

GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN LOGISTICS INC.

CORE GUIDE SERIES

The SMB Guide to Choosing a Freight Forwarder and 3PL/4PL Partner

How to Evaluate, Select, and Onboard a Logistics Partner · 2026 Edition

A plain-language guide for businesses selecting their first logistics partner or replacing one that is not working.

Mississauga, Ontario · globalscl.ca · 2026 Edition

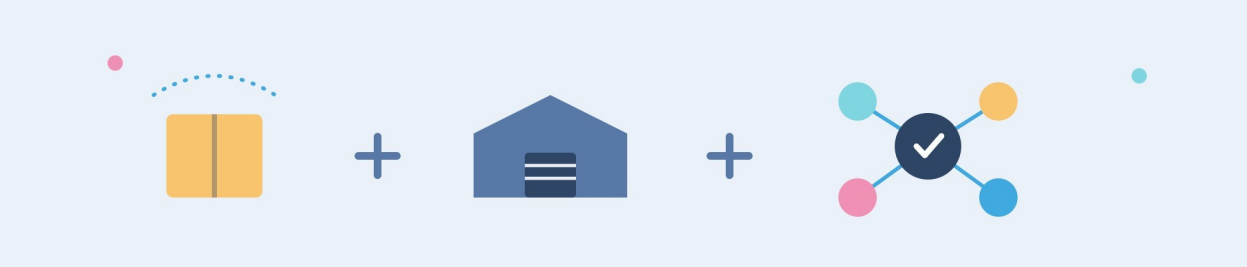
Executive summary

This guide is for small and mid-sized businesses choosing a logistics partner for the first time, and for businesses whose current arrangement is costing them time and money. It explains what the different types of provider actually do and how to compare them on the factors that matter. It also covers how to switch without disrupting shipments.

Four things to take away before you read further:

> A freight forwarder, a 3PL, and a 4PL are different levels of service. Match the level to your problem, not to the label a provider uses in its marketing.
>
> Evaluate on corridor and commodity fit before price. A cheap rate on a lane a provider does not know is expensive.
>
> A complete quote states what is excluded. If you cannot see the exclusions, you cannot compare the quotes.
>
> Switching providers is a project. A 90-day transition plan keeps shipments moving while accountability changes hands.

Part 1: What each type of partner actually does



Freight forwarder

A freight forwarder arranges the transport of your goods and coordinates the steps in between: booking carriers, preparing and checking documents, and managing customs clearance. The forwarder does not usually own the ships or aircraft. Its value lies in buying power and corridor knowledge. For a business making its first international shipments, a forwarder is normally the right starting point.

Third-party logistics provider (3PL)

A 3PL adds physical services on top of transport: warehousing, distribution, order fulfilment, and related handling such as temperature-controlled storage. You need a 3PL when your goods have to live somewhere between arrival and sale, or when fulfilment volume outgrows what you can run yourself.

Fourth-party logistics provider (4PL)

A 4PL manages a wider network on your behalf. It coordinates multiple carriers, warehouses, and service providers and acts as a single point of accountability for the whole chain. This model fits businesses with enough volume and complexity that managing providers has itself become a job.

What no partner can take off your hands

Under Canada's CARM system, you are the importer of record. Since January 1, 2026, a broker's business number can no longer be used to clear your goods, and your CARM Client Portal account, registration, and financial security are yours to hold. A partner operates with delegated access to your account. Any provider who promises to make your legal obligations disappear is describing something that does not exist, and that promise is a warning sign, not a benefit.

Part 2: How to evaluate a partner



The criteria that matter

- **Corridor experience.** Ask for evidence of regular shipments on your actual trade lane, in both directions if you import and export. A provider strong on transpacific ocean may be untested on your Europe airfreight.
- **Commodity fit.** Food, textiles, machinery, and e-commerce parcels each carry different rules and handling. If your product needs temperature control or CFIA compliance, the provider must show it does this work today, not that it could.
- **Customs capability under CARM.** The provider should explain, unprompted, how it works within your CARM account with you as importer of record, and what data checks it runs before filing a declaration.
- **Warehousing footprint.** If storage or fulfilment is part of the need, visit the facility. Location relative to your customers, and to the port or airport, drives your final-mile cost.
- **Visibility and communication.** Ask how you will know where a shipment is, who your named contact is, and how fast problems are escalated. Test it: send a question during the sales process and time the answer.
- **References.** Ask for two customers of a similar size on a similar lane, and call them. Ask what went wrong in the last year and how it was handled. Every provider has problems. The good ones can describe theirs.
- **Pricing transparency.** A complete quote makes clear what is covered across transport, customs handling, duties and taxes, warehousing, and final delivery, and states what is not included.

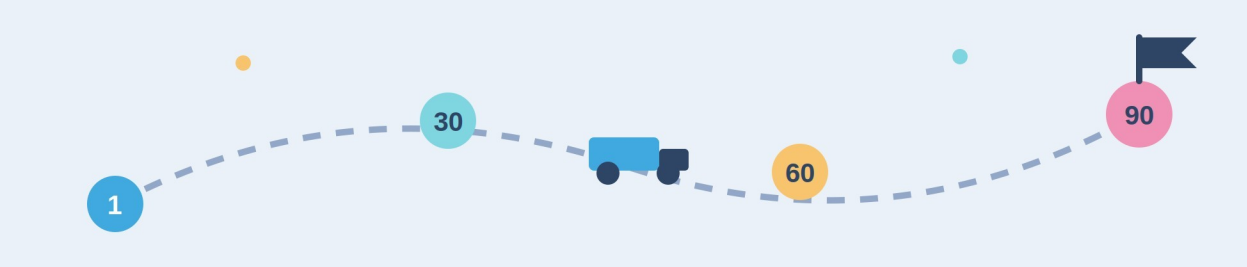
Questions worth asking every candidate

1. Which of your current clients ship my commodity on my lane, and at what volume?
2. Walk me through your process from booking to delivery for a typical shipment like mine. Where do delays usually happen?
3. How do you work within a client's CARM account? What do you check before filing?
4. What is excluded from this quote? What surcharges applied to clients like me in the past year?
5. Who is my named contact, what are their hours, and who covers when they are away?
6. If a shipment goes wrong, what happens in the first hour?

Red flags

- A quote with a single number and no breakdown.
- No named contact, or a different person answering every message.
- No references on your lane or commodity.
- A promise to “handle everything” including obligations that legally remain yours.
- Pressure to sign before you have seen the standard terms, liability limits, and insurance position.

Part 3: Making the switch, and the first 90 days



Days 1 to 30: set up

Grant the new partner delegated access to your CARM account and any government portals your goods require. Hand over the operational data that makes shipments predictable: product specifications, HS classifications, packaging details, supplier contacts, and delivery requirements. Agree the standard operating procedure in writing, including who books, who files, who is notified, and when. Keep your existing arrangement running. Nothing cuts over yet.

Days 30 to 60: run in parallel

Route the first live shipments through the new partner while the old arrangement handles the rest. Start with a shipment that is representative but not critical. Review each one against the promises made during evaluation: clearance time, communication, invoice accuracy against the quote. Fix process gaps now, while volume is low.

Days 60 to 90: cut over and review

Move remaining volume across, close out the previous arrangement cleanly, and hold a 90-day review. Compare on-time performance, customs clearance time, invoice accuracy, and how issues were handled against the baseline you had before. Set the review cadence for the relationship going forward. A quarterly performance conversation with data on the table is what separates a managed partnership from a drifting one.

What to measure from day one

- **On-time delivery** against the promised transit time, by lane.
- **Customs clearance time** and the count of declarations rejected or corrected.
- **Invoice accuracy** against the quote, including surcharges.
- **Issue response time** from first report to resolution plan.

How GSCL fits

GSCL is a freight forwarding and 3PL/4PL company based in Mississauga, Ontario, serving the Greater Toronto Area. We operate across the levels described in this guide: freight forwarding by sea, air, and cross-border Canada-US road, customs coordination under CARM with you as importer of record, warehousing and distribution including temperature-controlled handling, and

project and e-commerce logistics. One partner, accountable end to end, measured against the criteria in Part 2.

We are also comfortable being evaluated. Ask us the six questions above. Ask for the references. The evaluation process in this guide is the one we believe a good provider should welcome.

Your next step

Choosing a logistics partner is a decision you will live with on every shipment. Take the criteria and the questions in this guide into every conversation, including one with us. If you are selecting your first partner or replacing one, talk to our team. We will walk through your lanes and commodities, and show you exactly how we would run them.

Global Supply Chain Logistics Inc. · globalscl.ca · Mississauga, Ontario

Sources

Factual claims about Canadian customs obligations draw on government sources. Links are provided so every claim can be checked against the original. Sources accessed September 2026.

1. Canada Border Services Agency, “Get started with CARM” (importer registration, delegated access for brokers and forwarders). https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/services/carm-gcra/start-passer-eng.html
2. Canada Border Services Agency, Customs Notice 25-32, “End of CARM Transition Measures and Coming Into Force of Importer of Record Changes to the Customs Act” (broker business number can no longer clear goods on an importer's behalf). https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/publications/cn-ad/cn25-32-eng.html
3. Canada Border Services Agency, Customs Notice 24-27, “CARM October Implementation: Transition Measures” (financial security and release prior to payment background). https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/publications/cn-ad/cn24-27-eng.html
4. Canada Border Services Agency, “Step-by-Step Guide to Importing Commercial Goods into Canada.” https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/import/guide-eng.html
5. Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Automated Import Reference System (AIRS), for the commodity-specific requirements referenced in the evaluation criteria. https://inspection.canada.ca/en/importing-food-plants-animals/airs

This guide is general information, not legal or customs advice. Confirm requirements for your goods with CBSA or your logistics partner before shipping.