

A BPM Partners White Paper

FP&A Forecast: More Uncertainty Ahead

New capabilities will help Finance and FP&A navigate the unexpected and lead organizations through potentially volatile periods.



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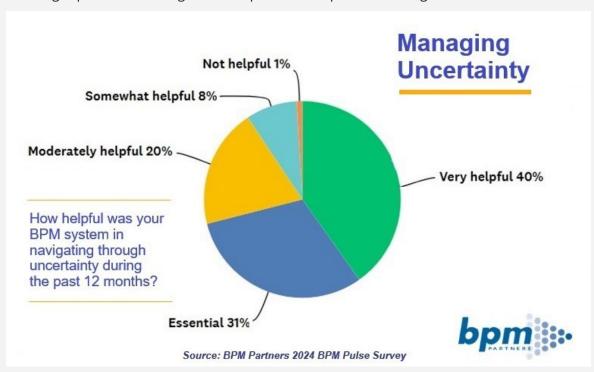
Executive Summary

Uncertainty ahead, for Finance, is all but certain. Accelerated change—driven by technology advances, geopolitical conflict, electoral and regulatory shifts—is a constant. Finance leaders know they must be equipped with new capabilities to navigate through turbulent periods.

It's a given that Finance—and the operational groups that drive the business—need efficient, high-performance planning, analysis and forecasting. At many companies, cloud-based Finance systems for business performance management (BPM) are in place and some degree of digital transformation has been implemented. Even with these improvements, are they ready for ongoing uncertainty and sudden, drastic changes in business conditions?

We have seen that sometimes the largest and least expected changes can manifest very quickly. Management responses need to be fast, agile, adaptive to new drivers and assumptions, and holistic in nature. In other words, they need to take into account more than a siloed departmental view, and be based on more than purely financial information.

The latest BPM Partners Pulse survey indicated that 99% of companies that own a BPM system rely on it to help them manage uncertainty, and 71% depend on it heavily or consider it essential. This establishes FP&A as the central core where organizations should focus on adding capabilities to navigate and cope with unexpected challenges.



When finance professionals look ahead, they see the uncharted territory of artificial intelligence (AI) with its wide range of technologies. Al is expected to have a major impact in the handling of large-scale analysis of big and diverse data sets, as well as streamlining and automating multi-step manual processes.

Navigating unexpected change is one reason that operational planning has become more important in FP&A (financial planning and analysis). This also accounts for the growing need for seamless integration between performance management systems and transactional source systems such as ERP, HRIS, and CRM.

To respond effectively to elevated risk levels, finance groups are currently putting emphasis on profitability optimization to focus on the areas of greatest return, as well as scenario modeling and ad hoc reporting to stay on top of the latest changes. These capabilities enable the company to adapt to changes in key drivers. They are key to modeling, understanding, and reacting to unexpected scenarios. They are also mutually reinforcing capabilities that work better together. Carrying off a planning reset while "under fire" is much more feasible when you can quickly draw on all relevant information—already integrated—from Finance, operations, supply chains, human resources, sales and marketing.

The actual modernization of FP&A can be handled as an incremental evolution, a phase-by-phase extension of existing capabilities, or a full-fledged transformation of these functions.

While some finance departments may move to embrace new capabilities more expeditiously, <u>research conducted in 2022</u>¹ by software provider Unit4 showed that legacy

methods do not go away easily. In fact, over two-thirds (69%) of finance functions still relied on spreadsheets or imports/exports from/to Excel.

The COVID crisis was the most extreme driver yet of abrupt, drastic uncertainty in business. Its tidal shifts demonstrated that Finance and its planning collaborators in any organization need to be ready when the time comes. That entails automating workflows, integrating data, and taking full advantage of new capabilities that include:

- Planning and analysis tools enhanced with Al
- Predictive planning and forecasting
- Profitability optimization
- Cloud-supported integration with ERP and other source systems
- Performance management geared specifically for revenue, sales, workforce planning and other functions.
- Scenario modeling and ad hoc reporting

Terminology

High-level definitions of key terms.

FP&A

Financial planning and analysis

xFP&A

Extended planning and analysis which incorporates operations

CPM = BPM = EPM

To denote corporate, business, and enterprise performance management, BPM Partners uses BPM, CPM and EPM interchangeably.

This whitepaper puts in perspective these capabilities, which are likely to have a major influence on business planning and management over the next decade. We also look at how they intersect for greater utility in coping with increased unpredictability, in a world that appears to move inexorably toward greater volatility.

¹ https://www.unit4.com/news/unit4s-2022-business-future-index-crisis-sees-51-embrace-accelerated-change-outperform Business Future Index 2022 research by Unit4

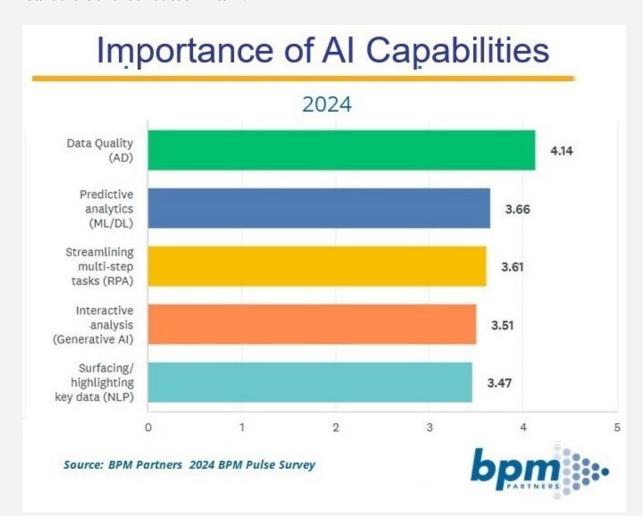
Trending Capabilities: AI

During the pandemic, some companies struggled as they barreled from pandemic shutdowns to recovery, explosive demand and supply chain problems. Others discovered they could react in nimble fashion, summoning the information needed to reforecast, adjust, and change strategy where necessary. The difference for many probably came down to having the right financial management tools in place.

In 2024, any discussion of new tools for Finance groups has to include AI, in its different forms and use cases for planning, analysis, and forecasting. Technologists may argue that there are several very specific branches of AI—including machine learning, generative AI (Gen AI), and natural language processing. From the viewpoint of Finance putting AI to work, it's useful to focus on four main types of deployment of AI:

- Data Quality
- Forecast Accuracy
- Process Automation
- Surfacing and Highlighting Key Data and Trends

The chart below shows that Finance considers data quality to be most important, so we will start there and look at each in turn.



Data Quality

Performance management systems provide data to facilitate decision-making. These

decisions could involve reacting to new regulations, compensating for the failure of a merger that was "in the bag", reallocation of resources, or a hiring freeze. Data for these mission-critical management actions must be reliable, trustworthy, and consistent.

Every time data is moved from a transactional source system (or directly entered), there is a risk of introducing errors. Anomaly detection is an Al capability that helps ensure the quality of the data. As the name implies, it identifies outliers. For example, it can spot redundant records, a number outside of a standard range, or even a data entry typo (such as: 100 typed in for 11 months of the budget and 10 accidentally typed in for the 12th month). This function helps flag potential errors for a Finance or IT professional to review.

Data quality was important in the past when the ERP system was the primary data source in an enterprise. Today it is more critical than ever because operational planning requires data from several additional source systems, multiplying the amount and diversity of data to combine and process, along with the risk of errors.

Forecast Accuracy

Finance groups have shown growing interest in predictive planning and forecasting, where machine learning has outstanding ability to analyze large data sets efficiently. This capability enables the system to more easily identify historical trends, seasonality, and the most impactful drivers. The result is greater forecast accuracy than a Finance manager could achieve on their own by perusing recent reports, going on instinct, or utilizing statistical algorithms—especially in a time-pressured, high-risk situation.

While analysis of large data sets elevates forecasting to the next level, it does not (and should not) replace the expertise and judgment of an experienced Finance manager. The system should generate a forecast, compare it to Finance's previous forecast, highlight the variances and determine the probabilities each forecast scenario coming to pass.

This capability has always been helpful, but in today's environment it is more important because companies forecast more frequently and model multiple scenarios simultaneously.

Robotic Process Automation

Ease of use continues to be a top priority and robotic process automation (RPA) capabilities can go a long way towards addressing this need. Not everyone considers RPA to be part of AI, but elements of AI and RPA work well together in handling complex tasks. Automating cumbersome, repetitive manual processes such as budget preparation, updating a forecast,

loading data, or producing reports can reduce the time, labor, and overall effort required. It can also ensure that no steps are missed, thus reducing the potential for errors. RPA can repeat the steps that were used the last time a process was run. If you forget exactly how you prepared last year's annual budget, the system can do it for you.

Surfacing and Highlighting Key Data and Trends

While natural language processing has been the AI capability that aids in querying the system to retrieve specific data, generative AI adds a more interactive layer to the process. These tools help Finance quickly and easily find the data they seek without entering specific account numbers or other system identifiers. Today they can go beyond that and offer analysis, produce reports, and answer specific questions such as "By how much are we missing our sales targets this month?", or "How can we increase our margins?"

While there are many concerns about the accuracy of large-scale public generative AI models, they are obviated when a Gen AI tool is focused solely on FP&A and trained using local financial data. It is early in the evolution of Gen AI, but it has tremendous potential to help finance professionals. It can quickly highlight data required for decision-making and even make prescriptive recommendations.

The challenge for Finance is to utilize these capabilities to leverage their team's innate knowledge of and judgment about the business.

Current status of Al

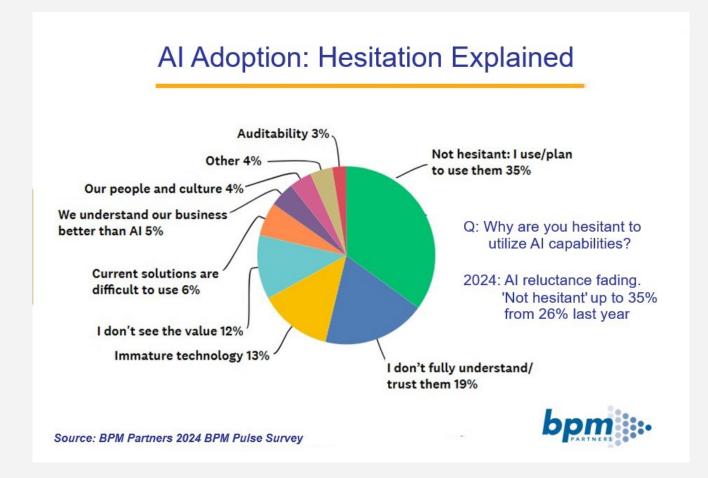
Looking at the delivery of AI by vendors of finance software, and adoption by end user organizations, there are a few surprises. First, some vendors have made AI capabilities pervasive throughout their products, while others are still at the starting gate.

User organizations, for their part, display some hesitancy and skepticism about AI. If they are moving forward, it is probably to experiment with AI capabilities already built into their existing software. Their approach overall is one of continued small steps, rather than aggressive leaps that entail more technology risk.

Finance is interested in using these technologies down the road. Machine learning (ML)/deep learning adoption may be driven by the growing demand for **predictive planning and forecasting**, which 66% of companies believe is highly relevant to their corporate planning.² Machine learning helps meet Finance's need to process extremely large data volumes in analysis and planning, identifying useful drivers and trends.

² Source: https://www.bpmpartners.com/2024/09/15/Global-CPM-Trends-and-Priorities-Report/

Over half of organizations expect to leverage machine learning and other forms of AI for planning and forecasting over time. Asia-located companies report the highest current usage of ML at 37%.



Finance groups are stepping cautiously with generative AI. As previously mentioned, public versions have been known to produce unreliable results. Finance professionals can expect to be 'supervisors' of Gen AI assistants; the technology will not replace them anytime soon.

Our 2024 survey found that about one third of Finance respondents either have plans to deploy AI, or already use it. The next largest group, 19%, doesn't fully understand or trust current AI-based solutions. That leaves roughly 45% who cited a range of holdup issues, with most believing that AI technologies are immature and do not yet deliver enough value.

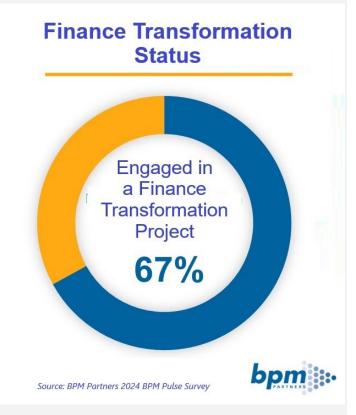
This breakdown bears some resemblance to Finance's cautious acceptance of cloud technology when it was first permeating the enterprise. A long list of barriers and concerns were mentioned at the time, including security, performance, and integration. We believe resistance against and avoidance of Al will recede substantially in the next few years as well.

Finance Transformation—What's Needed

Companies continue to be motivated to initiate finance transformation projects which entail extensive integration of strategic, financial, and operational planning. While digitizing back-office functions, Finance also needs to streamline and automate manual processes, and improve organizational structures. Overall, Finance aims for more unified systems with shorter cycle times.

Integration between source and planning systems is critical to BPM / CPM

The requirement for integration with transactional source systems such as ERP, HR systems, CRM systems and more, extends across finance and operational functions. Integrated data seeds today's budgets and plans, and includes the actual results to measure performance. FP&A / CPM and ERP systems alike provide more value when



different business functions across the company are aligned, so that corporate strategy can be carried out consistently with a data-driven, cross-functional response.

Finance's planning applications and transactional source systems such as ERP are complementary. ERP is generally more operational and focused on the day-to-day tasks of an organization. ERP systems keep a detailed static record of daily business processes and transactions. This retrospective information can span sales orders, inventory status, asset management, procurement, receivables, payables, reconciliations, invoicing, and other transactional history.

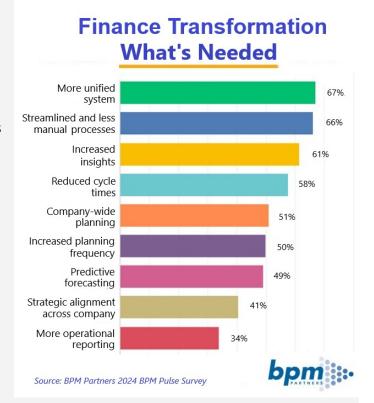
ERP is structured with independent tools for different departments and functions. When ERP is fully integrated with other business functions, such as Finance, HR, and Procurement in some cases, an enterprise can qualify and quantify resources more efficiently. Leaders can create a better general corporate strategy, using the increased visibility across an organization's resources and data.

The chart on the following page shows which BPM capabilities this year's Pulse survey respondents considers essential to successful finance transformation, with a unified system at the head of the pack.

Cloud technology is a supportive foundation for more unified systems and finance transformation

Consolidating ERP and FP&A offerings by means of cloud capabilities is an effective way to align core operational data with finance strategy and planning. This enables companies of all sizes to not only manage toward their corporate goals, but react quickly to events that were not anticipated. Organizations can then benefit from management responses encompassing HR, Finance, and even purchasing and supply chains that are wholeof-enterprise (cross-functional) in nature.

Following are some of the potential gains when Finance works to integrate all key business functions by aiming for a single "synchronized" data model. Invariably, having a single version of truth allows Finance to perform more effectively.

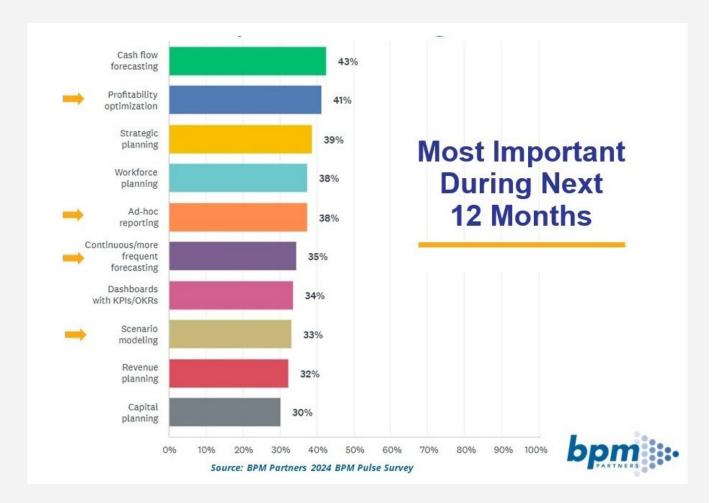


- Corporate strategy can be accurately matched to processes and budgets, because combined data gives a more complete picture.
- Departments and Finance can link operational plans directly to strategic drivers.
- Alignment across functions---with source data and plans that are consistent and nonconflicting—is much easier and more efficient.
- Data moves seamlessly between ERP and FP&A systems, as well as HR data.
- Each business function can work with the same accurate data, drivers, and goals, confident their planning foundation is consistent with the organization's data model—and won't be questioned.

The economic environment tends to evolve toward more instability

Technology, regulatory shifts, globalization and geopolitical conflicts often bring greater volatility and change business conditions quite rapidly. We are also in a time period when electoral changes will impact many populations and economies. Companies will need the ability to respond more quickly and therefore they need real-time access to key data. Timely, complete, and consistent data is key to more accurate and current forecasts as well as alternative forecasts/scenarios. Companies also need to understand their profitability to adjust their product and service focus if resources become more constrained. These requirements drive the growing importance of specific capabilities.

The chart below shows how Finance respondents ranked the importance of key capabilities for the coming year based on anticipated challenges. We then discuss several which are particularly important when it comes to being ready to respond to the unexpected.



Profitability optimization. Al currently holds the rapt attention of media and analysts, but profitability optimization is on the priority short-list of most managers today. The latest Pulse survey shows 47% of responding organizations already engaged and either deploying or using profitability optimization. In addition, 41% rate it as one of their top three issues in the coming year. When the going gets tough, companies often choose to focus on the areas of greatest return and they need the data to inform those decisions. Accurate profitability calculations rely heavily on detailed costing data usually found in the source systems, and complex allocations in the planning system.

Ad hoc reporting. A form of self-service reporting, ad hoc reporting has become increasingly more important and is relied upon by 69% of companies today. Sometimes decision-makers can't wait for the board book, month-end reporting package, or other prebuilt production reports to be run. They expect Finance to have near real-time access to integrated planning and source data. Beyond timing issues, existing reports may not contain

the information needed, especially when decision-makers are confronting unanticipated circumstances. When a manager is pressed to make a decision and needs a subset of specific data, the inherent ease of use of ad hoc reporting enables Finance self-sufficiency and allows moe agile responses.

More frequent forecasting. Most companies still forecast on a monthly or quarterly basis, but increasingly they also need so-called 'continuous forecasting'. A bit of a misnomer, it just means forecasting as often as needed. The actual frequency is usually determined by both the volatility of the general market, as well as the particular industry the company is in, and of course the status of their business. Unlike spreadsheets, most BPM systems make it easy to forecast as often as needed whether it is a remainder-of-year or rolling forecast.

Scenario modeling. A <u>recent study</u>³ found that half of companies find scenario modeling and simulations to be highly relevant to managing dynamic, unpredictable situations. By modeling multiple scenarios—typically covering the anticipated best case, worst case, and expected case—a company can be ready to quickly pivot to whichever situation they find themselves in and adjust spending and resource allocation accordingly. Again, unlike spreadsheets, BPM systems simplify this process by allowing companies to save and compare multiple versions and view them side by side in a single report. This may sound straightforward; it is a major improvement over the deficiencies of Excel or Google Sheets, and helps substantially in mapping a strategically reliable response to shifts that can impact the whole organization.

³ Source: https://www.bpmpartners.com/2024/09/15/**Global-CPM-Trends-and-Priorities-Report**/

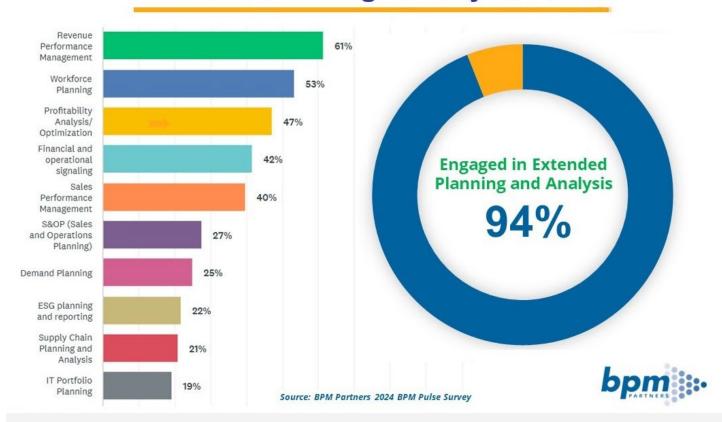
Extended Planning & Analysis

The intersection of operational and financial planning is important to an organization's capacity for nimble, accurate decision-making. Just as important, when Finance and operational decision-makers reconcile and work with each other's targets, actuals, drivers, and assumptions, their analysis and planning facilitate a holistic view of the business.

This enables managers to understand more fully how their decisions ripple through and impact other areas of the business. Ideally, operational plans support the overall corporate financial plan and are tied to it. Otherwise, the corporate financial plan is disconnected from reality and probably will not be fulfilled.

For many years, FP&A systems have focused primarily on financial planning. While planning was conducted in other areas of the business, it happened in disconnected, siloed systems. Some areas lacked any formal planning process. That has changed. Today the CFO and FP&A groups drive planning across the organization, often using a single unified planning solution.

Extended Planning & Analysis Focus



As our 2024 data shows, 94% of organizations are now focused on one or more areas of operational planning in addition to financial planning. The chart above shows cross-industry priorities and a representative sampling of them is addressed on the following page.

Revenue performance management (RPM)

The 2024 Pulse survey finds that 61% of responding companies are already engaged with RPM. A 2023 study by McKinsey found that a growing number of Fortune 100 firms were adding chief revenue officers. RPM helps optimize the amount and timing of revenue. It establishes the drivers of each product's revenue performance, to adapt sales and marketing to customer behavior. Revenue planning and its close cousin, sales performance management, are extensions of classic FP&A. Both entail collection and analysis of large amounts of data. Alignment of sales and marketing plans with company-wide financial goals ensures they have a strong foundation.

Workforce planning

The BPM Partners Pulse survey finds that 53% of respondents are already engaged in using extended planning and analysis solutions to manage workforce issues such as recruitment, retention, and training. The data collected and analyzed goes beyond standard salary planning and integrates with transactional HR source systems. Workforce planning establishes whether a business has the right resources in place, with the right skill sets, that are required to achieve financial goals. This highlights the importance of linking operational and financial plans. We also see workforce planning solutions used to address urgent post-pandemic challenges of facilities utilization, such as handling employee resistance to returning to the office. Many companies have confronted uncertainty about their utilization requirements and faced tough decisions about holding onto leases or letting them lapse.

Sales performance management (SPM)

Forty percent of Pulse Survey respondents are already engaged with SPM, which entails the discipline and data-informed work of boosting the efficiency and *effectiveness* of a sales organization. SPM integrates data from source CRM systems with financial data in a comprehensive effort to improve sales. The focus is usually on territory and quota management, capacity planning, and incentive compensation management. It can overlap with revenue performance management, which aims to optimize the revenue that is achievable with a given set of resources.

Services planning

Professional services businesses usually combine ongoing projects from prior years, annual retainers, and new short or long-term projects. All can be unpredictable. Client budgets which enable demand for those services can vary unexpectedly. Sudden fluctuations that characterize services industries necessitate frequent reforecasting. Challenges in recruiting needed talent add uncertainty to the supply side of the equation. Effective services planning requires quickly bringing together forecasts of demand, utilization rates, resource availability, billing rates, and more. For faster time to value and optimized system performance, a planning solution designed for professional services firms should understand all the parameters and come with standard templates, reports, and models to leverage that knowledge.

• Financial/operational signaling

Companies can react more quickly to changes when they monitor operational data and understand how it relates to financial outcomes. Operational data 'signals' provide early warning of potential issues, so managers can reset plans and minimize negative impact—or take advantage of emerging opportunities. For example, if a professional services organization has trouble filling open positions (signaled by the operational data) then it's unlikely they can meet their planned revenue targets. They may need to utilize contractors, impacting margins. Organizations want to recognize issues early and analyze how they flow through the plans, to quickly take corrective measures and adjust relevant items accordingly. They might need to reduce costs to offset the lower revenues, and/or reduce demand-generating activity if they can't meet current customer demand. This highlights how the tight integration of financial and operational plans can be very beneficial.

• Predictive planning and forecasting

Underpinning all these specialized extensions of performance management is the ability to use the organization's historical data and statistical analysis to project what probably lies ahead. Predictive planning provides values to use in budgeting and other forecasts. It helps CFOs and Finance teams see how factors such as sales or expenses may evolve, allowing them to allocate budgets appropriately and improve investment and cash flow planning. Predictive planning can identify potential risks in forecasts, such as supply shortages or cash shortfalls. Forty-six percent of companies in the 2024 Pulse survey expect to use predictive planning to validate manual planning, and nearly one third (31%) anticipate its use in automated execution of simulations and scenarios.

New Tools Can Help When it Counts Most

Recent history drives home the importance of agility, speed, ease of access, the ability to handle large data volumes, and integration across data sources—and the potential contributions of Al. Finance leaders in many industries share—and certainly have not forgotten—a common experience that challenged their abilities: the pandemic.

Organizations across the private and public sectors faced a scenario in 2020 that none of them could have envisioned. Did transportation, hospitality, manufacturing, educational, government and nonprofit entities have the planning and analytic capabilities needed to respond optimally—and continue to deliver their services and products? For most, the best management choices may have felt more extreme than any they had made before. Those decisions were easier to make for those that had all their information sources integrated. They had a more comprehensive view and were able to model scenarios realistically, and plan accurately under duress—and they made difficult decisions with more confidence.

Healthcare entities, nonprofits, and universities alike faced extensive realignment of expenses. School districts had to maintain services while they handled handle closures, find funding for remote learning and infrastructure hardware/software/networks, and refund to students who needed to withdraw. There were urgent capex decisions to make, such as whether to modify school ventilation or stop building offices. With the return to classrooms, workforce planning was critical for staff rescheduling and coping with educator retirement.

In manufacturing, supply chain issues and modifying work environments to be safer for employees posed very serious challenges. Today's latest generative Al-driven models (which were not available at the time) could have helped decision-makers ask the right questions and identify new data that would improve the planning itself. When the CFO asks a gen Alenabled system, "Find ways to maintain profits this year, with a success likelihood of at least 80%, given that certain microchips are in short supply," the response might be along the lines of, "Meeting that probability level requires additional data on possible product pricing, demand for new cars, and union flexibility."

World crises notwithstanding, there are often major surprises and changes that reduce predictability and threaten business continuity. These situations demand quick, assured application of revenue performance management, sales planning, profitability optimization and other newer capabilities. Rapid shifts in GDP, energy price swings, disruption of shipping routes and schedules (with huge swings in container availability and pricing) often result from geopolitical uncertainty and instability. Cybercrime and climate change are always potential X factors. Market uncertainties like a surge of competition for services you provide, product recalls, and shortage-driven inflation create challenges that finance and operational leaders need to address together. Combined operational and financial planning, specialized operational performance management, AI, and integration of information are key to navigating such circumstances successfully.

How These Capabilities Work Together

To prepare a Finance group for heightened risk and uncertainty, adding the capabilities described above constitutes a solid beginning. Introducing and combining them over time to be complementary and enhance each other and more effective is the next evolutionary phase. Here are a few examples of this mutual improvement:

- Machine learning enables analysis of vast quantities of data, which is necessary for increased adoption of predictive planning. We see that users currently have a high level of interest in leveraging predictive planning and forecasting.
- Gen Al delivers more useful responses when it has access to both operational and financial data (and in some cases, external data such as economic indicators). In a recent study, 90%⁴ of companies confirmed this adds significant value for them.
- Profit optimization (already widely applied) can provide greater value when used with creative scenario modeling.
- Combining joint operational/finance planning and integration allows for a broader, more whole-of-enterprise data foundation along with consistent actuals, assumptions, drivers and goals.
- Integration: financial and operational planning require actual data from an evergrowing list of financial and operation transactional source systems both as a starting point and to measure success in achieving financial and operational goals.

⁴ Source: https://www.bpmpartners.com/2024/09/15/Global-CPM-Trends-and-Priorities-Report/

Conclusion

Another pandemic may not appear in our lifetimes. However, there is increased likelihood of significant, unplanned shocks and changes that organizations that cannot control, but <u>must</u> be aware of and ready to confront. From healthcare to local and central government, and from nonprofit and education to manufacturing and consulting, organizations need to adapt quickly, while delivering their services and products profitably.

To help meet those challenges, your FP&A vendor should demonstrate a clear focus on extensive integration of the different forms of planning: strategic, financial, and operational. To support the growing demand for extended planning and analysis, integration with operational source systems from other vendors is a top priority. For an FP&A vendor, it's also very important to achieve seamless integration with their own ERP solution if they offer one, as well as with other leading ERP solutions in their target market.

It's best when a BPM (FP&A) solution provider is actively engaged with delivering the newer capabilities that are covered in this whitepaper. The fact is, the industry is in a learning phase to determine the best uses of AI in its different forms, and to deliver the full potential of extended operational uses of FP&A such as ESG, services planning, sales performance management, demand management, revenue performance management and marketing planning.

To confirm that a vendor is actively making progress with practical applications, you'll want to see that their product roadmaps include profitability optimization and effective uses of Al in analysis and reporting.

User organizations will need to experiment to find the best ways to apply new capabilities in their unique planning processes. While it should be done in small steps over time It's important to keep up, because the need to navigate uncertainty is growing. Risk factors appear likely to multiply and become more severe, while unexpected surprises demand quick and accurate responses.

There are solutions available today that offer many of the capabilities described here. They can prepare organizations to manage performance and optimize results in the face of business conditions with numerous unknowns and growing volatility. Many companies already take advantage of these solutions. It's up to you to determine the timeline for your company to join them.

About Unit4

Unit4's next-generation enterprise solutions power many of the world's most people-centric mid-market organizations. Our state-of-the-art cloud platform, ERPx, brings together the capabilities of Financials, Procurement, Project Management, HR, and FP&A onto a unified cloud platform that shares real-time information and is designed with a powerful, people-centric approach, so employees can benefit from better insight and become more effective and increasingly engaged. It supports rapid and continuous change while delivering individualized fit for customers at scale, delivering the right tools to unify the processes across their organization, and connect their people. Unit4 serves more than 6,000 customers globally including, Bravida, Havas, Migros Aare, Americares, Save the Children International, Action against Hunger, Metro Vancouver, Forest Research, Southampton City Council, Habitat for Humanity, Selkirk College, FTI Consulting, and Surrey County Council.

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