

# How to Become the Next CFO

A practical guide for finance professionals  
positioning for career growth



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# The Emerging CFO Opportunity

If you're a finance professional with ambitions to move to the C-suite, your timing couldn't be better. Demand for CFOs is increasing, but the role is also evolving.

“Finance leaders have always been strategic, data-driven business stewards and monitors, reporting the results for their organization monthly, quarterly, and annually. As we enter a post-COVID-19 pandemic phase businesses’ CFOs and financial leaders are routinely being asked to move beyond the numbers and financial expertise to tackle talent management, employee experience, hybrid work models, sustainability, diversity, and geopolitics. As a result, CFOs must find a way to blend financial acumen, analytical skill, and human connection. CFOs must be able to effectively communicate not only a business’ financial position but also its mission, purpose, and social standing.”<sup>1</sup>

Fueled by a growing global marketplace and infusions of capital, many medium-sized companies are expanding and actively seeking the strategic financial oversight they need to stay competitive, profitable, and compliant.

With all these opportunities on the horizon, how can today's finance director or VP get ready for their next career move? What does it take to become an effective CFO? What skills do you need to develop? And just as important, how do you gain the visibility to ensure you'll be considered when that seat at the table needs to be filled?

We sought insights from successful CFOs, executive recruiters and industry experts to find out.

Read on to get practical advice, tips, and tools to gain the skills and credibility you need as a finance professional to become a viable CFO candidate.

1. [Worldwide Financial Applications Forecast, 2022–2026: CFOs Moving Beyond the Numbers, June 2022, IDC #US49194023](#)

## Check In

# Fundamentals of the CFO Role



# Fundamentals of the CFO Role

Although the responsibilities of a CFO may seem intuitive, the role is often misunderstood. While it's true that the CFO is charged with optimizing the company's financial performance – from reporting and liquidity to return on investment – the duties of this job extend well beyond that of the stereotypical bean counter. That responsibility has expanded even further since the pandemic, and there are now multifaceted areas that finance are responsible for.

## A high-level view of the job

Although every company is a little different, most CFO jobs often include these fundamentals:

- Assist in formulating the company's future direction and supporting tactical initiatives
- Provide strategic recommendations to enhance financial performance and new business opportunities

- Manage the processes for financial forecasting and budgets, while advising and overseeing the preparation of all long-term financial planning and reporting
- Supervise acquisition due diligence and negotiate acquisitions
- Review all formal finance, HR, and IT procedures and implementing operational best practices
- Advise on changes to the business post-pandemic, for example sustainability practices, flexible working, and digital transformation

Typically, a CFO candidate needs 10 to 15 years of viable experience to even get on a recruiter's radar – and they must have the right combination of proven financial, business, and technological skills to get the job done.

“With a more global workforce and remote or hybrid workers, the ability to work with a diverse group of people is more critical than ever. Historically, HR leaders were responsible for the talent management cycle, but future-ready CFOs are doubling down on their human capital strategy by looking at structure and making sure they have the right people in the right chairs and that their teams are being offered the right growth opportunities.”<sup>2</sup>

– Cathy Logue, Managing Director, Global Practice Leader, CFO and Financial Executives, Stanton Chase

2. [SAP Concur, CFO Insights Series: Building a Future-Ready Finance Skill Set, 2023.](#)



# 4 Common Myths About the CFO Role Debunked

## 1

**A CFO's main job is cutting costs.**

**Reality:** A CFO's focus is growing revenue, increasing profits, and protecting cash flow. A CFO will have a deeper understanding of the organization, understanding financial and non-financial risks, and how to successfully mitigate them.

## 3

**Being a CFO primarily involves number-crunching and spreadsheets.**

**Reality:** The CFO is a key member of the executive team. The job focuses on cross-functional strategic planning, performance monitoring, and financial oversight.

## 2

**If you're good at finance, you'll make an excellent CFO.**

**Reality:** While most CFOs may start their careers as accountants, not all accountants have the skills to become a CFO. They need to be able to navigate cross-department complexities with ease by communicating with all key stakeholders.

## 4

**CFOs are short-term focused and don't welcome new technology.**

**Reality:** CFOs evaluate businesses in months, quarters, and years, but they are also focused on long-term objectives and meeting business goals. They also often drive implementation of new technology that will greatly benefit their business.



## The CFO Position

### Financial and Professional Skills Required





# Financial and Professional Skills Required

## Finance fundamentals:

Although the position has rapidly evolved from transactional to highly analytical, it still requires demonstrated hands-on experience with:

- Budgeting
- Analysis
- Cash flow management
- Compliance
- Expense management
- Forecasting
- Mergers and acquisitions
- Risk management
- Reporting
- Debt management
- Strategic planning
- Tax strategies

At the same time, the CFO must stay on top of regulatory compliance, changing trade agreements, and evolving international tax laws. They need to gauge the potential impact of each on the supply chain and overall business strategy. For even the most skilled finance professional, there's a lot to learn.



“As a finance leader, I’m focusing on the basics. For me, that includes embracing digital transformation and optimization of revenue growth with improved profitability in a sustainable way for long-term business health. You also need realistic planning and a good sense of the macroeconomic environment and the agility to course correct as needed to make decisions that go beyond short-term ambitions.”<sup>3</sup>

– Thomas Lavin, Chief Controlling Officer, Marketing and Solutions, SAP

### The CFO Career Path

In addition to a master’s degree and a professional finance qualification (such as ACCA or CIMA), most finance executives have previous experience as:

- Accounts assistant
- Controller
- Treasury executive
- Divisional finance VP or division CFO

Though the path to CFO in the past has been quite rigid, modern times call for modern CFOs. They need to have a deep understanding of the business and have experience company-wide.

3. SAP Concur, *CFO Insights: Top Priorities for CFOs in 2024*

### Business fundamentals

As counterintuitive as it may sound, no one becomes a CFO based on financial knowledge alone. These business skills are just as important to the job as financial expertise:



#### Communication

You'll need to boil down complex financial topics into simple messages that non-finance experts can understand, without talking down to them. That's a talent that separates a CFO from all other finance executives.



#### Sustainability focused

CFOs play a critical role in driving business strategy and sustainability should be top of the priority list when making any big decisions. The legislative landscape is changing to ensure businesses mitigate climate risk, and it's imperative CFOs stay ahead of the curve.

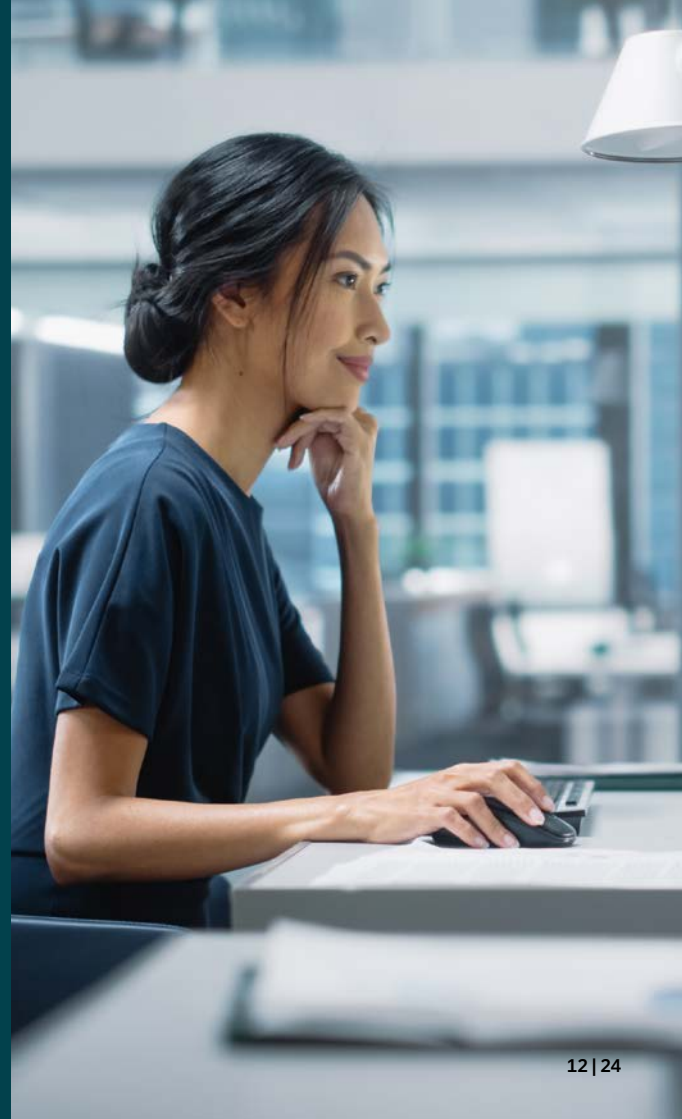


#### Decision-making and leadership

In many meetings, everyone is waiting for the CFO to make a decision. The ability to assimilate information quickly, weigh the options, and take responsibility for every decision is key.

# **The CFO Position**

## Technological Skills Required



# Technological Skills Required

CFOs have moved from simply using the technology they're given to becoming champions for digital change. As Cathy Logue, Managing Director, Global Practice Leader, CFO and Financial Executives, Stanton Chase explains:

“The role of the CFO and finance organization continues to evolve beyond managing the important financial reporting and control functions. Today’s CFOs are forward-thinking. They are embedded in the business, working as key members of the management team, not just supporting the business. They are proactive, embracing and driving transformation, digital and otherwise, and they are resilient, especially in turbulent times.”<sup>4</sup>

If your current technological knowledge is limited to spreadsheet software and your company's ERP, our experts recommend taking the steps on the following pages.

4. [SAP Concur, CFO Insights Series: Top Priorities for CFOs in 2024, 2023.](#)





### 1. Fine-tune your data and analytics skills

With access to real-time data analytics and reporting on key performance metrics, finance executives can better plan, manage allocations, and get a centralized view of the business – without the blind spots. But you need to know what you have, what you need, and what you want to see.

Consider attending courses and seminars or joining free online sessions that detail how to put together finance queries, use data analytics and manage datasets to improve your knowledge, and put you in a stronger position for career progression.



### 2. Identify where technology could improve company processes

Dissect your department's operations to identify where technology or automation could reduce steps, improve accuracy, or decrease costs for the company. Calculate the potential ROI, impacts, and process changes – both within the department as well as for the business as a whole.

It's a good way to uncover operational inefficiencies and start exploring potential solutions, their costs, and their value. This is increasingly a key requirement of the CFO.



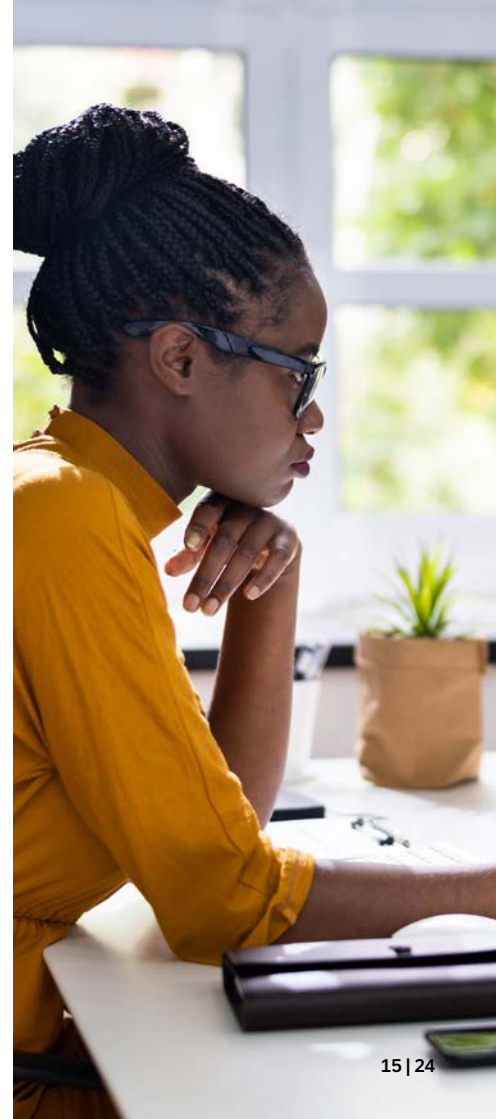
### 3. Stay on top of emerging technologies, trends, and developments

The ability to adopt technology in finance operations, as well as understand how it can enable other areas of the company to improve time to market, increase profitability, or support revenue growth is key for any CFO.

“Many finance leaders feel that the emergence of AI will pose a threat to their position and their team, while at the same time believe AI will help business operations and risk management become more effective. While the impact of AI on finance job levels is still being assessed, it will significantly change how the people that finance leaders manage work. The job of the finance leader is to find the sweet spot of combining artificial and human intelligence to generate meaningful insight.”<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Lavin, Chief Controlling Officer, Marketing and Solutions, SAP

5. [SAP Concur, CFO Insights Series: Building a Future-Ready Finance Skill Set, 2023.](#)





### 4. Build relationships with IT leadership

Now is the time to build a relationship with IT if you haven't already. The more IT, leadership understands about your role and needs, the better they can work with you and recommend the right solutions.

The reality is that adaptive technologies will change what “business as usual” looks like for nearly every aspect of finance and financial management. Anyone preparing to become a CFO must stretch beyond their accounting roots and become an advocate for technological change.



### 5. Be a sponsor for digital transformation

Most organizations will have gone through some level of digital transformation over the last couple of years. But it's important to take the lead on any further transformation and become a champion for innovation and change within the business.

Before you do this, ensure you have successfully adapted to new ways of working so you can demonstrate the value to the wider business and increase adoption.



# 5 Technology Trends CFOs Should Watch

## 1

### Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) has more to offer than task automation. CFOs can use AI to interconnect tools that deliver better business decisions and actions.

## 3

### Cloud Computing

The next generation of cloud computing will spark the explosion of connected devices and more real-time user interfaces.

## 5

### The Finance Department

Hiring, retaining, and building digital skills within the finance department will be a top priority for most CFOs looking to support employee engagement.

## 2

### Business Data

Providing data as a service will be a key driver for more effective decisions and help drive growth within the business. Ensure your tech stack can support this need.

## 4

### Cryptocurrencies

Cryptocurrencies have emerged as mainstream, and CFOs must stay on top of this trend as organizations start using them as a storage of value.

## Self-Marketing

Gain Visibility Within Your  
Company and Business  
Community



# Gain Visibility Within Your Company and Business Community

Even if you develop the right skill sets, advancing your career takes active self-promotion, relationship building, and industry involvement.

Here's what our experts recommend:



## **Make your intentions known**

No one ever made it to executive management by patiently waiting on the sidelines. Talk to your manager about your career ambitions.

Ask for advice and periodically report on your progress. It's likely that your boss will even become your advocate and give you opportunities to work on projects to further grow your skills.



## **Volunteer to take on a big project**

A great strategy for gaining visibility is to volunteer to solve your boss's most pressing challenge. Doing this shows the executive team that you're a problem-solver, a leader, and someone who can make a positive impact on the company. It will also provide excellent experience that you can use in your day-to-day role and pass on to your team.



## **Decision-making and leadership**

Instead of just joining finance associations, be an active participant. Volunteer to head membership, host a webinar, or run an event. If there's an opportunity to sit on a panel at a conference or speak on a topic that showcases your expertise, don't hesitate.

# Network, Network, Network!

“If you’re introverted, you’re going to have to work at networking, because it won’t come naturally to you. But it’s something that absolutely pays off. I can’t count how many times I’ve met someone, built a relationship and months or years later, leveraged that relationship to solve a problem, learn something new, or give a member of my staff an opportunity.”

– Chris Arendale, VP of Finance, SAP



## Action Plan

Getting from Where  
You Are to Where You  
Want to Be



# Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be

Now is the time to start taking incremental steps to fill the gaps in your experience or knowledge base. Although the process takes time, the important thing is that you commit to consistently doing something every quarter that moves you closer to your ultimate career goal.

Here's a quarterly action plan template to get you started.

Goals	Action steps	Possible resources	Target date	Actual date
Finance-related goal:     (e.g., Earn ACCA or CIMA)	1.  2.  3.  4.  (e.g., Register/take courses to qualify for membership)	     (e.g., My boss, my friend who is a member)		
Business-related goal:     (e.g., Improve my public speaking skills)	1.  2.  3.  4.  (e.g., Research public speaking courses, practice public speaking, read public speaking book)	     (e.g., LinkedIn Learning, Google, Ted Talks, Intranet)		

Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be

Goals	Action steps	Possible resources	Target date	Actual date
Technology-related goal:  (e.g., Get a better understanding of finance data and analytics)	1. 2. 3. 4.  (e.g., Begin to understand all the company's data sources and how data is collected and used)	     (e.g., Head of IT, supplier webinars)		



## Next Steps

# The Future Is Up to You

As the role of CFO continues to expand and evolve, dedicated finance leaders will have the opportunity to move from where they are today to the C-suite. With an honest self-assessment, a strong network, and a commitment to proactively fill knowledge gaps, you can give yourself a competitive advantage in the job market when the time is right.

For more information on SAP Concur Solutions, visit [concur.com](https://concur.com)

Download our [CFO Insights Series: Top Skills Every Finance Leader Needs to Succeed](#) and [90-day CFO checklist](#) to learn more about the top future finance leader job skills and to help with a successful introduction to the role.

