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AI primed to offer ocean carriers many and varied ways to cut expenses

The founder of a company building AI agents to automate core operational workflows at supply chain companies says up to 70% of ocean carrier customer service volume could be automated within the next two years. Photo credit: Thomas Stoiber / Shutterstock.com.

Peter Tirschwell, Vice President | Feb 2, 2026, 11:58 AM EST

Freight transportation companies, including ocean carriers, closely scrutinize the cost structure of their competitors. The reason is existential: In highly competitive and quasi-commodity markets, companies with lower costs can undercut the competition, walking away with customers, revenues and market share.

With artificial intelligence (AI) entering the picture, offering the potential for mass-automation of human tasks, an ever-present focus on cost is set to be hyper-charged. The race is on to leverage AI to lower costs as quickly and aggressively as possible, with one forwarder telling the *Journal of Commerce* the urgency is more a matter of remaining competitive — and ultimately remaining in business — than improving profitability.

Journal of Commerce Analysis

"One issue that stands out is the opportunity to use AI to cut costs ... the supply chain sector is ripe for major cost savings," Benjamin Gordon, managing partner of Cambridge Capital, wrote in late January following his annual BGSA Supply Chain Conference.

Among ocean container carriers, blocks of cost were taken out over decades through a series of mergers and acquisitions that took the market share of the top 10 carriers from about 50% in the mid-1990s to nearly 85% today, according to Alphaliner.

But with few further opportunities for large-scale consolidation and freight rates under growing pressure from slowing volumes and the largest-ever order book, carriers will need to look elsewhere. It won't be long before AI offers up ready solutions.

The reason, some way, is that big new pockets of cost are able to be removed by automating a range of core carrier processes including customer service, dispute resolution, scrutiny of vendor invoices, and the order-to-cash cycle.

Customer service inquires primed for automation

Customer service is a prime target. Customer inquiries regarding vessel ETA, last free day, extension on free time, whether a bill of lading (BoL) has been sent or if a draft BoL can be sent, all are standardized processes ripe for automation, said Siddharth Vijay, founder of New York-based Lynk Labs, which is building AI agents to automate core operational workflows at supply chain companies.

Vijay estimates that 40% of ocean carrier customer service volume can be automated, with humans left to focus on exceptions. "I estimate this number can get up to 70% in the next two years," he told the *Journal of Commerce*.

Assuming a $30,000 fully loaded headcount cost per customer service representative, if a carrier has 2,000 staff, the savings would be about $24 million per year. If the staff count is 5,000, the savings could reach $60 million per year, Vijay estimated. Those numbers are too big to be ignored.

"This only accounts for the headcount savings," he said. "The other large value proposition is improving customer relationships with timely, rapid answers," a key KPI for customer service teams.

It is unlikely that ocean carriers, even though they tend to be conservative organizations, will not soon begin exploring such opportunities given the competitive implications.

In the area of dispute resolution, to handle thousands of billing and service disputes, ocean carriers employ small armies to research history, exceptions and documentation required to resolve the dispute. Vijay said AI can make the process vastly more efficient by identifying root causes of disputes to enable carriers to proactively fix systemic issues, summarizing disputes and suggesting resolutions to improve handling time per dispute and reducing the number of disputes.

AI and carrier decision-making a 'very viable' pairing

For ocean carriers, there may be an even bigger prize from large-scale integration of AI. Could AI one day soon drive core carrier decision-making regarding when to accept or reject bookings, where to position empty containers, what ports to call, when to blank sailings, and where to deploy ships, all rolled up into running the business to maximize profit?

Such a scenario is "very viable," Vijay said.

"I don't think it is far-fetched at all," he said. "At its core, this is what we call a constrained optimization problem. Given vessels, capacity, rates, port constraints, and customer commitments, etc., what is the profit-maximizing network?"

"The hardest part isn't the AI algorithm itself; it's aggregating clean, operational data across the carrier and having enough representative historical examples to 'train' and validate the system," Vijay added. "In other words, it's fundamentally a data availability problem."

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