Editorial: The future of work and its long-standing supply chain implications – lessons from the pandemic and beyond

1. Why does the "future of work" in supply chains still matter?

In 2026, the "future of work" is no longer a speculative narrative: it is a set of managerial choices that materially shape operational performance. Yet those choices remain far from convergent. Many firms have consolidated remote or hybrid work arrangements introduced during the COVID-19 crisis, while others have tightened presence requirements and mandated a near-total return to the site. This bifurcation is not merely a question of organizational culture or employee preference; it is increasingly a governance and design issue, involving managerial capability, coordination architectures, compliance constraints and the distribution of value and risk across organizational levels and supply chain (SC) tiers (McKinsey & Company, 2025).

Supply chain management (SCM) and logistics constitute a particularly revealing domain in which to study these shifts. SCs are inherently socio-technical systems: they combine digital coordination layers with physical flows, and they depend on a labor architecture that is simultaneously place-dependent (e.g. production, warehousing, transportation, last-mile operations) and place-flexible (e.g. planning, procurement, analytics, customer service). Consequently, the debate about work arrangements in SCM is less about whether remote work is "good" or "bad," and more about how different work regimes reconfigure information processing, exception handling, relational coordination and learning loops under uncertainty.

This special issue call, launched early in 2024, explicitly framed the "future of work" as a long-term SC question, inviting research on flexible work arrangements, workforce risks and resilience, sustainability implications and the design of technologies and managerial practices for hybrid/remote SCM and logistics. Looking back from 2026, the relevance of that framing is amplified by four developments.

First, remote and hybrid work models have increasingly been discussed as persistent features of labor markets and organizational models, with important distributional effects across occupations and demographic groups (OECD, n.d.; OECD, 2025a). This matters in SCM because occupational segmentation is structurally pronounced: a large share of 'frontline' SC labor cannot be relocated away from physical sites. In practice, this creates a two-tier workforce risk (i.e. within the same organization and often within the same value stream), raising issues of perceived fairness, retention and inclusion that may ultimately influence operational reliability and safety outcomes (Akbari *et al.*, 2025; McPhail *et al.*, 2024).

Second, the return-to-office (RTO) debate has matured into a question of managerial practice rather than policy rhetoric. Practitioner evidence suggests that organizations often struggle with consistency, exceptions, performance assessment, collaboration quality and the unintended consequences of prescriptive mandates (McKinsey & Company, 2025; McPhail *et al.*, 2024). SCM complicates this further: "the office" may refer to headquarters, a plant, a distribution center, a control tower, a client site, or a rotating hub for cross-functional rituals (e.g. S&OP). Each interpretation produces different coordination costs and benefits.

Third, the future of work in logistics remains tightly entangled with digitalization and automation. Many organizations face persistent labor shortages, rising service expectations and strong cost-to-serve pressures, which accelerate investment in Industry 5.0 technologies. Yet, automation is not only a technology story. It is a work redesign story involving task decomposition, safety, skill formation, supervision and algorithmic management

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(Kok and Akbari, 2023). As a result, it is increasingly difficult to analyze SC performance without simultaneously analyzing how work is structured, governed and supported by technology.

Finally, artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping global supply chains, transforming not only the design and flow of operations but also the nature of work within them. Emerging research shows that AI-driven forecasting, intelligent automation and real-time decision systems are improving operational efficiency, resilience, visibility and sustainability at unprecedented scale. At the same time, AI is redefining workforce roles by shifting SC labor toward higher-order problem-solving and collaborative human/AI decision-making, whilst exposing skills gaps in other areas.

In short, the "future of work" is not peripheral to SCM; it is one of the mechanisms through which SCs build (or fail to build) resilience, performance and sustainability under persistent uncertainty (Sodhi and Tang, 2021).

2. What did this special issue process reveal about the field?

In 2024, the call for papers invited conceptual and empirical contributions and explicitly encouraged submissions at the intersection of SCM/logistics and human resources management/organizational behavior (HRM/OB). The editorial process itself provides a useful diagnostic signal about the current research landscape.

We received "only" 14 submissions, and 4 articles were accepted after peer review. Two observations stand out.

First, the submission volume was modest relative to the breadth and urgency of the topic. The pandemic disrupted labor availability, occupational health practices and cross-functional coordination in ways that were visible to scholars and practitioners alike and the SCM literature has strongly emphasized the strategic importance of resilience-building since that period (Sodhi and Tang, 2021). Yet the relatively small submission pool suggests that work arrangement questions (e.g. remote/hybrid regimes, managerial practices, workforce segmentation and socio-technical redesign) still struggle to be recognized as central SCM research objects rather than contextual HR variables.

Second, thematic diversity remained narrower than the call's intended scope. The call explicitly invited work on workforce risk and resilience, last-mile implications, sustainability opportunities, technology design for hybrid SCM work and the hidden costs of flexible work, among others. In practice, many submissions clustered around broad digitalization narratives or general "skills" discussions. This reflects a longer-standing gap: research at the SCM/logistics-HRM/OB interface remains comparatively rare, and when it does appear it often focuses on competence frameworks rather than theorizing how work regimes reshape coordination, governance and performance across SC processes (Jena and Ghadge, 2021; Kok and Akbari, 2023).

This gap matters because SCM possesses powerful conceptual tools for studying interdependence, integration, relational governance and information processing: tools that are highly relevant for understanding hybrid work, distributed decision-making and algorithmic coordination (Fayezi and Ghaderi, 2022). Yet cross-fertilization with HRM/OB remains limited, leaving many urgent managerial problems under-theorized from a SC perspective.

3. What do the accepted papers contribute and how do they connect?

The four accepted articles examine the future of work in SCs through complementary lenses: (1) how flexible work arrangements and knowledge practices translate into performance outcomes; (2) how hybrid and remote settings reshape coordination and accountability within supply chain teams; (3) how resilience strategies may redistribute vulnerabilities across tiers, raising the question of "resilience for whom"; and (4) how post-pandemic work practices are evolving in SC professions across cultural contexts. Together, they reinforce the special issue's core claim that the future of work is not an external HR topic but a central SCM challenge.

"Role of flexible work arrangement and knowledge management on supply chain performance: the mediating of employee productivity and moderating of digital transformation" (Le and Bui Thi Tuyet, 2026). This paper shows that flexible work arrangements and stronger knowledge practices are associated with better SC performance, largely because they support higher employee productivity. It also highlights that digital transformation strengthens these relationships, suggesting that flexibility delivers more value when organizations have the right digital tools and processes in place.

"Managing team dynamics in modern supply chains operating in hybrid and remote environments, leveraging synergy and overcoming the social loafing effect" (Zighan and Aburub, 2026). Based on interviews with SC professionals, this paper explains why hybrid and remote settings can sometimes reduce coordination quality: when tasks and contributions are less visible, accountability becomes blurred and some forms of under-contribution can emerge. The study also emphasizes practical levers such as role clarity, better task visibility and more deliberate coordination routines to sustain teamwork in distributed environments.

"Resilience for you, vulnerability for me: lessons to build a resilient, equitable, and sustainable global apparel supply chain" (Alam *et al.*, 2026). Based on an interpretive case study drawing on interviews with stakeholders across brands, manufacturers, sector associations and international organizations, this article makes a central "future of work" contribution by showing how disruption responses are translated into workforce outcomes along the chain. It documents how downstream risk-management practices (e.g. order cancellations, payment delays, price pressures) cascade into work intensification, job insecurity and heightened vulnerability for manufacturers and, ultimately, garment workers. By framing resilience through equity and justice, the study argues that resilience cannot be evaluated only by recovery at the focal firm level, but must also consider *who absorbs the shock* in labor terms, explicitly raising the question "resilience for whom". The paper thereby positions governance, transparency and relational practices as levers to reduce the transfer of operational risk into precarious working conditions across tiers.

"Evolution of post-pandemic work practices in supply chain-related professions" (Touratier-Muller *et al.*, 2026). Based on qualitative interviews with SC managers in Japan, France and Colombia, this paper examines how hybrid work has been structured and normalized in SC functions after the pandemic. The findings suggest that hybrid arrangements have been implemented across these three contexts, with managers reporting broadly satisfactory work outcomes when performance is managed through results rather than physical presence. By combining a dynamic managerial capabilities perspective with a cross-cultural lens (communication, trust and time orientation), the study illustrates how SC managers adapt work practices and HR approaches to balance operational constraints with employees' expectations for flexibility and work-life balance.

Overall, these papers connect within-firm work design (flexibility, knowledge practices, team routines and digital enablement) with broader network-level outcomes (resilience, governance and the distribution of vulnerability across tiers). They also show that "future of work" questions cannot be addressed without simultaneously considering coordination mechanisms, managerial practices and the equity implications of supply chain decisions.

4. Reframing "future of work" as supply chain design under constraints, and a forward-looking research agenda

The COVID-19 crisis did not merely expose fragile SCs; it revealed how profoundly SC outcomes are mediated by work: who is available, where, under what employment conditions and with what tools and routines (Hohenstein, 2022; Sodhi and Tang, 2021). Contributions published during and after the pandemic highlighted how service SCs faced societal, financial and technological challenges (Ajmal *et al.*, 2023), how logistics service providers adapted to pandemic-related risks (Hohenstein, 2022) and how disruption management generated

resilience lessons in express and parcel logistics (Garola *et al.*, 2023). Collectively, these streams support a central premise: "future of work" dynamics should be theorized as design parameters of supply chains, not as an external HR topic.

In 2026, we therefore frame future-of-work choices as design trade-offs under multiple constraints: (1) *physical* constraints (what must remain on-site versus what can be remote or automated) (Kok and Akbari, 2023); (2) *coordination* constraints (interdependencies, exception handling, escalation pathways) (Fayezi and Ghaderi, 2022; Vuchkovski *et al.*, 2023); (3) *governance* constraints (compliance, safety, cybersecurity, accountability and managerial capability) (McKinsey & Company, 2025; McPhail *et al.*, 2024); (4) *equity* constraints (unequal access to flexibility and uneven exposure to risk) (ILO, 2025; OECD, 2025a); (5) *sustainability* constraints (commuting, delivery intensity, urban freight externalities) (Hopkins and McKay, 2014); and (6) *capability* constraints (digital maturity, data quality and the ability to learn and stabilize new routines) (Vuchkovski *et al.*, 2023). This reframing aligns with broader perspectives on the future of jobs shaped by skills evolution, technology adoption and institutional conditions (OECD, 2025b; WEF, 2025), while insisting on SCM specificity: these forces materialize in forecasting routines, S&OP rituals, carrier scheduling, warehouse shift design and inter-firm collaboration governance.

At the same time, the editorial process suggests that the SCM-HRM/OB interface remains underdeveloped: submissions were relatively limited in volume and often concentrated around generic "skills" narratives and broad digitalization claims, rather than examining the operational mechanisms through which work arrangements reshape coordination, resilience and social sustainability (Jena and Ghadge, 2021; Kok and Akbari, 2023).

To move the field forward in ways that fit IJLM's empirical tradition, Table 1 proposes a research agenda that emphasizes questions, designs and data collection approaches commonly mobilized in SCM (e.g. interviews, case studies, surveys, mixed methods, observations and experiments).

Advancing this agenda will require methodological pluralism with strong attention to mechanisms and causality. Longitudinal designs capturing policy shifts (hybrid → RTO or the reverse), multi-level models spanning individuals/teams/facilities/networks and fine-grained qualitative research documenting how coordination is performed are particularly promising in logistics settings where disruptions and exception management are frequent (Garola *et al.*, 2023; Hohenstein, 2022).

5. Closing reflections

This special issue was motivated by an inflection point: the pandemic revealed that SC performance depends not only on inventory, capacity and supplier strategies, but also on work arrangements, workforce risks, safety practices and managerial coordination capability (Ajmal *et al.*, 2023; El Baz *et al.*, 2023; Hohenstein, 2022). The accepted papers advance this conversation by clarifying how flexible work connects to knowledge processes and performance, how hybrid team dynamics can enable or undermine collaboration, how resilience must be examined through an equity lens and how SC professions are evolving in the post-pandemic era.

At the same time, the editorial process highlights a persistent gap: despite strong practical demand, research at the SCM/logistics-HRM interface remains limited and often narrow in topical scope (Jena and Ghadge, 2021; Kok and Akbari, 2023). In 2026, as organizations oscillate between consolidating hybrid models and reasserting on-site mandates, SCM scholars have an opportunity to treat work not as a contextual variable but as a core object of SC theory, design and sustainability, consistent with broader calls to study SCs under extreme conditions and persistent uncertainty (Sodhi and Tang, 2021).

Table 1. A research agenda on the "future of work" at the SCM-HRM/OB interface

Gaps	Why it matters	Illustrative research questions	Potential empirical designs	Relevant theoretical lenses
Hybrid/RTO as a SC coordination intervention	Because "where work happens" directly shapes the speed and quality of SC decisions under uncertainty (especially exception handling) and therefore becomes a core determinant of reliability and resilience	Under what conditions does co-location improve decision quality and exception-resolution speed and when does it not? Which mechanisms (tacit knowledge, escalation, sensemaking) explain effects?	Comparative multiple case studies across sites with different RTO regimes; interviews with planners/ops/managers; observations of S&OP/control-tower routines; survey of coordination quality linked to operational KPIs (e.g. SEM/PLS)	Organizational information processing; relational coordination; resilience under extreme conditions
Managing hybrid SC teams: routines, accountability and collaboration risks	Because hybrid work increases coordination overhead and changes accountability structures, which can silently erode execution discipline and service performance	Which routines (cadences, meeting architecture, digital visual management) sustain collaboration and mitigate social loafing? How do hybrid settings alter accountability and mutual monitoring?	Interview-based studies of team practices; embedded case studies of hybrid teams in planning/logistics; mixed methods (survey on teamwork + interviews + performance indicators); field experiments on routines (e.g. changing cadence/rituals and tracking outcomes)	Team effectiveness; practice-based view; socio-technical systems
Knowledge management, learning and performance in distributed SCM work	Because distributed work can undermine tacit knowledge transfer and learning loops that are essential to prevent small disruptions from propagating across the chain	What knowledge types (tacit vs codified) are lost or strengthened under hybrid work? How do KM practices (documentation, communities, playbooks) affect resilience and performance?	Qualitative studies (interviews + document analysis) of KM devices; mixed methods linking KM survey measures to SC performance (SEM/PLS); longitudinal case studies capturing learning across disruptions; observations of exception-handling/ knowledge-sharing episodes	Knowledge-based view; organizational learning; dynamic capabilities
Workforce segmentation ("two-tier flexibility"), fairness and operational reliability	Because unequal access to flexibility inside SCs can destabilize critical nodes via turnover, disengagement and degraded safety/quality behaviors, ultimately threatening end-to-end reliability	How do perceived fairness and flexibility asymmetries affect discretionary effort, safety compliance and retention in SC nodes? How do these human outcomes translate into reliability metrics?	Multi-site case studies (DC/transport vs planning/procurement); surveys on justice and commitment linked to HR outcomes (turnover intention) and operational indicators; interviews with frontline and managers; fsQCA to identify configurations of practices leading to high reliability	Organizational justice; stakeholder/social sustainability; institutional pressures and adoption timing

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Gaps	Why it matters	Illustrative research questions	Potential empirical designs	Relevant theoretical lenses
Last-mile and urban freight in work-from-anywhere economies	Because work-from-anywhere consumption patterns reshape last-mile demand and labor models, intensifying the operational and sustainability tensions of urban logistics	How does remote work reshape delivery patterns (density, failure rates, time windows) and required workforce flexibility? Which organizational models can reconcile service quality with sustainable practices?	Case studies of couriers/3PLs/e-commerce; interviews with operations and workforce managers; mixed methods combining operational delivery data descriptions with qualitative insights; Delphi studies to forecast emerging last-mile work models	City logistics; socio-technical systems; stakeholder theory
Technology design for hybrid SCM work (beyond "digital transformation")	Because digital platforms (control towers, collaboration tools, exception systems) reshape autonomy, accountability and attention—thus influencing decision quality and resilience rather than merely "enabling" remote work	Which tool features improve exception triage and cross-functional coordination without overload? How does technology mediate accountability and collaboration in hybrid SCM?	Implementation case studies of control towers/exception systems; interviews with users + IT; observations of tool use in decision episodes; mixed methods (perceived usability + performance outcomes); design-oriented field studies (iterative evaluation)	Socio-technical systems; technology appropriation; information processing; resilience capabilities
Resilience and social sustainability: avoiding "risk displacement" across tiers	Because resilience strategies can shift risk and pressure to suppliers and workers, undermining long-term SC viability and sustainability performance	How do resilience strategies redistribute vulnerability across tiers and employment statuses? What role do safety and health practices (and their timing) play in resilience and social performance?	Multi-tier qualitative studies (buyers + suppliers + subcontractors); interviews and document analysis of compliance/Health and Safety; comparative case studies across sectors; fsQCA to identify configurations of governance and practices associated with resilient and socially sustainable outcomes	Stakeholder theory; institutional theory; relational governance
Inter-organizational hybrid work (buyer-supplier-3PL): governance and collaboration	Because distributed collaboration changes trust-building, auditing, negotiation and information sharing; core mechanisms through which SCs coordinate and adapt	How does hybrid collaboration affect trust, opportunism and joint problem solving? Which SCM-HRM integration practices enhance network performance?	Dyadic/network case studies (buyer-supplier-3PL); interviews with boundary spanners; survey studies of relational governance and collaboration quality; mixed methods triangulating relational measures with performance perceptions/outcomes	Relational view; governance perspectives

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