Call-off: scheduling to the rhythm of production

A call-off is the call-based release of a delivery that has already been contractually agreed under a framework agreement or contract. It is used in series production and just-in-time environments to trigger material requirements from the supplier at short notice and in line with demand. For buyers, the call-off is the central operational control instrument between strategic procurement and ongoing production.

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Key facts at a glance

01 The call-off triggers a concrete part-delivery from a framework agreement without concluding a new purchase contract.

02 Typical components are call-off quantity, delivery date, call-off number and reference to the framework agreement.

03 In automotive and mechanical engineering supply chains, call-offs are frequently handled via EDI or a supplier portal.

04 Unlike an urgent purchase order, the call-off usually follows a fixed scheduling rhythm and defined lead times.

05 Firm and quantity-variable call-offs as well as non-firm call-offs (call-offs subject to reservation) are common variants.

06 Clear rules on acceptance periods, over-delivery and short-term call-offs prevent disputes in performance records and over delivery delays.

Definition: call-off

A call-off is the binding request to a supplier to deliver a specific quantity of material that has already been contracted by a defined date. It generally requires a framework agreement or framework order in which prices, conditions and framework terms have already been agreed. Legally, the call-off is interpreted either as a binding purchase order or as a unilateral option of the buyer, depending on the contractual situation.

Distinction from the purchase order

Whereas the classic purchase order is itself a contract element and usually leads directly to the conclusion of the contract, the call-off is merely the exercise of an already existing contract. The key difference lies in lead time: purchase orders often require a quotation and negotiation process, while call-offs draw on agreed conditions and can be placed within defined lead times. In practice, this means significantly reduced transaction effort for buyers for recurring requirements.

Types of call-offs

Practice distinguishes several types of call-offs, which differ in terms of binding effect and quantity control. The choice should match the production structure and the capacity of the supplier.

Methods and approach for call-offs

A functioning call-off process links demand planning, contract management and delivery logistics. Prerequisites are a well-maintained material master with clean attribute maintenance, as well as consistent unit and currency master data, so that call-off quantities and prices are transferred without errors.

Firm and variable call-offs

Firm call-offs bind quantity and date and serve as the baseline load in production. Variable call-offs define quantity corridors within which scheduling is carried out at short notice. A combination is frequently used: a firm baseline call-off plus forecast additional quantities, which only become binding through a short-term call-off.

Non-firm call-offs and reservations

With non-firm call-offs, the concrete quantity initially remains open; only the later call-off subject to reservation makes it binding. This form is widespread when end-customer volumes are still fluctuating. Buyers should agree in the contract within which period the reservation must be released so that the supplier remains able to plan.

Communication channels: EDI and supplier portal

In series environments, call-offs are typically transmitted via EDI (e.g. EDM formats or VDA standards); for smaller suppliers, supplier portals are increasingly becoming established. There, the supplier confirms dates and quantities, reports deviations back and thereby supports exception management for critical call-off items. Manual email-based processes are considered error-prone for significant volumes and should be documented and subjected to regular checks.

Key KPIs for call-off management

Measurability is a prerequisite for continuous improvement of the call-off process. Key metrics relate to on-time delivery, call-off stability and process quality and are frequently incorporated into supplier evaluations and performance records.

On-time delivery and delivery reliability

Delivery reliability measures whether deliveries arrive complete, on time and in the correct quantity. In practice, values above 95 to 98 per cent are regarded as the target level in production-close supply chains. Binding measurement rules (measurement windows, tolerances for quantity and date) should be agreed contractually.

Call-off stability and change rate

The change rate describes how often already firm call-offs are subsequently amended or cancelled. High change rates put strain on the supplier, drive up prices in the long run and can affect the basis for bid objections or claims in future tenders.

Stock and lead-time metrics

Also relevant are adherence to agreed lead times, the stock of material called off but not yet delivered, and scrap and recall rates in connection with call-off items. These figures often draw on the same data set as the spend taxonomy and can thus be integrated into spend management.

Risks and controls in the call-off process

The call-off carries risks on both sides: for the buyer, there is the risk of supply shortfalls from short-term call-offs; for the supplier, the risk of load imbalance caused by call-off fluctuations. Clear contract design and ongoing controls minimise both.

Contractual provisions

The framework agreement and call-off provisions should stipulate minimum and maximum quantities, lead times, acceptance periods, over- and under-delivery tolerances and rules for short-term call-offs. The consequences of non-call-off (e.g. production-proximate storage costs or costs of default) and the handling of delivery delays, e.g. via stop-shipment, should also be regulated contractually.

Supplier risks and precautions

For critical items, buyers assess the financial stability of the supplier, for example via a defined supplier credit limit or creditworthiness indicators. In times of disrupted supply chains, topics such as supplier de-risking, risk diversification and country risk in procurement are moving more strongly into the focus of call-off management. Even for single-source items, an emergency call-off path should be documented.

Exception management

Not every deviation justifies manual intervention. Structured exception management categorises deviations by severity and actively addresses only relevant cases – for instance foreseeable date breaches, quantity-relevant deviations or quality issues. Complementary methods such as 5 Whys help to trace recurring call-off problems back to root causes rather than merely treating symptoms.

Current developments: digitalisation and sustainability in call-offs

The call-off is traditionally a strongly EDI-driven process. Currently, the focus is shifting towards integrated supplier collaboration, data quality and sustainability requirements.

Digital collaboration and supplier enablement

With a growing number of small and medium-sized suppliers, supplier enablement is gaining in importance: suppliers need low-barrier access points to confirm call-offs, report deviations and submit performance records. Supplier portals and standardised interfaces are increasingly replacing isolated solutions. The goal is for schedulers and suppliers to work from the same data basis.

Sustainability and transparency

As up-to-date demand data, call-offs also provide the quantitative basis for sustainability assessments, in particular for Scope 3 emissions in indirect procurement. The more precise the call-off data, the more robust the emissions allocation at item and supplier level.

Synchronisation with logistics providers

For outsourced logistics services, buyers increasingly coordinate call-offs with a 3PL provider that handles consolidation, consolidated shipments and scheduling. This reduces transport costs and improves punctuality, but requires a clear process organisation between procurement, scheduling and logistics.

Typical metrics

Metric	Typical value
Delivery reliability	> 95%, in series production often > 98% *Measured against call-off quantity and date within defined tolerances.*
Call-off confirmation rate	> 99% within 24–48 hours *Proportion of call-offs confirmed by the supplier within the deadline.*
Change rate for firm call-offs	< 5% *Proportion of firm call-offs subsequently amended or cancelled; a high value puts strain on the supplier.*

Over-/under-delivery	typically ±5% tolerance *Contractually agreed quantity tolerance per call-off item, industry-dependent.*

Practical example

A mid-sized mechanical engineering company sources sheet-metal formed parts from a press and bending shop under a two-year framework agreement with fixed price commitments. Until now, call-offs were handled by email with unclear tolerances, which led to frequent over-deliveries and complaints. After a process overhaul, firm monthly call-offs with four weeks' lead time plus variable weekly call-offs were introduced; transmission takes place via a supplier portal with automatic call-off confirmation.

- Contractual fixing of lead times, quantity tolerances and short-term call-off rules
- Migration of call-off transmission to a supplier portal with a call-off confirmation obligation
- Introduction of a change rate as a KPI and monthly review with the supplier
- Structured exception management with escalation levels for date and quantity deviations

Conclusion

The call-off links strategic framework agreements with the operational needs of production. Its value arises from clear contract design, reliable master data and structured communication with the supplier. Those who digitalise call-off processes and measure them with robust KPIs reduce inventory, improve delivery reliability and create a solid data foundation, including for sustainability reporting. At the same time, the call-off remains a risk topic: short-term changes and single-source items require precautions and clear escalation paths. Buyers are well advised to treat the call-off not as a routine act but as a manageable lever.

Frequently asked questions

? What is a call-off in simple terms?

A call-off is the instruction to a supplier to deliver a specific quantity of material that has already been contractually agreed. It is usually based on a framework agreement in which prices and conditions have already been fixed. The call-off itself only triggers the concrete delivery.

? What is the difference between a call-off and a purchase order?

A purchase order is a standalone contractual offer with prices and conditions, whereas a call-off only activates an existing framework agreement. Call-offs therefore have shorter lead times and significantly less processing effort. Legally, whether the call-off itself is binding depends on the wording of the contract.

? What is a non-firm call-off?

With a non-firm call-off, the concrete delivery quantity initially remains open. Only a later call-off subject to reservation makes the quantity and date binding. This form is common when demand is still uncertain and the buyer requires flexibility.

? What mandatory information does a call-off contain?

Typically a call-off number, reference to the framework agreement, material number, quantity, requested delivery date, delivery address and, where applicable, packaging and labelling requirements. In addition, validity, lead time and tolerance provisions should be identifiable. For electronic call-offs via EDI or a supplier portal, this information is transmitted in standardised formats.

? Is a call-off legally binding?

That depends on the contractual arrangement: if the call-off is agreed as a binding purchase order, the delivery obligation arises upon receipt. With non-firm call-offs or call-offs subject to reservation, the binding effect only takes effect when the reservation is released. In individual cases the wording should be reviewed legally.

? How is delivery reliability measured for call-offs?

Delivery reliability compares the called-off quantity and date with the quantity actually delivered, usually within a defined measurement window. In practice, values above 95 to 98 per cent are targeted. Contractually agreed tolerances for quantity and date are important so that the measurement is comprehensible for both parties.

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