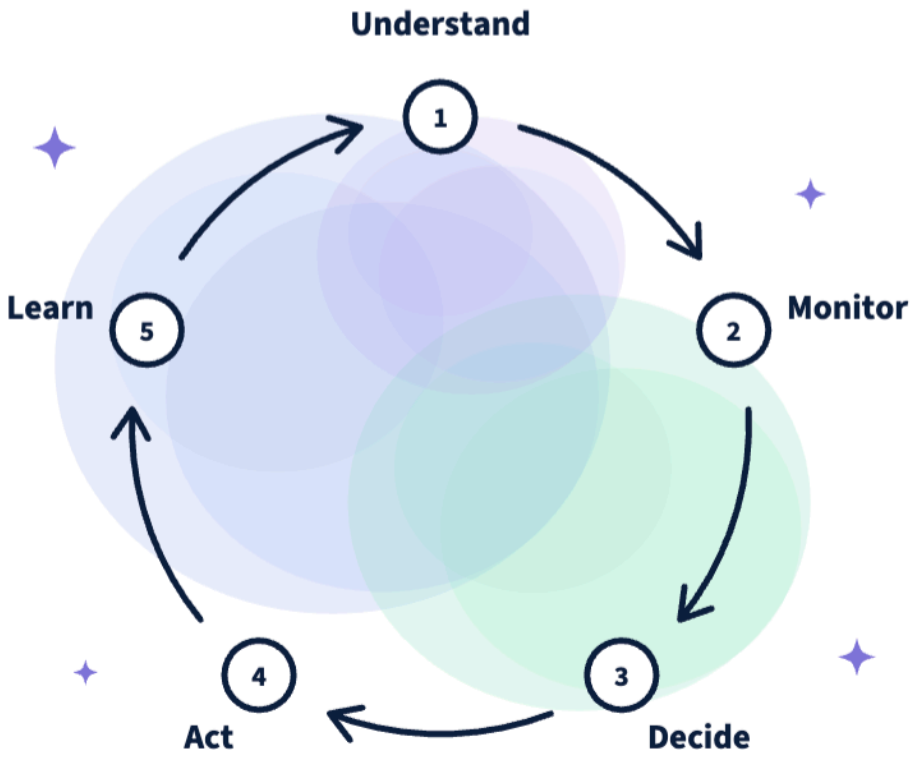
FP&Action: *The Next Era of Finance*

How operating intelligence and AI agents move finance from reporting what happened to acting on what matters.



FOREWORD

Finance has always planned. Now it can act.



By Christina Ross
Founder & CEO, Cube

For decades, finance teams have done far more than keep score. They build the budget, run the forecast, model the scenarios, and explain the variance. The tools behind that work kept getting better. The ledger records the business, the planning model projects it, the dashboard displays it. Yet each generation ended at the same handoff: a plan or an analysis that a person still had to carry into the rest of the business and turn into action.

That handoff is shrinking. Finance data can now be monitored continuously, questions can be answered in plain language, and routine decisions can be prepared before anyone asks for them. The planning and analysis finance already does can now connect directly to what the business does next.

We call this **FP&Action**, Financial Planning & Analysis growing into Financial Partnering & Action. It is a finance operating loop that understands the business, monitors it, helps decide what to do, acts, and learns from the result. This guide lays out what that loop is, why the current generation of tools stops short of it, what it requires, and what you can do about it in the next two quarters.

Cube was founded by a three-time CFO who spent years on the receiving end of late numbers and stale dashboards. The opinions in this guide come from that seat. They are meant to be tested against your own.

“Finance has always seen what is coming. Operating intelligence lets it act before the moment passes.”

Christina

Contents

FOREWORD — **Finance has always planned. Now it can act.** — 2
How the planning and analysis finance already does can carry straight through to action

CHAPTER 1 — **The reporting era is ending** — 4
Finance software has gotten faster at describing the past. The next gain comes from changing what happens next.

CHAPTER 2 — **Why planning software stopped at the report** — 5
The category was designed around a screen a person looks at. That design choice sets the ceiling.

CHAPTER 3 — **The FP&Action loop** — 7
Five stages that turn finance from a reporting function into an operating function.

CHAPTER 4 — **The forecast miss, start to finish** — 8
The most common finance fire drill, run first the old way and then through the loop.

CHAPTER 5 — **What agentic finance requires** — 10
The loop only works on the right foundation. These are the requirements, in the order they have to be built.

CHAPTER 6 — **What to do in the next two quarters** — 13
Five moves for finance leaders, and a note for the advisors who help them.

CLOSING — **About Cube** — 15
The agentic FP&A platform and how finance teams use it

CHAPTER 1

The reporting era is ending



Finance software has gotten faster at describing the past. The next gain comes from changing what happens next.

The close is faster than it used to be. The dashboards are better looking. The board deck still goes out with last month's answer to a question the CEO asked two weeks ago.

Every layer of the modern finance stack is built to report. That was the right goal when the hard problem was getting accurate numbers at all. It is the wrong goal now that accurate numbers are table stakes and the scarce resource is the time between a signal appearing in the data and someone doing something about it.

Three eras of finance technology

ERA	WHAT IT PRODUCES
Era 1: Record	ERPs and ledgers capture every transaction. The output is a trustworthy account of what happened. The work of interpretation stays entirely with people.
Era 2: Reporting	Planning tools, BI, and dashboards organize the record into budgets, forecasts, and variance views. The output is a report a person has to read and act on.
Era 3: Action	Operating intelligence watches the business continuously, prepares decisions, and carries approved changes back into the plan and the systems that run the company.

Most finance teams today live in Era 2. Many vendors describe themselves as Era 3 because they have added a chat window to an Era 2 product. The difference shows up in a simple test: when something changes in the business, who notices first, the system or a person with a spreadsheet?

WATCH OUT

A faster report is still a report. If the only thing that improved is how quickly a human can read the same page, the operating model has not changed.

What reporting cannot do

- **It cannot notice.** A dashboard shows what you point it at. A forecast miss that begins in one department's hiring plan stays invisible until someone opens that view.
- **It cannot prepare.** When a miss surfaces, the analyst starts from zero: pull the data, build the bridge, draft the explanation.
- **It cannot follow through.** The recommendation lives in a slide. Updating the plan, re-forecasting, and notifying owners are separate manual steps.
- **It cannot remember.** The lessons from last quarter's miss sit in a post-mortem that the next forecast never reads.

> **"The scarce resource in finance is no longer the number. It is the time between a signal and a response."**

CHAPTER 2

Why planning software stopped at the report

The category was designed around a screen a person looks at. That design choice sets the ceiling.



Planning software grew up as an interface. Users log in, open a model, and read or edit numbers. Everything about the product, from the data model to the pricing, assumes a person is sitting in front of it.

The interface became the product

When the interface is the product, the product can only do what a user opens it to do. It waits. It holds the data inside its own walls. It reports on what it was told to report on, in the format it was built to display. Adding more features to the interface adds more things a person can look at, and does not add any capacity to notice, decide, or act on their behalf.

The loop that finance actually runs, in every company, has five stages. Here is where the work stops at each one in a typical Era 2 stack.

STAGE	WHERE THE WORK STOPS TODAY	WHAT IS MISSING
Understand	Dashboards and reports on data that was loaded on a schedule	Data unified across every source, governed, and traceable to the transaction
Monitor	Periodic refreshes and manual variance review at month end	Continuous watching against plan, with thresholds that raise a flag early
Decide	Analysts build scenarios by hand after someone asks	Options and trade-offs prepared before the question arrives
Act	Email, meetings, and tickets to carry a decision out	Approved changes written back into the plan and connected systems
Learn	A post-mortem slide that the next forecast never reads	Outcomes fed back into drivers, assumptions, and thresholds

DATA PRINCIPLE

Every stage that ends in a person doing manual work is a stage where speed depends on headcount and attention. Agentic finance removes that dependency one stage at a time.

Bolted-on assistants inherit the same limit

The common response has been to add an AI assistant to the existing product. This helps with the Understand stage, because a question that used to take a report build can now take a sentence. It does little for the other four. An assistant that lives inside the interface can answer questions about the data that interface holds. It cannot watch the business when nobody is asking, and it cannot write a decision back into the systems of record unless the architecture was built to allow it.

AI INSIGHT

Judge any AI claim in finance by what happens when nobody is logged in. If nothing happens, you are looking at Era 2 with a new front end.

CHAPTER 3

The FP&Action loop

Five stages that turn finance from a reporting function into an operating function.



FP&Action is a closed loop. Each stage produces something the next stage needs, and the last stage feeds the first. The loop never finishes. It gets faster and more accurate each time it runs.

UNDERSTAND › MONITOR › DECIDE › ACT › LEARN

Each pass through the loop leaves the next pass with better data, tighter thresholds, and sharper assumptions.

1. Understand

Every source system, every dimension, and every plan version sits in one governed layer. Every number maps back to the general ledger, and every insight can be traced to the transaction behind it. Without this stage, every later stage produces answers nobody trusts enough to act on.

2. Monitor

Finance agents watch actuals against plan, forecast, and prior periods continuously. They flag variances when they cross a threshold, not when the month closes. A hiring slip in July shows up in July.

3. Decide

When a signal appears, the system prepares the decision: what changed, why, what it affects downstream, and what the realistic options are, each with a modeled outcome. The finance leader reviews a decision brief instead of building one.

4. Act

Approved decisions are carried out. The forecast updates, the affected budget owners are notified, and the change is written back to the plan and the connected systems. Humans approve. The system does the legwork.

5. Learn

The result of each action returns to the model. Drivers get recalibrated, thresholds tighten where they fired too late, and the next forecast starts from a better position than the last.

BEST PRACTICE

Define approval rights at the Decide and Act stages before you automate anything. The loop works when everyone knows what the system recommends, what it can change on its own, and what needs a named human's sign-off.

CHAPTER 4

The forecast miss, start to finish

The most common finance fire drill, run first the old way and then through the loop.



Every CFO knows the call. Revenue landed short of the forecast, the board meeting is in nine days, and the first question is why.

A forecast miss makes a good test case because it touches every stage of the loop and every function in the company. It also happens often enough that the cost of handling it badly is paid every quarter.

THE MISS TODAY

Reactive and manual

The miss surfaces at close. An analyst pulls actuals from several systems, reconciles them to the ledger, and builds a variance bridge in a spreadsheet. Sales ops and the department heads each offer a partial explanation. The CFO assembles a narrative days before the board meeting and re-forecasts by hand. The lessons go into a slide.

THE MISS IN THE LOOP

Early and prepared

A monitoring finance agent flags the drift weeks before close, when a leading driver moves off plan. A decision brief arrives with the variance already bridged to its causes and the downstream effects modeled. The CFO chooses an option, and the forecast, owners, and plan update. The outcome feeds the next forecast.

What changes for the finance team

- **The first draft is done before the meeting.** The analyst's job moves from assembling the bridge to testing the brief.
- **The conversation starts at the decision.** Leaders spend their time on options and trade-offs instead of reconciling whose number is right.
- **The forecast improves with each miss.** Every variance recalibrates a driver, so the same miss is harder to repeat.
- **Board prep shortens.** The narrative, the bridge, and the supporting data already exist and already tie to the ledger.

This loop runs in Cube today. The Data Managers keep source systems reconciled and traceable to the transaction, the Analysts and Planners monitor actuals against plan and forecast, and the Business Partners assemble the narrative. Finance leaders review and approve.

“Every forecast miss is a lesson. Most companies write the lesson down. Few companies feed it back.”

CHAPTER 5

What agentic finance requires

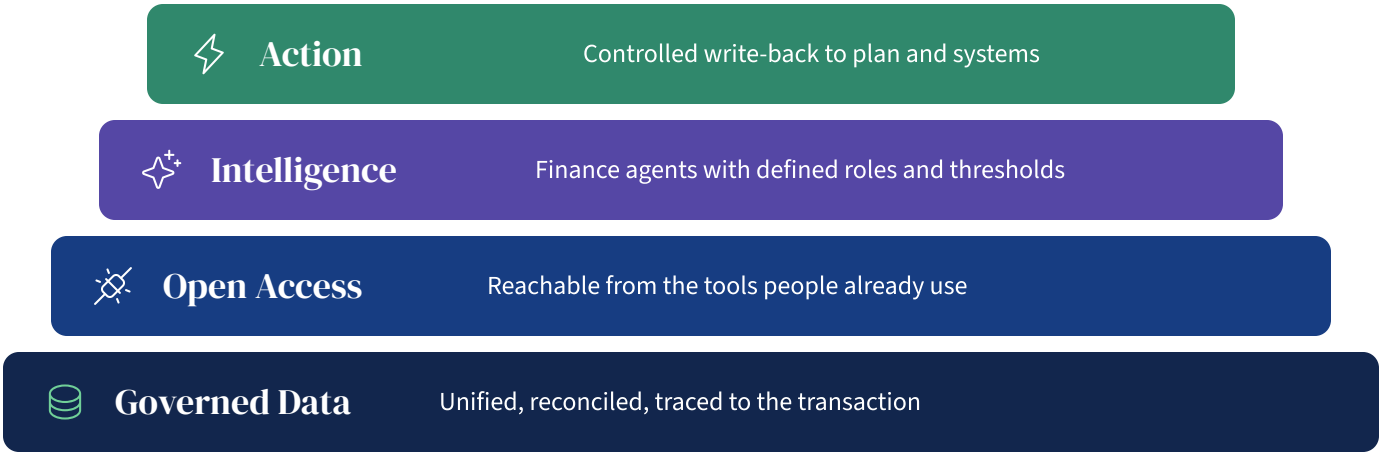


The loop only works on the right foundation. These are the requirements, in the order they have to be built.

Agentic finance is an architecture decision before it is a feature decision. A product can add an assistant in a quarter. It cannot add governed data, open access, or controlled write-back without being rebuilt.

Think of the requirements as layers. Each depends on the one beneath it, and an agent is only as reliable as the weakest layer it stands on.

THE STACK, TOP TO BOTTOM



Governed data comes first

A finance agent that watches ungoverned data produces confident noise. Hierarchies need to be consistent across systems, source data needs to reconcile to the ledger, and every figure needs a path back to the transaction behind it. Finance-grade AI starts here, and no model improvement replaces it.

AI INSIGHT

Trustworthy AI in finance comes from better architecture, not bigger models. If an insight cannot be traced to the source, a CFO cannot put it in front of a board.

Open access follows

Finance work is moving into the AI tools executives already use. If planning data can only be reached through one vendor's interface, the answer to an executive's question arrives late or never. A headless architecture exposes the planning layer through open standards, so the same governed numbers are available wherever the question is asked.

The Cube MCP Server is listed in Claude's Connectors Directory, so finance teams can query governed planning data from the AI tools they already work in.

Intelligence with defined roles

General-purpose assistants try to do everything. Finance needs specialists with clear responsibilities and clear boundaries, so each one can be tested, audited, and trusted for its specific job.

AGENT TEAM	WHAT IT DOES
The Data Managers Data layer, governance, reconciliation	Manage integrations, reconciliation, and data quality, and keep every figure traceable to the transaction. The foundation every other agent team depends on.
The Analysts Ad hoc analysis, anomaly detection	Handle ad hoc analysis, trend detection, and anomaly flagging. Turn complex questions into traceable answers.
The Planners Planning, forecasting, variance	Own budgets, forecasts, rolling plans, and variance tracking. Remove the manual reconciliation loop from the planning cycle.
The Business Partners Board decks, narratives, cross-functional	Build board materials and narratives and carry finance's view into the rest of the business.

Write-back needs controls

The Act stage is where risk concentrates. Changes that flow back into the plan or a system of record need approvals, an audit trail, and a way to reverse them. Start with recommendations that a human applies, then extend write-back to the narrow set of changes you trust the system to carry out.

CHAPTER 6

What to do in the next two quarters



Five moves for finance leaders, and a note for the advisors who help them.

You do not need to rebuild the finance function to start. You need one loop, run end to end, on a problem your leadership already cares about.

Five moves

1. **Pick the forecast miss as your first loop.** It touches every stage, every leader cares about it, and the baseline is easy to measure.
2. **Audit your data trace.** Pick ten figures from your last board deck and follow each to its transaction. The gaps you find are your Understand-stage roadmap.
3. **Set thresholds and owners.** Decide which variances should raise a flag, how early, and who receives it. A monitor with no owner is a dashboard.
4. **Write your approval rules.** List what the system may recommend, what it may change on its own, and what needs a named approver.
5. **Reshape the team's week.** Move analyst time from assembling extracts to testing briefs and challenging assumptions.

BEST PRACTICE

Measure the loop by the time between a signal appearing in the data and a decision being carried out. Shrinking that interval is the point of the whole exercise.

A note for advisors and partners

You know your clients' operating rhythms, politics, and constraints better than we do. What we can add is a view of where finance technology is heading, and a working loop to test it against. Finance leaders will start asking where their stack stands on agentic capability, what to prepare in their data, and which vendor claims hold up. The questions in this guide give you a shared vocabulary for those conversations, whether or not Cube is part of the answer.

“The next era of finance goes to the teams that close the gap between knowing and doing.”

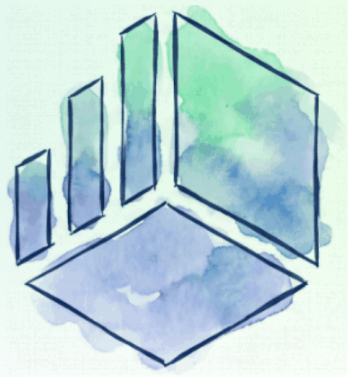
Ready to put this guide into practice?

See FP&Action in practice

The agentic FP&A platform that helps you tell the story behind the numbers. Founded by three-time CFO Christina Ross.

Learn more →

Or get a demo



We believe the future of business is finance-driven. Cube connects your business data into one governed model and brings it everywhere decisions happen.

How finance teams use Cube

Close and consolidation

Multi-entity rollups and a faster month-end.

Budgeting and planning

Budgets, headcount, and revenue plans.

Forecasting and scenarios

Rolling forecasts and what-ifs in minutes.

Reporting and board decks

Packs in Excel, Sheets, and slides.

Variance analysis

Drivers explained and traced to the GL.

KPIs and performance

One set of metrics for the business.

AI Agents: Your Always-On Digital Finance Team

Charlie, the superagent, routes work to four finance agent teams. People stay in control.

The Data Managers
Integrate and reconcile

The Analysts
Analyze and report

The Planners
Forecast and model

The Business Partners
Shape decisions