

ANNUAL REPORT

# Situation and trends in finance departments in the UK

How CFOs in the UK are thinking and preparing for 2026 – 2027

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Welcome to the 2026 Finance Department Annual Report. This report starts from something simple: we asked CFOs and senior finance leaders how they live their day-to-day and what really keeps them busy. No varnish. No hype.

The context has not got easier. There is pressure to control costs, protect cash, meet stricter regulation and, at the same time, keep up with “digital transformation”. A lot of that lands on the finance team’s shoulders.

In this year’s survey, **finance leaders in the UK put three themes at the centre** of their plans for 2026:

- automation of core finance processes,
- better visibility and reporting,
- and smarter use of data, increasingly supported by AI.

In short: fewer hours chasing spreadsheets, more time understanding the business and making decisions.

We also see treasury and cash management gaining weight. It’s no longer just about closing the month. It’s about having enough visibility to spot problems early and act before they become critical.

On top of that, regulation continues to move. E-invoicing, audit requirements and sector-specific rules are forcing many finance departments to review how they handle invoices, approvals and controls.

ESG is there too, but in a different way. It’s in the conversation, and some finance teams already work with ESG metrics. But many admit they still lack time, data and internal alignment to turn ESG into part of their regular financial management.

What is clear is that the role of the CFO has changed. The CFO is no longer just “the person who closes the books”. They are expected to **drive automation**, make sure data flows, support strategic decisions and protect the team from being buried in manual work.

With this report, we want to help you locate yourself:

- see where your department looks like others,
- where you may be ahead,
- where there is clear room to improve,
- and what may be worth prioritising in 2026–2027.

# Finance leaders in 2026

This report is meant to be what many of us would like to read more often: a clear, practical, no-nonsense **snapshot of the real situation in finance departments in the UK.**

The pages that follow are based on the answers and experience of a panel of CFOs, finance directors and senior finance leaders in companies operating in English-speaking markets.

People who deal every day with month-end, cash flow, tools, teams and boards.

## We will look at:

- ▶ The strategic priorities that will shape finance in 2026.
- ▶ The real state of digitisation and automation, and which processes still depend on manual work.
- ▶ How AI is being used (or is expected to be used) in finance, beyond the buzz.
- ▶ The role of ESG and sustainability, and how far it has really entered the finance agenda.
- ▶ The future of finance talent, where tech, analytics and leadership skills weigh as much as technical accounting.

## Why is this report different?



At Dost, we start from a simple idea: The finance department is not just another function; it is **one of the pillars of the company.**

We work every day to make it work more manageable, because we believe the CFO and their team are key when it comes to deciding how the company grows, what gets prioritised and where effort is invested.

That's why, in this report, we've focused on being a loudspeaker rather than a protagonist.

We've captured the voice of almost 200 CFOs and senior finance leaders who have shared their priorities, their challenges and their view of what 2026 should look like.

**It really is a report by finance leaders, for finance leaders.**

# 2026 snapshot of the finance function

Based on the survey, a clear picture starts to emerge.

In 2026, the finance department cannot afford to be “just the numbers area”. The role that appears in the data is much broader: guardian of cash, **owner of data quality** and driver of automation.

Across the panel:

- Automation of financial processes is one of the most common priorities for 2026.
- Improving visibility and reporting is also near the top of the list. Many teams feel they still spend too much time assembling information instead of discussing what it means.
- Cost control and management remains a central concern, especially in a context of uncertainty and rising costs.
- AI and advanced analytics stand out as a strong focus: almost every respondent includes them somewhere in their top priorities for the year.

On the technology side, every finance team in the survey works with some form of ERP. Almost all of them still **rely heavily on Excel or Google Sheets**. Only a minority use specialised automation tools or in-house developments to plug the gaps. That says a lot about where many UK finance teams really are today.

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**58%** 58% of respondents place the automation of financial processes among their top three priorities for 2026.

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**55%** 55% include improving visibility and reporting in their top priorities for the year.

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**80%** Around 80% are already using, exploring or planning to use AI in the finance department in 2026.

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**84%** 84% work with an ERP and Excel as the core of their day-to-day finance operations. Excel is still a key piece, although not always the most robust one.

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**80%** Around 80% of finance departments still do not have specific ESG objectives within finance, although many say they are considering it.

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**55%** 55% point to strategic vision as one of the hardest skills to find in finance profiles; almost half also mention technological fluency as a major gap.

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# Who answered the survey?

Finance directors no longer just “keep the books”. They shape strategy, push digital transformation and live with the pressure of the short term.

In this section, you'll see who the respondents are, which sectors they work in and what kind of companies they are steering.

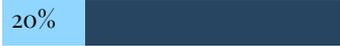
## Sector breakdown

In terms of sectors, the companies surveyed give us a broad and representative mix:

38% operate in industry or manufacturing.



20% belong to the construction sector.



15% come from HORECA (hotels, restaurants and catering)



## Team size

39% 39% of companies have fewer than 100 employees.

44% 44% operate with medium-sized teams, from 100 to 1,000 employees.

17% 17% represent large corporations, with more than 1,000 employees.

## Strategic priorities for 2026

The priorities that CFOs choose for 2026 say a lot about the pressure they feel: what can't wait any longer, and what, even if important, ends up slipping to the background.



The data paints a fairly clear picture: the CFO's agenda for 2026 rests on three words: **automation, reporting and cash.**

Regulatory compliance, including topics like e-invoicing, is on the list, but not as the main protagonist. And ESG sits almost outside the top three priorities: it is present in the conversation, but it does not yet lead the finance agenda.

# Types of finance departments in 2026

From the responses, it's clear that not all finance departments are at the same level of maturity. But three quite distinct profiles do appear. Seeing them helps to place yourself: it's not about who is "behind" or "ahead", but about **understanding the starting point of each team.**

## Finance department in survival mode

This type of team is **mostly manual or only partially automated.** The ERP is there, but a large part of the real work still happens in Excel and via email. Month-end feels heavy, and any change in structure (new business lines, countries, products) turns into more tabs and more linked spreadsheets.

In these teams, automation shows up in the survey as a clear priority, but it often feels hard to get started because of lack of time, budget or internal know-how. **AI is watched from a distance:** there is interest, but it's not yet clear how to fit it into daily work.

In this archetype, the main challenge is to create a bit of operational breathing space so that change can actually begin.

## Finance department in transition

This is the largest group. These teams describe themselves as **partially automated:** some processes are already integrated in the ERP or in other tools, but they still coexist with manual workflows. The data exists, but it needs to be "pushed along" to get to the final report.

This kind of department usually has AI projects already under way or planned for 2026, and automation is high on the priority list. In the data, almost everyone here is at least exploring AI, and no one says it is not on their roadmap.

The risk for this archetype is ending up with a collection of isolated initiatives and no clear roadmap. The opportunity lies in bringing order to what already exists and choosing carefully which processes to tackle first.

## finance department as business partner

This profile is most visible in teams that see themselves as **mostly automated and that are already using AI** or actively experimenting with it.

In these cases, the conversation shifts from "how do we close the books?" to "what decisions should we be taking based on what we're seeing?".

The data shows that the vast majority in this group are already using or testing AI, and only a small minority say it is not on their roadmap. Here, the focus for 2026–2027 is no longer "going digital for the first time", but rather improving data quality, streamlining the tool stack and strengthening the strategic role of the finance team.

# Key cross-overs: size, digitisation and AI

Beyond the headline percentages, there are a few cross-overs that help to see who is really leading the change, and who is at greater risk of being left behind.

## Level of digitisation and artificial intelligence

Among the departments that consider themselves mostly automated, three out of four are already using or **exploring AI in their finance function**, and only one in twelve says it is not on their roadmap.

In partially automated departments, the picture is similar: most already have projects or pilots under way, and no one says AI is completely off the table. By contrast, in mostly manual teams, things look different: a significant share still says AI is not yet on their agenda.

The more advanced a team is in terms of automation, the more natural it becomes to move into artificial intelligence as well.

Not just because the data is in better shape, but because **they have already crossed the barrier of “changing how we work”**.

## Company size and AI

In companies with 51 to 250 employees, every respondent falls into one of three categories: already using AI, actively exploring it or planning to do so. None say it is absent from their roadmap.

In very small companies (fewer than 20 employees) and very large ones (more than 500), there is more variety: some teams are already experimenting, while others have not yet taken the first step. **It is less a question of size and more about mindset**: mid-sized companies seem to be at a point where the pressure to professionalise finance is high, but the organisation is still agile enough to change.

## Level of digitisation and the priority given to automation

Mostly manual departments are, logically, the ones that mark automation as a top priority most often.

What is striking is that even among teams that already see themselves as “mostly automated”, almost half still list process automation as a key objective for 2026.

The underlying message is simple: no one feels this journey is finished. The difference lies in where each team is starting from.

# State of digitisation and processes that are still manual

There's a lot of talk about digital transformation, but the truth shows up in the day-to-day: how much work still depends on spreadsheets, emails and repetitive tasks? The gap between the narrative and reality is exactly here.

In this section, we go into more detail on which processes are still manual and what is stopping many teams from automating further.

## What is still manual

Even though some departments see themselves as "mostly automated", when we ask which processes are still very manual, the results are clear:

66% FINANCIAL PLANNING

55% BUDGET MANAGEMENT

55% FINANCIAL REPORTING

24% ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE

In other words, the recurring monthly processes: budgeting, planning and reporting; **still depend heavily on manual work.**

## What barriers are they facing to automate more?

The data tells a fairly consistent story:

40% of respondents say their main barrier to further automation is lack of budget.

40%

37% highlight difficulty integrating with the ERP as their primary obstacle.

37%

32% say their main barrier is lack of internal knowledge (skills, tools, training).

32%

One open comment sums it up well: **the challenge is not just buying technology, it is "getting the data to travel from source to final destination without breaking anything along the way".**

This is where one of the big contradictions of the modern finance department appears: we say we are "digitised", but the key processes still rely on Excel and manual work.

# Month-end, cash and regulation: where the real pressure is

Even though the survey doesn't ask directly about closing times or how many days it takes to consolidate data, the answers make it quite clear where many teams are getting stuck.

The processes most often flagged as manual (financial planning, budget management and reporting) are **precisely the ones that underpin the month-end close** and the key conversations with the leadership team.

## A clear consequence for 2026–2027

There is an expectation that the finance department will reduce the operational weight of the close without losing information quality. That doesn't necessarily mean cutting the closing time in half from one year to the next, but it does mean moving towards more repeatable processes, with **less dependence on spreadsheets and on specific individuals**.

Any CFO who wants more room for strategic work cannot avoid this conversation.

On treasury and liquidity, the fact that a significant share of respondents mark this as a priority shows that the concern goes beyond the annual budget. The picture that emerges is of finance teams that need more visibility of cash in the medium term and more ability to run scenarios.

It's not just about knowing “how much is in the bank today”, but about **being able to anticipate tension** and act with some margin.

Treasury also doesn't sit on its own. It intersects with:

- automation (bank connections, reconciliations, cash forecasting),
- AI (cash-flow forecast models),
- and reporting (more dynamic, forward-looking information for management).

Looking ahead to 2026–2027, the expectation is that finance will be able to offer a view of liquidity that is less reactive and more predictive.

The combination of these three axes (**month-end, treasury and regulation**) sends a clear message for the coming years:

In practice, if finance wants breathing space in 2026–2027, the realistic goal is not to “close in three days” from one year to the next, but to cut manual steps from the close, reduce reliance on key individuals and achieve a reliable 60–90-day view of cash.

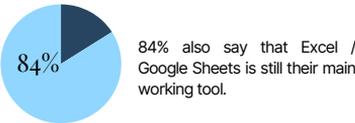
Any project that helps move those three levers will have a **direct impact on the CFO's** ability to spend more time on business decisions and less time firefighting at the end of every month.

# Automation, tools and artificial intelligence

The technology ecosystem in the finance department has been filling up with different pieces over the years, not always well connected. And meanwhile, the team just needs things to work.

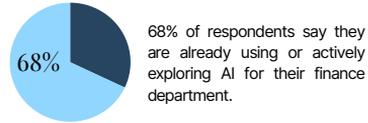
In this section, you'll see what tech stack other finance teams are using, the role played by the ERP and Excel, which gaps are covered by specialised tools, and to what extent artificial intelligence has moved from theory into day-to-day practice.

## What tools are being used?



In other words, the typical setup is still: **ERP at the core, spreadsheets everywhere**, and in some cases, extra tools or in-house developments to plug specific gaps.

## What is the state of artificial intelligence in finance?



## Where is the focus – what do they want to automate with AI?

When we ask what they would like to automate with AI, the answers cluster around four main areas:



In the open comments, many people repeat the same ideas: “use AI to take away operational work” and “free up time for analysis and strategy”.

**Artificial intelligence is seen as a lever to gain time and focus**, not as a toy or a slogan.

At its core, this section reinforces a simple idea: the technology is already there; the challenge now is to put it at the service of the team, not the other way round.

# Sustainability and ESG

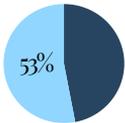
ESG shows up more and more in presentations, board packs and leadership conversations. The real question is: to what extent has it already turned into concrete objectives for the finance department, with clear numbers and responsibilities?

In this section, we look at how ESG fits into the finance agenda, what some teams are actually doing, what is holding others back, and why measurement is still one of the biggest challenges.

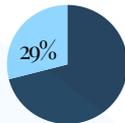
## Are there ESG objectives in finance?

Every company talks about sustainability, but is it really integrated into financial management?

We asked finance leaders whether their departments have specific ESG-related objectives. The answers were:



A solid 53% said that, although they do not have them in place yet, they are considering it.



29% of finance leaders said they do not have ESG objectives and it is not on their roadmap.

*My future as a CFO will not only revolve around my role as a business strategist and key decision-making partner, but will also be defined by the major challenge of leading the automation of financial and administrative processes: implementing systems that reduce manual tasks, integrating real-time data from multiple sources, ensuring the reliability of information and freeing up the team for higher value-added activities.*

*This means facing challenges such as resistance to change, the need for new digital skills within the finance function, and the ability to transform large volumes of data into actionable insights that improve efficiency, profitability and risk control.*

**Iván Roselló**, Finance Director at Vidext Technologies

## Barriers to pushing ESG from finance

Among those who see difficulties in driving ESG from the finance department, three barriers stand out:

50% say it is not considered a priority for 2026.

|     |
|-----|
| 50% |
|-----|

40% point to a lack of resources and tools to measure properly.

|     |
|-----|
| 40% |
|-----|

16% highlight lack of alignment with other departments as the main issue.

|     |
|-----|
| 16% |
|-----|

For most CFOs, 2026 is more likely to be a year of **first real steps in ESG** than a year of fully developed models. And that is fine, as long as those first steps actually happen.

# Talent and the CFO role

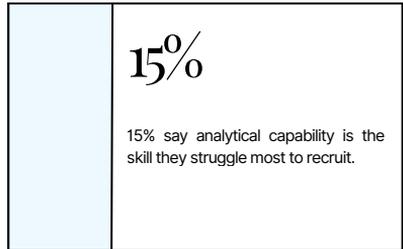
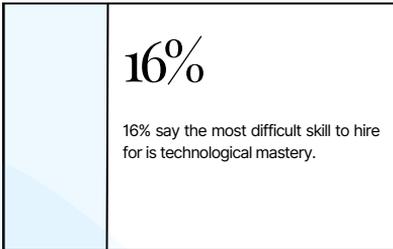
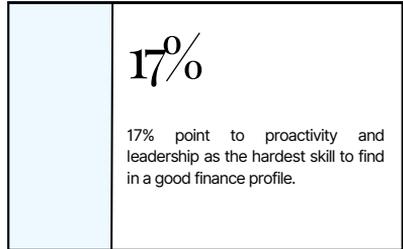
You can have the best ERP on the market, several AI projects running and access to all the data you want... but if the team doesn't have the right skills, progress will stall. That's why it makes sense to look not only at processes, but at people.

*The future CFO is a financial architect of systems and minds where accounting structure, data science, and automation converge.*

**Whitney Arnolds, Consultant at Whitney Arnolds**

In this section we look at which skills are hardest to find in finance profiles, how CFOs imagine their department evolving, and what personal challenges they highlight for 2026.

## Skills that are hard to find in finance profiles



In short, the main gaps are not in basic accounting technique, but in the **ability to connect finance with business**, technology and people.

## How they expect the finance department to evolve

Despite the diversity of sectors in the sample, answers cluster around three main ideas:

Increased use of artificial intelligence for operational tasks



Greater resource efficiency



More time spent on strategic work



The direction is clear: **less manual execution, more focus on decisions.**

And when asked about their main challenge for 2026, several themes recur:

- ▶ Keeping up with automation and improvements in reporting processes
- ▶ Automating processes more broadly
- ▶ Participating more in the company's strategic decisions
- ▶ Transforming the finance team, supported by better tools that enable a more strategic way of working

*The CFO of the future is a strategic partner to the CEO, combining business vision and technological fluency to automate processes, generate data-driven insights and lead decisions that drive growth, efficiency and sustainability.*

**Oriol Reigt, CFO at 011h**

## Personal challenges for the CFO in 2026

In the open question “What is your main challenge as a CFO looking ahead to 2026?”, the same topics appear in different words:

- ▶ Continuing the automation journey and improving reporting
- ▶ Pushing further on process automation
- ▶ Gaining a stronger role in strategic decision-making
- ▶ Transforming the finance team, supported by digital tools, without losing strategic vision

One of the responses sums it up well: the challenge is to transform the finance team, supported by digital tools, **without losing the strategic perspective.**

## How do they see the future CFO?

When they are asked how they see themselves in the future, the same ideas come up again and again in phrases like:

**“The CFO of the future must be someone who...**

...is key to the company's strategic vision.”

“...combines finance and technology.”

“...embraces change and is able to spot opportunities.”

“...acts as a partner to the CEO and the rest of the organisation.”

*For me, the CFO of the future must be someone who follow my 5 stars framework:*

*Speed : Real time decision*

*Transparent: create trust, enhance visibility*

*Lifelong learning: showing growth mindset*

*Unity: welcome collaboration*

*Love and care: show empathy*

**Samir Das, CFO at Daylight**

Overall, the CFO is seen less as a guardian of the budget and more as a partner who helps define the company's direction.

When asked what they would do if they could remove half of their team's operational workload, almost all respondents say the same: they would use that time for analysis, strategic planning, process improvement and business support.

A few add, quite honestly, that it would also help them “live better”.

# 2026–2027 roadmap

After looking at the data, the priorities and the barriers, it's easy to feel there are too many fronts open. But it's also clear that almost all the answers point in the same direction: more automation, **more AI applied to specific tasks**, better use of data, more focus on cash, and a more strategic role for the CFO.

Realistically, no department is going to solve everything in a single year. What does seem reasonable is for each team to set, for 2026–2027, at least four clear decisions:

## Automation

Choose one specific finance process that is clearly manual today, for example, part of the monthly reporting, a section of the invoice workflow or a block of reconciliations, and commit to not doing it in the same way 12 to 18 months from now.

It doesn't need to be the perfect process or the most complex one. What matters is that it's visible, recurring, and that improving it will free up real time.

## Artificial intelligence

This is not about "having an AI project" for the sake of it. It's about defining one small, measurable use case where AI adds something tangible for the team: report drafts, support with forecasts, reading invoices, risk alerts.

From there, measure its impact in hours saved, fewer errors and faster response times, and decide whether it's worth scaling into other areas. The expectation for 2027 is not to have AI everywhere, but to **have proved that it works in at least one meaningful part of the finance flow**.

## Tool stack

Be clear about the role of the ERP, what is still being done "because we've always done it that way" in Excel, and which gaps are being filled by specific tools or in-house developments.

**This is not about kicking Excel out of the department.** It's about knowing exactly where it stops being reliable or efficient. From there, design a gradual transition towards more stable processes, even if it's only in two or three concrete areas.

## Team and CFO role

Looking at the responses, the CFO of 2026–2027 is expected to combine finance, technology, business vision and leadership. That can't be solved just by adding more tools.

It means revisiting which skills already exist in the department, which are missing, who can grow into a more analytical or more technological role, and where external support or a new hire might be needed. It also means the CFO asking themselves which day-to-day tasks they could stop doing if certain parts of the function were better automated or delegated.

If, by 2027, a finance department can say it has made progress on these four fronts: one key process that is no longer manual, one AI use case that genuinely adds value, a slightly more ordered stack of tools, and a team with more capacity to think and less need to "push data around", it will be clearly closer to the CFO model that this report points towards.

# CFO 2026: a central role in the business

Across the survey, a fairly clear picture emerges of where finance departments are expected to go in 2026 and 2027. Not just in terms of technology, but also in their role, their focus and the way they work. Based on the data and the open comments, we can sum this up in several underlying shifts that are already under way and that will set the bar for the next few years.

First, automation stops being a “nice project to have” and becomes a **minimum condition for doing the job properly**. Most teams highlight process automation and better reporting as priorities, while at the same time recognising that the most manual processes are still the ones that support planning and month-end. The message is clear: if finance remains stuck in reporting, budgeting and reconciliations, it will be **very hard for the CFO to dedicate real time to strategy**, risk management or ESG.

Looking ahead to 2026–2027, any department that wants to play in the top league is expected to have taken at least one or two solid steps in this direction, even if that “only” means **automating part of a key process**.

In parallel, artificial intelligence is consolidating as a lever to gain time and focus, not as a technology fad. Almost nine out of ten finance departments are already using, exploring or planning to use AI, and they are doing so in very concrete areas: report preparation, forecasting, invoice data extraction, risk control. The expectation for the coming years is not that the CFO becomes an AI expert, but that they can **identify which operational tasks make sense to automate** and how to free up team capacity for analysis, planning and business support.

The standard that is taking shape for 2027 is a finance department that uses AI in a normal, everyday way in some parts of the financial flow, even if only in small segments, and that measures its **impact more in hours freed up** than in big speeches.

Another clear conclusion is that Excel will remain present, but is **no longer accepted as the sole backbone of the finance function**. ERP and spreadsheets are still the dominant combination, and many companies add layers of specific tools or in-house developments to fill gaps. The direct consequence is that the finance stack is more powerful, but also more complex to manage.

What is expected from the CFO and their team in 2026–2027 is not that they “abandon Excel”, but that they are very clear on up to what point it is safe and efficient to depend on it, and from where it makes more sense to rely on more robust systems. The CFO who makes the difference will be the one who **knows how to organise this ecosystem of tools, reduce duplication and build a coherent data flow**, rather than simply adding more pieces without a clear plan.

On sustainability, ESG is firmly in the conversation, but still competes with more visible urgencies. More than half of finance departments still have no ESG objectives of their own, even though they are considering it, and the most frequently mentioned barriers are that “it is not a priority right now” and that it is hard to measure. The general feeling is that almost **no one questions ESG, but many postpone it**.

For 2026–2027, the realistic expectation is not that every finance department has a perfect ESG framework, but that they have managed to take one or two concrete steps: **define some ESG-linked financial indicator** that they can measure properly, connect it to decisions on investment, suppliers or consumption, and integrate it gradually into their reporting.

Finally, **the most important bottleneck is not technology, but talent**. Respondents insist that the hard part is not finding people who know accounting, but profiles with strategic vision, technological fluency and the ability to lead change. When they describe the CFO of the future, the same words keep appearing: strategy, technology, leadership, business vision.

In the coming years, the CFO is expected to move beyond being seen as simply “the guardian of the budget” and to **consolidate as a partner to the CEO** and the rest of the organisation, able to turn data into decisions, drive automation projects and build teams that blend technical, analytical and people skills.

Looking at 2026–2027 with all this in mind, the bar is roughly here:  
finance departments are expected to make clear progress in automation and AI, to bring order to their tool stack, and to invest seriously in hybrid talent.

And the CFO is expected not just to accompany these changes, but to lead them, freeing their team from purely operational tasks so that finance can take the place that many already hint at in this report:

**the position of a central pillar in the company's strategy  
and in how the organisation evolves.**

Thank you for joining us on this journey into the future of finance departments. This report is not just a guide; it's a collection of the voices and experiences of CFOs and finance leaders who, like you, are ready to make a difference.

And now comes the most important question: are you ready to take the reins and lead the change?

## About dost

Dost is a financial automation platform that uses artificial intelligence to simplify and streamline accounts payable and accounts receivable.

The difference compared with many other tools on the market is its end-to-end approach: automatic document capture, accurate data extraction, line-by-line reconciliation, tailored approval workflows and smooth integrations with the ERP.

Since launch, **dost** has worked with hundreds of companies to digitise and automate their finance processes, helping CFOs and finance teams free up time from manual work and focus more on analysis, decisions and collaboration with the rest of the business.

# Participants



# Got any questions? We'd love to hear from you.

Contact us at  
**hello@dost.io**

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# Methodology

This report is based on an online survey of finance leaders in the UK and other English-speaking markets, carried out in November 2025.

The questionnaire covered:

- the level of digitisation in the finance department,
- priorities for 2026,
- the use of automation and AI,
- the state of ESG within finance,
- and the skills and challenges shaping the future of the CFO role.

The sample brings together CFOs, finance directors, controllers and senior finance professionals from organisations of different sizes and sectors, including professional services, technology / SaaS, industry and telecommunications.

The aim of the survey design was not to produce an academic study, but a practical, honest snapshot that reflects how finance leaders themselves see their departments today and where they want to take them in 2026–2027.



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