

# SUPPLY CHAIN CANADA™

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ISSUE 1 2026



**Playing Catch-up on  
Productivity  
SMEs Need to Grow Their  
Game With AI**

Logistics Management  
**Don't Start the Revolution  
Without Us**  
Canada Can Lead in Robotics

Transportation  
**It's Not the Hindenburg**  
Sending Cargo By Airship Can Be  
Safe and Efficient

Procurement  
**Make Room at the Table**  
Inclusive Supply Chain Is a Huge  
Boost for the Economy

Inventory Management  
**Zoning Out**  
Trust, Burnout and Clarity Are  
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Warehousing  
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Message from the President and CEO



Dylan Bartlett  
President and CEO,  
Supply Chain Canada

AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR MEMBERS

CC: SUPPLY CHAIN PROFESSIONALS FROM COAST TO COAST TO COAST

**D**ear Members,  
As we move forward in a world that continues to shift and evolve, one truth remains constant: **our greatest strength lies in our connection to one another.** The work each of you does day in and day out forms the backbone of this association, and it is through our shared experiences, insights and aspirations that we continue to grow stronger.

In times of rapid change, community becomes more important than ever. It is community that grounds us, challenges us and inspires us to push further. Within our association, we are fortunate to have a network of talented, dedicated individuals who are eager to learn, share, innovate and lead. But the true magic happens when we come together — not just in spirit, but face to face.

That's why our upcoming National Conference in Quebec City means so much.

This event is more than a gathering; it is an opportunity to reconnect with long-time colleagues, build new relationships, broaden our perspectives and shape the future supply chain together. Whether you are seeking fresh ideas, meaningful collaboration or simply the energy that comes from being surrounded

by peers who understand your passion, our National Conference offers something uniquely powerful.

When we meet in person, conversations flow differently. Ideas spark more naturally. Partnerships are born. Confidence is renewed. And collectively, we leave energized, informed and ready to elevate the work we do for the communities we serve.

I encourage each of you to attend our National Conference and make every connection count. Introduce yourself to someone new, share your experiences generously and embrace the diverse perspectives that make our association and this country so strong. Our greatest advancements will come not from individuals working in isolation, but from the shared momentum we build together.

Thank you for your commitment, your engagement and the passion you bring to our supply chain community. I look forward to welcoming you personally at our National Conference and witnessing all the meaningful connections, conversations and collaborations that will shape our path ahead.

With gratitude and excitement,  
Dylan Bartlett  
President and CEO

## Message du président et chef de la direction



Dylan Bartlett  
président et chef de la direction,  
Chaîne d'approvisionnement Canada



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# UNE LETTRE OUVERTE À NOS MEMBRES

## CC : PROFESSIONNELS DE LA CHAÎNE D'APPROVISIONNEMENT D'UN OCÉAN À L'AUTRE

**C**hers membres, Alors que nous avançons dans un monde en perpétuelle évolution, une vérité demeure immuable: **notre plus grande force réside dans nos liens.** Le travail que chacun d'entre vous accomplit au quotidien constitue le pilier de notre association, et c'est grâce à nos expériences, nos idées et nos aspirations partagées que nous continuons de nous renforcer.

En cette période de changements rapides, la communauté devient plus importante que jamais. C'est elle qui nous ancre, nous stimule et nous inspire à aller plus loin. Au sein de notre association, nous avons la chance de compter sur un réseau de personnes talentueuses et dévouées, désireuses d'apprendre, de partager, d'innover et de diriger. Mais la véritable magie opère lorsque nous nous réunissons, non seulement en esprit, mais aussi en personne.

C'est pourquoi notre prochain congrès national à Québec revêt une telle importance.

Cet événement est bien plus qu'un simple rassemblement; c'est l'occasion de renouer avec des collègues de longue date, d'établir de nouvelles relations, d'élargir nos perspectives et de façonner ensemble l'avenir de la chaîne d'approvisionnement. Que vous soyez à la recherche d'idées novatrices, d'une collaboration enrichissante ou simplement de l'énergie que procure le partage avec

des pairs qui comprennent votre passion, notre congrès national vous offre une expérience unique et puissante.

Lorsque nous nous rencontrons en personne, les échanges se déroulent différemment. Les idées jaillissent plus naturellement. Les partenariats se créent. La confiance se renouvelle. Et collectivement, nous repartons dynamisés, informés et prêts à faire progresser notre travail au service des communautés que nous servons.

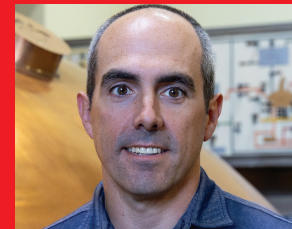
Je vous encourage tous à participer à notre congrès national et à faire en sorte que chaque rencontre compte. Faites de nouvelles rencontres, partagez généreusement vos expériences et appréciez la diversité des perspectives qui font la force de notre association et de notre pays. Nos plus grandes avancées ne viendront pas d'individus travaillant en isolement, mais de la dynamique collective que nous construirons ensemble.

Merci pour votre engagement, votre implication et la passion que vous apportez à notre communauté de la chaîne d'approvisionnement. Je me réjouis de vous accueillir personnellement à notre congrès national et d'être témoin de toutes les rencontres, conversations et collaborations enrichissantes qui façonneront notre avenir.

Avec gratitude et enthousiasme,  
Dylan Bartlett  
Président et chef de la direction



Palash Sanyal  
Director



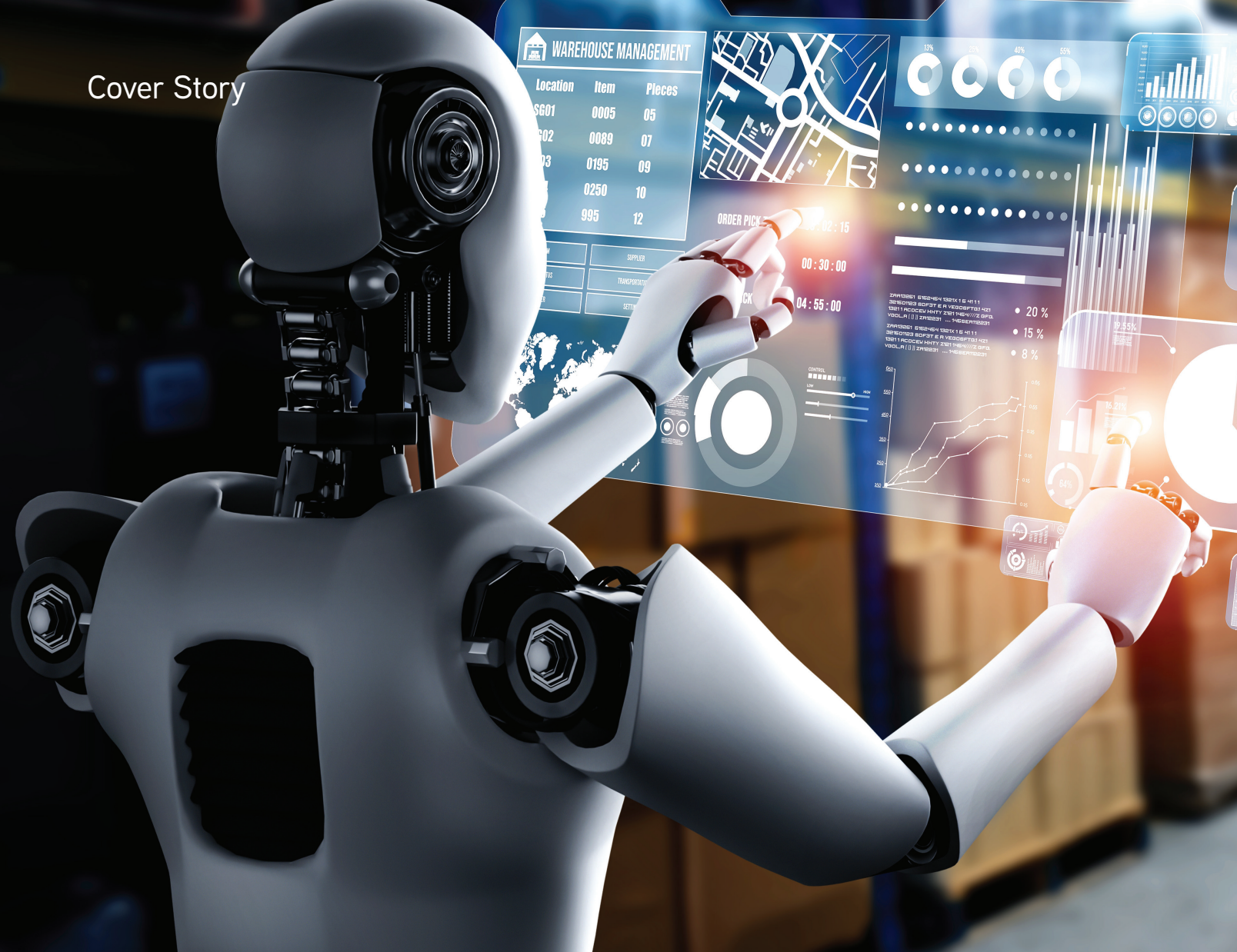
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# PLAYING CATCH-UP ON PRODUCTIVITY

## SMEs NEED TO GROW THEIR GAME WITH AI

By Mario Toneguzzi

Canada's supply chains are proving more resilient after years of disruption, but experts say productivity gains will depend on how quickly companies adopt artificial intelligence and upskill their employees.

While Canadian firms have progressed in digitalization and automation, the pace of AI adoption still lags global competitors, particularly among small and medium-sized businesses, industry leaders say.

Executives and consultants interviewed say Canadian productivity sits in the middle of the global pack, with interest in AI widespread but implementation uneven. Challenges include fragmented data, intricate technology and the scale of behavioural change required as roles shift toward data-driven decision-making.

Many companies are still experimenting with limited AI use cases even as demand forecasting, predictive analytics and automation



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become operational norms elsewhere. Despite the hurdles, investment in reskilling is increasingly necessary. Robotics and automation are already common in warehousing and logistics while generative AI is expected to play a growing role in planning and analytics.

The shift, experts say, will redefine supply chain jobs away from manual tasks toward interpreting insights and acting on them, a transition many Canadian organizations are only beginning to navigate.

Georgianna Ma, a partner with EY Canada's business consulting team, says the Canadian market has navigated quite well through various disruptions, whether it was COVID-19 or tariffs. Therefore,



**Georgianna Ma**  
Partner,  
Business Consulting,  
EY Canada

from a productivity perspective, the supply chain has typically gotten much more resilient.

"The only thing we are seeing that we could probably uptake is how fast we adopt and inject the use of AI," she says. "I think we've had ways of automation that many Canadian clients and organizations have uptaken, (for) which I think we've done a decent job, and you see that across the entire value chain. But in terms of truly understanding where AI adds value

and implementing it in the ways we do, I think we can probably do better."

Ma says most people could be well-versed with the technology, but many need upskilling or reskilling.

“When we talked about the past, it was process consultants or operators and people who truly have detailed supply chain experience. But now I think we need to combine it with people who actually understand the underlying data implications and are much more well-versed in that space,” she says.

“I think (it’s) just being a lot more aware of the AI tools that are available in our day-to-day, like the Microsofts of the world, the internal chatbots they might have or their own internal ChatGPT-type tools.” She says there also needs to be awareness of the software “they’re using on the periphery of their supply chain

space. It’s understanding the AI capabilities and what some of the upcoming product roadmaps are going to be. I think there’s a lot of expectation to understand all that, but being much more data-driven is more important than before.”

“**A very large percentage of roles that exist today won’t exist in five years.**”

Ma says most companies are talking about investing in reskilling and all recognize something

needs to be done. However, companies first need to figure out what they need to reskill them on or for.

“You have to be good with change and the ability to transform. Then, the other piece is probably in their specific domain; whether you’re talking about warehouse, logistics or planning, you have to be much more well-versed in the digital capabilities that you can leverage to enhance your job,” she says.

Generative AI and predictive analytics are going to be the operational norm. Ma says many clients are looking at AI-generated or AI-empowered planning to understand how they manage

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their demand, forecast and supply. They're also turning to AI to improve forecast accuracy and continuously tune in based on the experience, the intel, the insights and the data that are fed into the system.

"A lot of it is leveraging AI to absorb the information we have, and then people are making decisions or acting on it, whether it's an escalation they need to resolve or an action they need to take. It's less about analyzing the data and more about acting on the analysis done by the system," adds Ma.

"Robotics and automation — we definitely see it a lot in warehousing and logistics. A lot of companies in Canada have already adopted AI-powered picking robots or automated warehouses. A lot of the manual tasks like picking and packing are done by robots."

Alain Sawaya, a partner and the national leader for KPMG in

Canada's supply chain and procurement services, says about 75 to 80 per cent of CEOs are thinking about AI as their top priority but adoption remains a major challenge in Canada.

The manufacturing landscape today requires such a complex ecosystem that very few things are manufactured or built only in Canada, so we largely depend on other countries, he says. "Our interest is there. Our drive is there. I think Canada's in the forefront, but the adoption is still limited."

Data are difficult to get with the level of quality required for AI or automation to do its job. Then, there's a behavioural change involved for a lot of companies — the roles, how they operate, how



Alain Sawaya  
National Leader,  
Supply Chain and  
Procurement,  
KPMG Canada

they process things. The idea of data scientists and scenario analysts is popping up now, more so than having workers do the standard tasks, which are often non-value-added and can be automated.

"So it's a change in behaviour and a change in the ecosystem of staffing and how people work. As much as companies want to do it, it's going to take time to overhaul it and change it, even though you think you're ready. The data side, the behaviour side and the change management are big factors," says Sawaya. "And arguably, many companies in Canada have grown through acquisition, so there's a very disparate and eclectic technology footprint which makes it difficult



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to harmonize things (so) that you can take advantage of all but small-use cases or very localized use cases of AI.”

Sawaya says companies need to invest in reskilling. “The principle of AI has been around for quite a long time. It’s only in the last

three, four, five years the quality of its output has become so good. It’s outpacing humans very rapidly. And so reskilling is going to be required if you have to change roles,” he says.

“I’m guessing that a very large percentage of roles that exist today won’t exist in five years. So the new roles are going to have to be created, organized and skilled up. Some people are going to be willing and interested in skilling up. Others won’t be able to make it.”

He says the predictive component of AI has historically been



**Soumya Ghosh**  
Partner,  
Digital Services,  
MNP

on standard finished goods only. Basic things, financial performance and some operational performance are going to become more widespread.

“Predicting things around channels, likelihood of failures in the system, probability of a supplier being able

to furnish you and supply you properly, likelihood of things happening, event management, assumptions management are going to become critical. Often, it’s difficult to do, but better an average-to-week prediction than no prediction at all,” adds Sawaya.

He says the use of technology will grow where possible. Companies are generally interested in investing because they can see the benefit even though it’s a big spend. However, he doesn’t know how fast they’ll be able to do so if they haven’t already done it.

“If I look at some automation around back office; for instance, simple things like reviewing contract compliance. How do you know if a supplier you’re dealing with is supplying you with the conditions you agreed to when they’re all buried in hundreds and hundreds of contracts?” he says.

“Automating that to find those flaws could probably unlock a lot of money. And the money will be the attraction factor for companies on both the physical robotics in warehouse and manufacturing, as well as in the back office for examples like contracting or others.”

Soumya Ghosh, a partner with MNP’s digital services team, says most statistics indicate Canadian small and medium-sized businesses are probably not doing the best in productivity, compared to G7 and other countries. However, he has definitely seen technology being adopted.

“Even if we take automation and AI separately, just the maturity of manual processes — the contracting, the contract negotiation, taking a little bit of risk or having all the checks and balances in place, even just supply chain in general — is a little bit lower overall. And most of those are managed in spreadsheets and Word documents and whatnot. So the overall maturity of supply chain is not where it should be. And that is obviously augmented by the lack of investments in AI and agents,” Ghosh says. 🍁



# DON'T START THE REVOLUTION WITHOUT US

## CANADA CAN LEAD IN ROBOTICS

By Linda Slobodian

**T**his is a pivotal year for AI and robotics, according to Deloitte's Technology, Media & Telecommunications Predictions report. The global consulting firm predicted that as work continues to make AI scalable, the "gap between the promise of AI and its reality" will narrow in 2026, leading to significant change by 2030.

Canada stands at the "forefront" of AI research and has the potential to become a leader in robotics, says Nihar Dalmia, partner at Deloitte Canada and head

of the insights and engagement practice team. "The time is now for Canada as an economy to be an example to the world of how to do this responsibly and innovatively."

Dalmia emphasized Canada must navigate this evolving technological landscape with boldness and caution. The report predicted the global agentic AI market could



Nihar Dalmia  
Partner,  
Deloitte Canada

reach US\$45 billion by 2030. Running AI models will make up 2/3 of all AI compute in 2026. It highlighted how AI is driving infrastructure investment and reshaping business models as it redefines core aspects of hardware, software, media, telecom and robotics.

"I find with robotics there is this inflection point that we're

starting to approach,” says Dalmia.

GenAI and agentic AI are already driving many things, the report says. The next year or two will see a “slow but steady” growth in robotics and drones, but the “emergence of physical AI models is poised to transform both industries with massive acceleration in growth and usefulness.”

By 2026, the global cumulative installed capacity of industrial robots could surpass 5.5 million. Since 2021, annual new sales have stalled at just over 500,000. By 2030, new shipments could reach one million annually with revenues of US\$21 billion.

AI-powered humanoid robots for industrial use at scale are in early stages, says Deloitte. At an average US\$14,000-\$18,000 cost per unit, this market could

be worth between US\$210 million and \$270 million in 2026. If technology, cost and operational barriers are overcome, by 2030 it could hit US\$1 billion. By 2050, growth could reach US\$5 trillion.

**“How do we make sure that we are controlling these robots and they’re not controlling us?”**

What’s driving robotics’ rise?

“One, we are seeing labour shortages across the board right now,” says Dalmia. “Two, we’re seeing that we reached a stepping point in computing power, as well as how good some of these AI models have become. When you combine the computing

power with these AI models — but do it in a responsible way which Canada is known for — I think Canada can be a leader in how robotics will take off for specific applications in a way that is responsible.

“In my conversations, I have learned that even when Canada is not a lead actor, being a fast follower can be hugely advantageous because you learn from other mistakes and you infuse your learnings. As I said, the Canadian way of doing things is ‘Let’s do it in a way that’s privacy-friendly and responsibly.’ That, to me, is what the inflection point is all about. It’s not just the technology.”

The report stressed human labour will be central in many industries as automation augments workforces.

## Key Takeaways

- Agents assemble: The global Agentic AI market could reach US\$45 billion in 2030, but only if enterprises and providers perform proper orchestration.
- AI disrupts search: Daily usage of AI within search is expected to be three times greater than the usage of any standalone AI tool.
- Hardware heats up: Inference — the running of AI models — will make up 2/3 of AI compute by 2026. Despite forecasts to the contrary, most inference will likely still take place in data centres using costly, power-intensive AI chips worth over US\$200 billion rather than on inexpensive chips at the edge.
- Rise of the robots: The installed base of global industrial robots is estimated to reach 5.5 million by 2026, with modest annual growth. Robot sales will surge past a million units per year, but not until 2030.



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“This is not one of those fields that we have to go in with our eyes closed. Obviously, there is the risk of perception that it is going to take jobs and we’ll have robots walking around everywhere,” says Dalmia, adding that myths swirl around robotics.

“We have to approach it not as what the movies might say or show, but as practical applications where robotics can be infused in different forms, not just the humanoid type but in industrial applications or others,” Dalmia says.

“I think it’s important to put it into context that industrial robots come in different forms whether it’s being used in manufacturing plants or drones or even what might have been traditional machinery that are now intelligent

and have the ability to sense and whether it takes actions or interprets human language,” he adds.

“Often, when we think about robots, we often think about moving robots with hands and legs, but robots come in different ways and essentially have intelligence. That’s what’s more important to focus on than the traditional way of thinking about robots.”

Expansion has downsides, Dalmia says. “There needs to be a lot of thought that goes into what we use robotics for and what we should not. And when we use it, how do we make sure that we are controlling these robots and they’re not controlling us? And that at the end of the day, it’s humans in the loop

and not out of the loop. That is important.

“Secondly, we have to make sure that the way the models these robots will be using, are using data that is not biased and they are continually evaluated for accuracy, for any model drifts that may lead it to do things that are unintentional.”

He says that robots will only be as good as the people trained to use them.

“While you introduce technology such as robotics to solve a problem, we also have to make sure that people are skilled up to understand how to make the most of it (and) the business processes that we have been using that may be archaic are redefined to make use of these robotic capabilities so that it’s not

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# INNOVATION

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Explore the full  
conference experience!

From May 27–29, 2026, Supply Chain Canada's National Conference brings together professionals from across industries for three days of insight, connection, and conversation in Québec City.

This year's conference will explore resilience, risk, innovation, and reinvention through keynote sessions, breakouts, networking, and partner engagement designed to help attendees navigate complexity with confidence.

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# Your Guide to the 2026 National Conference Experience

## What to Look Forward To

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1

### **Keynote sessions**

Hear from leaders and experts addressing the issues, trends, and opportunities shaping supply chains today.

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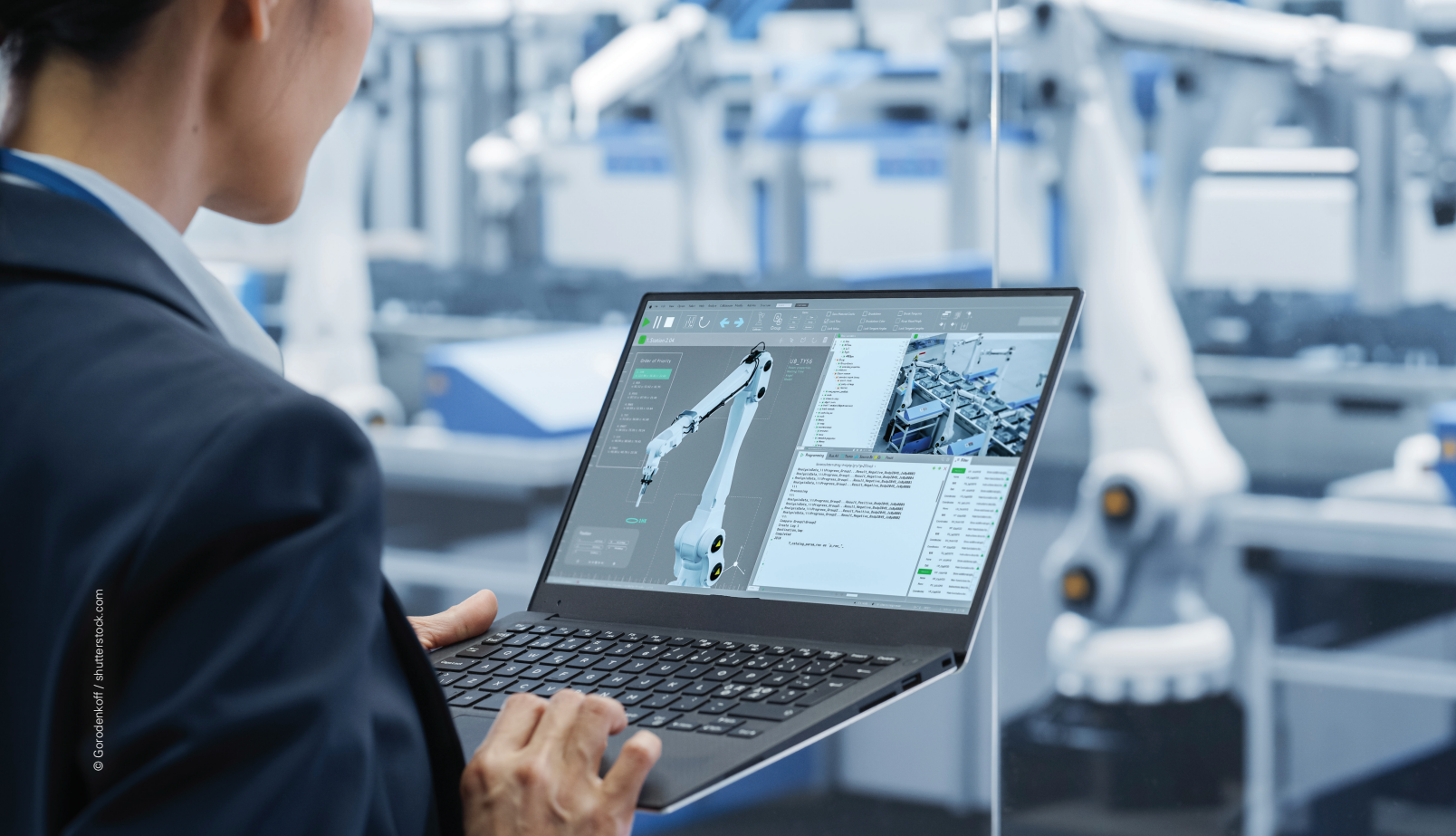
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incremental, it's transformational. We have to embrace this with caution but also with an approach that is grounded in responsibility and literacy."

Canada is at the forefront of research, Dalmia adds.

"There's a lot of good work done by the government to fund Canadian initiative startups as well as spending in areas and sectors where there is a need to drive AI adoption in manufacturing or supply chain or health care. It's very encouraging to see that."

However, there's work to do to continue building the momentum and overcome obstacles, says Dalmia. "Canadian organizations tend to be on the conservative side when it comes to adoption and that can be inhibiting to innovation." Instead, he recommends a sector-based approach to guide investment.

"Canada more broadly needs to focus on specific sectors that require disproportionate investment to drive growth from AI. I think of health care, mining, agriculture and other sectors where we have traditionally been very, very strong in driving the AI adoption. If you take that sector-based approach, there is a lot more momentum and multiplication of AI innovation. That is something Canada can continue to do better."

Dalmia believes "now is the right time" to protect Canada's strongest AI experts.

"We've always been at the forefront of AI research and innovation, and those capabilities have in many ways stayed in Canada (and) in other ways migrated to other countries, including the U.S. We need to find ways to encourage universities and research organizations to keep

those people here and give them the right funding mechanisms to continue to drive adoption and innovation."

Meanwhile, there's a "lot of room" within the supply chain for AI to increase productivity, solve problems and reduce wastage.

"Supply chains tend to be highly complex and often very manual, requiring many, many different stakeholders to be co-operating for organizations to be profitable," Dalmia says. "And so, the general productivity in supply chain needs to be improved."

Cost isn't always a roadblock. Infrastructure and high-end applications are expensive, Dalmia adds. "You might not need the most sophisticated AI. There's a lot of simple things that can drive human augmentation." 🍁



# IT'S NOT THE HINDENBURG

## SENDING CARGO BY AIRSHIP CAN BE SAFE AND EFFICIENT

By Donald Benham

**L**ook! Up in the sky! It's a plane! It's a helicopter! No, it's a Zeppelin!

That name has not inspired confidence ever since Zeppelin 129, the Hindenburg, burned and crashed after its 1937 maiden voyage across the Atlantic, killing 36 people. The explosion, captured on film and broadcast live on radio, created a public relations disaster that has kept the vehicles limited to being public relations blimps for almost a century.

Now, they're poised to return as low-cost cargo airships. Important changes in design, based on lessons learned from the Hindenburg, make the new versions safe, efficient and competitive with airplanes and

helicopters, according to two of their most passionate advocates.

"People have had a chance to absorb the idea a bit more — get over the giggle factor of the Goodyear blimp and the scare factor of the Hindenburg to actually look at the technology more realistically," says Barry Prentice, president of Buoyant Aircraft Systems International.

Buoyant built an airship in 2016, but just as Prentice was about to begin testing it, the ship and its hangar were destroyed in a violent summer storm. He is trying to raise the money to build a second one.

Arnaud Thioulouse, CEO of Flying Whales Quebec, says every time airships are talked about, "people who don't know about airships think

about the Hindenburg." However, the new vehicles will have to pass a rigorous government certification process to prove they're safe, he says.

The company, whose major shareholders are the governments of Quebec and France, plans to build a factory in Quebec to assemble airships for the North and South American markets. Thioulouse expects to have an airship built, certified and ready to fly by 2030, followed by 11 more. The assembly line will create 300 jobs, while a dozen regional hangars will create 20 to 30 jobs each, plus new jobs at dozens of suppliers, he says.

Prentice, a business faculty professor and director of the University

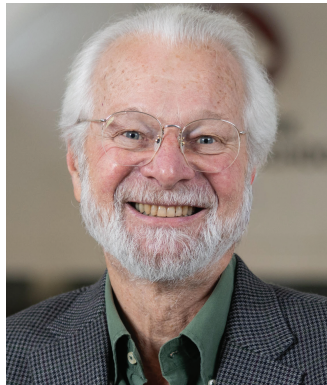


of Manitoba Transport Institute, would rather have focused on being an academic. However, he reluctantly co-founded his airship company in 2011 to press Transport Canada to prepare a regulatory framework for his vision of the coming age of airships.

“As much as (U.S. President Donald Trump is eyeing the North and eyeing our resources and Greenland’s, it’s forced the Canadian government to wake up and realize we have to have a way of defending this. It’s very positive for the airships, because logistics is the key to defence,” Prentice says. “If you can’t get the troops there and the food and the bullets, you don’t have any defence. In the North, airships are ideal for that.”

Prentice and Thioulouse agree that airships have significant competitive advantages in serving isolated areas, especially in Canada’s North.

“If you look at the problems in the North, people who live there tell me it’s worse today than 25 years ago, when we first started talking about this,” Prentice says, adding



**Barry Prentice**  
President,  
Buoyant Aircraft Systems  
International



**Arnaud Thioulouse**  
CEO,  
Flying Whales Quebec

that climate change makes winter ice roads less and less reliable.

Thioulouse says a Flying Whale can carry 60 tonnes, 12 times the payload of a helicopter, greatly reducing the number of round trips and producing 80 per cent less emissions. Airships can carry bigger items, such as blades for wind turbines, without having to break them up into smaller shipments, he says.

Flying Whales has developed an application to transport an entire mobile hospital to provide health care for isolated communities. “You bring up the hospital in an area. A few weeks later, you bring it to another community.

When you can carry 60 tonnes, you can have quite an important hospital with several pieces of equipment,” Thioulouse says.

Prentice and Thioulouse say the airship needs to be a rigid structure, not a blimp. “There’s a real limitation on how fast you can push a blimp. At a certain speed, there’s no structure. The nose starts to cave in. A rigid airship is like a bullet. It keeps on going,” Prentice says.

Thioulouse says the electric thrusters that help maneuver the Flying Whale must be attached to a rigid structure, which also allows the load to be allocated along the structure. However, he and Prentice part company on the hydrogen-versus-helium debate that continues to polarize the airship community.

The Hindenburg used hydrogen. The Goodyear blimp uses helium. “We use helium as a lifting gas. Why? Because it’s the safest solution you can have, which is very important when you develop a new kind of aircraft,” Thioulouse says. “We have a platform that does not need energy to overcome gravity. We use energy onboard to move around, but not to extract from gravity.”

Prentice plans on using hydrogen to lift Buoyant’s proposed airship. Flying Whale’s decision to use helium “will cost more and won’t be as efficient, but it will still work. I have no doubt the vehicle will fly. If they could fill it with hydrogen, it would lift even more,” Prentice says.

He also has serious doubts about the economic viability of the Flying Whales’ cargo-loading system. Buoyant has proposed building depots where airships could land on a turntable that would rotate to keep the ship’s nose pointed into the wind. Cargo would be loaded and unloaded at the depots.

Flying Whales plans to launch airships from its regional hangars which could load and unload cargo almost anywhere with their system of pumping water in and out of the ship as needed for ballast, Thioulouse says.

Prentice remains skeptical. “Whether they can make it economical in what they’re proposing to do and their trans-loading system, we don’t know. The jury’s out,” he says.

Prentice’s advice to all Canadians interested in the future of airships? “Keep looking up!” 🍁



# MAKE ROOM AT THE TABLE

## INCLUSIVE SUPPLY CHAIN IS A HUGE BOOST FOR THE ECONOMY

By Dave Webb

In a worldwide supply chain wracked by uncertainty, nimble LGBTQ+ and minority-owned suppliers can boost Canada's fortunes.

Early March saw DEFY Conference 2026 arrive at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. The biennial conference is sponsored by Supplier Diversity Alliance Canada (SDAC) and WEConnect International. It brought entrepreneurs from LGBTQ+, Indigenous and racialized minority communities together with government and

corporate leaders, along with global partners, for two days of keynotes, workshops and networking. The focus: an inclusive supply chain that will help shape Canada's economic future.

DEFY "sends a powerful message that Canada's economy is strongest when everyone has a seat at the table," says Sarah Evalina,



Sarah Evalina  
COO,  
Canadian Queer Chamber of  
Commerce

chief operating officer at the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC), which co-founded the SDAC with the Canadian Aboriginal and Minority Supplier Council (CAMSC) and the Inclusive Workspace Supply Council of Canada. The IWSCC represents business owners who are veterans or have disabilities.



Such diverse businesses already contribute \$22 billion to Canada's economy and employ more than 435,000 Canadians, according to the CQCC. Yet they still can be underrepresented in Canada's economic picture.

One impediment: As mostly smaller businesses, they often aren't part of the networks where the deals are done, says Cassandra Dorrington, president and chief executive officer of CAMSC.

"Let's say I'm a national bank and I wanted somebody who's going to do flooring on all my banks, but you have to be a national organization to do flooring for me," Dorrington says. Some government contracts might demand a certain revenue for the



Cassandra Dorrington  
CEO,  
Canadian Aboriginal and  
Minority Supplier Council

business or previous government experience. And often, smaller diverse businesses just don't know the bids are out there.

Government request-for-proposals (RFPs) may make the public domain, but outsiders may have to dig deep to find private corporations' proposals, and some are simply done through referral networks.

"Let's say HR is looking for somebody to do recruitment," Dorrington says. "They might not put a big public bid out there, but they might ask a couple people, 'Do you know who's doing recruitment right now?' If you're not in that network, you don't get asked."

Evalina notes that traditional business connections often

aren't there for immigrant- and LGBTQ+-owned businesses. Other suppliers have the benefit of legacy family business connections, whereas immigrant owners are new to the country and LGBTQ+ businesspeople can have fraught family relationships that can freeze them out.

"CQCC and Deloitte ran a study that reported that one in three queer business owners has faced discrimination because of their identity," Evalina says. "And that same figure, one in three, has reported losing opportunities after identifying as 2SLGBTQI+.

It's both heartbreaking and important to share those figures."

SDAC organizations act as market access tools for such businesses, Dorrington says. However, they also offer corporate partners access to a cohort of suppliers that can provide unique products and services. AstraZeneca PLC approached CAMSC for suppliers in specific areas as the pharmaceutical company looked to expand its Canadian procurement network. Food store chain Sobeys Inc. sought suppliers to expand its stock with ethnic and Indigenous products.

Diverse suppliers are largely represented in verticals with lower startup costs. Professional services were among the first to populate CAMSC when the non-profit launched in 2004, Dorrington says. Automotive financial services, staffing and information technology companies

were also among early movers, but recently there has been a growing footprint in logistics and construction.

“There are lower startup costs to providing services, or can be, than to providing goods,” says Evalina. “I think that it also is valuable for these entrepreneurs who have lived experience, or different experience, to be bringing that to professional services fields.”

“**One in three queer business owners has faced discrimination because of their identity.**”

Evalina notes that there is considerable representation in creative fields, hospitality, tourism and event planning. And diverse businesses are usually smaller and nimbler, “so we see a lot of folks working in change management and innovation and transformation. I would just name that as a particular advantage at the moment where globally, let alone in local communities, we’re experiencing a healthy amount, maybe an unhealthy amount, of change and disruption.”

The elephant in the supply chain room is the erratic economic and social policy of the current administration in the U.S., Canada’s largest trading partner.

“In Canada, and for those around the world, this past year



has certainly been an unprecedentedly challenging one for business owners and entrepreneurs,” Evalina says.

The war on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the U.S. has had a chilling effect, forcing diverse suppliers to re-align their language and representations.

“The war on DEI in the U.S., that’s been coming for a while. It’s reached fever pitch,” Dorrington says. The November 2025 conference of the National Minority Supplier Development Council Dorrington attended in Miami was much smaller than it has historically been, she says. The U.S. government’s stance has forced those who still want to work with diverse suppliers to use different language.

“They were talking economic inclusion, supplier inclusion and supplier engagement,” Dorrington says. “They’re using every other word they could think of, but not saying ‘diverse.’

But they still wanted to have a supply chain that had everybody at the table that they can make use of.” It’s a shift that will likely affect the Canadian operations of cross-border companies.

“I would say here in Canada, we have an economic framework that does continue to prioritize inclusion as a key marker of broad-based economic resilience,” says Evalina. “We’ve seen (Procurement Assistance Canada) be stood up in this most recent federal budget. So you see ways that we in Canada, through the government, through corporations and through individual entrepreneurs, are taking a strong response and I think we have a really solid foundation to do that,” Evalina says.

“For us to create a stronger and more diversified Canadian supply chain, it only stands to bolster Canada as an economic and a social leader on a global stage, which we do have the attention of these days.” 🍁

# NEW AND NOTEWORTHY



**P**olaris Transportation Group is proud to announce the launch of their newly developed Carbon Calculator feature, now available on the company's online Customer Portal. The calculator generates carbon emissions based on the shipper's actual freight route and weight within their required date range – offering accurate, shipment-specific results rather than general estimates.

"Access to reliable emissions data is essential in today's supply chains," says Fulya Karakas-Akgun, Polaris' sustainability manager. "Our Carbon Calculator will empower customers to better understand and manage their

environmental impact as we work together toward lower-carbon logistics."

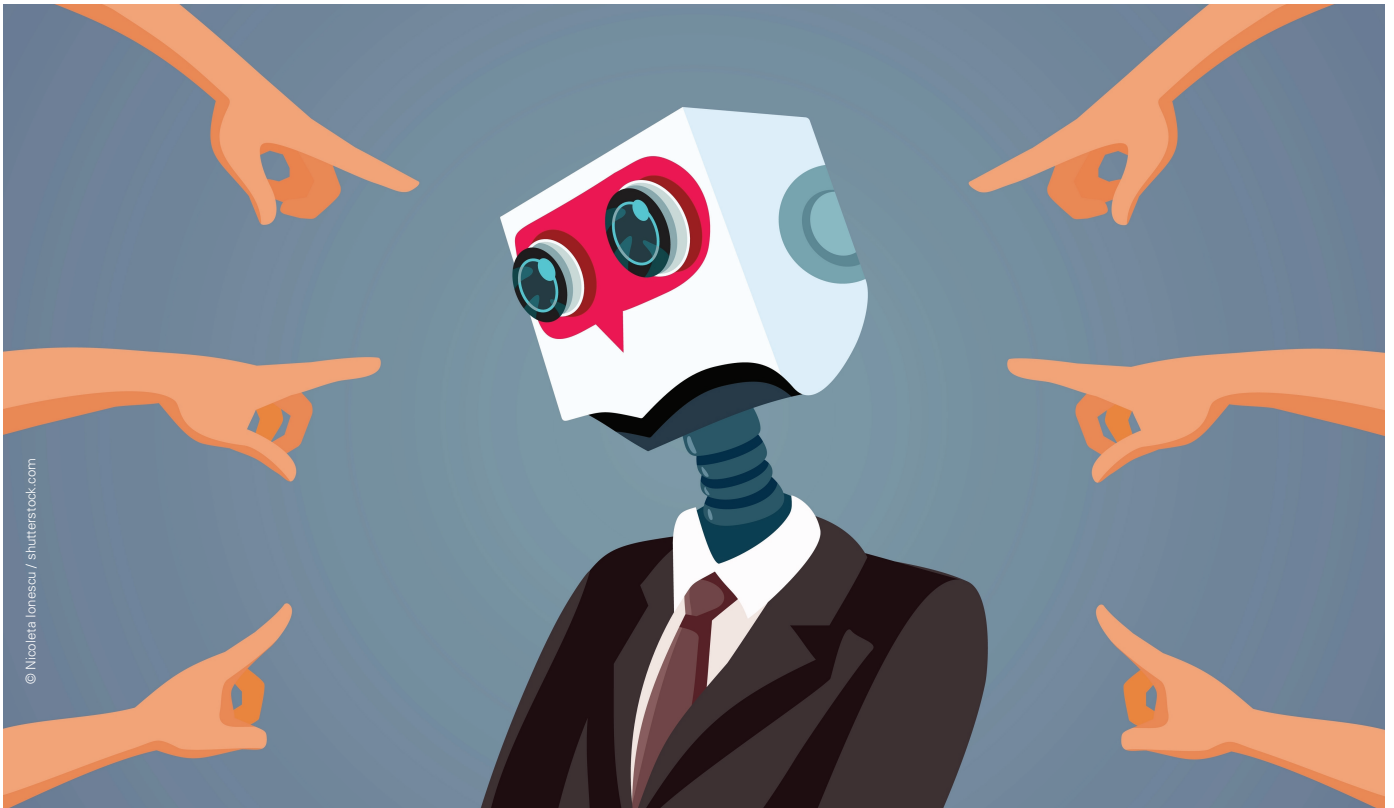
As part of Polaris' commitment to sustainability, this tool provides greater freight emissions visibility to support more informed, environmentally conscious planning and reporting. The launch follows the 2025 release of the company's inaugural Sustainability Report, which tracks the progress of the environmental, social and governance (ESG) initiatives outlined in their Sustainability Action Plan and Sustainable Growth Strategy.

"The Polaris Carbon Calculator marks another milestone in our company's sustainability

journey," says Polaris CEO Dave Cox. "Through innovation and collaboration, we are making a collective effort to reduce our environmental impact and create a greener future for transportation."

The new feature is live on Polaris' Customer Portal, where shippers can conveniently access additional shipping insights and online tools. For more information, Polaris partners and customers are encouraged to contact their Sustainability team at [sustainability@polaristransport.com](mailto:sustainability@polaristransport.com).

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## ZONING OUT

### TRUST, BURNOUT AND CLARITY ARE EMPLOYEES' AI ISSUES

By Glenn Johnson

Employee engagement has fallen sharply even as artificial intelligence boosts productivity, signalling a growing risk for employers who treat technology as a solution rather than a leadership challenge.

According to DHR Global's Workforce Trends Report 2026, the next phase of workforce performance will hinge less on tools and more on trust, clarity and how leaders respond to rising burnout and uncertainty across their organizations.

Based on a survey of 1,500 white-collar professionals across North America, Europe and Asia, the report examines how AI adoption, return-to-office policies and evolving

workplace culture are affecting engagement, burnout and retention.

While AI is already delivering some productivity gains, the data show those gains are occurring alongside declining engagement and persistently high burnout — a combination that creates risk if left unaddressed.

#### Engagement is Falling

One of the report's most striking findings is the sharp decline in



Lisa Walker  
Managing Partner,  
DHR Global's Global  
Industrial Practice

employee engagement, which fell from 88 per cent in 2025 to 64 per cent globally in 2026. That drop is consistent across regions, with engagement slightly higher in North America (67 per cent) and Europe (68 per cent), and lowest in Asia (59 per cent).

More concerning, however, is why engagement is declining. According to Lisa Walker, managing partner of DHR Global's Global Industrial



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Practice, engagement has become increasingly fragile.

“While engagement is down, burnout remains stubbornly high, suggesting that many employees are still pushing themselves despite feeling depleted and uninspired,” Walker says. “Where engagement does exist, it is increasingly driven by job insecurity and a tighter labour market rather than confidence in leadership or belief in the organization’s direction.”

This marks a fundamental shift in the psychological contract between employers and employees. Organizations may still be benefiting from short-term productivity and compliance, but the report suggests this form of engagement is unstable.

“When people stay engaged out of fear, they are less likely to take risks, challenge decisions or raise concerns early,” Walker says. “Over time, that erodes trust, creativity and discretionary effort.”

The risk is especially acute in operationally complex environments, such as supply chains, where hesitation or silence can quickly translate into safety issues, quality failures or late-stage disruptions.

### **Burnout Remains High**

While engagement has dropped, burnout remains entrenched. The

report indicates 83 per cent of employees feel burned out to some degree, essentially unchanged from the previous year.

The drivers are familiar, but intensifying:

- 48 per cent cite overwhelming workloads;
- 40 per cent cite working too many hours; and
- 37 per cent struggle to balance work and personal life.

What has changed is burnout’s impact. More than half of employees now say burnout directly undermines their engagement, increasing the risk of disengagement, stress-related absence and eventual turnover.

“Employees are ‘engaged’ because they’re afraid to lose their jobs, but they’re exhausted because the system feels unstable,” Walker says. “That combination can lead to quiet quitting, higher stress and employee flight when the market turns.”

Burnout is particularly pronounced in supply chain roles, which have spent years operating in a constant state of exception — absorbing shocks from COVID-19 disruptions, labour shortages, tariff changes, currency volatility and geopolitical instability.

“Late shipments, system failures and labour gaps all flow downhill to operators who are expected to fix everything in real time,” Walker says. “Digital tools can reduce that burden — but only if they remove work rather than create new workarounds.”

### **AI Delivering Real Productivity Gains**

Despite these pressures, AI is already improving productivity for a significant share of employees.

The report finds that 39 per cent of employees experienced noticeable productivity gains from AI tools over the past year. Gains were highest in Asia (44 per cent), followed by Europe (40 per cent) and North America at 33 per cent.

Employees report benefits such as faster research, improved drafting and analysis and automation of repetitive tasks. Organizations are responding by adjusting learning and development priorities, shifting responsibilities toward higher value work and creating new roles to oversee AI systems.

AI is clearly changing how work is performed. However, the report also highlights a widening gap between productivity gains and employee confidence.

### **The Communication Gap Around AI**

One of the most persistent challenges identified in the report is lack of clarity about AI’s impact on roles and skills. Only 34 per cent of employees say their organization has communicated very clearly about what AI means for their job. At the same time, 69 per cent of C-suite leaders believe communication has been clear — revealing a significant perception gap.

Walker notes that while updated 2026 data on AI-related fear are not yet available, 2025 findings showed that 51 per cent of employees

feared AI would threaten or replace their jobs — a concern many organizations have yet to address directly.

“Without clear direction and credible reassurances, the narrative of AI becomes a threat rather than an opportunity,” Walker says.

In supply chain environments, the concern is not only job loss, but loss of professional identity. AI is being introduced into forecasting, production scheduling, maintenance planning, procurement and quality control — areas where expertise has been built over years.

“Employees want to know whether their judgment will be embedded into the system or replaced by it,” Walker says. “Without that clarity, AI feels less like a tool and more like a threat.”

### What Responsible AI Leadership Looks Like

In trust-based cultures like Canada’s, Walker says responsible AI leadership requires a different emphasis.

“Employees are hearing about AI improving productivity, but the elephant in the room is fear,” she says. “They’re looking for direction, clarity and reassurance so they can support AI without worrying they’re automating themselves out of a job.”

The report shows that 71 per cent of employees say relevant professional development increases engagement, making skills investment one of the most powerful levers available to Canadian employers.

“AI strategy in Canada should include funded upskilling, career transition paths, certifications and redeployment opportunities — not just efficiency targets,” Walker says. “That’s what builds trust.”

In Canadian supply chain-driven sectors — from energy to manufacturing to food — responsible leadership also means involving the people who run the system in AI design, testing and governance.



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“Employees are hearing about AI improving productivity, but the elephant in the room is fear.”

“These are safety-critical, compliance-heavy environments,” Walker says. “Employees need to know AI is there to support their judgment, not substitute for it.”

### What Canadian CEOs Can Do Now

Walker points to two immediate actions Canadian CEOs can take to improve well-being and productivity.

First, convert fear into growth through development. Make learning visible, funded and tied to real career paths, especially for roles being reshaped by AI.

Second, listen and empathize. Burnout is driven not only by workload, but by frustration at not being heard. Leaders who take time to listen and work with employees on solutions demonstrate that people matter beyond output.

Flexibility remains another critical issue. While fully in-office employees report higher engagement, flexibility remains a powerful driver of engagement and retention for hybrid workers, particularly in North America.

“Return-to-office mandates are a blunt tool,” Walker says. “Removing flexibility may increase visibility in the short term, but it often comes at the cost of trust, morale and long-term retention.”

For Canadian employers, the question is not office versus remote, but purpose. Offices that support collaboration, mentoring and problem-solving are assets; attendance for its own sake is not.

### Not Just an HR Issue

The Workforce Trends Report 2026 makes clear that AI, engagement and flexibility are no longer peripheral HR concerns — they are core resilience issues. When employees trust the system, organizations adapt. When they do not, the system becomes brittle.

AI can accelerate productivity, but leadership will determine whether it also accelerates trust, capability and long-term performance. 🍁

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# AUTOMATING ON A BUDGET

## CREATING A SMART WAREHOUSE STEP BY STEP

By Tyler Nyquist

**A**s automation continues to transform global workforces, success is often defined by the companies with the deepest pockets. However, these technologies require an immense monetary investment. Reconstructing warehouse operations is a lengthy and demanding undertaking, one with which Mo Baki, vice-president, operations, at Polaris Transportation Group, is familiar.

“I previously worked in the corporate offices of Amazon and with fulfillment centres, so I came from a place where warehouse automation was beyond remarkable,” says Baki. “These are million-square-foot, fully automated, 10th- or 11th-generation fulfillment centres.”

Just over a year ago, Baki transitioned to his current position at Polaris Transportation, a substantial departure from his previous experience and one that required him

to find effective solutions to automating without the hefty price tag.

“So, one of my mandates was, what can we do in the warehouse to automate, or to introduce automation, understanding that we’re dealing with a legacy facility,” says Baki. “It’s a very old facility. Even just operationally, the freight profiles are very different. It’s not just pick and pack. We pallet and do much more, and starting out it was very manual.”



**Mo Baki**  
VP Operations,  
Polaris Transportation Group

Faced with a much smaller budget and team, Baki faced the same dilemma with which many operations managers wrestle: how to keep up with competition on a more minimal investment.

### **Modular Projects Instead of Massive Overhauls**

"Instead of focusing on large automation projects, I wanted to focus on smaller upgrades, and those upgrades that solve specific workflow problems," says Baki. "Obviously, not every warehouse can justify million-dollar automation. So that was my strategic objective coming in."

One of the first things Baki introduced was station scanners. "Prior to me coming in, we had a runner in the warehouse, and the runner would go to the office, pick up the bill of whatever that request was, run it all the way up to the warehouse, give it to the picker. That picker would go in on the forklift, bring everything in (and) start packages together. It was task heavy."

By installing scanners at every station and investing in gravity conveyor belts rather than automated ones, Baki and his team were able to take a 15-minute process down to around two to three minutes. Baki had set his goal at retaining workers, which was also a major driver in the company's mission and in the future of the business. Keeping those necessary people and implementing the new scanner system was step one of the process.

"Then from there, we started looking at it and saying, how can we make this even better?" says Baki. "What are the immediate things we can do while keeping staff and avoiding major upfront costs?"

### **Optimizing Warehouse Layout**

Baki says the most obvious and effective improvement any warehouse

can immediately engage in is to optimize its layout.

"That's a head count right here," says Baki "Ultimately, when you factor in the time that it takes to scan in and out, things like that, layout is huge and some companies fail at it. A lot of smaller companies will fail when the layout doesn't fit."

One of the measurements he looks at is the distance every worker travels for one full cycle. "For when the order comes in, until that order is packaged and ready to go, what is the distance that the person has to traverse? Where are they going to grab that equipment, and what are they using to move things around? Layout is a huge deal."

Baki says his current warehouse is modestly sized, so this was a fairly straightforward process at Polaris. However, it was the most critical step that led to the next building block.

**“Not every warehouse can justify million-dollar automation.”**

### **Rethinking Manual Packing and Cutting Paperwork**

Scanners were a significant investment. By introducing more scanning stations at more warehouse locations and reworking how things are packed, there was less paperwork as shipments were being tracked digitally.

"Our system is able to provide our customers with updated real time, updated inventory kept when they submit an order. They can log into our system and see, have we started picking? Where in the process are we for that pick? And once we're completed, they can see how

long it took us to complete that pick," he says.

"The advantage for us is flexibility, so we can test, measure the impact and expand gradually, rather than committing to a large system up front. (It) allows us to outgrow our system, as opposed to bringing in a big, huge system that's built for automation and then trying to plug and play everything."

Once they had it mastered, the team would naturally outgrow the system, and be ready to invite in a new vendor or new software.

### **Progress, Not Perfection**

Using the transition times as a learning opportunity turns operations into real-time data that can fully instruct what automations are needed and where. Collecting and interpreting those data will lead to the next step.

"At that point, we'll know exactly what we need in terms of automation, so we'll be able to pick and choose the system that's going to adapt or work specifically for us," says Baki. "So, it's just a matter of doing small improvements or multiple small improvements over specific amounts of time, which for us is roughly every three months."

Over-optimization is just another way businesses direct themselves toward perfection in the warehouse and while functionality is key, setting realistic goals with a modest budget is the best way to progress without obsessing over perfection. Inefficiencies always happen, and even the most sophisticated AI or automated system can have issues, from implementation to employee usage or dissatisfaction.

"Just making sure that the layout matches exactly what the process requires, and then whatever automation you can do from there, you're just best to take it a step at a time and learn as you grow," says Baki. 🍀



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