

Future-Ready Finance: Productivity at the Human–Technology Crossroads



Contents

3	Introduction
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4	I. Common technology themes in finance functions
---	--

7	Table 1: Key technology initiatives in finance functions
---	--

9	II. CFO-led productivity initiatives: Finance as enabler, not guarantee
---	---

10	III. Future-ready finance: Evolving skills for accountants
----	--

10	Table 2: Key shifts in finance
----	--------------------------------

11	What is changing and what is not
----	----------------------------------

12	Bridging the gaps
----	-------------------

12	Conclusion
----	------------

13	Endnotes
----	----------

Introduction

Information technologies have long been reshaping work in finance and accounting. Tasks once handled manually, such as data entry and transaction reconciliations, have been digitised and often automated. More recently, attention has turned to AI-based tools, which are expected to further accelerate processes and reduce errors. The objective is to shift routine and repetitive activities to machines, enabling finance professionals to focus on higher-value work such as strategic analysis, risk management, and advisory and business partnering. The emerging consensus in both industry and academia is that AI is more likely to reshape roles than replace them, provided finance professionals can upskill and adapt.

Opportunities come with challenges. Research points to growing demand for "full-stack"¹ financial practitioners: experts who are skilled in accounting and finance and are also comfortable with analyzing AI outputs and identifying data trends. For example, controllers will be increasingly valued not just for their oversight, but also for their ability to guide and supervise AI-enabled systems and translate algorithmic-driven insights into information suitable for sound business decisions².

In this context, the ability to build trust through ethical judgement, transparency, and professional integrity continues to be a defining feature of the finance role. Distinctly human skills – such as empathy, curiosity, communication, diplomacy, critical thinking, and ethical judgement – have become salient. Together, three pillars – financial, digital, and human-centred capabilities – form an integrated skill set that is increasingly central to the future of the accounting profession.

AI's rise can be transformative, but it is not turnkey. Productivity gains are neither automatic nor guaranteed. Finance professionals must actively shape how tools are selected, implemented, and used, embracing efficiency benefits while maintaining accountability for judgement-intensive tasks. Following on from our recent [Future-ready finance: Technology, Productivity, and Skills Survey Report](#), this publication draws on roundtables with CIMA members to explore AI adoption stories and use cases, productivity initiatives and barriers, hype versus reality, and the implications for finance roles as the profession seeks to develop future-ready practitioners.

The report first turns to technology, exploring how digitalization, especially AI and automation, are being deployed in finance teams. These real-world initiatives illustrate the changing landscape and set the stage for understanding technology's impact on productivity and the skill set that future-proofs finance careers.

I. Common technology themes in finance functions

Table 1 presents key technological initiatives in finance functions. Across these diverse examples, several recurring themes emerge in how technology is being adopted:

1. Automation of routine work

Automation is delivering efficiency gains today, but it has limits, and companies are proceeding carefully in more complex areas. Despite that, nearly every case shows a strong drive to automate finance tasks. From BI dashboards replacing spreadsheets to agents integrated into ERP systems, finance teams are eliminating manual work to gain speed and accuracy. Tools free up staff for higher-value analysis, so the wins are tangible. However, a key consideration is that automation works for well-defined, repetitive, and streamlined processes. Errors occur if you push automation beyond that. Not everything should or can be automated, especially tasks requiring judgement. And the possibility of hallucinations remains, so human oversight is critical.

2. Data and systems readiness

Many participants stressed that if financial data is unreliable and processes are clunky, tools like BI dashboards or AI analytics will just produce poor outputs. AI will not fix data and process quality. Hence, organizations with clean data, standardized processes, and modern systems gain the most from new technology, whereas those with fragmented legacy systems struggle. Therefore, upgrading ERP platforms and **optimizing processes** were necessary **precursors** to successful tech initiatives.

3. AI optimism tempered by pragmatism

Across the board, finance professionals are exploring AI, and there's a clear optimism about its long-term potential to "change the game" in finance through automation and smarter analysis. Yet the examples reveal a cautious, pragmatic approach rather than blind trust. Many early AI use cases in finance are **small-scale or admin supportive** — using AI to draft emails and documentation, clean data, or accelerate invoice coding, etc. In core finance processes, however, **AI's impact remains limited so far**; no one is letting an algorithm run the entire financial month-end close or statutory submissions, or make investment decisions without human oversight. A recurring theme is the need for **human review** and prudence towards AI outputs. Participants gave examples of AI tools producing incorrect numbers or plausible-sounding, but false answers. In other words, today's AI is powerful for creating drafts and handling repetitive tasks, but it's not mature enough yet for high-stakes finance work without human control. Finance teams are therefore testing AI in controlled ways, often choosing in-house AI solutions to keep data secure and focusing on use cases with clear return on investment. Separating hype from reality and taking a measured approach is important and helps avoid wasted effort on trendy tools until they prove their value.



4. Data security and governance are essential

The **sensitivity of financial data** means technology adoption is entwined with cybersecurity and governance. Several organizations noted that fear of data leaks or compliance breaches slows down the move to external AI tools. A common strategy is implementing strict policies or internal platforms. These efforts show that **trust is a prerequisite** for tech adoption. Finance leaders invest in security systems and access controls to ensure new tools can be used responsibly. The trade-off is that heavy security measures can reduce flexibility and make certain modern tools harder to use. The prevailing view, however, is that maintaining control over data is non-negotiable for finance. Organizations are finding ways to balance innovation with security by clearly defining what data can be used in AI experiments, educating staff about data privacy, and phasing in technology only when proper guardrails are in place.

5. Human factors: adoption, skills, and culture

A critical theme cutting through all conversations is that **technology's success in finance depends on people**. Tools may be available, but getting finance teams to embrace new ways of working is often the hardest part. Many organizations faced **resistance**. For example, out of habit, some colleagues reverted to manual Excel reports despite new dashboards. Others feared that automation threatened their job security and hesitated to use it. Other cases show that when leadership actively drives change and supports the team, adoption improves. Conversely, poor communication or misaligned incentives can stall progress. The **solution** often mentioned is investment in **training, change management, and a culture of innovation**. Successful finance functions created 'safe spaces' for employees to experiment with new tools, ran pilot projects, and ensured peer support, so that users gain confidence and skills over time. Additionally, embedding tech expertise within finance teams (e.g., hiring data analysts into finance) was a tactic to bridge the gap between pure technologists and finance professionals. Across the examples, those organizations that treated tech implementation as a **human transformation project**, not just an IT upgrade, fared better in realizing outcomes.

6. Different speeds, same direction

Finally, while the **pace of tech adoption varies**, all signs point towards an increasingly digital finance function. Depending on the size, business sector, and organizational culture, some companies are **early adopters**, rapidly rolling out AI analytics and expecting quick uptake. Others are held back by legacy systems, regulatory caution, or leadership skepticism. These differences were evident in the roundtables: One finance team implemented an AI-assisted ERP within months, whereas another is putting AI on the back burner for now. Despite these differences, even more traditional firms recognize they must eventually modernize or be left behind. Participants acknowledged that technologies like AI, cloud analytics, and process automation are becoming **standard tools** for finance, much like spreadsheets and basic ERPs in earlier periods. The interim focus for many is getting the **prerequisites** right (data, security, skills) and learning from others' experiences. Notably, several professionals expect the current AI 'buzz' to normalize within a year or two as



companies move from exploration to clearer strategies. In that sense, these discussions reveal a determination to harness technology's advantages, tempered by realism about organization's readiness and a clear view of potential pitfalls.

Although technologies are proving to be enablers, translating their potential into tangible productivity gains is not automatic. The next section examines how CFOs and finance teams are leveraging these innovations, alongside process optimization and cultural changes, to drive meaningful improvements in productivity.



Table 1. Key technology initiatives in finance functions

(Anonymized examples of tech adoption projects, with context, use cases, and outcomes/challenges.)

 Organizational context	 Technology initiative/use cases	 Outcomes and key challenges	 Participant quotes
Large multinational company, operating a finance shared service centre in Central Europe	Deployed an in-house generative AI tool (internal “GPT type” assistant) for finance staff, integrated to the ERP system (SAP). It started as a chatbot for interrogating internal policies and external regulation. Subsequently, it took over tasks like automated invoice processing.	Enabled faster access to information and auto-processing of invoices (cut about 17% of manual adjustments). Safeguarded data by avoiding public AI. Challenges: Strict data privacy and security requirements; cautious user adoption to ensure accuracy and trust.	<i>‘But of course, this world is run by technology and AI. So, unless you adopt, I think, we are not surviving in the market.’</i> <i>‘SAP is just there to store the data ... we have this tailored tool which is more advanced ... it does everything an accountant does in SAP.’</i> <i>‘With this tool, we eliminate like 17% of the manual adjustments in books.’</i> <i>‘Negotiations we cannot do with AI ... we need human intervention.’</i> <i>‘Don’t rely fully on AI. It can misguide you ... You should have a knowledge of IFRS and see whether the AI is working properly or not.’</i>
Mid-sized high-growth SaaS company in Western Europe	Rapid implementation of an AI-enabled ERP system and related automation tools across finance (e.g., new AP management module with built-in controls).	Achieved quick efficiency gains through end-to-end process integration. Finance and IT roles converged (e.g., a finance team member with coding skills eliminated need for extra IT support). Challenges: Intensive cross-functional effort to deploy multiple systems in months; required upskilling staff and close collaboration to realize benefits.	<i>‘I remember that previously implementing ERP, it could take one year, a year and a half or so. I see how quickly, just in a couple of months, we made this AP management tool, and we go live with it and all the controls are there and risks are mitigated and everything is integrated, and it’s beautiful how currently software which is on the market is much easier and better compared to some other products we used previously for our accounting or other functions.’</i> <i>‘The ability to implement it quickly and simultaneously, not one module at a time, really improved productivity.’</i> <i>‘It’s such a close collaboration that sometimes it’s really hard to understand where the product idea comes from, from finance or product team, and which analytics is better: product analytics or finance analytics.’</i>
Established utility company modernizing reporting in Eurasia region	Business Intelligence (BI) dashboards (Power BI) replacing manual Excel reports, mandated by CFO to automate management reporting	Significantly reduced report preparation time and provided faster data insights for decisions. Challenges: Integrating new BI tools with legacy systems — outdated source systems and unreliable data needed fixing, which complicated implementation. Training finance staff/users to fully utilize the BI tool was also crucial (underuse of advanced features was a risk).	<i>‘In terms of automation, I think a lot of businesses are getting better at automation — whether it be through BI dashboards or being able to present data to an operations team or a nonfinancial stakeholder. But the big thing this doesn’t capture ... is the people who you’re then making the data useful for — they’re not comfortable with having data in that format.’</i>

Table 1. Key technology initiatives in finance functions (continued)

 Organizational context	 Technology initiative/use case	 Outcomes and key challenges	 Participant quotes
UK organization where nature of operations requires strict security measures	Careful adoption of AI assistants and process automation under strict data controls (e.g., piloting Microsoft Copilot for drafting emails and introducing fully online forms for purchase orders, travel requests, etc.) in place of paper workflows.	Streamlined routine tasks: email drafting and form processing are faster, reducing administrative burden. Challenges: Extreme cybersecurity measures protect data, but limit flexibility that IT innovations can provide.	<i>'So, security is our number one priority. And, at the moment, it's a massive, massive concern because of the weaknesses in the world that are going on. So, we have a good understanding of AI, but we have a good understanding of its limitations as well.'</i>
Family-owned, traditional manufacturing firm in Central Europe	Process standardization and ERP integration to enable a government mandated e-invoicing system (compliance-driven change)	Automated a previously manual, error-prone process in the ERP, ensuring regulatory compliance. The new e-invoicing capability became operational before the legal deadline, illustrating the high stakes of tech-driven transformation in this context. Challenges: Major change management effort requiring cross-department and external partner alignment.	<i>'I cannot trust AI ... because quality of data is still an issue.'</i> <i>'Everybody says, "We need to adopt AI", but nobody sees that we have hundreds of other strategic projects running.'</i> <i>'IT companies [vendors] are today on the market, tomorrow they disappear.'</i>
Large multinational cloud software vendor, based in West Europe	ERP-driven automation Multiyear ERP implementations and upgrades with Oracle. Automating high-volume, low-complexity calculations (e.g., transfer pricing, cost-plus invoicing). Standardizing processes across international subsidiaries. Leveraging built-in ERP features to reduce manual work.	Significant reduction in time taken for routine tasks. Teams shifted focus from transactional tasks to analytical and supervisory roles. Improved consistency and scalability in financial operations. Challenges: Underutilization of existing ERP features due to lack of awareness. Resistance from staff preferring legacy tools. Need for ongoing discovery and collaboration with technical teams to unlock ERP capabilities.	<i>'In terms of AI, I think there is definitely the drive, but what I appreciate as well is, to a certain extent, let's not be the beta testers, right? There is, of course, a pro of being a beta tester, but sometimes waiting a little bit and letting others figure things out makes it much more productive and easier for you to be successful. So, I think that that's how I would describe the mindset for me for now, but, as I say, this is also combined with extreme pressure on resources.'</i> <i>'I still don't see it really ... AI as a technology is very powerful, but it still doesn't solve problems. When we look at successful companies, startups ... they often started with solving certain practical existing problems. And it often is something totally trivial and the best if it's something people don't like doing. And I think AI has a huge potential, but I don't see it harnessed yet.'</i>
Global finance shared service centre of a technology company in West Europe	An AI-based tool to approve expense reports and similar back-office transactions.	Delivered dramatic efficiency gains — for instance, automated expense approvals cut manual work by about 80%, speeding up cycle times. Challenges: Workforce impact — redeploying or reducing roles as automation scales, prompting fears of job loss in some staff. Firms must carefully weigh what should be automated. Consider ROI versus what still benefits from human judgement, and invest in reskilling employees for more analytical, value-added roles.	<i>'I think the impact on shared service centres will be huge. I work in a technology company. We already use our own software to do expense approval and reduce the manual workload by 80%. And this was a major change, and the software we use was not even super expensive. It's our own software.'</i> <i>'If you think about where the headcount sits, even if it sits in Manila or India, you have over 1,000 people keying in invoices. And you have standardized processes for this because this is a shared service centre. This was already optimized, standardized to the maximum possible. The scalability there is huge. And even if it's 1,000 people in Manila, the savings are huge. So, there will be software there really soon.'</i>

II. CFO-led productivity initiatives: Finance as enabler, not guarantee

Finance leaders increasingly recognize that productivity gains require more than cost-cutting. True impact comes from rethinking processes, leveraging technology, and investing in people. Yet, success is far from guaranteed.

Technology as a lever, not a fix

- CFOs have led major system upgrades and automation efforts, replacing outdated platforms with ERPs and dashboards.
- These initiatives can streamline reporting and free up time for higher-value work — but only when paired with reliable data and system integration.
- One CFO emphasized the need to ‘take the leap’ despite transition challenges, while others noted that automation without data quality and standardization often fails to deliver.

Collaboration and accountability

- Productivity also improves when finance redefines how teams work. In one case, a CFO centralized accounting specialization across group companies, reducing duplication and clarifying roles.
- This approach fostered ownership, broke down silos, and improved service delivery across divisions

People make it work

- Technology alone doesn’t drive productivity — people do. Leaders who neglect this risk disengagement and burnout.
- ‘Do more with less’ mandates, without support or security, erode motivation. One participant noted, *‘When people don’t have job security ... they also lack motivation to develop.’*
- Effective CFOs build trust through transparency, coaching, and clear communication of purpose. They support upskilling and create space for experimentation.
- In one company, an automation project failed until leadership acknowledged the need for trust and training. As the finance leader put it: *‘Technology won’t drive productivity by itself. People have to make it work.’*



The cost-cutting trap

- Some organizations pursue productivity by reducing headcount. But work doesn't vanish with roles, so remaining staff face unsustainable pressure.
- Productivity gains achieved through attrition are often short-lived and risk long-term performance.
- CFOs need to combine cost discipline with clear priorities, employee support, and a realistic view of capacity.

Ultimately, even the most sophisticated systems and processes depend on the people who use them. The following section turns to the evolving capabilities for finance professionals to thrive in this new era, where financial expertise must be paired with digital proficiency and strong human-centric skills.

III Future-ready finance: Evolving skills for accountants

The accounting profession is undergoing a transformation. Table 2 outlines the shift from traditional practices to digitally enabled roles:

Table 2. Key shifts in finance

 Pre-digitalization	 New ways of working
Manual data entry and processing	Automated workflows using AI for data collection, cleansing, and reconciliations.
Periodic financial reporting	Real-time analysis, forecasting, and continuous performance monitoring
Technical accounting know-hows	Hybrid skill set = finance expertise + data analytics and AI tools
Following set procedures	Adaptability and judgement: overseeing AI outputs, handling exceptions
Working in isolation	Collaboration and advisory: co-creating with AI and colleagues, communicating insights

What is changing and what is not

Despite the promise of automation and AI, the profession's evolution is uneven. While systems increasingly handle routine tasks, many finance teams still struggle to shift their focus from compliance to insight. The future demands more than technical upgrades; it calls for a mindset shift.

Key capabilities include

- **Digital fluency**

Familiarity with analytics tools, AI assistants, and data visualization tools is no longer optional. Yet, many professionals underutilize existing system features, often due to lack of awareness or training.

- **Business acumen**

Financial outcomes are shaped by a range of operational and strategic levers across the business. Understanding how business models drive financial outcomes and contextualizing that in the broader market and operational realities is central to modern accounting; this is an area where many early-career accountants remain underprepared.

- **Critical thinking and ethics**

AI can flag anomalies, but only humans can interpret and challenge them with sound judgement. Accountants must interrogate outputs, apply professional skepticism, and ensure that ethical standards are upheld, especially as reliance on opaque algorithms grows.

- **Communication and business partnering**

As finance becomes more embedded across functions, the ability to translate data into actionable insights and influence decisions is essential. Yet, communication remains a weak spot for many new professionals.

- **Adaptability and resilience**

The pace of change is relentless. Those who resist new tools risk obsolescence. Resilience (especially under pressure), curiosity, and continuous learning are now baseline expectations.

Bridging the gaps

Organizations are investing in upskilling, but training alone won't close the gap. What's needed is owning one's growth and development, readiness to constantly challenge workflows, and a mindset that engages with technology critically. Sustained motivation to learn and adapt is vital.

As one finance leader put it: *'Every time there is a big push: What can we do better, how can we automate, how can we simplify?'*

In the end, AI may streamline processes, but it cannot negotiate, build trust, or make ethical decisions. These remain human responsibilities. The future of finance will be shaped not by tools, but by the professionals who know how and when to use them.

Conclusion

Achieving a future-ready finance function requires a careful balance between technological innovation and human expertise. Although AI and automation can unlock significant efficiency gains, lasting productivity improvements depend on robust data foundations, ethical oversight, and a workforce equipped with new digital and strategic skills. Finance teams that embrace continuous learning, foster a culture of innovation, and support their people through change will be best positioned to thrive at the human–technology crossroads, turning today's technological opportunities and challenges into sustainable success.

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Endnotes

¹Aditya Arora, "The Rise of the Full-Stack Financial Analyst: Integrating AI, Risk Management, and Strategic Planning," *European Journal of Computer Science and Information Technology*, 27 April 2025, 13 (10), 101-111, <https://ejournals.org/ejcsit/vol13-issue10-2025/the-rise-of-the-full-stack-financial-analyst-integrating-ai-risk-management-and-strategic-planning/> (accessed 15 April 2026).

²T.F. Alruwaili and M.H. Mgamal, "The impact of artificial intelligence on accounting practices: an academic perspective," *Humanities & Social Science Communications*, 12, 1197 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05004-6> (accessed 25 April 2026).



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