Will your freight payment provider hold up in a volatile market?

What C-suite leaders and logistics professionals should require from a freight audit and payment partner

If you lead finance, treasury, logistics, or transportation, freight payment can no longer be treated as a routine back-office function. In 2026, it sits directly at the intersection of fuel volatility, tariff pressure, capacity shifts, working-capital management, and carrier stability.

As of the last week of May 2026, the national average on-highway diesel price was up $1.31 per gallon (34%) since the beginning of March, and up $1.48 (40%) versus a year ago. At the same time, both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) warned in April that geopolitical tensions inflationary pressure, and trade costs are expected to weigh on global growth and trade in 2026.

That means the core question has changed. It is no longer enough to ask whether a provider can process invoices efficiently. You need to know whether your provider can help you defend freight spend, preserve liquidity, keep carriers paid predictably, and maintain clean, traceable data when the market becomes less predictable.

This paper examines what market volatility now requires from a freight audit and payment partner and why a stronger model is increasingly defined by five capabilities: defensible data, working-capital flexibility, operational resilience, shipper-carrier neutrality and hands-on expertise.

Why freight payment resilience matters more now

The operating environment for shippers has become materially more complex. According to a Thomson Reuters February 2026 report, 72% of trade professionals identified U.S. tariff volatility as the most impactful regulatory change they faced, while 68% said supply chain management had become a dominant strategic priority. Similarly, McKinsey found that nine in ten supply chain leaders encountered challenges in 2024, and only a quarter said their organizations had formal processes in place to discuss supply chain issues at the board level. In practical terms, that means cost pressure and disruption are increasingly enterprise issues, not just freight transportation issues.

Energy and trade disruptions are reinforcing that pressure. Reuters reported in March 2026 that the Strait of Hormuz crisis affected a route that normally carries around one-fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas supply, creating one of the most serious energy disruptions in recent memory. UNCTAD has since said that global trade growth is expected to slow in 2026 because of geopolitical uncertainty, inflationary pressure, and higher trade costs, while the IMF's April 2026 World Economic Outlook projects global growth at 3.1% in 2026, assuming the conflict remains limited in scope and duration. If you are responsible for freight spending, that combination matters because it raises both the cost of moving goods and the cost of getting the decision wrong.

Freight market data also shows that transportation costs are not moving in lockstep with volume. A recent U.S. Bank Freight Payment Index news release reported that in Q4 2025, national freight shipments rose only 1.5% quarter over quarter, while shipper spending increased 4.6%. On a

About U.S. Bank Freight Payment

For more than 25 years, U.S. Bank Freight Payment has been a trusted steward between shippers and carriers—protecting capital flow, payment accuracy, data integrity and relationships with bank grade standards. We audit invoices line by line, pay securely and on time, and deliver clean, decision grade reporting, with $46 billion in freight payments processed annually. We keep innovating—advancing automation, analytics and workflows that turn freight spend into action. Our experts lean in to resolve issues and optimize working capital—reducing friction, extending terms and moving supply chains forward with clarity, confidence and certainty.

year-over-year basis, shipments were still down 4.9%, yet spending was up 5.2%, indicating that shippers are paying more to move only slightly more freight in a tightening-capacity environment. If your freight payment provider cannot help you understand those shifts clearly and defensibly, your reporting may lag the business reality you are trying to manage.

What this means for you

If you sit in the C-suite, especially in finance or treasury, your standard for freight payment should be higher than 'the invoices get paid.' You need a system that creates an audit-ready record of spend, validates charges consistently, and gives you confidence that the numbers will stand up in internal reviews, month-end close, and board-level conversations. If you lead logistics or transportation, your priorities are different, but closely related. You need clear invoice-to-payment detail, fewer low-value exceptions, stable integration into ERP and TMS workflows, and reporting that helps you act on lanes, carriers and disputes rather than simply describe them.

In both cases, the underlying requirement is the same: you need a provider that helps you operate with more certainty when volatility increases. That is especially important because Deloitte has argued that supply chains are now being asked to balance resilience and efficiency simultaneously, while its working-capital research shows that companies are leaning more heavily on agile cash-flow management and stronger supplier partnerships as a source of competitive advantage. Freight audit and payment now plays into both of those objectives.

What you should require from a freight payment provider

A. Defensible data, not just reporting

A dashboard can summarize freight spend, but it does not automatically make your numbers defensible. If invoice data enters reporting without consistent validation, every downstream metric becomes harder to trust.

A stronger freight payment model addresses this by validating invoices before they become analytics and by keeping a traceable record from invoice receipt through audit, exception handling, payment, and reporting. In today's market, a freight payment solution that provides 100% pre-payment audit is a must to ensure that real-time data being fed into your TMS and ERP is accurate, so you can make strategic decisions at the speed of the market changes.

The World Economic Forum reports that **74%** of business leaders now view supply chain resilience as a primary driver of growth, not just a cost of doing business.

B. Working-capital flexibility, without weakening carrier confidence

When markets get volatile, preserving cash matters. But extending terms in a way that creates carrier friction can introduce a new form of risk into the network.

A more flexible approach gives you the ability to improve working capital while keeping carriers paid on a predictable rhythm. A freight payment solution, like the one from U.S. Bank, can help shippers extend payment terms without renegotiating carrier contracts, while also allowing carriers to be paid upon invoice approval while the shipper pays to terms. Deloitte's working-capital analysis supports the importance of these types of financing strategies in volatile environments as a more central lever for liquidity and resilience.

C. Operational resilience, under real-world volume and complexity

Many providers look capable in a stable environment. Fewer can absorb complexity when volume changes, capacity tightens or disputes spike.

A robust provider must be able to handle multiple modes, large carrier networks, and integrated data flows without compromising payment timing or reporting quality. U.S. Bank Freight Payment processed more than $46 billion in freight payments in 2025 for hundreds of customers and nearly 20,000 carrier payees across more than 200 countries and 100 currencies, with more than 99% of payments handled electronically. Scale alone is not the whole answer, but it is a relevant signal when you are evaluating whether a provider can hold up during disruption.

D. Neutral ground, between shippers and carriers

When freight costs rise and payment timing becomes more sensitive, disputes tend to become more expensive. A provider that acts as neutral ground can reduce that friction by giving both parties shared visibility into invoice status, payment timing and exception resolution.

Simply returning inaccurate invoices, or short payment is not a strategy to keep reliable carriers. A freight audit and payment solution should provide collaborative online tools that allow shippers and carriers to view invoice status, resolve exceptions more quickly and reduce rework. This kind of neutrality is especially important if you want your provider to reduce operational friction, rather than force your team to mediate it manually.

E. Human expertise, not technology alone

A common weakness in the market is the over-reliance on software without enough knowledgeable support behind it, or someone that answers the phone when you call. When markets fluctuate, you need someone who understands your business to provide expert guidance, consultative support and top-notch customer service to help you solve problems, not just route tickets.

Why a bank-backed freight payment model stands out

A bank-backed freight payment model brings together capabilities that are often fragmented in the broader market. Instead of combining audit, payment, financing, carrier collaboration and analytics through disconnected layers, it can put those capabilities into one control structure with stronger governance around money movement, compliance, and data integrity.

U.S. Bank Freight Payment offers AML (Anti-Money Laundering), OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control), SOC (System and Organizational Controls), and SOX (Sarbanes-Oxley Act) compliance integrations, along with automation, working-capital support, analytics, and collaboration tools. That combination matters because freight payment is not simply an invoice workflow; it is part of how you control cash, risk and decision quality across your supply chain.

That distinction becomes even more important when you are asked to explain results, not just report them. U.S. Bank Freight Payment is built on pre-payment audit, invoice-level visibility, and operational workflows designed to reduce exceptions before they distort downstream reporting. In a volatile market, that is not just a nice-to-have, it's what allows you to walk into close, review or renewal with a freight story you can defend.

What you should require from a freight payment provider:

- Defensible **data**, not just reporting
- Working-capital **flexibility**, without weakening carrier confidence
- Operational **resilience**, under real-world volume and complexity
- **Neutral** ground, between shippers and carriers
- Human **expertise**, not technology alone

Conclusion

If you are evaluating whether your freight audit and payment provider will hold up in a volatile market, the right test is not whether it works when conditions are easy. The right test is whether it gives you trusted data, protects cash flow, supports carrier stability, and helps you act with confidence when fuel costs rise, trade policy shifts and capacity tightens.

As was detailed in the initial paragraphs, current market conditions suggest that volatility is not a temporary interruption. It is a structural feature of the operating environment you are now expected to manage. That is why freight payment should now be evaluated as a resilience capability, not just a processing function.

Providers built primarily around software, partial controls, or limited service may be adequate when markets are stable. But if you need a partner that can help you defend freight spend, protect working capital, reduce exception noise, and support stronger shipper-carrier alignment, the more effective structure is one built on validated data, predictable payment execution and accountable human support. That is the standard a solution such as U.S. Bank Freight Payment is designed to meet.

Learn how U.S. Bank Freight Payment can drive certainty across your supply chain.

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