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What freight looks like when it disappears

How AI is rewiring the work of large shippers, and what it means for the brokers, 4PLs, and software platforms they rely on.

One morning earlier this year, the freight team at a large Australian retailer arrived at their desks to find an alert waiting for them.

Australia Post announced an increase in its fuel surcharge. A competing carrier serving the same routes hadn't, and wasn't due to for another two months due to their hedging strategy. For 60 days, the retailer could shift a substantial portion of its parcel volume from one carrier to the other, saving the business nearly half a million dollars.

The alert hadn't come from a person. No analyst had noticed the surcharge gap, run the numbers carrier-by-carrier, and written it up. A system had observed both carriers' rate movements overnight, modelled the cost impact across the retailer's freight profile, and surfaced the opportunity before the team's first coffee.

In the old way, no one would have spotted it. Or someone would have spotted it eight weeks later in a quarterly review, when half the window had already closed. This is what's actually changing in freight, and it has very little to do with the AI most vendors are trying to sell.

The shift no one's named properly

For most of its history, freight management has been a rear-view exercise. You looked at what happened last month, asked why a particular route underperformed, ran a tender, and adjusted. The data took weeks to arrive, and decisions took even longer. By the time the analysis was complete, the conditions that produced it had usually changed.

That loop is now collapsing in on itself. The same exception report that once took a team of ten people a day to assemble, and could only run on Mondays and Wednesdays because that was all the manpower available, can now run sixty times a day with one person supervising it. The proactive call to a customer about a delivery that was about to slip, used to be a slight differentiator and is rapidly becoming the floor.

Gartner expects spending on supply chain management software with agentic AI to grow from under $2 billion in 2025 to $53 billion by 2030[1]. The TMS (Transport Management System) and FMS (Freight Management System) sub-segment, where freight buyers actually spend, is on a similar trajectory, albeit on a smaller scale. Most analysts estimate the global TMS market at around $18 billion in 2025, growing to between $37 billion and $48 billion by 2030, at compound rates of 11 to 15 per cent[2]. The 2026 MHI Annual Industry Report[3] finds that 53 per cent of organisations already use AI in their supply chain, with another 48 per cent rating AI's disruptive impact as significant or transformational.

Perhaps the most telling figure for any business that buys freight services is that a Google Cloud analysis of recent shipper sentiment found 74 per cent of shippers say they're likely to switch 3PL providers based on a provider's AI capabilities.

However, the headline numbers miss the more important shift. It's not that freight management is getting more of what it had before; it's becoming a different kind of activity. The work of freight management is moving from retrospective to real-time, from real-time to predictive, and from predictive to autonomous. Each step changes who needs to be in the room when a decision is made and how many decisions a single human can reasonably oversee. That is the real transformation, and the dashboards and chatbots that attract most of the marketing attention are the surface layer of something much deeper.

[1] https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2026-04-07-gartner-forecasts-supply-chain-management-software-with-agentic-ai-will-grow-to-53-billion-in-spend-by-2030

[2] https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/transportation-management-systems-market; https://www.marketsandmarkets.com/Market-Reports/transportation-management-market-232446179.html; https://www.researchandmarkets.com/report/transportation-management-system

[3] https://www.mhi.org/annual-industry-reports

What customers are actually asking for

Talk to a senior supply chain leader about AI for long enough and a strange thing happens. They stop talking about AI.

What they describe instead is a wish that freight would simply stop being a problem they have to manage. They don't want better visibility tools, as they've had them for a decade, and they don't want "yet another **** dashboard". What they want, as one Australian freight executive put it recently, is for freight to be handled with the right exceptions surfaced only when a human actually needs to weigh in.

The label that's emerging for this is the "autonomous freight orchestration layer". Strip away the jargon, and it means three things stacked on top of each other.

- First, real-time exception management, which is now table stakes.
- Second, proactive intervention, which is where most leading shippers are pushing today.
- Third, full orchestration, where agents observe, decide, and execute, with humans placed only at the points where judgement matters.

The leading edge is closer than most of the industry assumes.

C.H. Robinson, the largest freight broker in North America, has built and deployed more than 30 AI agents that perform millions of shipping tasks for the company, with agentic AI now pushing automation past 90 per cent for some customers. This is cutting processes from hours or days to seconds.

DHL Supply Chain has rolled out voice agents that handle driver follow-up calls and warehouse appointment scheduling. Google Cloud's logistics group describes the shift as moving from "systems of record" to "systems of agency", an awkward phrase, but one that captures something real. Software that doesn't just record what happened, but acts on it.

The retailer in our opening example is already unremarkable in 2026 terms, and will be ordinary and not even worth a mention by 2028.

The part that most articles and whitepapers leave out

If we stopped writing here, it would be a useful brochure, though slightly misleading.

The honest reality, which freight executives say in private and rarely in public, is that most AI sold to this industry today will not deliver. Gartner predicts that over 40 per cent of agentic AI projects will be cancelled by the end of 2027 because of escalating costs, unclear business value, or inadequate risk controls[4]. McKinsey research found that although nearly two-thirds of enterprises have experimented with AI agents, fewer than 10 per cent have scaled them within any given business function[5]. The most common cause is data quality, with eight in ten companies citing data limitations as a roadblock.

The technology supply side is no cleaner. Gartner has flagged a phenomenon it calls "agent washing", in which vendors rebrand existing chatbots and automation tools as agentic AI without delivering genuine autonomy. Of the thousands of vendors making agentic claims, Gartner estimates that only about 130 offer real agentic features[6]. The rest are selling dressed-up rules engines.

But the deeper problem isn't the models, and it isn't only the vendors. What's becoming clearer across the industry is that many AI initiatives are not stalling because of incapable technology, but because of the operational environments they're being dropped into, which were never designed for autonomous systems in the first place.

Freight remains one of the messiest operational domains in the enterprise stack. Carrier data arrives in different formats and at different levels of quality. Critical workflows still live in inboxes, spreadsheets, PDFs, and tribal operational knowledge. Many shippers are still trying to reconcile invoices accurately, standardise master data, and gain visibility over freight they've already booked. Layering sophisticated AI on top of fragmented operational plumbing does not automatically create autonomy. In many cases, it simply creates faster confusion.

This is where much of the market tension sits today. Generative AI has likely been overestimated in the short term and underestimated in the long term. Informatica CEO Amit Walia argued in 2024[7] that enterprises became caught up in the immediate excitement around GenAI without fully appreciating that long-term value depends on governed, accessible, enterprise-grade data foundations. The pattern is increasingly visible across logistics and supply chain, with companies chasing frontier AI capabilities while still operating workflows that rely on emailed spreadsheets between warehouses, carriers, and finance teams.

The Gartner Hype Cycle[8] plays a role here too. New technology waves often move through a familiar pattern of inflated expectations, then disillusionment, then gradual operational maturity. Freight is arguably entering the difficult middle phase now. The tools themselves are often more capable than businesses realise, and many organisations already possess AI functionality inside existing platforms that remains largely unused. The bottleneck is less about model intelligence and more about operational readiness, governance, workflow design, and data maturity.

[4] https://cio.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/artificial-intelligence/gartner-predicts-40-failure-rate-for-agentic-ai-projects-by-2027-industry-leaders-respond/122319085

[5] https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/seizing-the-agentic-ai-advantage

[6] https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2025-06-25-gartner-predicts-over-40-percent-of-agentic-ai-projects-will-be-canceled-by-end-of-2027

[7] Bloomberg, "Informatica CEO: Generative AI Overestimated" (2024): https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2024-09-04/informatica-ceo-generative-ai-overestimated-video

[8] Gartner Hype Cycle methodology: https://www.gartner.com/en/research/methodologies/gartner-hype-cycle

How to spot agent washing

A short field guide for any freight buyer evaluating a vendor's AI claims.

- **Does it observe, decide, and act, or only do one of those?** A genuine agent does all three with limited supervision. A rebadged automation tool does only one, usually the action, while waiting for a human to trigger it.
- **What does it do when it's uncertain?** Real agents have explicit handling for ambiguity, including the ability to escalate to a human. If the answer is "it always knows what to do", that's either marketing or a hallucination problem waiting to happen.
- **Where is the audit trail?** Every agent decision should be reconstructable after the fact. If the vendor can't show you exactly why an agent made a particular call last Tuesday, you have a governance problem on the day you go live.
- **What data does it actually need to work?** Agents are only as good as the data they're trained on, and the data they can access at runtime. Vendors who can't articulate the data requirements are selling a demo, not a deployment.
- **What happens when it's wrong?** Every AI system gets things wrong. The question is whether the vendor has thought through the consequences, the rollback plan, and the human safeguards. If the answer is "it won't be wrong", walk away.

Even the well-resourced get this wrong. Klarna, the Swedish buy-now-pay-later company, spent 2024 announcing it had replaced 700 customer service agents with AI. By 2025, it was quietly rehiring them after discovering that the AI-first approach had led to lower-quality customer outcomes[9]. The Klarna lesson applies to every shipper considering AI today. The agent is only as good as the workflow it's aligned with, and replacing humans turns out to be a different problem from supporting them.

There's a parallel reality on the demand side. One Australian freight executive recently described a call with a large retail client, during which she walked through a sophisticated AI use case, only to be cut off mid-pitch. "That's all great", the client said, "but I just need my carriers to actually turn up. Right now, I just need the basics."

This is the gap that vendor marketing doesn't address. A meaningful portion of large shippers are still working out how to manage their existing carriers, reconcile their invoices, and gain visibility into the freight they've already booked. AI doesn't fix any of those problems on its own, and in some cases, it can make them worse by adding a sophisticated layer of automation on top of foundations that aren't ready to bear the weight.

The shippers getting real value from AI in freight today aren't the ones who tried to do everything at once. They're the ones who picked a single, narrow, painful problem, applied AI to it, watched what happened, and only then expanded the scope. This is also why many successful AI deployments in freight look surprisingly unglamorous. The highest-return use cases are often narrow, operational, and deeply practical: invoice anomaly detection, carrier allocation optimisation, proactive ETA intervention, appointment scheduling, POD matching, or exception triage. These are not science-fiction outcomes. They are operational friction points being reduced incrementally over time.

The data backs this up. Stanford's 2026 AI Index found that almost nine in ten enterprise AI agents never make it from pilot into production, with most stalling at the leap from a contained experiment to a scaled deployment . The agents that do reach production deliver strong returns, but the ones that fail almost always do so when trying to do too much, too broadly, too soon. Scope becomes the primary determinant of whether an AI investment delivers.

[9] https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/klarna-ceo-reverses-course-by-hiring-more-humans-not-ai/491396

What gets reshaped

If autonomous orchestration is where this is heading, the question becomes: who delivers it?

The simplest version of the answer, the one most loudly argued in the trade press, is that AI cuts brokers and 4PLs out of the equation. Direct shipper-to-carrier matching, faster and cheaper than any human intermediary could deliver, with the broker's margin captured by the algorithm instead. Zerobroker, a US-based startup that raised $6.5 million in seed funding from investors including Flexport, has built its entire pitch around this premise, eliminating what it calls the 20 to 30 per cent commission fee traditionally charged by freight brokers . Other commentators argue that AI is targeting the high-margin "brains" of the brokerage operation rather than the "muscles", and that the moats of proprietary data and established relationships may be thinner than previously believed.

The honest answer is more complicated and more interesting.

Routine, transactional brokerage work, the matching, quoting, document-handling, and milestone-tracking that has historically filled a broker's day, is being automated. The brokers and 4PLs that survive will be the ones that shift their value proposition up the stack by:

- architecting freight networks for shippers who don't have the in-house expertise to do it themselves
- managing the genuinely hard problems that AI struggles with, like crisis response, dangerous goods compliance, complex commercial negotiations, multi-modal exception handling, and the moments where good judgement matters more than fast judgement
- acting as the implementation and consulting layer for the technology itself, helping shippers actually get value from platforms they don't have the bandwidth to learn.

C.H. Robinson, despite being the most visible AI-deploying broker in the world, has been explicit about this in its positioning. The company describes its strategy as "Lean AI: the combination of advanced AI, deep human expertise, and a lean operating model" and uses it to underpin a 4PL service offering rather than to disintermediate itself. Germany's 4flow has gone further, launching a 4PL-native AI platform called optaire at the 2026 Gartner Supply Chain Symposium. It is presented as a deliberate combination of consulting, software, and managed service. The pattern, in both cases, is that AI doesn't kill the 4PL, but it changes what the 4PL sells.

For shippers, this means the evaluation criteria for choosing a broker or 4PL partner are shifting. The questions that mattered five years ago, such as carrier coverage, rate competitiveness, and account management quality, still matter, but two new ones now sit alongside them.

- How is your AI capability going to compound my advantage versus my competitors?
- What happens when something goes wrong that the AI can't handle?

The shippers asking those questions today are paying attention, but most aren't.

The plumbing question

There's a second reshaping happening one layer deeper, and it matters more than most freight buyers realise.

Microsoft's Satya Nadella made waves in 2024 by suggesting that traditional business applications were essentially "CRUD (Create, Read, Update, Delete) databases with business logic", and that the logic layer would migrate into AI agents while the applications themselves became the underlying data layer[12]. Bain & Company has framed the same shift as a "rebundling on a three-layer stack: systems of record, agent operating systems, and outcome interfaces"[13]

Whatever you call it, the implication is that the SaaS platform of 2025 is becoming the plumbing of 2028, and for freight, this plays out in three patterns:

- The first is platform-native agents, where the freight management system ships with agents built and maintained by the platform vendor. The shipper doesn't build anything. The agents come with the software and improve as the platform improves.
- The second is ERP-native agents that call freight platforms via the Model Context Protocol (MCP), an emerging standard developed by Anthropic that enables agents from one system to access the data of another. In this pattern, an enterprise's SAP agent reaches into the freight platform to pull the route data, carrier performance, and cost analysis it needs, then makes decisions inside the ERP layer where the rest of the business logic lives.
- The third, and the most interesting for sophisticated shippers, is in-house agents. Companies with strong technical capability build their own agents on top of the freight platform's data, customising them to workflows and decisions that no off-the-shelf product would think to address.

Most shippers will not need to choose between these three.

The realistic future is a combination, with the platform handling the basics, the ERP handling cross-functional decisions, and the in-house team handling whatever they consider proprietary or competitively meaningful. But the choice of underlying platform now carries far more weight than it did when the platform's job was simply to be a database with a user interface.

There's a thought experiment worth running here. If you replace your freight platform in 2028, you're not just replacing a piece of software. You're replacing the foundation on which a year or two of agent development has been built. The plumbing analogy holds. You don't pull out the pipes and wiring just because you've decided the bathroom needs updating; you build new bathrooms around them. The cost of getting the plumbing decision wrong now compounds over time in a way that wasn't true for SaaS purchases of the previous decade.

For shippers evaluating freight platforms today, the question to ask every vendor is one that almost no one is asking yet. How does your platform expose its data and workflows to agents I haven't built yet? If the answer is vague or evasive, that's information.

[12] https://officechai.com/stories/saas-applications-will-collapse-in-the-ai-agent-era-microsoft-ceo-satya-nadella/
[13] https://www.bain.com/insights/will-agentic-ai-disrupt-saas-technology-report-2025/

Just try something

The reasonable response to all of this, for a senior supply chain leader trying to run a business while a fundamental restructuring of their industry plays out around them, is to feel slightly overwhelmed. The advice from people closest to the work is unanimous and simple. Just try something.

We don't mean a transformation program or a multi-year AI roadmap signed off by the board and tracked by McKinsey. Try a single, narrowly scoped agent applied to a single, painful problem, with low risk, low cost, and a clear test to confirm it delivered value. Then try another, and another.

Don't mistake this for a softer ambition than transformation, because it's actually a smarter, more honest one. The companies most likely to benefit from AI in freight may not be the ones with the most advanced models, but the ones with the cleanest operational foundations and the fastest experimentation cycles. The shippers who will be in the strongest position three years from now are not the ones with the best slide deck about their AI strategy. They are the ones who have spent the intervening time iterating through dozens of small, contained experiments, learning what works in their specific operations and building muscle memory for AI deployment, in the same way previous generations built muscle memory for ERP and cloud.

The path to a transformed freight operation in 2028 is not a transformation project in 2026. It is a portfolio of small, working agents in 2026, evaluated honestly, expanded selectively, and stitched together over time into something that, in retrospect, looks like a transformation.

There's a useful perspective here in how technology shifts have always worked. You don't get to see over the next hill until you've climbed this one. The shippers waiting for clarity on where AI in freight is going will not get it until they start moving. Those who are already moving, even on small things, will be the first to see the next hill.

Freight has always been a problem that most leaders wanted to forget, and for the first time, it's becoming possible. The companies that get there will be the ones that started.

1300 822 746
sales@cario.com.au

Melbourne HQ
11 – 15 Smeaton Ave,
Dandenong South, VIC 3165

Melbourne
58 Balmain St,
Cremorne, VIC 3121

Sydney
Unit 10, 1 Chaplin Drive,
Lane Cove West NSW 2066