

RESEARCH · FINANCE CAREERS

The Finance Career Ladder

How long each step from Accountant to Finance Director takes, what each one pays, and how people actually make them, from 312 pay survey responses and 1,716 finance careers.

12.6 yrs

Median from first finance role to first FD or CFO seat

+25%

Median pay step from Head of Finance to Finance Director

82%

Of first steps to Financial Controller or above came with a new employer

5

Median employers on the way to the first FD seat

What this is built on

Two sources that answer different questions. The **Finance Pay Index**, where 312 UK finance professionals reported their level, pay and years of experience, shows where people are now. The **work histories in 1,716 finance CVs** sent to us between May and October 2026, read role by role with dates and levels, show the route they took to get there.

Two cautions. Many CVs leave out early roles, so time taken to reach each level is measured only on the 1,262 careers where the CV starts at Accountant level or below. And these CVs belong to people applying for jobs, so people who change employer are more likely to be in the sample than people who stay put.

The ladder

LEVEL	RESPONSES	MEDIAN BASIC	STEP FROM THE LEVEL BELOW	EXPERIENCE OF PEOPLE IN THE ROLE	MEDIAN PQE
<u>Management Accountant</u>	35	£46k		7.5 years (5 to 10)	1
<u>Finance Manager</u>	34	£66k	plus 43%	15 years (11 to 20)	7
<u>Financial Controller (incl. Group)</u>	53	£85k	plus 29%	14 years (10 to 20)	10
<u>Head of Finance</u>	37	£100k	plus 18%	18 years (12 to 20)	12
<u>Finance Director (incl. Group)</u>	73	£125k	plus 25%	20 years (17 to 23)	15
<u>CFO</u>	80	£165k	plus 32%	20 years (16 to 25)	18.5

Finance Pay Index, data to 14 October 2026, 312 responses. Pay is the published median for each title, the same figure as its live page (each title links to it). Experience shown as median with the middle half in brackets. PQE is years since qualifying.

From Finance Manager up, each step adds between 18% and 32% to the median basic. The biggest single jump is the first one, from Accountant to Finance Manager, at 43%.

From first finance role to each level

Measured from the start of the first finance role on the CV to the start of the first permanent role at each level. Interim and contract titles are not counted as reaching a level, because a three month interim Finance Director role is not the FD step.

FIRST REACHED	CAREERS	QUICKEST QUARTER	MEDIAN	SLOWEST QUARTER
Finance Manager	650	3.7 years	6.5 years	10.2 years
Financial Controller	426	4.9 years	8.2 years	12 years
Head of Finance	235	7.1 years	11 years	14.8 years
Finance Director or CFO	120	8.5 years	12.6 years	17.8 years

These are earlier than the experience figures on the previous page, and both are right. The previous page shows how experienced people in each role are today, including those who have held it for years. This page shows when they first arrived.

The spread is wide. A quarter of the careers that reached Finance Director did it within eight and a half years; another quarter took nearly eighteen. If you are at the slower end, you are in a large and ordinary group.

The Financial Controller years

For the 186 careers that went from Financial Controller to Head of Finance or above, the median time spent at Controller level first was **5.8 years**, with the middle half between 3 and 10. Several years at Controller level before the next step is the normal pattern, not a sign that a career has stalled.

Experience within a level pays less than the step

LEVEL	SPLIT AT	FEWER YEARS (RESPONSES)	THAT MANY YEARS OR MORE (RESPONSES)
Financial Controller (incl. Group)	14 years	£80k (25)	£95k (28)
Head of Finance	18 years	£95k (17)	£118k (20)
Finance Director (incl. Group)	20 years	£125k (26)	£125k (46)
CFO	20 years	£165k (26)	£175k (53)

Finance Pay Index, data to 14 October 2026, 241 responses. Each level split at its own median years of experience; responses in brackets.

Below director level, more years in the role are worth something. Within this sample, the more experienced Finance Directors (20 years or more) were paid no more than the rest (£125k against £125k). From there, pay moves more with the size and ownership of the business and the step to CFO than with time served.

Most steps up come with a new employer

FIRST REACHED	STEPS WITH A KNOWN EMPLOYER	MOVED EMPLOYER TO MAKE THE STEP
Finance Manager	839	81%
Financial Controller	659	83%
Head of Finance	409	83%
Finance Director or CFO	249	84%

Roughly one step in six was an internal promotion. Remember that these are people applying for jobs, so the true share of internal promotions across all finance careers is higher than this. Even so, the pattern is the same at every level: when the seat above you is occupied, the next step is usually somewhere else.

But not by moving often

The careers that reached Finance Director passed through a median of **five employers** in 12.6 years: roughly two and a half years each. That is the pace that works. Our CV guide shows the other side of it. Five employers in the last five years is the pattern most often screened out of senior shortlists. Moving gets you the step. Moving too often costs you the shortlist.

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Five employers on the way to Finance Director is normal. Five employers in five years is the most common reason a senior CV is passed over.

HARPER MAY

Planning your next step

- **Place yourself on the table honestly.** Compare your years since your first finance role with the median for the level above. If you are inside the middle half, you are on time.
- **Make each move a step.** A sideways move to a new employer spends one of your moves without moving you up. Look for a bigger title, a bigger business, or a scope you can show on the next CV.
- **Stay long enough to show results.** About two and a half years per employer is the pace in these careers, and it is long enough to put numbers on what changed because you were there.
- **Prepare for the director step early.** In our experience, the people who make it have already sat in front of a board or investors, run a team, and been through a funding round, sale or audit change. Ask for that exposure in your current role before you need it on your CV.

Sources: Finance Pay Index, data to 14 October 2026, 307 permanent responses with years of experience. Harper May, 1,716 finance work histories from CVs received May to October 2026; time to each level measured on the 1,262 careers visible from Accountant level or below. Groups under 8 withheld. The advice on planning is ours.

If you are ready for the next step

KNOW WHAT IT PAYS

See where your salary sits against your level, sector and size of business, free at financepayindex.com.

TALK TO US ABOUT TIMING

Send us your CV and we will tell you honestly whether the next step is a move now or a better year where you are.

SENIOR FINANCE ONLY

We place CFOs, Finance Directors, Heads of Finance and Financial Controllers, and nothing else, mostly in London.