

REFRAMING THE CFO MANDATE

AI's emerging role in modern finance

STOIX



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ABOUT THESE INSIGHTS

Senior finance leaders are working through a period of rapid change as AI develops faster than established practices. Many are finding that the pace of new tools outstrips the level of certainty they can offer their organisations.

Bringing together leaders from a range of sectors, we hosted a roundtable to look at what's working, what's not, and what this technology shift means for senior finance professionals.

MEET THE PANEL



Tom Smith
Consulting CFO, Generis



Kalli Bowyer
CFO, Cero Generation



Samuel Mark Brandman
Chief Financial Officer Advisor,
Amplified Global



Scott Ryan
CFO, MPB



Steven Ramsey
Global Chief Financial Officer,
ADM Indicia



Carilyn Ng
Director, Liberty Global



Tom Platford
Fractional Chief Financial
Officer, Early-Stage Startups



Alistair Langan
Global Commercial Finance Senior
Director, Ex Sony PlayStation

LEARNING *WHILE LEADING*

The environment CFOs are navigating today offers fewer reference points from past experience.

AI is advancing at a pace that makes it difficult for finance leaders to rely on established playbooks. Understanding of tools, capabilities and limitations is changing quickly, often month by month. This creates a leadership challenge. Senior roles traditionally assume a high degree of certainty, yet AI adoption requires leaders to learn alongside their teams.

Finance leaders are increasingly operating without fully formed frameworks. Progress often comes through experimentation rather than predefined models. While AI is already delivering value, its quality remains uneven. Some tools improve speed and insight while others require close supervision to avoid errors. Because finance operates under tighter controls and higher accuracy expectations than most functions, cautious progress has become the default stance.

The challenge is no longer whether AI will feature on the finance agenda, but how to move forward responsibly. Leaders must build capability at a sustainable pace and guide teams through a period where learning and leadership develop in parallel.



Senior roles traditionally assume a high degree of certainty, yet AI adoption requires leaders to learn alongside their teams.

In practice, this requires finance leaders to:

1

Accept that certainty will develop over time rather than upfront

2

Learn alongside their teams rather than directing from fixed frameworks

3

Balance experimentation with the control standards expected of the function



THE CFO'S *NEW TERRAIN*

AI is moving faster than the governance and decision frameworks that typically support finance leadership. While CFOs are expected to provide direction, much of the practical learning is happening within teams as analysts and operational staff test tools, build small automations and adapt workflows.



LEARNING HAPPENS *CLOSEST TO THE WORK*

Effective leadership in this context requires creating safe conditions for experimentation while accepting that insight often comes from those closest to the work.

Teams respond differently to AI. Some engage quickly, others remain cautious, and some disengage after early setbacks. CFOs must create space for this range of responses while setting boundaries that protect the organisation from unnecessary risk.



BALANCING OPPORTUNITY *AND CAUTION*

This balance between opportunity and caution is becoming central to the CFO mandate. Finance leaders are expected to help the wider business understand the implications of AI while maintaining standards of data integrity and control that cannot be compromised.

The path forward depends on shaping a culture where learning, caution and curiosity can coexist.

ADOPTION *REALITY*

AI adoption in finance is progressing more cautiously than in other functions, not due to lack of interest, but because of the level of accuracy required in financial outputs.

CONSTRAINTS SHAPING *EARLY ADOPTION*

A consistent pattern emerging is that AI is currently more effective at identifying patterns and anomalies than at guaranteeing data reliability.

This places accountability firmly with finance leadership. Any misjudgement in how AI is used can carry financial, legal or reputational consequences, reinforcing a reluctance to move quickly.

Trust is further challenged by inconsistencies in some widely used tools, where visible errors undermine confidence and make broader deployment harder to justify without strong review processes.

WHERE PROGRESS *IS EMERGING*

At the same time, progress is evident. Organisations that have provided controlled access to generative tools often see early enthusiasm, followed by a period of reassessment as limitations become clear. Flexibility remains important. Allowing teams to explore multiple tools, rather than committing too early to a single platform, helps organisations learn what works in practice.

Adoption speed also varies with the scale and quality of underlying data. Organisations with richer datasets are often able to extract more value, while others face structural limits that slow progress regardless of intent.



Any misjudgement in how AI is used can carry financial, legal or reputational consequences, reinforcing a reluctance to move quickly.



INCREMENTAL WINS *THAT ACCUMULATE*

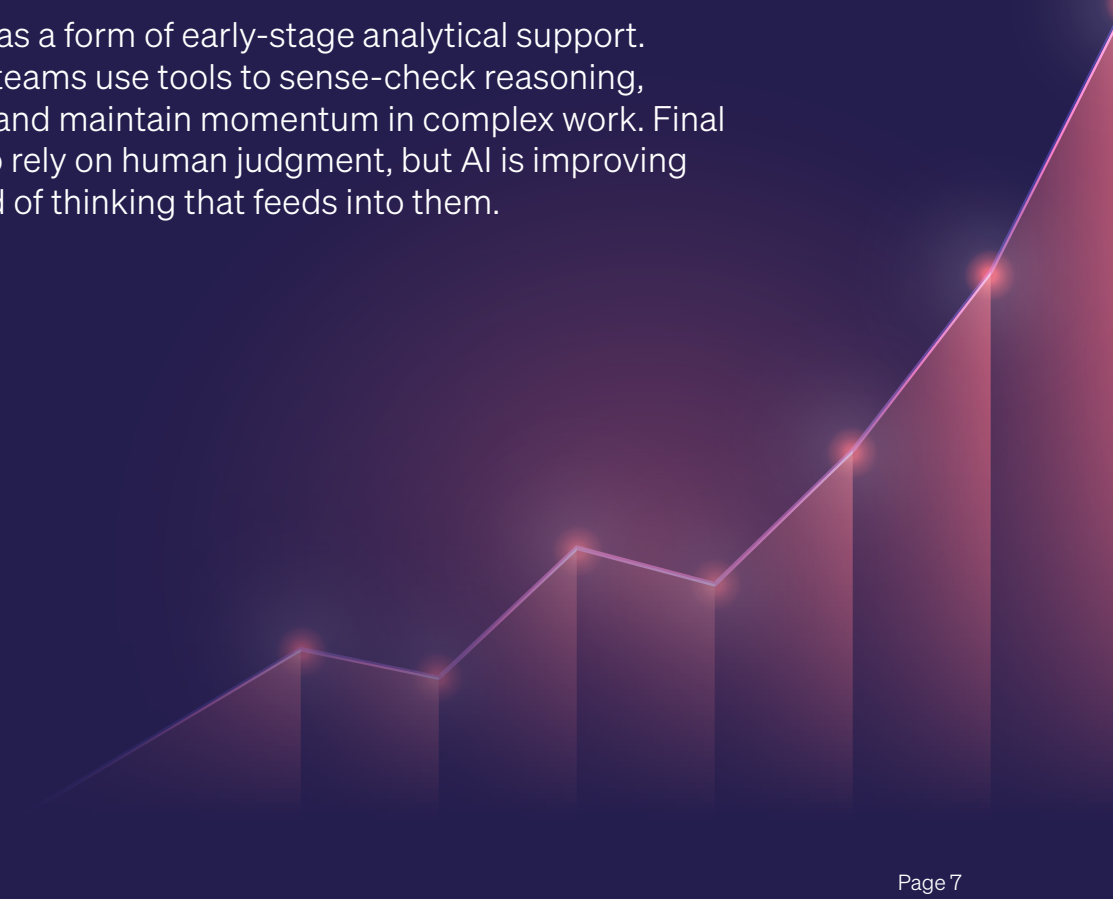
While large-scale transformation is still some distance away, meaningful value is already emerging through small, practical improvements.

Rather than dramatic shifts in operating models, AI is improving speed, clarity and the flow of work across everyday finance activities.

Examples include faster variance analysis, where teams spend less time assembling information and more time understanding underlying drivers.

Other gains appear in less obvious areas, with operational staff often identifying opportunities that formal transformation programmes overlook.

AI is also being used as a form of early-stage analytical support. Finance leaders and teams use tools to sense-check reasoning, explore implications and maintain momentum in complex work. Final decisions continue to rely on human judgment, but AI is improving the quality and speed of thinking that feeds into them.



NEW BEHAVIOURS IN *THE FINANCE FUNCTION*

The most significant barriers to effective AI adoption in finance are cultural rather than technical. Finance functions are built on structure, control and predictability. These foundations remain essential, but they also make experimentation harder to introduce.

Time is a critical constraint. Competing operational demands leave little space to explore new tools, particularly when such work does not produce immediate outputs. Without deliberate support, experimentation is often the first activity to be crowded out by routine cycles.

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO *AI ADOPTION*

In finance, structure, control and predictability make experimentation difficult.

Time restraints: Operational demands leave little space to explore new tools before outputs are seen.

Experimentation is the first activity to be crowded out by routine cycles.

The emergence of new behaviours depends on deliberate practices:

- 1 Creating sandbox environments**
Safe spaces to test ideas without affecting live systems.
- 2 Actively sharing prompts**
Exchanging prompts and workflows as a practical form of collaboration.
- 3 Dedicated time for reflection**
Reviewing what works (and what doesn't) as a regular routine.

CULTURAL CHANGE IS NOW A CENTRAL LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY.

CFOs must create environments where teams can try new approaches, reflect on what they learn and build confidence in using AI as part of their work.

FROM TECHNICAL COMPETENCE TO SYSTEM STEWARDSHIP

Finance roles are shifting away from task-based execution toward judgment, review and oversight of increasingly automated systems.

As AI takes over incremental steps within processes, professionals are required to interpret outputs rather than produce them manually.

This transition can be uncomfortable for teams whose expertise has been built on precision and hands-on detail. It requires new skills and confidence, particularly in evaluating AI-generated outputs.

At the same time, finance teams are operating in more complex regulatory and data environments. Managing multi-jurisdictional requirements and evolving digital reporting obligations reinforces the need for a stewardship model, where finance professionals guide systems rather than operate them step by step.

ADAPTING TO *NEW DEMANDS*

Shifting roles

Manual precision gives way to judgement and review of automated outputs.

New constraints

Manual precision gives way to judgement and review of automated outputs.

MAINTAINING *TRUST & INTEGRITY*

Prompting systems

Defining context and assessing AI's reasoning without being a specialist.

Ensuring reliability

Keeping processes trustworthy and aligned with standards.



The emphasis is shifting from **technical mastery** toward ensuring that AI-enabled processes remain trustworthy and aligned with organisational standards.

THE TALENT MODEL IN FINANCE *IS CHANGING*

As automation reduces the volume of repeatable manual work, the traditional pathways through which early-career finance professionals develop foundational skills are being disrupted. **Tasks that once formed the backbone of training are diminishing.**

This is not simply a training issue. It represents a structural change in how finance capability is built. Organisations will need to rethink the design of early roles, create new ways to develop judgment and ensure that future talent gains a deep understanding of financial fundamentals despite reduced exposure to manual processes.



STRATEGIC RESPONSIBILITIES

IN THE NEXT PHASE OF AI

As AI becomes embedded in everyday decision-making, the CFO's role continues to expand.

Finance leaders are responsible for guiding organisations through rising expectations and shifting boundaries of what is possible.

Standards of accuracy and control remain unchanged. AI does not lower the tolerance for error. At the same time, leaders must protect space for learning and experimentation, ensuring that teams can explore new approaches without undermining core responsibilities.

The CFO also plays a central role in shaping responsible data practices. As more tools draw on sensitive information, clear usage policies and strong understanding of implications become essential.

Leadership in this phase is less about providing answers and more about setting direction. In practice, this places clear expectations on the CFO role.

STRATEGIC RESPONSIBILITIES *FOR FINANCE LEADERS*

Maintain accuracy & control

Standards of accuracy, control and oversight will remain unchanged as adoption increases.

Protect learning & experimentation

Teams need space for structured experimentation to explore and evaluate new approaches.

Set guardrails for data use

Clear policies for responsible use are essential as more tools draw on sensitive information.

Guide through uncertainty

Leadership must provide steady guidance through uncertainty rather than fixed answers.

WHAT COMES *NEXT?*

The next phase of AI adoption in finance is likely to be steady rather than abrupt. Near-term gains will continue to come from incremental improvements that build capability and confidence across teams.

Human oversight will remain essential. Reliability, data integrity and judgment continue to define how finance uses automation. Progress will vary between organisations, but all will need clear guardrails to ensure that learning does not compromise control.

Over time, these incremental steps will support broader system-level change. AI will continue to evolve, and finance functions will evolve with it. The role of the CFO is to guide this shift with consistency, clarity and a focus on building the capabilities that will matter most in the years ahead.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

FOR FINANCE LEADERS

AI is moving faster than established finance practices, creating a gap between tool capability and leadership certainty.

CFOs must guide teams through ambiguity, supporting experimentation while upholding strict standards of accuracy and control.

Adoption remains cautious because finance carries higher accountability for data integrity than other functions.

Early value is emerging through small, practical improvements that enhance speed, analysis and workflow efficiency.

New behaviours are taking hold, including sharing prompts, testing workflows in sandbox environments and building peer-led learning.

The finance skillset is shifting from task execution to judgment, review and the ability to guide AI-enabled systems.

The traditional talent model will need to evolve as early-career manual work declines and foundational learning routes change.

CFOs must set clear guardrails for responsible use, ensure safe data practices and protect time for structured experimentation.

Incremental gains will dominate the near term; system-level transformation will take longer and require careful preparation.

The next phase depends on building confidence, capability and consistency across teams as AI becomes part of daily finance work.

APPENDIX A: *GLOSSARY OF AI TOOLS AND TERMS*

This glossary summarises the tools, concepts and terms referenced during the roundtable.

AI-native ERPs and finance platforms

<p>Rillet</p> <p>An AI-native ERP designed around automation and agent-driven workflows. Built to reduce manual finance activity by embedding intelligence into core processes rather than layering AI onto a traditional ledger structure.</p>	<p>Relic</p> <p>An AI-enabled finance platform positioned within the same emerging category as Rillet. Designed to automate routine steps and support faster operational workflows.</p>
<p>Light</p> <p>An integrated finance operations tool covering bills, expenses, OCR, accounts payable and payment runs. Designed as an all-in-one automation platform with AI supporting routine tasks.</p>	<p>Ramp</p> <p>A finance operations and spend management tool used for expenses, AP and automation. Often paired with newer ERPs to create connected workflows across finance operations.</p>
<p>Campfire AI</p> <p>A finance-focused AI platform providing automation, drafting and review support for operational workflows, planning tasks and internal reporting</p>	

Automation and workflow platforms

<p>N8N</p> <p>A low-code automation platform used to build workflows, connect applications and trigger finance processes. Supports rule-based actions with optional AI-enabled steps.</p>	<p>Zapier</p> <p>An automation platform that links applications and triggers workflow actions without coding.</p>
<p>Google Apps Script</p> <p>A lightweight automation tool used to extend Google Workspace applications such as Sheets, Slides and Forms.</p>	<p>DualEntry</p> <p>A finance operations tool designed to simplify and automate double-entry bookkeeping within connected workflows. Supports cleaner journal posting and structured financial data handling.</p>

Planning and performance tools

<p>Planful</p> <p>A planning, budgeting and forecasting platform used to consolidate financial plans, manage reporting cycles and support scenario modelling within finance teams.</p>	<p>Tableau</p> <p>A data visualisation tool used to present dashboards and analytical outputs.</p>
<p>Alteryx</p> <p>A data preparation and automation tool used for blending data and building repeatable analytical workflows.</p>	

Workflow and automation concepts

<p>Prompt library</p> <p>A shared collection of prompts designed to maintain consistency in how teams interact with AI tools.</p>	<p>Sandbox</p> <p>A protected environment where teams can test tools or workflows without affecting live systems.</p>
<p>Workflow automation</p> <p>The practice of connecting tools or processes to remove manual steps.</p>	<p>Integration scripts</p> <p>Lightweight scripts, often built in tools like Google Apps Script, used to connect or automate actions across systems.</p>
<p>Rolling close / continuous processes</p> <p>A concept referring to finance systems that update continuously rather than monthly. Considered an emerging, not yet mainstream, model.</p>	

Key terms mentioned by participants

<p>Pattern matching</p> <p>AI's strength in identifying anomalies or trends without guaranteeing data accuracy.</p>	<p>Judgment layer</p> <p>The human checkpoint required to assess AI outputs and ensure integrity.</p>
<p>Reviewer role</p> <p>A shift in responsibility as automation reduces preparer tasks and increases the need for evaluation and oversight.</p>	<p>Shadow Tech</p> <p>Technology built or maintained by teams outside formal IT channels; referenced in relation to the CFO's growing role in operational tech.</p>
<p>Data integrity</p> <p>The accuracy, safety and reliability of data used in finance processes.</p>	<p>Guardrails</p> <p>Boundaries and rules set by leadership to ensure safe and responsible experimentation with AI tools.</p>

ABOUT *STOIX*

We're an international, agile, and modern CFO and finance leadership search partner. Our team has experience and networks across all sectors and ownership structures in EMEA, US and Asia.

Established in 2021, we take a rigorous approach, using personal judgement and trusted relationships underpinned by data and modern technology, to drive an efficient process. We have an industry leading completion rate working successfully for both high growth and established businesses.

To talk confidentially about finance leadership hiring or to discuss the findings of this report, contact:
neil.french@stoix.com



NEIL FRENCH

Co-Founder & Director
neil.french@stoix.co.uk

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