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Vintage Voice

How healthcare supply chain echoes ‘Mission: Impossible’

Cinematic tropes translate into hospital, remote care fallout for dead reckoning

By Rick Dana Barlow

SCHAUMBURG, IL (February 5, 2024) – Last month, the producers of the “Mission: Impossible” film franchise doubled down on promoting the seventh-in-the-series, “Mission: Impossible, Dead Reckoning Part 1,” recently released via streaming on Paramount+, due in part to two possible motivations.

First, Tom Cruise likely took a cue from the “Back to the Future” movies and filmed Dead Reckoning Parts 1 and 2 – that is, Nos. 7 and 8, back-to-back or at least together. Whether you consider this tactic one movie split in two or two consecutive stories stitched together is up to you. My wife questioned the editing decisions (or lack thereof) about not producing a concise story under two hours. Being an advocate, fan and practitioner of long-form narrative, I prudently responded with an acknowledging nod and a classic McKayla Maroney smirk. (She’s an American gymnast and Olympic gold medalist renowned for the wry facial expression to a joke or pun.)

To celebrate this cinematic event, my wife and I streamed all seven films now, long before No. 8 is scheduled to be released in late May 2025.

Full disclosure: I am a die-hard fan of the original “M:I” television series that ran from 1966-1973 (even the 1988-1990 revamped update that seemed to shed a bit of the coolness vibe). Although the original leader of the “Impossible Missions

Force” was Dan Briggs (played in season 1 by Steven Hill who later played gruff, curmudgeonly District Attorney Adam Schiff on “Law & Order” during the 1990s), many likely recall Jim Phelps (played by snowcap-coiffed Peter Graves throughout the rest of the series’ run and the revamp) as the titular IMF head.

Unfortunately for many die-hard “M:I” fans, however, Cruise decided to use an M. Night Shyamalan-like cinematic twist for what would become his vanity film franchise project. Cruise wanted to center the film around his own character in the inaugural movie in 1996, so [SPOILER ALERT] he made Jim Phelps the traitor-turncoat-villain. This not only irked Peter Graves, who was given first dibs to reprise his role and wisely declined, but also infuriated many devoted fans of the TV show and mythology. Consequently, Jon Voight took up the role instead.

To appease disgruntled devotees, Cruise inserted plenty of Easter eggs in the films over the years (that I won’t divulge or explore here because they’re better left for critic and fan sites) and then slathered on scores of densely choreographed, mind-tingling and well-orchestrated stunts. I will confess that watching the films in successive evenings (rather than the multiple-year intervals in which the films were released) uncovered several underpinning themes woven throughout the cinematic series that approach – if not puncture – the trope barrier.

1. Each movie is progressively longer in duration.
2. Each movie seems to poke fun at the framework of the original concept and conceit against the backdrop of reality – from the sobering mission objectives to the team member selection process to the self-destructing mission briefs and the implausible mission success rates that the “real” government agencies arrogantly dismiss with an elitist sneer and attribute to chance and dumb luck. (They’re not ... ahem ... *totally* ... wrong.)
3. Each movie seems to show the limitations of the technology employed – “deus ex machinas” and “MacGuffins” used either to advance the plot, showcase character development, foment tension or elicit humor – by having them break down, malfunction and frustrate characters with only moments to spare. Not surprisingly, the latest film takes on artificial intelligence, the “IT” topic of the moment (IT bearing the double entendre of occupational/technology acronym and the ALL-CAPs celebrity status marking “it” as a pop cultural phenomenon today).

4. Each movie seems to showcase a good-guy-gone-bad in the form of a double agent, mole, traitor or turncoat with altruistic (but dubious and morally ambiguous) motivations that hails from governmental law enforcement agencies – from the USA’s CIA to the UK’s MI6 to the IMF itself. Such rogues represent divergent diagonal lines, the hypotenuse of chutzpah and hubris!

Yet, if you unspool each successive film and compare scenarios to healthcare supply chain operations, there seems to be several archetypal elements in which the circumstances IMF agents experience eerily mirrors a bit of what healthcare supply chain executives, leaders, managers and professionals face.

In a way, this implies that healthcare supply chain management (HSCM), in and of itself, may be something of a “Mission: Impossible.” Let us rustle through the dossiers (paper or electronic) and count the metaphorical ways.

1. **IMF event:** Brief mission orders from “The Secretary” clandestinely arrive in the hands of the IMF leader who listens, reads and watches, before the communication mechanism self-destructs seconds later. **HSCM translation:** Orders from the C-suite arrive by email, PowerPoint presentation or videoconferencing, by and large, because Supply Chain may not be allowed in or invited up to the C-suite. The orders – typically involving “realistic and reasonable” cost reduction and savings demands to plug massive holes that could have been prevented earlier with foresight, planning and predictive analytics – then disappear into the burgeoning stack of expectations when another fad or trend resurfaces.
2. **IMF event:** The obligatory chase scene/sequence – involving cars, motorcycles, airplanes, boats, snowmobiles, trains, (give yourself golden bonus points for a jetpack), and even Cruise’s “Chariots of Fire” sprinting style – amps up the tension to drive the audience wild. **HSCM translation:** Imagine chasing down the distributor or delivery truck that leaves the dock without fully checking the invoice and unloading the proper ordered cases and boxes of medical/surgical products or orchestrating delivery routes from the consolidated service centers to the far-flung remote-care facilities throughout the county. Of course, don’t overlook the races in the consolidated service centers that may involve forklifts, automated guided

vehicles and any dive-bombing drones to make the warehouse techs move faster.

3. **IMF event:** The laptop software cannot seem to connect with the orbiting hijacked commercial satellite to provide the agents with eyes on the ground during their bout of subterfuge at the all-important charitable gala ... or their trusty 3-D printer simply cannot finish the mask of the world-famous VIP that Cruise will impersonate in time to stop the launch of the nuclear missile. **HSCM translation:** The computers are down, the power goes out, suppliers report stockouts and burgeoning backorder requests while someone hides the magic wands and pixie dust above the ceiling tiles with the shadow stash. Sound familiar? The global pandemic isn't *that* far behind us, right? Neither are annual hurricanes, rainstorms, tornadoes, etc.
4. **IMF event:** In the super spy-fi reel world, people seem to access any database within any known or top secret commercial and governmental organization within minutes, turbo-charged by plenty of keyboard-pounding, sweat-dripping, expletive-screaming actions – even faster than hackers into hospital databases here in the real world. **HSCM translation:** Supply chain pros would love to employ the tension-driven actions of the secret agents, but they must be mannered, mature, polite and respectful, even as they're inhibited by firewalls, varied data standards (yes, an oxymoron at best), contractual limitations, software glitches, transcription errors, backorders and stockouts and clinician demands that fall just short of criticism calling for supply chain to self-destruct in five seconds. Maybe 25 seconds. Tops.
5. **IMF event:** One or more of the protagonists frequently are threatened with being disavowed by The Secretary, the agency, the government, etc. if they are caught. **HSCM translation:** The philosophy of asking for forgiveness rather than permission may only offset this half the time. Otherwise, miscues, mistakes and misunderstandings can lead to serious reprimanding or a security escort out the door – either one labeled a mission abort. Enter a third-party consultant or a new departmental leader.
6. **IMF event:** IMF (or an agent) is blamed for something outside of its purview or control (typically a faux pas by another agency or agent) and must take the fall by being forced to disband or be absorbed by another department or organization. **HSCM translation:** Couched under the guise of “efficiency and effectiveness” this is how Supply Chain migrated to Finance from Operations for many healthcare organizations. And how supply chain pros

find new careers in the consulting, IT, real estate and supplier realms, among others!

7. **IMF event:** A prolonged fight scene leaves agents beaten severely with visible abrasions, contusions and overt limping only for them to show up at the safe house in the next scene completely healed to regroup in time for the next mind-blowing action sequence. **HSCM translation:** After being buffeted about the conference room while listening to the tension-piqued questions and demands from medical-conference-exhibit-hall/medical-journal-article-motivated clinicians, supply chain pros return to their lair to seek solace from fellow staffers and their crack sourcing agents who promptly embark on a Starbucks run in the cafeteria.
8. **IMF event:** The team uncovers a double agent, mole or traitor within their organization or another government agency who threatens the White House, Congress, all Americans, the world, etc., and must feign ignorance and string this person along for as much time as needed for everything to converge at the appropriate triumphal (gotcha!) moment. **HSCM translation:** Short of a colleague or coworker doing anything illegal or unethical, this scenario applies to the person searching for and voluntarily landing that attractive new employment opportunity on his or her own terms (like the dotcom bubble a quarter-century ago). The persons left behind (particularly those in pressurized, stressful environments) view this escapee as a double agent, mole or traitor while verbally expressing nothing but happiness for them.

Kidding aside (and for entertainment purposes only), the healthcare supply chain remains a noble and notable, but often disrespected and under/unappreciated, profession and industry. For some, it can be seen as the cause of and solution to all of life's problems and successes. Notable and noble, but also necessary.

Our businesses, cultures, economies, lifestyles and even humanity at large, rely on supply chain operations. At times, it can feel like an impossible mission, yet not only is it possible but it's also successful and sustainable – and you remain a valuable and valued part of it.

Without it and your contributions and participation, our fate likely would self-destruct in seconds.

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