



5 Questions Every Operations Leader Should Ask About AI





OVERVIEW

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Every AI vendor is making the same pitch right now: faster decisions, fewer errors, and less manual work.

That's not the decision operations leaders are actually making.

The real question is how much control you're willing to give up to get those benefits.

Some AI simply helps your team make better decisions. Other AI makes decisions for them. Knowing the difference may be the most important evaluation you'll make.

For the operations leader running a manufacturing shop or distribution center, the question isn't whether AI works. It's whether it's safe to put inside the system your business runs on.

Inventory, purchasing, receiving, and manufacturing workflows don't leave much room for mistakes. A recommendation is one thing. A tool that can influence operational decisions, create records, or help drive purchasing activity is something else entirely.

In manufacturing and distribution, AI generally falls into two categories:

- **Assistive AI** keeps people in the loop. It gathers information, prepares work, explains recommendations, and waits for approval.
- **Autonomous AI** operates more like a black box. It makes decisions, commits actions, or relies on logic that's difficult to inspect or question.

Neither approach is inherently right or wrong, but for inventory operations, where a missed receipt,

incorrect BOM, negative on-hand balance, or inaccurate lot assignment can ripple through the business, understanding which category you're buying matters.

And that's the real fear. Not that AI won't help, but that the wrong AI will make things worse.

A tool that drafts a purchase order before this morning's receipts post. One that recommends building from an outdated BOM. One that misses a stockout because inventory appears negative after a delayed receiving transaction. These aren't theoretical AI failures—they're everyday operational problems with expensive consequences.

For a lean operation, AI that introduces new risk can cost more than the manual work it was meant to replace.

The good news is that the right AI can reduce both the time and cost of running inventory operations—without requiring you to give up operational control.

That's what makes evaluating AI difficult right now. The market is crowded, the messaging sounds remarkably similar, and many vendors are still figuring out where AI fits into real operational workflows.

Inside, you'll learn:

- Why the difference between "inside your system" and "alongside your system" matters
- What human approval should look like before AI takes action
- How to evaluate whether the tool helps your entire team or only power users
- What to look for when AI gets something wrong
- The adoption questions most buyers never ask

1. Is the AI Working From Live Data, or Yesterday's?

This is the most important distinction in the market right now, and it's one many demos gloss over.

There are generally two categories of AI available to manufacturers and distributors today. The first connects to your data through exports, uploads, or APIs, analyzes that information, and delivers recommendations in a separate interface. The second works directly inside the system your team already uses, reading live operational data and helping prepare actions within the same environment where work happens.

Inventory doesn't sit still. A late receipt changes available stock. A production order consumes components. A

transfer changes availability across warehouses. A single transaction can completely change what the "right" recommendation should be.

A purchase order drafted from yesterday's export may not reflect this morning's receipts. A stock answer generated from last week's spreadsheet may already be outdated. In a live operation, timing matters.

When evaluating a vendor, ask two simple questions:

- Where does the AI get its data?
- Where does it put the output?

If the answer involves exports, spreadsheets, copy-and-paste workflows, or separate dashboards that someone has to remember to check, you're looking at a different category of tool than one that operates from live inventory data.

The Real Risk

Bad inventory decisions rarely happen because people lack information. They happen because the information changed. AI is only as useful as the data it's using at that moment.



2. Who Approves the Action Before Anything Changes?

This is where the difference between assistive AI and autonomous AI becomes real.

Assistive AI prepares the work. Autonomous AI performs the work.

For inventory operations, those represent very different levels of risk.

For any action that creates, changes, or commits a record, the right answer is: a human does. Every time. Because a wrong call here — a duplicate PO, a phantom stockout, a halted line — lands on you, not the AI vendor.

That safeguard is what separates a useful operational tool from one that introduces unnecessary risk.

Any AI operating inside an inventory, manufacturing, or warehouse system should require explicit approval

before a record is created, modified, or committed. Not a confirmation email. Not a notification after the fact. A deliberate review step that shows exactly what the AI is proposing to do and why.

Users should be able to see the recommendation, the supporting data behind it, and the impact of the action before anything changes.

For example, if AI drafts a purchase order, it should show the items, quantities, vendor, reason for the recommendation, and source data before anyone approves it. The person stays in control. The AI simply removes the manual work of gathering information and preparing the action.

What to Listen for in a Demo

Be cautious when you hear terms like:

- Fully automated
- Hands-off
- Autonomous
- Set it and forget it

When vendors emphasize “fully autonomous,” ask what happens when inventory is wrong, a receipt hasn’t posted, a supplier changes lead times, or demand shifts overnight. Great AI should surface uncertainty—not hide it.

Control Still Matters

The goal isn’t to remove people from the process. The goal is to remove repetitive work while keeping experienced operators in control of the decisions that matter.

3. Can Anyone on Your Team Use It, or Just Your Best Person?

Most SMB operations have some version of the same challenge.

There’s one person who knows where everything lives. They know which supplier to call when lead times change. They know which report tells the real story. They know which inventory discrepancies can be ignored and which ones need immediate attention.

When they’re unavailable, work slows down. When they leave, the business feels it.

AI that requires prompt engineering, technical configuration, or extensive training doesn’t solve that problem. It simply creates a new version of it.

The goal is not to turn your operations team into AI experts. The goal is to help more people perform work correctly without depending on a single person to interpret the system.

Look for tools that accept plain-English input, provide clear recommendations, and explain themselves in a way that makes sense to someone who isn’t a power user.

For example, if a warehouse supervisor asks why a particular item needs to be reordered, the answer shouldn’t require them to interpret a complex model or dashboard. The system should explain the recommendation in operational terms that they already understand.

The best AI doesn’t replace your most experienced employee. It makes more of your team capable of working like them.

What to Look For

The best operations AI should:

- ✓ Accept plain-English requests
- ✓ Explain recommendations clearly
- ✓ Guide users through decisions
- ✓ Reduce dependency on tribal knowledge

The Knowledge Test

Good AI doesn’t concentrate knowledge in one person. It helps spread it across the team.

4. What Happens When the AI Gets Something Wrong?

No AI tool gets everything right all the time. Just like a human, if given wrong data or bad instructions, mistakes can happen.

This doesn't mean there is a problem with the tool, but teams need to understand how and why the technology arrived at that answer, and how to fix it next time.

Ask a vendor:

- Does the AI explain what it did and why?
- Does it show the data it used?
- Does it ask follow-up questions when information is missing?
- Is there an audit trail?
- Can actions be reviewed or reversed before they're committed?

The answers will tell you a lot about how the system is designed.

Suppose the AI recommends creating a purchase order because an item appears below reorder. Minutes later, receiving posts a late shipment that satisfies demand. Does the AI explain why it made the recommendation? Can the user see the inventory transactions behind the suggestion? Can they reject the action before duplicate inventory is ordered?

The issue isn't whether the AI occasionally gets something wrong. The issue is whether the system helps users catch and correct mistakes before they create operational problems.

What to Look For

A trustworthy AI should:

- ✓ Explain recommendations
- ✓ Surface supporting data
- ✓ Flag missing information
- ✓ Maintain an audit trail
- ✓ Require approval before action

Trust Comes From Visibility

Trust comes from visibility. Operations teams can manage risk when they understand what the system is doing and why.





5. Will Your Team Actually Use It?

The best AI isn't the one with the most features. It's the one operators trust enough to use every day. That usually comes down to three things.

1. The tool lives where work already happens.

If employees have to leave the systems they use every day, adoption becomes harder. The most successful tools fit naturally into existing workflows rather than requiring users to jump between platforms.

2. It speaks the language of the operation.

Inventory, bins, vendors, lead times, purchase orders, and work orders shouldn't require translation. Teams are more likely to trust and use a tool when it reflects the way they already think about their work.

3. It reduces work instead of creating more of it.

If the AI introduces new processes, new data entry

requirements, or another system to maintain, adoption quickly becomes an uphill battle. The best tools remove friction rather than adding it.

The most successful implementations usually feel less like introducing a new tool and more like making an existing process easier.

Adoption Checklist

Before moving forward, ask:

- Does it live where work already happens?
- Does it use language operators already understand?
- Does it reduce work instead of creating new workflows?
- Can new employees use it without extensive training?

Adoption Drives Value

The best AI in the world won't create value if nobody uses it.

The Bar Should Be High

By now, you've probably noticed something. This isn't really an AI evaluation. It's a control evaluation.

The right AI reduces manual work without asking you to surrender operational judgment. It helps your team move faster while making it easier to understand what's happening, why it's happening, and what should happen next.

That's the difference between technology that looks impressive in a demo and technology your team will trust on a busy Monday morning when a shipment arrives late, inventory doesn't match expectations, or production priorities suddenly change.

Can the tool work from accurate information? Can users understand what it's doing? Can they stay in control? Will the team actually use it?

Those questions matter far more than any feature list because they're what determine whether the tool creates value after the demo is over.

Ask these five questions in every evaluation. The vendors that answer them clearly are usually the ones worth investigating further.

Bottom Line

The goal isn't to find the AI with the longest feature list. It's to find the AI that helps your team reduce time, reduce cost, and make better operational decisions—without giving up control of the systems that run your business.

About Fishbowl

At Fishbowl, we believe AI should reduce the time and cost of running inventory operations—not increase operational risk.

That's why our approach starts with live operational data, keeps people in the approval process, and focuses on helping manufacturers and distributors work faster without turning critical inventory decisions into a black box.

Whether it's preparing purchase orders, answering operational questions, identifying inventory issues, or helping users navigate everyday workflows, AI should act as an assistant—not an autopilot.

The result: less manual work, faster decisions, fewer costly mistakes, and more confidence that the work being done reflects what's actually happening in your operation.

[Request a demo](#)