SUPPLY CHAIN & OPERATIONS

Roundtable Summary

In partnership with Chameleon International & Fero · 2 July 2026 · Part of the RTG Insight to Impact Series

Feeding into the Equity Exchange · All contributions anonymised

This document captures the key themes, insights and provocations from the RTG Supply Chain & Operations roundtable. All contributions are anonymised and attributed to the session, not individuals or brands. The session was hosted in partnership with Chameleon International and Fero, and brought together senior operators, founders, recruiters and advisors from across the drinks industry.

> *"Someone's sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago."* Warren Buffett, 1991

1. AI, Talent & the Changing Shape of the Job

Participants were candid about how fast operational roles have changed in the past eighteen months, and how unevenly the industry has responded to that change so far.

> **Supply Chain Resilience** (Sheffi & Rice, 2005)
>
> *In their MIT Sloan Management Review research, Sheffi and Rice argue that a company's ability to weather major disruption depends less on how it reacts in the moment than on the flexibility and redundancy it has already built into its supply chain beforehand.*
>
> This represents a shift the roundtable's own experience bore out again and again: the businesses least rattled by this year's shocks were consistently the ones who had already done the unglamorous groundwork, well before disruption hit.

The roundtable's own experience over the past twelve months bore this out repeatedly, in ways the group unpacked in detail.

- AI adoption has moved from optional to expected within job specs in roughly eighteen months, with a marked shift away from Excel literacy towards data science and Python skills.
- Several businesses flagged a genuine skills-succession risk: bringing in a single specialist fluent in tools the rest of the team can't use creates a dangerous single point of failure when that person is out of the business.
- There was strong agreement that AI can accelerate repeatable tasks, but only when it is embedded consistently into a workflow. Applied patchily, its output becomes unreliable and hard to trust.

- The clearest warning from the room was that junior team members who lean on AI without understanding the underlying process risk are losing the critical thinking the role actually depends on.

> *"You don't need someone who can code. You need someone who's a very sharp, critical thinker and problem-solver who can leverage the tools."*

The Human Layer AI Can't Replace

Multiple participants stressed the enduring value of picking up the phone and visiting a manufacturer's warehouse in person, arguing too many teams have never actually seen how their own product is made or stored.

- The group agreed AI works best as a genuine plus-one to human judgement and relationships, not a replacement for either.
- Relationships built in person were repeatedly described as what actually gets a supplier to prioritise you when something goes wrong, not a relationship that exists on paper alone.
- Warehouse visits were credited with revealing how manual many processes still are, and where the real risk sits if a system or a key person is suddenly unavailable.

> *"The producers who don't have a proper process, you can't fix that with a dashboard. You fix it by turning up."*

2. Regulation, Cost & the SME Squeeze

Deposit Return Scheme changes, Extended Producer Responsibility and packaging regulation dominated a large part of the conversation, and the group was frank about how unevenly that burden falls.

The SME Regulatory Tax

For SMEs, new regulation routinely lands as an unplanned, unfunded project bolted onto someone's existing day job. Larger businesses absorb the same change more easily, because the infrastructure to handle it already exists.

- Trade bodies were highlighted as a genuinely underused resource. Most smaller businesses don't realise how much support already exists, or how well placed trade bodies are to represent them collectively on emerging legislation.
- Raw material shortages and shipping delays have been a near-constant firefight this year, with suppliers routinely unable to give reliable timelines, compounding the planning burden on smaller teams.

> *"The government needs to support SMEs. EPR took a lot of resource out of a small team just to track packaging."*

Resilience Is Built Before the Shock Arrives

- Businesses that had already standardised and digitised their processes absorbed sudden shocks, like tariff changes, more easily.
- For less-prepared businesses, the same shocks were described as business critical, often landing with short notice.
- The group's shared conclusion was that resilience isn't dramatic. It's the boring admin done properly, months before you actually need it.

> *"When Brexit hit, what hurt most was the areas where small companies had no standardised processes in place beforehand."*

3. Talent, Progression & the Middle-Management Gap

The group returned repeatedly to how retention and progression actually work in operations roles, and where the traditional model is breaking down.

- There was discussion around building depth through projects, secondments and international moves rather than assuming growth only comes from a new title.
- That approach was linked directly to unusually high retention, with people rarely leaving because there is always a next stretch of the role still to grow into.
- A shortage of experienced middle-management talent was raised as a specific, structural gap that the industry needs to work to solve.
- It's currently a genuinely tight, client-led talent market, having swung hard from the candidate-led market of a couple of years ago; the group agreed neither extreme is healthy for long-term retention.

> *"Accidental managers are being created. You're functionally brilliant at your job and get promoted. You finish on Friday, and you're a manager on Monday, and none of the training that made you functionally brilliant prepared you for leadership."*

Accidental Management

- Several participants noted that people are routinely promoted for excelling at the function itself, then given little or no training in how to lead the people now reporting to them.
- The group agreed this gap in people-management training, not a lack of technical skill, is what actually holds many good operators back from becoming good leaders.

4. Flexibility, Culture & Who Gets Left Out

A genuinely split conversation about flexible working closed out the discussion, one of the more contested topics of the whole session.

- Some participants strongly valued in-person, spontaneous collaboration, arguing operational knowledge is often passed through corridor conversations that remote teams simply miss.
- Others pointed out that flexibility, including shift patterns built around the school run, is what keeps experienced parents and other carers in the industry at all, not just a preference for younger staff.
- The group agreed flexibility is now a genuine retention lever at every career stage, not a perk reserved for younger colleagues.
- Several businesses said they now deliberately avoid early-morning meetings, recognising who that quietly excludes from full participation.

> *"It's easier now, post-COVID, because people understand what it's doing to your shift patterns when you can't be flexible."*

5. Connection, Resilience & What the Room Would Change

The session closed with a broader, more reflective provocation: what has genuinely made operations more resilient over the past two years, and what would the room change if they could pull one lever industry-wide?

What made the biggest difference, in hindsight:

- Businesses that digitised and standardised processes early absorbed shocks, like tariff changes and duty structure changes.
- Several participants described organising teams around capability rather than rigid hierarchy, made easier by faster, AI-supported communication.
- Investing properly in training managers, not just promoting the best technical performer, was repeatedly linked to stronger retention.
- Deliberately building in-person rituals was credited with genuinely rebuilding team culture.
- Visiting suppliers and manufacturers in person surfaced risks and relationships that no dashboard would ever have shown.
- Leaning on trade bodies earlier, rather than treating every regulatory change as a bespoke problem, saved real time and stress.
- Being honest with teams about uncertainty, rather than promising stability that couldn't be guaranteed, was seen as better for morale than false reassurance.

What the drinks industry needs to change:

- Give trade bodies a bigger, better-known role in supporting SMEs through regulatory change, rather than leaving each business to solve it alone.
- Build genuine, structured progression paths within operations roles, rather than only sideways moves into other functions.
- Invest properly in training people to manage, not just promoting the best individual performer.
- Take flexibility seriously as a retention strategy for experienced talent, not only as a junior-staff perk.

> *"Resilience isn't dramatic. It's the boring admin nobody wanted to do, finished six months before you needed it."*

Key Takeaways for the Equity Exchange

- ◆ AI adoption has moved fast, but the biggest risk is lost critical thinking, not lost jobs — it works best embedded quietly in a consistent process.
- ◆ Regulatory change is a disproportionate tax on SMEs; trade bodies are a genuinely underused resource that could close much of that gap.
- ◆ Retention doesn't require a ladder. Depth through projects, secondments and cross-functional moves can outperform title-chasing on loyalty.
- ◆ A shortage of experienced middle management is a structural gap the industry hasn't addressed, compounded by ‘accidental management’ with little leadership training.
- ◆ Flexibility is now a retention lever at every career stage, not a junior-staff perk, and views on it remain genuinely, healthily split.
- ◆ Resilience is built long before disruption hits. The businesses least shaken by this year's shocks were the ones who had already done the unglamorous groundwork.

This is the second in an ongoing series of RTG roundtables, following Category, Strategy & Insight in April 2026.

Future sessions will cover marketing and more.

To get involved or share a reflection for the Equity Exchange: **hello@raisingtheglass.co.uk**