PEOPLE & MASTER DATA

Why Your Supply Chain Needs a Talent Strategy, Not Just a Digital One

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Supply Chain Planning isn't just about the system. It's about who reads the score, who plays the keys — and who owns the music

For years, companies have been investing heavily in APS platforms, digital twins, AI, and automation—hoping technology would finally solve the complexity of supply chain planning.

But here's the uncomfortable truth: **The real bottleneck isn't the system. It's the people.**

Planning is not failing because the technology is immature. It's failing because most organizations don't truly understand how planning works, who owns it, or what "good" even looks like.

Who Plans the Supply Chain, Really?

Most organizations can't answer a basic question: Who is actually responsible for orchestrating the supply chain end to end? Is it a global planner? A network planner? A regional team? The site? The market? Often, it's nobody—and everybody.

This lack of role clarity undermines even the best systems. Planning roles are fractured, accountabilities are unclear, and ownership of the flow is diluted across functions, regions, and time zones.

The Planner Role Is Evolving, but the Organization Hasn't

Planning today requires a different kind of talent—one that blends data fluency, scenario thinking, commercial awareness, and system literacy. But many organizations still treat planners as:

Legacy MRP operators, burned out from firefighting Junior analysts, asked to define future-state requirements without guidance Functionally siloed contributors with limited end-to-end visibility

We are asking people to drive transformation with no roadmap, no support, and no authority. In many cases, planning has been centralized to solve talent scarcity—but without investing in the capability or governance needed to support it.

When Structure Works: Two Models in Practice

A UK-based pharmaceutical company built a model around **central brand planners**, accountable end-to-end for the supply chain performance of their portfolios. These planners acted like entrepreneurs—backed by clear KPIs, ownership, and autonomy. They were supported by **local asset planners** focused on line-level execution and constraints.

A Swiss-based pharmaceutical company structured planning around **forecast-driven replenishment** with a strong **internal VMI model**. Sites replenished markets based on planning triggers, supported by a central **supply chain excellence team** that:

Defined inventory policies Updated safety stock parameters and MoQs Modeled VMI vs. make-to-forecast logic Applied ABC segmentation based on product criticality and consumption behavior

These models worked not because of tools alone—but because roles were defined, planning logic was owned, and capabilities were continuously developed and reinforced.

Capability Building Is Not a One-Time Exercise

What these companies understood is that planning maturity requires ongoing investment:

Internal planning academies tailored to their supply chain models Onboarding and development paths for planners at every level Clear separation of configuration support and decision ownership Governance models to refresh parameters, review policies, and manage exceptions

Yet most companies still approach capability as a launch activity—hoping the organization will "settle in" post-implementation. But planning doesn't settle. It adapts, evolves, and requires structure to scale.

Navigating the Consulting Landscape: Who Connects the Dots?

Consulting partners bring tremendous value to supply chain transformations. They offer fresh perspective, capacity, and proven methods to accelerate progress. But even this ecosystem often mirrors the structural fragmentation seen within organizations.

Strategy consultancies excel at defining high-level operating models and governance frameworks. However, these models are sometimes built without a full appreciation of system capabilities, data realities, or frontline planning dynamics. Without implementation depth, critical design assumptions may go unchallenged. **Management consultancies** often lead the way on process mapping and functional redesign. Some bring planning tool knowledge, but typically operate between business requirements and IT—without true fluency in how decisions are executed in real systems. **System integrators** deliver essential configuration and deployment expertise. Some have evolved toward more integrated advisory services, but often remain dependent on input from the client—who may not have fully defined planning logic, data ownership, or decision rights.

Each group brings value. But very few actors connect end-to-end planning logic with process, platform, role design, and governance in an integrated way.

Transformations don't stall because of a single issue—they stall when capability gaps and structural misalignment go unaddressed. Too often, the people who define the model, configure the system, and operate the plan are not working from the same blueprint.

Planning Needs a New Definition

Part of the challenge lies in the word itself: *Planning*.

It sounds narrow. Tactical. Anchored in the early 2000s—when planning meant spreadsheets, forecasts, batch MRP runs, and S&OP decks. The reality is that today's supply chain challenges require something very different.

Modern planning is not just about building a forecast or balancing a supply plan. It's about:

Orchestrating across functions with conflicting incentives and metrics Prioritizing the flow of materials, products, and decisions in real time Resolving trade-offs between utilization, service, inventory, and cost Applying judgment in the absence of playbooks, rules, or clean data Creating trust and transparency between supply chain, finance, commercial, and operations

Today, most organizations don't have formal policies to guide these decisions. Planners often operate without alignment, without playbooks, and without clarity on how to respond when priorities collide.

Manufacturing may chase asset utilization. Network planners push for OTIF. Finance pressures for lower inventory—except when year-end

cleanup demands quick depletion. The same flows are managed differently across cycles, countries, or personalities.

> *What we call "planning" is often a patchwork of decisions made in isolation—each rational on its own, but incoherent as a system.*

This Is Why Talent Doesn't Come

High-performing talent isn't drawn to firefighting. Or ambiguity. Or functions that get blamed when things go wrong but excluded from strategic discussions.

They want to solve complexity. Design flows. Work in environments where: Rules are structured but flexible Logic is respected Tools are fit for purpose And their work is understood and valued But we haven't built that environment yet.

If we want to attract the next generation of planners—true orchestrators, scenario thinkers, and flow architects—we need to **redefine what planning is** and **give it the mandate and structure it deserves**.

Planning is no longer a silo. It's the operating system of the enterprise. And it's time we treated it that way.

AI Won't Save You from Structural Gaps

As talent pressures persist, organizations increasingly look to AI for relief. But here's the paradox: **If we can't explain our planning model to new hires, how will we teach it to an algorithm?** AI can optimize decision-making, but only when: The planning logic is codified Data is clean and governed Roles are defined Exception processes are structured

Without these, AI simply scales ambiguity—faster and with greater reach. In one company, a senior leader claimed planning could be done "on a beer mat." The alarming part wasn't the comment—it was that no one in the organization could explain why that wasn't true.

What's Missing: A Planning Operating Model

Planning success depends on **orchestration**, not configuration. To move from reactive to proactive, companies must integrate:

Concepts – What decisions need to be made, and when? **Processes** – How are decisions triggered, and who resolves exceptions? **People** – What roles exist, where do they sit, and how are they supported? **Systems** – What tools enable transparency and judgment? **Data** – Who owns parameters, and how are they maintained over time?

Most organizations tackle one or two—rarely all five. That's why APS systems underdeliver, AI doesn't scale, and planners remain stuck in firefighting loops.

For the CSCO: What's the Next Move?

The questions supply chain leaders should be asking aren't: Is the APS live? Are planners trained on the tool? They're:

Who owns our planning logic? How are parameters governed and renewed? Where does capability sit—and how is it built over time? Can we scale without burning out the function?

These are not project questions. These are **operating model questions**—and they determine whether transformation sticks or stalls.

Final Thought

You can't automate what you don't understand. You can't transform what you haven't defined. And you can't orchestrate a supply chain when no one owns the music.

If you want to build a next-generation supply chain, start by building the **planning function**—with the structure, capability, and clarity it deserves.

Because talent isn't a constraint. **It's the multiplier.**