



2026 CFO Report

*Benchmarking AI
ROI, Operations,
and Dealmaking*

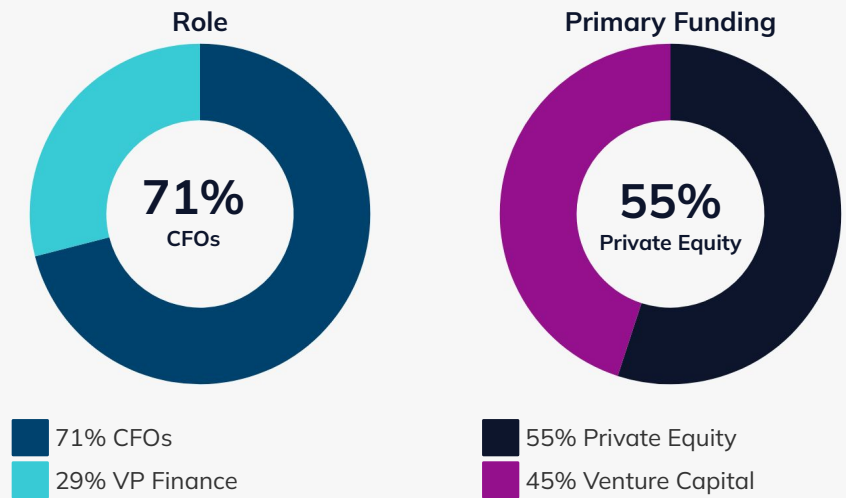
In Collaboration with Cascade Insights®

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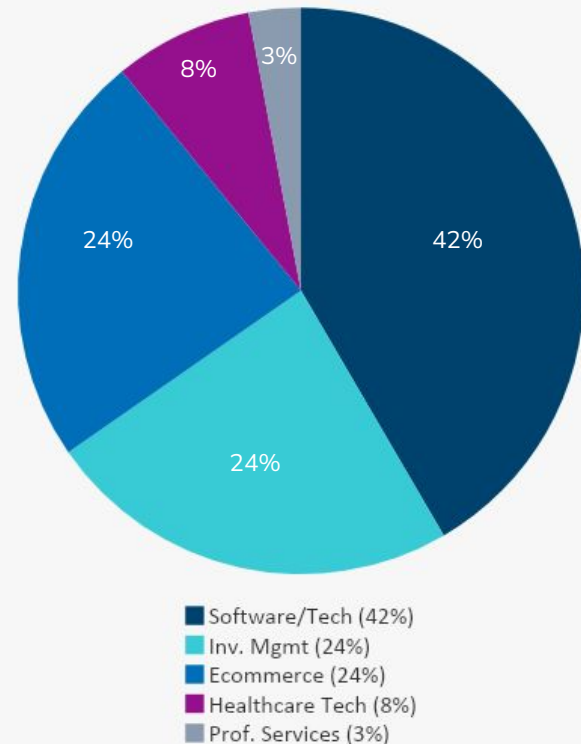
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The 2026 CFO Report

In collaboration with Cascade Insights, Consero Global surveyed 102 financial leaders from investor-backed companies. This report captures where finance leaders stand in 2026 — at the intersection of near-universal AI adoption and significant structural barriers that prevent its full potential from being realized.



Survey Industries (Industry Background)



Executive Summary

The Paradox of Progress

Consero's report highlights that the 2026 financial landscape for investor-backed companies is defined by a significant deployment gap. While AI adoption has reached 97% — with 76% of CFOs seeing ROI within a year — the promised strategic shift remains elusive.

97%

AI adoption
in finance departments

76%

See ROI within
12 months

45%

Trapped in the
"Efficiency Gap"

99%

Expect material
transaction in 2026

We Are in a Critical Interim Period

Despite fully-embedded AI adoption doubling, structural barriers like data readiness (33%) and scaling challenges (31%) prevent full deployment.

This has trapped 45% of financial leaders in an "efficiency gap," spending over 60% of their time on manual tasks. Consequently, **keeping finance operations aligned with the rapid pace of growth** has emerged as the #1 risk concern.

The 2026 CFO Mandate: Foundations Before Scale

To bridge this gap, smart leaders are prioritizing foundational stability to meet investor demands for value creation.

Rather than rushing toward an exit—which ranks as the lowest priority—CFOs are optimizing cash flow and reshaping teams with data-centric talent.

As 99% of leaders prepare for material transactions this year, the mandate is clear: invest in operational foundations and talent now to ensure sustainable growth.

Key Findings: The 2026 Data at a Glance

The trajectory of the finance function is accelerating toward automation

75%+

of AI investments in finance achieve a positive return within 12 months

Only 3% of leaders skeptical of future payoffs

42%

Broadly/Fully Deployed AI

Doubled since 2025 — broad deployment accelerating

33%

Cite Data Readiness as a Roadblock

Closely followed by scaling from pilot to enterprise (31%)

57%

CFOs Skewed Toward Ops Work

Unchanged since 2022 despite AI investments

#1

Investor Priority: Revenue Growth (51%)

Tied with cash flow & EBITDA expansion at 50–51%

99%

Expect Material Transaction in 12 Mo.

50% YoY surge in add-on acquisitions

#1–3

Top Finance Function Priorities are Foundational

Top three priorities: 1. **Cash Flow & Working Capital Optimization**, 2. **Data Infrastructure**, 3. **Faster Close**

48%

Expect exit via private sale or going public

Yet building an exit-ready finance function is their lowest priority

🔑 #1 Risk in 2026: Scaling finance operations to keep pace with growth (34%) — outweighing audit readiness and cybersecurity

Value Creation: The 2026 CFO Mandate

Investor-backed CFOs navigating an interim period of competing demands

Aggressive investor demands for growth must be balanced against the need to rebuild the finance "engine." While the long-term goal is strategic leadership, current priorities are dictated by a mandate to fix foundational data and operational gaps before scaling.

Fast Closes, Lagging Automation

65%

Organizations that can complete their monthly close within 9 days

27%

Still rely primarily on spreadsheets for reconciliations or adjustments

13%

Investor-backed firms that have achieved a fully-automated close process

Competing Investor Mandates

Investors have set nearly equal priorities across four major pillars, forcing CFOs to balance short-term and long-term goals simultaneously:

- Revenue Growth (51%)
- Cash Flow Optimization (51%)
- EBITDA/Margin Expansion (50%)
- Digital Transformation (50%)

This forces financial leaders to prioritize foundation building (cash flow and infrastructure) rather than more strategic initiatives. CFOs cite **balancing short-term financial targets with long-term strategic investments** as their number one challenge in meeting investor expectations. This is more than those who chose too many competing priorities, macroeconomic headwinds, and outdated technology infrastructure combined.

CFO Finance Function Priorities (Ranked)

1

Cash Flow & Working Capital Optimization

2

Better Data Infrastructure and Analytics

3

Faster, More Automated Financial Close

4

Adopting AI & Automating Finance Processes

"We focus spending on projects that bring quick revenue while still funding tools supporting future growth."

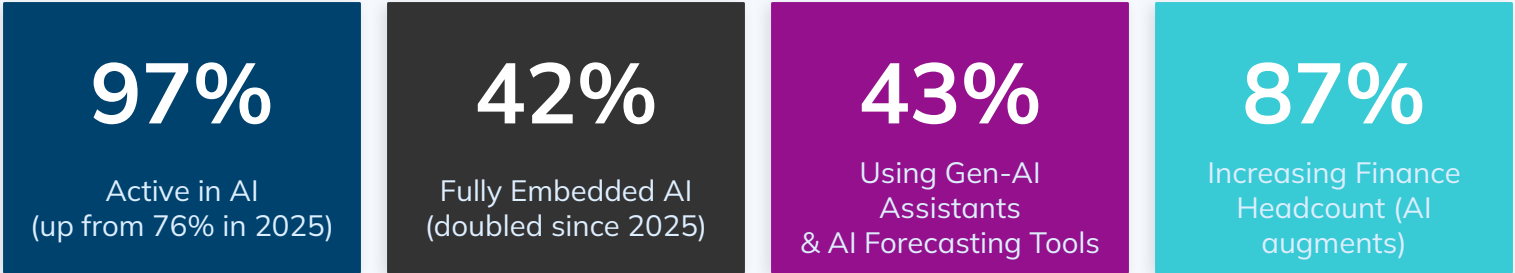
— Survey Respondent, Investor-Backed CFO

CFO's ranked priorities – 2nd and 3rd focused on infrastructure and automation and 4th on AI – show that they are working on building out a foundation that is ready for AI deployment.

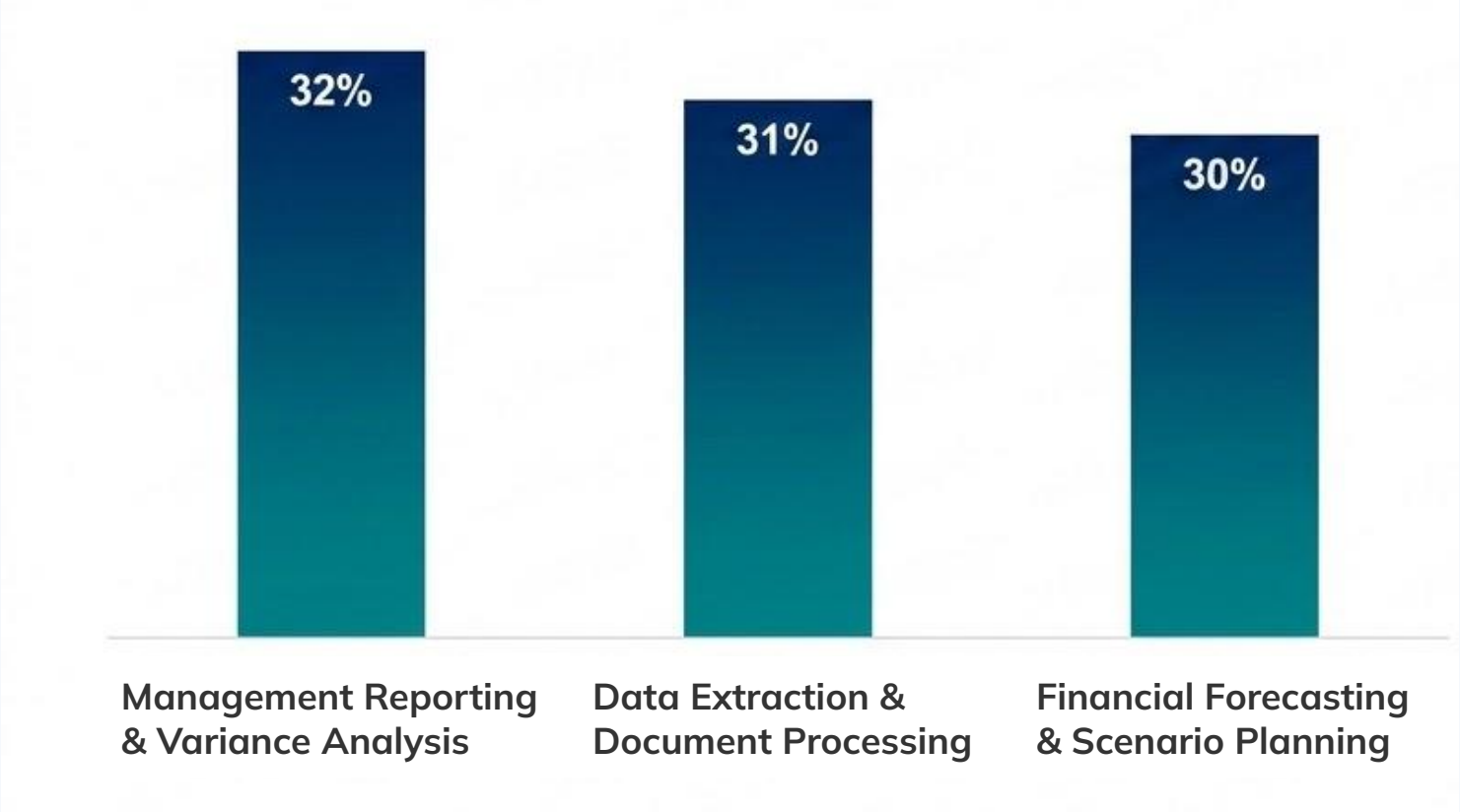
AI Adoption Moves From Pilots to Broad Deployment

The transition from experimental AI pilots to enterprise-wide integration is accelerating

While adoption has reached near-universal levels, the focus has shifted toward high-utility applications that deliver measurable returns.



Top AI Use Cases in Finance (2026)



Financial Leaders See AI ROI Within a Year

The financial justification for AI is settled

Time to AI Payback

The financial justification for AI is settled: 70% of CFOs see payback within 12 months with 23% of CFOs seeing payback in as little as 3–6 months.



ROI by Use Case — % Achieving Payback Within 6–12 Months



How ROI is Measured

Financial leaders measure success of AI initiatives through the reduction of manual hours (21%) and productivity gains per employee (19%), suggesting that AI is being used to augment existing teams rather than replace them.

Future Investments

Organizations are not backing down on AI investments. Nearly 3 in 4 organizations plan to **increase their AI investment by at least 5-20% within the next year**. That does not mean that AI deployment comes without challenges.

Data Readiness & Scaling Challenges Hinder AI Potential

While the desire to automate is universal, structural blockers prevent a full strategic pivot

This study uncovered four structural impediments that hinder AI adoption across the finance function. **Data readiness**—specifically quality, accessibility, and completeness—is the primary roadblock at 33%, followed by the difficulty of **scaling** successful pilots into enterprise-wide rollouts at 31%.

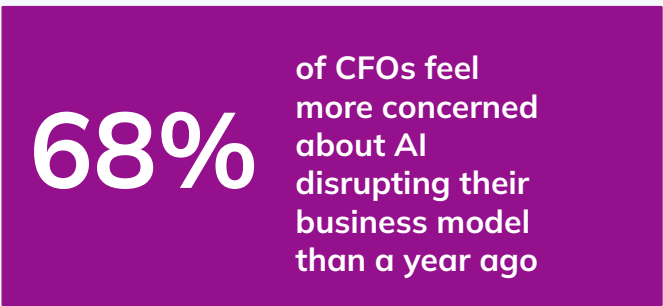
These hurdles are compounded by unclear prioritization and siloed systems (28% each) that prevent the seamless integration required for sophisticated automation.

Top AI ROI Blockers

Impediment	Impact
Data Readiness Gaps (Quality, accessibility, completeness)	33%
Scaling Challenges (Pilot-to-enterprise failure)	31%
Unclear Use Case Prioritization	28%
Siloed Systems	28%

When examining top-tier initiatives like management reporting and financial forecasting, a **lack of internal skills** emerges as a critical secondary barrier. This skills gap likely drives the surge in headcount noted in the study; rather than replacing staff, CFOs are hiring specifically to fill the analytical voids necessary to support AI augmentation.

AI Disruption Concerns



E-commerce is split with 50% being more concerned about AI disrupting their current business model. Data shows that only consulting and professional services leaders feel about the same about AI disruption in 2026.

Transaction Expectations Are High

The pressure on finance operations has reached a breaking point

With 99% of firms expecting at least one material transaction (equity raise, acquisition, or sale) in the next 12 months, the pressure on finance operations has reached a breaking point.



The Move to Embedded Partners

To manage this surge, **87% of CFOs utilize third-party Finance & Accounting (F&A) partners.**

However, the way they use these partners has shifted.

Outsourcing is no longer just for project-based M&A support; the companies looking for M&A transaction support from partners has **dropped by over half** since 2024.

Instead, they’re looking for operational infrastructure support.

Operational & Management Reporting



Cash Flow Management



Financial Due Diligence



M&A Transaction Support



To meet investor priorities, financial leaders are handling more strategic initiatives in-house: **growing revenue & expanding margins.** They’re turning to partners to help them double down on getting operations in order by providing buttoned up financials.

Nearly Half of CFOs Expect to Exit, But are Prioritizing Elsewhere

A critical misalignment has emerged in 2026

A critical misalignment has emerged: while investor-backed finance leaders anticipate major transactions, few are actively preparing for them. At the start of this year:

48%

of CFOs expected to sell privately or go public within 12 months.

28%

of CFOs excited meeting exit & fundraising timelines as a top concern.

Despite these expectations, **Exit Readiness ranks as the dead-last priority for the finance function.** CFOs are currently so focused on fixing the foundational engine and mitigating risks that they are deferring the preparation required for a final departure.

CFOs Are Focusing on Foundations to Mitigate Scaling Risks

While 99% of leaders expect a material transaction this year, the lack of active preparation creates significant vulnerabilities:

Compressed Timelines: 27% of CFOs already struggle to balance short-term targets with long-term investments; a sudden exit adds intense pressure to strained operations.

Reduced Valuation Risk: Without a "clean" engine and audit-ready financials, organizations risk losing leverage or facing price adjustments during due diligence.

Operational Friction: The #1 risk concern for 2026 is scaling operations to keep pace with growth (34%), even overtaking audit readiness (32%) and cybersecurity (31%).

Strategic Recommendation: Preparing from Day One

To maximize value, investor-backed CFOs should begin exit preparation **12–18 months** ahead of an anticipated sale. By integrating readiness into daily operations rather than treating it as a final hurdle, leaders can move from a reactive posture to a position of strength when an offer arrives.

The Path Forward

Three critical actions for the 2026 CFO

The 2026 data indicates that the “Future CFO” must be as much a technologist and data architect as a financial steward. To move from operational anchor to strategic leadership:

01

Solve the Data Gap First

Before increasing AI spend, address the quality and accessibility of core data. AI ROI is capped by the cleanliness of the underlying systems. With 33% citing data readiness as the #1 blocker, this is the foundational priority.

02

Outsource to Elevate

Leverage F&A partners to manage the 6–9 day close and routine reporting. This is the only proven way to reclaim the 60% of time currently lost to transactional work — freeing CFOs for strategic decisions.

03

Hire for Systems Fluency

Shift recruitment toward candidates with SQL, BI, and ERP proficiency. The era of the Excel Power User is being replaced by the era of the Data Architect — and skills gaps are already impeding AI deployment.

By fixing the operational engine now, investor-backed CFOs can ensure they are ready for the transactions—and the disruptions—that 2026 will undoubtedly bring.



ABOUT CONSERO GLOBAL

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- Financial Planning & Analysis
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- M&A Due Diligence
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