CFO INSIGHTS REPORT

Action for Growth

Strategies for CFOs to navigate economic uncertainty and accelerate growth.

SAP Concur

Foreword

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Welcome to the March 2025 SAP Concur CFO Insights report, our third global survey examining the evolving business environment from the perspective of finance, IT and HR leaders.

Key insights from this report include:

- **Finance leaders are spearheading expansion but could be missing chances to grow through collaboration.** Few want to share responsibility for growth with their C-suite peers, even though this could bring valuable opportunities in areas such as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) priorities, cybersecurity, and digital transformation.
- **CFOs are laser-focused on cost-cutting to drive growth.** Automating manual processes has become a key challenge this year.
- **Nearly all finance leaders now report success from using artificial intelligence (AI),** including in decision-making and cost and risk reduction.

In last year's CFO Insights report, we highlighted how finance leaders were repositioning for growth following the economic downturn. This year, CFOs are leading the charge within organizations for further expansion.

Our research shows finance heads tend to view themselves as leading on value generation – only 9% think growth leadership should be shared. But the data suggests CFOs have an opportunity to enhance their influence further through collaboration.

For example, many IT leaders want to cooperate more closely with finance on cybersecurity, but few finance leaders share their enthusiasm. We explore how to unblock the barriers to cooperation.

CFOs face external challenges, too. Economic and geopolitical tensions are making forecasting and cost control even harder than in previous years. To counter this, finance leaders are using AI to focus on automating manual processes.

ESG regulation has historically posed another major external challenge. While driving ESG-related initiatives can be costly, finance leaders are less concerned about these costs this year, as they believe ESG has become a growth driver.

This report is your essential guide to facing these challenges, driving growth, and securing your organization's future. It offers actionable advice to help lead your company through the challenges and opportunities of 2025 and beyond.

Who agrees that growth leadership should be shared across the C-suite?

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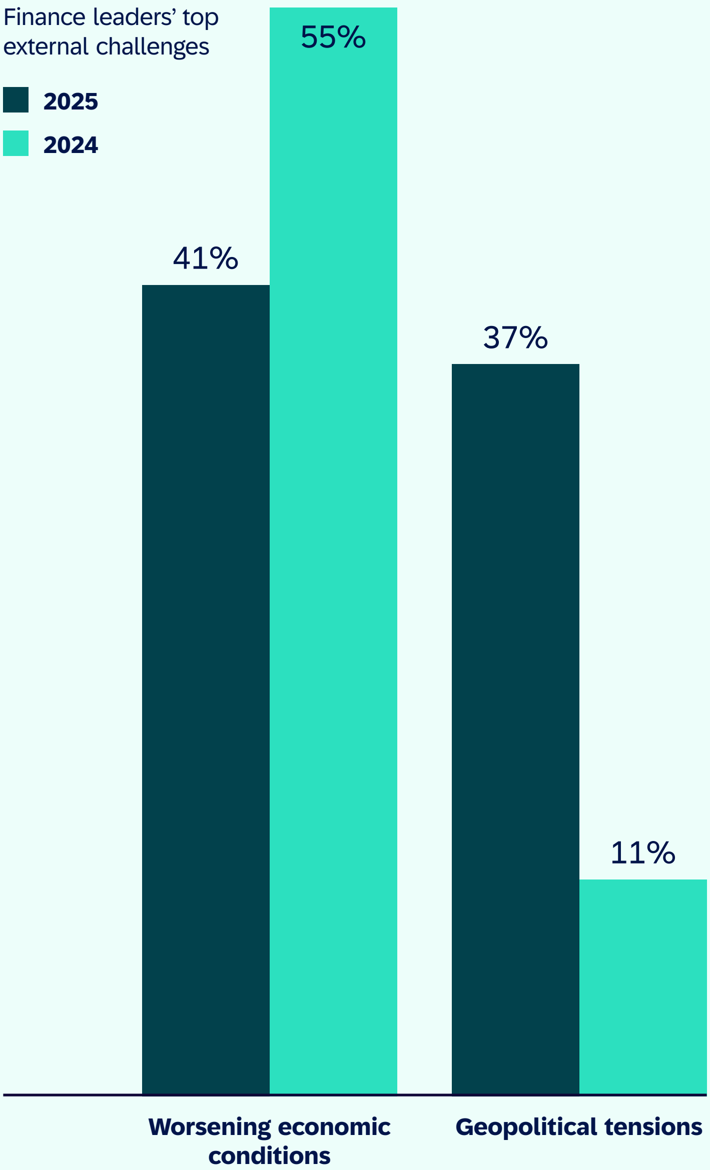
Executive summary

SAP Concur surveyed 350 chief financial officers and senior finance leaders, 115 HR leaders and 115 IT leaders for its latest *CFO Insights* report.

The research, conducted in December 2024 and January 2025, covered Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the United States. The sectors in the survey ranged from finance to technology, healthcare, utilities, consumer, and industrial.

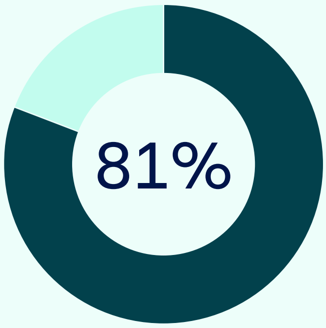
The big challenges and priorities of 2025

Worsening economic conditions remain the biggest challenge for CFOs in 2025, though to a lesser extent than in 2024. However, concerns surrounding geopolitical tensions have seen a surge in the past year.



CFOs can't do it alone

The majority of CFOs feel responsible for driving growth amidst challenges. While they excel in cross-functional and cross-departmental communication, there are barriers to fostering collaboration in their businesses.



of CFOs believe that they are the primary drivers of growth

Finance, HR, and IT leaders have different ideas on the top blockers to cross-functional collaboration:

AI in the finance department

AI and automation presents significant opportunities for finance departments, particularly in offsetting challenges around manual processes and fostering greater forecasting accuracy.

38%

of CFOs are treating manual processes as a top internal challenge, compared to 1% in 2023

43%

of CFOs predict that AI will lead to more accurate forecasting

38%

of CFOs believe that more mundane/time-consuming tasks will become automated

Cybersecurity budgets grow

Cybersecurity is a major priority for finance leaders this year – but few plan to engage with IT leaders to drive this agenda forward. This suggests that, while many are willing to allocate funds, they may not take an active role in determining how those resources are spent.

59%

of finance leaders plan to increase their cybersecurity budget to respond to growing threats

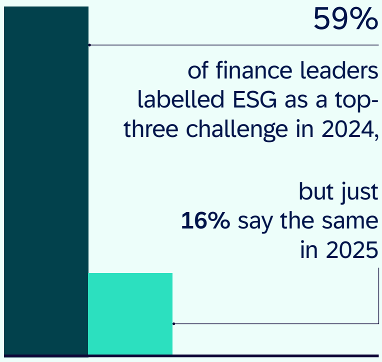
But only

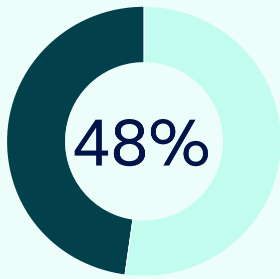
20%

of CFOs plan to enhance collaboration with the CISO and IT departments to drive this forward

ESG becomes strategic growth driver

ESG has evolved from being seen as a major challenge to a growth opportunity for finance leaders.

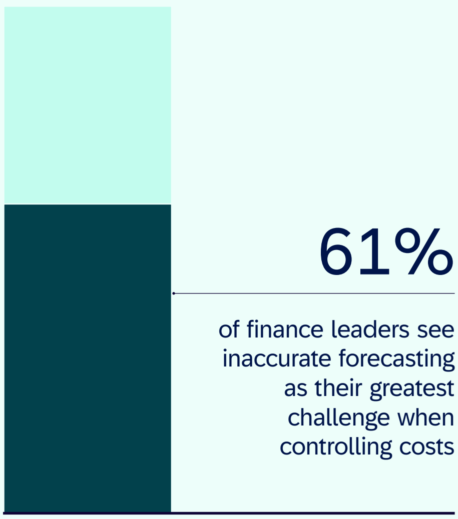




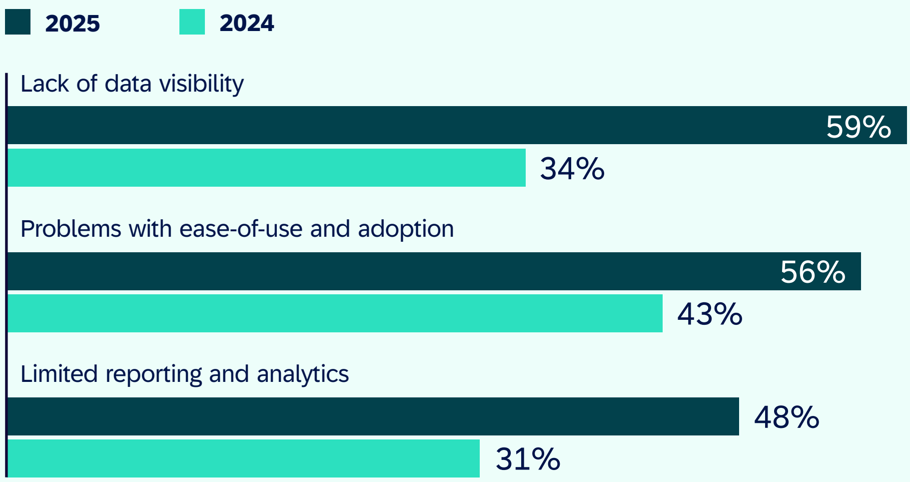
of finance leaders are focusing on sustainability and ESG to drive growth this year

Tech for forecasting and cost control

Finance leaders are welcoming technology to offset challenges around their financial forecasting. But some frustrations with cost control software remain.



Frustrations with cost control software are increasing:



Manual processes become the enemy as CFOs face major challenges

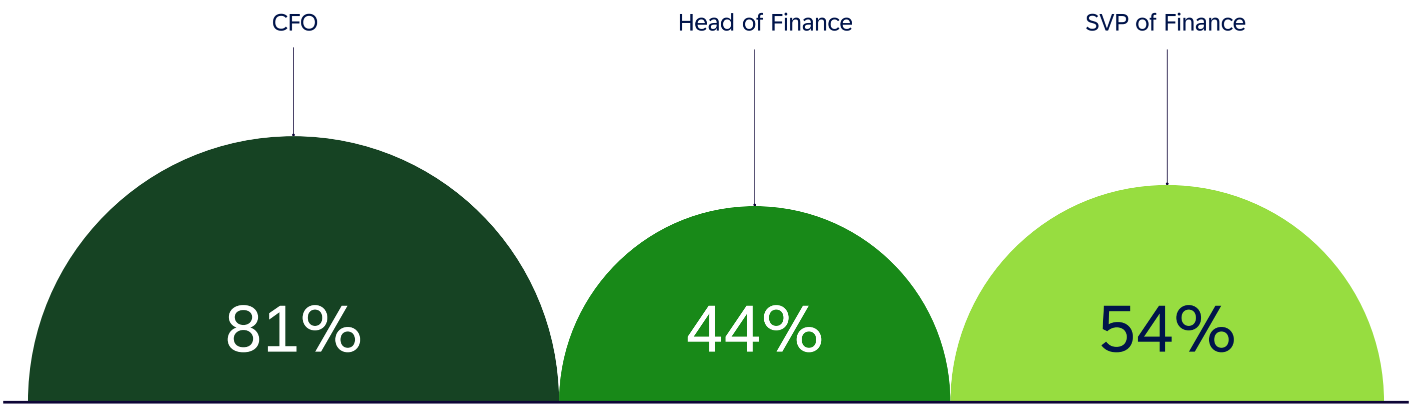
It can feel lonely at the top, with more than 8 in 10 CFOs believing they are the main drivers of growth in their organizations.

They're putting significant pressure on themselves to lead expansion almost single-handedly and navigate a raft of challenges in 2025.

The most pressing concern is the threat of worsening economic conditions, with 41% of CFOs in our survey ranking it a top-three external challenge. This concern has allayed slightly compared to last year, which aligns with the United Nation's prediction that global growth will hold steady at 2.8% in 2025.[1]

But many finance leaders still fear GDP could slide or tip into negative territory. They also say worsening economics are the top barrier to accurate forecasting, which in turn is the biggest obstacle to controlling costs – an issue we explore further in article six.

Who agrees that the CFO is the primary driver of growth?

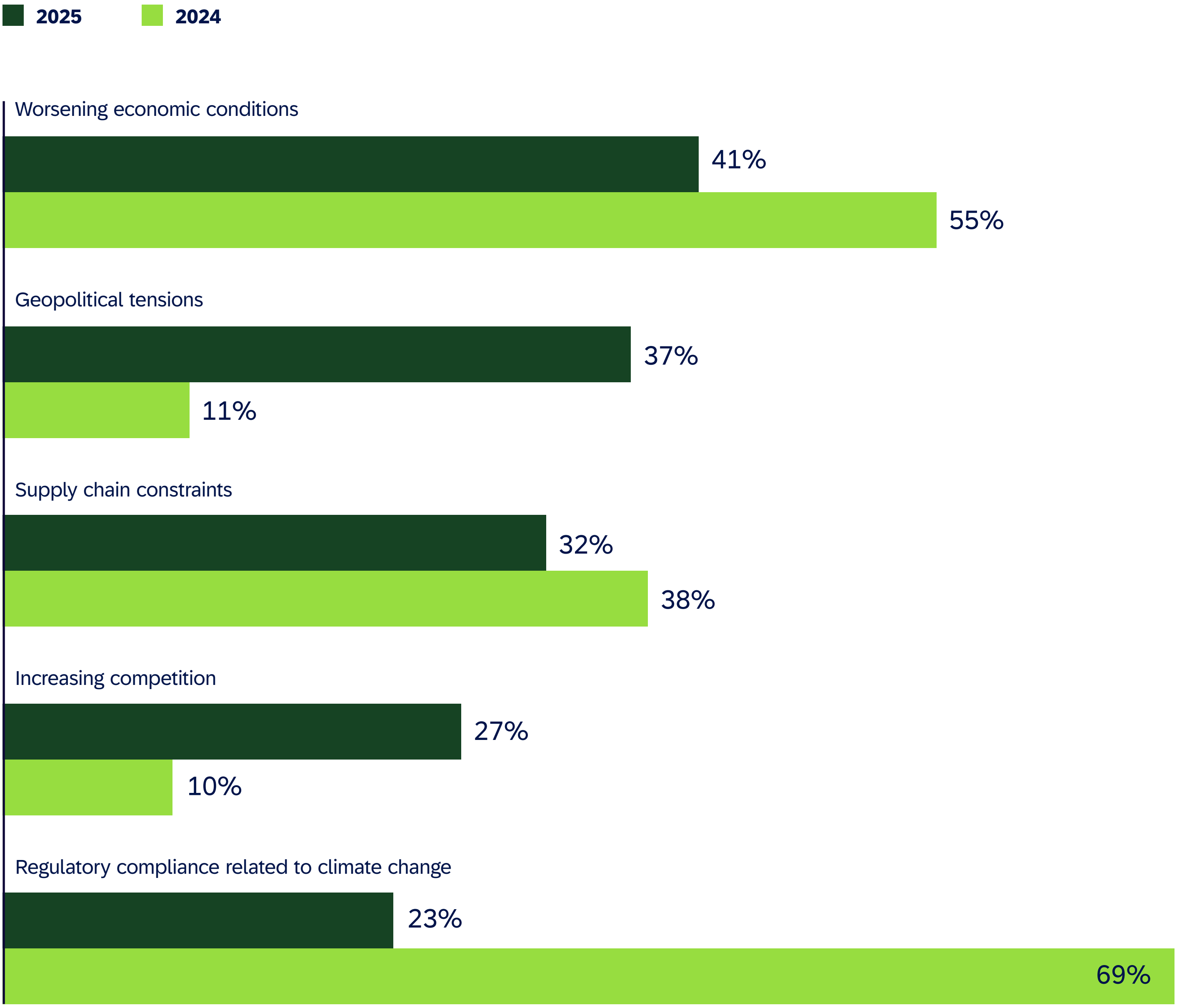


1. United Nations World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025

Close behind economics, geopolitical tensions are a rapidly increasing challenge – 37% of finance leaders class geopolitics as a top-three threat, compared to 11% last year. This corresponds with the Geopolitical Risk Index, which has heightened and become more volatile since 2022.[2] It's a worry that is increasing among finance leaders in every country we surveyed, suggesting multiple causes. Alongside conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, rising geoeconomic fragmentation and trade restrictions are harming growth prospects, according to the International Monetary Fund.[3]

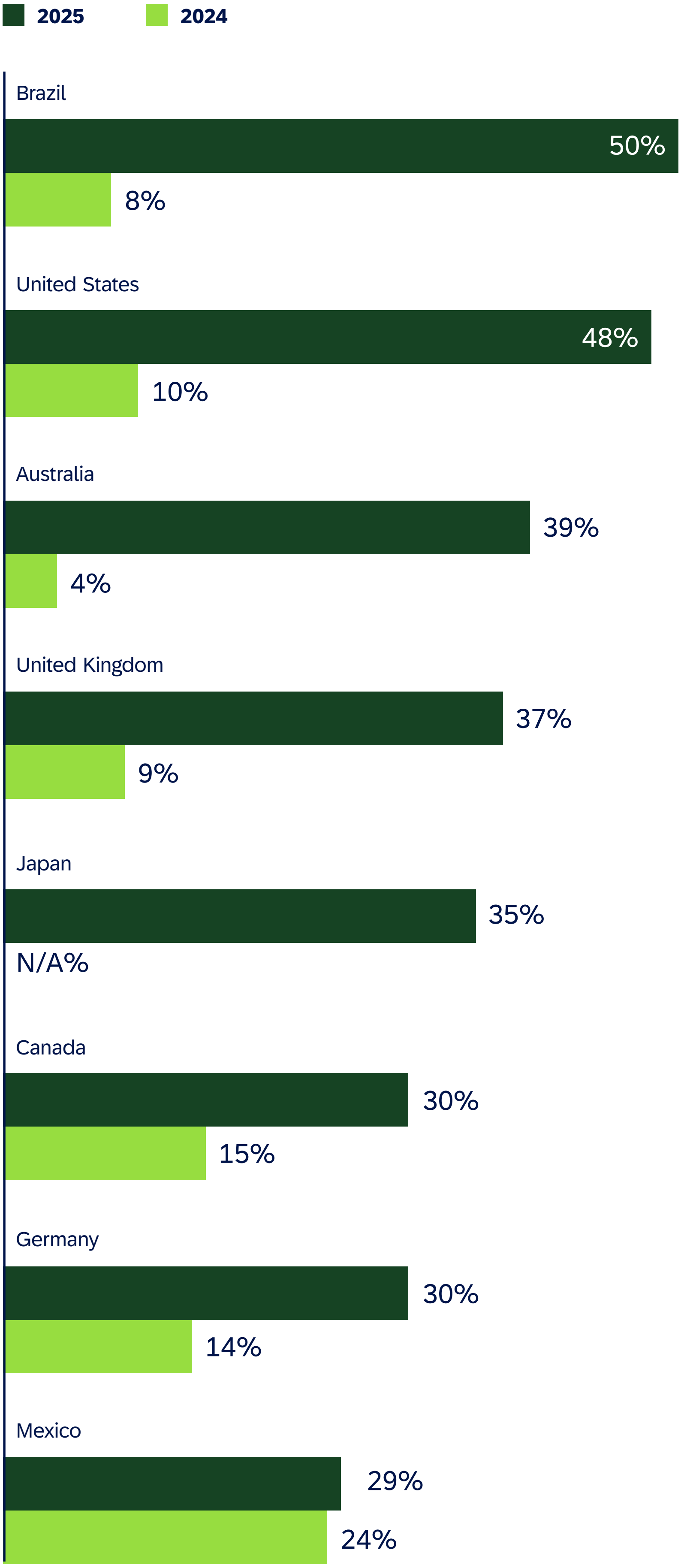
"Alongside conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, rising geoeconomic fragmentation and trade restrictions are harming growth prospects.

CFOs' top external challenges



2. Geopolitical Risk Index
3. International Monetary Fund

Countries with geopolitics as a top-three concern



As the table to the left shows, concerns about geopolitics are most pronounced among CFOs in Brazil, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Potential anxieties for Brazilian CFOs include the impact of U.S. protectionist policies, and the risk of a recession and political fallout. In the United States, finance leaders may share similar apprehensions about the effects of protectionism. Meanwhile, Australia is delicately navigating its role between global giants like the United States and China, and the United Kingdom faces a similar challenge in balancing relations with Europe and the United States.

Supply chain constraints, which can link closely to economic and geopolitical tensions, are seen as the third-biggest challenge, with 32% of finance leaders ranking them as a top-three external threat.

Conversely, ESG and climate change regulation have become much less pressing challenges. This is despite the continued rise in reporting requirements worldwide, as highlighted in article five. Instead, ESG has become the third-highest priority for driving growth.

But this year's top goal for fueling expansion is optimizing costs and driving efficiency (69%). Fifty-eight percent of finance leaders are turning to automation and AI to drive performance, and they are seeing results, as we highlight in article three. In particular, finance leaders have set their sights on automating manual processes that AI-driven machines can now perform more efficiently.

With other leaders keen to work with finance in growth initiatives – for example, 29% of IT leaders want to work together on ESG initiatives – CFOs can make cooperation a stronger part of their growth designs. We explore these potential collaborations more in the next article.

A huge opportunity to build influence through collaboration

Our research suggests CFOs have a tremendous opportunity to drive value further through collaboration.

To maximize growth opportunities, it is necessary for all organizational divisions – such as HR, marketing, and IT – to contribute and work together. But in our study, only 9% of CFOs think growth leadership should be shared across the C-suite. Could this reluctance to share responsibilities be counterproductive?

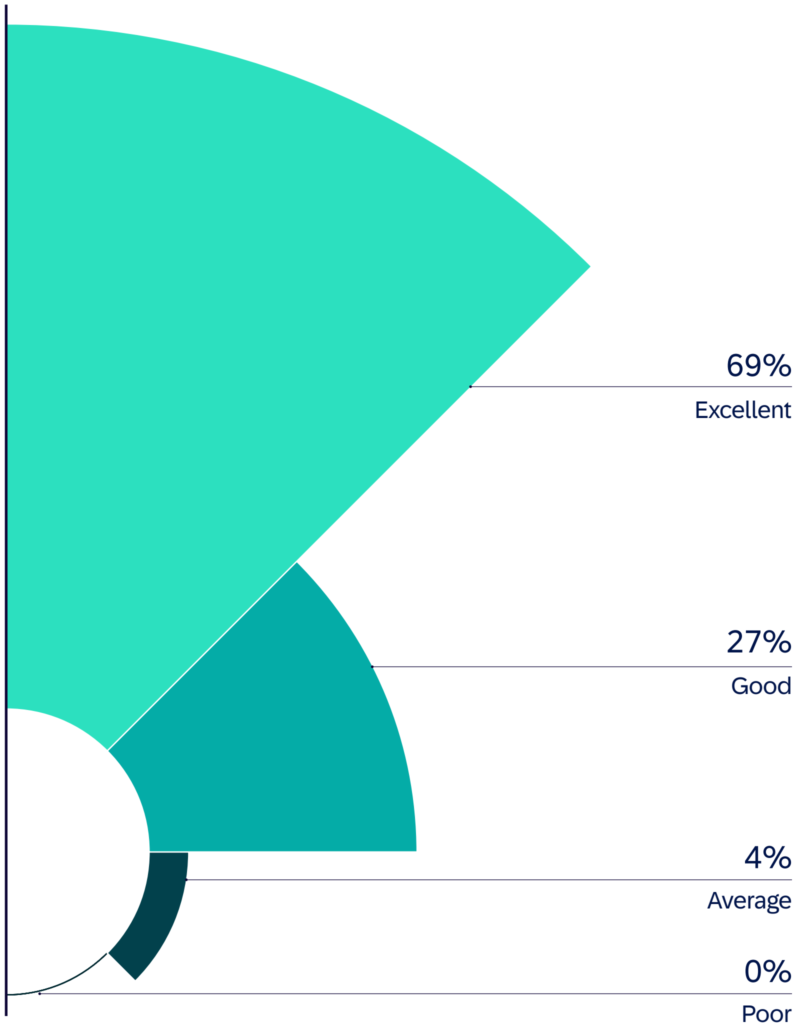
Other leaders want to collaborate more. But even within finance, there are disagreements on this topic. While 81% of CFOs believe they are the primary drivers of growth, only 52% of finance SVPs agree. SVPs are more likely to think the CFO should support, not lead, growth initiatives (20%) or say that growth leadership should be shared across the C-suite (28%).

Overall, the data indicates that CFOs must prioritize becoming a strategic partner to all business functions in 2025. This approach will help the organization keep up with technological advances, navigate regulatory changes, and adapt to evolving economic conditions.

CFOs also have an opportunity to bring C-suite leaders together in connecting actions to manage technology and rising costs. Fifty-two percent of IT leaders want to collaborate with finance on cost management and reduction, while 50% want to work together on investment and technology tools.

According to our findings, finance leaders are confident about getting buy-in from the wider business on new growth initiatives, with 96% rating themselves as "excellent" or "good" at this. Their confidence is not misplaced – 89% of HR leaders and 88% of IT chiefs agree their organization's finance leaders are good at cross-functional communication.

How do CFOs rate their communication skills to get buy-in on new growth initiatives?



So, what's getting in the way of greater cross-functional efforts? Finance believes the biggest barrier is conflicting departmental priorities (58%), which 57% of IT leaders agree on. However, HR leaders say the biggest blocker to collaboration is insufficient data sharing and transparency (57%).

What do business leaders see as the top blockers when it comes to cross-functional collaboration?

What approaches are business leaders looking for to overcome collaboration blockers?

> "
> CFOs recognize HR's more strategic role since the pandemic and believe they have a duty to work with them.

There are also disagreements on the best way to enable better cooperation. Finance and IT prioritize implementing flexible budgets for collaborative projects. HR would rather focus on aligning shared goals and KPIs, but only 11% of finance leaders see that as the main priority for working together. This discrepancy suggests more effort is needed to get finance and HR on the same page.

The good news is that CFOs are not starting from scratch. Our 2024 CFO Insights Report highlighted that finance leaders have been working with chief information officers (CIOs) and chief human resources officers (CHROs) more than in previous years. In particular, CFOs recognize HR's more strategic role since the pandemic and believe they have a duty to work with them. But our 2025 findings suggest there are still some untapped opportunities CFOs can unlock by working with their C-suite peers.

Action items

Make collaborations more effective by committing to align on shared goals and budgets, carving out time for regular cross-functional meetings, and smoothing communication by using the many collaboration features available in software tools.

Look for areas of mutual interest between finance and other business divisions. For example, explore potential collaborations with HR by finding mutual priorities in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); incentivizing top performers; and boosting productivity.

With CIOs, potential areas of mutual interest could include using AI to boost efficiencies, and determining return on investment for new tech investments. Other possible areas for collaboration are integrating AI deployment across the organization with minimum disruption and cost overrun, and optimizing user experience.

Support consistent use of data and aligned goals when making company-wide decisions. To achieve this, focus on supplying quality data, technology, and talent; and build a strong risk management strategy to enable this fully aligned approach.

Five top facts about finance and AI

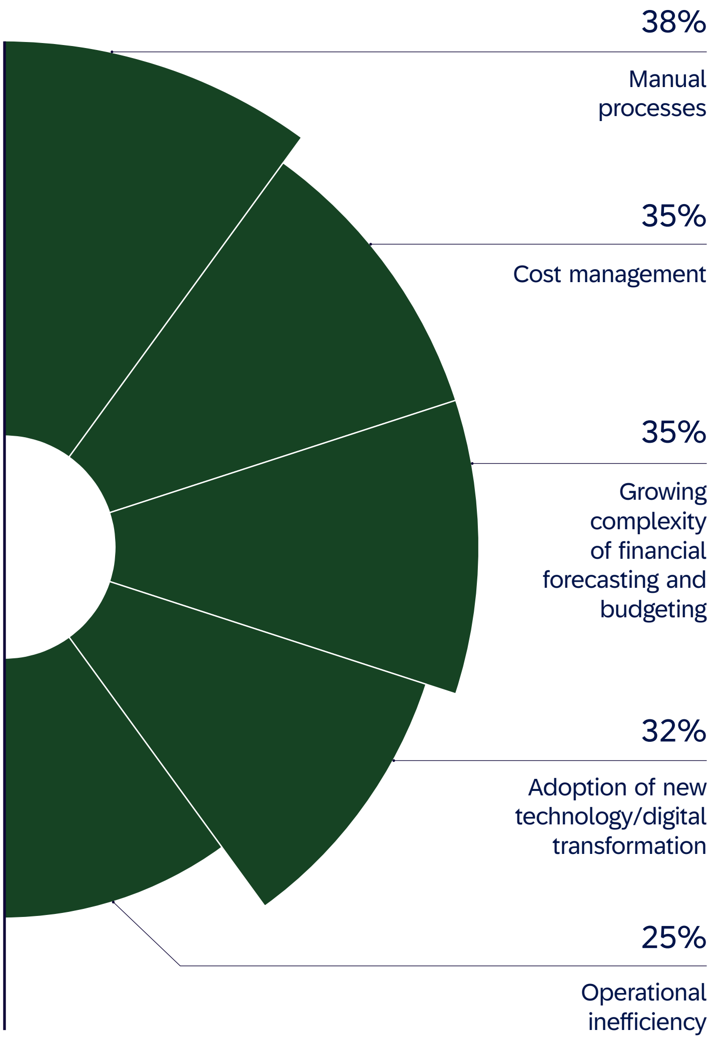
In 2025, finance departments are embracing AI and automation, unlocking opportunities to collaborate further with other teams such as IT. A key finding this year is that 94% of finance leaders say AI has already helped improve decision-making. Also, 73% say it has positively impacted cost and risk reduction.

01

Manual processes become enemy number one

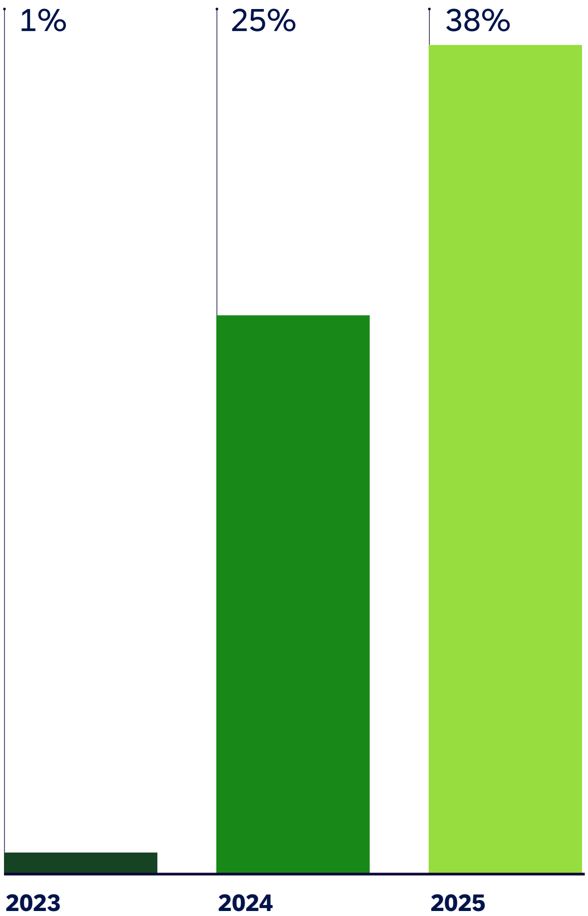
The growing popularity of AI has triggered a mindset shift around how to drive efficiencies. Now they understand what's possible, finance leaders are hyper-aware of opportunities to automate and optimize. Hands-on processes have come from nowhere to become the top internal challenge finance leaders face – from 1% to 38% in just two years.

CFOs' top internal challenges



Manual processes are a growing area of focus

Percentage of CFOs who say manual processes are a top-three challenge



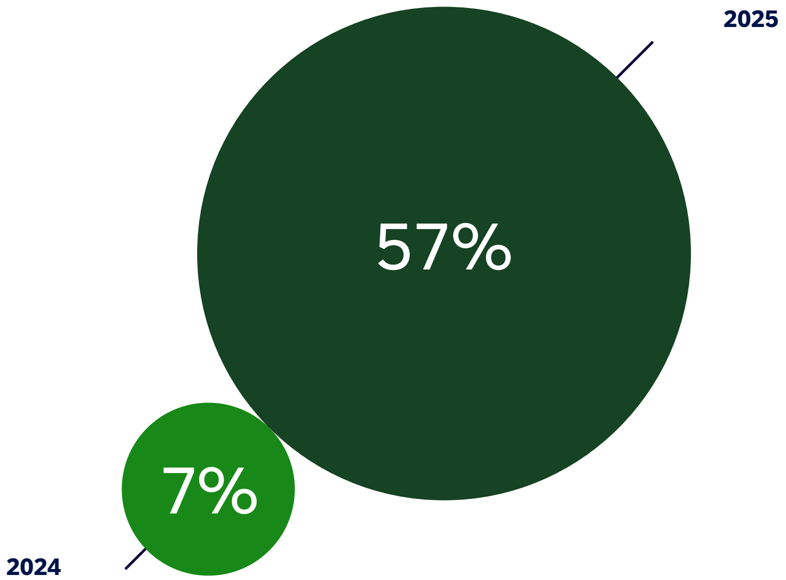
02

AI adoption rockets

As awareness of AI grows, finance departments have embraced it to drive automation. Over half (57%) say general finance tasks like generating emails, transcription, and summarizing documents are highly automated by AI, compared to only 7% in 2024.

Other areas where CFOs report significant automation by AI this year include creating new pricing models, which jumped from 5% to 22%, and fraud monitoring, which rose from 28% to 45%. Notably, pricing models leapfrogged risk scenario planning, management accounts preparation, and tax and legal accounting in terms of automation levels since last year.

How many finance leaders describe general office tasks as highly automated?



03

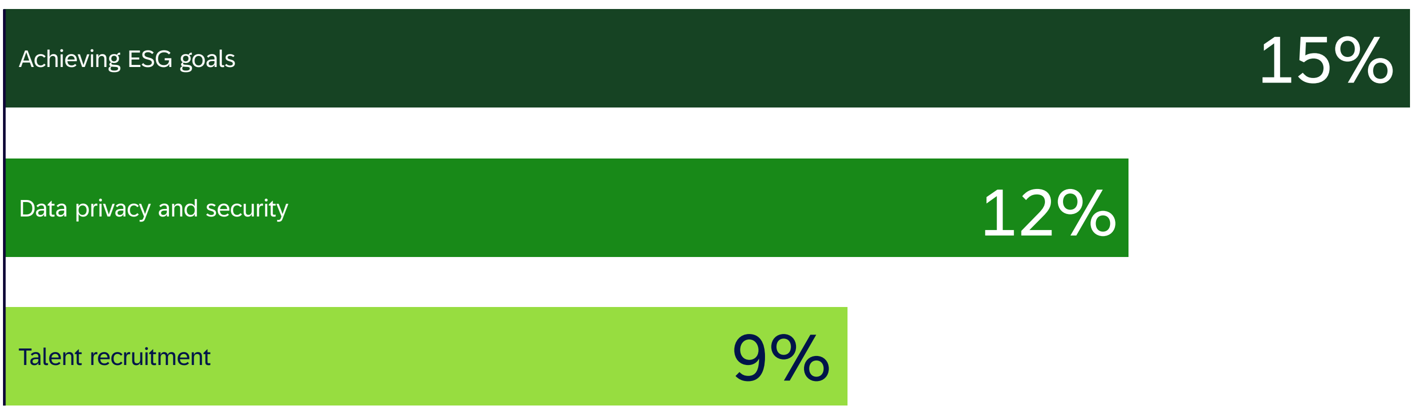
Some concerns persist

Despite this positivity, not everyone is convinced by AI. For example, 15% of finance leaders say AI has had a negative effect on ESG, likely because of the high energy consumption needed to store data and run models. Meanwhile, 12% say it has negatively impacted data privacy and security, underlining a concern many have voiced about the safety of information shared with and stored in AI models.

One in ten finance leaders also predict that AI will lead to redundancies in their department, but this varies by country. Fewer finance leaders in the United States cited this concern – just 4% had it in their top three. Anxieties around AI causing redundancy were deepest in Brazil, Australia, and the United Kingdom, which could reflect wider economic concerns in those countries.

Where is AI having a negative impact?

Percentage of finance leaders who say AI has had a negative impact on certain business areas



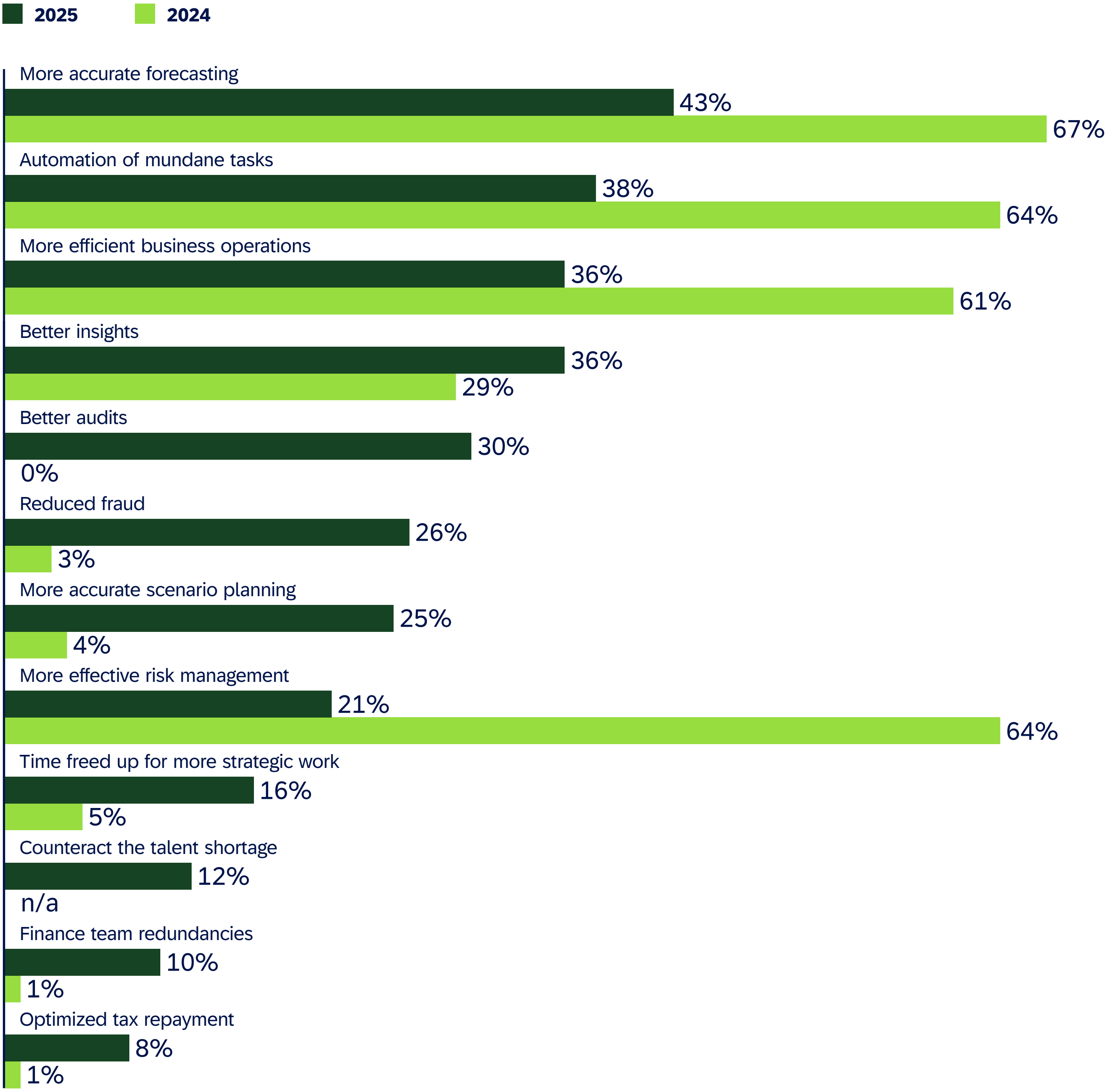
04

CFOs see more AI possibilities

Finance leaders overwhelmingly agree that AI has already improved at least some tasks in the finance department, and they're now seeing more possibilities for the technology as understanding matures and adoption rates increase. In 2024, CFOs anticipated four main benefits of AI: more accurate forecasting; automation of mundane tasks; improved risk management; and more efficient business operations. This year, CFOs predict that a much wider range of benefits will be realized with AI, indicating that, as the technology becomes more commonplace, they are becoming increasingly excited about its less obvious uses.

CFOs are seeing more use cases for AI

Scenarios ranked as a top-three most likely outcome of AI

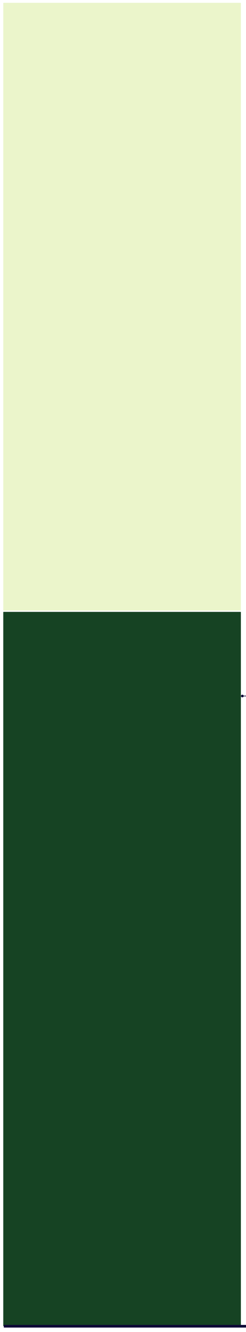


(Note: "Counteract the talent shortage" was introduced in the 2025 survey)

05

AI can bolster collaboration

The adoption of AI brings an opportunity for finance leaders to strengthen their relationships with IT. Sixty-five percent of technology leaders agree there is already strong collaboration between departments on executing growth strategies. But more than half would like finance leaders to work together more on digital transformation.



54%

of IT leaders would like to see finance leaders improve their collaboration efforts on digital transformation

Action items

Review the existing processes in the finance department to pinpoint manual tasks that could be automated or enhanced with AI.

Liaise with IT leaders to implement AI solutions for greater efficiency across the organization. IT can help identify automation opportunities finance leaders may not be aware of; aligning your goals with those of IT leaders from the start will lead to better outcomes.

Establish frameworks for measuring and monitoring investment, implementation, and results to help prioritize future strategy and resources.

CFOs take the reins on cybersecurity

There's a big push on cybersecurity this year. Fifty-nine percent of finance leaders plan to increase their cybersecurity budgets in response to growing threats, according to our survey.

The latest cybersecurity statistics show breaches continue to rise in volume and severity, and a number of CFOs now see cyberattacks as a top risk to their organizations.

This anxiety is prompting a significant number to assume control, with 27% of CFOs taking over responsibilities in cybersecurity over the last two years.[4] Only a small percentage believe this responsibility should be excluded entirely from the CFO role.

However, our data shows only 20% of finance heads plan to enhance collaboration with the CISO to drive this agenda, compared with 42% of IT leaders.

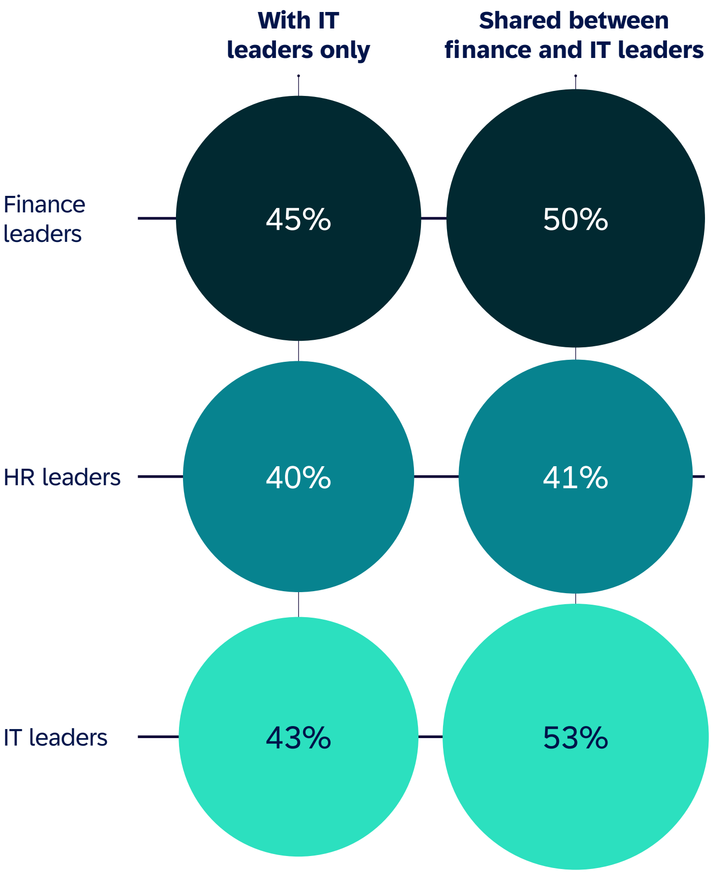
One stumbling block could be disagreement or confusion over which executives should be responsible for driving protection against increased cybersecurity threats. Across finance, HR, and IT leaders, our survey shows a fairly even split on whether cybersecurity should be driven by IT alone, or by IT and finance working together.

Despite this divergence, most finance leaders are adamant growth plans will proceed as planned, or that they will adapt plans to align with cybersecurity measures. Far fewer will slow down to enhance security measures.

The specific actions that finance leaders plan to take vary by business size. Forty-eight percent of finance leaders at large firms (1,000+ employees) say they will invest in advanced security technologies, compared to only 6% in small companies (250-499 employees). Larger companies are planning to take more actions to tackle rising cybersecurity threats than smaller ones, likely because they have more resources available to invest in the area. This could leave small organizations vulnerable.

4. Egon Zehnder

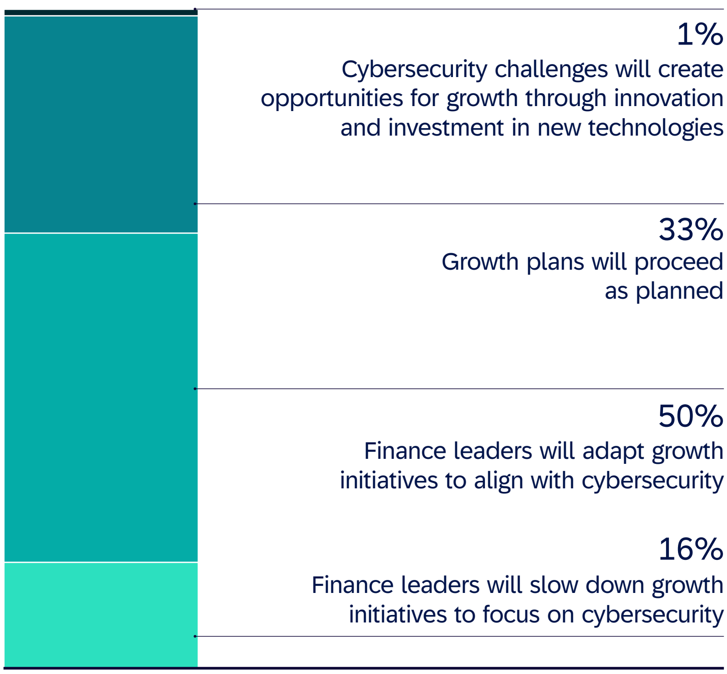
Where should primary responsibility lie within the C-suite for driving progress on cybersecurity?



(Some options omitted so percentages do not add up to 100%)

Growth initiatives will not slow down for cybersecurity

How CFOs say the evolving cybersecurity landscape will influence their ability to pursue growth initiatives



Overall, our findings suggest there could be an opportunity for finance leaders to liaise with CISOs and other C-suite peers over cybersecurity and data privacy issues, including weighing benefits against the costs, risk management, and crisis response plans. CISOs and CFOs in particular can work together to identify the most critical data assets, determine potential vulnerabilities, and establish a strategy to safeguard assets.

Specifically, finance and technology leaders can collaborate to assess technologies such as automated security software, blockchain, biometrics, and AI to detect threats and anomalies.

They can also bring in other leaders such as the chief transformation officer to ensure cybersecurity is factored into the organization's transformation plans from the beginning, especially those involving digitized processes or cloud computing. This helps avoid creating new vulnerabilities hackers can exploit.

Action items

Increase collaboration with the CISO and IT team to position cybersecurity as a growth driver, not a cost center. Do this by aligning it with expansion initiatives, and be clear on responsibilities and ownership to ensure the success of each project.

Strengthen scenario planning to anticipate emerging and unexpected risks, which often pose the biggest threat.

Help other leaders build cybersecurity governance frameworks, including establishing a committee, defining key roles and responsibilities, training staff, and running internal audits.

ESG transforms from challenge to growth driver

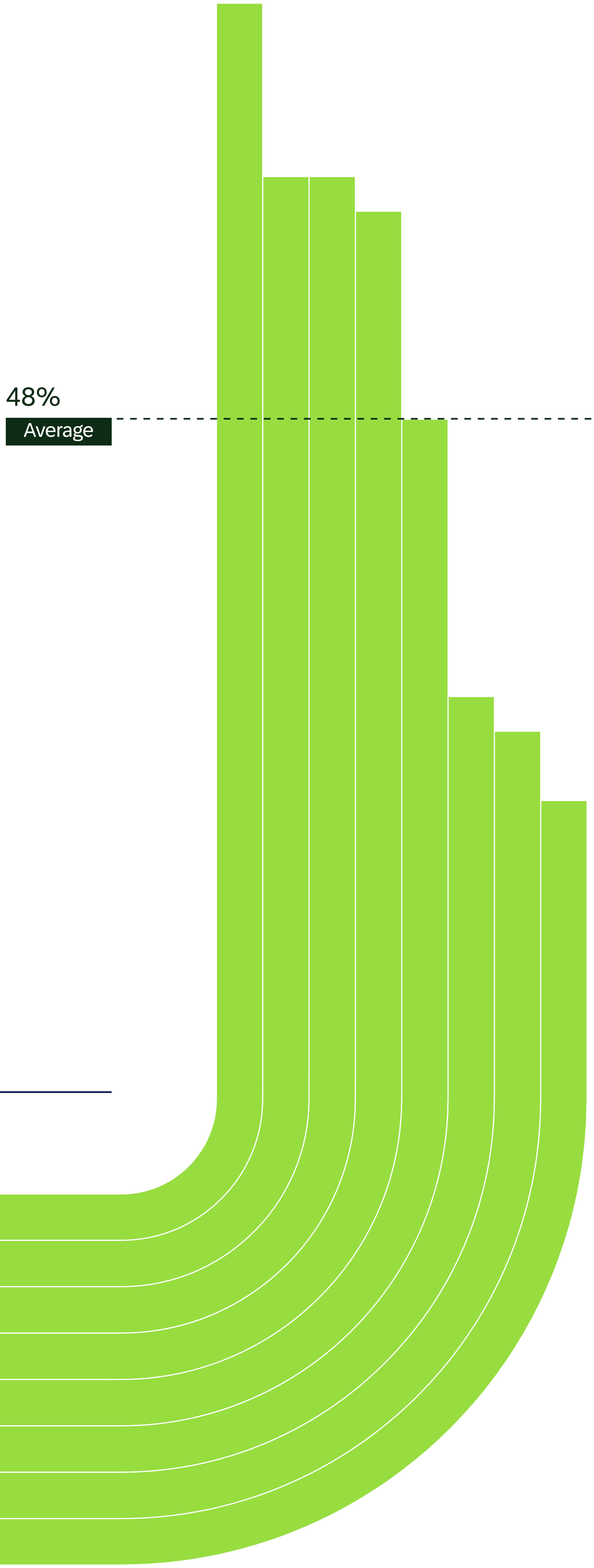
ESG has fallen quickly down the list of finance leaders' problems. In 2024, 59% said it was a top-three internal challenge, but now only 16% do.

Similarly, compliance with climate change regulation was a top external challenge for 69% of CFOs last year, but only 23% today.

CFOs still care about these issues, but they now see ESG as a growth driver rather than a barrier: the proportion of CFOs focusing on sustainability and ESG initiatives to drive growth has increased from 30% in 2024 to 48% this year.

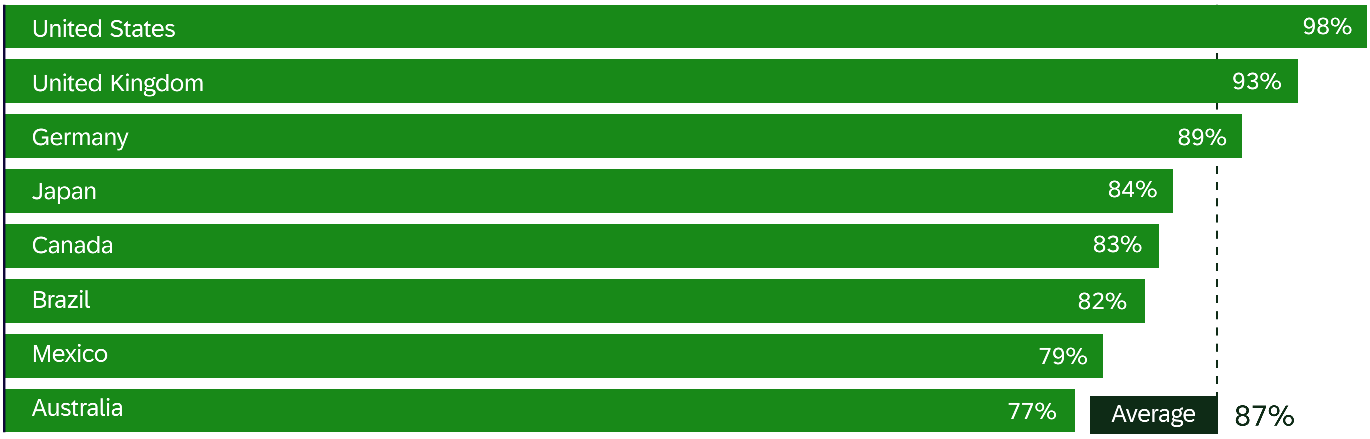
Concerns noted in our [2023 CFO Insights Report] about the uncertain link between ESG and growth are dissipating. In 2025, many finance heads will promote ESG reporting as a way to boost revenue by attracting investors, increasing customer loyalty, enhancing brand reputation, and helping open new customer segments or markets. Promoting ESG for growth is, however, a higher priority for larger companies (55%) than smaller ones (39%).

Who's focusing on sustainability and ESG to drive growth in 2025?



United States	60%
Brazil	55%
United Kingdom	55%
Mexico	54%
Germany	48%
Canada	40%
Australia	39%
Japan	37%

Who's increasing investment in ESG initiatives in light of incoming regulations?



This focus on sustainability is increasingly expensive – 87% of finance leaders are upping their ESG investments in light of incoming regulation, according to our 2025 survey. This rises to 98% in the United States, despite expectations (since confirmed) that the Trump administration would attempt to loosen ESG regulations. The United States is also the top country using sustainability to drive growth.

U.S. deregulation efforts aside, sustainability reporting rules and standards are still growing quickly around the world. Developments include the United Kingdom's Biodiversity Net Gain Requirements, EU countries transposing the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) into law, and many U.S. organizations aligning with CSRD. Additionally, Japan mandated sustainability disclosure rules in 2023, Australia added climate-related financial disclosure requirements to its sustainability reporting regime in 2024, and Malaysia will begin phasing in compulsory Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) reporting from December 2025.

For the 13% of respondents who are not increasing their ESG investment, top reasons are lack of return on investment (ROI), low cultural alignment, and dearth of internal expertise. Those investing in ESG also face similar barriers in implementing initiatives. Their top obstacles are regulatory complexity, insufficient knowledge, and difficulty measuring ROI.

Again, collaboration with C-suite peers could help overcome these barriers. There is an appetite for cross-functional cooperation in this area – for example, 29% of IT leaders want to work more closely with finance on sustainability and ESG initiatives.

Action items

Harness cross-functional expertise. Work with HR to hire new positions, provide ongoing training to all staff on ESG issues, and communicate regularly on sustainability initiatives and resources.

Partner with IT to develop ways of monitoring and measuring ESG initiatives, and collecting the data. Set clear, measurable goals for how you will use sustainability data to enhance value creation and performance. Gather the necessary people, skills, and infrastructure in finance and other departments to forge this connection.

Use advanced ESG data and reporting tools. For example, use employees' itineraries in travel and expense tools to help capture data that can support ESG reporting and offer more sustainable business travel options.

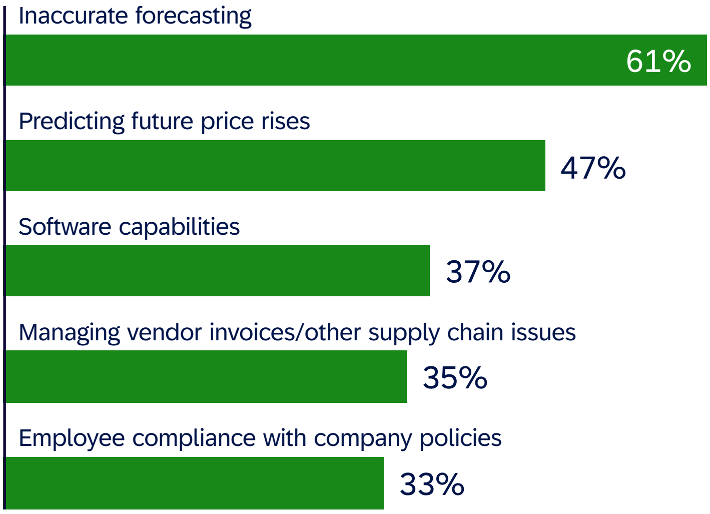
Tech can solve the mounting challenges of forecasting and cost control

Growing economic and geopolitical uncertainties have made financial forecasting and cost management more difficult; they now rank as two of the biggest challenges finance leaders face.

Supply chain constraints add additional complexity, while increased demand for forecasting agility only heightens the pressure CFOs are under.

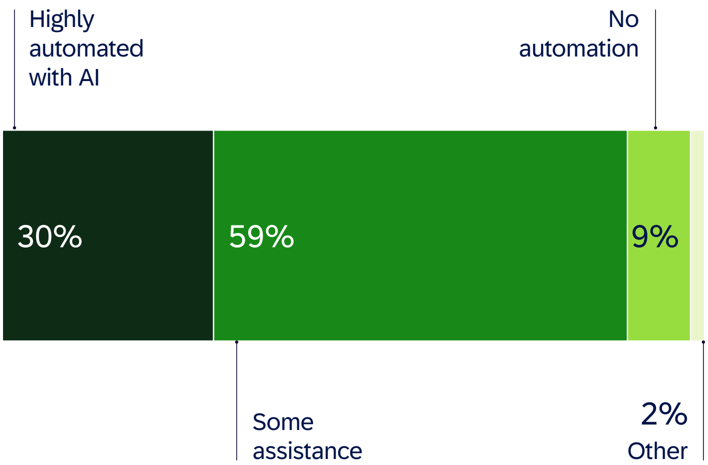
But technology is evolving to help CFOs meet these challenges. Our survey shows 43% of finance leaders believe AI will likely improve forecasting accuracy, and 30% are already "highly automated" in this area.

What are the greatest challenges when controlling costs?

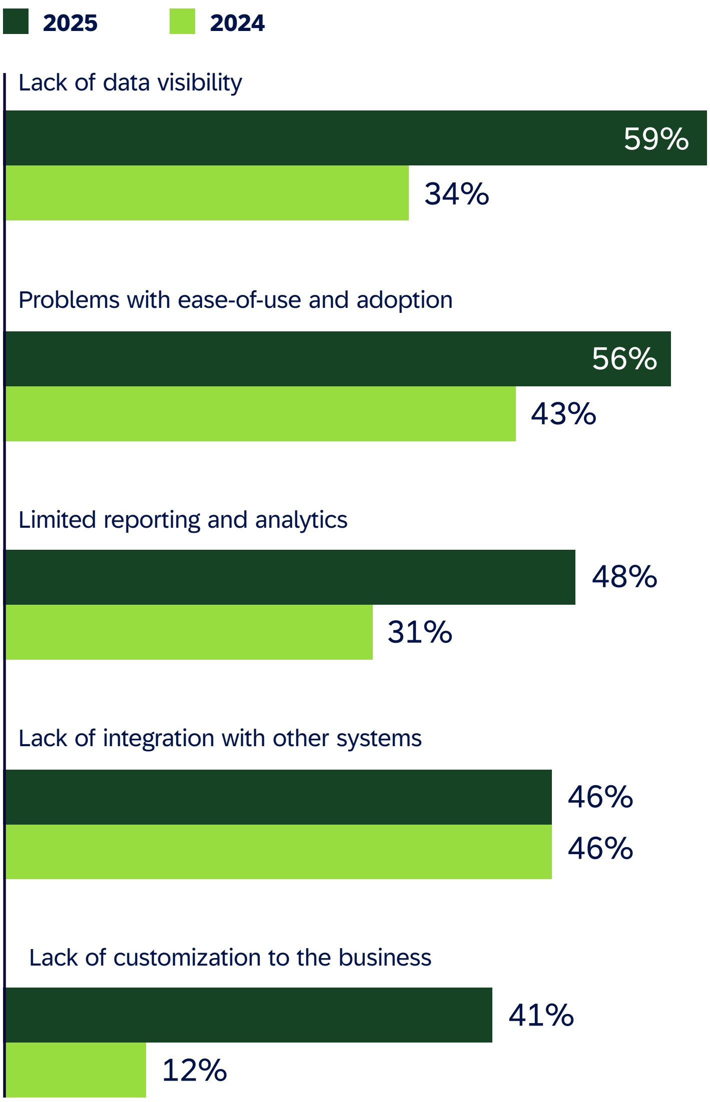


(Top five responses shown)

How automated is financial planning?



Frustrations with cost control software are increasing



However, finance leaders in our survey reported growing dissatisfaction with their cost control software. Limitations around reporting, ease of use, and data visibility are the top difficulties they experience. Furthermore, leaders bothered by the lack of customization options have risen from 12% last year to 41% today.

It's unlikely that software has become harder to use over the last 12 months, but these figures suggest finance teams are under increasing pressure, and the frustration comes from pushing their software to its limits. These difficulties may also reflect the newness of many AI solutions and the speed with which teams have had to adopt them. Users may have had insufficient training, limiting their ability to harness the technology's full potential.

As the technology evolves, it will shift from reactive to proactive spend management, empowering users to forecast and control costs even more effectively. AI-driven analytics will deliver real-time insights into spending patterns, allowing finance teams to identify areas for reduction, highlight risks, and enable proactive decisions.

For example, in business travel and expense management, AI can generate travel requests and cost estimates based on historical data, and deliver personalized recommendations based on employee preferences and organizational policies. AI can also help identify potential fraud and flag suspicious activities to keep costs down.

Action items

Explore secure AI-powered solutions to further automate your financial forecasting and cost control. Build strong relationships with technology partners to ensure your tools meet your evolving business demands.

Comprehensive training and expert optimization from the start should help, as should using advanced solutions that embed AI capabilities seamlessly and ethically.

Look for outcomes beyond simple efficiency gains, such as increased innovation, enhanced decision-making, and strategic business growth.

Get more of the inspiration, best practices, and skills you need to navigate a constantly changing world at

www.concur.com/cfo-insights

About SAP Concur

SAP® Concur® is the world's leading brand for integrated travel, expense, and invoice management. Driven by a relentless pursuit to simplify and automate everyday processes, the solutions guide employees through business trips, move authorized charges directly into expense reports, and automate invoice approvals. By integrating near real-time data and using AI to analyze transactions, businesses can see what they're spending, improve compliance, and avoid possible blind spots in the budget. SAP Concur is imagining a world where travel and expenses practically manage themselves, helping businesses run at their best every day.

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