

# Learning to Coordinate: A Critical Synthesis of Reinforcement Learning Approaches for Autonomous Robotics in Warehouse Automation

Victor Ogunrinde\*

Obafemi Awolowo university ile ife

## ABSTRACT

The rapid acceleration of e-commerce has placed unprecedented demands on warehouse logistics, creating a compelling use case for autonomous mobile robot fleets operating at scale. Reinforcement learning has emerged as a promising paradigm for addressing the coordination challenges inherent in multi-robot warehouse automation, offering potential advantages over traditional optimization methods in dynamic, partially observable environments. Yet despite substantial research investment and promising laboratory demonstrations, the translation of reinforcement learning based approaches to industrial practice remains constrained by unresolved theoretical and engineering challenges. This paper presents a systematic critical synthesis of the literature on reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics, examining 67 peer reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2026 across the intersecting domains of multi-agent path finding, task allocation, and collaborative order fulfillment. The analysis identifies three persistent tensions that structure the field: the tradeoff between centralized coordination and distributed scalability, the challenge of transferring policies trained in simulation to noisy physical environments, and the unresolved relationship between individual robot learning and system level optimization objectives. Our findings indicate that while hierarchical and curriculum based reinforcement learning architectures demonstrate genuine promise for specific subproblems, claims of generalizable superiority over classical methods remain insufficiently supported by evidence from realistic, large scale evaluations. We propose an integrative framework that specifies conditions under which reinforcement learning adds value relative to conventional approaches, with implications for research design and industrial deployment.

**Keywords:** Reinforcement learning, warehouse automation, multi-agent systems, autonomous mobile robots, path planning, task allocation

*Journal of Science, Technology and Social Transformation* (2026)

Doi: 10.64235/584snk91

## INTRODUCTION

The transformation of warehouse logistics through autonomous robotics represents one of the most economically consequential applications of artificial intelligence over the past decade. Amazon's acquisition of Kiva Systems in 2012, which catalyzed a wave of investment in robotic fulfillment centers, has been followed by similar commitments from Alibaba, JD.com, Ocado, and a proliferation of logistics startups. Contemporary warehouses increasingly deploy fleets of autonomous mobile robots that transport inventory pods, retrieve items for order fulfillment, and navigate dynamically through environments shared with human workers and other machines. The scale of these operations is striking: leading fulfillment centers may coordinate hundreds or even thousands of robots performing millions of discrete tasks daily, all within environments characterized by tight

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**Corresponding Author:** Victor Ogunrinde, Obafemi Awolowo university ile ife, Email: danielogunrinde@student.oauife.edu.ng

**How to cite this article:** Ogunrinde, V. (2026). Learning to Coordinate: A Critical Synthesis of Reinforcement Learning Approaches for Autonomous Robotics in Warehouse Automation. *Journal of Science, Technology and Social Transformation* 2(4), 1-8.

**Source of support:** Nil

**Conflict of interest:** None

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spatial constraints, stochastic task arrivals, and the imperative for real time responsiveness .

At the heart of this coordination challenge lies a class of problems that have proven remarkably resistant to conventional optimization approaches. Multi-agent path

finding in dynamic environments, task allocation under uncertainty, and the joint optimization of navigation and scheduling decisions interact in ways that defeat purely centralized or rule based solutions. Traditional methods, including conflict based search and prioritized planning, scale poorly with fleet size and struggle to adapt when task patterns shift or robots fail. Linear programming formulations become intractable when the state space grows beyond modest dimensions, while heuristic rules, though computationally efficient, leave substantial performance gains unrealized.

Reinforcement learning has emerged as a compelling alternative paradigm for addressing these challenges. By enabling robots to learn coordination policies through trial and error interaction with simulated warehouse environments, reinforcement learning promises to discover strategies that generalize across changing conditions and capture the sequential structure of long horizon logistics decisions. Proponents argue that learned policies can adapt to congestion patterns, balance workloads across heterogeneous robot teams, and recover from disturbances more gracefully than hand coded heuristics. Recent demonstrations in simulated environments have reported substantial improvements in throughput and energy efficiency, with some studies claiming advantages exceeding 25 percent over baseline methods.

Yet for all the enthusiasm surrounding reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics, the field remains characterized by fragmentation, methodological inconsistencies, and a persistent gap between simulated performance and real world viability. The present paper asks a central research question: Under what conditions do reinforcement learning approaches for warehouse robotics deliver meaningful advantages over classical optimization and heuristic methods, and what barriers currently limit their industrial adoption? This question carries both theoretical significance for understanding the applicability limits of learning based coordination and practical importance for logistics operators, technology developers, and researchers charting future directions.

Several theoretical frameworks inform our analysis. Multi-agent reinforcement learning provides the foundational technical paradigm, extending single agent reinforcement learning to settings where multiple learning agents interact, with complications including non stationarity, partial observability, and the curse of dimensionality. Hierarchical reinforcement learning offers a potential solution to scaling challenges by decomposing coordination problems into abstract subtasks, while curriculum learning provides mechanisms for structuring exploration to enable stable policy convergence in complex environments. From a systems engineering perspective, the framework of hybrid intelligence suggests that effective warehouse automation may require not the replacement of classical methods but their integration with learned components in carefully designed architectures.

The research objectives are threefold. First, we synthesise the existing literature on reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics, identifying technical approaches, empirical findings, and persistent gaps. Second, we critically examine the methodological assumptions underlying current research, particularly the reliance on simulated environments and the generalizability of reported results. Third, we propose an integrative framework for evaluating and designing reinforcement learning systems for warehouse automation, specifying conditions under which learning based approaches are likely to outperform classical alternatives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Coordination Landscape in Warehouse Robotics

Before examining reinforcement learning approaches specifically, it is essential to understand the coordination problems that warehouse robotics systems must solve. The literature has converged on several canonical problem formulations, each with distinct technical characteristics and evaluation criteria.

Multi-agent path finding (MAPF) constitutes perhaps the most fundamental coordination challenge. In its lifelong variant, which reflects the continuous task flow of real warehouses, multiple robots must navigate from current positions to assigned destinations while avoiding collisions and minimizing metrics such as makespan or flowtime. Classical approaches to MAPF include conflict based search, which resolves inter agent conflicts through a hierarchical search tree, and prioritized planning, which decomposes the multi-agent problem into sequential single agent plans based on predetermined priority orders. While prioritized planning scales efficiently to large fleets, its performance depends critically on the quality of the priority assignment, a dependence that has motivated learning based approaches to dynamic priority generation.

Task allocation constitutes a second major problem dimension. In warehouse environments, robots must be assigned to incoming orders, tote retrieval tasks, and putaway operations, with decisions affecting both immediate throughput and future system state. The multi-tote storage and retrieval system, in which robots carry multiple totes per tour, has received particular attention due to the complex coupling between tote selection, robot routing, and workstation scheduling. Mixed integer programming formulations can optimize these decisions jointly, but their computational requirements become prohibitive at realistic scales, motivating the development of heuristics and learning based methods.

Most challenging are formulations that integrate path planning with task allocation, requiring simultaneous decisions about which robot performs which task and how that robot navigates to task locations. The joint optimization problem exhibits what operations researchers



call combinatorial complexity, with the number of feasible assignments growing factorially in fleet size. It is precisely this complexity that has attracted reinforcement learning researchers, who argue that learned policies can capture structured regularities that exhaustive optimization cannot exploit.

## Reinforcement Learning Architectures for Warehouse Coordination

The reinforcement learning literature on warehouse robotics has explored diverse technical architectures, each embodying different assumptions about the coordination problem and the appropriate division of labor between learning and planning components.

Single agent reinforcement learning approaches treat the multi-robot coordination problem as a collection of independently learning agents. Each robot maintains its own policy, mapping observations of the local environment to navigation and task selection actions. The appeal of this approach lies in its scalability: adding robots does not fundamentally change the learning problem for existing agents. However, independent learning suffers from non stationarity, as each agent's environment changes when other agents update their policies. This can lead to unstable learning and convergence to suboptimal joint policies. Researchers have addressed these challenges through techniques such as experience sharing, where robots share transition data through a centralized replay buffer, and through the design of reward functions that incentivize cooperative behavior.

Centralized training with decentralized execution has emerged as a dominant paradigm in multi-agent reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics. Under this framework, policies are trained using a centralized critic that has access to global state information, but execution uses only local observations available to each robot. This approach mitigates the non stationarity problem during training while preserving scalability during deployment. The Multi-Agent Self-attention Recurrent Q-Learning framework exemplifies this paradigm, using attention mechanisms to enable agents to focus on the most relevant aspects of the global state when learning coordination policies.

A third architectural family integrates reinforcement learning with classical planning methods in hybrid frameworks. The RL guided Rolling Horizon Prioritized Planning framework represents a particularly sophisticated example of this approach. Rather than replacing the classical planner, reinforcement learning is used to optimize the priority order for prioritized planning, a design choice that preserves the planner's theoretical guarantees while improving its performance through learned heuristics. The framework casts dynamic priority assignment as a partially observable Markov decision process, with an attention based neural network autoregressively decoding priority orders. Evaluations in realistic warehouse simulations demonstrated

throughput improvements of approximately 25 percent over random priority baselines, with strong zero shot generalization across agent densities and warehouse layouts.

## Empirical Evidence and Performance Claims

The empirical literature on reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics presents a pattern of consistently positive claims that merit careful scrutiny. Reported improvements over baseline methods frequently exceed 20 percent, with some studies claiming gains above 50 percent in specific metrics.

The Hybrid Auction Consensus framework with Fine tuned Recurrent Learning, for instance, reported a 26.2 percent increase in task success rate, an 84 percent faster recovery from deadlocks, and a 38 percent improvement in energy efficiency when evaluated in simulations involving 1000 robots and 5000 tasks. Similarly, the Multi-Agent Self-attention Recurrent Q-Learning framework achieved average delivery rate improvements of 15.4, 29, and 26.2 percent over baselines across different task configurations. Even relatively modest claims, such as the 25 percent throughput improvement reported for RL guided rolling horizon prioritized planning, substantially exceed what would typically be considered practically meaningful in industrial logistics.

Yet several factors complicate interpretation of these claims. The most significant concerns the nature of baseline comparisons. Many studies compare learning based approaches against relatively simple heuristics rather than against the state of the art in classical optimization. Random priority assignment, for example, is a weak baseline for prioritized planning; more sophisticated priority ordering heuristics exist but are rarely included in comparisons. When learning based methods are compared against strong classical baselines, the performance advantages typically diminish substantially. A comprehensive benchmarking study would be necessary to establish genuine superiority, but no such study currently exists in the peer reviewed literature.

A second factor concerns the simulation environments used for evaluation. While the complexity of warehouse simulations has increased markedly in recent years, with platforms now incorporating realistic physics, stochastic task arrivals, and heterogeneous robot capabilities, the gap between simulation and physical deployment remains substantial. Simulated environments cannot capture the full range of real world complexities, including sensor noise, communication delays, mechanical failures, and the unpredictable behavior of human coworkers. The extent to which policies trained in simulation transfer to physical systems remains an open question, with limited published evidence.

## Methodological Critiques and Persistent Gaps

Critical examination of the literature reveals several recurrent methodological weaknesses that threaten the validity and

**Table 1:** Summary of Reinforcement Learning Approaches for Warehouse Robotics

| <i>Framework</i> | <i>Core architecture</i>     | <i>Coordination mechanism</i> | <i>Reported improvement</i>  | <i>Evaluation scale</i> |
|------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| RL-RH-PP         | RL + Prioritized Planning    | Priority assignment           | 25% throughput               | Up to 100 robots        |
| MASRQL           | Self-attention + Recurrent Q | Centralized training          | 15-29% delivery rate         | Simulated warehouse     |
| HAC-FRL          | Auction-Consensus + PPO      | Distributed task allocation   | 26% task success, 38% energy | 1000 robots, 5000 tasks |
| A3C-YOLOv5-PPO   | A3C optimization             | Perception + control          | Not quantified               | Multiple scenarios      |
| MAPDP            | MARL for pickup/delivery     | Paired context embedding      | Task completion              | Benchmark instances     |

Note: Reported improvements are as stated in original publications and may not be directly comparable due to differing evaluation protocols and baseline conditions.

generalizability of reported findings. The most consequential concerns the evaluation protocols employed. Many studies report performance metrics aggregated across a limited number of simulation runs, often without reporting confidence intervals or statistical significance tests. When such tests are performed, the reported improvements are typically statistically significant, but statistical significance is a weak criterion when sample sizes are large, as simulation studies can generate effectively unlimited data. What matters is economic significance: whether the magnitude of improvement justifies the substantial engineering investment required to deploy learning based systems.

A second methodological gap concerns the treatment of uncertainty and robustness. Real warehouse environments exhibit stochasticity across multiple timescales: task arrivals vary by hour and season, robot health degrades over time, and layouts may be reconfigured. Reinforcement learning policies trained under stationary distributions may fail catastrophically when conditions shift. Few studies have systematically evaluated the robustness of learned policies to distributional shift, and those that have report mixed results. The RL guided rolling horizon framework demonstrated zero shot generalization across agent densities and warehouse layouts, a notable exception to the general pattern. Whether such generalization extends to more fundamental changes, such as different task arrival distributions or robot failure modes, remains unexamined.

A third critique concerns the interpretability and verifiability of learned policies. Classical optimization methods produce solutions that can be inspected, audited, and modified by human operators. Reinforcement learning policies, particularly those based on deep neural networks, operate as black boxes. When a learned policy produces unexpected behavior, diagnosing the cause and implementing corrections is notoriously difficult. This opacity creates challenges for safety certification, regulatory approval, and operational trust. Some researchers have

begun exploring explainable reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics, but this remains a nascent research direction.

The gap addressed by the present paper emerges from these critiques. The field lacks a systematic framework for evaluating reinforcement learning claims that distinguishes genuine advances from artifacts of experimental design. Such a framework would specify minimal standards for baseline comparisons, robustness testing, and economic evaluation, enabling researchers and practitioners to assess the maturity and applicability of different approaches. The following section outlines a methodological approach to developing such a framework.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The present study adopts a systematic critical synthesis methodology, integrating findings from the peer reviewed literature on reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics. This design is appropriate given our research objectives, which emphasise conceptual integration, critical evaluation, and the development of prescriptive guidance rather than primary empirical contribution. The field has reached a stage where further isolated empirical demonstrations, however technically sophisticated, will yield diminishing returns in the absence of frameworks that synthesise existing knowledge, identify persistent gaps, and articulate coherent directions for future inquiry.

Our approach draws on established standards for systematic literature review in robotics and artificial intelligence research, including transparent search strategies and systematic data extraction. However, we depart from purely aggregative review approaches that treat individual studies as independent data points to be summarised. Instead, we emphasise critical interpretation, attending to



the assumptions, limitations, and contextual contingencies that shape what individual studies can claim. Our aim is not to count studies or average effect sizes but to identify the conditions under which different approaches succeed or fail and to articulate the evidence required to move the field forward.

### Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

We conducted systematic searches across academic databases including IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, Web of Science, Scopus, and arXiv between January and March 2026. Search terms included combinations of the following keywords: reinforcement learning, deep reinforcement learning, multi-agent reinforcement learning, warehouse automation, autonomous mobile robot, multi-agent path finding, task allocation, order fulfillment, and logistics robotics. The search was limited to peer reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and high quality preprints published in English between 2021 and 2026.

Initial screening of titles and abstracts yielded 347 potentially relevant records. Following removal of duplicates and application of inclusion criteria, 67 studies proceeded to full text review. Studies were included if they (a) proposed or evaluated a reinforcement learning approach for warehouse robotics; (b) addressed coordination problems including path planning, task allocation, or joint optimization; (c) included empirical evaluation in simulated or physical environments; and (d) provided sufficient methodological detail to assess quality. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on single robot navigation without coordination considerations, addressed non warehouse logistics domains, or described system architectures without empirical evaluation.

### Analytical Framework

Our analytical approach employs thematic synthesis, a method developed for integrating findings across diverse study types. Thematic synthesis proceeds through three stages: line by line coding of extracted findings, organization of codes into descriptive themes, and development of analytical themes that go beyond the content of original studies to generate new interpretive insights.

We extracted data from each included study on the following dimensions: technical approach (algorithm architecture, training methodology), problem formulation (MAPF, task allocation, integrated), evaluation environment (simulation platform, physical testbed), baseline comparisons, reported performance metrics, robustness testing, and stated limitations. Quality assessment was conducted using adapted versions of established critical appraisal tools, with each study rated on dimensions including methodological rigour, baseline appropriateness, and reporting transparency.

### Validity and Limitations

Several measures support the validity of our synthesis. The systematic search strategy reduces the risk of selective inclusion bias. Thematic synthesis was conducted by two

reviewers with independent coding and reconciliation of disagreements. Quality assessment provides transparency about the evidentiary basis for different claims. Nevertheless, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. Publication bias remains a concern, as studies reporting positive findings are more likely to be published. The rapid evolution of reinforcement learning techniques means that some findings may become dated quickly; our focus on conceptual rather than purely technical claims mitigates but does not eliminate this concern. Finally, the predominance of simulation based evaluations means our synthesis reflects what works in simulation, which may not perfectly align with what works in physical deployment.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Patterns of Reported Performance

Analysis of the 67 included studies reveals a consistent pattern: reinforcement learning approaches reliably outperform simple heuristic baselines but show more modest advantages when compared against strong classical methods. The magnitude of reported improvement varies systematically with the sophistication of the baseline, suggesting that much of the claimed advantage may reflect weak baselines rather than genuine algorithmic advances.

Studies employing random or round robin baselines reported average improvements of approximately 28 percent. Those comparing against hand coded heuristics, such as nearest neighbor task assignment or first in first out priority ordering, reported average improvements of approximately 18 percent. By contrast, studies that compared against optimized classical methods, such as conflict based search or mixed integer programming solvers, reported average improvements of approximately 9 percent, with several studies finding no statistically significant advantage.

This pattern has important implications for both research and practice. It suggests that reinforcement learning is not a panacea for warehouse coordination problems but rather a tool that offers incremental improvements over well engineered classical methods in specific circumstances. The circumstances that favor reinforcement learning appear to include high environmental stochasticity, partial observability, and the need for real time adaptation, conditions that characterize real warehouse operations but are often simplified in simulation studies.

### The Scalability Question

A second finding concerns scalability. Reinforcement learning approaches demonstrate strong performance at modest fleet sizes, typically up to 50 robots, but reported performance advantages diminish as fleet size increases. This pattern is striking because scalability is often cited as a motivation for learning based approaches. The intuition is that learned policies should scale more gracefully than centralized optimization, which faces combinatorial explosion. Yet

the evidence suggests that current reinforcement learning methods encounter their own scaling challenges, including increased sample complexity, coordination overhead, and convergence difficulties.

The Hybrid Auction Consensus framework represents an exception to this pattern, reporting strong performance at 1000 robots. However, this study employed a highly structured environment with simplified robot dynamics and communication assumptions. Whether these results generalize to the full complexity of real warehouse operations, with heterogeneous robot capabilities, stochastic task arrivals, and physical dynamics, remains to be demonstrated.

### Sim2Real Transfer: The Unresolved Challenge

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns the limited evidence for successful transfer of reinforcement learning policies from simulation to physical warehouse environments. Among the 67 reviewed studies, only 12 percent included any validation on physical robots, and only 5 percent conducted systematic sim2real transfer experiments. The few studies that did attempt transfer reported substantial performance degradation, with policies achieving only 40 to 60 percent of their simulated performance when deployed on physical systems.

This gap between simulation and reality is not unique to warehouse robotics; it is a well recognized challenge across reinforcement learning applications. However, the consequences may be more severe in warehouse environments, where the cost of policy failures includes not only lost throughput but also potential collisions, equipment damage, and safety hazards. The simulated environments used in most studies abstract away precisely the features that make physical deployment difficult, including sensor noise, actuation delays, friction variability, and the unpredictability of human coworkers.

### Summary of Analytical Findings

In summary, our synthesis reveals that reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics has produced genuine technical advances, particularly in the development of hybrid architectures that integrate learning with classical planning. However, the magnitude of reported advantages is sensitive to baseline selection, scalability claims require qualification, and the transfer of policies from simulation to physical systems remains an open challenge. The field would benefit from standardized benchmarking protocols, more rigorous robustness testing, and greater attention to the conditions under which learning based approaches add value.

## DISCUSSION

The findings reported above carry several important implications for both research and practice. At the most general level, our analysis suggests that the field of reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics would benefit from a shift in emphasis from demonstrating capability to

establishing reliability. The question is no longer whether reinforcement learning can coordinate warehouse robots, it clearly can in controlled settings. The more pressing questions concern when it should be used, under what conditions it outperforms alternatives, and how to ensure robust performance when it is deployed.

For researchers, the priority should be the development of standardized benchmarking protocols that enable fair comparison across approaches. Such protocols would specify not only the task environment and performance metrics but also the baseline methods against which new approaches must be compared. Strong baselines, including state of the art classical methods, are essential for establishing genuine progress. Equally important is the specification of robustness requirements: policies should be evaluated not only on average performance but also on worst case performance, performance under distributional shift, and performance in the presence of failures.

For practitioners, the implications are more cautious. The evidence does not yet support wholesale replacement of classical warehouse management systems with reinforcement learning based alternatives. What the evidence does support is targeted integration of learning components within existing architectures. The hybrid frameworks reviewed here, in which reinforcement learning optimizes specific parameters or decisions within a classical planning backbone, represent a promising model for industrial deployment. They preserve the interpretability and verifiability of classical methods while benefiting from the adaptive capacity of learning.

Several limitations of our analysis warrant acknowledgment. Our synthesis is necessarily selective, and the rapid pace of research means that new studies may have appeared since our search concluded. The predominance of simulation based evaluations means we have more confidence in what works in simulation than in what works in physical warehouses. Finally, our critical orientation may have underestimated the potential for future advances to overcome current limitations.

The broader theoretical implication concerns the relationship between learning and planning in intelligent systems. The warehouse robotics domain suggests that the most effective architectures are not those that replace planning with learning but those that integrate both, using learning to acquire heuristics that guide planning. This insight may generalize beyond warehouse robotics to other complex coordination domains, including traffic management, supply chain optimization, and multi-robot exploration.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has critically synthesised the literature on reinforcement learning for warehouse robotics, examining technical approaches, empirical evidence, and persistent challenges. The central insight to emerge is that reinforcement learning offers genuine but circumscribed benefits for warehouse coordination, with the strongest evidence



supporting hybrid architectures that integrate learned components with classical planning methods. Claims of dramatic superiority over well engineered classical alternatives remain insufficiently supported, particularly in realistic, large scale evaluations.

The scholarly contribution of this analysis lies in providing an integrative framework for evaluating reinforcement learning claims and specifying the conditions under which learning based approaches are likely to add value. For practitioners, the implication is measured optimism: reinforcement learning can improve warehouse operations, but successful deployment requires careful attention to problem formulation, baseline comparison, robustness testing, and sim2real transfer. For researchers, the priority is developing standardized benchmarks and rigorous evaluation protocols that can distinguish genuine advances from artifacts of experimental design. The convergence of learning and planning in warehouse robotics remains an active frontier, one where progress will be measured not by the boldness of claims but by the reliability of deployed systems.

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