

Built for growth:
Turning financial
complexity into
strategic advantage

Unit4 back-office
research 2025



Why you need a future-ready finance function

Professional services is growing fast, merging often, and facing more financial complexity than ever. Disconnected financial systems, manual processes, and post-M&A integration headaches are slowing progress and eating up valuable time in the finance and IT teams.

But there's good news: with the right investment in scalable, integrated financial management, these challenges become opportunities. Opportunities to gain clarity, drive efficiency, and free up your teams to focus on what really matters — strategic decision-making and business growth.

In this eBook — using data from **600 senior finance and IT decision makers** within the professional services sector — we explore the financial realities holding organizations back and outline how to build a future-ready finance function that supports growth, agility, and resilience.



Key findings from our research



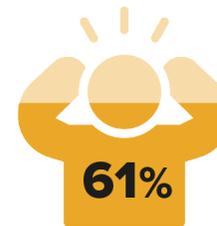
Only 46% of cash flow management is automated currently, with similar proportions still relying on MS Excel.



Senior finance decision makers spend 2 days per week, on average, consolidating financials in the run up to year-end.



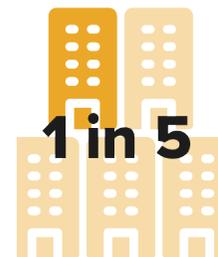
44 hours (or more than 1 FT employee's time) spent per week across the finance team, on average, consolidating and correcting discrepancies in project financials.



61% of respondents felt like the additional strain of year-end reporting negatively impacts the wellbeing of their finance team.



73% lack a single source of truth for their financial data.



1 in 5 organizations took longer than 1 year to integrate company systems post-merger or acquisition, longer than anticipated for 86%.



Cash flow

The hidden cost of manual financial management

Why you need a future-ready finance function

For professional services firms, effective cash flow management is vital to maintaining business continuity, funding growth, and navigating periods of change such as mergers or client churn. Automation is critical to effective cash flow management. It helps to eliminate manual errors, speed up forecasting, and ensure real-time visibility into financial health. And while most organizations have some level of automation within their financial management processes, it is not full automation for many.

Only
46%

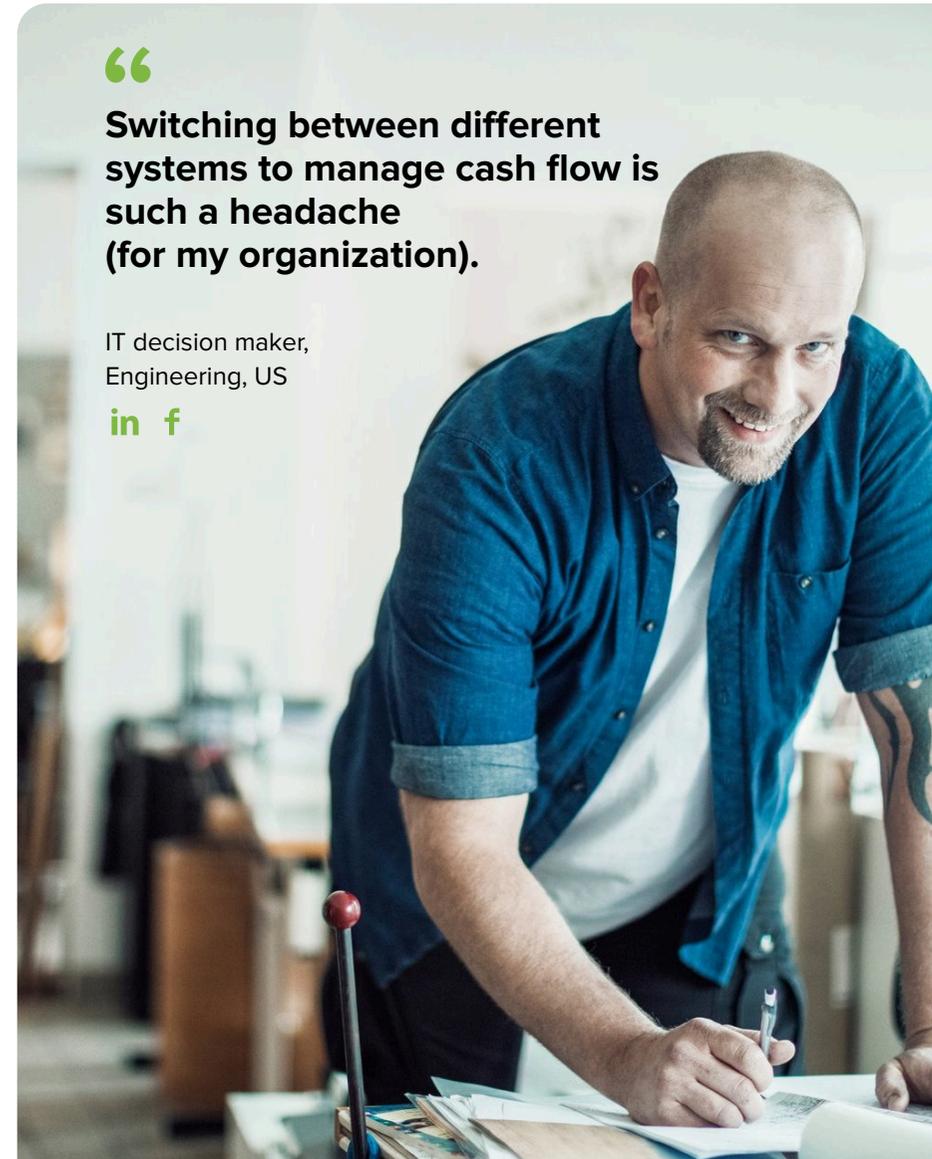
**of cash flow
management is
automated, on average**

“

Switching between different systems to manage cash flow is such a headache (for my organization).

IT decision maker,
Engineering, US

in f

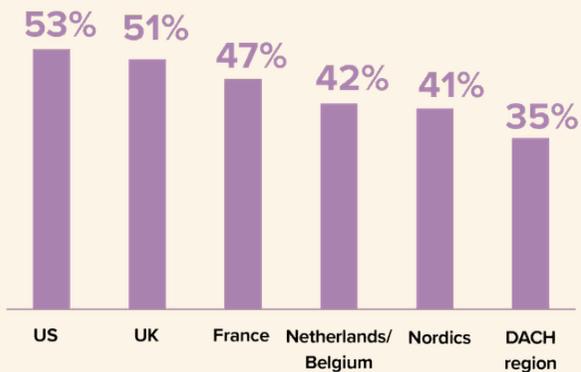


Respondents report that nearly half (46%) of their cash flow management processes are automated — yet even with this partial automation in place, 88% still struggle to manage them effectively.

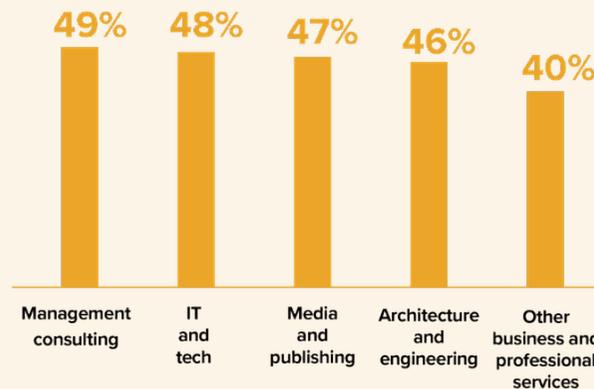
Average percentage of automated cash flow management



Country



Industry



Size of organization

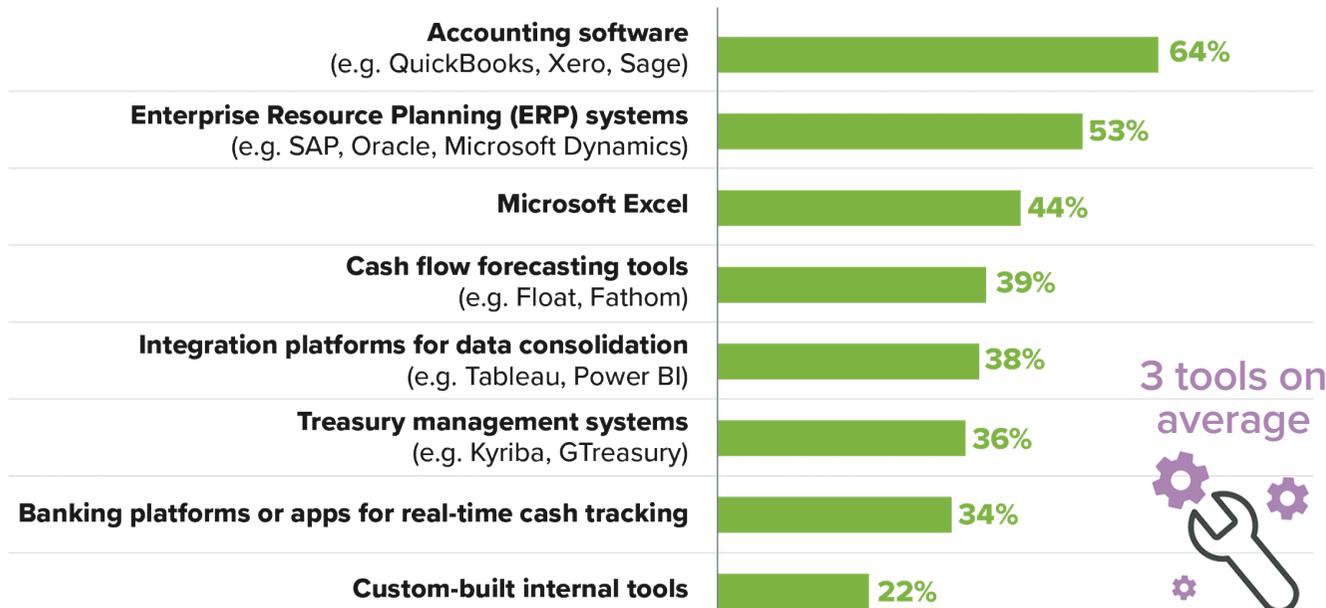


Tools used for cash flow management and reporting

So, what is behind the disconnect?

Most firms are still juggling multiple tools to manage their cash flow. On average, they use three different systems, with **44%** still relying heavily on Microsoft Excel.

Tools used for cash flow management and reporting



This is corroborated by a Deloitte study which found that many finance teams still rely on manual and excel-based workflows that delay financial close, forecasting, and operational reporting.

Deloitte,
“The Future of Financial
Automation”

Senior decision makers share their views

This patchwork approach creates silos, duplication, and manual workarounds that drain time and introduce risk. Respondents report that the top three impacts of manual intervention in cash flow management are increased processing times, increased operational costs, and increased risk of errors.

The data tells one part of the story, but the lived experience of senior decision makers brings the issue into sharper focus:

“We don’t have **real-time access** to cash flow forecasts.”

Finance decision maker,
Management Consulting,
UK

“Cash flow management is based on manual recording which is **prone to errors** and affects the accuracy of decision making.”

Finance decision maker,
Accountancy and Financial
Advisory Services,
Netherlands

“My firm’s cash flow forecasts are **inconsistent and untrustworthy.**”

Finance decision maker,
IT and Tech,
US

“Effectively tracking spending is challenging, and a **streamlined system** would help prevent overspending while improving forecasting.”

Finance decision maker,
Management Consulting,
UK

For professional services firms — where people are usually the primary asset and salary, sub-contractor fees, and operational costs must be tightly managed — inefficient cash flow management processes can have a significant impact on performance, profitability, and planning.

While financial management processes with partial automation and disparate systems can be inefficient, leaving gaps for lost time and errors to occur.

To truly unlock value, organizations need cash flow management solutions that seamlessly integrate and provide real-time visibility, reducing the time finance teams spend reconciling figures, and allowing them to proactively manage working capital, forecast accurately, and drive stronger financial outcomes.

5 reasons for cash flow management and planning





Project financials

For professional services firms that rely heavily on project-based work, visibility into each project's financial performance is critical. Yet, the management of project financials – including specific costs, revenue, budgeting and forecasting for individual projects – reveals similar inefficiencies to cash flow processes.

On average, senior finance decision makers report losing 44 hours per week across the finance team investigating and updating discrepancies in project financials. **That is the equivalent of more than one full-time finance employee dedicated entirely to resolving issues that should be preventable** – 84% recognize that their finance team spends too much time on manual processes that could otherwise be automated.



Project financials discrepancies

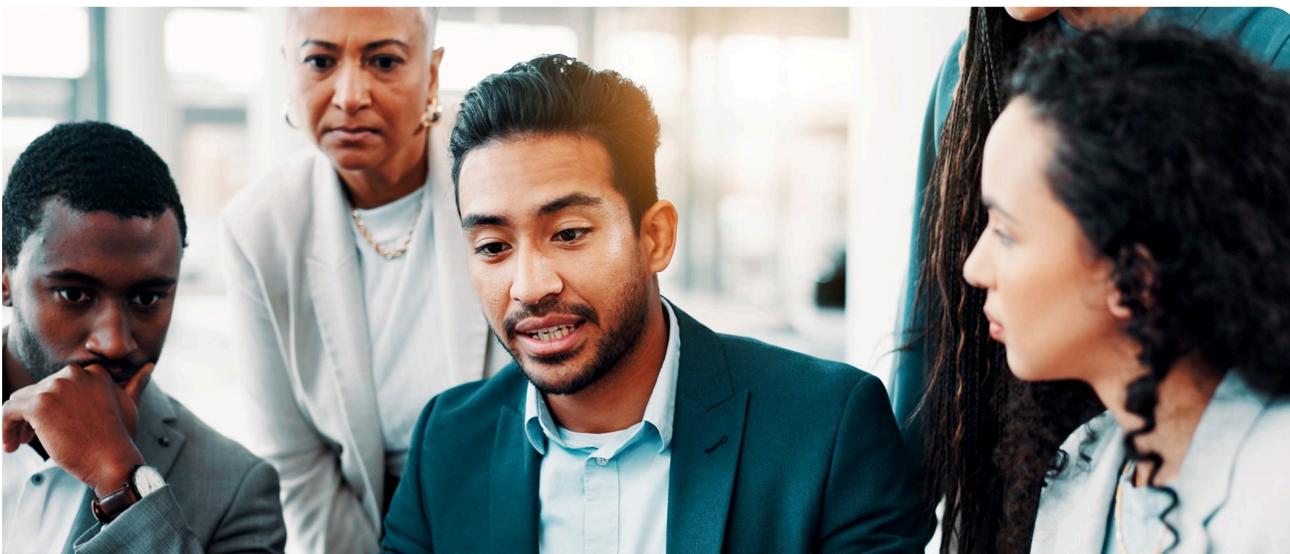
And despite there presumably being fewer projects to reconcile, the smaller organizations struggled with this even more, perhaps due to less dedicated finance resources, fewer specialized tools, and heavier reliance on basic software:

Average time spent investigating and updating project financial discrepancies by organisation size



Finance teams are weighed down with inefficiencies, wasting time here that could be better spent on strategic planning, financial forecasting, and identifying opportunities for growth and margin improvement.

These challenges are compounded by the lack of a unified financial view: **73% of respondents believe that their organization lacks a single source of truth for its financial data.** This means teams are working from potentially different numbers, increasing the error risk and creating that need to spend 44 hours reconciling discrepancies. It's no surprise **92%** of respondents recognize that consolidating their financial data would improve the accuracy of financial reporting. Without centralized financial visibility, confident decision-making is near impossible.



My organization lacks a single source of truth for its financial data

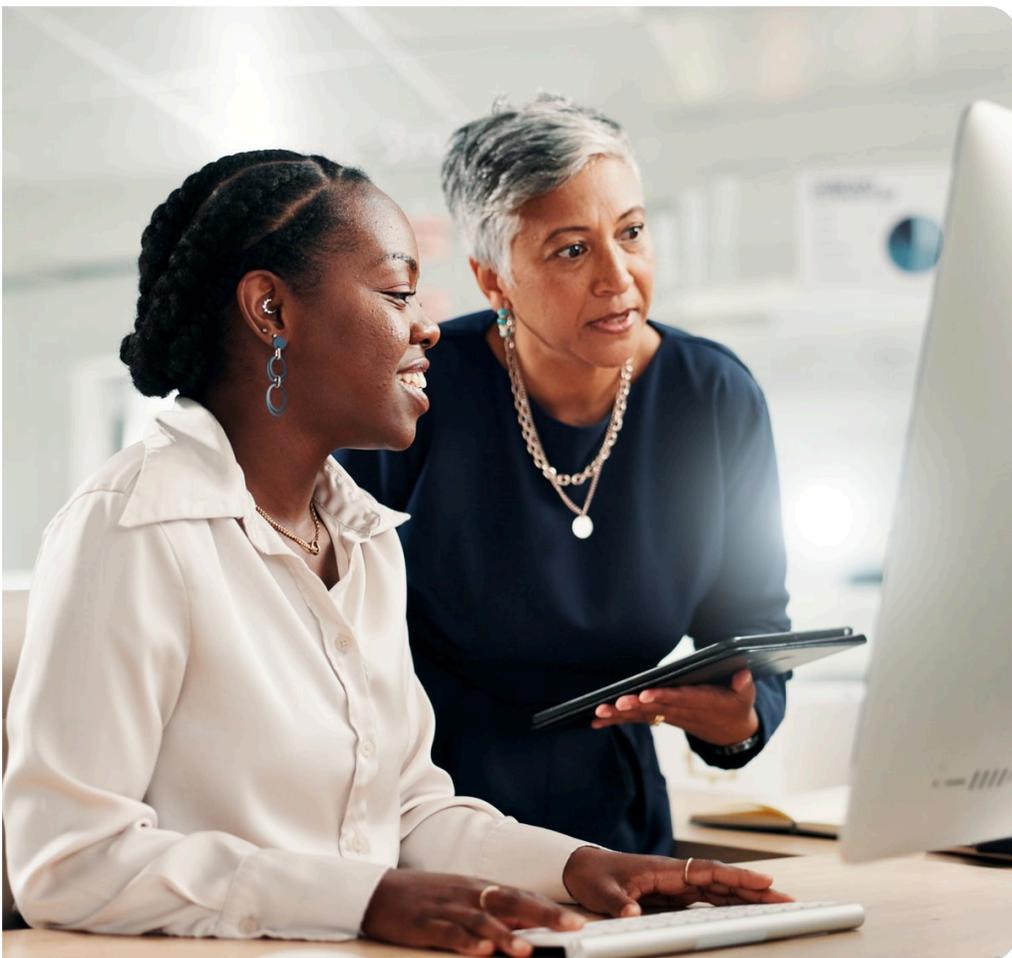


Consolidating data would improve the accuracy of my organization's financial reporting

In order to build financial processes with clarity and control, investment in integrated financial solutions bringing project-level and company-wide data together is needed.

With this right investment, businesses can reduce manual intervention and duplication, improve reporting accuracy, and free up finance teams to focus on insight and innovation.





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Year-end financial reporting



Year-end is a critical time for finance teams — a period where all financial activity across the year must be closed out, reconciled, reported, and submitted with absolute accuracy.

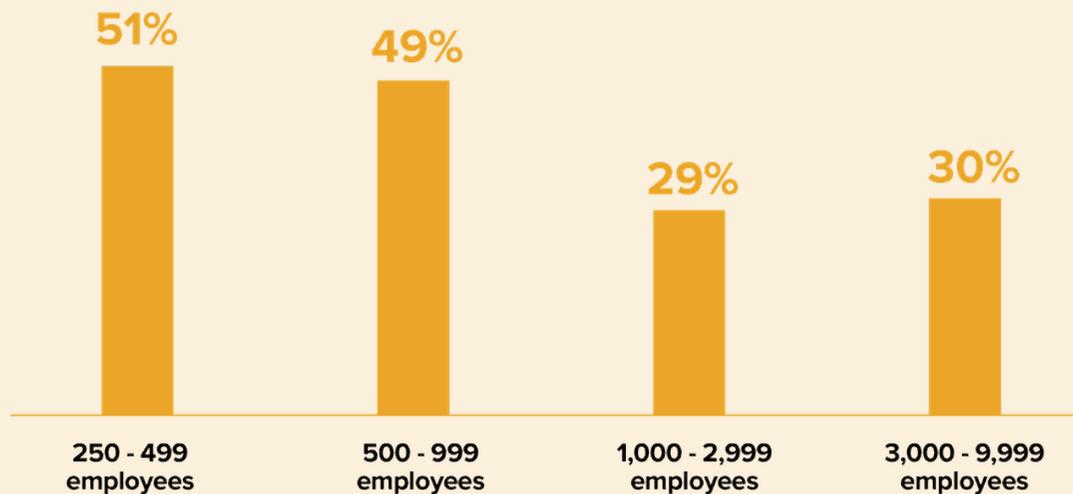
It's a vital process that ensures compliance, satisfies stakeholder expectations, informs business planning, and contributes directly to the financial health and transparency of the organization. But for many professional services firms, year-end has become synonymous with stress, last-minute firefighting, and long hours spent trying to reconcile fragmented systems.

Year-end discrepancies

At year-end, the inefficiencies plaguing cash flow and project financials reach a critical point.

Firstly, 100% of respondents experience discrepancies in year-end financials – this is an unavoidable problem with the current state of financial management within these businesses. As seen with project financials, the smaller the organization is, the more they struggle with the frequency of these discrepancies.

% of respondents who report that year-end discrepancies happen very frequently, by organization size



Smaller organizations can lack the resources and system maturity of their larger counterparts, meaning they can face a disproportionate burden that can snowball at year-end.

The human impact of consolidating

Secondly, senior finance decision makers estimate that they spend around two full working days per week consolidating year-end financials in the run up to deadlines. That is two days of very senior-level expertise and time – time that could otherwise be spent future planning, advising the business, and driving value – lost to fragmented data and outdated systems.

The top three challenges to year-end that respondents report all feel very familiar too:

44%

**Time consuming
manual
processes**

40%

**Lack of
integration
across systems**

40%

**Difficulty
consolidating
financial accounts**

And while year-end shares many of the same challenges seen across project financials and cash flow, it also adds a layer of urgency and stress to finance teams, affecting their wellbeing:

61% of respondents felt like the additional strain of year-end reporting negatively impacts the wellbeing of their finance team.

Prevent burnout from year-end reporting



Senior decision makers recognize that reducing the increased workload that seems to come with year-end would help prevent burnout across their team (73%).

The solution though, doesn't just lie at addressing year-end financial processes.

Integrating finance systems, consolidating finance data, and reducing the amount of manual intervention across reporting processes would go a huge way to simplify and streamline the financial management processes throughout the year, and in turn, simplify it as it reaches a peak at year-end. Doing this would protect staff wellbeing and talent; and unlock wasted bandwidth to focus on growth and not just compliance.

73%

Reducing the workload of year-end reporting would help prevent burnout among my organization's finance team.

**What can
businesses do?**





Automate manual workflows

to free up valuable finance resources.



Replace fragmented financial tools

with an integrated platform that unifies finance processes and delivers real-time visibility into financial health.



Consolidate financial data into a single source of truth

to eliminate duplication, reduce errors, and improve reporting accuracy.



Proactively manage financial operations

throughout the year to ease the pressure of year-end reporting
Invest in scalable systems and processes that grow with the business.



Invest in scalable systems and processes

that grow with the business.



Financial complexity post-M&A

Mergers and acquisitions are often a strategic lever for growth, allowing businesses to expand their capabilities and strengthen themselves competitively. They are (hopefully) the fastest route to long-term value. They are also no longer a rare occurrence, instead becoming the strategic norm for most industries, including professional services.

A recent report from McKinsey* highlights the strong upward pull of M&A that they anticipate in 2025.

Over the past five years, M&A activity has been high in professional services, reflecting a rapid consolidation in this industry and demonstrating a highly dynamic market.

58%

of respondents have acquired another organization

48%

have been acquired in that time

25%

have experienced both of these in the timeframe

*McKinsey, February 2025, [M&A Annual Report: Is the wave finally arriving?](#)



“

Mergers and acquisitions are an effective way for companies to grow rapidly, but they also carry a number of risks. Therefore, we must develop a more thorough financial assessment mechanism to ensure that all acquisition and investment decisions add real value to the company.

Business direction and strategy decision maker
Accountancy and financial services, Nordics

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While M&A activity presents immense opportunities for growth and stronger market positioning, it also exposes:

47% Inconsistencies with financial data

44% IT talent and resource allocation challenges

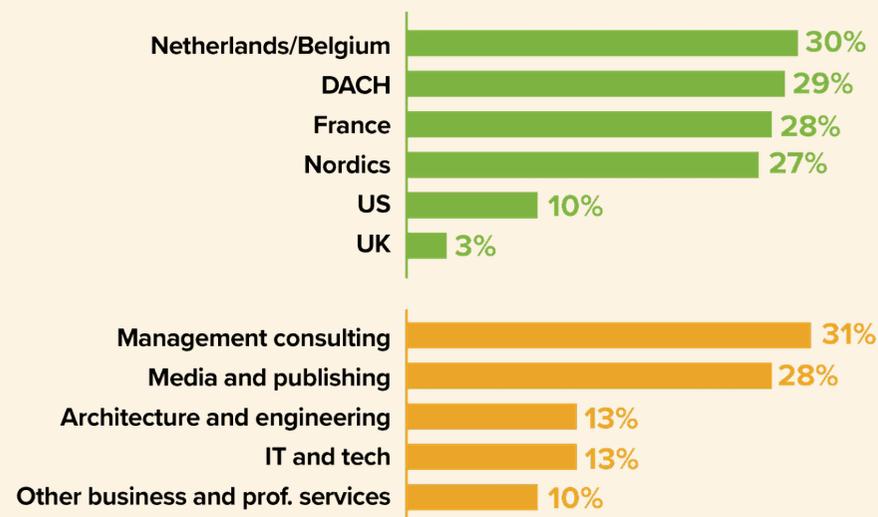
43% Incompatible finance systems

42% Standardization of back-office process challenges

M&As are costly and complex, and they are also taking longer than anticipated. For 1 in 5 businesses, it took longer than 1 year to integrate company systems following a merger or acquisition. And 86% of senior decision makers said the integration of company systems, processes and financial data took longer than expected following a merger or acquisition.

That is a whole year of financial inconsistencies and risk; of operational inefficiencies, and of delayed value realization, putting question marks over the justification of the deal in the first place, while the discrepancy of expected time to integrate vs. experience highlights the gap between planning and reality.

Took longer than 1 year to integrate company systems

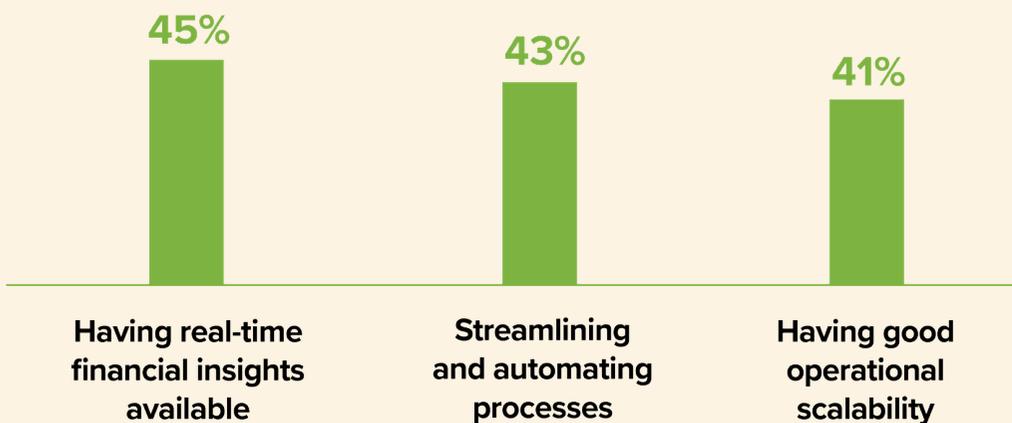


A business stuck in ‘transition mode’ after an M&A is a missed opportunity for growth.

Appealing to investors and easing the M&A process

M&A success is not just about the transition. It's also about demonstrating operational maturity, long-term readiness, and the ability to scale post-deal. In a competitive M&A landscape, the most attractive businesses will be those with agility, scalability, and robust systems already in place.

The top ways in which senior decision makers feel that they can enhance their business value to investors in this highly dynamic marketplace are:



These value drivers also align with the most critical steps to enable smooth M&A:

- ➔ Focus on clear and transparent communication
- ➔ Have scalable and flexible cloud-based IT/business solutions
- ➔ Streamline financial tools and systems

These actions not only ease the path to integration but also demonstrate operational maturity which is a key consideration for those looking to make investments into business acquisition. So, for organizations that see M&A as a 'when,' not an 'if,' proactive investment in scalability, process alignment, and automation is not just beneficial – it's essential.

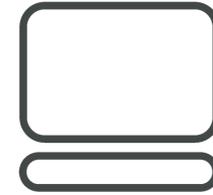
Conclusion

Key investments in financial management for business growth



Conclusion – Key investments in financial management for business growth

Financial complexity will always be a challenge to face. It is also a challenge which scales with the business. Organizations who struggle with a lack of integrated financial systems or heavy manual intervention will only amplify those challenges as they continue to grow.



Whether or not M&A activity is on the horizon for a business (and for many, it will be), there should be focus on three core areas to ensure that their financial management solutions help growth, rather than hinder:



**Automation
of manual
financial
processes**



**Scalability
and system
integration**



**Real-time
visibility and a
single source
of truth**

When these areas are lacking, the data shows that it leads to long M&A integration timelines, lost time and effort across the finance teams, and missed growth opportunities throughout the business.

By shifting away from manual processes and disparate financial tools and moving toward seamless integration and dynamic access to real-time financial data, finance decision makers are better set up to spend time where it is important – the growth of the business.

Partnering for success

Successful integration and optimization across a function which is a) so complicated, b) so baked into every other function, and c) so critical to the business operations requires the right technology and the right expertise.

Most organizations recognize this, with **90%** of organizations open to third-party support to optimize cash flow management.



Internal IT and finance teams are often stretched too thin to do this alone:

The top technical challenge following M&A was a **lack of IT talent and resource**

Senior finance decision makers **lose 2 days per week to year-end consolidation** in the run up to deadlines

The equivalent of **one FT-employee's time is spent investigating and updating discrepancies** in project financials per week

External partners bring experience, best practices, and the tech expertise that over-stretched internal teams lack, helping them to achieve the goal of greater integration and automation more easily.

Now is the time to get your financials in order and future-proof your business.

How Unit4 helps



We are a leading SaaS provider of next-generation enterprise software, empowering professional services firms to boost productivity, profitability, and agility. With over 40 years of dedicated expertise in the services sector, our cloud-based platform combines Financials, Procurement, Project Management, HR, and FP&A, streamlining operations and strengthening collaboration across teams.

Our AI-powered back-office tools deliver real-time insights, automate workflows, and provide user-friendly solutions tailored to individual roles, helping professional service firms tackle critical challenges such as mergers and acquisitions, year-end processes, and managing complex global projects. We work closely with our customers to understand their unique needs and help them achieve their business outcomes.

With flexible, modular solutions that enable rapid adaptation and smarter decision-making, Unit4 drives resilience and growth.

**Talk to us today to find out
how we can help you**



Survey details

Methodology

During February 2025, Vanson Bourne surveyed 600 senior finance and IT decision makers in midmarket and enterprise sized organizations. The sample was made up of respondents from the US [175], UK [100], France [50], Netherlands and Belgium [100], the Nordics [100] and the DACH region [75]. Respondents came from a variety of business and professional service sectors including management consulting, IT and technology, architecture and engineering, and media and publishing.

About Vanson Bourne

Vanson Bourne is an independent specialist in market research for the technology sector. Their reputation for robust and credible research-based analysis is founded upon rigorous research principles and their ability to seek the opinions of senior decision makers across technical and business functions, in all business sectors and all major markets.

For more information, visit www.vansonbourne.com.



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