

TRANSFORM

Survey: CPG and Retail Finance Leaders Focused on Foundational Challenges

Protiviti's latest survey of finance executives at [retail](#) and [consumer goods](#) (CPG) companies shows a clear focus on technology-enabled financial planning and analysis (FP&A), and a growing need to address foundational challenges, including data standardization and FP&A processes, before embarking on advanced technology initiatives. The finance leaders face increased pressure to maximize their approach to technology, data, FP&A and stakeholder collaboration to help their companies navigate changing market demands and operational complexities.

In this year's survey, the finance leaders ranked financial planning and profitability analysis and reporting, strategic planning, routine reporting and closing activities, security and privacy of data, and process improvement as their top five priorities for the next 12 months. Cloud-based applications and internal customers' changing demands and expectations were No. 6 and No. 7, respectively.

Why it matters: Uncertainty looms large heading into the new year. Retailers and CPG companies must reevaluate their pricing strategies and inventory management to maintain a competitive edge. Utilizing real-time data analytics and strategic insights will be key. Furthermore, tackling crucial challenges such as grasping customer needs, standardizing data, and improving forecasting capabilities will become increasingly vital.

Top Priorities for CPG and Retail Finance Leaders

1. Financial planning and profitability analysis and reporting
2. Strategic planning
3. Routine reporting and closing activities
4. Security and privacy of data
5. Process improvement
6. Cloud-based applications
7. Changing demands and expectations of internal customers
8. Leadership (within your organization)
9. Tax changes
10. Enhanced data analytics

Navigating market uncertainties

In the United States, companies are bracing for a wave of uncertainty in the marketplace as they wait to see how policy proposals from the incoming Trump administration and a Republican-led Congress will take shape. For more on this topic, please read our report [Trump 2.0: Possible Winners and Losers](#).

Potential changes in tariffs and tax codes could significantly affect how retailers operate, price their products and maintain profitability. For instance, product and service price increases in response to tariff hikes would necessitate a strategic approach to inventory management. Businesses will need to model pricing changes effectively to mitigate risks and sustain profitability. They must also anticipate how these shifts will influence consumer spending patterns, which means that access to real-time data analytics and strategic insights will be even more critical.

Strategic planning starts with data visibility

For many retail and CPG companies, the immediate, No. 1 priority is improving data access, visibility and standardization to support accurate FP&A. The focus is less on deploying advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and more on laying the groundwork for reliable analytics and insights.

So many organizations are struggling to consolidate data from disparate sources, harmonize it and create a consistent framework for analytics. The lack of standardized, reliable data not only hinders day-to-day forecasting but also delays long-term strategic planning. Historical data patterns are critical for making informed decisions, particularly in areas like product pricing, profitability analysis and financial forecasting.

A good example of this is an equipment manufacturer working with Protiviti on a performance-improvement project. The company seeks to enhance visibility into the profitability of its dealer programs. The project involves consolidating data from various sources and systems, developing and standardizing it, and ensuring alignment to generate insights necessary for strategic decision-making around these programs.

AI strategies: Bridging the gap

Our survey also examined how finance departments in retail and CPG companies are leveraging generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Of those surveyed, 74% said they are employing GenAI for different functions, including:

- Process automation (58%)
- Financial forecasting (55%)
- Product or service pricing strategy (52%)
- Expense management (35%)
- Portfolio optimization (32%).

Notably, AI is ranked No. 15 among the highest priorities, indicating that some finance leaders are still trying to address the basic foundational components that support AI and advanced technologies: data access, accuracy and format, and the streamlining and standardization of the underlying processes.

Also, at many retail and CPG companies, conversations around AI often remain high-level, focusing on broad solutions that aim to address multiple large-scale use cases. In some cases, the push by AI providers for easy-button solutions overlooks the nuanced inefficiencies within business operations.

All this suggests the need for targeted technology-based solutions that address deeper inefficiencies beyond board-level discussions and a more hands-on approach to developing tailored automation and analytical solutions.

Cloud-based applications and financial collaboration

The survey shows that the adoption of cloud-based applications (the No. 6 priority) continues to grow among retail and CPG teams as they seek to integrate data and improve collaboration across departments. Last year, cloud-based applications were ranked No. 10 on the priority list.

It also shows that finance leaders are increasingly working alongside other departments, from supply chain to marketing to HR teams, to generate actionable insights that go beyond the numbers. These partnerships are essential for aligning financial strategies with broader organizational goals.

Data security and privacy, ESG, and leadership

Protecting data and systems from cyber threats remains paramount: According to the survey, it is the No. 4 priority. As organized crime increasingly targets supply chains, retailers and CPG companies recognize that robust cybersecurity measures are essential to safeguard operations.

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations remain a priority for finance leaders as regulatory pressures and stakeholder expectations grow. This will remain the case as consumers continue to show a strong preference for ethical brands.

Leadership development and talent acquisition

Building leadership pipelines and acquiring the right talent are critical challenges for retail and CPG companies. Boards are prioritizing leadership development (the No. 8 priority) to ensure business continuity and strengthen organizational resilience.

This is particularly critical for the finance function, which must include skilled professionals capable of managing data-harmonization efforts and establishing foundational analytics capabilities. Without this groundwork, companies will struggle to transition to more advanced technologies or strategies.

What's next?

The year ahead presents great uncertainty in the economic and regulatory environments. Improved data visibility, reliable historical trends and robust reporting frameworks will enable retail and CPG finance leaders to navigate the changes and position their organizations for sustainable growth.

Also, a thorough understanding of customer behavior and preferences is more important than ever for retailers. Here is the bottom line:

- Finance organizations will face heightened demands for data-driven insights to support strategic decision-making and respond to increased information requests internally.
- Recognizing the diversity in consumer financial situations and adapting strategies accordingly will be critical for success.
- When macroeconomic and policy environments are changing rapidly, getting control of the fundamentals of financial data management can be as important as adopting new technology.

To learn more, read our research report, *Transform: Assessing CFO and Finance Leader Perspectives and Priorities for the Coming Year*, available at www.protiviti.com/financesurvey.

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