

THE AGILITY IMPERATIVE:

Fulfillment Strategies for a Volatile World

Insights from 150 supply chain leaders
to **build resilient logistics**
in 2026 and beyond



Custom content for GXO from Studio by Informa TechTarget.



Introduction

Peak-season volatility is now the norm, driven by geopolitical conflicts, trade disputes, and evolving consumer expectations. Brands and retailers have become increasingly adept at navigating these challenges, particularly through investments in technology and strategic service partnerships that drive agility and resilience across the supply chain.

That likely explains why most brands and retailers approached the 2025 peak season expecting relative stability compared to prior years, according to the findings of a survey of 150 U.S. brand and retail supply chain executives conducted by GXO and Supply Chain Dive's studioID. Just over half (51%) expected a significantly or somewhat more stable 2025 season, while 28% anticipated conditions similar to previous years.

A majority (61%) of the surveyed retail and brand leaders also expressed at least some confidence that their organizations could flex retail store and fulfillment operations up or down to manage demand swings. But when nearly 203 million consumers swarmed brick-and-mortar stores and e-commerce websites during the five-day holiday weekend between Thanksgiving Day and Cyber Monday in 2025¹, many found that confidence tested.

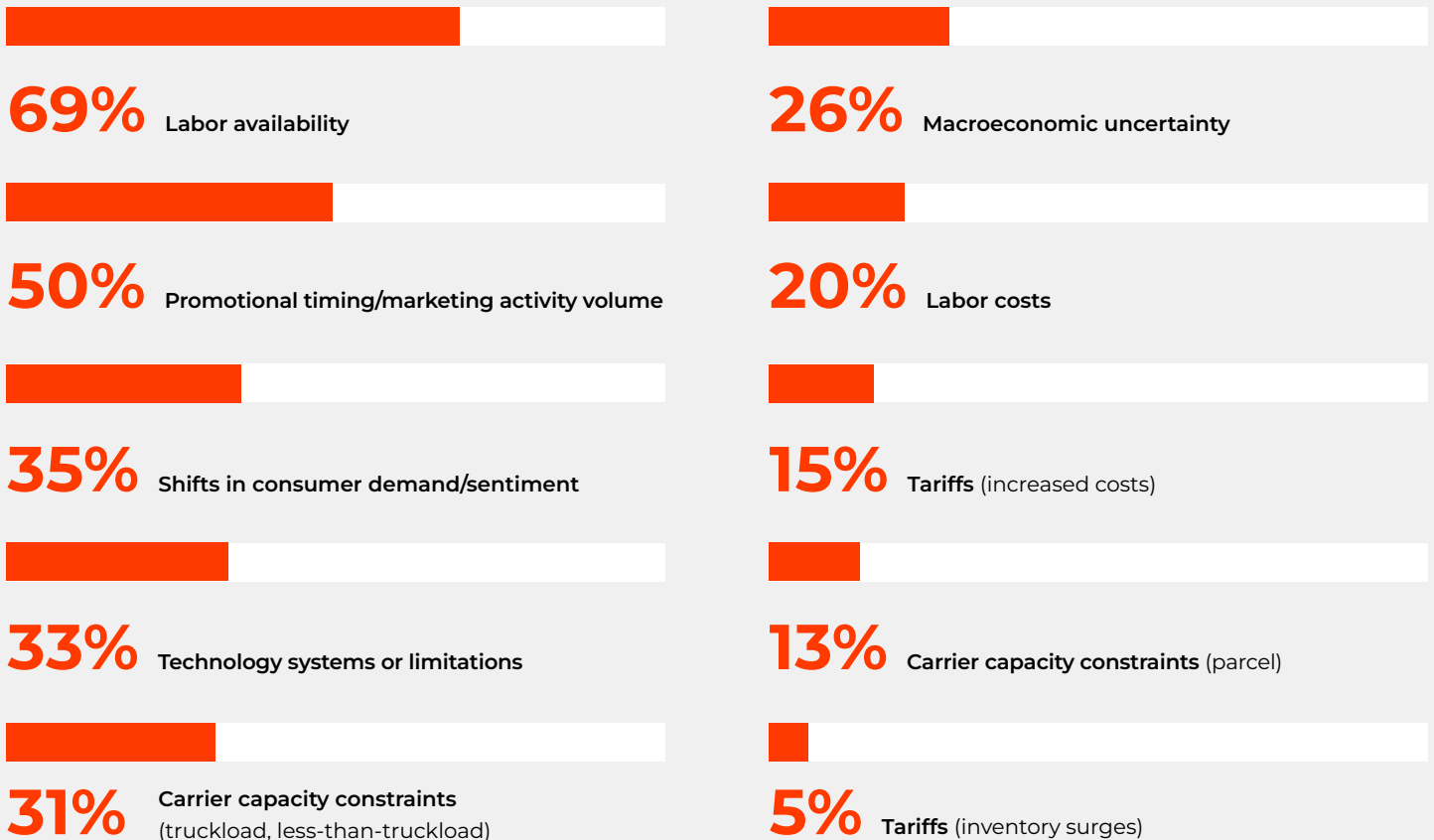
This report explores what the data reveals about peak-season readiness, where brands and retailers excel, where gaps remain, and why some strategies fall short. You'll also find actionable insights to turn lessons from 2025 into stronger, more resilient performance in 2026 and beyond.

Intention vs. Reality:

What Does Agility Really Look Like?

Brand and retail leaders recognize external challenges are constant. Nearly seven in 10 respondents cited labor availability (69%) and half pointed to promotional timing and market activity volume (50%) as their top three concerns. Roughly one-third also named shifts in consumer demand, technology limitations, and carrier capacity constraints for truckload and less-than-truckload as top issues.

Which external forces are you expecting to have the greatest impact on your organization's operations during the 2025 peak season?*



*Respondents selected up to three responses.

Overcoming these pressures requires a flexible logistics operation — a critical component of operational resilience. However, leaders varied widely in how exactly they define agility. Nearly eight in 10 said agility means the ability to scale labor quickly, but agreement broke down quickly from there. Roughly six in 10 cited the ability to onboard or switch fulfillment partners quickly (61%), adapt technology or systems to changing needs (58%) or adjust promotions in real time (57%). Interestingly, less than one in three (31%) said that the ability to shift inventory across channels qualifies as agility.

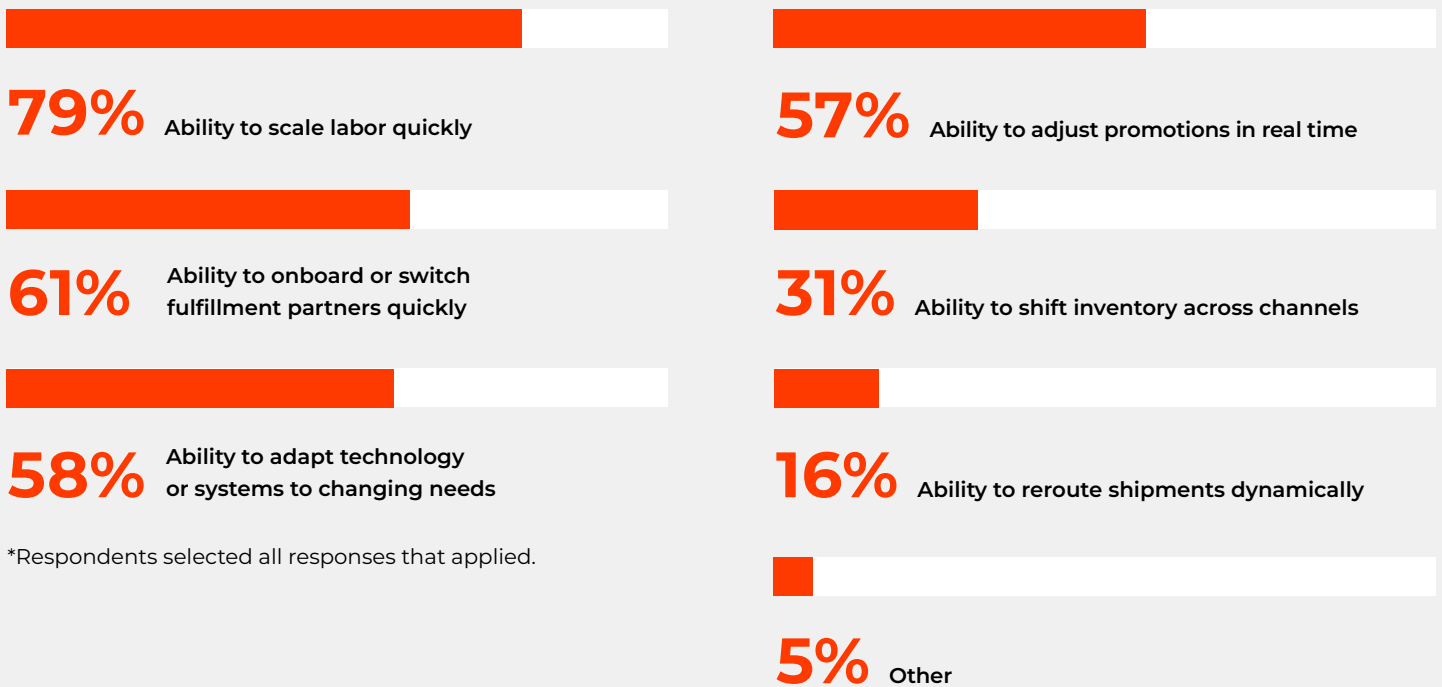


Flexible inventory supported by the right logistics partners is the biggest area of opportunity. Building agility into inventory management is the ultimate lever for supply chain resilience.”



Jeff Kellan
 Division President,
 Omnichannel Retail & CPG, GXO

How does your organization define agility regarding its fulfillment operations?*



*Respondents selected all responses that applied.

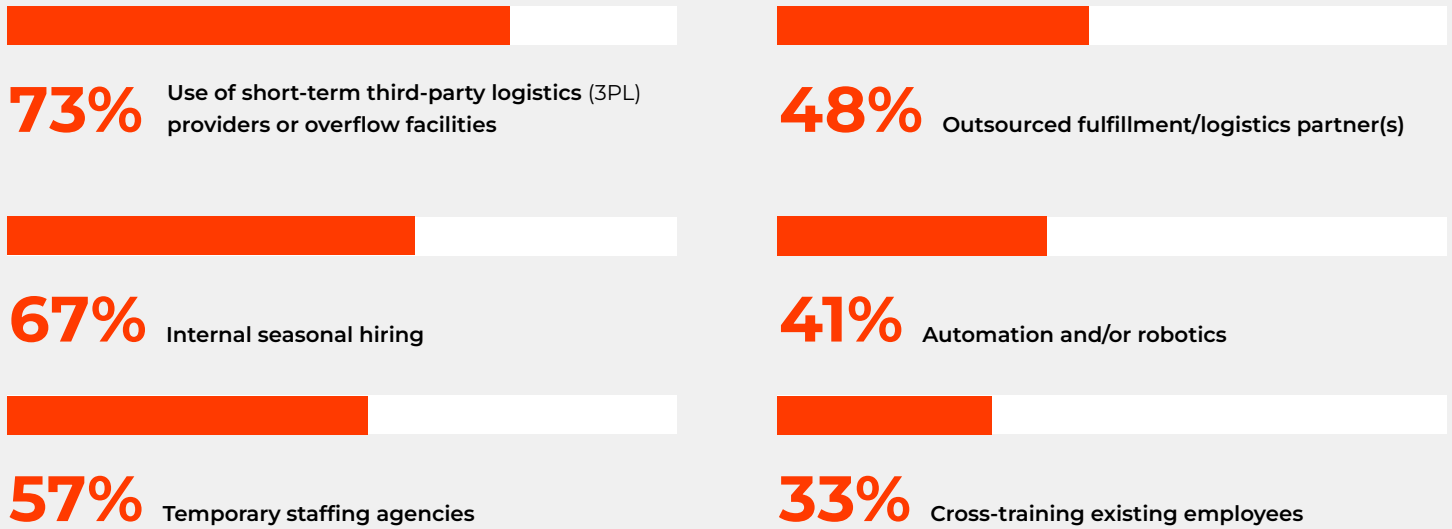


Scale Smarter, Not Harder

While 61% of leaders expressed confidence in scaling operations for peak-season swings, only 19% were very confident. That gap signals a significant readiness issue: organizations can scale, but not all can do so efficiently or predictably.

Executives reported relying on a wide range of methods to scale during peak periods. Nearly three-quarters (73%) use short-term or overflow facilities, while two-thirds (67%) rely on seasonal hires. Over half (57%) turn to temporary staffing agencies, and just under half (48%) outsource fulfillment to logistics partners. A smaller, but still significant number (41%) incorporate automation or robotics, and one-third (33%) cross-train existing employees.

Which approach best describes the method(s) your organization uses to scale retail and fulfillment operations during high-volume periods?*



*Respondents selected all responses that applied.

Stopgap measures like overflow facilities and short-term 3PLs can help temporarily, but longer-term scalability requires proactive planning and strong partnerships. While most leaders turn to reactive solutions during peak periods, established partners often deliver better results.

“Short-term 3PLs and pop-ups add complexity,” said Ken Looney, division president, ecommerce at GXO. “At the same time, implementing wholesale changes within a retailer’s own network is extremely burdensome. When brands work with an established partner like GXO, they benefit from existing fulfillment facilities and flexible technology solutions, giving them a competitive advantage over scaling internally.”

Temporary labor can also introduce unnecessary complexity, although organizations are improving how they manage this legacy approach. Leaders reported that temporary labor accounts for about 15% of the peak-season workforce, though this figure can vary significantly by geography and other organizational factors.

Most executives said scaling down after peak season is less challenging than in prior years, suggesting that labor planning and management have matured as businesses rely more on temporary labor.

“Scaling back labor is easier with accurate forecasting,” Kellan said. “Closing the forecasting gap is still a critical priority for the industry.”



Big Tech Sees Little ROI

As retail and supply chain operations become increasingly digital, the tech stack is now a cornerstone of peak-season strategies. More than three-quarters (77%) deployed real-time inventory visibility platforms ahead of the 2025 peak season, while six in 10 (61%) implemented new fulfillment technologies, such as warehouse, order, or transportation management systems. Just over half (53%) invested in AI-driven forecasting tools or fixed automation.

Which technologies have you deployed to help you scale operations efficiently for the 2025 peak season?



77% Real-time inventory visibility platforms to share inventory data across warehouses/stores/etc.



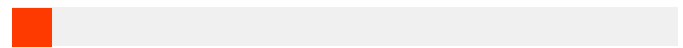
61% New logistics/fulfillment technology deployment (e.g., warehouse management systems, order management systems, transportation management systems)



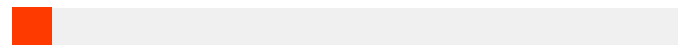
53% AI-driven forecasting/planning tools



53% Fixed automation (conveyor belts, AS/RS)



5% Robotics (e.g., goods-to-person, automated guided vehicles, collaborative robots, shelf-auditing robots, customer service robots)



5% No new technologies deployed for peak season

*Respondents selected all responses that applied.

Despite widespread tech adoption, ROI satisfaction tells a different story. Just 4% were extremely satisfied with automation and robotics investments, while most fell into the 'somewhat satisfied' range (57%). Investments in AI forecasting and planning tools showed similar patterns, but with greater frustration: nearly one-third (30%) said they were not very or not at all satisfied.

The takeaway? Technology alone doesn't guarantee agility — execution does. Many organizations still struggle to translate their technology investments into measurable results, often due to poor data quality or flawed implementation. Returns remain a hidden cost driver, with two-thirds of executives (62%) citing associated processing costs among their biggest challenges, underscoring the need for technology investments to deliver measurable efficiency gains.

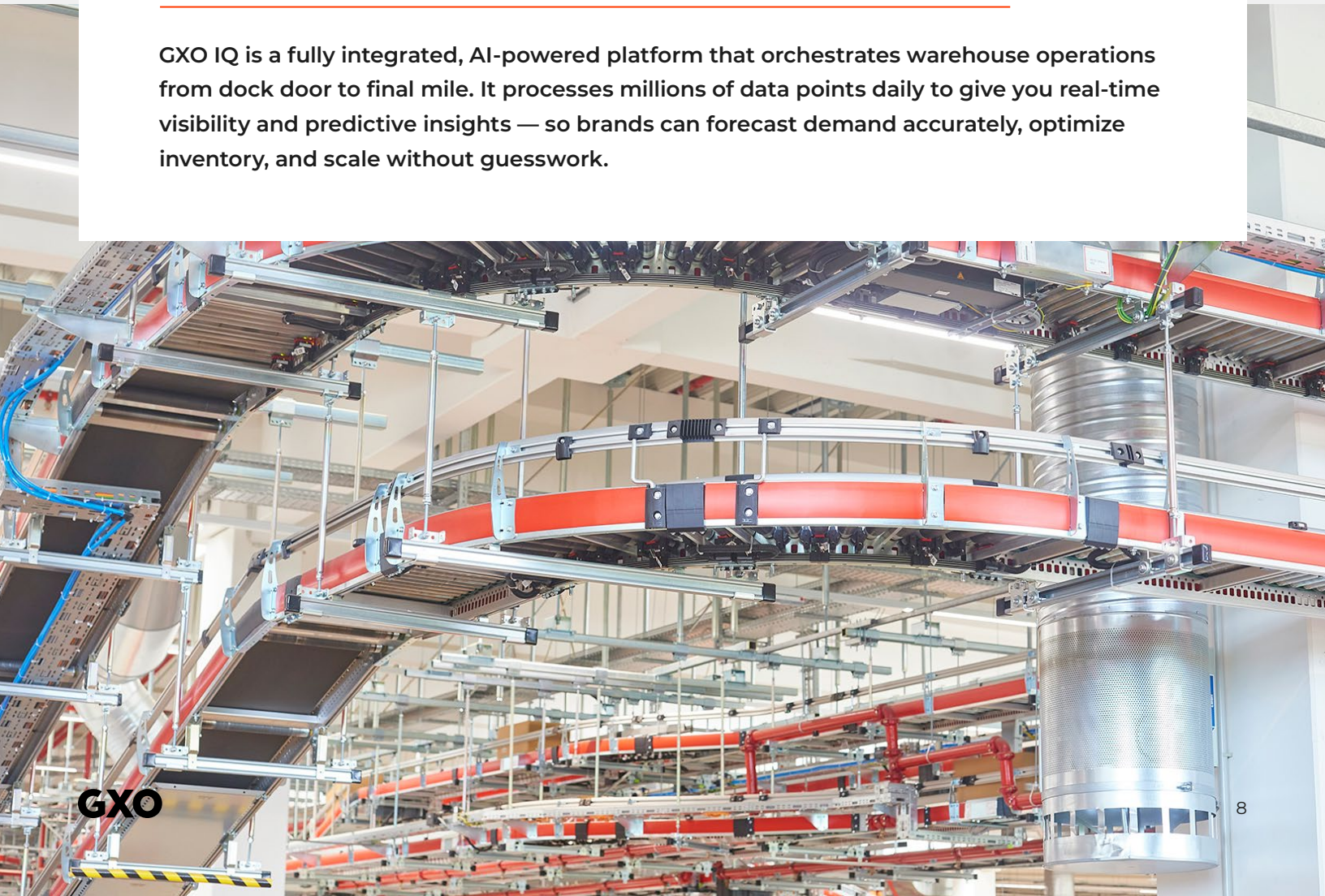
Looking ahead to 2026, leaders plan to invest in AI-driven planning and forecasting solutions (61%), AI-based security systems to reduce fraud (54%), order management systems (51%) and warehouse management systems (41%).

But as leaders consider these investments, it is essential to prioritize solutions that solve specific problems, rather than investing in new robotics or AI simply for the sake of doing so. Without clear business objectives and strong labor support, AI and automation solutions will continue to deliver lackluster results.

Retailers and brands can also shift part of that tech burden to their 3PL partner. Nearly six in 10 (58%) respondents say they plan to partner with a tech-enabled 3PL in 2026. By prioritizing 3PLs with proven, operationalized automation and intelligence investments, businesses can reduce their own risk and accelerate ROI.

Visibility and Predictive Power at Your Fingertips

GXO IQ is a fully integrated, AI-powered platform that orchestrates warehouse operations from dock door to final mile. It processes millions of data points daily to give you real-time visibility and predictive insights — so brands can forecast demand accurately, optimize inventory, and scale without guesswork.

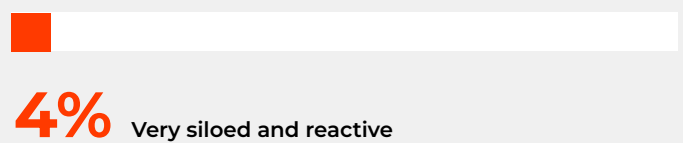
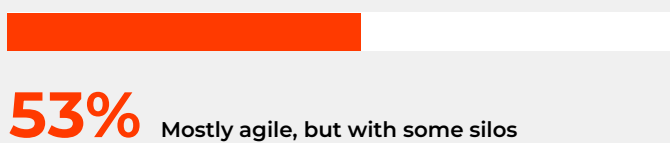
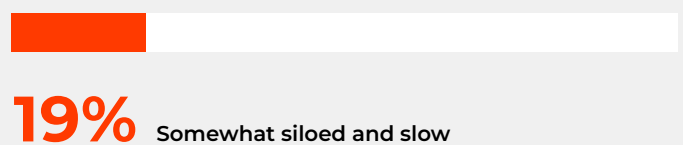
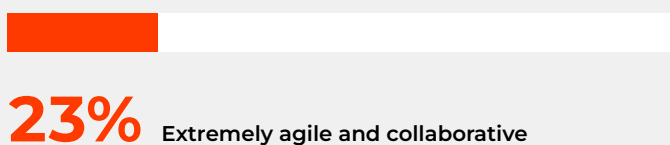




More Collaboration, Fewer Silos

Fulfillment agility starts with breaking down silos and fostering collaboration across core functions, such as operations, supply chain, marketing, and customer experience (CX). While more than three-quarters (77%) of executives said their organizations were fairly agile when making cross-functional decisions during peak season, less than a quarter (23%) described their organizations as extremely agile and collaborative.

How would you describe your organization's ability to make rapid decisions across functions during peak season?



When forecasting and promotional behaviors are disconnected from realities on the fulfillment center floor, operations can quickly become bogged down. If demand planning relies primarily on revenue assumptions over unit-level execution data, organizations face higher costs to maintain agility. That trade-off erodes margins, service levels, and decision-making speed.

Returns management adds complexity that spans marketing, CX, and fulfillment. Nearly half of executives (45%) say their returns strategy supports customer experience, but far fewer see profitability gains, highlighting the importance of connected decisions.

Organizations that perform best in future peak seasons will align forecasting, promotions, returns, and fulfillment decisions around shared data and accountability. Those that continue to operate in silos will continue to see fulfillment costs rise.



Poor forecasting undermines the effectiveness of an organization. When forecasts miss the mark, maintaining operational agility becomes more cost prohibitive. The best way to control costs is to treat planning as an integrated, cross-functional decision. The industry must balance speed and accuracy, and better data is key to achieving that.”



Jeff Kellan

Division President
Omnichannel Retail & CPG, GXO





The Role of 3PL Partners in **Building Agile Fulfillment Operations**

Peak season volatility is not going away. Consumer demand, evolving trade policies, and economic shifts will continue to disrupt supply chains. In this environment, 3PLs are no longer just pressure-release valves; they are becoming essential partners in driving operational agility.

That's why nearly all survey respondents reported using 3PLs in some capacity, and over half (51%) increased their reliance on outsourced partners during the 2025 peak season. It's also why executives are scrutinizing their partnerships more closely, with more than eight in 10 executives identifying a broad set of attributes as extremely or very important when evaluating 3PLs, including:

98%

Cost efficiency

97%

Ability to scale quickly

97%

Flexibility

89%

Technology/
Integration capabilities

88%

Proven service quality

81%

Geographic coverage

80%

Well-established company

GXO



It comes down to flexible capacity and meeting service and cost targets. Brands expect reliability: ship right and deliver right, especially during the holidays. Agility means adapting quickly to keep those promises, which is why we design our workflows and deploy systems with flexibility at the core. Scaling efficiently while controlling costs is critical, but ultimately, protecting the customer experience is what brands value most in a 3PL.”



Ken Looney
Division President
Ecommerce, GXO

The most successful brands will move beyond transactional outsourcing relationships and build deeper operational partnerships. In this strategic model, 3PLs do more than absorb volume; they become integral to performance across peak and non-peak periods.





Looking ahead

Agility in today's unpredictable landscape depends on incremental, compounding adjustments to processes, strategies, and relationships. The key lesson from 2025: fulfillment agility does not come from isolated investments in labor or technology alone. It requires cross-functional alignment and collaboration from all key stakeholders and partners — including planning for reverse logistics. With 65% of leaders citing resale and refurbishment as major challenges, returns must also be factored into 2026 roadmaps.

The brands and retailers that align inventory, labor, technology, and logistics partners around shared business objectives and real-time decisions will be best positioned to thrive in today's always-on peak environment.

To see how a strategic partnership with a leading 3PL can help boost your fulfillment operation, reach out to the team at GXO.



GXO

GXO Logistics, Inc. (NYSE: GXO) is the world's largest pure-play contract logistics provider and is positioned to capitalize on the rapid growth of ecommerce, automation and outsourcing. GXO has over 150,000 team members across more than 1,000 facilities, totaling more than 200 million square feet. The company serves the world's leading blue-chip companies to solve complex logistics challenges with technologically advanced supply chain and ecommerce solutions, at scale and with speed. GXO corporate headquarters is in Greenwich, Connecticut.

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