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FINANCE TRANSFORMATION IMPERATIVES:

A Roadmap for 2026



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Executive Summary

Finance is at a pivotal inflection point. As digital tools become more sophisticated, finance teams are expected to deliver faster insights, greater agility, and strategic value across the enterprise. The pressure to evolve is mounting; those who fail to act risk falling behind in a rapidly transforming landscape.

As such, this report outlines the core drivers of next-generation finance transformation, such as AI &

automation, regulatory shifts, talent evolution, and risk management. Drawing on lessons from leading teams at Philips, Attain Finance, and FIS, the report highlights key mistakes to avoid in finance transformation. In addition, the comprehensive 10-step guide helps organizations ensure their transformation projects succeed. Finally, the report explores finance operating model transformation, as the emergence of Finance Centers of Excellence (FCoEs) marks the next frontier.

Designed for forward-thinking CFOs, this roadmap offers key predictions for 2026 and practical strategies to build future-ready finance functions.



Why Finance Transformation is Crucial in 2026

The role of the CFO has undergone a dramatic expansion. Today's finance leaders must balance traditional responsibilities, such as compliance and cash flow management, with new demands like data storytelling, strategic support, and organizational agility. This shift has created significant prioritization challenges, as finance teams track spend, risk oversight, and digital transformation initiatives.

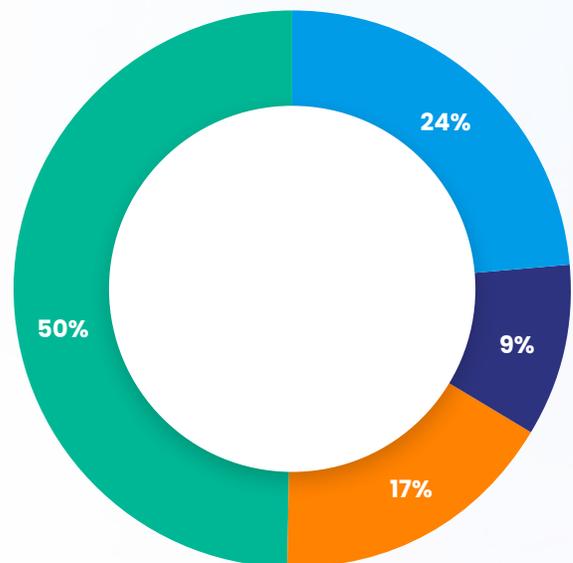
Finance processes are often uniquely positioned as "low-hanging fruit" for automation. AI and automation technologies are reshaping long-standing tasks such as reconciliations, vendor queries, and anomaly detection. Yet, many organizations still rely heavily on manual processes or legacy tools, limiting their ability to scale and respond to change.



FIGURE 1

What's the level of automation in your finance back-office processes like transaction reconciliation, financial close, and reporting?

- Manual/ excel-based
- Legacy accounting tools
- Modern autonomous back-office platforms
- Combination of manual and legacy

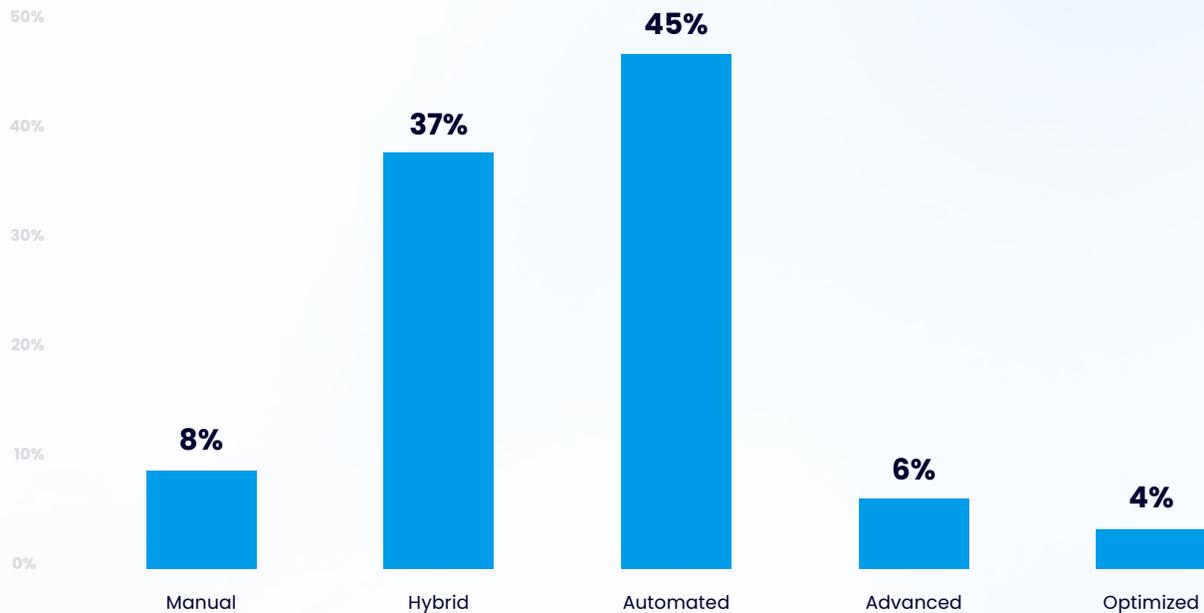


SOURCE: Data collected by SSON Digital, June 2025

continued

FIGURE 2

How would you describe your current finance back-office automation maturity level?



SOURCE: Data collected by SSON Digital, June 2025

For example, when it comes to the finance close process, data shows that half of organizations are still managing this manually via Excel. Only 17% have adopted modern autonomous platforms.

Beyond this, whilst just over 45% of organizations describe their automation maturity as “automated,” less than 10% have surpassed the advanced/optimized level.

With finance positioned to reap massive benefits through automation, lifting some of the heavy burden on CFOs, these levels are expected to soar. To meet the demands of 2026 and beyond, CFOs must cut through competing demands and elevate finance from back-office enabler to strategic partner, driving sustainable value.



Top Trends Shaping Finance in 2026



AI-Powered Automation

Undoubtedly, the buzzword of recent years, AI, remains a strategic imperative. Finance functions remain the epicenter of AI deployment for GBS organizations, as the plethora of manual, time-consuming, and data-reliant tasks are prime opportunities for automation. Common use cases include invoice processing, reconciliation, and reporting. These AI-enabled processes not only increase efficiency but also allow for deeper analytics and data-driven insights. 40% of organizations planned to implement AI in finance operations in 2025, with another 21% targeting 2026.

These increased automation levels are set to completely transform efficiency for finance teams,

with invoice processing, cash applications, and reconciliation among the most manual-intensive finance processes, closely followed by AR and collections. These areas are ripe for automation, offering immediate ROI through reduced cycle times and improved accuracy.



FIGURE 3

When does your organization plan to implement AI solutions in finance operations?



SOURCE: Data collected by SSON Digital, June 2025

FIGURE 4

Which finance process currently requires the most manual effort in your organization?



SOURCE: Data collected by SSON Digital, June 2025

continued

Looking at current adoption rates, AI is being leveraged across a range of finance functions, such as AP, fraud detection, compliance, and financial forecasting and analysis.

Beyond this, predictive analytics is emerging as a cornerstone of finance's strategic role. AI-driven forecasting and scenario planning are becoming essential, especially as forecasting complexity increases. To support these advancements, finance teams are migrating to cloud-based, modular platforms that unify fragmented legacy systems and centralize data.

The Rise of Finance Centers of Excellence



**Insights from Stephanie Dentino, MBA,
Internal Audit Manager, Attain Finance**

An FCoE is a dedicated team or hub within an organization that centralizes finance expertise, technology, and best practices to drive consistency and innovation across the enterprise. While traditional finance teams may be scattered across departments or regions, an FCoE provides a renewed opportunity for focus, scalability, and standardization. It acts as a knowledge and capability powerhouse, supporting everything from reporting and planning to automation, analytics, and governance. An FCoE can be physically centralized or virtually distributed, but its purpose is the same: to elevate finance from a back-office function to a strategic business partner.



Core Objectives of an FCoE

1 Process Optimization:

Streamline finance operations such as budgeting, forecasting, reporting, and compliance.



2 Standardization:

Create consistency in data, tools, and processes across business units or geographies.



3 Data-Driven Decision Making:

Leverage analytics, dashboards, and KPIs to provide clear, actionable insights for leadership.



4 Technological Enhancement Opportunities:

Implement tools such as ERP systems, artificial intelligence (AI), or financial planning & analysis (FP&A) platforms.



5 Talent Development:

Build specialized skills in areas like data science, risk analysis, and business partnering.



continued



How does an FCoE work?

Team Composition & Structure

An FCoE is typically staffed by a mix of finance professionals, data analysts, technology experts, and process improvement specialists. The leadership team sets strategy, aligns with enterprise goals, and reports to the CFO or executive team. Team members are subject matter experts with deep knowledge in areas like tax, treasury, FP&A, audit, or compliance. It is also important to note that other team members are exclusively focused on financial systems, automation, and analytics. Depending on the size of the company, the FCoE may be centralized in one location or operate in a virtual, hub-and-spoke model with regional representatives.

Process Integration

FCoEs are overarching, working closely with other parts of the organization, such as shared services, accounting, or business finance, to standardize and elevate finance activities. An FCoE may own the development of the organization's budgeting framework, or they may set reporting standards for all finance functions, while data is gathered locally. The implementation of financial technologies can also be owned by an FCoE, while end-users execute tasks. Of course, the FCoE doesn't replace local teams; it enhances their performance through tools, templates, training, and oversight.

Technology and Data Infrastructure

FCoEs rely heavily on digital platforms to drive efficiency and insight. They often serve as the center of finance digital transformation, leading initiatives like process automation, deployment of self-service dashboards, or predictive analytics. Common tools include:

- ✓ ERP Systems
- ✓ FP&A Platforms
- ✓ Data Visualization Tools
- ✓ Automation Software
- ✓ Cloud-Based Analytics and AI solutions



Real-World Applications in Corporate America

Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson established a global FCoE to support its enterprise-wide transformation. The FCoE focused on streamlining the company's planning and reporting processes and rolling out digital tools to support decision-making across over 60 countries. As a result, they reported faster close cycles and more accurate forecasting, while increasing internal customer satisfaction.



General Electric (GE)

GE's FCoE initiative was part of its finance modernization program. By centralizing treasury, audit, and FP&A functions, GE reduced costs by millions annually while improving consistency and reducing error rates. The FCoE also trained finance employees on emerging technologies like RPA and data science.

continued



Microsoft

Microsoft’s FCoE plays a critical role in supporting its dynamic, global business. It standardizes forecasting and risk modeling across its cloud services and product lines, providing the executive team with a real-time pulse of business performance. Their FCoE helped reduce manual data handling and drove faster insights during quarterly planning cycles.

Regulatory Compliance & ESG

Regulatory demands are intensifying, particularly surrounding ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance). For example, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) requires standardized, audited ESG data alongside financials for nearly 50,000 companies by 2026. For finance teams, this means integrating ESG metrics into core reporting, controls, and assurance frameworks.

Top 5 Compliance Metrics to Track in Finance

ESG Data Integration
Rate: % of ESG metrics successfully embedded into financial reporting systems. Indicates progress toward CSRD compliance and ESG transparency.

1

Audit Readiness Score: Level of preparedness for ESG and financial audits. Reflects the strength of internal controls and assurance frameworks.

2

CTC Compliance Coverage:
 % of jurisdictions where e-invoicing mandates are met. Tracks alignment with global real-time invoicing regulations.

3

Automation Adoption Index: Extent of automation in compliance processes. Measures the efficiency and scalability of regulatory monitoring.

4

Regulatory Change Response Time: Average time taken to adapt to new or updated regulations. Highlights agility and resource effectiveness in compliance operations.

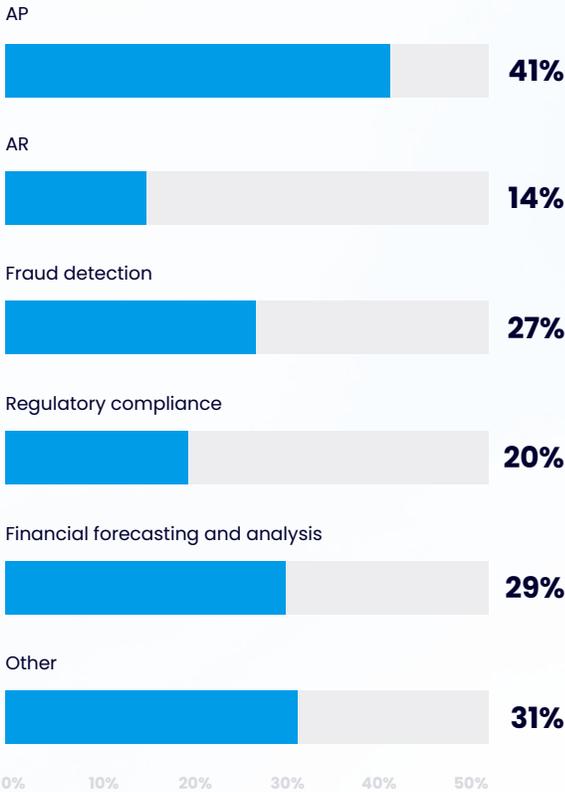
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FIGURE 5

Which areas of finance are you currently leveraging AI for?

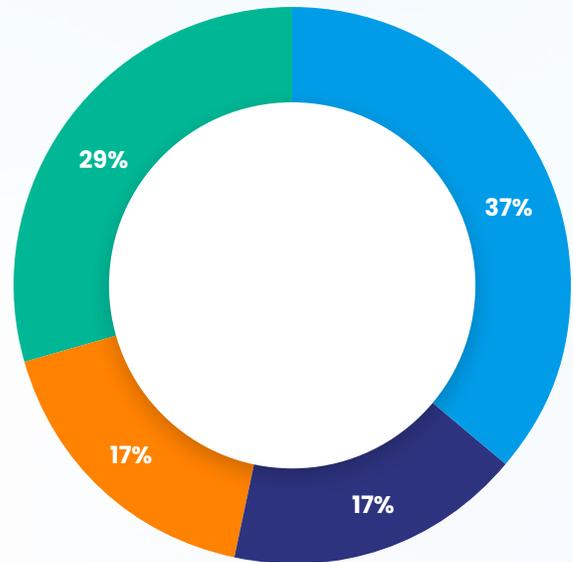


SOURCE: Finance Transformation Virtual Summit June 2025

FIGURE 6

What primary difficulties do you encounter in adapting to regulatory changes?

- Changes arising from various jurisdictions
- Accelerated rate and frequency of changes
- Limitation of resources
- Insufficient expertise



SOURCE: R2R Virtual Summit July 2025

Key Challenges: Adapting to the Pace of Change

However, data shows key challenges in adapting to regulatory changes include region-specific complexities (37%), insufficient expertise (29%), resource limitations (18%), and the rapid rate of change (18%).

For example, e-invoicing mandates are expanding globally, but are defined by region, making it difficult to standardize. By 2026, real-time e-invoicing will be required in many jurisdictions, driving efficiency, fraud prevention, and structured data collection. Despite this, only 7% of organizations feel “very equipped” for these mandates, while 23% are unaware of what CTC compliance entails.

continued

The risks associated with non-compliance and the time-consuming nature of ensuring compliance have led to digitization gaining traction. AI and automation tools are being used to streamline regulatory monitoring, dynamic policy management, and reporting. While 55% of organizations have adopted some automation (such as RPA), less than 14% have implemented advanced AI/ML solutions.



FIGURE 7

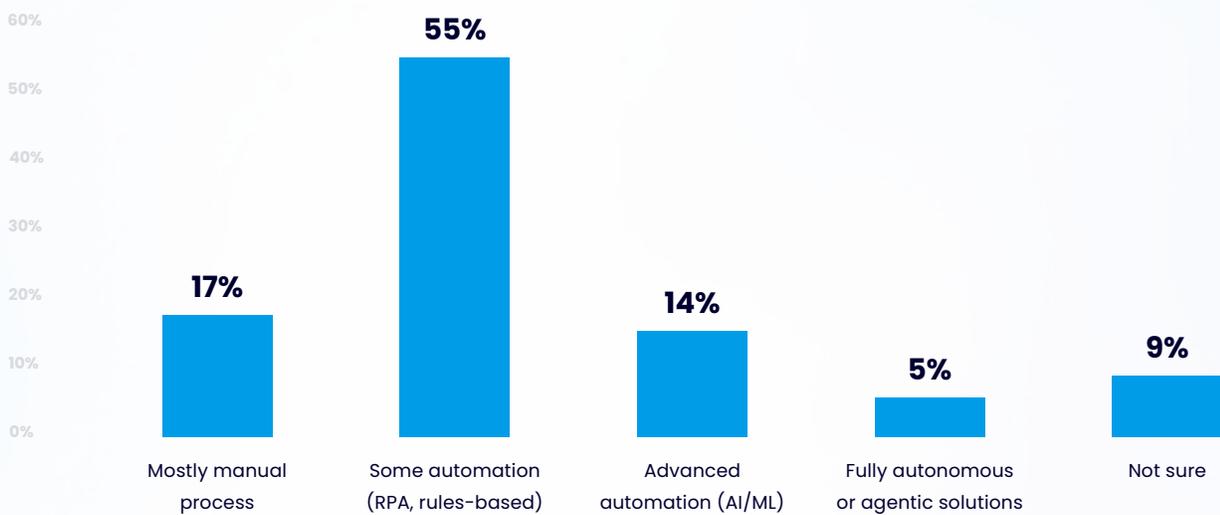
What is your current level of knowledge for e-invoicing mandates or CTC compliance?



SOURCE: Data collected by SSON Digital July 2025

FIGURE 8

Where is your organization today in terms of compliance automation?



SOURCE: Data collected by SSON Digital, July 2025

continued

Talent Expectations

Increased automation and strategic focus have led to the finance talent landscape shifting. There is a growing demand for professionals with skills in AI, data analytics, and digital finance. According to data collected by SSON, finance leaders are prioritizing digital fluency across five key areas:

- ✓ Understanding AI and analytics tools (51%)
- ✓ Driving digital transformation strategy (49%)
- ✓ Collaborating with tech/data teams (33%)
- ✓ Making data-driven decisions (31%)
- ✓ Upskilling teams in digital capabilities (57%)

Despite finance leaders acknowledging the importance of digital skills in the age of AI, upskilling efforts face significant barriers such as a lack of time, unclear skill frameworks, low engagement, and limited budget/resources. Organizations are applying a range of

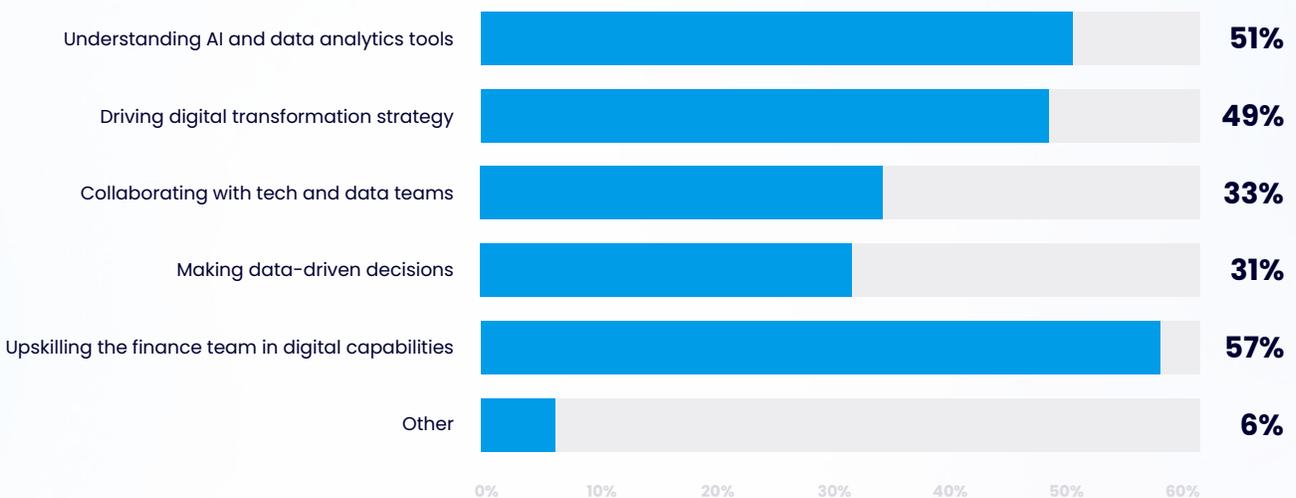
techniques in order to counter this, including creating skills academies, workforce analytics, microlearning, and certification programs.

Finally, remote and hybrid work models are also influencing talent expectations. Younger finance professionals increasingly expect modern cloud-based tools and flexible work arrangements, making digital transformation not just a strategic priority but a talent retention imperative.



FIGURE 9

What aspects of digital fluency is most critical for finance leaders to succeed in the AI era?



SOURCE: Finance Transformation Virtual Summit June 2025

continued

FIGURE 10

Which of these is your biggest challenge in upskilling your teams?



SOURCE: Finance Transformation Virtual Summit June 2025



Cybersecurity & Fraud Risk Management

As finance becomes more digital, the threat landscape grows more complex. Finance leaders must adopt zero-trust defense strategies, including rigorous identity controls and micro-segmentation. AI-driven defense tools are proving effective in monitoring transactions and flagging anomalies. As risks become more sophisticated, so must the tools used to combat them.

Examples of modern risks include:

- ✓ **Automated Attacks:** Credential stuffing, account takeovers, and fake account creation are being scaled through automation. These attacks are increasingly difficult to detect without intelligent monitoring systems.



- ✓ **Digital Payments:** The rise of mobile payments, digital wallets, and cryptocurrencies has opened new doors for fraud. While these tools offer convenience, they are only as secure as the user's behavior and the authentication protocols in place.

- ✓ **Business Email Compromise:** BEC attacks involve impersonating executives or vendors to trick employees into transferring funds or revealing sensitive data. These attacks are often highly targeted and socially engineered, making them difficult to identify.

- ✓ **AI-Powered Fraud**
However, AI in particular is increasing fraud risks. Fraudsters are now using generative AI to create highly realistic deepfakes and phishing emails. These tools enable voice, face, and persona simulations of trusted vendors or senior executives, making BEC attacks even more dangerous.

What to look out for:

- ✓ **Changes to Vendor Details:** Sudden requests to update vendor payment details, especially via audio or video, should be verified independently.

continued

- ✓ **Urgent Executive Requests:** High-pressure messages from “senior leaders” demanding immediate payments may be deepfake impersonations.
- ✓ **Unusual Invoice Approvals:** Invoices accompanied by unexpected voice/video instructions or bypassing normal workflows could be fraudulent.
- ✓ **Requests for Sensitive Info:** Any media-based request for login credentials, vendor data, or system access should be treated with suspicion.

Top Tips to Prioritize Finance Security in 2026

Here are SSON’s best practices for remaining vigilant against growing fraud risks and cybersecurity threats:



Embrace Zero-Trust Architecture

- Assume no user or device is trustworthy by default.
- Implement strict identity verification and continuous authentication processes.
- Segment networks to limit lateral movement in case of breaches.



Leverage AI/ML for Threat Detection

- Use AI-powered tools to monitor transactions in real time.
- Flag anomalies and suspicious patterns before damage occurs.
- Continuously train models to adapt to emerging fraud tactics.



Strengthen Identity & Access Controls

- Enforce multi-factor authentication (MFA) across all systems.
- Use biometric verification and behavioral analytics.
- Regularly audit access privileges to minimize insider threats.



Vet Third-Party Vendors Rigorously

- Conduct cybersecurity assessments before onboarding.
- Monitor vendor activity and data access continuously.
- Include breach response protocols in contracts.



Build a Culture of Cyber Awareness

- Train finance teams on phishing, deepfakes, and social engineering.
- Simulate attacks to test response readiness.
- Encourage reporting of suspicious activity without fear.





In Conversation with Pamela Novoa Ralli, Head of Product Management, FIS

To explore how leading companies are responding to the future of finance transformation, we sat down with Pamela Novoa Ralli, Head of Product Management at FIS, to discuss the transformative role of AI, automation, and intelligent systems in modern finance.

Pamela shares how FIS is tackling fragmentation and siloed data head-on with tools that integrate ERP data with commercial intelligence to deliver real-time scoring, predictive analytics, and prescriptive recommendations. From ESG-driven risk insights to autonomous finance agents, Pamela offers a compelling vision of a future where finance becomes a strategic command center for liquidity, risk, and engagement.

Finance teams are facing increasing complexity and expectations; how do you see organizations responding to this pressure?

Finance teams are navigating a perfect storm of rising complexity, tighter timelines, and higher expectations. Organizations are responding by modernizing finance workflows, but many still struggle with fragmented systems and siloed data.

An example of how FIS Automated Finance is solving the problem (head-on!) is our upcoming release of Revenue Insight, a scalable, agentic AI platform that integrates ERP data with commercial intelligence from D&B, Equifax, and custom scoring models. This enables real-time scoring, predictive analytics, and prescriptive recommendations, not just for AR, but across the back office.

For example, our ESG & Shipping-Augmented Credit Risk Intelligence use case combines shipping

disruptions and ESG signals with payment behavior to provide early warning indicators, helping reduce DSO and improve forecasting accuracy.

What role do you think technology (especially AI and automation) should play in helping finance teams evolve?

Technology should do more than automate; it should amplify decision-making and reshape how finance teams operate. At FIS, we're moving beyond traditional automation to deploy agentic AI systems that act with autonomy, context-awareness, and adaptability.

These aren't just bots; they're intelligent agents designed to:

- 1 Understand nuance** (e.g., Carla Pro analyzes email tone and intent to recommend empathetic or assertive collection strategies)
- 2 Execute multi-step tasks** (e.g., our Cash Application Automatch Agent reconciles payments with invoices using logic, learning, and feedback loops)
- 3 Continuously improve** (e.g., Risk Agent evolves with new data to refine risk segmentation and prioritization)

This shift enables finance teams to go from manual and reactive to insight-driven and proactive.

continued

Whether it's predicting cash flow, identifying AR risk, or optimizing collections, AI is becoming the strategic layer that connects data, decisions, and outcomes.

And it's not theoretical, these agents are already live across the US and Europe, achieving 80–95% pass rates, and transforming finance into a command center for liquidity, risk, and engagement.

As regulatory demands grow, especially around ESG and e-invoicing, how are finance leaders rethinking compliance and reporting?

- 1 **ESG Scoring Models** that combine bureau data with sector context to assess sustainability risk.
- 2 **Corporate Linkage & UBO intelligence**, which aggregates exposure across subsidiaries and flags compliance risks.
- 3 **Private AI deployments** that ensure secure, role-based access and data governance, critical for regulatory alignment.



4. Our Medallion Architecture (Bronze, Silver, and Gold layers) ensures data lineage, quality, and compliance across environments, whether on Azure, AWS, or on-premises.

How should teams manage the interaction between human teams and AI agents in a hybrid finance environment?

Deploying AI in a finance environment isn't just about balancing automation and oversight; it's about designing intelligent collaboration between human expertise and AI capabilities.

At FIS, we've architected our agentic AI platform to support multi-agent workflows that can operate autonomously or in human-in-the-loop configurations, depending on the task and tolerance for automation.

To make this work, teams need more than just process maps. They need:

- 1 **Agentic task decomposition:** breaking down finance workflows into discrete, goal-oriented tasks that can be assigned to AI agents or humans.
- 2 **Dynamic orchestration:** allowing agents to escalate decisions, request feedback, or defer to human judgment based on real-time context.
- 3 **Transparent performance metrics:** like our 80–95% pass rate benchmarks, which help teams understand when and where AI is most effective.

This isn't about replacing people, it's about augmenting them with intelligent systems that learn, adapt, and collaborate. The result is a finance function that's faster, smarter, and more resilient.

continued

Based on your experience working with clients, what's one common pitfall you see in finance transformation, and how can organizations avoid it?

One of the most common pitfalls we see is underestimating the complexity of operationalizing AI, especially in finance. It's easy to get excited about automation, but many teams treat it like a plug-and-play upgrade, rather than a strategic shift in how decisions are made and work gets done.

A real learning moment for us came during early deployments of Carla Pro and our Cash Application agents. We realized that even highly accurate models (with 80–95% pass rates) can fail to deliver value if the underlying data is fragmented, or if teams aren't aligned on how AI should interact with their workflows.

Here's what we've learned:

- 1 Start with the data:** Our Medallion Architecture (Bronze, Silver, and Gold) was born out of hard lessons. AI fails fast when data lacks structure, lineage, or governance.
- 2 Design for collaboration:** AI agents like Carla Pro are most effective when they're not just accurate, but also understandable and actionable by the teams using them.
- 3 Don't skip the human layer:** We've seen the best results when finance teams are involved early, helping define agent roles, validating outputs, and shaping escalation paths.

Ultimately, successful transformation isn't just about deploying smart tools, it's about building trust in the system, aligning people around new ways of working, and making sure the technology is solving real problems, not just checking boxes.



How to Ensure Your Finance Transformation Succeeds



Insights from Akhilesh Kohli, Former Managing Director, GBS LLP & VP Head APAC GBS, Philips

A successful finance transformation follows three key phases:



Vision & Strategy

1 Clarify the Objective: What are we transforming?

Too many transformations start with, “Let’s automate!” But automate what? For what purpose?

Doing the same work faster or cheaper isn’t always transformation; it’s optimization. The first step is about creating shared clarity around the purpose of the initiative.

2 Define the Vision: What does “transformed” look like?

Before you get into project plans and milestones, paint a picture of the destination. How will finance operate in the future? What will it feel like for the team? How will business stakeholders interact with finance?

A strong vision answers:

- What will be different in 2–3 years?
- What roles will finance play: scorekeeper, advisor, innovator?
- How will the function be structured: centralized, federated, or hybrid?

3 Understand the current state: Honor the reality before changing it

You can’t leap into the future without acknowledging the present. Take time to deeply assess your current finance function: people, processes, tools, and culture.

Include:

- Technology stack and digital maturity
- Process bottlenecks and duplications
- Skills gaps and cultural blockers
- Stakeholder expectations and frustrations

4 Map the Journey: From ‘As-Is’ to ‘To-Be’

Once the destination is clear and the current state is understood, define the road between the two. This is your finance transformation roadmap: your blueprint for change.

The roadmap should include:

- Clear phases and milestones
- Priority initiatives with business value
- Dependencies, quick wins, and foundational capabilities



continued



Design & Execution

5 Build the Core Team: Champions, Architects, and Doers

Finance transformation cannot succeed as a side project. You will need a cross-functional team that blends strategic thinking with operational depth and can speak the language of both finance and technology.

Your team should include:

- > A strong finance transformation leader (ideally not buried in operations)
- > Process owners and SMEs from different finance functions
- > IT and data leaders
- > A change and communication lead

6 Set Up Governance, Stakeholder Alignment, and Change Strategy

Transformations often die from confusion, lack of ownership, or poor communication. Don't skip the "soft" stuff, as it's often the hardest.

Establish:

- > Clear governance (decision-making rights, escalation paths)
- > Stakeholder mapping and engagement plans
- > A structured change management and communication strategy

7 Get into the Work: Solve Real Problems, Not Just Launch Tools

Transformation is not about implementing tools; it's about solving problems. Spend time in the pain points. Understand what frustrates people, what slows down decisions, and what causes rework.

Focus on:

- > High-impact areas where finance spends time but adds little value.
- > Where automation or insights could free up capacity
- > Processes that are ripe for standardization or simplification



Scale & Sustain

8 Pilot, Learn, and Scale

Don't try to boil the ocean. Choose one meaningful area, say, automated forecasting, digital AP, or close process optimization, and pilot it. Use it to learn, test governance, pressure-test technology, and build belief.

9 Create Sustainable Value: Standardize with Purpose, Build COEs

As your transformation progresses, you'll find opportunities to standardize processes and centralize expertise via Centers of Excellence (COEs), shared services, or global process owners.

But don't standardize for its own sake. Keep a balance between structure and flexibility so teams can still innovate.

10 Keep the Momentum Going

Transformation is not a one-time event; it's a capability. Once your foundation is built, the challenge becomes how to continuously evolve, adapt, and improve.

Maintain momentum by:

- > Regularly measuring and reporting value delivered
- > Keeping leadership engaged through progress updates.
- > Investing in upskilling and talent development
- > Building feedback loops to adapt to change

PREDICTIONS FOR 2026

The future of finance will be shaped by automation, compliance, and a strategic perspective. AI will become deeply embedded across finance functions, enhancing everything from forecasting accuracy to anomaly detection. ESG reporting will take center stage as a core responsibility for finance teams, driven by regulatory mandates such as the CSRD. Meanwhile, e-invoicing is set to become the global standard, leveraging structured data formats and real-time processing to streamline operations.

Next, centralized operating models such as FCoEs will continue to develop, enabling organizations to scale efficiently while maintaining speed and standardization. This level of efficiency allows the finance role to evolve into a strategic analytics hub, with data-driven decision-making becoming central to financial leadership. As cyber risks grow more complex, finance controls will be reshaped by AI-enhanced monitoring and zero-trust security frameworks.



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