



The Inventory Tasks Draining Your Day





OVERVIEW

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There is no single moment when manual inventory work becomes a problem.

It's the purchase order your operations manager builds at 8 a.m. It's the receipt waiting in a queue. It's the inventory transfer someone forgot to enter before lunch.

But those aren't really the problem. The real problem is everything your team has to do before they can make a good decision.

→ Before someone creates a purchase order, they verify inventory, check vendor lead times, confirm open sales orders, review existing POs, and determine whether demand has changed.

→ Before approving a transfer, they investigate inventory across multiple locations.

→ Before answering Sales about available inventory, they check receipts, production status, and allocations.

That's where operations teams spend their day—not making decisions, but gathering the information required to make them confidently.

That's also where AI has the greatest opportunity to help. Not by replacing operational judgment, but by removing the busywork surrounding it.

Each one of these is a small delay. Together, they're often the reason your best operations person is still catching up long after everyone else has gone home.

Most manufacturers know manual inventory work costs time. Far fewer realize that much of that time isn't spent deciding what to do. It's spent preparing to decide. That's an important distinction because it completely changes where AI delivers value.

The manufacturers seeing the biggest gains from AI aren't asking it to run the operation. They're asking it to prepare the work so experienced people can make better decisions, faster.

We'll break it down.

In this whitepaper, you'll learn:

- Why do operations teams spend more time preparing for inventory decisions than making them
- How to estimate the labor cost of manual purchasing, receiving, and inventory management work
- The hidden costs that don't appear on a timesheet or financial report
- How AI can reduce repetitive work without replacing operational judgment
- A simple exercise you can use to estimate what manual inventory work may be costing your operation

The Tasks Your Team Is Absorbing Right Now

Most operations leaders don't start the day planning to spend hours creating purchase orders or chasing inventory updates.

The work accumulates one small task at a time. Every inventory decision comes wrapped in administrative work.

In a typical SMB manufacturing or warehouse operation, that work usually falls into four buckets:



Purchasing

- Creating purchase orders
- Verifying vendor pricing and lead times
- Checking inventory before issuing orders
- Following up on late deliveries



Order Management

- Entering sales orders
- Confirming inventory availability
- Managing backorders
- Updating order status



Receiving

- Matching shipments to purchase orders
- Logging receipts
- Handling discrepancies
- Updating inventory levels



Reconciliation

- Cycle counts
- Inventory adjustments
- Inventory transfers
- Stock validation

These tasks are part of running a manufacturing business. The challenge is they get absorbed into someone's day rather than treated as a process.

Now notice what almost every task has in common.

Very few involve an actual business decision.

Most involve collecting information, validating records, entering data, or preparing work before someone can decide what to do next.

That's the work AI is uniquely positioned to remove.

Why This Matters

The goal isn't simply to eliminate manual work. It's allowing experienced operators to spend more of their day applying judgment instead of preparing for it. Those aren't the same thing.

The Math That's Easy to Skip

The tasks above add up quickly. A recent report highlighted by SupplyChain247 found that 65% of frontline manufacturing supervisors spend up to four hours per shift on manual data collection and reporting—roughly 20 hours per week per supervisor.¹ For many SMB manufacturers, a significant portion of that time is spent on purchasing, receiving, inventory management, and reconciliation work.

On purchase orders alone, the numbers can be significant. According to an APQC study, manual PO processing can cost organizations \$50-\$150 to process when you account for staff time across requisition, approval, issuance, tracking, receiving, and payment.²

For a manufacturer issuing 150 POs per month, that is \$90,000-\$270,000 per year in administrative cost.

Even at more conservative assumptions, the math is uncomfortable.

A mid-size manufacturer processing 75 POs per month at 15 to 20 minutes per PO is spending 18 to 25 hours per month on PO creation alone. At a loaded labor cost of approximately \$35 per hour for an operations manager, that's between \$630 and \$875 every month spent on a single task.

And that's just purchase order creation. It doesn't include receiving, transfers, inventory adjustments, cycle counts, or order management activities.

The challenge is that most businesses never see these costs clearly. They get absorbed into salaried roles, spread across multiple people, and buried inside the normal rhythm of the day.

That's why manual inventory work often feels free. No invoice arrives. No line item appears on a financial statement. The cost shows up as time that could have been spent somewhere else.

But the opportunity isn't simply saving labor dollars. It's recovering hours that experienced operators can spend preventing tomorrow's problems instead of documenting yesterday's work. That's the shift AI should create.

Note: All labor cost figures in this piece are estimates based on published industry benchmarks. Verify against your own data.

Top 3 Costs That Don't Show Up in Time Tracking

The labor hours are the visible part of the equation. Underneath them are three costs that rarely make it into a budget conversation.

1. Delayed Action

A purchase order that takes 24 hours to build and approve is a purchase order that reaches the supplier 23.5 hours later than it could have. In manufacturing, a delayed PO can mean a delayed delivery, which can mean a delayed production run, which can ultimately mean a delayed shipment to a customer.

Most delays don't start as emergencies. They become emergencies because nobody noticed them early enough.

The decision usually isn't delayed because nobody knows what to do. It's delayed because someone has to gather the information first.

A one-day delay may not matter this week. But when those delays accumulate across suppliers, receipts, approvals, and production schedules, the impact starts showing up downstream. Expedited freight gets approved. Production schedules get adjusted. Customer commitments get pushed back.

By the time someone feels the impact, the original delay is often impossible to trace.

2. The Knowledge Bottleneck

Most SMB manufacturers have at least one person everyone depends on. They're the person who knows

which supplier to call when lead times change. The person who understands how inventory actually moves through the building. The person who can explain why the system says one thing and the shelf says another.

That knowledge is valuable. The problem is when critical processes depend on one person's availability.

New employees can't move quickly until they've absorbed months of tribal knowledge. When that person is unavailable, work slows down. When that person leaves, institutional knowledge often leaves with them.

This cost doesn't show up on a P&L. It shows up in onboarding time, slower decision-making, avoidable mistakes, and the owner who stays late because they're the only person who knows how everything fits together.

Your best operator isn't valuable because they click through your tools faster than everyone else. They're valuable because they know where to look, what questions to ask, and which signals actually matter.

Good AI doesn't replace that expertise. It helps more people benefit from it.

3. The Compounding Effect of Stale Data

An operations manager spending three hours per day on manual updates and data entry is spending roughly \$28,000 per year simply keeping information current.

And during every gap between an event occurring and someone entering it into the system, the information everyone relies on is out of date.

Inventory data doesn't have to be wildly inaccurate to create problems. It only has to be slightly behind reality.

A receipt entered three hours late. A transfer entered the next morning. An adjustment waiting for approval.

Individually, these gaps seem minor. Together, they create a system people stop trusting.

Once trust disappears, every inventory decision takes longer because every answer has to be verified manually.

Once that happens, teams create workarounds. More spreadsheets. More phone calls. More manual checks. And the cycle starts all over again.

The Real Cost

Manual work doesn't just consume time. It creates more manual work.

Every delay increases the amount of checking, confirming, investigating, and correcting required tomorrow.

What You Get Back With the Time You Recover

Reducing manual inventory work can absolutely save money. But that's rarely why manufacturers invest in AI.

The bigger benefit is what becomes possible when your team has more capacity.

Most SMB manufacturers aren't looking to reduce headcount. They're looking for enough time in the day to stay ahead of the operation instead of constantly reacting to it. The goal isn't eliminating work.

The goal is eliminating the repetitive work surrounding operational decisions: creating purchase orders, looking up inventory, checking supplier status, investigating discrepancies, confirming availability, and preparing transfers.

Those activities don't create competitive advantage. They simply consume the time required before someone can make a decision.

Fifty hours per month recovered from purchase order creation, inventory updates, and other manual tasks creates room for work that often gets pushed aside when teams are busy keeping the operation moving.

When AI prepares that work instead, experienced operators spend more time solving problems than searching for information.

That time can be invested in:

- Supplier negotiations and relationship management
- Process improvements that increase efficiency
- Quality initiatives and root-cause analysis
- Training new employees
- Inventory optimization and planning
- Solving problems before customers notice them

The manufacturers that stay ahead aren't necessarily the ones working the hardest. They're the ones who spend less time preparing decisions and more time making them.

Key Takeaway

Most manufacturers don't have a decision problem. They have a preparation problem.

Their people already know how to run the operation. They simply spend too much of their day gathering information before they can act.

That's where AI delivers its greatest value—not by replacing experienced operators, but by removing the repetitive work surrounding the decisions only they can make.

Run Your Own Numbers Before You Do Anything Else

Before making assumptions about what manual inventory work is costing your business, run a quick estimate using last month's purchase order activity.

1. Pull your purchase order count from last month.
2. Multiply that number by 15 minutes as a baseline.
3. Divide by 60 to convert the result into hours.
4. Multiply those hours by your operations manager's loaded hourly cost.

The exercise isn't about proving your team works too slowly. It's about identifying where experienced employees spend time doing work software should be preparing for them.

Example:

75 purchase orders per month

15 minutes per PO

1,125 minutes of work

18.75 hours per month

At \$35/hour = approximately \$656 per month

That's one task.

Now consider the time spent receiving inventory, processing transfers, entering adjustments, reconciling discrepancies, updating inventory records, and answering stock-related questions from sales or customer service.

The number grows quickly.

Ask Yourself

Ask yourself:

- How many purchase orders did we create last month?
- How many hours were spent receiving and reconciling inventory?
- How many inventory adjustments were entered manually?
- How many inventory questions required someone to stop what they were doing and investigate?

Notice that none of these questions ask whether your people know how to manage inventory. They ask how much time they spend preparing to manage it.

If those answers are difficult to estimate, that's often part of the problem.

The manufacturers who measure this first tend to make better technology decisions than those who don't. The cost of manual inventory work isn't an abstract problem. It's a line item most businesses have simply never written down.



Where AI Fits

This is where many AI conversations go off track.

The goal isn't autonomous inventory management. The goal isn't replacing planners, buyers, warehouse managers, or operations leaders.

The best use of AI is removing the busywork around decisions, not the decisions themselves.

That means helping teams:

- Gather information instantly instead of hunting through multiple screens
- Identify exceptions that actually require attention
- Prepare purchase orders instead of manually creating them
- Answer inventory questions without searching reports
- Surface what changed instead of expecting users to discover it themselves

The buyer still decides whether to issue the purchase order. The warehouse manager still decides how inventory should move. The planner still decides whether demand justifies action. AI simply removes the repetitive work required to get there. That's the distinction that matters.

Bottom Line

The manufacturers seeing the biggest gains from AI aren't handing inventory decisions over to software.

They're handing software the repetitive work surrounding those decisions so experienced people can focus on what humans do best: applying judgment, solving problems, and keeping the operation moving.

Because AI shouldn't replace operational expertise. It should amplify it.

About Fishbowl

Fishbowl helps manufacturers and distributors reduce the manual work behind purchasing, receiving, inventory control, and order management.

We believe AI should help operations teams spend less time gathering information and more time making decisions.

That's why our approach focuses on preparing work—not replacing the people responsible for it. Whether it's investigating inventory, preparing purchasing actions, answering operational questions, or surfacing what needs attention, AI should act as an assistant—not an autopilot.

By bringing inventory, manufacturing, warehouse, and purchasing workflows into a single system, teams spend less time chasing updates, maintaining spreadsheets, and entering data, and more time focused on execution.

The result isn't just fewer manual tasks. It's faster decisions, better visibility, and more capacity to run the business.

See how growing manufacturers are getting time back with Fishbowl.

[Book a demo](#)

¹ SupplyChain247, "65% of Frontline Manufacturing Supervisors Waste Up to Four Hours Per Shift on Manual Data and Reporting Tasks," 2026.

² APQC, Purchase Order Processing Benchmarks.