THE FOUNDER'S PLAYBOOK

YOUR FIRST CFO

A practical guide for Australian startup founders on when, how and why to hire a CFO in 2026

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STORY RECRUITMENT

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THE MISTAKE

THE TITLE IS RIGHT THE TIMING USUALLY ISN'T

Almost every founder I speak to is convinced they need a CFO twelve months before they actually do and a Head of Finance often gets dressed up in a CFO title to close the gap

Both hires can be good. But they are not the same job, they do not earn their seat at the same stage and they do not cost the same money

This playbook is what I'd tell any founder thinking about hiring their first CFO, whether that's late Series A, Series B, or further down the track

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REFRAME

A HEAD OF FINANCE RUNS THE FUNCTION A CFO RUNS THE STRATEGY

A Head of Finance owns reporting, FP&A, the board pack and the day-to-day. A CFO owns capital, investors, M&A, the narrative and the relationships that move the company forward

You can run a great Series A business with a Head of Finance. You usually can't run a great Series B business without a CFO. The job is to know which side of that line you're on

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HEAD OF FINANCE VS CFO

THE DIFFERENCE, SIDE BY SIDE

HEAD OF FINANCE $200–250K + EQUITY	CFO $275–450K + EQUITY
MANDATE	
Owns the **finance function**. Makes sure the engine room runs and the numbers are right	Owns **financial strategy**. Sits next to the CEO on capital, structure and direction
WHERE THEY SPEND TIME	
Month-end, board pack, FP&A, controls, team management, hiring the finance org	Investors, board, capital strategy, M&A, exec team, debt & treasury, narrative
REPORTS INTO	
Founder/CEO, COO or CFO. Often the first finance hire, then, as the business scales, you hire a CFO above them	CEO directly. Peer to the rest of the exec, owns the finance leadership chain below them
IN THE ROOM WITH INVESTORS	
Supports the process. Builds the model, runs the data room, answers diligence	Runs the process. Picks the bankers, negotiates terms, owns the relationship after close
TYPICAL BACKGROUND	
Finance leader role inside a scaled startup or growth business	Has already been a CFO (or a strong number two) through at least one growth round, scale, or exit
BEST-FIT STAGE	
Series A through early Series B. First proper finance hire for most startups	Late Series A onwards if a near-term raise / exit is in play. Most common at Series B and beyond

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WATCH OUT

MOST "CFOS" ON THE MARKET ARE HEADS OF FINANCE WITH A BIGGER TITLE

TITLE INFLATION IS RAMPANT AT SERIES A–B

Plenty of strong finance leaders carry a CFO title at a sub-$10M ARR business because that's what the market gave them. That doesn't mean they've done the job a real CFO needs to do at your next stage

Before you fall in love with a CV, test the scope behind it. The four questions worth asking up front:

- **Have they led a capital raise end-to-end?** Picked investors, run the data room, negotiated terms, not just supported the founder
- **Have they sat at the exec table?** Reporting into a CEO with the rest of the C-suite as peers, not into a COO as part of operations
- **Have they hired and managed a finance team?** Multiple direct reports, including a Head of Finance or Controller below them
- **Have they owned an investor relationship?** Quarterly updates, board prep, the awkward calls, not just the pitch deck

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THE FLIP SIDE

IT ALSO GOES THE OTHER WAY TOO!

SOME HEADS OF FINANCE ARE READY FOR THE CFO SEAT

DON'T SCREEN OUT THE STEP-UP CANDIDATE

There's a deep pool of finance leaders who have lived the full growth journey of a scale-up, from Series A chaos through to a Series B or C balance sheet and have done most of the CFO job without ever being given the title

They're often the best value hire on the market. The signs that someone is genuinely ready:

- **They scaled with the business, not just in it.** Joined at $3–5M ARR and were still there at $30M+, through the headcount, systems and reporting step-changes
- **They've been the de facto number 2.** Built the model, wrote the board pack and sat in the diligence sessions, even if the founder or CFO presented it
- **They've handled real complexity.** Multi-entity, international, first audit, first debt facility. Scope is a better proxy for readiness than title
- **They interview like a CFO.** They ask about board dynamics, capital strategy and your next raise, not just team size and compensation

Judge the scope someone has actually carried, not the title they were given. Some of the strongest CFO hires we place have never held the title before

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LATE SERIES A

$15+M raised with runway into a Series B

YOU ARE HERE	SERIES B	SERIES C+ / PRE-EXIT
Maybe	**Yes**	**Non-negotiable**

This is the most common stage where founders ask the question and the most common stage where the answer is "not yet"

- For most late Series A businesses, a **strong Head of Finance** is still the right hire. They will handle reporting, FP&A and the day-to-day, and they will scale into Series B if you pick well
- The exception: you're **12 months out from a Series B** led by a US fund, planning international expansion, or running a complex regulated / hardware / multi-entity model. Then a CFO might be needed earlier
- A pattern that works well here: **Head of Finance + Fractional CFO support for specific requirements**. If raising capital with sophisticated investors or leading an international market entry etc.
- If you hire a CFO here and the business doesn't move fast enough, they'll be bored inside 12 months and gone inside 18

WHAT TO ACTUALLY HIRE

Head of Finance ($200–250K + equity) for most. Fractional CFO ($8–15K / month) alongside if specific circumstances require it

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SERIES B

$25M+ raised and $10M+ ARR

LATE SERIES A	YOU ARE HERE	SERIES C+ / PRE-EXIT
Maybe	**Yes**	**Non-negotiable**

This is the classic point. A CFO stops being a "nice to have" and starts paying for themselves

- Your board now has institutional investors with real expectations. Quarterly reporting, audit-grade numbers and a credible 3-year plan are standard
- Capital strategy is no longer a founder responsibility. Debt facilities, secondaries, FX hedging and tax structures all need an experienced financial owner
- You're hiring senior leaders across the business. The CFO becomes a peer for the CRO, CPO and COO, not someone reporting up to them
- If you've made it this far with a Head of Finance, the right move is often promote and supplement or replace and upgrade. However, a CFO hire here could still make sense, depending on the complexity of the business

WHAT TO ACTUALLY HIRE
A genuine CFO. $325–375K base + equity, often with a meaningful new-hire remit. Expect 8–14 weeks to land the right one

SERIES C+ / PRE-EXIT

$50M+ raised with scale or exit on the horizon

LATE SERIES A	SERIES B	YOU ARE HERE
Maybe	**Yes**	**Non-negotiable**

You need a CFO who has done this stage before. Not someone who is hoping to learn on your business

- Investor relations becomes a job on its own. Quarterly updates, lead investor management, secondaries and increasingly direct conversations with LPs of your funds
- M&A becomes a lever, not a curiosity. Bolt-ons, talent acquisitions and competitor consolidation all sit with finance
- Audit-grade reporting, SOX-style controls and IPO readiness are 12-month projects. The CFO drives them, the Financial Controller/Head of Finance delivers them
- If a CFO at this stage is your first finance hire, you could bring in a FC or HoF in parallel so the CFO can operate above the work, not under it

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THE EXCEPTION

YOUR INDUSTRY CAN OVERRIDE YOUR STAGE

Stage is the default lens, not the only one. In heavily regulated or capital-intensive sectors the finance function carries genuine technical complexity from day one and an earlier CFO hire can be required

FINTECH

- Heavily regulated, licence obligations and regulator reporting from early on
- **Non-bank lending especially:** securitisation, warehouse facilities and funder covenants
- Treasury management becomes a core discipline
- Unit economics sit inside the funding structure. Get it wrong and the model breaks

DEEPTECH

- Long-term capitalisation across grants, non-dilutive funding and staged equity
- R&D capitalisation, tax incentives and multi-year project accounting
- Supply chain and production costing well before revenue is meaningful
- Capex-heavy scenario planning across horizons far longer than a SaaS model

The test: if the technical complexity of your finance function would stretch a strong Head of Finance today, your stage matters less than your sector. Hire the CFO earlier and hire one who has done it in your industry or one similar

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THE JOB WRITTEN OUT

If a candidate can't credibly speak to 6 of these 8, they are a Head of Finance, not a CFO

CAPITAL STRATEGY
Sizing the next round, choosing between equity, debt and secondaries, and deciding when to raise vs when to wait

INVESTOR RELATIONS
Owning the relationship with existing investors and warming the next round 9–12 months ahead of need

BOARD MANAGEMENT
Building the board pack, running pre-reads, and being the credible second voice next to the CEO in the room

M&A AND CORP DEVELOPMENT
Sourcing, valuing, negotiating and integrating acquisitions. Often the same playbook in reverse for an exit

FINANCE ORG BUILD
Hiring and managing Controllers, FP&A, Tax and Treasury. Owning succession for the function

STRATEGIC PARTNERING
Pricing, GTM economics, pricing model overhauls, market entry decisions. A real partner to the CEO, CRO and CPO

RISK & GOVERNANCE
Audit committee, insurance, controls, D&O, cyber, and regulatory exposure as the business scales internationally

NARRATIVE & EQUITY STORY
Articulating what the business is worth and why, both internally to staff and externally to the market

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

GREEN FLAGS & RED FLAGS

GREEN

- Has already been a CFO (or strong number two) through a Series B or beyond, ideally with a raise or exit attached
- Can speak fluently about capital structure, not just cash flow and reporting
- Comes with a usable network of investors, bankers, lawyers and tax advisors
- Has hired and managed a finance team, including their own successor at a previous business
- References include the CEO, the lead investor and a board chair, not just other finance people

RED

- CFO title at a sub-$5M ARR business with no team underneath them and no raise led
- Big-company CFO with no scale-up exposure. The instincts are different and the move down rarely works
- Talks fees, title and equity before they've understood the business model
- Hasn't asked who's on the board or who the next round investor is likely to be
- Frames the role as "fixing the finance team" before they've met them

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THE RAISE LENS

MOST CFOS GET HIRED AROUND A RAISE, AND MOST OF THOSE HIRES ARE TIMED WRONG

9–12

months before the raise is when the best CFOs want to start, not three weeks before the pitch

3–6

months is how long the right CFO will take to land, build trust and earn the right to lead the process

A real CFO can shave months off a raise process, add term-sheet leverage and build 10–20% more on valuation by running the process properly. Almost none of that is possible if they joined a month before the raise

If a raise is the trigger, start the search the quarter before you start the deck

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COMPENSATION REALITY

WHAT A REAL CFO ACTUALLY COSTS IN 2026

Australian market and full-time. The figures below assume a credible CFO who has done the stage you're heading into. Title-only CFOs come cheaper, but usually cost more in the long run

LATE SERIES A $275–325K + EQUITY	Often a promotion from a previous Head of Finance or a CFO from a smaller business. Can always be supplemented with greater equity to attract more senior candidates
SERIES B $325–375K + EQUITY	Proper exec hire. Has raised before, hired a team before, sat on a board meeting before. Often the most senior finance hire a founder will make
SERIES C+ / PRE-IPO $350–500K+ EQUITY	Public-company-ready. Often paid more in equity than cash. Look for IPO, M&A or significant secondary experience. Compare benchmarks against the rest of the C-suite, not the finance market

A NOTE ON EQUITY

Strong CFO candidates at Series B+ care about equity as much as base. If you can't structure a meaningful grant, a refresher schedule and a clean acceleration on change-of-control, you will likely lose out to the offers that can

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BEFORE YOU START

ANSWER THESE BEFORE YOU START THE SEARCH

If you can't answer these clearly, you're either not ready to hire a CFO or you might hire the wrong one

01 What is the single biggest thing this CFO needs to have delivered in 12 months for the hire to have been worth it?

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02 Is the trigger a raise, an exit, international expansion or operational complexity? Each pulls a different profile

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03 Do you already have a Head of Finance or Controller underneath or is this CFO walking into an empty function?

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04 What does your board actually expect, and have you tested that with the lead investor?

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05 What equity story can you tell this person? Both the company's and theirs personally

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06 Are you looking for a step-up CFO (cheaper, more upside, more risk) or a proven CFO (more expensive, less risk, harder to secure)?

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07 Will you let them genuinely own the investor relationship or are you keeping it? Be honest before you start

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THE REAL CHOICE

STEP-UP CFO OR PROVEN CFO?

Most founders start the search as "find a CFO". The real choice sits one layer down, and it changes everything about your shortlist, your pay structure and your timeline

STEP-UP

- **Profile:** Strong Head of Finance or number two ready for their first CFO seat
- **Pros:** Hungry, more affordable, deeper equity alignment, scales with the business
- **Cons:** First-time mistakes are on your business. Needs an experienced board / advisor scaffolding around them
- **Best when:** You have time, a supportive board and a willingness to be the safety net

PROVEN

- **Profile:** Already held a CFO role at the stage you're heading into, ideally with a raise or exit
- **Pros:** Walks in with playbooks, a network and pattern recognition. Lower execution risk on the raise
- **Cons:** Expensive, harder to close, motivation can flag once the playbook is run
- **Best when:** A raise, exit or international scale-up is on a hard timeline

A classic structure: a step-up CFO with a seasoned operator on the board or as an advisor. You get hunger inside the business and pattern recognition over the top

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THE MARKET RIGHT NOW

THE POOL OF AUSTRALIAN CFOS WHO HAVE TAKEN A SERIES B+ AND SCALED IS SMALLER THAN MOST REALISE

100–200

people nationally who have credibly held a CFO seat through a Series B or beyond at a venture-backed business

10–14

weeks from first conversation to accepted offer for the right CFO, with executive search done properly

Almost none of these people are on Seek. They are running finance functions inside other businesses and the ones worth speaking to are usually approached, not advertised to

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THE REAL TRIGGER

THE TRIGGER IS SPECIFIC TO THE BUSINESS NOT JUST SENIORITY

Hire a CFO when capital, investors or M&A start needing a dedicated financial owner and your Head of Finance is the right person for everything else

If the question is **"do I need a CFO or a Head of Finance?"**, the honest answer for most founders, most of the time, is still **Head of Finance**

The CFO question only really fits when investor work, capital structure or M&A becomes a full-time job in its own right. When it does, hire properly and hire early. The good ones won't wait

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THINKING ABOUT YOUR CFO HIRE?

Whether you're 3 months out from a raise or 18 months out from a Series B, I'm always happy to talk through what the right profile looks like, what it'll cost and who's actually on the market

No pitch, just free and helpful advice

Tom Hunter

STORY RECRUITMENT · THE CFO TRACK PODCAST

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