

REPORT 2026

Ship4wd Presents: **The 2026 Small Business Supply Chain Report**

Tariffs, blind spots, and a 3% investment problem: A national survey reveals the state of shipping, sourcing, and supply chain readiness among 500 U.S. small and mid-sized businesses

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Commissioned by Ship4wd

Survey conducted via Pollfish | April 2026 | ship4wd.com

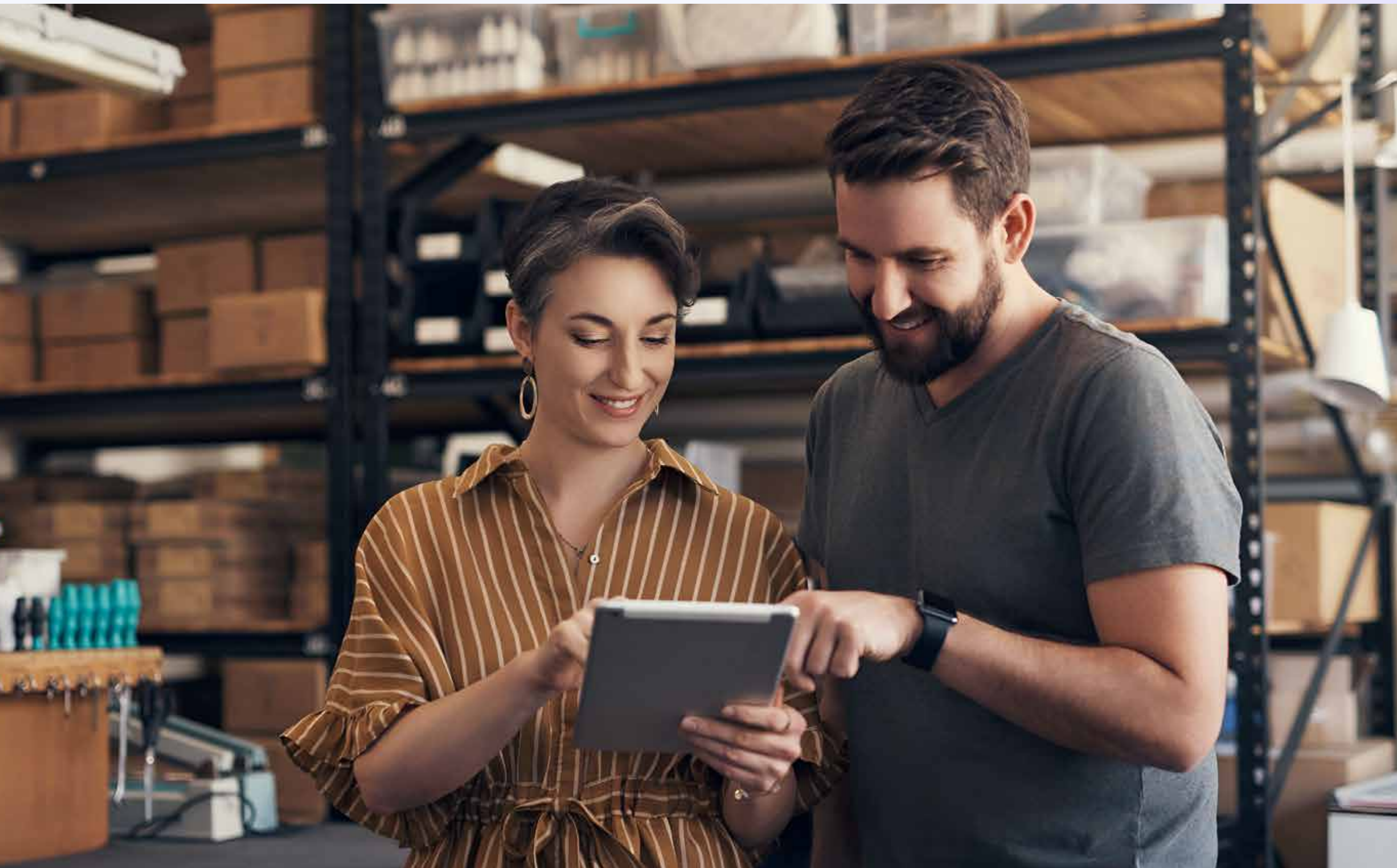
About This Report

The operating environment for small and mid-sized businesses has become increasingly unpredictable, and for many business owners, an enormous headache.

Tariff volatility, rising logistics costs, and persistent supply chain disruption are placing new demands on companies that often lack the resources and infrastructure of their larger counterparts.

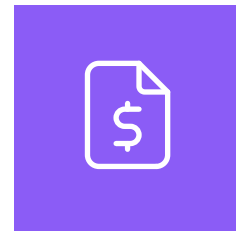
To better understand how these pressures are shaping decision-making, investment, and operational readiness, Ship4wd surveyed 500 U.S.-based small and mid-sized business owners and decision-makers actively involved in shipping, sourcing, or supply chain management.

This report presents the findings.



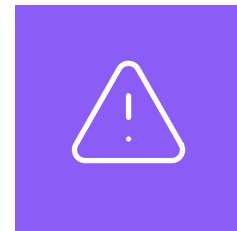
Key Findings at a Glance

96%



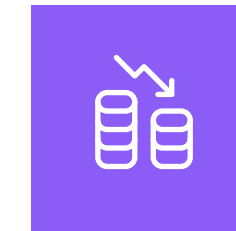
of SMBs say tariffs negatively impacted their business in the past year

99%



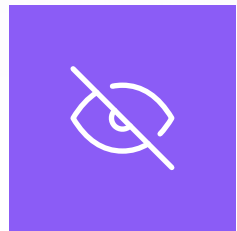
experienced at least one shipping or sourcing disruption in 2025

62%



suffered lost revenue or missed sales due to supply chain problems

72%



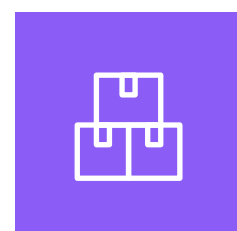
lack full real-time visibility into their shipping and sourcing operations

51%



say their disruption protocol has never actually been tested

59%



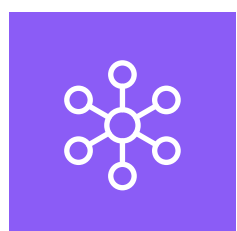
are stockpiling inventory as their primary coping strategy

91%



are already using AI in some form in their logistics operations

89%



say integrated supply chain solutions are critical to their business

Tariffs: The Single Biggest Disruptor

Tariffs have become a defining supply chain challenge for U.S. small businesses, reshaping how businesses plan, price, source, and serve their customers.

73.4%

of SMBs cited tariffs as the #1 factor that impacted their shipping, sourcing, or supply chain over the past year



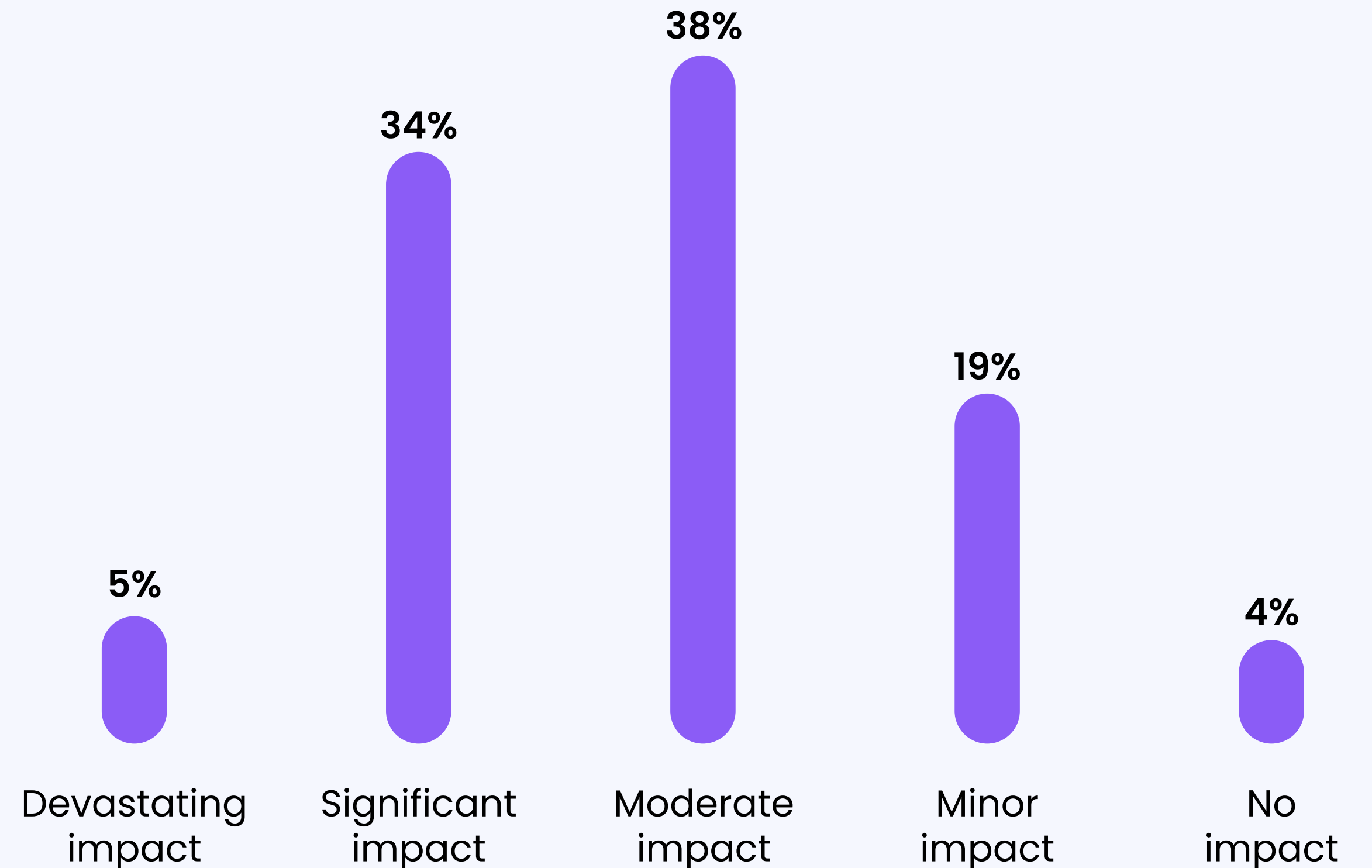
Measure the impact in 2025

73.4%

When asked which factors impacted their shipping, sourcing, or supply chain over the past year, 73.4% of SMBs cited tariffs.

Of those who felt the impact, the severity was significant: 38% reported moderate impact, 34% significant impact, and 5% described it as devastating. Only 4% said tariffs had no impact at all.

% of SMBs

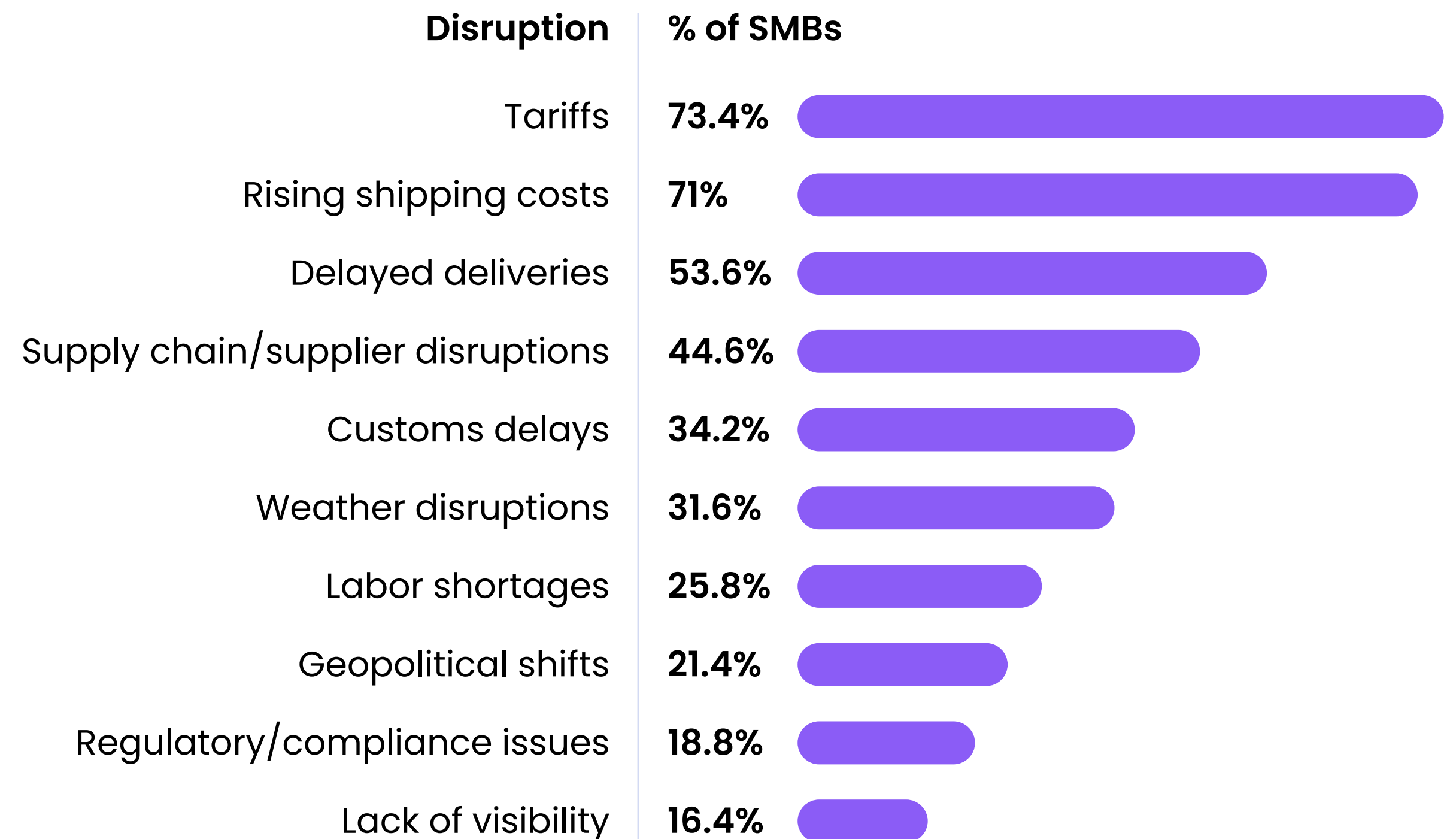


Heading into 2026, businesses are worried...

When asked what their main concern is for 2026, 67.2% of the small and mid-sized businesses surveyed ranked tariffs as a primary shipping and sourcing concern, just outpacing the rising shipping costs (65.2%) and delayed deliveries (47.2%).

When asked specifically about anticipated tariff impact in 2026, 75% expect moderate-to-devastating impact, and only 4% expect no impact. This concern has extended beyond shipping, with 65.8% of businesses saying that new tariffs or trade restrictions are the single biggest regulatory threat to their business, far outpacing concern over labor laws (11.4%), data privacy (10.4%), and environmental regulations (9.8%).

Top supply chain disruptions in the past year:



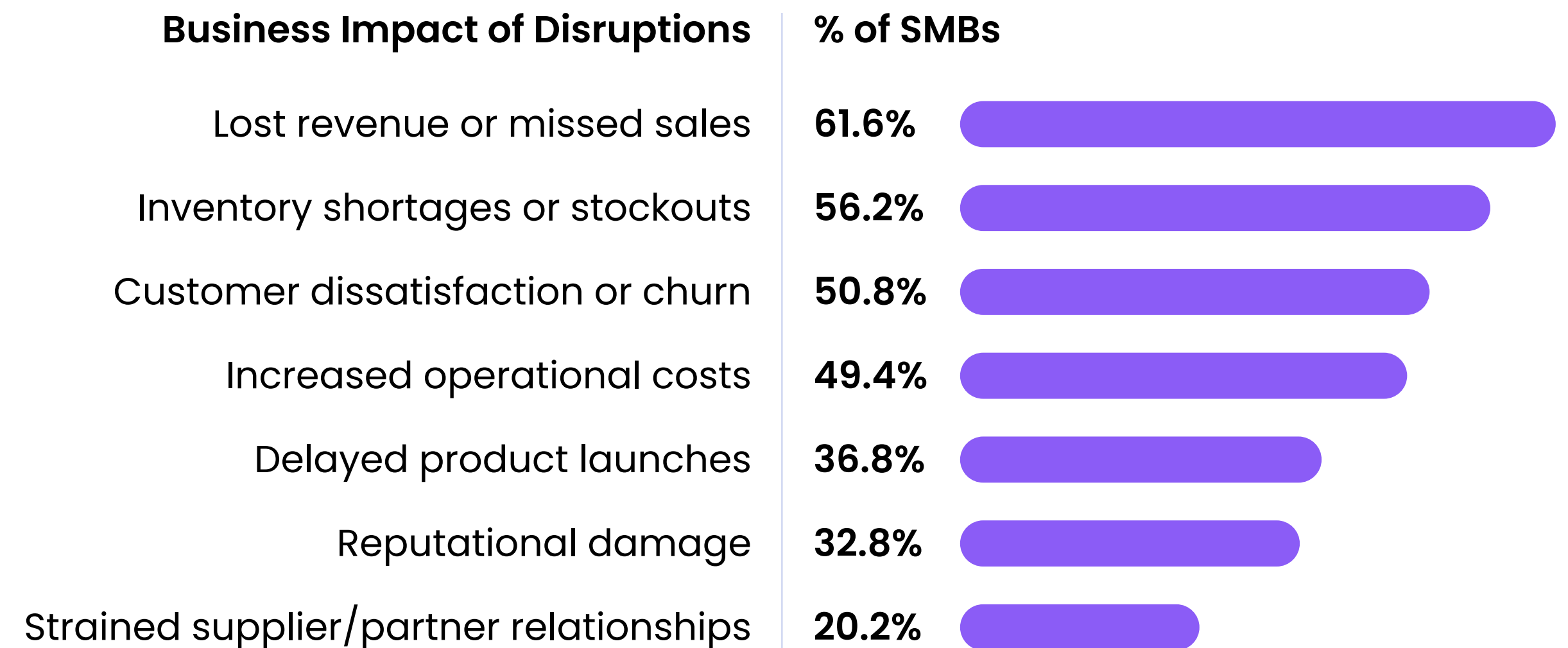
The True Cost: Revenue, Customers, and Reputation

61.6%

of SMBs have been impacted by lost revenue or missed sales due to disruptions in shipping or sourcing

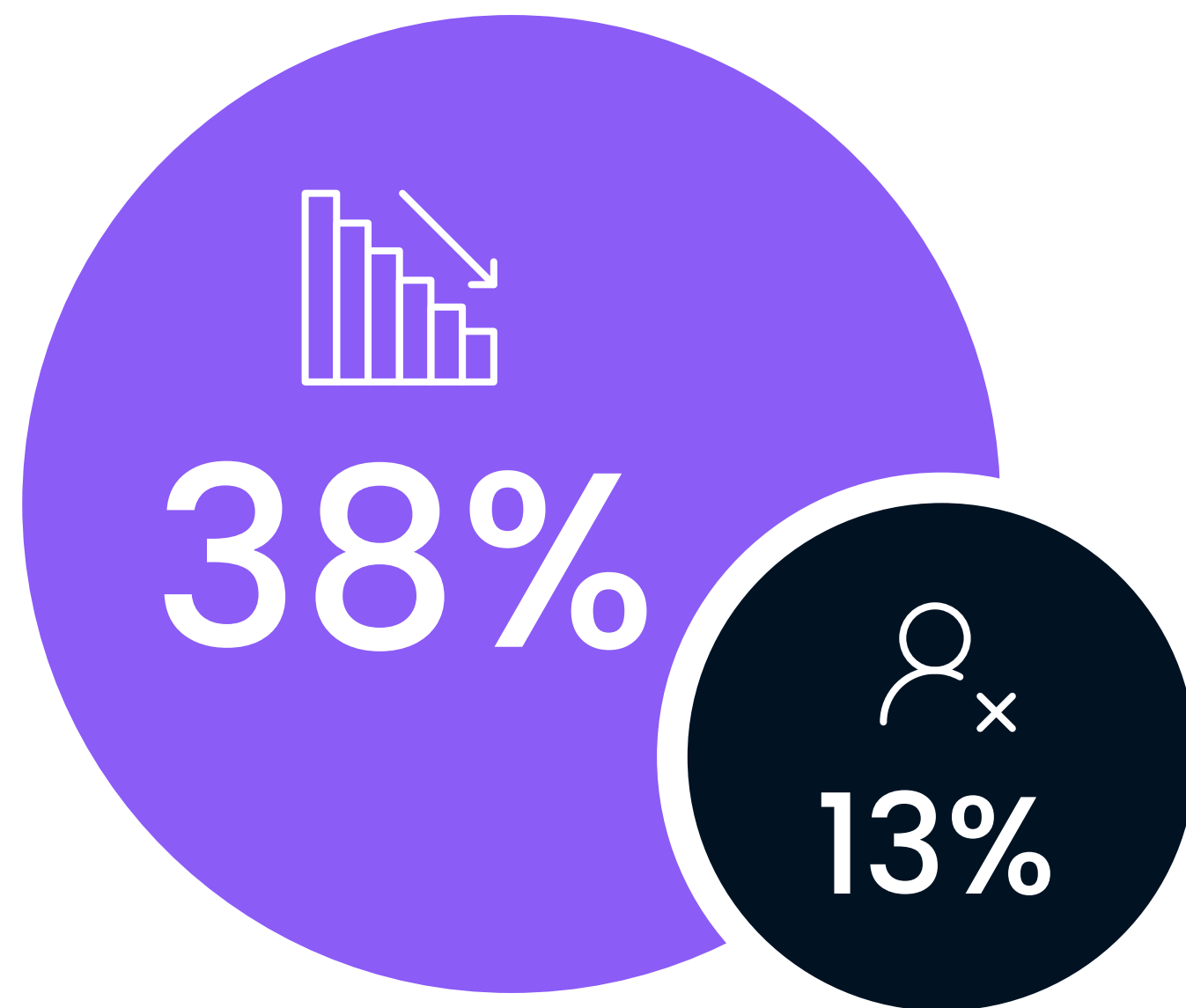
The supply chain disruptions of the past few years haven't just been inconvenient to logistics companies, they've been genuinely damaging to small and mid-sized businesses, as well. While large enterprises are able to absorb the hit of a late container or a surprise increase in tariffs, SMBs can't. A two-week shipping delay can easily cascade into a stockout, then lost sale, decrease in marketplace ranking or the loss of a customer.

See other ways small and mid-sized businesses are affected by supply chain disruptions:



The customer relationship toll

The unpredictability of tariffs, timelines, and shipping rates doesn't stay contained within operations, it trickles directly into customer retention and revenue. When delivery timelines shift and inventory is unavailable, the end customer bears the burden, straining the seller-customer relationship and risking the loss of that customer for good.



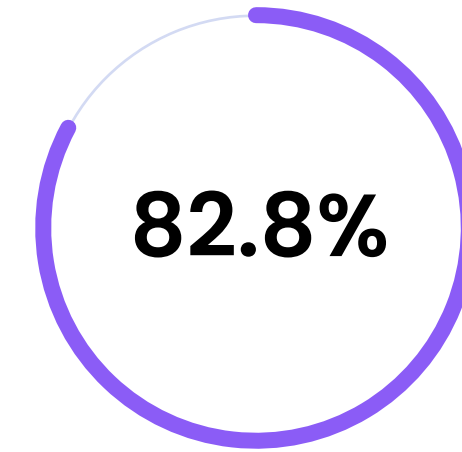
The data confirms it:

38% of SMBs report increased complaints or customer churn as a direct result of shipping and delivery problems, and an additional **13%** have lost repeat customers altogether. That means more than half of the businesses surveyed (**51%**) say supply chain disruptions are now directly eroding their customer relationships.



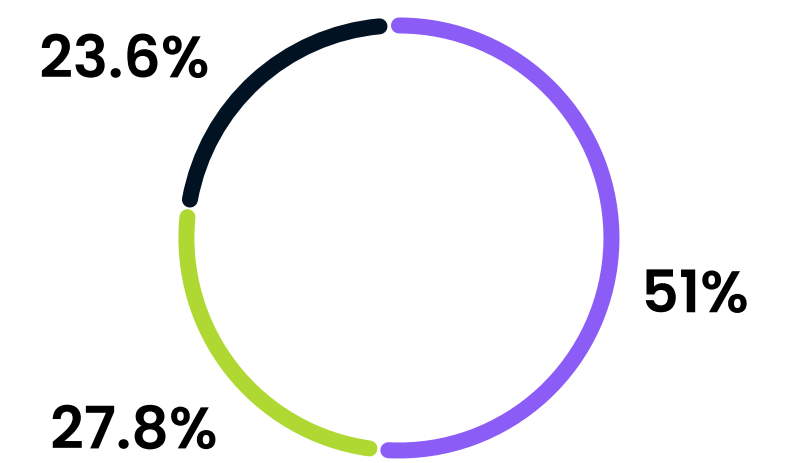
How Prepared are SMBs for the Next Disruption

23.6%
of SMBs feel “very confident” that their logistics strategy can withstand future supply chain challenges



While **82.8%** of SMBs describe themselves as very or somewhat prepared for shipping disruptions, when digging further, the survey uncovered that:

- 51% say they have a protocol in place but have never had to use it
- Only 27.8% have full real-time visibility into their shipping and sourcing operations
- Only 23.6% are “very confident” that their strategy can adapt to future challenges like rising costs and geopolitical shifts



In other words, while most SMBs feel prepared, the majority are relying on theoretical analysis, are operating with incomplete information, and lack confidence in their business’ ability to adapt.



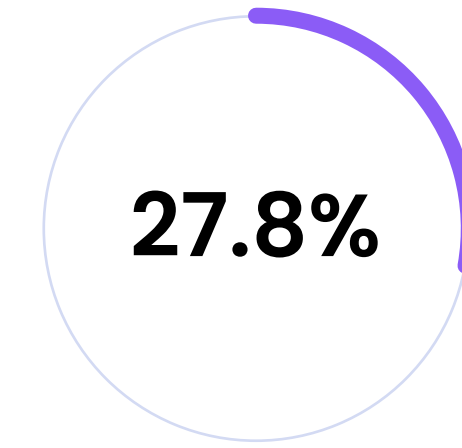
The Visibility Gap: Are SMBs Equipped with Accurate Information

72.2%

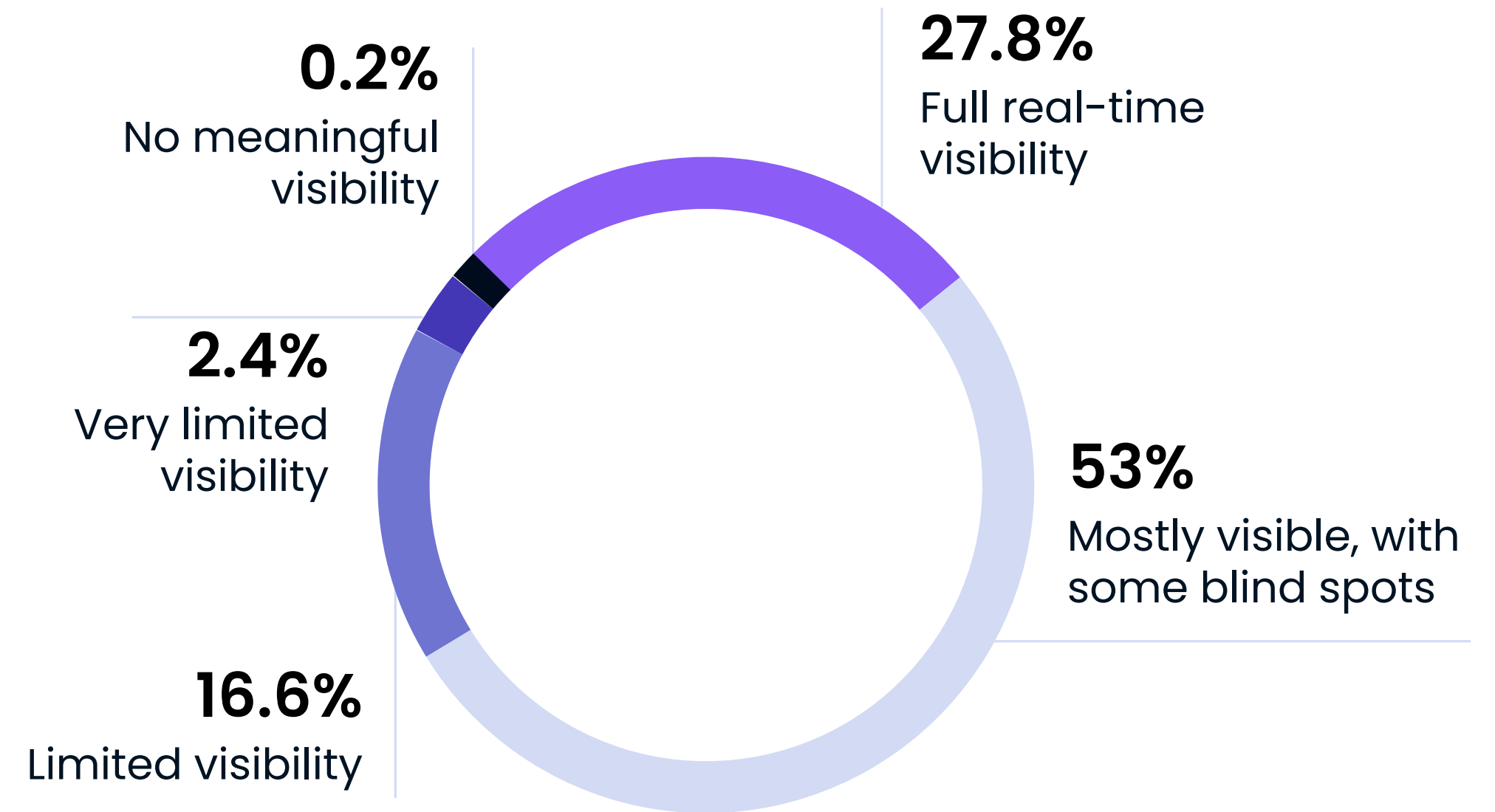
of SMBs are making logistics decisions without knowing the full picture



72.2% of SMBs making sourcing, shipping, and inventory decisions without complete information, the ability to pivot when conditions change is severely limited. In an environment where tariff changes, port delays, and carrier disruptions can shift conditions overnight, limited visibility can translate directly into higher costs, slower response times, and failure to get ahead of problems before they reach the customer.



Only **27.8%** of SMBs confirmed having full real-time visibility into their shipping and sourcing operations. The rest are flying at least partially blind:



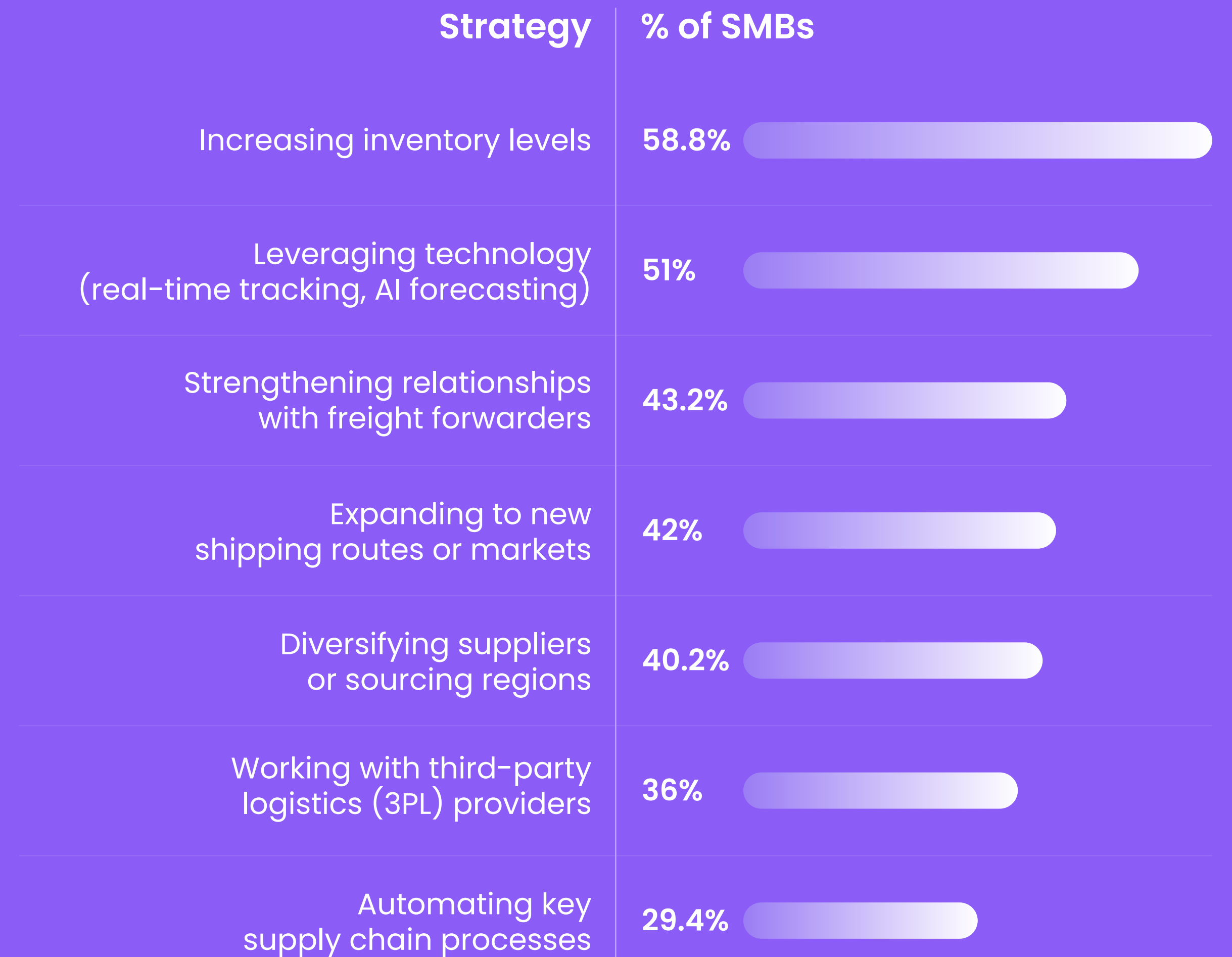
How SMBs Are Coping

Strategies used in the past year:

When asked what strategies helped them overcome supply chain challenges in the past year, the businesses we surveyed revealed a clear pattern: the go-to responses are still rooted in what they can control – physical inventory and supplier relationships – with technology gaining ground but not yet dominant.

The most prominent strategy was stockpiling inventory. It's an intuitive response to uncertainty, but a potentially expensive one, tying up working capital, increasing warehousing costs, and creating new risks around overstock.

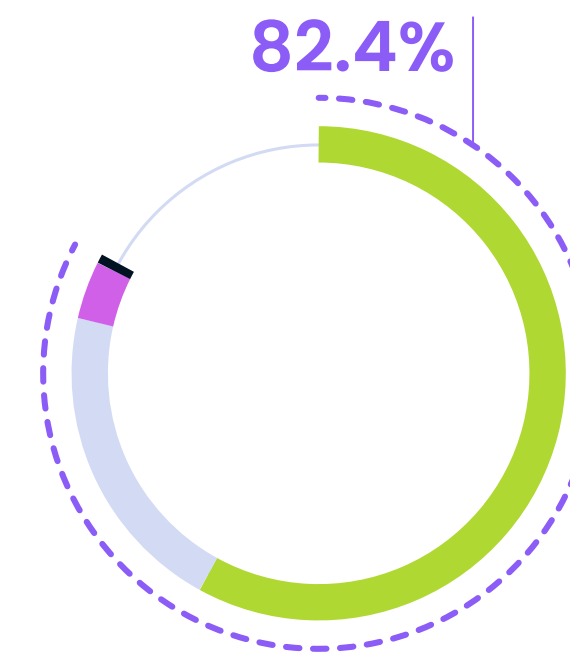
Meanwhile, technology-driven approaches are climbing, but the gap between stocking up on inventory and adopting digital solutions suggests that most small businesses are still managing disruption reactively rather than strategically.



Disruptions Have Become the Norm





99%

of SMBs experienced at least one disruption in their shipping or sourcing operations in the past year.

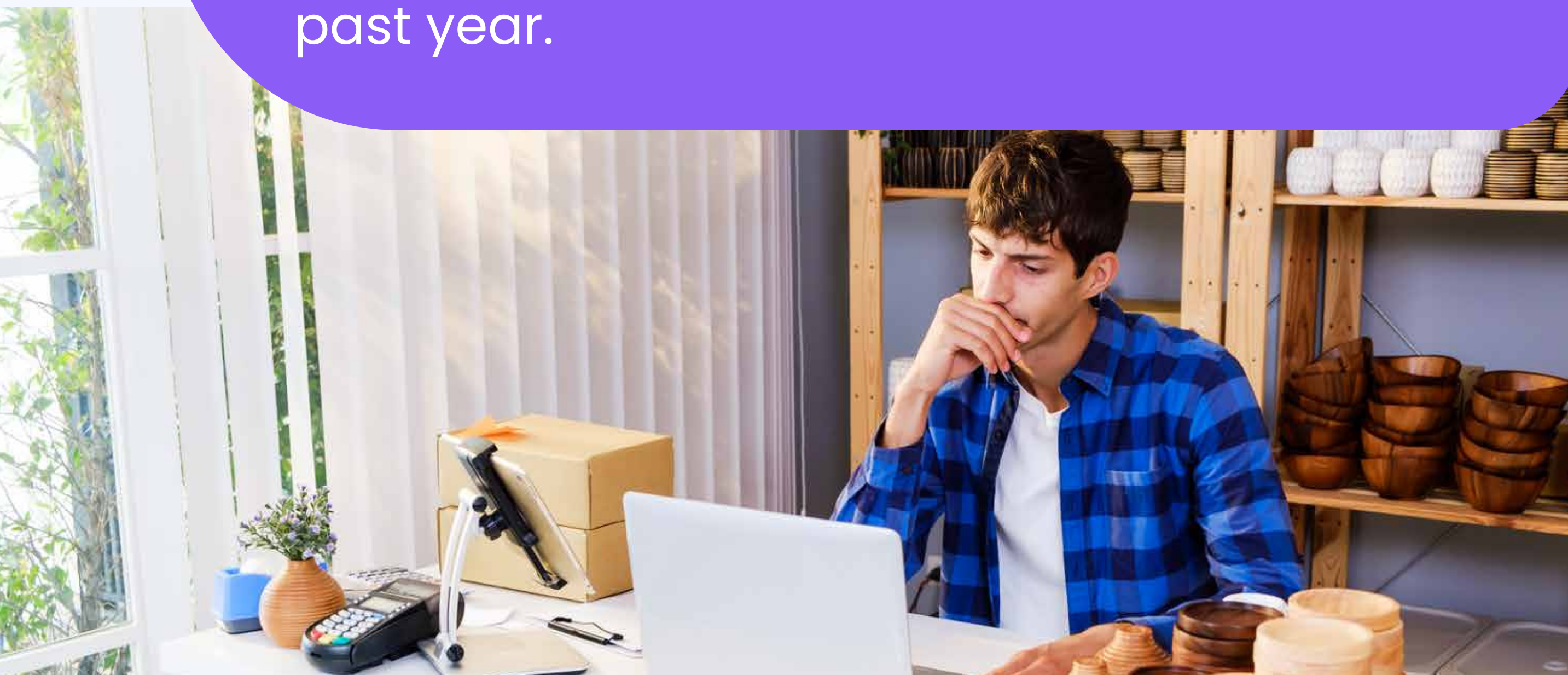


82.4% of SMBs experience disruptions at least occasionally:

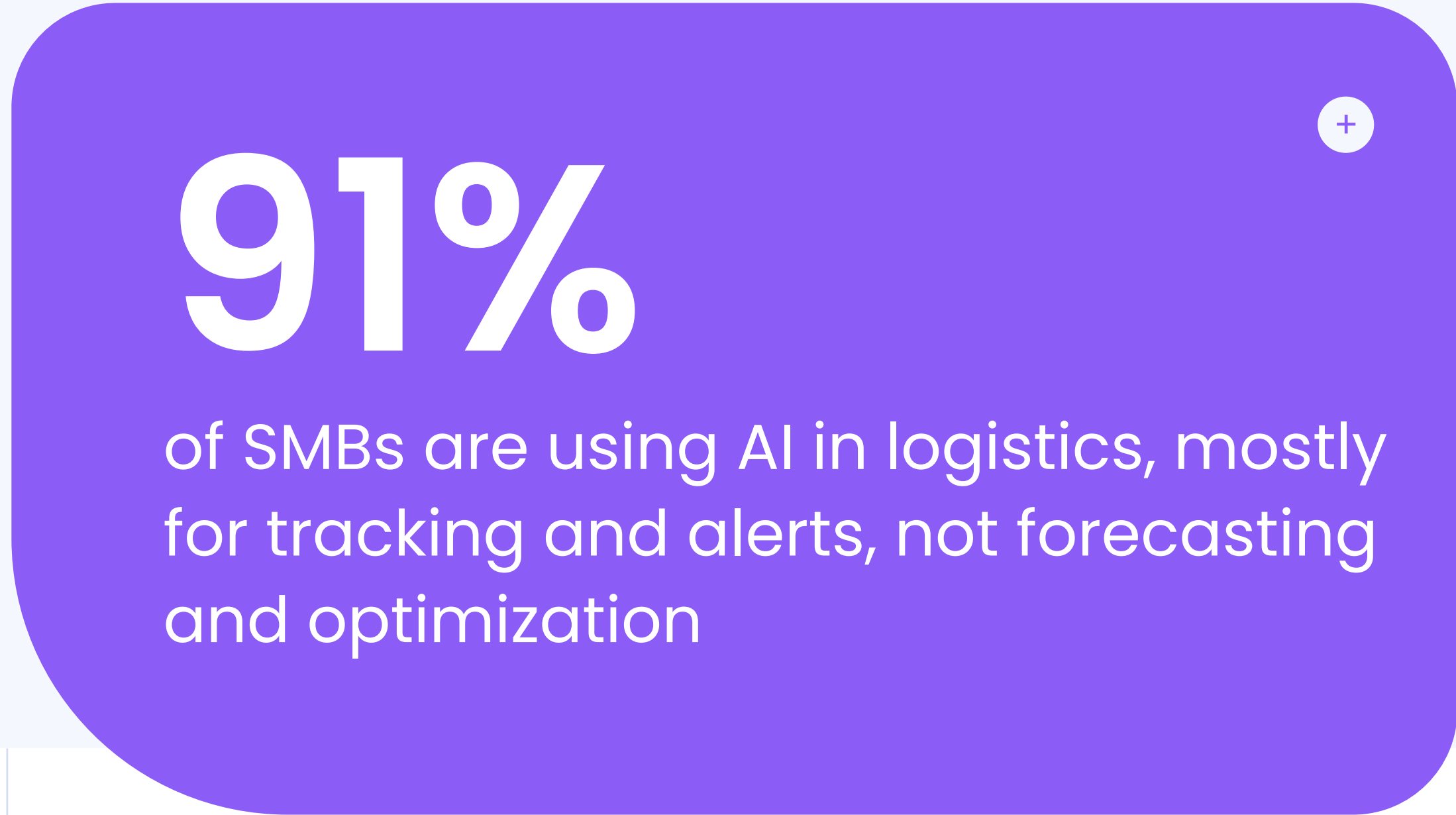
Supply chain disruptions are not rare events for U.S. small businesses. They've become a regular part of doing business, consistently testing the preparedness and resilience of business owners.

-  **58%** experience disruptions occasionally
-  **20.6%** experience them often
-  **3.8%** experience them very frequently
-  Only **0.6%** say they never experience disruptions

SMBs can no longer build and operate their logistics operations without planning for the next disruption. The more visibility you have, the more prepared you are, and the more confidence you have in your supply chain teams and partners, the faster the recovery.



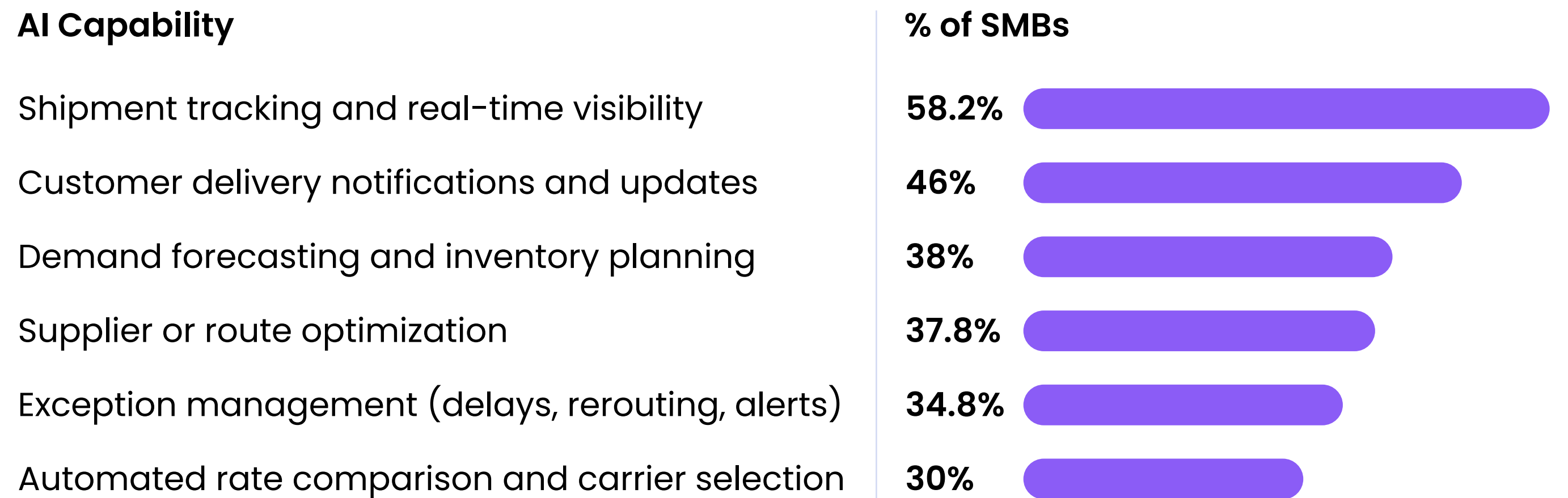
AI in Logistics: The Journey Toward Adoption



AI adoption in logistics has crossed the mainstream threshold. 90.8% of SMBs report using at least one AI-powered capability in their shipping, sourcing, or logistics operations. Only 9.2% say they do not currently use AI in logistics at all.

But the data also shows that adoption is uneven. Most SMBs are using AI for visibility and alerts, tracking shipments, getting sent delivery notifications, while higher value applications like demand forecasting, route optimization, and automated rate comparison remain underutilized.

AI capabilities currently in use:

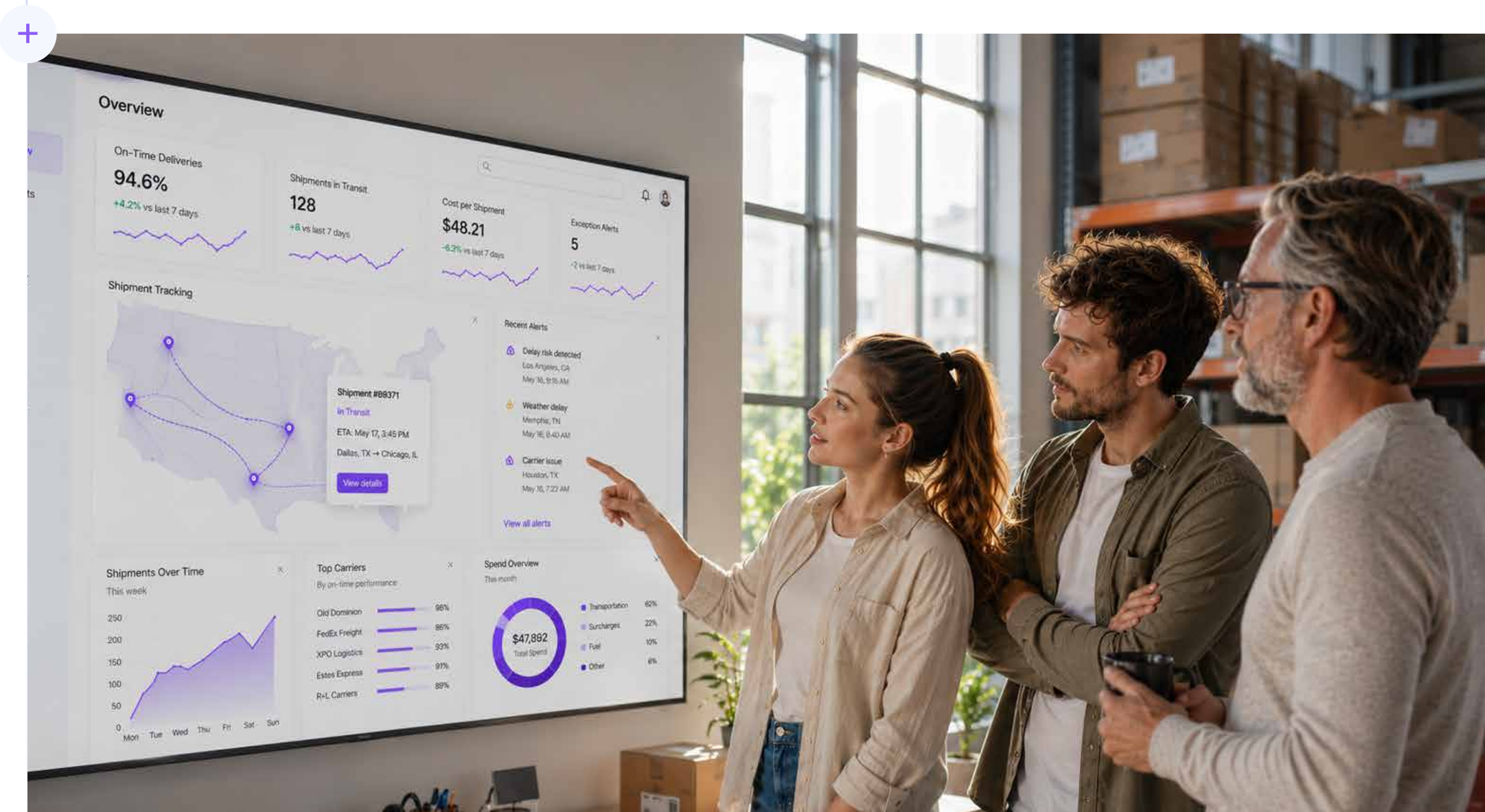


How SMBs view AI adoption

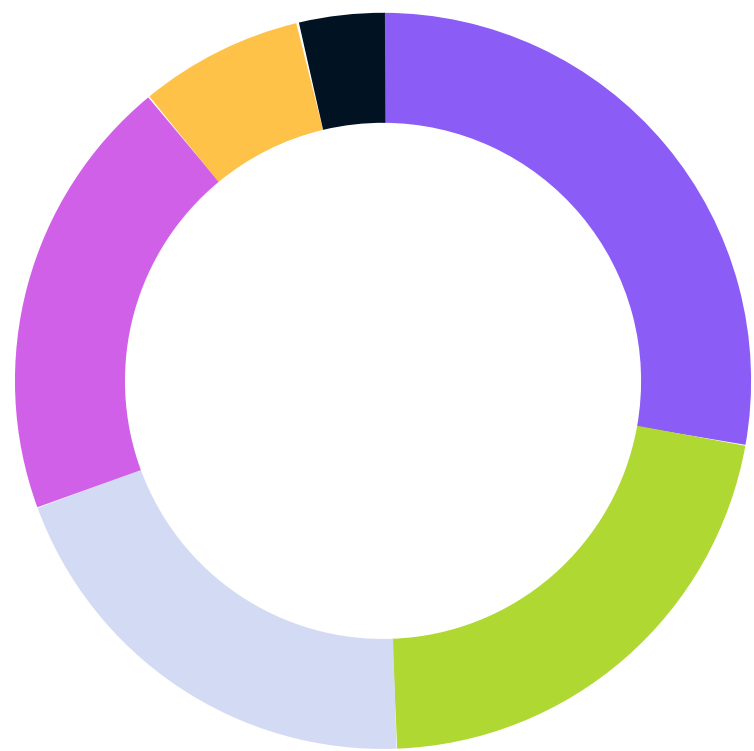
SMBs are using AI mainly as a safety net, without yet adopting it as a growth strategy. When asked how they view AI in their logistics operations, the top responses had to do with protection, not growth:



Meanwhile, the tools available to businesses are evolving fast. According to Gartner, 40% of enterprise applications will embed task-specific AI agents by the end of 2026, up from less than 5% in 2025 (Gartner, August 2025). That means the platforms SMBs use to manage procurement, shipping, and inventory are increasingly building and developing around AI capabilities, including automated search, carrier selection, and predictive disruption alerts. The businesses that get comfortable with technology and adopt these tools early gain an operational edge.



How SMBs primarily view AI in logistics:



Rank	% of SMBs	View
1	27.8%	A way to reduce operational risk
2	21.6%	A cost-control tool to protect margins
3	20%	A competitive necessity as others adopt it
4	19.6%	A growth driver for scale and expansion
5	7.2%	A future consideration, not immediate
6	3.8%	Not relevant to our business



This represents a massive opportunity for small and mid-sized businesses. Larger businesses have always had the advantage of bigger teams, dedicated specialists with expertise across each step of the supply chain. AI levels that playing field; so that, with the right tools, a small business can now access the same forecasting, optimization, and real-time decision-making capabilities that used to require an entire department and deep industry relationships. By closing this operational gap, SMBs can eventually grow at a pace that would have been impossible just a few years ago.

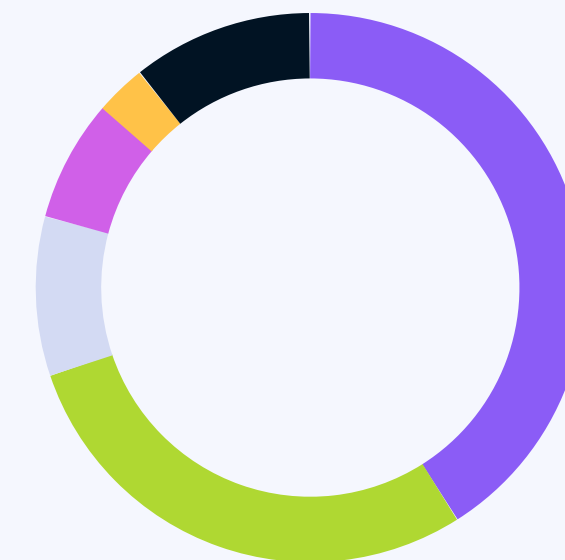
Technology Investment Plans for 2026

89%

of SMBs plan to invest in new supply chain technology in 2026

If there's one lesson SMBs can take from the past few years of disruption, it's that relying on the same processes, strategies, and tools you've been using, 'standing still' so to speak, isn't an option. The past few years have forced a rethink from even the largest, most established sellers. SMBs today understand they need to be doing more to protect their businesses from disruption.

That understanding shows up clearly in the data: 89.4% of SMBs plan to invest in new technology in 2026 to address current and potential supply chain challenges, with AI and automation leading the agenda by a wide margin. What's concerning, however, is where that investment is and isn't going. Small businesses are overwhelmingly prioritizing management and planning tools over infrastructure and operational changes. Planned investment in digital freight forwarding (3%) and IoT for real-time tracking (7.2%) is strikingly low, in both cases, lower than the percentage of businesses planning no new investment at all (10.6%).



Planned technology investments:

% of SMBs

Investment

41%	AI and automation tools
28.8%	Advanced data analytics and demand forecasting
9.4%	Blockchain for tracking and transparency
7.2%	IoT for real-time tracking
3%	Digital freight forwarder integration
10.6%	No new investment — relying on existing systems

Freight Forwarding – Traditional vs Digital

Despite widespread recognition of the need for better visibility and technology, we found that the majority of SMBs still rely on traditional freight forwarding over digital alternatives.

Traditional forwarding operates through personal relationships, with a heavy reliance on phone calls and email-based quoting. What it offers in familiarity, it often lacks in transparency and speed; quotes can take hours or days, pricing is rarely all-inclusive, and tracking typically means calling someone for an update or managing a separate tool.

Digital freight forwarding is built around the opposite, offering services like instant quoting, live tracking, on-demand support, and documentation management in a single platform. It gives SMBs the immediacy and control that larger businesses have long had with their in-house logistics teams.

The data suggests that SMBs still find themselves in the middle of this transition, with traditional forwarders remaining the default. But given that 72% of SMBs lack full visibility into their supply chain, however, we expect that balance to shift soon.



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52.8%

Plan to work with traditional freight forwarders to manage logistics and mitigate risks

44.2%

Plan to integrate with freight forwarders' digital platforms for collaboration and real-time tracking

35.6%

Plan to use digital freight forwarders to increase visibility and reduce manual processes

12.4%

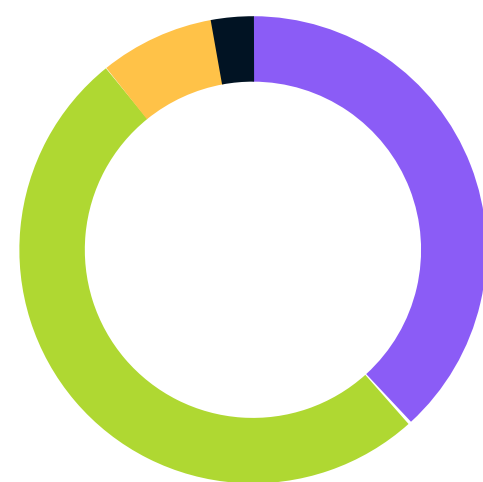
Do not plan to use freight forwarders at all

The Push for Integrated Supply Chains

89% of SMBs say integrated supply chain solutions are critical, yet **only 3%** plan to invest in digital freight forwarder integration this year



A surprising outcome the survey revealed, is the overwhelming demand for integrated supply chain solutions, with 89% of SMBs saying integration across shipping, sourcing, and inventory management is critical to their operations:



- **38.2%** say it is extremely critical and they require full integration
- **50.8%** say it is somewhat critical, and believe integration would improve operations
- **Only 8%** say integration is not critical
- **3%** are unsure

These numbers were surprising, and not because we don't believe in integration, but because earlier results showed that only 3% of surveyed companies expressed interest in investing in digital freight forwarding integrations. The gap between this near-universal aspiration for integration and the reality of how most SMBs actually run their logistics operations today is one of the most significant opportunities the space has to grow.

When shipping, sourcing, and inventory management live in separate tools, every handoff and every additional vendor adds risk. If a shipment delay doesn't automatically trigger an inventory alert, or a tariff change needs to be manually updated across multiple systems, the cost goes straight to the bottom line. The result is exactly what this survey found: limited visibility and reactive decision-making will erode customer relationships and stall business growth if not addressed in time.

Among its other many benefits, connected systems give SMBs the ability to see disruptions forming and take the necessary steps before consequences hit. 89% of SMBs accept they need this. Only 3% are actively investing in the tools that deliver it.

5 Takeaways:

Takeaway 1:

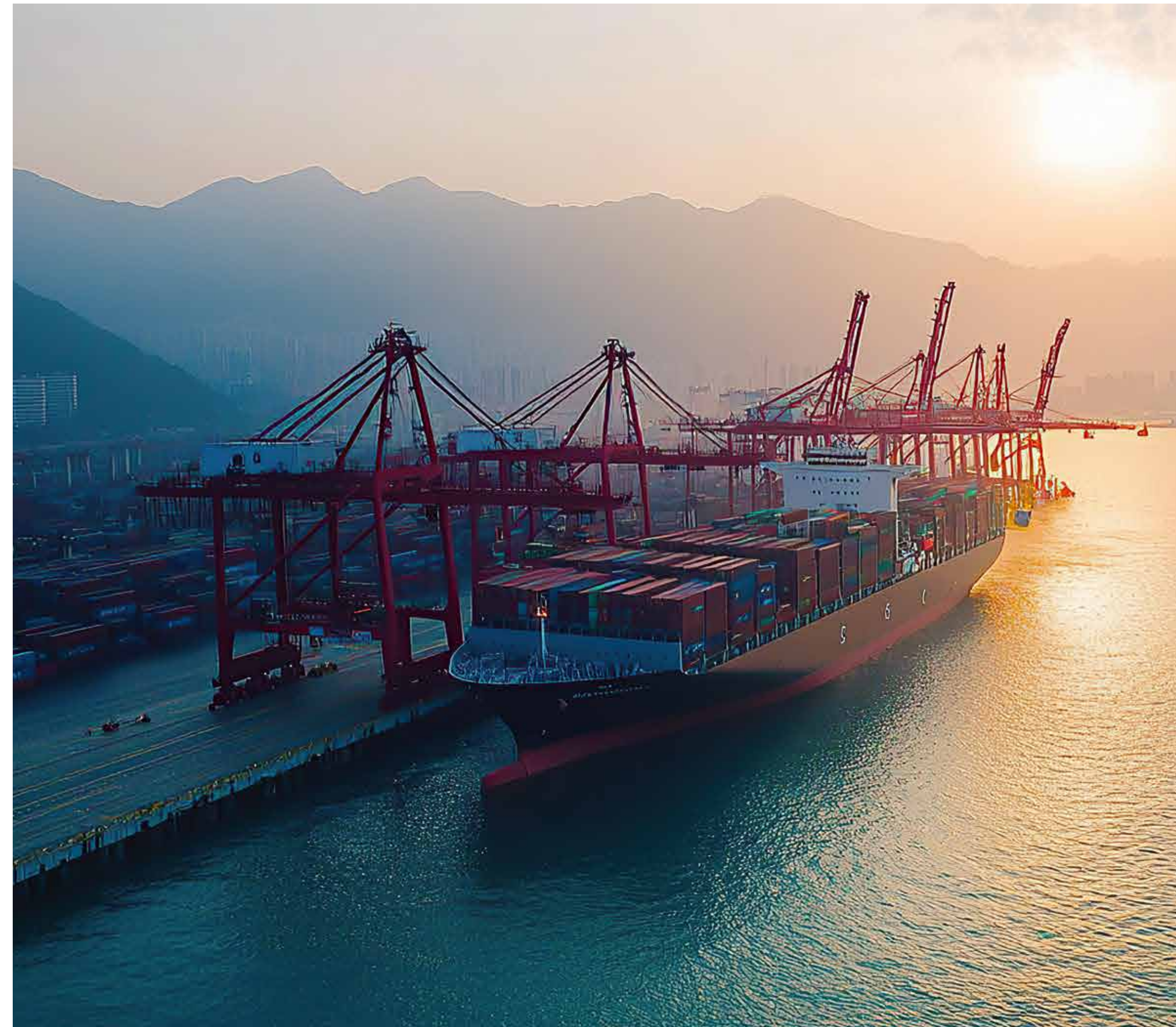
Tariffs have reshaped the SMB supply chain landscape, and not just financially.

Tariffs were the top disruptor in 2025 and remain the top concern for 2026. But the impact goes beyond cost. Tariffs are fundamentally changing how SMBs think about their margins, how they plan inventory, where they source products, and how they build relationships with suppliers and customers. Three-quarters of SMBs expect meaningful tariff impact this year, and the ripple effects are actively reshaping an industry that operated on a very different set of assumptions just a few years ago.

Takeaway 2:

There is a dangerous confidence gap.

While most of the SMBs surveyed state feeling prepared for disruption, the data suggests otherwise. Untested crisis protocols, limited visibility, and low adaptability confidence stats paint a picture of businesses that may be overestimating their resilience. While it's never possible to be fully prepared for what you don't know, some areas should already be stress-tested, and it's critical to invest in visibility tools that let you see problems coming instead of reacting after they arrive.



5 Takeaways:

Takeaway 3:

Reactive strategies still dominate.

Stockpiling inventory remains the #1 response to disruption. This more expensive, capital-intensive approach doesn't scale well. And though technology adoption is growing, it hasn't yet displaced the instinct (and panic-response) to stock up rather than shift to a well-thought-out 'Plan B'. SMBs that redirect investment from warehouse space to smarter forecasting and real-time tracking tools will be better positioned to respond to disruptions without tying up the cash flow they need to grow.

Takeaway 4:

AI is underleveraged by SMBs.

Over 90% of SMBs use AI in logistics, but most are using it for visibility and alerts rather than the higher-value applications such as, forecasting, optimization, risk management, where the greatest ROI lies. The opportunity here isn't to adopt AI, most businesses already have to some extent, but to move beyond basic applications and start to use the technology to make business-changing decisions, not just monitor day-to-day operations.

Takeaway 5:

The demand for integrated, digital solutions is clear, but investment isn't following.

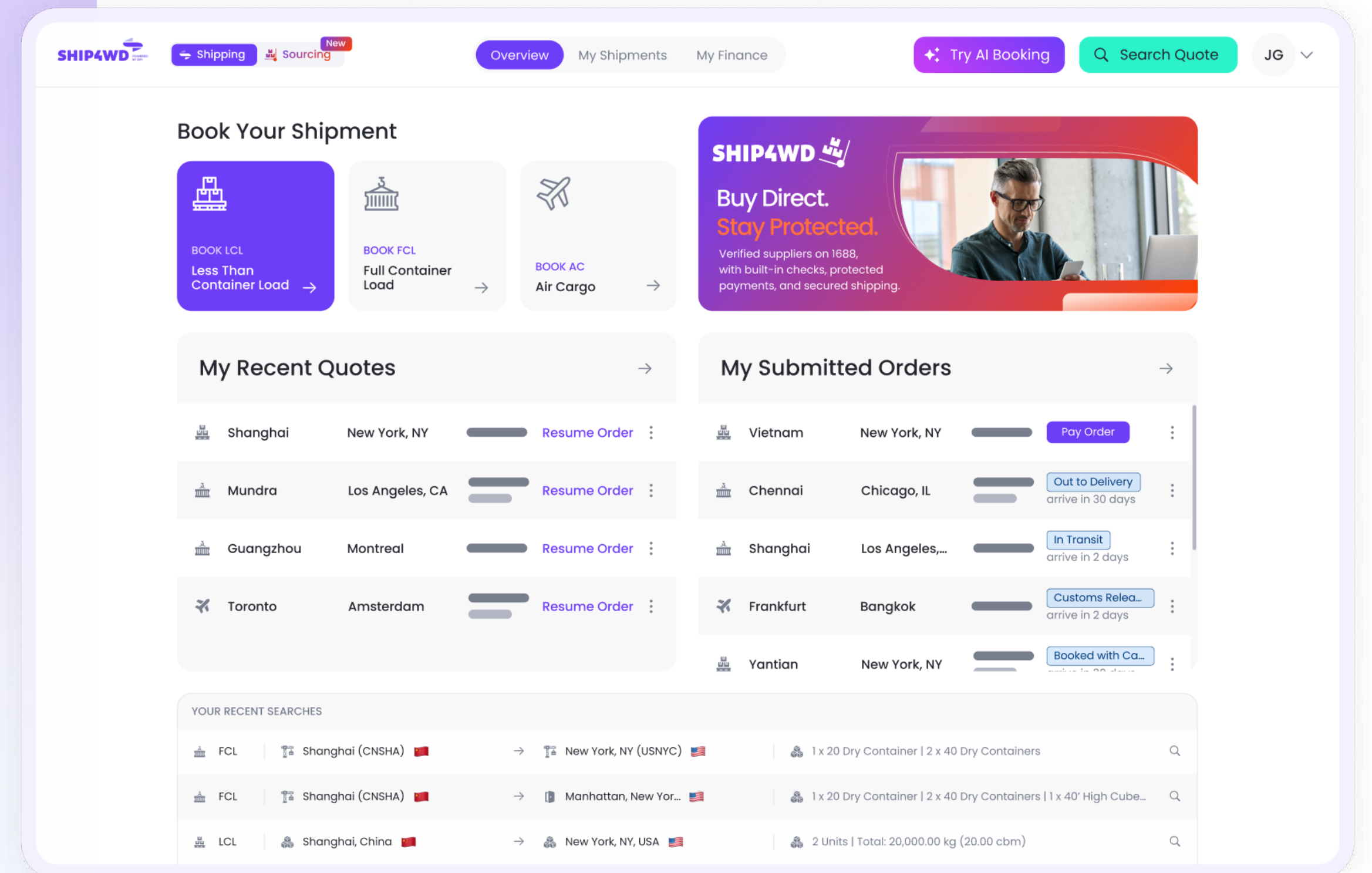
Most SMBs still rely on traditional forwarders and disconnected systems, even as they cite limited visibility and reactive decision-making as their biggest operational challenges. The action to transform their supply chain efficiency and resiliend is lagging behind. The data makes it clear, 89% of SMBs say they need integrated supply chain tools, yet only 3% are actively investing in digital freight forwarding integration.

2026: The Year to Take Back Control of Your Supply Chain

This survey made one thing clear: SMBs know what they need, visibility, integrated systems, and the ability to act before disruptions reach their customers. What most don't have is a partner built to deliver all of it in one place.

That's why we built Ship4wd. To give small and mid-sized businesses the tools, visibility, and leverage to compete at any scale – so logistics becomes the part of their business that works, not the part that keeps them up at night. We built it for the business owner who wants to grow without having to become a freight expert first.

From sourcing and shipping to customs and delivery, we bring the entire supply chain into a single platform, so small businesses can stop managing five tools and three vendors just to move a container. With 24/7 expert support, instant, transparent pricing, and an end-to-end experience designed specifically for SMBs, Ship4wd exists so you can get back to the part of your business that you love.



Register for free and get instant shipping quotes at

ship4wd.com

About Ship4wd

Ship4wd is a digital freight forwarder and B2B sourcing e-commerce marketplace, supporting small and mid-sized businesses with a simplified and streamlined shipping experience. Backed by the ZIM Group, a top 10 global carrier with 80 years of shipping expertise, Ship4wd merges the proven reliability of an industry leader with a seamless online platform that puts SMBs in control of their international shipping. Through its all-in-one platform, Ship4wd's SMB clients can quote, book, and track air and ocean freight shipments in minutes. With 24/7 live expert support, guaranteed shipment visibility, and flexible payment options, Ship4wd helps SMBs source and move goods faster, smarter, and with complete confidence.

