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CFO'S GUIDE TO

Achieving Radical Productivity Gains

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Introduction

“What keeps you up at night?”

Pose this question to any CFO, and you’ll receive strikingly consistent responses, with accurate forecasting, maintaining compliance, navigating market volatility, driving growth, and protecting competitive positioning ranking as top concerns.

However, a closer look inside the finance function reveals a stark reality. One where your team’s time is spent primarily on transactional tasks, rather than on the analysis and insights the business depends on them to produce.

Finance, first and foremost, is about control. It has the lowest margin for error and carries the highest risks. Yet its role in the organisation is changing, and many CFOs are finding that their remit has expanded dramatically, no longer confined to finance itself.

In fact, 83% of finance teams say their workload continues to rise, citing global expansion, regulatory changes, and outdated systems as major pressures [1]. You’re now expected to lead operations, procurement and other functions. Simultaneously, you’re confronted with record transaction volumes and expected to deliver accurate, timely insights to the board, investors, and regulators.

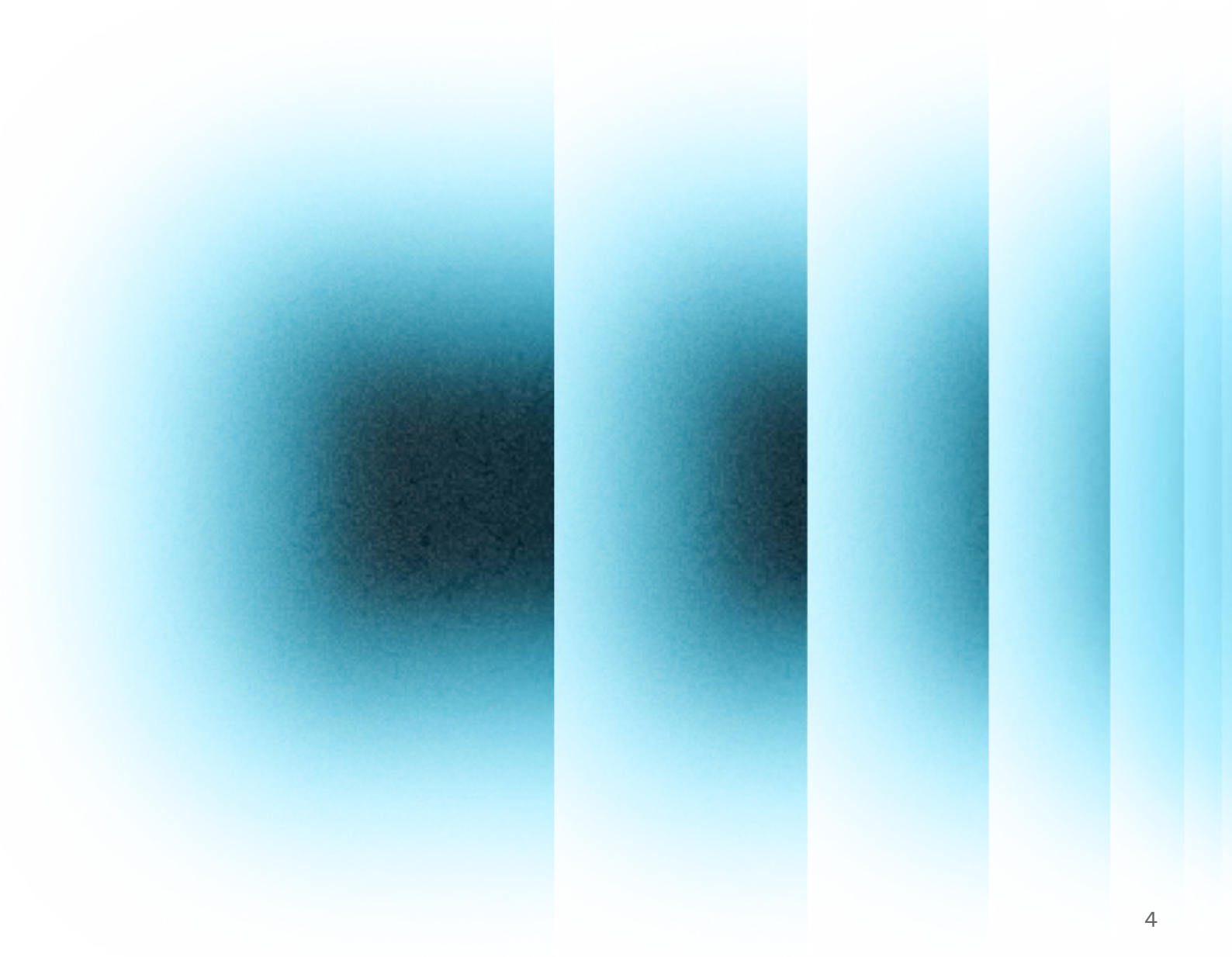
The gap between expectations and the ability to execute has never been wider. This is the CFO paradox.

2025 benchmarks show that reconciliations remain the single biggest bottleneck in the close, with month-end cycles routinely exceeding 9 days for mid- to large-size enterprises [2].

Add to this Gartner's 2025 'Budget Priorities for CFOs' survey, which found that 77% of CFOs recognise the need to increase technology investment to strengthen their function, with almost half of the CFOs surveyed intending to increase spending by 10% or more in 2025 compared to last year [3].

Yet, despite widespread recognition and rising intent, a lag in adoption persists, as McKinsey found that only 1% of finance teams have automated more than three-quarters of their workflows [4]. The leaders who act decisively now, starting with core accounting and close processes, stand to gain a tangible competitive advantage – before it becomes a table stake.

This guide is for finance leaders looking to capitalise on this transformation and reclaim their team's time, capacity, and focus while the competition plans and theorises – before following suit.



Why Finance Has Been Slow to Adopt AI

Accounting used to mean combing through physical records. Closing the books took weeks. Human error, and paper cuts, were rife.

Today, the volume has exploded, and the complexity has only grown. Yet the workflows for these fundamental processes remain essentially unchanged.

Accountants are still stuck doing the same manual work as before, except now across a significantly larger and more convoluted ecosystem.

Millions of transactions must be processed daily across numerous payment terminals, corporate expenses, and multiple systems. The same dataset must be processed to serve various stakeholders, including tax authorities, the board, and investors, each with distinct reporting requirements.

Pasha Golestaneh, a former head of accounting, describes it vividly:

> *"Raising invoices, maintaining subledgers, creating journal entries, updating fixed asset schedules – 80-90% of the time it's business as usual. It's not acceptable anymore that an accountant is doing that for six days straight, 10 hours a day during closing, because the value added is minimal, other than checking a box that says we've done it."*

Legal firms have been leveraging AI for some time. The same goes for marketing teams, who lean on AI for tasks such as content and campaign optimisation. Yet 79% of finance leaders still say their teams are "swamped" with manual month-end close tasks such as journal entries, reconciliations, and exception handling – areas that legacy systems like Excel and rule-based automation still struggle to handle.

Yet the problem is so clear, and the scale is so sweeping, then why has finance failed to adopt AI to the same degree as these other verticals?

There's one fundamental difference. Marketing and legal are primarily text-based industries where pattern recognition plays a key role; something AI has excelled in.

Why?

Because the context is essentially universal – a contract clause, for example, means roughly the same thing across most organisations.

Finance, however, is an entirely different story. Each finance team operates in an extremely context-dependent environment, with customised ERPs, unique workflows, approvals, and reporting requirements. As a result, introducing AI into finance has proven to be historically complex, and, despite growing investment, results have been fairly limited; only about 5% of AI pilots in finance have resulted in meaningful P&L impact [5].

Importantly, the majority of these AI deployments have targeted analytical use cases, such as forecasting, reporting, or scenario modelling, leaving the core operations of accounting and controllership unaddressed. This isn't due to neglect, but the fundamental constraints of the existing technology – until recently.

Yet, to now understand how new technology solves these challenges, we first need to assess what has long since been the only option for those core workflows – rule-based automation.

Why Rule-Based Automation Isn't Enough

The core limitation of rule-based automation is that it can only do as it is explicitly told. It cannot adapt, learn, or act beyond predefined given instructions, relying purely on fixed, hard-coded business logic.

The issue with this is that the context of accounting processes is anything but static: customers may change payment methods, suppliers might modify invoice formats, departments alter coding structures, new products are introduced, systems update, and one-off transactions are common. Real-world data is messy, it's dynamic – and rule-based automation cannot keep pace.

Rules are brittle; when a transaction deviates from the established business logic, the system fails and is simply unable to classify it. A single unexpected field, a missing reference, or a new supplier name is enough to cause the rule to fail.

For example, should an invoice arrive with a new cost code, it cannot be posted, nor can a bank transaction with a slightly different description be reconciled. Rule-based automation requires linear steps; if one step fails, the rest do not execute – halting reconciliations, delaying journals, preventing reports from refreshing, and pushing the close out by days.

Neither does rule-based automation truly reduce workload, and therefore, neither does it free up your team's capacity. Exceptions still accumulate, and rules must be manually updated constantly as the business and its workflows grow and evolve – a resource-intensive affair requiring engineers, consultants, IT companies, and business analysts.

But the ground is shifting.

Enter Agentic AI

The first crop of forward-looking CFOs is now turning to a transformative solution across their foundational domains: agentic AI.

Agentic AI combines large language models, reinforcement learning, and multi-agent orchestration to complete complex tasks – without requiring constant supervision.

Where rule-based automation can only react to predefined inputs, agentic AI goes far beyond passive response generation or data retrieval. It adapts to real-time information, interprets context, and autonomously determines which actions to take.

This includes planning and executing multi-step workflows that span multiple processes, systems, and agents, automatically managing dependencies, routing exceptions, and escalating only true anomalies for final human review and approval.

In further contrast to rule-based automation, agentic AI learns by observing how teams resolve exceptions in real-time, picking up on the organisation's chart of accounts, departments/cost centres, and approval hierarchies, combining this with historical data to understand the reasoning behind financial processes.

Crucially, agentic AI isn't intended to, nor does it, completely replace judgment. It instead enhances it, surfacing patterns, risks, and suggesting the next-best action that humans may otherwise miss.

These distinct capabilities enable agentic AI to deliver transformations that the finance function has been previously unable to achieve with rule-based automation. Using these agentic AI agents, organisations can now bypass rigid rules entirely and move directly to intelligent decision augmentation, where agentic AI's reasoning then works in tandem with human judgement.

Using agentic AI, finance leaders are not only improving accuracy and compliance, driving faster, more accurate closes, but also freeing their teams to focus on the strategic, value-added work that has long been overshadowed by looming month-end processes.

How to Implement Agentic AI

Achieving transformation with agentic AI cannot be rushed. It is imperative that we first establish a solid foundation.

This is neither a theory nor anecdotal. According to a Cloudera-commissioned study, 90% of IT leaders state that unified finance data is critical for unlocking AI value [6]. Deloitte's Finance 2025 report echoed this, finding that AI's effectiveness in key finance workflows depends heavily on having clean, integrated data [7].

Without a strong foundation, even the most sophisticated AI will be forced to conduct guesswork. Specifically, for agentic AI to be as effective as possible, it needs transaction-level ERP integrations, clean data, as mentioned, from source to ledger, and structured workflows that capture the decision-making context.

The deep ERP connection is particularly vital. One reason legacy close management tools have failed in the past is that they simply layer checklists, dashboards, and review workflows on top of existing systems – leaving agentic AI agents without the complete story.

Naman Mathur, Head of Product at Stacks, observes:

> *"Much of the industry relies on high-level summary data like trial balances. These snapshots miss the underlying transaction-level details that provide essential context for accurate automation. What's missing are the decision breadcrumbs: how transactions were previously handled, who made edits, what documents were attached, and why adjustments were made."*

For example, recurring vendor payments coded differently across departments or months carry implicit logic that humans understand intuitively. It is only when

agentic AI has this workflow logic to observe that it can learn and apply said logic consistently from then onward.

If a payment to 'AMZN' is coded to IT expenses because it was AWS, then the agent learns that context. Next month, when another 'AMZN' transaction appears, it applies that reasoning – but if the pattern suggests office supplies instead, it adapts and flags it for review, rather than applying the same rule haphazardly.

Agentic AI's understanding of your organisation's business logic is continuously refined, with every exception processed serving as another lesson. The result isn't limited to faster processing, but fewer bottlenecks and cleaner data with every cycle.

Yet where to begin?

Rather than trying to automate the entire close at once, start small, build trust, measure impact, and scale what works. With this incremental approach, you can grow confidence realistically, make it easier to identify opportunities for improvement, and steadily move toward a reliable, orchestrated end-to-end close.

Stage 1. Agentic AI learns individual, high-frequency workflows

If our goal is to unlock your team's capacity, then the core accounting and close processes present the greatest opportunity to create the most immediate impact.

The first wins will come from the processes that occur daily or weekly, such as reconciliations, recurring journals, cash allocations, and exception clean-up. At this stage, individual agentic AI agents handle one of these workflows each in isolation – without yet seeing how that work connects to the broader close.

These tasks share three key characteristics: they're repetitive, follow patterns, and consume a disproportionate amount of time relative to the value they add. Most importantly, they contain an abundance of small, context-rich accounting decisions.

When an agentic AI agent first enters these workflows, it learns from your existing transaction records by analysing past decisions and how your team has previously handled exceptions, to write its initial policies and matching logic. It is then ready to start performing reconciliations.

In the first reporting cycle, the agentic AI agent will encounter more cases where it lacks sufficient confidence to act and, so, flags and escalates for human judgement. Then, it observes how your accountants resolve these cases – the reasoning behind decisions, such as how timing differences are treated, which discrepancies have required supporting documentation in the past, and how previous exceptions were resolved – and uses these observations to build reliable, repeatable judgment.

With every reporting cycle, the amount of human review required decreases as the agentic AI's understanding deepens, and it handles more and more cases independently.

The significant difference to rule-based automation in these use cases is that, instead of a list of unresolved items requiring full human investigation, your team receives a set of partially resolved issues – with the agent's analysis, attempted matches, and outstanding questions laid out clearly.

Through the automation of this tedious work, your team can direct their attention to reviewing the few genuinely ambiguous cases. Herein lies the first key to unlocking those radical productivity gains.

Stage 2. Agentic AI develops coordinated, cross-process judgment

Once individual agents have mastered their specific, separate workflows, the next step is to widen their field of view.

At this stage, as opposed to only understanding reconciliations, recurring journals, cash allocations, and exception clean-up as separate tasks, the agent begins to see how each step influences the next.

Pivotally, for the first time, the agent can follow the chain of cause and effect that runs through your month-end close; the dependencies that no single accountant, nor rule-based automation, could track at once.

The agent highlights potential issues and the downstream consequences, giving your team foresight into risks before they materialise. While humans still decide how and when to address them, this foresight prevents bottlenecks. Vitally, it also allows for more strategic planning during the close. In fact, In fact, in a 2025 HFS Research report, a significant portion of finance teams identified cross-team process dependencies as a root cause of close cycle delays [8].

The impact is far-reaching.

For example, suppose a vendor payment is misclassified early in the cycle. In that case, the agent can now see that the effect isn't contained to that reconciliation and that it will cascade into spend variance analysis and distort period-end reporting.

Likewise, if a journal entry is awaiting approval, the agent can trace the potential downstream effects within the workflow and flag the risk to your team, so they can intervene before it causes issues.

The major shift from stage one is that the agent is now surfacing consequences that could arise, rather than just the issues alone. In turn, finance teams gain access to a level of foresight that was previously unavailable to them. Furthermore, that was simply impossible.

Stage 3. Teams shift to continuous close processes

Once agents have formed a comprehensive understanding of your workflows and the underlying reasoning behind them, and can anticipate cross-process consequences, the next evolution is continuous operations across the entire finance function.

Unlike stage one, where humans still handle most of the work, stage three sees agents now executing routine, predictable, transactional tasks independently – reserving only the most complex, ambiguous, or high-risk decisions for human judgment, review, and approval.

Agents also move beyond the foresight of stage two to continuous monitoring. Real-time monitoring, scenario analysis, and proactive insight become the norm, allowing finance teams to move from reactive correction to continuous, high-value decision-making.

This progression marks a significant shift in how your team can operate, no longer relying on retroactive reporting. As Tom Stenhouse, CFO at Nextgen Clearing, says:

> *"There's no reason to wait until the end of the month to understand your financial position. For key areas like revenue and cash flow, a live view or rolling updates provide immense value. Waiting 20 days to address issues means you're missing opportunities to course correct."*

Without continuous processes, expecting teams to be more strategic is a hard ask. Felicia Su, Controller at Miro, has witnessed firsthand:

> *"When accounting teams spend their days fighting fires with broken processes or bad data, they simply don't have the bandwidth to think long-term. Moving out of 'band-aid mode' is the first step to becoming a proactive partner to the business."*

Now, with this three-stage framework, you know where to start and how to scale – but how do you redeploy the capacity you've just unlocked?

Shifting Finance from Defense to Offense

Deadlines dominate the calendar. Finance teams are spread thin, forced to adopt a reactive, defensive posture, focusing solely on maintaining the status quo. As Pasha Golestaneh notes:

> *"You're in defence mode when you're closing the books – just keeping everything afloat, meeting deadlines. You're actually doing very little in terms of building new processes."*

This is where agentic AI serves a much larger purpose past automation.

When the operational burden is lifted, teams are free to adopt a more forward-looking, offensive mindset.

As Albert Malikov, the founder and CEO at Stacks, describes:

> *"If they start bringing insights to leadership that they didn't have time to find before, that's success." He also shares one example: "If a controller comes back to leadership and says, 'I finally had time to dig into a business line and found its loss-making,' that's the right outcome," says Malikov. "You're not just closing faster, you're building a smarter finance function."*

Finance returns to its intended role: illuminating risk, seizing opportunities and influencing impactful business decisions – only faster and with far greater confidence.

The effect of this redeployment extends beyond performance, however. It also has an equally profound impact on team morale and retention.

Empowering Accountants to Stay and Grow

The industry is currently experiencing a widening talent shortage. 87% of finance leaders report a "critical talent shortage" in accounting – a 14% rise since last year [9]. Additionally, according to the IMA, nearly 30% of accounting and finance professionals intend to leave their current employer within the next year, citing low engagement and a lack of growth as key reasons [10].

Vladi Vinogradsky, Accounting Lead at Robinhood, has witnessed this firsthand:

> *"I've worked at various technology companies and witnessed many accountants who want to be strategic, but many feel the only way to do that is by leaving accounting for other business functions. It shouldn't be that way."*

This is reinforced by ACCA's Global Talent Trends 2025 survey; 58% of finance and accountancy professionals anticipate their next career role will be outside their current organisation [11].

The trend is clear. Monotonous work erodes engagement, and, without the opportunity to contribute to the broader picture, attrition is inevitable.

A CFO of a leading global payment processor for large enterprises put it plainly:

> *"If I want to keep that fantastic talent on the accounting side, I can't just sit back and hope they will stay with bad tooling and bad processes. There's something offensive about it that needs to happen to make them want to stay, or they'll find a place that is taking that approach."*

Enabling Growth

As your company grows, so too does the complexity; there are only more transactions, systems, and even more interdependent processes. The natural response? Hire accordingly.

This isn't a sustainable solution. Nor is it viable any longer. Nearly half of hiring managers report that the talent drought has only worsened in the last three years, with more accountants nearing retirement than entering the industry [12].

As one CFO predicts:

> *"I expect we'll continue to grow our team. I think we can scale the business much faster than we have to grow the team... That 60-70% in accounting and controlling will get smaller as a proportion, and those people can shift attention to FP&A, business control, and pricing."*

Agentic AI offers an efficient solution, enabling finance to have a far greater impact without additional hiring in a talent-scarce market.

Ensuring Adoption

Navigating change is both a technical and deeply human issue, particularly with finance being so mission-critical. Something as simple as a rogue calculation carries significant consequences, including compliance penalties, audit issues, and a loss of stakeholder confidence.

Naturally, this can foster defensive attitudes; people resisting change not out of stubbornness but due to legitimate concerns surrounding accuracy, oversight, and job security. Left unaddressed, these worries stall or block adoption entirely.

Building faith early is imperative; according to Deloitte's 2025 Centre for Controllership poll, 42.7% of finance professionals cited trust as a key barrier to adopting agentic AI [13].

Build Trust Gradually

As we detailed previously, agentic AI needs to be introduced gradually to your business to ensure complete understanding and long-term success. This same principle applies from a change management perspective.

Invite your accountants and controllers into the process so that they can both witness and validate its effectiveness firsthand. The benefits are two-fold: they can provide real-time feedback to ensure future expansion runs smoothly, and you create buy-in organically by making them active participants.

Invest in AI Skills and Literacy

McKinsey's 2025 findings suggest that the biggest blocker to scaling AI isn't employees, but leadership themselves. Staff are far more ready and willing to adopt new technology than you may expect, but still only 1% consider their implementation to be 'at maturity'[14].

This disconnect was highlighted in EY's workplace survey of over 1,100 employees, which found that, while 84% of them are eager to embrace agentic AI in their role, only 52% of senior leaders reported full investment in upskilling, leaving teams to figure it out on their own [15].

Building comprehensive AI literacy is key. Leaders should invest in continuous, structured training programmes that cover data quality and its impact on AI outputs. Staff will need education surrounding the ethical considerations, including explainability and trust.

This becomes even more relevant in light of this insight recently published by Gartner. By 2029, they predict one-third of finance roles will become "shared jobs" between humans and AI, making collaboration with intelligent systems like agentic AI a core competency [16].

Effort should also be focused on changing perceptions around agentic AI and job security; despite the excitement conveyed, EY also found that 56% worry about being made obsolete [17]. Leaders should emphasise communication on role evolution, not role redundancy, to reassure employees that their judgment and expertise will, in fact, be increasingly valued.

Strengthen Governance, Controls and Oversight

Trust and control are intertwined. As Albert Malikov explains:

> *"All data manipulation: preparing, categorising, cleaning – should be handled by technology. Machines do it faster and with fewer mistakes. But reviewing, approving, and providing business context must stay with humans. They understand the company, compliance, and risk."*

While agentic AI automatically logs all actions and provides all relevant documentation, organisations still need to put their own guardrails in place. This includes layered approvals, human-in-the-loop reviews, and access controls, ensuring that teams retain oversight and that risk is managed appropriately.

Communicate With Middle Management

When it comes to driving adoption, it's vital to have someone who can campaign on your behalf; someone who bridges the gap between senior leadership and their people. An 'internal champion'. Typically, this will be middle management, with whom you should strive to develop a strong relationship.

Create spaces where they can raise practical concerns, allow them to play a role in shaping rollout timelines, and empower them with wins and success stories to take back to their teams.

This was made particularly important in McKinsey's "Learning Perspective" report. They argue that, when companies under-invest in change management and employee support, middle managers may see AI as a threat rather than a tool [18].

The need for strong guidance and accountability cannot be understated for internal buy-in. Yet, to secure this same backing from the board, CFOs will need to come equipped with compelling, clear evidence.

Quantifying the Business Impact of Agentic AI

Executive support won't be swayed by abstract theories and promises.

CFOs need to show precisely how agentic AI supports the function, so focus only on what you can measure: time saved, losses avoided, and improvements in cash flow. Here's exactly how you can quantify them:

Time Redeployed to Strategic Work

One of the clearest indicators will be time. Specifically, how much of it agentic AI restores, allowing your team to perform those high-value activities. Track the hours previously spent on reconciliations, data entry, invoice chasing, and reporting preparation versus the hours now dedicated to forecasting, pricing models, scenario analyses, or strategic reporting.

For example, if your team now spends 100 additional hours per month on strategic analysis, document which decisions were influenced and the resulting financial or operational impact. Show how this redeployment directly connects to agentic AI adoption to better-informed business decisions that protect margins and help seize opportunities.

Avoided Costs

Showing the hard numbers is key, but they mean little without context.

With agentic AI facilitating continuous close monitoring, losses can now be detected and prevented – and those savings add up.

Where possible, use historical records to identify and quantify past losses, including duplicate payments, late fees, and compliance penalties. Every penny translates directly into cash-backed savings.

For example, on a £10 million annual payable volume, capturing even 1% of early payment discounts could free £100,000 that would otherwise have been lost.

Cash cycle impact

By anticipating bottlenecks, Agentic AI significantly accelerates invoice processing and payment collection. Quantify this by comparing the time these took before and after automation.

If automation shortens the cash collection cycle by five days for a company with £10–15 million in annual revenue, that's roughly £130,000–£200,000 in working capital freed up.

That's funding now immediately available without raising extra capital, and demonstrates how faster cycles improve liquidity, allowing the business to invest and respond to opportunities quickly.

Conclusion

Leadership expects you to serve as the strategic engine of the organisation, enabling growth and agility, and demonstrating market leadership.

But finance has been stuck in a perpetual race, heads down until month-end, too occupied with transactional tasks to anticipate the next opportunity or capitalise on the shifting ground beneath their feet.

Agentic AI presents change. To define it simply as automation is a disservice; it is fundamentally rewriting how the finance function operates.

The result isn't just less manual load and a faster close. It's the reclaimed capacity, increased analytical firepower, and renewed morale. It's the ability to shape the future rather than dwell on past data.

As Albert Malikov notes: "There's massive potential locked inside every finance team, and technology should be the key that sets it free".

Early adopters of Stacks are already experiencing the transformation. The only question which remains is what role you wish to play: observer, participant – or leader.

Stacks.ai is an agentic AI platform that integrates with your ERP, Excel, and other systems to automate your reconciliations, journal entries, flag anomalies, and provide real-time visibility and 100% auditability into close processes.

Early implementations have resulted in considerable reductions in manual work, faster month-end close, and automated audit preparation. By autonomously handling routine tasks, Stacks allows finance teams to redirect their focus to analysis, exceptions, and strategic insights.

Designed specifically for multi-entity, multi-currency operations, Stacks shows how agentic AI can enhance your team's efficiency, accuracy, and oversight.

A one-click close is no longer just something to dream about.
We're building it right now. Learn more about Stacks at Stacks.ai

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