Invoice clearing: checking, matching and releasing invoices without media discontinuity

Invoice clearing refers to the systematic checking, matching and resolution of incoming invoices against purchase order and delivery evidence before release for payment. In industrial practice, it is a core process of the purchase-to-pay cycle, bringing together procurement terms, conditions and delivery data in a three-way match. Well-organised clearing reduces manual follow-up, prevents duplicate payments and creates the data basis for metrics such as spend analysis and supplier rating.

As of October 2026 · amplifa-marketplace.ai/en/glossary/rechnungs-clearing

Key facts at a glance

01 Invoice clearing is the three-way match of purchase order, goods receipt and incoming invoice (three-way match).

02 Typically, 60–90 % of all invoices are processed fully automatically in practice.

03 Clarification cases frequently arise from price, quantity or tax rate discrepancies as well as missing purchase order references.

04 Errors should ideally be corrected directly at the source, for example through self-billing or clearly defined procurement terms.

05 Metrics such as lead time and exception rate can only be evaluated reliably with consistent master data and a high classification rate.

Definition: invoice clearing

Invoice clearing encompasses all steps between the receipt of a supplier invoice and its final release for payment, including the resolution of discrepancies. It is thus a sub-process of the operational procurement and finance process, connecting invoice verification, account assignment, approval and accounting.

Distinction from classical invoice verification

Classical invoice verification looks at the individual invoice in isolation, for example for arithmetical accuracy and VAT details. Invoice clearing goes beyond this: it anchors the invoice in the overall context of the procurement transaction and ensures that price, quantity, payment terms and procurement terms match the purchase order. Only this contextual matching makes invoice data reliable for spend analysis and contract management.

Importance for B2B supplier relationships

In manufacturing supply chains, invoices are often complex: partial deliveries, freight surcharges, material surcharges or minimum quantity prices lead to discrepancies between order and invoice. Structured clearing resolves these cases on a rule-based basis rather than via email exchanges. This reduces clarification times and has a positive effect on supplier rating, because punctual, correct invoices are a measurable quality feature of supplier performance.

Methods and approach in invoice clearing

The core of the process is matching the invoice against documents from purchase order and goods receipt. Depending on invoice type and the maturity of the company, different procedures are used.

Three-way match as the standard procedure

In a three-way match, purchase order, goods receipt document and invoice are compared line by line. If quantity, price and tax rate match within defined tolerances, the invoice is released automatically and marked for payment. In the event of discrepancies, a clarification case is created and escalated to procurement or the specialist department. In practice: the more complete the order and receipt data, the higher the automation rate.

Two-way match and self-billing

For services, contract manufacturing work or recurring framework call-offs, there is often no classical goods receipt document; here the two-way match of purchase order and invoice applies. More mature processes use self-billing: procurement creates the invoice itself based on the service rendered, and the supplier confirms it. This eliminates a large proportion of typical discrepancies, but requires very clean master data and agreed processes.

Tolerances, escalation levels and clarification rules

Effective clearing thrives on clear rules: quantity and price tolerances, for example typically 2–5 % depending on the material group, determine automatic release or manual clarification. For frequent error patterns such as missing purchase order number, incorrect freight surcharge or deviating tax rate, standardised clarification paths with clear responsibilities are defined. A contingency plan for critical suppliers or urgent orders prevents urgent payments from being blocked in the clarification process.

Digital support and data basis

Invoice clearing is a data process: only where master data, order data and incoming documents are available in a structured form can automation and evaluation take place.

Incoming invoice processing and duplicate detection

Modern systems capture invoices via email, portal or electronic format, automatically identify the supplier and purchase order reference and check for duplicate invoices. Reliable duplicate detection prevents duplicate payments, which in practice arise mainly with partial invoices and renamed files. In addition, a high classification rate in catalogue and master data supports the automatic assignment of line item numbers and GL accounts.

Interfaces to the procurement process

Clearing only unfolds its effect in combination with the upstream process: when purchase orders are derived from a spend analysis and terms are agreed as binding in the source-to-contract (S2C) process, order and invoice data match from the outset. Contract management and procurement terms form the reference against which clearing checks. Content enrichment of item data also reduces clarification cases, because unclear item descriptions are the most frequent cause of discrepancies.

Key KPIs in invoice clearing

Clearing is measured primarily by speed, degree of automation and error costs. These metrics can usually be derived directly from the invoice processing system.

Automation rate and lead time

The automation rate describes the share of invoices that pass through without manual intervention; in practice, well-established processes typically achieve 60–90 %. The lead time from invoice receipt to posting should frequently be under five working days. Both metrics react sensitively to data quality: missing purchase order numbers or a low classification rate immediately push them down.

Exception rate, error costs and discount utilisation

The exception rate shows how many invoices require manual follow-up; leading processes typically achieve less than 20 %. The cost per processed invoice and the punctual use of early payment discount or early payment programme payments, which are only feasible with fast clearing, are also important. These figures also serve as input for the supplier rating.

Risks and controls in invoice clearing

Without structured controls, there is a risk of duplicate payments, mispostings, tax risks and delayed payments with supplier conflicts. Controls must therefore be built into the process, not applied retrospectively.

Typical risks

The most common risks are duplicate and fraudulent invoices, payments without a purchase order reference, incorrect tax rates and price discrepancies compared with agreed terms. In cross-border transactions, deviating Incoterms FCA arrangements and the resulting freight and customs cost shares make matching difficult. Changing contact persons and informal commitments outside the purchase order also regularly lead to clarification cases.

Controls and compliance

Effective controls start at the source: binding procurement terms, a supplier credit check before new business, clear approval rules with segregation of duties and regular reconciliation with contract management. Before onboarding new suppliers, a supplier capacity check is also worthwhile so that promised services and later invoiced quantities match. Tax details, for example regarding input tax deduction or cross-border transactions, should be professionally reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Current developments: e-invoicing and automation

The increasing use of electronic invoice formats and digital intake channels is fundamentally changing clearing: structured data replaces paper documents, and rule sets can be applied by machine.

E-invoicing as a driver

The increasing obligation to receive electronic invoices in the B2B sector in Germany and the EU improves data quality at the point of entry and reduces manual capture effort. Structured formats also enable more reliable duplicate detection and automatic account assignment. Companies should use a rollout management approach: connect supplier groups step by step, prioritising high invoice volumes.

Integration into networked processes

In future, purchase order, delivery and invoice will merge into a continuous data stream. Reorder point procedures and capacity planning generate predictable, forecastable order volumes, which are also reflected in the invoice run. Anyone maintaining consistent data across the entire product life cycle management – from enquiry through pilot run to series production – achieves the highest degrees of automation in clearing.

Typical metrics

Metric	Typical value
Automation rate	typically 60–90 % *Share of invoices processed automatically; depends on purchase order reference and data quality*

Exception rate	typically < 20 % *Share of invoices requiring manual follow-up; leading processes are significantly below this*
Lead time	typically < 5 working days *From invoice receipt to posting; automated cases often within one day*
Cost per invoice	typically a few to over 10 EUR *Strongly dependent on the degree of automation and manual clarification effort*

Practical example

A medium-sized mechanical engineering company with around 12,000 incoming invoices per year struggled with high exception rates: price discrepancies on surcharges, missing purchase order references for contract manufacturing work and duplicate invoices for partial deliveries. A combination of process and data measures significantly increased the automation rate within one year.

- Introduction of a binding three-way match with defined tolerances and standardised clarification paths
- Conversion of recurring contract manufacturing orders to self-billing with monthly consolidated billing
- Establishment of duplicate detection and enrichment of item data (content enrichment) to improve the classification rate
- Inclusion of invoice quality in the supplier rating with monthly feedback to top suppliers

Conclusion

Invoice clearing is far more than invoice verification: it is the interface that reveals how well purchase order, delivery and terms are aligned across the entire procurement process. Companies with clear tolerances, standardised clarification paths and a good master data foundation achieve automation rates well above 60 % in practice and noticeably reduce processing costs. Prerequisites are binding procurement terms, well-maintained supplier data and continuous measurement of the metrics. The advance of e-invoicing increases the pressure to digitalise processes, but also rewards every step in that direction. Those who approach clearing strategically benefit twice: through lower process costs and through reliable data for procurement and finance.

Frequently asked questions

? What does invoice clearing mean?

Invoice clearing refers to the systematic checking, matching and resolution of incoming invoices against purchase order and goods receipt before payment release. The aim is to identify and

resolve discrepancies in price, quantity or terms on a rule-based basis. It is therefore a central sub-process of the purchase-to-pay cycle.

? What is the difference between a two-way match and a three-way match?

In a two-way match, only the purchase order and the invoice are compared, for example for services or recurring billing. The three-way match additionally includes the goods receipt document and is the standard in industrial procurement. The more complete the document data, the higher the share of invoices approved automatically.

? How does invoice clearing work with self-billing?

In self-billing, the customer creates the invoice themselves based on the delivery or service rendered, and the supplier confirms it. This largely eliminates typical discrepancies between purchase order and invoice. It requires clean master data, agreed prices and a reliable process for recording services.

? What is the average processing time for an incoming invoice?

In manually organised processes, processing often takes several days to over a week, mainly due to cases requiring clarification. Fully automated invoices are typically booked within hours or one day. Key factors are the purchase order reference, data quality and clear tolerance rules.

? Which metrics are important in invoice clearing?

Key metrics include the automation rate, lead time from receipt to posting, exception rate, cost per invoice and early payment discount utilisation. In addition, duplicate and error rates provide insights into data quality. These figures also serve as input for supplier rating.

? What role do procurement terms play in invoice clearing?

Procurement terms define payment terms, discounts, delivery and service handling and form the reference against which invoices are checked. Clear terms prevent discrepancies at the source and accelerate clearing. Divergent or informally agreed terms, by contrast, are the most frequent cause of clarification cases.

Find the right suppliers on Amplifa

Verified industrial suppliers in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Describe your requirement and receive comparable offers.

amplifa-marketplace.ai