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EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS

Navigating global supply chain transformation

Logistics experts from Benesch and global providers share how they're navigating volatility, technology disruption and trade uncertainty in a rapidly changing marketplace

Meet the panelists

Aaron Ambrite, **Vice President, Global Compliance and Associate General Counsel, AIT Worldwide Logistics**

Ambrite leads global compliance, third-party risk management, security and safety efforts. He has extensive experience in supply chain security, contract drafting and negotiating, risk management, compliance education and third-party due diligence.

Marc S. Blubaugh, **Co-Chair, Benesch Transportation & Logistics Practice Group**

Blubaugh litigates transportation and logistics cases in state, federal and administrative courts. He represents international and domestic carriers, freight forwarders, brokers, warehousemen and shippers in disputes involving cargo claims, freight charges, contract breaches, trade secrets, unfair competition and class action defense.

Elissa Critchfield, **Vice President, Legal, Quality and Governance, Yusen Logistics**

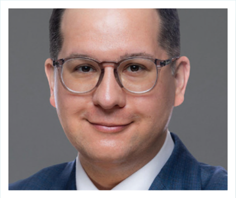
Critchfield oversees a broad portfolio of strategic and compliance functions, including U.S. Customs and regulatory affairs, quality management systems, business ethics programs and corporate governance. She serves as the Corporate Customs House Brokerage (CHB) license holder and the Corporate TSA Security Coordinator, ensuring regulatory integrity and operational excellence.

Josh Jubelirer, **Senior Vice President, Legal, Echo Global Logistics, Inc.**

Jubelirer leads all aspects of the legal, risk and insurance functions for Echo and its subsidiaries. With more than ten years of experience in the transportation industry, he has overseen and managed a wide range of issues from acquisitions, high stakes litigation, contract negotiations, carrier compliance and cargo security.

Char Dalton Smith, **Chief Legal Officer & Chief of Staff, SEKO**

Smith has responsibilities for SEKO's global subsidiaries, overseeing over 30 operating entities outside the U.S. In addition to her management of all legal affairs for the group, she serves on the board as Company Secretary and oversees the global Human Resources, Compliance and Claims teams.



Jonathan R. Todd, **Vice Chair, Benesch Transportation & Logistics Practice Group**

A national supply chain authority, Todd has served on advisory committees by appointment of the Transportation and Commerce Secretaries, TSA Administrator, and Ohio Governor. His clients include manufacturers, retailers, tech firms, carriers, forwarders, and brokers. He's spent his career focused on transportation, logistics, warehousing, fulfillment, procurement, sales and global trade.

Eric L. Zalud, **Co-Chair, Benesch Transportation & Logistics Practice Group**

Zalud focuses on commercial litigation, transportation, logistics, e-commerce, insurance coverage and bad faith, and product liability, including defense of medical, consumer, and industrial products. He has litigated or arbitrated cases before state and federal courts, the Surface Transportation Board, VA, U.S. Olympic Committee, BBB, Federal Maritime Commission and Court of International Trade.

Clockwise from left: Aaron Ambrite, Char Dalton Smith, Marc S. Blubaugh, Jim Kirk, Jonathan R. Todd, Elissa Critchfield and Josh Jubelirer discuss global supply chain volatility at Benesch and Crain's Executive Insights roundtable.

By Seka Palikuca | Crain's Content Studio

Global logistics and supply chain disciplines are facing the most volatile year in recent memory, catching even seasoned professionals off guard. After weathering the disruptions of the COVID-19 era, many large companies underestimated the impact of new tariff policies and geopolitical changes. The result: 2025 has brought the strongest headwinds global supply chains have seen in decades.

"Volatility is the word everyone in the industry would use to describe this year — it's created a level of trepidation in the business community," said Marc Blubaugh, co-chair of Benesch's Transportation & Logistics Practice Group.

The industry's unpredictability stems from the lightning-fast rollout of tariff and regulatory changes amid rising geopolitical tensions, triggering cascading disruptions across supply chains and leaving even the most sophisticated operations struggling to keep pace.

To explore these challenges and potential paths forward, Benesch and Crain's Content Studio recently convened a panel of experts for a Crain's Executive Insights roundtable. The discussion brought together leaders from Benesch's Transportation & Logistics Practice Group and in-house counsel and business leaders from global logistics providers including SEKO, Yusen Logistics (Americas), AIT Worldwide Logistics and Echo Global Logistics. Moderated by Jim Kirk, publisher and executive editor of Crain's Chicago Business, the conversation examined how organizations are adapting to rapid policy shifts, technology disruption and an increasingly complex global trade environment.

Participants agreed that successfully navigating this volatility requires agility, ongoing investment in technology and deep operational expertise.

> **“This year has been not only volatile and uncertain, but a very active environment where we’re all chasing our tails.”**
>
> **Char Dalton Smith**, chief legal officer and chief of staff, SEKO Logistics

The year of volatility: 2025’s perfect storm

What sets 2025 apart from previous trade-policy upheavals isn’t just the scale of the changes or their ripple effects across global markets — it’s the speed at which they’re unfolding. The compressed timeline for implementing new rules has created a uniquely challenging environment, testing the limits of supply chain resilience more than even the COVID era, panelists agreed.

While the pandemic was chaotic, it ultimately forced companies to build systems for risk management and recovery in response to supply chain interruption. In contrast, this year’s rapid-fire policy shifts have made it nearly impossible to find a new normal for the cost of goods.

“Thursday end of day or Friday, we get the rule — and it’s effective on Monday,” said Char Dalton Smith, chief legal officer and chief of staff at SEKO Logistics. The whirlwind pace, she added, has left logistics providers, government agencies and customs officials scrambling to interpret and comply with new regulations. “It’s been not only volatile and uncertain, but a very active environment where we’re all chasing our tails.”

The ever-shifting tariff landscape has felt like navigating a maze of new — and seemingly conflicting — rules that vary by product and country of origin. A brief respite came when the Trump administration imposed its “pause” on reciprocal tariffs. Even now, the 90-day moratorium on China tariffs is set to expire Nov. 10.

Just before the pauses, import shipping activity had nearly ground to a halt amid mounting uncertainty. Once the pause took effect, companies rushed to move freight, triggering a surge in container volumes that strained some inbound capacity. The momentum continued with new trade deals involving Canada and Mexico and a series of revisions to Section 232 steel tariffs, as additional products were added to the list of impacted goods.

The nonstop pace of regulatory change has forced many companies to shelve long-term supply chain and capex strategies in favor of day-to-day survival. “Effectiveness became tactical,” said Jonathan Todd, vice chair of Benesch’s Transportation & Logistics Practice Group. “Companies — whether shippers or service providers — abandoned strategic plans they’d built over years because everyone was fighting to survive each new change.”

Supply chain survival tactics: From reactive to strategic

The response from beneficial cargo owners, or BCOs, evolved throughout 2025 as companies adapted to the new reality for imports.

“We have clients who paused any major decision-making or investments,” Smith said. “And we have clients that have rapidly looked to diversify their supply chain, looking into emerging markets in India, Dubai and the Middle East. But we don’t know how those markets are going to be treated either.”

The shipper strategy was initially reactive, said Aaron Ambrite, vice president of global compliance and associate general counsel at AIT Worldwide Logistics. “We saw an increase in moving up required dates of delivery to beat tariffs that were coming into effect,” he said. Companies also shifted modes of delivery, moving cargo from ocean to air freight to avoid tariffs. The goal was to get the freight to the U.S. and warehouse it until needed.

As the year progressed and the initial panic cooled, many shippers began taking more strategic approaches, finding creative ways to address the challenges. This took several forms:

Supply chain diversification. Companies began earnestly searching for alternative sourcing locations beyond China. Shippers increasingly recognized the importance of “supplier diversity and not sourcing all goods from producers in the same country” as a way to manage geopolitical risk, Todd said.

Tariff engineering. Shippers began asking customs brokers with deep expertise in tariffs and product specifications for comprehensive reviews of their product classifications. They hoped to correctly identify tariff codes that possibly carried lower duty rates, Ambrite said.

Foreign Trade Zones and bonded warehouses. Interest in these domestic services increased dramatically for companies looking for ways to defer duties on imported goods or avoid them for re-exported goods.

Nearshoring opportunities. Some large companies like Apple and Hyundai announced nearshoring or reshoring initiatives. U.S. manufacturers have begun looking at nearshoring opportunities in Canada and Mexico to benefit from the USMCA trade deal. Both countries present viable options, Smith said, due to their proximity and potential product exemptions. It can be a cost-effective option for labor-intensive sectors like e-commerce, where the cost to serve would benefit, especially in Mexico, with its lower labor costs.

The e-commerce sector has faced particularly acute challenges. Freighter capacity is shifting to Europe, with companies redirecting their business due to changes to de minimis filing requirements in the U.S., noted Eric Zalud, co-chair of Benesch's Transportation & Logistics Practice Group. Many e-commerce businesses have been hobbled as previously, small-value shipments saw minimal customs processing.

The evolution of logistics: From afterthought to mission-critical providers and partners

The turbulence has also brought one clear benefit: It's accelerating the logistics industry's transformation. Supply chain management has evolved from a back-office function to a mission-critical imperative.

"It used to be that supply chain functions were almost an afterthought," said Todd. "Today, these are C-suite issues that drive competition and success, and that's why the logistics community is so important."

For Elissa Critchfield, VP of legal, quality and governance at Yusen Logistics, this has translated to heightened visibility for logistics professionals and the industry. The pandemic spurred new interest in supply chain knowledge in general, and how our connected global systems link to bring goods and services to end-customers. She also noted a deep connection with internal logistics leaders who are driven to generate strong and reliable data to support critical logistics decisions. "I've noticed our customers have elevated logistics roles inside their organizations as the issues facing supply chain became more specialized," she said. "Talent development and corporate culture have become part of risk management strategies, as organizations need to keep their specialists engaged and focused on the ever-changing risk landscape."

> **"As systems make autonomous decisions, accountability must stay human."**
>
> **Jonathan Todd,** vice chair of Benesch's Transportation & Logistics Practice Group

> **"Talent development and culture have become part of our risk management strategy."**
>
> **Elissa Critchfield,** VP of legal, quality and governance, Yusen Logistics

There has also been a fundamental shift in how logistics providers and their customers work together. The relationship has become less transactional and more consultative.

Logistics providers bring unique value to the relationship through their broad industry experience, which is desperately needed right now. "A company may have one supply chain but providers see many, many supply chains across different industries," Todd said. This has brought supply chain professionals front and center in making companies competitive, offering "an incredible opportunity for freight forwarders and customs brokers to engage with global and domestic companies in solution-building far earlier in the process."

Logistics providers are now finding themselves brought in during the decision-making stage, which has required them to significantly upskill their workforce.

AIT "definitely had to add additional resources and subject matter experts," Ambrite said, "and that's not just around customs but also around specialized business units across all industries."

Smith added that SEKO's expansion has gone beyond client-facing roles to strengthen compliance. New supply chain transparency laws now require companies to examine the ownership structures of their suppliers at far deeper levels, prompting the creation of new audit functions. As SEKO has grown through acquisitions, the company has also invested heavily in educating employees and managers worldwide on how U.S. laws apply to their operations. That effort includes ongoing discussions and in-person training sessions — not just written policies.

"Our larger clients look to us for in-house education sessions, similar to what they would rely on a firm like Benesch to do," Smith said. "They want and expect us to explain regulations to the management team and this has become a competitive differentiator."

The current challenging environment creates an opportunity for "particularly sticky relationships" between BCOs and service providers, said Blubaugh. "It becomes a much more consultative relationship, not just a commoditized transaction, which is fulfilling for all involved. It leads to better outcomes and solutions."

Building resilience amid uncertainty

As volatility becomes the norm, logistics leaders say supply chain resilience has evolved from a crisis response to a core business strategy. Panelists highlighted several themes shaping what resilience means in 2025.

Agility: The group agreed agility was one of the most crucial characteristics needed. Zalud noted supply chains are seeing increasing pressure to "pivot quickly" in response to geopolitical issues, tariff and trade policy changes, weather-related disruptions, security issues and capacity constraints. This also touches the growing importance for transparent communication. "Our customers don't expect perfection," Ambrite added. "They expect honesty, visibility and a plan."

For supply chains to stay agile, the logistics providers servicing the flow of goods must be as well. Josh Jubelirer, senior vice president of legal at Echo Global Logistics, said customers now expect service providers who understand their business, are strategic partners and can pivot quickly while continuing to deliver a high level of service with minimal friction.

Cybersecurity response: Cybersecurity has become one of the logistics industry's most pressing concerns. Zalud pointed to recent ransomware attacks on major carriers as a warning sign of how vulnerable global operations have become. "It's probably the No. 1 risk out there right now," added Critchfield, emphasizing the need for clear response plans where "everyone knows their roles" and leaders can act quickly to stabilize situations.

> "The demand for transparency has escalated from something as simple as knowing where your truck is to now maybe knowing the environmental impact of a particular shipment."
>
> **Josh Jubelirer,** senior VP, legal, Echo Global Logistics

Crisis management: Several participants highlighted the pandemic as a learning opportunity in crisis management for supply chain professionals. As Blubaugh observed, "the degree of resilience now is an order of magnitude over what it was in 2019 by virtue of having survived COVID."

Leading with character: The human element of resilience is just as important, Smith said. "People's character is tested in a crisis" and if you don't have people in leadership who can maintain composure and remain calm in a crisis, then you will run into barriers.

Active management: Todd connected the dots on the discussion by noting that passive approaches are no longer sufficient and "active management is required" across the entire modern supply chain ecosystem. Both shippers and service providers must actively manage their suppliers, customers, staff and branches rather than relying on autopilot approaches.

Technology transformation: The role of AI in modern logistics

During the discussion, artificial intelligence emerged as a transformational force reshaping global logistics operations. Zalud brought up that these investments do not necessarily mean fewer resources spent on human capital. Instead, AI offers the opportunity to enable employees to handle more complex tasks and provide efficiencies and higher levels of service.

Echo Global Logistics, one of Chicago's premier logistics and tech companies, has "always been a big believer in the importance of technology," said Jubelirer. He sees AI as an exciting frontier that Echo is already using to create remarkable new efficiencies for its customers and employees.

Operational efficiency: AI is being deployed across operational areas such as warehouse management systems for e-commerce sites and complex pick-pack operations, Smith said. Automated forklifts and robotics able to run 24/7 with human oversight are also emerging, albeit with significant capital investment. AI can handle mundane tasks such as appointment scheduling that previously consumed significant staff time, Blubaugh shared.

Compliance applications: Ambrite shared how AIT is integrating AI in operating systems to help with potential compliance issues. The innovation would flag whether cargo going to a certain country is prohibited and check on suspicious shipping patterns. With the high speed of regulatory changes, this application can be a game-changer in guiding teammates through compliance requirements in real time.

Enhances visibility: The demand for transparency has escalated dramatically across supply chains. Jubelirer highlighted the evolution "from something as simple as knowing where your shipment is to now knowing the environmental impact of your supply chain." Technology enables greater visibility across supply chains, informing decisions about sustainability, timing, security issues and other risks before they become problems.

Cost management: While customers invest more in security and compliance, they look to AI-driven efficiencies to offset costs.

As AI adoption speeds up, so does the need for proper governance, the roundtable participants emphasized.

Data oversight should not reside with one functional department in the organization but must be a shared responsibility, Smith stressed. Legal, compliance, operations and IT teams must work together to understand where data lives, how it travels and what privacy regulations apply, depending on location and jurisdiction. For example, there are special requirements for Department of Defense clients who may prohibit their information from ever being plugged into AI tools.

Critchfield spoke of the importance of a data management policy. "In the past, we had boxes archived in long-term storage solutions. People didn't necessarily know the best approach to data retention, so they saved everything." The digital age calls for more thoughtful data retention rules. This is especially necessary before a company considers utilizing a third-party AI system.

Todd cautioned that while AI brings speed, it also introduces new layers of legal exposure. "As systems make autonomous decisions, it remains true that accountability and risk stays with humans," he said.

Chicago: A dominant player in logistics operations

Regional dynamics can shape company operations, with Chicago rising to the top for the roundtable participants. As a major logistics hub, it attracts top talent from around the country — and cultivates much of its own. Critchfield noted that the city's universities and training programs feed directly into logistics, compliance and technology roles, helping sustain the region's leadership. Blubaugh cited the panelists assembled in the room as evidence of the "luminaries" and "amazing logistics talent in the Chicago area."

Many logistics providers are also Chicago-based, noted Jubelirer. This creates a rich ecosystem that plays off of Chicago's role as a technology hub critical to modern logistics operations.

Chicago also has infrastructure and location advantages, said Ambrite. "So much freight just moves through here, whether it be rail or you're looking at the Great Lakes. From a distribution center standpoint, you can get to 99% of the country with a two-day truck, and probably 60% with a one-day."

On the down side, Chicago faces infrastructure challenges due to the congestion within its airports that leads to excessive cargo pickup and drop-off times, Ambrite added. This represents a broader national infrastructure issue that warrants investment and attention.

The future of modern supply chains

The global logistics industry has evolved by leaps and bounds in 2025, and has risen to serve customers by meeting the serious challenges thrown its way. The strategic importance of supply chain disciplines has also grown this year and that trajectory will only continue. Despite daily challenges, roundtable participants were enthusiastic about the industry's future.

"Innovation is what makes the industry exciting, Blubaugh said. "Every day there's something new in this otherwise ancient industry that has been moving goods from time immemorial."

Success in the years ahead will require organizations to embrace agility, invest in cutting-edge technology and human expertise, maintain robust compliance and cybersecurity postures and, above all, view business relationships as collaborations.

Disruption has not hobbled the logistics industry but rather made it more sophisticated, more strategic and more essential to global commerce than ever before.

"Change is part of the world today, part of business — especially on a global scale — and accepting that fact is how we prepare for success," Todd said.

Ambrite agreed. "Every challenge is a lesson," he said. "The companies that keep learning and adapting will be the ones leading the next decade."

"This is such an innovative industry, especially for an ancient one that has been moving goods from time immemorial."

Marc S. Blubaugh, co-chair, Benesch Transportation & Logistics Practice Group

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