk areas in retail.

Reconnecting supply and demand in a volatile retail environment

Highlights:

- Fashion volatility driven by TikTok, influencers and shorter trend cycles is making traditional forecasting increasingly unreliable.
- The distinction between “core stock” and “fashion risk” is becoming more important than forecast precision alone.
- Many retailers admitted AI still feels more like an enhancement layer than the transformational solution vendors promise.
- Transport reliability remains highly unstable, forcing constant trade-offs between margin, speed and inventory exposure.
- The strongest operators are aligning marketing, commercial and supply chain decisions much earlier in the process.

Try This:

Split your inventory strategy into “must never run out” products and “high volatility” products, then build different replenishment rules for each.

Headline:

Retailers are no longer trying to eliminate volatility. They're trying to build supply chains that can survive it.

Talent and shaping your team for the future

Highlights:

- Businesses are increasingly worried that automation-heavy recruitment and onboarding is stripping out human connection.
- Soft skills, communication and accountability are becoming more valuable as AI handles more operational tasks.
- Younger talent expects development, flexibility and purpose, not just salary and progression.
- Leaders are trying to balance automation with maintaining meaningful human interaction inside teams.
- Many organisations still don't know how to train future talent when AI increasingly removes entry-level learning tasks.

Try This:

Review your recruitment process and identify where automation may be filtering out the very soft skills your business actually needs.

Headline:

Retail leaders are hiring less for technical perfection and more for adaptability, judgement and human skills.

eCommerce into the Nordics: changing consumer patterns & catering to the unique characteristics of Nordic markets

Highlights:

- Nordic customers expect delivery choice, app visibility and strong out-of-home delivery options as standard.
- Customers in the region tend to buy higher-value products and return less frequently than many other markets.
- Circular fashion and resale behaviour are far more culturally embedded than in many UK retail markets.
- Norway remains a major operational pain point due to customs complexity and changing regulations.
- Retailers are increasingly using local returns consolidation and locker networks to avoid expensive reverse logistics.

Try This:

Test a genuinely localised Nordic checkout experience, including preferred delivery methods and collection options, before investing heavily in expansion.

Headline:

The Nordics are a high-value opportunity, but only if retailers localise the experience properly.

Rethinking last mile strategy to create perfect customer experiences

Highlights:

- Click and collect continues to grow because it drives both customer convenience and store footfall.
- Retailers are increasingly treating delivery communications as a marketing and loyalty channel, not just operational updates.
- Lockers and parcel shops are growing quickly, but capacity issues and customer collection behaviour are becoming real concerns.
- Many businesses are questioning whether faster delivery promises genuinely improve conversion enough to justify the cost.
- One consistent frustration is that every team and carrier reports performance differently, making “one version of the truth” difficult.

Try This:

Run an A/B test on delivery promise messaging before investing in operational changes that may not materially improve conversion.

Headline:

Last mile strategy is becoming a balancing act between convenience, cost, operational complexity and margin erosion.

Forecasting & Inventory balancing

Highlights:

- Retailers repeatedly stressed that excess stock is often a symptom of poor organisational alignment rather than poor forecasting alone.
- Teams are increasingly recognising that “early stock” can be just as damaging as late stock.
- Social media and marketing activity are shortening product lifecycles and making demand patterns harder to predict.
- Businesses are shifting toward continuous forecasting reviews instead of relying on fixed planning cycles.
- AI is viewed as useful for improving forecasting, but only when backed by strong data quality and shared ownership.

Try This:

Create a formal “exit strategy” for excess stock during the planning phase, rather than after inventory problems emerge.

Headline:

Forecasting failures are no longer just inventory problems. They're cash flow, customer experience and board-level risk problems.

Cross-border de minimis changes: risk, readiness and retail Impact

Highlights:

- Businesses are reassessing direct-to-consumer cross-border models as compliance complexity increases.
- Many retailers are questioning whether expensive local warehousing investments genuinely deliver long-term value.
- Regulatory uncertainty is forcing businesses to make operational decisions without complete information.
- Country of origin, product classification and VAT exposure are becoming much more commercially significant.
- Peer networks, legal experts and specialist advisors are increasingly being relied on to interpret rapidly changing rules.

Try This:

Pressure-test your cross-border model against three different regulatory scenarios rather than planning around a single assumed outcome.

Headline:

Most retailers aren't looking for perfect answers on cross-border trade. They're trying to stay flexible while regulation keeps shifting.

3PL fit and creating a strong partnership

Highlights:

- Retailers repeatedly prioritise service, flexibility and honesty above headline pricing alone.
- Open-book contracts are viewed positively for collaboration, but only when fee caps and governance are clearly defined.
- Poor integrations and weak inventory visibility are still causing major financial losses and operational disputes.
- Cultural fit and transparency mattered as much as warehouse capability or automation levels.
- Businesses are becoming far more rigorous about compliance, labour standards and operational governance when selecting partners.

Try This:

Create a “must-have vs nice-to-have” matrix before speaking to providers so procurement decisions don’t drift toward price alone.

Headline:

The best 3PL relationships are behaving less like supplier contracts and more like operational partnerships.

Where are the opportunities to unlock inbound efficiency?

Highlights:

- Many businesses now see supplier compliance as one of the biggest hidden drivers of inbound cost.
- Poor labelling, inconsistent packaging and weak supplier processes are creating avoidable warehouse rework.
- Retailers are increasingly introducing supplier scorecards, penalties and stricter operating standards.
- RFID generated strong interest, but participants warned it only works when suppliers fully comply end-to-end.
- Several attendees questioned whether traditional PDC models are adding unnecessary complexity rather than reducing it.

Try This:

Identify the single biggest inbound “touchpoint” creating rework or delay and redesign the process around eliminating it entirely.

Headline:

Retailers are becoming far less tolerant of supplier non-compliance and operational friction.

AI with ROI: where are the best use cases?

Highlights:

- The strongest AI use cases today are still practical: admin reduction, reporting, forecasting support and customer service triage.
- Businesses are seeing immediate gains from automating repetitive operational tasks that teams should never have been doing manually.
- Retailers remain cautious about handing over accountability completely, especially in forecasting and commercial decision-making.
- AI literacy and prompting skills are quickly becoming workplace capabilities rather than specialist technical skills.
- The biggest divide was between businesses experimenting aggressively and those still stuck debating policy and risk.

Try This:

Start with one repetitive, admin-heavy workflow that frustrates your team daily and measure time saved before expanding AI usage further.

Headline:

Retailers are moving away from “AI strategy” conversations and focusing on where AI can genuinely remove operational pain.

Wrap-up: What we heard across the Hive



- **Visibility is still the biggest operational weakness**

Across forecasting, customs, last mile, recommerce and 3PL management, the same frustration kept resurfacing: retailers still struggle to get a clean, connected view of what is happening across their operation. Businesses are spending huge amounts of time reconciling systems, chasing updates and manually joining information together.

- **AI interest is high, but retailers are staying pragmatic**

The conversations were notably grounded. Most leaders were less interested in futuristic transformation narratives and far more focused on removing admin, improving reporting, supporting forecasting and helping teams make faster decisions. The dominant attitude was “show me where it actually saves time or money.”

- **Cross-functional alignment remains painfully difficult**

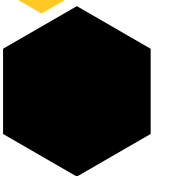
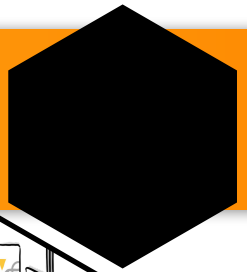
Many operational challenges discussed were ultimately traced back to siloed decision-making. Supply chain, buying, marketing, finance and customer teams often operate against conflicting KPIs, creating inventory problems, poor customer communication and slow operational responses.

- **Customer expectations continue to rise, but so does the cost of meeting them**

Retailers are increasingly balancing convenience against commercial reality. Whether discussing returns, delivery promises, lockers, cross-border shipping or click & collect, there was constant tension between creating a frictionless experience and protecting already pressured margins.

- **Retailers are shifting from optimisation to resilience**

A few years ago the focus was pure efficiency. Now the conversation is much more about flexibility, optionality and reducing exposure. Businesses are building more contingency into supply chains, diversifying partners and trying to avoid becoming overdependent on any single route, provider or operational model.



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