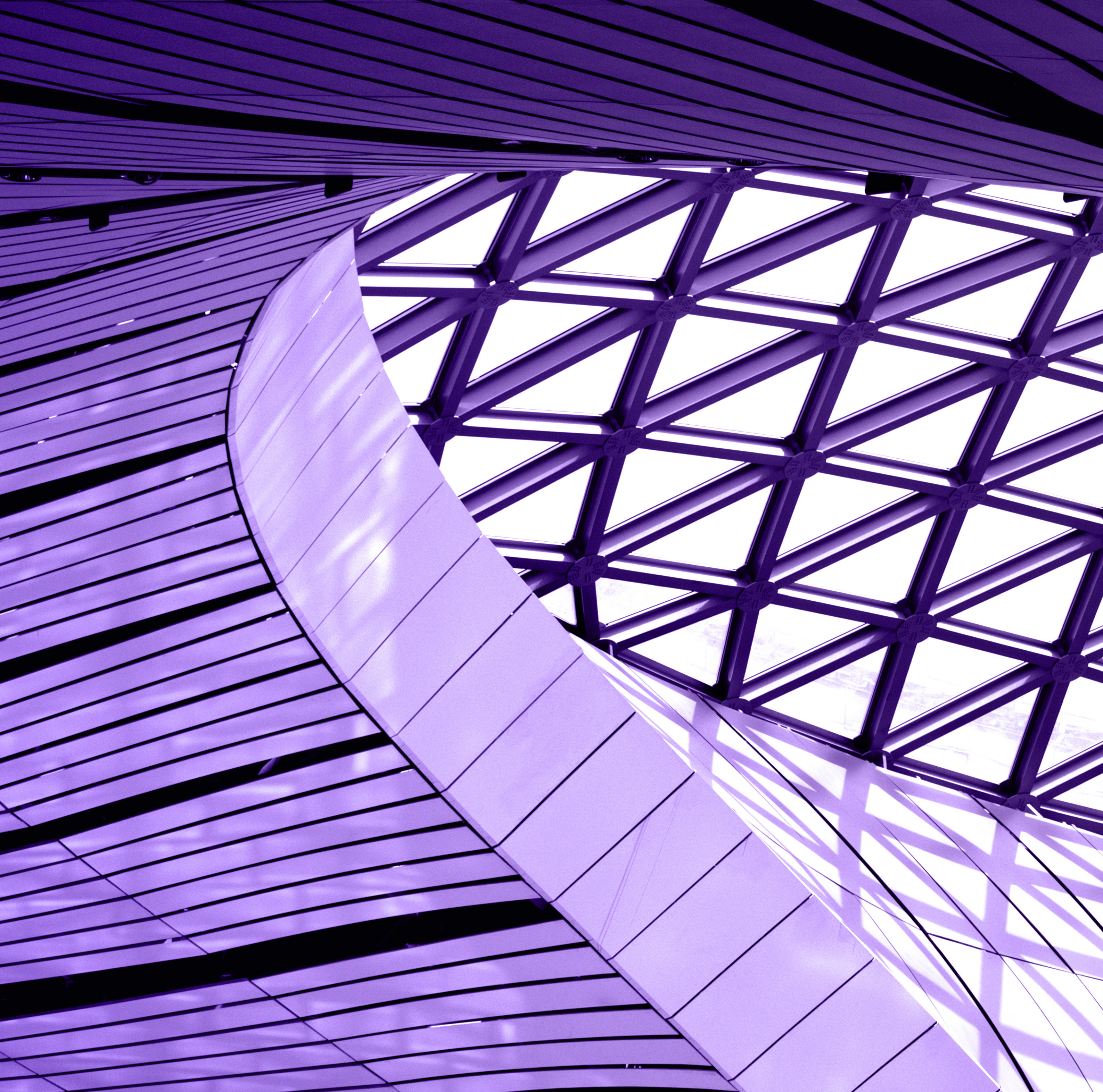
Grant Thornton

The new CFO agenda: transformation, trust and talent in the UAE



Contents

Foreword

Our inaugural report marks the launch of the Grant Thornton UAE flagship CFO survey. The publication is locally led and grounded in the unique challenges and opportunities shaping finance leadership in the country.

The survey explores the evolving priorities of CFOs across finance transformation, technology adoption, tax and audit developments, risk and regulatory compliance, capital planning and restructuring.

The themes, ranging from artificial intelligence (AI) issues and environment, social and governance (ESG) readiness, to talent shortages, digital governance and growth strategies, reflect the breadth of the CFO mandate today. We also cover the strategic role finance leaders play in guiding the UAE's business landscape.

Our report captures the perspectives of finance leaders at a pivotal moment for the region. Over the past year, economic conditions have shifted, regulatory expectations have intensified and technology has continued to redefine the finance function at speed. CFOs now operate in a landscape characterised by digital acceleration, heightened risk, ESG scrutiny and a fundamental change in workforce expectations.

The CFO is dealing with a much broader set of topics that are moving at a much faster pace than just a couple of years ago. There's more regulation showing up from all directions, and they're being asked to go far beyond the numbers.

Despite these pressures, the findings reveal a fairly confident and ambitious finance community, one that is moving beyond traditional financial stewardship towards strategic and digital foresight.

We are proud to bring fresh insight, local and global relevance and long-term dedication to supporting finance leaders as they navigate an increasingly complex and fast-moving environment.

Kabir Dhawan

Kabir Dhawan
Partner, Head of Consulting
Grant Thornton UAE

Executive summary

> The UAE CFO report reveals that, due to increasing regulatory complexity, heightened stakeholder expectations and ongoing economic volatility, the finance community is operating under greater responsibility while stepping into broader leadership roles. Across all six themes, one message is clear: the CFO remains the organisation's strategic anchor, balancing short-term business-as-usual with long-term direction.

Hisham Farouk
CEO, Grant Thornton UAE

1

From systems to strategy: technology is redefining finance

Technology investment is accelerating, but most transformation programmes remain incremental rather than organisation-wide. Priorities are split between reporting, analytics, forecasting, AI and automation. Cloud adoption, driven by regulation and industry norms, is shifting spend from capital expenditure (CapEx) to operational expenditure (OpEx) and demanding new return-on-investment (RoI) models and control frameworks.

Implications for CFOs:

- Move from system upgrades to strategic transformation with clear value cases.
- Build strong data foundations (governance, accuracy and privacy) as prerequisites for AI.
- Act as an 'enterprise integrator' linking technology, performance, risk and cost.
- Shift finance teams from transactional delivery to analytical and scenario-driven support.

2

Resilience in economic uncertainty: balancing growth, liquidity and cost

A higher cost environment than a few years ago (tighter credit and rising operating costs) is reshaping decision making. While 83% of CFOs plan to raise new funding, banks are applying stricter governance expectations. Public-sector investment remains strong, but private-sector liquidity remains somewhat constrained.

Implications for CFOs:

- Treat liquidity management as a strategic function, not a short-term issue.
- Diversify funding sources, including alternative finance and blended structures.
- Strengthen scenario planning and stress testing to guide investment decisions.
- Rebuild cost frameworks to prioritise productivity and value creation, not austerity.

3

Beyond compliance: turning risk into strategic advantage

Cybersecurity, AI-related threats, regulatory complexity, supply-chain fragility and geopolitics dominate the risk agenda. With the UAE Personal Data Protection Law (PDPL), data-residency rules and accelerated cloud migration, CFOs must understand how data is stored, secured and governed.

Implications for CFOs:

- Evolve risk management from control-based compliance toward predictive analytics.
- Embed risk KPIs into board reporting and link them to financial outcomes.
- Strengthen digital-risk oversight, including cyber resilience and AI governance.
- Use risk diversification (suppliers, markets, products) as a strategic tool.

4

The ESG readiness gap: from compliance to competitive edge

Less than four in ten (37%) of CFOs have dedicated environment, social and governance (ESG) processes in place, though this varies considerably by size of organisation. Many expect formal International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) - aligned UAE reporting standards in the next 12-18 months. Early adopters already benefit from better stakeholder confidence and access to capital.

Implications for CFOs:

- Build ESG reporting systems now; waiting for regulation will put firms behind.
- Integrate ESG into capital allocation, risk management and procurement.
- Treat sustainability as a value lever: cost savings, access to financing, investor credibility.
- Strengthen governance and transparency, especially critical for businesses preparing for listings.

> The modern CFO is no longer just a controller of numbers: they are a strategist, a communicator and a catalyst for change.

Kabir Dhawan,
Partner, Head of Consulting, Grant Thornton UAE

5

People power: talent and change management are persistent pain points

Talent expectations are rising: employees want faster progression, flexibility and meaningful work. Skills shortages, higher labour costs and change fatigue are now structural issues. Digital and ESG transformation requires broader capabilities than traditional finance roles.

Implications for CFOs:

- Build cross-functional finance teams with skills in data, technology, ESG and risk.
- Clarify career paths and invest in continuous learning to retain mid-career talent.
- Strengthen wellbeing and workload management to sustain transformation momentum.
- Treat Emiratisation and diversity as long-term capability investments, not compliance exercises.

6

From finance to foresight: the CFO's expanding role

CFOs are assuming wider responsibilities: digital transformation, sustainability, talent, risk, governance, data strategy and capital planning. Boards rely on them to interpret market signals, shape risk appetite and guide transformation.

Implications for CFOs:

- Redefine the finance function as a strategic partner across the organisation.
- Develop leadership capabilities: communication, influence, foresight and change stewardship.
- Professionalise governance, especially in family businesses and for pre-IPO.
- Invest in personal development: AI literacy, ESG expertise, digital governance and scenario thinking.

Findings

1 **From systems to strategy:** technology is redefining finance

Transformation

Almost all the CFOs we interviewed (98%) report that transformation initiatives are planned or underway, but most remain incremental rather than full-scale. The focus is still on efficiency, control and compliance, rather than on innovation or value creation.

Although two-thirds (65%) describe comprehensive transformational programmes, a third (33%) are still in early stages. Priorities are twofold:

- **Financial**: reporting and analytics (44%), risk management (39%), forecasting (38%)
- **Digital**: artificial intelligence (AI) and automation (40%)

"UAE financial leaders are very busy trying to both change the business and run the business at the same time. These are two different skill sets."

Kabir Dhawan – Partner, Head of Consulting
Grant Thornton UAE

Automation is giving way to augmentation. This entails AI-enabled forecasting, anomaly detection and scenario planning. AI success depends on data quality, governance and privacy. Without strong data foundations, CFOs risk automation without insight.

Digitisation of tax is reshaping compliance. This is driven by the introduction of e-invoicing, the implementation of the new taxes and alignment with global tax frameworks. CFOs must now oversee real-time tax data, reporting accuracy and cross-border governance.

"CFOs are increasingly responsible for overseeing tax obligations across multiple regional jurisdictions. This demands investment in both technology and skilled staff, however there is a limited number of tax technology professionals in the region."

Imran Mushtaq – Partner, Tax
Grant Thornton UAE

Value creation

Helping to generate value for the organisation through delivery of insights, involvement in strategic decisions and leadership of change initiatives

Business protection

Ensuring that appropriate controls, processes and governance are effective to identify and mitigate risks faced by the organisation and discharge its compliance responsibilities

Stakeholder management

Identifying and balancing the needs of relevant stakeholders and customers of Finance, including those inside and outside the Finance Function

Operational delivery

Completing core Finance Function tasks, such as transaction processing, ledger maintenance and statutory reporting

The technology challenge

Cloud adoption (encouraged by regulators and accelerated by national initiatives) is shifting digital investment from capital expenditure (CapEx) to operational expenditure (OpEx). CFOs must therefore rethink return-on-investment (RoI), budgeting and financial control frameworks.

Large government entities and sovereign-wealth-linked organisations are setting the tone for digital investment through large-scale AI and analytics programmes aligned with the UAE Digital Economy Strategy. Private sector CFOs, especially in larger firms, are following suit, focusing on practical, RoI-based adoption rather than speculative innovation. Compared with their global peers, UAE finance leaders tend to move faster once regulations or incentives are clarified, though they tend to remain more conservative about untested technologies.

Over half of CFOs **(54%)** are now directly involved in technology decisions.

Many act as “enterprise integrators,” linking innovation, risk and financial performance.

Finance in the UAE is fast evolving into a digital, data-driven function, one that demands both technical fluency and strategic perspective. True transformation depends on sequencing, governance and measurable business value rather than speed or scale alone.

Strategic priorities

44%	Improving reporting and analytics
40%	Implementing AI and automation
39%	Improving financial risk management strategy and practices
36%	Improving forecasting
36%	Expanding into new markets
36%	Securing access to capital
36%	Attracting and retaining talent
35%	Ensuring regulatory compliance

Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

> Finance leaders are moving from automation to augmentation — using AI to see around corners, not just close the books.
>
> **Marwan Galal**
> Director, Advisory
> Grant Thornton UAE

2 Resilience in economic uncertainty: balancing growth, liquidity and cost

Financial constraints

Economic resilience remains the defining test for finance leaders across the UAE. After years of abundant liquidity and cheap capital, CFOs are adapting to a world of tighter credit and slower global growth. Both the public and private sectors now face sharper scrutiny over spending, efficiency and return on capital.

Our survey confirms the strain. CFOs cite changing market conditions (47%), rising operating costs (44%) and increased borrowing costs (42%) among the top pressures.

At the same time, **83%** plan to raise new funding. But many encounter stricter lending criteria, elevated rates and longer approval times from banks now prioritising credit quality over growth.

Family owned and mid-market businesses, once able to rely on relationship-based lending, must now demonstrate stronger governance and transparency to attract finance. The introduction of corporate tax and greater Central Bank UAE (CBUAE) oversight of financial services has tightened liquidity management. Alternative funding is slowly gaining ground (private credit, mezzanine and revenue-based models), particularly as sovereign funds increase co-investment in growth-stage enterprises.

Public sector spending remains a stabilising force. Major government and infrastructure projects, along with clean energy and logistics, continue to sustain demand. But CFOs in the private sector must manage their exposure to long payment cycles and contract-linked revenues.

Investment decisions are more cautious. Boards now expect clearer investment strategies, scenario planning, stress testing and measurable RoI before approving new transformation or environment, social and governance (ESG) projects. Modern enterprise resource planning (ERP) platforms and real-time dashboards allow finance teams to model multiple futures. This is vital in a market shaped by fluctuating oil prices and shifting global trade routes.

Labouring away

Employee change fatigue (43%) and skills shortages (43%) are other challenges facing CFOs. This reflects overstretched teams in which top talent is pulled into projects, leaving gaps in business-as-usual. It can also create problems with rewards, recognition, and promotion for your most valued people.

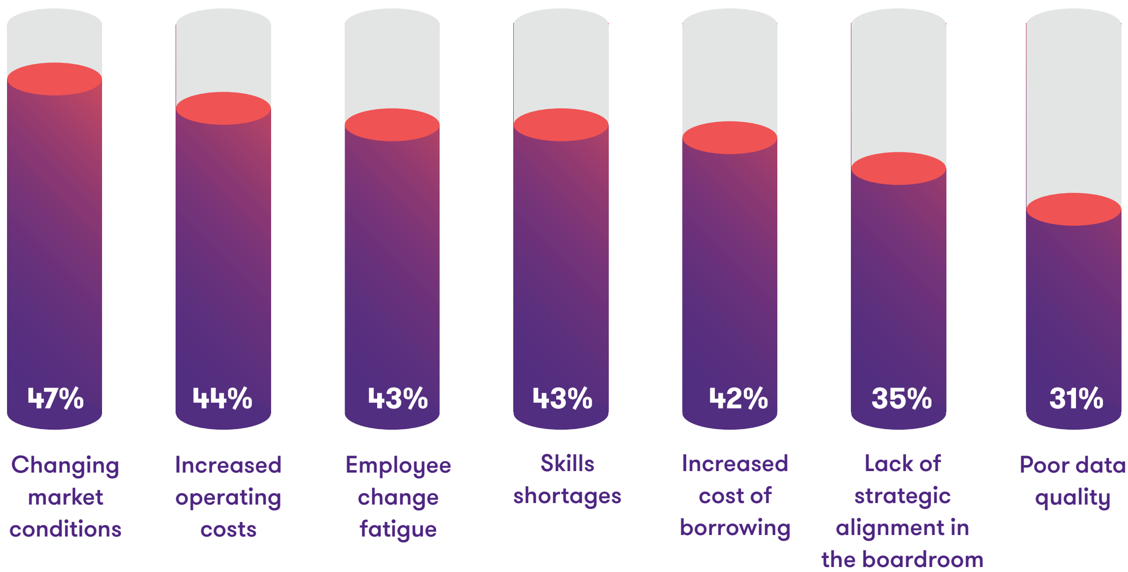
In general, resilience in the UAE is not about austerity; it is about agility. The most effective CFOs are re-engineering cost structures and balancing liquidity with innovation, including alternative financing options. A smarter capital strategy, workforce planning and productivity gains are vital to sustain growth.

It is critical that finance leaders are keeping a closer eye on a broader set of financial and non-financial parameters than perhaps was needed a few years ago. Access to rapidly developing technology and knowing which tools can help to not only monitor the current health of the business, but also enable predictive analysis to anticipate what lies ahead is going to differentiate the strategically minded CFO from the more traditional disclosures and reporting driven CFO.

> Whilst the avenues of capital sourcing are diversifying, there is an increasing expectation from stakeholders that CFOs allocate capital efficiently to fund growth and expansion and at the same time protect liquidity to remain agile in an evolving environment.
>
> **Salmaan Khawaja**
> Partner, Head of Financial Advisory
> Grant Thornton UAE

Biggest challenges

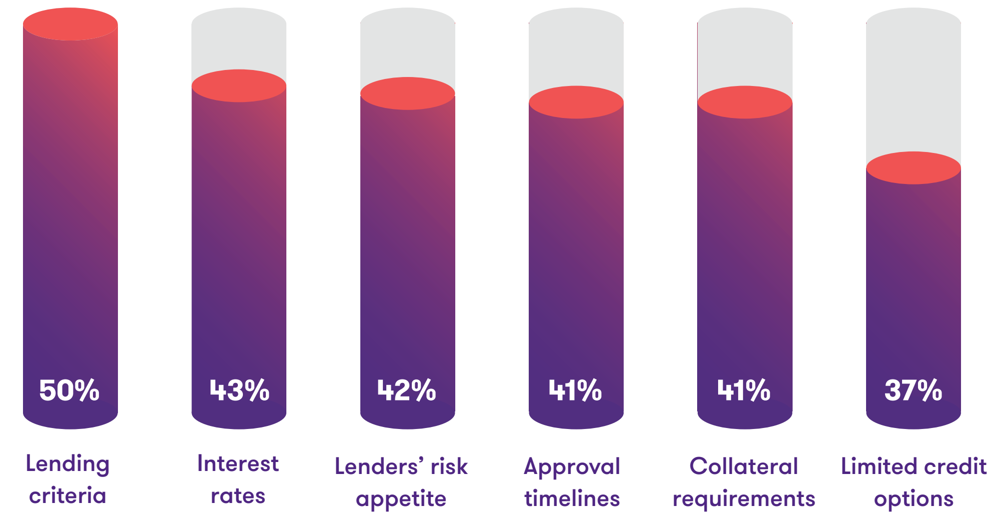
Key challenges facing finance functions in the year ahead



Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

Challenges to securing capital

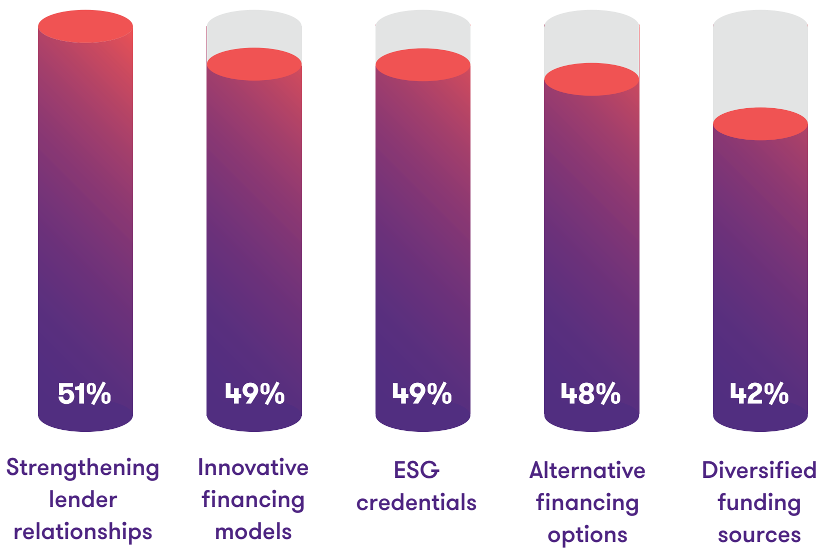
Tighter lending conditions and interest rates constrain access to capital



Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

How to access additional capital

Actions taken to access additional capital (next 6 months)



Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

3 **Beyond compliance:** turning risk into strategic advantage

New risk realities

Risk and resilience have moved to the centre of the finance agenda. Survey results show that CFOs rank cybersecurity (43%), AI-related threats and economic instability (both 37%) and regulatory compliance (35%) as their top risks. Close behind, and related to economic instability, are supply chain disruption (35%) and geopolitical impacts (34%). In today's volatile world, risk is no longer a control function but a performance driver.

CFOs are confronting overlapping threats: cyber-attacks, data leaks and AI-generated misinformation can all erode trust and valuation. Cybersecurity is now inseparable from AI risk: finance data used for predictive models is itself a target.

Government digital-transformation mandates and the UAE Personal Data Protection Law (PDPL) have heightened scrutiny of how companies store and process information. Local data-residency rules, especially for regulated sectors, mean CFOs must understand where cloud-based analytics actually sit and how to keep sensitive data within UAE borders.

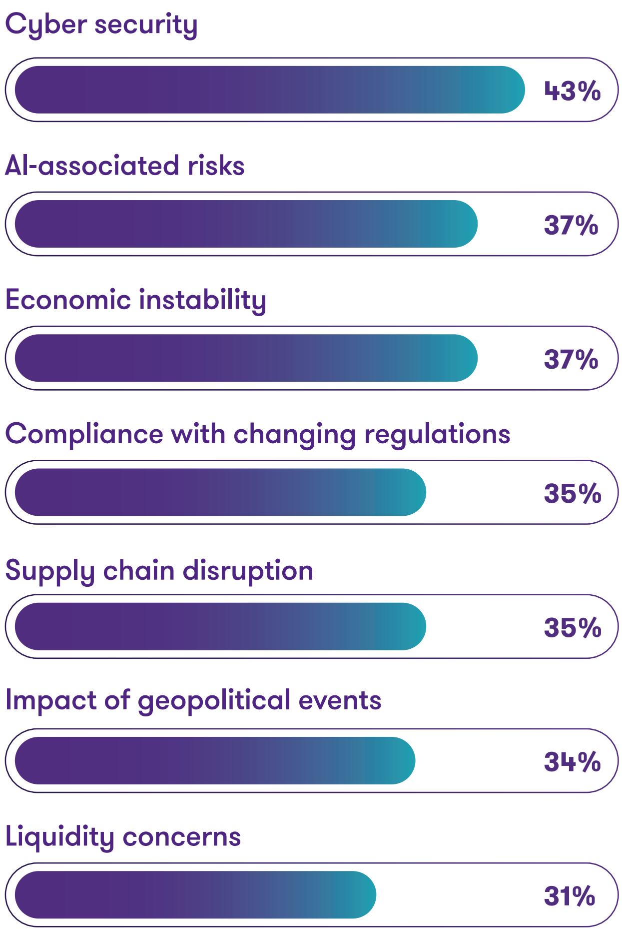
Cloud adoption is therefore both a solution and a source of risk. As organisations are increasingly driven by regulation to migrate systems from CapEx to OpEx models, finance leaders must ensure that security standards, vendor resilience and service-level guarantees are built into contracts. The growth of local data centres by multinational and UAE providers is helping address earlier concerns over sovereignty, though risk governance still lags behind the speed of adoption.

"CFOs are moving beyond risk registers and audit trails to focus on resilience, data and decision making."

Mohamed Elewa – Partner, Head of Business Risk Services
Grant Thornton UAE

Key risks

Key risks facing organisations in the year ahead



Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

Resilience through diversification

Regional instability and global trade friction have also forced CFOs to diversify sourcing and revenue bases. Geopolitical mitigation now includes having alternative suppliers and markets, not just insurance. Talent shortages add a further operational risk, highlighting the need for upskilling. Competition for data and AI skills is acute, especially within the government and energy sectors.

Across the UAE, the more sophisticated CFOs are redefining risk as a competitive advantage, aligning governance, cybersecurity and data ethics to strengthen investor confidence and stakeholder trust.

They're engaging with external experts, watching for early warning signs, sharing best practice with industry peers, establishing clearer risk roles, carrying out regular risk assessments and using technology to find risk-mitigation solutions.

Risk management

Risk frameworks are maturing, yet remain uneven. Half of CFOs (52%) believe their organisation's approach is robust; in larger entities, that figure rises to 70%. Many CFOs are integrating risk metrics into board reporting, linking risk indicators to financial KPIs such as cash-flow volatility or margin exposure.

The most advanced firms use risk analytics to model supply-chain disruption, credit exposure and ESG performance, thereby transforming compliance into foresight. Public sector and sovereign-linked entities are setting the pace, embedding risk dashboards and predictive modelling into performance management.

ESG risk

As ESG considerations increasingly shape financial decision making, CFOs are beginning to treat climate, transition and governance factors as core enterprise risks rather than standalone sustainability topics. These risks are already influencing access to capital, credit assessments and supply chain resilience, bringing ESG firmly into the remit of risk management and finance. Leading organisations are therefore embedding ESG risk indicators into existing enterprise risk and performance frameworks, enabling earlier identification of potential exposure and more informed decision making. This integration allows CFOs to move beyond compliance towards building resilience and strategic flexibility in an increasingly volatile environment.

> Risk management in the UAE is no longer defensive—it's becoming a language of value and resilience.
>
> **Mohamed Elewa**
> Partner, Head of Business Risk Services
> Grant Thornton UAE

Actions to manage risks

Actions taken to manage emerging risks

49% Engaging external experts

41% Clear risk ownership and accountability

42% Monitoring key risk indicators

41% Regular risk assessments and audits

42% Industry collaboration and peer insights

36% Risk technology and analytics

Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

4 The ESG readiness gap: from compliance to competitive edge

Emerging ESG responsibilities

Environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors are becoming a mainstream financial concern. Yet only 37% of CFOs report having dedicated ESG processes in place, while 41% are still developing capabilities. A further fifth (19%) want to act, but are unsure as to how. Among smaller firms, that figure drops sharply. This readiness gap reflects both limited regulatory pressure to date and uncertainty about where ESG should sit: within finance, risk or as a standalone sustainability function.

In the UAE, climate risk has become a topic of discussion and the landscape is shifting fast. Listed companies and Central Bank-regulated financial institutions are preparing for mandatory disclosure under new sustainability reporting rules. These will likely be aligned with the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) and the UAE Securities and Commodities Authority (SCA) frameworks. For many CFOs, the challenge is turning qualitative commitments into quantifiable reporting and credible assurance. Finance leaders are discovering that ESG is not about publishing policies: it's about proving performance.

> CFOs who see ESG as an investment, not an obligation, will find themselves ahead of the curve when regulation catches up.
>
> **Janice Daly**
> Partner, Advisory
> Grant Thornton Ireland

Early wins: what CFOs can do now for quick impact

CFOs seeking quick ESG progress can start by clearly defining material ESG priorities aligned to business strategy, rather than waiting for full regulatory clarity. Establishing ownership through a central ESG or finance-led function enables faster coordination and accountability. Many organisations are also leveraging existing finance, operations and procurement systems to create a baseline set of ESG metrics and KPIs, avoiding complex new tooling at the outset. Even high-level emissions tracking provides immediate visibility on risk, cost and efficiency, while preparing the organisation for future disclosure and assurance requirements.

Zero gains

The UAE Net Zero 2050 Strategy, COP28 legacy initiatives, and Abu Dhabi's sustainable finance framework are all driving investor scrutiny of emissions, governance, and social impact. Sovereign funds now incorporate ESG criteria into due diligence and funding decisions, cascading those expectations through supply chains. For CFOs, this means compliance is no longer optional: it directly affects access to (more affordable) capital and eligibility for partnerships.

Family-owned and mid-market businesses face a specific challenge: they are expected to professionalise governance and reporting to attract investors or prepare for listings. ESG transparency, once viewed as a corporate communications exercise, is now central to valuation and succession.

From reporting to value creation

CFOs are beginning to integrate ESG metrics into financial planning, linking energy efficiency, waste reduction and workforce diversity to cost savings and reputational strength. Some public sector and large private entities are introducing sustainability dashboards that track progress alongside financial key performance indicators (KPIs). Most, however, still lack the systems and data quality controls needed for reliable measurement.

Leading CFOs see opportunity in this transition. By embedding ESG into capital allocation, procurement and risk frameworks, they can enhance resilience and stakeholder confidence. Early adopters are already differentiating themselves through transparent reporting, access to green financing and alignment with global sustainability indices.

"ESG is moving from policy to performance. CFOs who embed it early will gain the edge."

Gouban Gopal – Executive Director, Consulting
Grant Thornton UAE

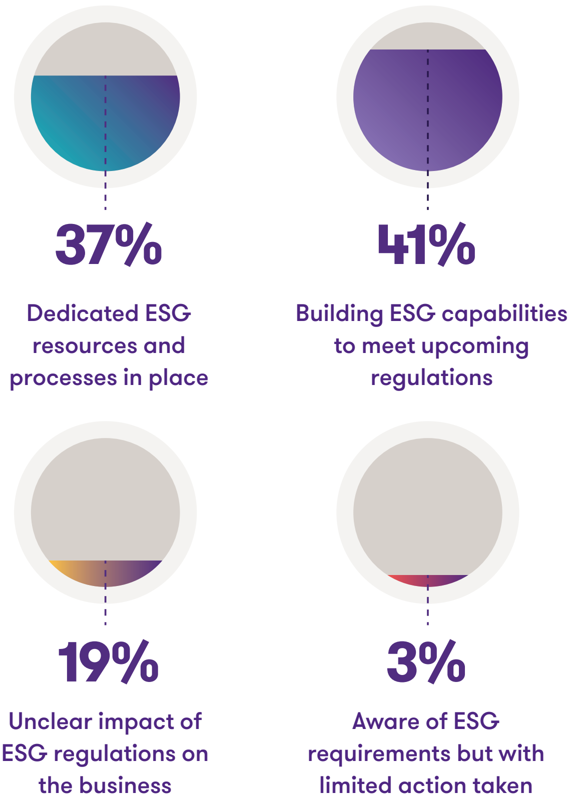
Closing the gap

Bridging the readiness divide requires clearer accountability, stronger data infrastructure and sustained investment in capability building. The UAE's growing diverse economy, from energy to logistics, tourism, real estate and finance, offers ample scope for CFOs to link sustainability with innovation and competitiveness. As reporting standards tighten, those who integrate ESG into strategy rather than treat it as compliance will define the next phase of corporate growth.

The UAE, due to its innovative track record and unique economic context, is well-positioned to become a leader in the global sustainability transition and climate adaptation, especially if it leverages its strengths in the energy sector.

ESG compliance: variety and uncertainty

ESG readiness to navigate upcoming regulations



Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

5 **People power:** talent and change management are persistent pain points

Talent crunch

Talent pressures are intensifying across the UAE. CFOs highlight these challenges: changing employee expectations (51%), motivation (47%), rising talent costs (46%), limited talent pool (46%) and lack of internal progression opportunities (42%). The issues reflect a workforce adjusting to rapid digitalisation, a tight labour market and new regulatory demands reshaping the finance function.

Employees now expect faster development, meaningful work and more flexible arrangements than traditional models provide. Younger finance professionals increasingly value purpose and progression, as well as flexibility (e.g., working from home, a four-and-a-half-day week), alongside competitive pay. The shorter public sector working week may also have influenced some expectations.

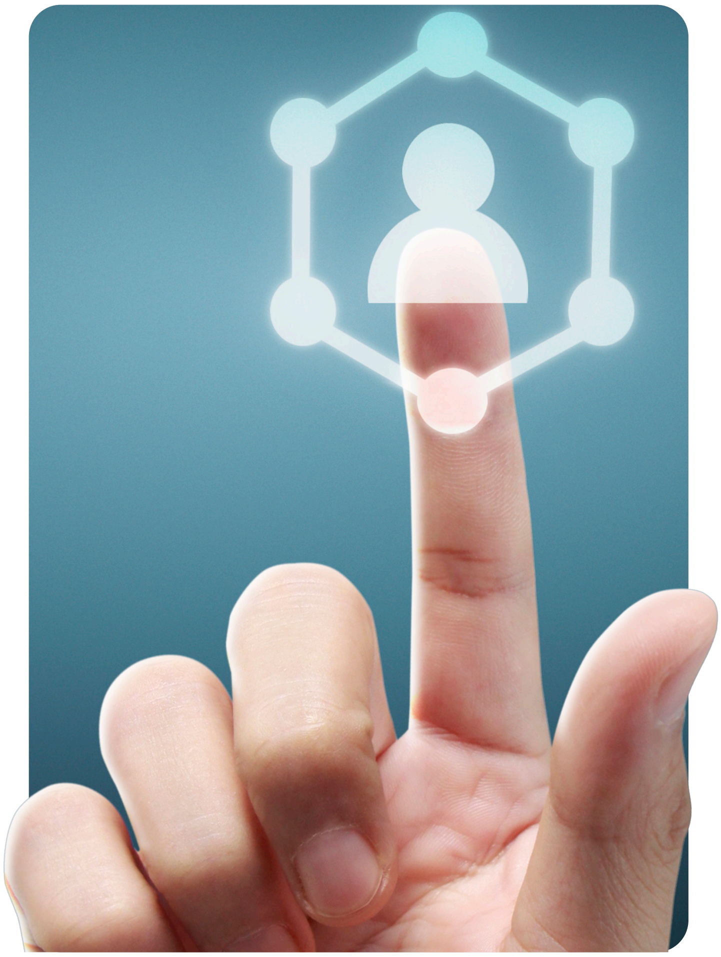
Capability gaps and work strains

As tax digitalisation, AI-enabled finance processes and ESG reporting become part of day-to-day operations, finance teams need broader skills. These include data literacy, systems thinking, oversight of automation and sustainability awareness.

Our survey finds that CFOs expect staff to understand not just output, but also how automated models work: how data is sourced, governed and validated. This is creating acute competition for hybrid skill sets, particularly in government entities, financial services and energy. And this is exacerbated by change fatigue, raising the risk of attrition at mid-career levels.

Many finance team structures in the UAE have the potential to modernise, adopt international best practice and develop business acumen. The creation of business partner models and centres of excellence would help to rectify these issues. Otherwise, they'll struggle to develop talent or have an efficient organisational structure.

Similarly, a clear growth pathway for finance professionals who want to develop skills beyond traditional accounting and a way to link rewards to critical competencies are desirable. Without this, people can become frustrated and leave. As expectations evolve, CFOs are under pressure to strengthen learning, development and succession plans.



The role of Emiratisation and diversity

Emiratisation remains a strategic priority and a source of competitive advantage when approached proactively. CFOs who invest in national talent through mentoring, technical training and cross-functional exposure can strengthen the leadership pipeline and reinforce governance credibility.

Leading organisations run parallel employee life cycles for Emiratis, including targeted attraction, mentorship and tailored learning programmes, while ensuring all staff are included and engaged. Using Emirati finance professionals as hiring managers and mentors to attract and inspire Emirati talent can be effective.

Similarly, given the critical importance of gender balance in the workforce, we see that a three-pronged approach works well to foster a more inclusive, balanced culture. This involves:

Leadership behaviour

equitable hiring practices, performance management

Systemic change

organisational policy, career progression systems

Symbolic actions

office design, visible values, inclusive activities

> People are the constraint and the catalyst of transformation.
>
> **Nishanth Krishnan**
> Director, Consulting
> People & Organisation
> Grant Thornton UAE

More skill in the game

Successful CFOs are responding to challenges by consolidating skills development, adopting greater automation, clarifying responsibilities and creating cross-functional teams with expertise in finance, digital, ESG and risk. Digital capability must encompass data visualisation and management, data analytics and cybersecurity to leverage advanced technologies such as AI itself.

Alongside technical skills, financial leaders must develop adaptability, agility and empathy to succeed today. Many are therefore paying closer attention than before to wellbeing and workload management to prevent burnout and maintain the impetus for change.

"Organisations that invest in people, particularly in skills, adaptability and wellbeing, are the ones that sustain transformation momentum."

Nishanth Krishnan – Director, Consulting
People & Organisation
Grant Thornton UAE

Talent measures

Actions taken to address skills and workforce challenges

53% Investment in training and development

47% Automation to reduce manual workload

45% Mentorship and capability development programmes

45% Review of compensation and reward structures

43% Flexible working arrangements

Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

6 **From finance to foresight:** the CFOs' expanding role

A wider mandate

The UAE's CFO role is expanding fast. Our survey shows CFOs expect greater responsibilities in non-traditional finance responsibilities over the coming five years (57%). These include ESG and digital transformation. A similar proportion (56%) anticipate strategy and high-level decision making roles, while 54% cite technology, and just over half (52%) mention risk management and compliance.

This broadened remit reflects both global trends and local market dynamics, where rapid growth, regulatory change and digital acceleration demand a more forward-looking finance function.

CFOs now operate at the intersection of transformation, technology and governance.

They must articulate a clear financial narrative for stakeholders, translate complex risk and market signals into strategic choices and guide teams through regular periods of (testing) change. The traditional annual learning cycle is no longer sufficient; finance leaders must continuously refresh their capabilities to keep pace with shifting expectations.

Leadership beyond the numbers

The modern CFO must excel not only in financial analysis but in interpretation, explaining what numbers mean for strategy, risk and long-term value. They are a 'risk architect', balancing financial discipline with scenario planning and guiding organisations through uncertainty.

Similarly, CFOs must understand the frameworks behind AI, cloud systems and data models, not simply to validate outputs, but to oversee governance, cybersecurity and the ethical use of information.

This shift requires stronger communication, storytelling and change-management skills. Boards increasingly rely on CFOs to frame strategic risks, evaluate technology investments and justify transformational budgets with credible, evidence-based scenarios.

> The UAE CFO is stepping out from behind the numbers, becoming a strategist, storyteller and change leader.
>
> **Kabir Dhawan**
> Partner, Head of Consulting
> Grant Thornton UAE

Happy families

There's a strong link between succession, professionalism and governance. In the UAE, where family-owned businesses represent a significant share of the economy, CFOs play a critical role in professionalising governance. This often means clarifying roles among owners, CEOs, and CFOs, particularly in succession planning, initial public offering (IPO) preparation and enterprise valuation.

CFOs are often the bridge between legacy operating models and modern corporate structures. They increasingly help design policies, controls and reporting frameworks that align with investor expectations and international standards, while reinforcing the organisation's cultural identity.

ESG disclosure and climate risk reporting are accelerators of this shift. As ISSB-aligned standards come closer to implementation, CFOs will increasingly be responsible for non-financial metrics that influence investor confidence and financing terms. This expands their influence well beyond finance into sustainability, risk, supply chains and human capital.

Capability building

Given the breadth of the role, CFOs are investing in personal development. Peer-learning platforms are gaining traction because they offer space for leaders to compare approaches, test ideas and benchmark practices. Skills such as data fluency, AI literacy, ESG competency and digital governance are becoming essential. Despite the non-financial and less standardised nature of ESG data, CFOs are being increasingly involved in ESG and climate-related disclosures due to their reporting expertise, as well as ESG's importance to risk management.

CFOs who master these domains position themselves as trusted advisors to boards, regulators and investors.

Finance leaders must embody adaptability, curiosity and agility. Strategic foresight is now as important as technical expertise. CFOs who combine these attributes will guide organisations through transformation with confidence and sustainability.

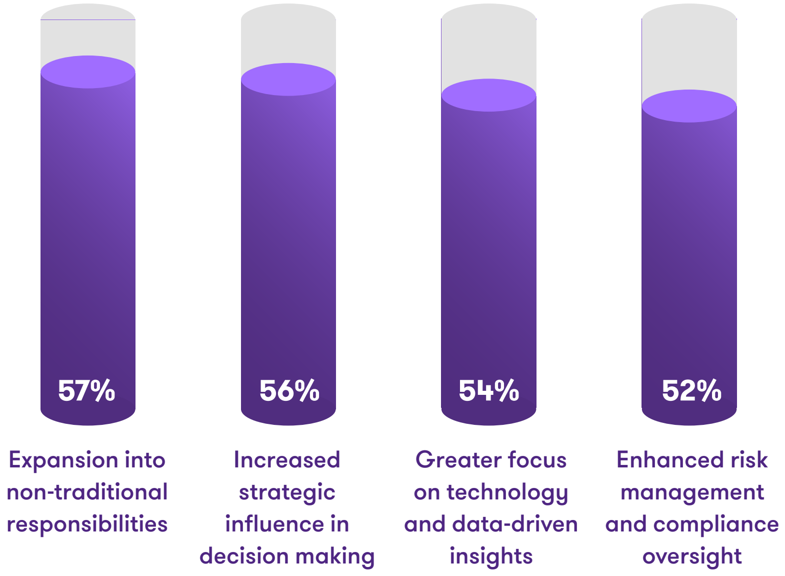
CFOs want support by having better access to industry trends and best practices, to enhance benchmarking and visibility. Help in succession planning, which is often weak below the C-suite level due to the revolving local workforce, is also desired. As are change management, leadership presence and effective stakeholder communication, which are all crucial for transformation success.

"Today's CFO is not simply managing numbers—they're defining where the organisation is heading, and how fast it can get there."

Kabir Dhawan – Partner, Head of Consulting, Grant Thornton UAE

The evolving CFO role

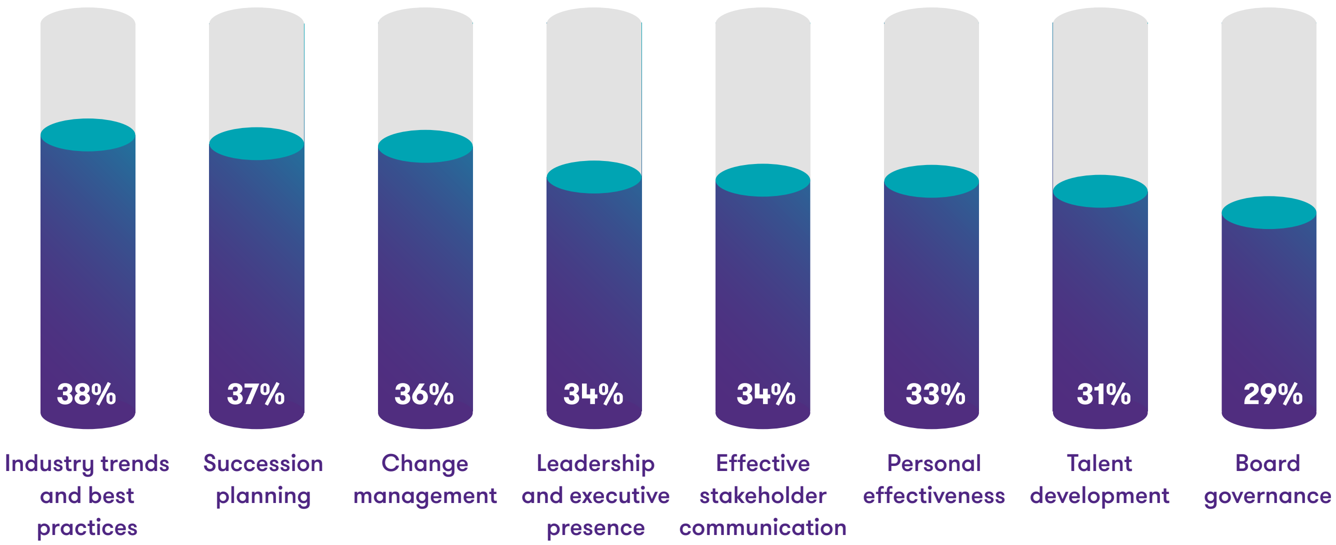
How the CFO role is expected to evolve over the next five years



Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

Support needed

Areas where CFOs seek additional support to be more effective



Source: Grant Thornton UAE CFO report research

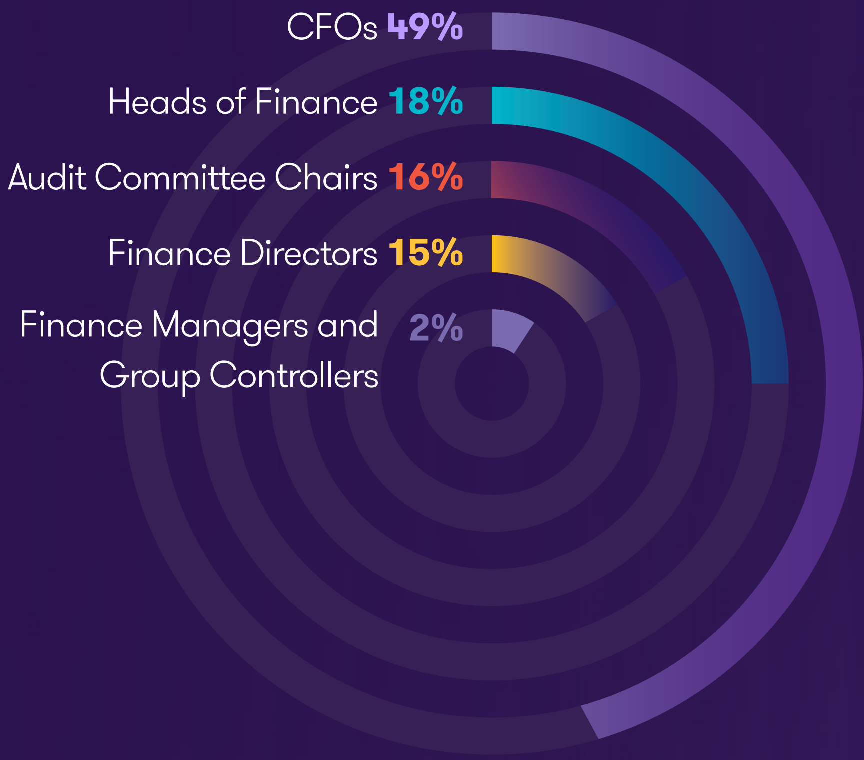
Survey methodology

Grant Thornton surveyed more than 300 finance leaders in UAE organisations in September 2025.

These included, primarily: CFOs, finance directors, group controllers and audit committee chairs. We also interviewed finance managers and heads of finance.

Organisations' turnover size ranged from AED 232 million (USD 63.2 million) to AED 23.2 billion (USD 6.32 billion).

Industry representation was diverse, spanning all key sectors in the Emirates.



Revenue

Organisations' turnover size ranged from

AED 232 million

(USD 63.2 million)

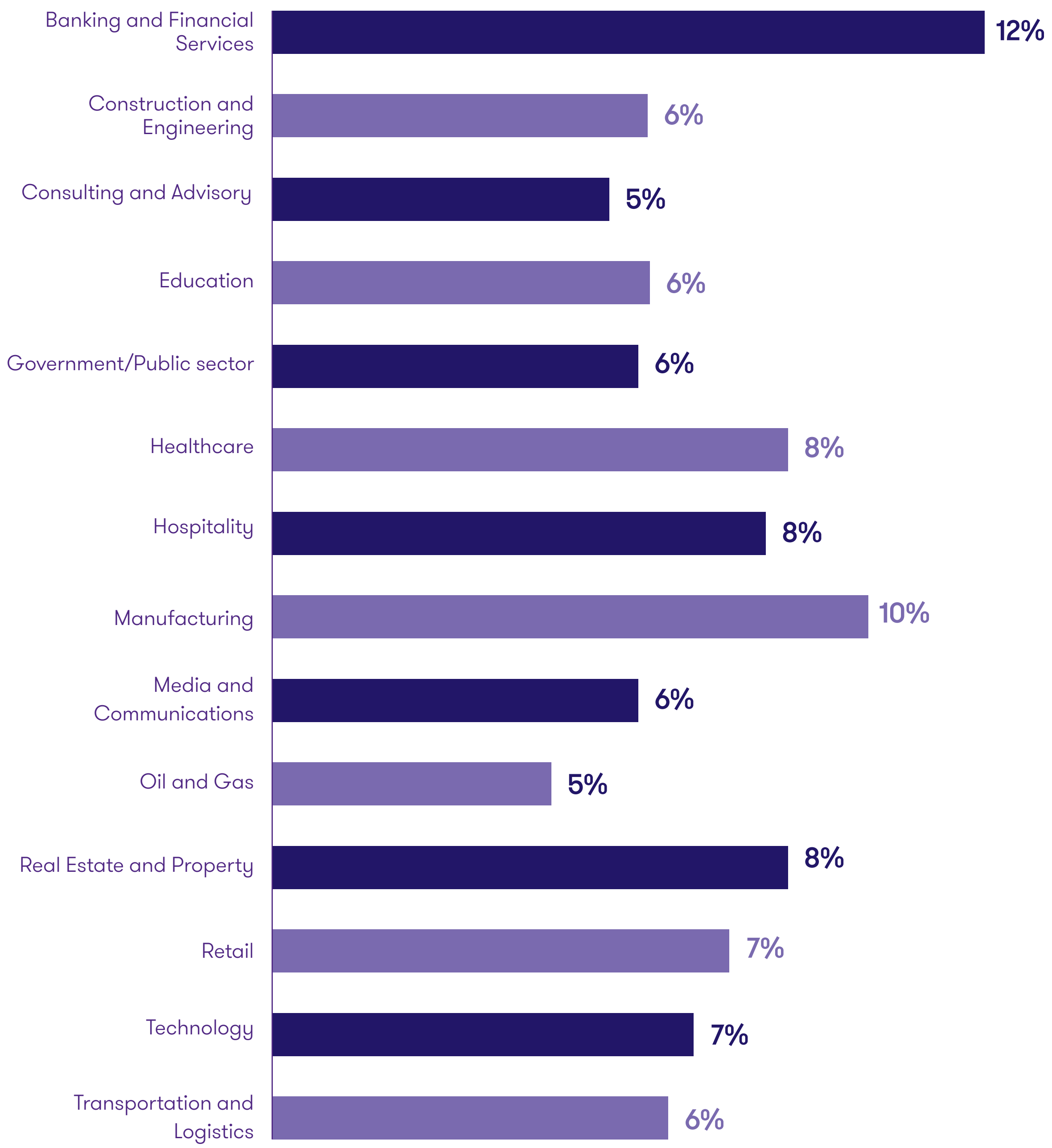
AED 23.2 billion

(USD 6.32 billion)

Methodology note

The findings presented in this report are based on survey responses and interviews conducted with participating organisations and individuals and reflect their views at the time of the research. As with all survey-based research, the results are subject to inherent limitations, including sample size, respondent selection and potential response bias. The insights should be interpreted in the context of the methodology applied and are not intended to represent definitive or predictive outcomes. This report does not constitute professional advice and should not be relied upon as a basis for specific business or investment decisions. The authors and the issuing organisation accept no liability for any loss, damage or consequences arising from the use of, or reliance on, the information contained in this report.

Sectors


Banking and Financial Services
12%
Construction and Engineering
6%
Consulting and Advisory
5%
Education
6%
Government/Public sector
6%
Healthcare
8%
Hospitality
8%
Manufacturing
10%
Media and Communications
6%
Oil and Gas
5%
Real Estate and Property
8%
Retail
7%
Technology
7%
Transportation and Logistics
6%

Contributors

Kabir Dhawan

Partner, Head of Consulting
Grant Thornton UAE

kabir.dhawan@ae.gt.com

Kabir leads the Consulting practice and has extensive experience delivering large-scale transformation programmes across the UK, Europe and the Middle East. His work spans operating model redesign, organisational transformation and the integration of people, process and technology to drive sustainable change.

Salmaan Khawaja

Partner, Head of Financial Advisory Services
Grant Thornton UAE

salmaan.khawaja@ae.gt.com

Salmaan leads the Financial Advisory practice and brings over 20 years of experience advising corporates, private equity firms, sovereign wealth funds and high-net-worth individuals on M&A, capital strategy and restructuring.

Imran Mushtaq

Partner, Tax
Grant Thornton UAE

imran.mushtaq@ae.gt.com

Imran leads Grant Thornton UAE's Indirect Tax practice and brings over 20 years of tax advisory experience across the UK, the EU and the GCC. He has supported on the introduction of VAT in Oman, the UAE and Bahrain. He has also assisted several regional tax authorities with tax policy and legislation, as well as the development of audit frameworks.

Mohamed Elewa

Partner, Head of Business Risk Services
Grant Thornton UAE

mohamed.elewa@ae.gt.com

Mohamed leads Business Risk Services specialising in ICFR, internal audit transformation and control framework design. He has over 25 years of experience advising businesses across Egypt, Canada, the USA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE on business risk management, governance and operational improvement

Janice Daly

Partner, Advisory
Grant Thornton Ireland

janice.daly@ie.gt.com

Janice leads Sustainability Advisory Services within Grant Thornton Ireland, specialising in sustainable finance, climate risk and regulatory transformation. She brings over 15 years of global financial markets experience spanning strategic finance, treasury and sustainable finance programmes.

Gouban Gopal

Executive Director,
Consulting
Grant Thornton UAE

gouban.gopal@ae.gt.com

Gouban spearheads the ESG Advisory practice, developing sustainability strategies, calculating carbon emissions, and guidance on reporting across global frameworks. He has over 13 years of experience across Australia, the UK and the Middle East.

Nishanth Krishnan

Director, Consulting
People & Organisation
Grant Thornton UAE

nishanth.krishnan@ae.gt.com

Nishanth has over 14 years of experience specialising in organisation redesign, workforce planning, performance management, HR, finance transformation and target operating model development.

Marwan Galal

Director, Advisory
Grant Thornton UAE

marwan.galal@ae.gt.com

Marwan specialises in technology consulting with a focus on data, digital and IT transformation across MENA and North America. With a strong background in data engineering, enterprise architecture and analytics, he advises businesses on strengthening data governance, improving data quality, modernising core platforms and enabling AI-driven decision making.

Grant Thornton UAE

Rooted in the UAE. Built for cross-border growth.

For sixty years, Grant Thornton UAE has provided audit, tax and advisory services to local and international businesses in public and private sectors in the United Arab Emirates. Founded in 1966 by our Chairman, Farouk Mohamed, we have grown alongside the UAE's economic transformation.

We are a member of Grant Thornton International Limited, a global network of independent firms made up of 76,000 professionals operating in more than 150 markets. We are also part of Grant Thornton Advisors LLC platform that connects top performing member firms in strategic financial hubs across US, Europe, the Middle East and beyond. This platform enhances our ability to deliver seamless cross-border services, underpinned by investments in technology, people and quality.

We bring deep industry knowledge, local context and global perspective to deliver proactive insight and practical guidance. Our commitment to quality and innovation means that we don't just respond to change, we help you shape it.

We're ready to grow with you

Follow us on LinkedIn

Our offices

Abu Dhabi

Unit 2, Level 14
Sila Tower
ADGM Square
Al Maryah Island
PO Box 41255
Abu Dhabi, UAE

T +971 2 666 9750
F +971 2 666 9816

Dubai

The Offices 5
Level 3
Office 303
One Central, DWTC
PO Box 1620
Dubai, UAE

T +971 4 388 9925
F +971 4 388 9915

Sharjah

Level 5
City Gate Tower
Al Etihad Street
Al Taawun
PO Box 1968
Sharjah, UAE

T +971 6 525 9691
F +971 6 525 9690

Grant Thornton

grantthornton.ae