

CFOs'



RISE



MORE AND MORE CFOs ARE BECOMING CEOs AS BUSINESSES OPT FOR FINANCIALLY GROUNDED LEADERSHIP. WHAT EXPLAINS THIS SHIFT? BY **MAMTA SHARMA**

TO THE TOP



SOURCE RUSSELL REYNOLDS ASSOCIATES ANALYSIS

**ZOOM
IN**

24% INDIA'S CFO TURNOVER IN 2024, UP SHARPLY FROM 15% IN 2023

22 OUTGOING CFOs, OF WHICH 11 MOVED TO NEW ROLES, INCLUDING CEO

45% OF THOSE WHO TOOK UP NEW ROLES STAYED IN THEIR COMPANIES

82% CFOs REPORT BROADENING OF RESPONSIBILITIES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, INCLUDING ESG, M&A, CORPORATE STRATEGY, AND ENTERPRISE CO-LEADERSHIP

ILLUSTRATION BY **RAHUL SHARMA**



► **P.B. BALAJI HAS** become the latest in a long list of chief financial officers (CFOs) rising to the office of chief executive officers (CEOs) at global companies, epitomising a trajectory that's becoming the norm in a world characterised by flux.

The 54-year-old Group CFO of Tata Motors Ltd has been named CEO of Jaguar Land Rover Ltd (JLR) effective November 17, 2025, making him the first Indian to rise to the top position at the British luxury automobile maker. An alumnus of Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, and Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, Balaji succeeds Adrian Mardell, who is retiring after a 35-year career at JLR, three of them as CEO.

Balaji, who previously worked at consumer goods giant Hindustan Unilever, brings financial discipline, strategic insights and boardroom credibility to JLR at a time the automaker is beset by challenges posed by US tariffs, a stalled transition to electric vehicles and pressure to reposition the brand.

Balaji's appointment also reflects a broader global trend: CFOs are increasingly stepping into top roles, capitalising on their perceived financial discipline and boardroom experience.

In 2023, 8.4% of vacant CEO positions in Fortune 500 and S&P 500 lists were filled by CFOs, the highest level since 2013, says CristKolder Associates, a corporate research group.

Closer home, a Russell Reynolds Associates' analysis of the top 100 BSE-listed companies, excluding the public sector, found that CFO turnover in 2024 surged to 24%, up sharply from 15% in 2023.

Of the 22 outgoing CFOs, 11 moved to new roles; the other half either retired or shifted to board-only

WORKPLACE • TRENDS

positions. Notably, among those who took up new roles, 45% stayed with their companies, transitioning to CEO or divisional CEO positions.

What is driving this phenomenon?

"Business models are evolving rapidly. Think subscription services, platform economies. New financial instruments are emerging, from venture debt to crowdfunding and tokenisation," says Abhijit Bhaduri, a global talent advisor.

Numbers back Bhaduri's observation. Research by Russell Reynolds Associates shows that in 2022, 33% of S&P 500 CFOs who changed jobs became CEOs, compared to 8.8% the year before.

Its recent Global CFO Turnover Index covering S&P 500, FTSE 100, and Euronext 100 reveals that of the outgoing CFOs taking on new roles in 2024, 34% moved to President or CEO roles, up from 20% in 2023.

Another 15% moved to divisional CEO positions, up from 11%, while 6% transitioned to chief operating officer (COO) roles, up from 5%. And about 15% took on other C-Suite positions in corporate strategy or risk oversight roles—slightly down from last year.

ACROSS INDUSTRIES, GEOGRAPHIES

The transition is visible across industries and geographies. In India, in 2024, Nalin Negi stepped up as CEO of BharatPe, Manoj Bhat took the helm at Mahindra Holidays & Resorts Ltd, and Shrikant Kanhere assumed the role of Deputy CEO at Adani Wilmar, now known as AWL Agri Business Ltd.

Sreedhar N. of Cie de Saint Gobain SA, who served as Group CFO until April 2025, has now taken over as Senior Vice President and CEO for Asia Pacific and India. Similar moves include Aditya Pande's at InterGlobe Enterprises Ltd, Sanjay Dwivedi's at Balaji Telefilms Ltd, and Ved Prakash Goel's at Dr Lal Path-

Labs Ltd's international business, among others.

This momentum is also evident in recent appointments at global companies. Yum! Brands Inc named Chris Turner, its Chief Financial and Franchise Officer, as CEO, effective October 1, 2025. Fernando Fernández was promoted from CFO to CEO of Unilever effective March 1, 2025, succeeding Hein Schumacher in a surprise leadership change aimed at accelerating a turnaround.

Christoph Jurecka is set to take over as CEO of Munich Reinsurance Company by the end of 2025, succeeding long-time chief Joachim Wenning. At Sony Group Corporation, Hiroki Totoki moved from a combined CFO/COO role to President and CEO on April 1, 2025, with unanimous board backing for his role in driving growth strategy and investment in intellectual property and semiconductors.

Nik Jhangiani, CFO at Diageo Plc, stepped in as interim CEO following Debra Crew's departure, while Jennifer Piepszak, currently CFO of JPMorgan Chase & Co., was appointed COO in June 2025 and is seen as a frontrunner to succeed Jamie Dimon as CEO in the coming years.

Another example is Gaurav Jain, CEO of AXA SA, who took over the top role after serving as CFO for more than five years.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

"In my entire career, I passed through various roles and responsibilities within the finance domain. Most of them were focused on financial numbers. But to become a CEO, the most important thing was when I started thinking and understanding beyond numbers," says Jain. He believes the real growth came from looking outward and engaging beyond finance. "You can't hide from managing relationships beyond your department. Effective communication, whether in managing investor relationships or engaging with the boardroom, is essential. Managing large banking relationships as a CFO is quite similar to managing investors as a CEO," he says.

Is that what makes CFOs favoured CEO candidates or is there more to it?

"Companies are seeking leaders who

Unconventional Paths to the top job

IMMERSIONS

Spend time on the ground in operations like sales, factory floors, and customer service to build empathy and grassroots insight

VOLUNTEER FOR CROSS-FUNCTIONAL PROJECTS

Take on or lead initiatives beyond finance (e.g. product launches, digital transformation); drive innovation from the inside out

"SHADOW" A CEO

Observe C-suite executives in action to learn how they communicate, handle crises, and inspire—then translate financial metrics into compelling narratives. A manufacturing CFO on a

climate non-profit board learns how to measure impact in stories, not just numbers

MAKE A CONNECTION

Connect with leaders in marketing, operations, HR, and even external experts. Let a 25-year-old explain Web3 or creator economies or social media activism

DIVERSE NETWORK BUILDING.

Rewire your understanding of influence and aspiration

MENTORING OUTSIDE FINANCE

Find mentors in sales, marketing, or product. Stay curious, learn continuously, and embrace new ideas



CFO to CEO India Transition 2024-2025



SREEDHAR N
SR VICE PRESIDENT,
CEO, SAINT-GOBAIN
ASIA PACIFIC AND
INDIA REGION



**SHRIKANT
KANHERE**
DEPUTY CEO & CFO,
AWL AGRI
BUSINESS LTD



MANOJ BHAT
CEO,
MAHINDRA
HOLIDAYS



**TANUSHREE
SHYAM BAGRODIA**
WHOLE-TIME
DIRECTOR AND COO,
UNIPARTS INDIA



P B BALAJI
CEO, JAGUAR
LAND ROVER

Global CFO to CEO Transitions 2024-2025



CHRIS TURNER
CEO, YUM! BRANDS
(EFFECTIVE OCT 1,
2025)



**FERNANDO
FERNÁNDEZ**
CEO, UNILEVER



**CHRISTOPH
JURECKA**
CEO, MUNICH RE
(BY END OF 2025)



**HIROKI
TOTOKI**
PRESIDENT & CEO,
SONY GROUP
CORPORATION



**NIK
JHANGIANI**
INTERIM CEO,
DIAGEO

NOTE ILLUSTRATIVE LIST

can unlock more shareholder value, and CFOs are perhaps best positioned to do that not just from a cost perspective, but also from a growth perspective,” says Vinita Katara, who co-leads the CFO practice for Russell Reynolds Associates in Asia.

Fuelling this shift is the fact that the CFOs’ role itself has expanded dramatically.

According to a global survey by Egon Zehnder, 82% of CFOs say their responsibilities have grown considerably in the last five years, taking them well beyond finance into areas such as strategy, operations, ESG, and digital transformation, making them increasingly ready for the CEO’s role. ESG is short for environmental, social, and governance.

Says Bhaduri: “Communication technology is

transforming how information flows within and outside organisations. And talent models are shifting with gig economy, remote work, and a growing focus on skills over roles.”

EXPANDING ROLE

The CFO’s role may have expanded dramatically in recent years but making the leap still demands a broader and more nuanced leadership toolkit. Egon Zehnder’s Super CFO survey reveals that 60% of CFOs aspire to become CEOs, and seven in 10 believe they are ready. Yet the path is not without hurdles; 46% cite networking and visibility as the big barriers.

Neetu Kashiramka, MD at VIP Industries, believes the financial lens provided her a strong foundation

for strategic decision-making. “A deep understanding of the P&L (profit and loss) statement, business drivers, capital allocation, and risk management is invaluable. Ultimately, an organisation works towards its P&L statement and balance sheet, and knowing exactly how these end deliverables are built is a significant advantage,” she says. The shift, however, required a different mindset. “I had to unlearn the instinct of default financial optimisation and instead prioritise long-term value creation,” she says.

The cultural shift was equally significant. As CFO, she was often a peer or trusted advisor. “As CEO, the dynamic changed—I became the final decision-maker. This required more intentional communication and a leadership style that empowered others rather than simply partnering with them.” She says understanding customer lifetime value or market innovation cycles is now as critical as monitoring earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation. “Finance leaders should help quantify the value of investments in research and development, customer experience, and sustainability. This requires a shift from post-mortem analysis to forward-looking, scenario-based thinking.”

Bhaduri says these shifts demand a wider skillset—one that modern CFOs are increasingly developing. They need the architect’s eye (strategic thinking) to see how every financial decision shapes the overall business strategy; the storyteller’s voice (communication and influence) to translate complex financial data into compelling narratives; the tech whisperer’s fluency (digital acumen) to leverage artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital tools for smarter decisions; and the people mover’s approach to lead with empathy, inspire teams, and foster accountability and innovation.

WHAT BOARDS LOOK FOR

When boards and search committees evaluate CFOs for the CEO role today, the conversation goes far beyond financial expertise. There is a clear emphasis on leadership.

SKILLS
FOR THE
JOB



FINANCIAL
DISCIPLINE



BOARDROOM
EXPERIENCE



STRATEGIC
INSIGHT



MANAGING
LARGE
BANKING
RELATIONSHIPS



FORWARD-
LOOKING
THINKING

“Boards are looking for some evidence of leadership beyond finance—this could mean oversight of ESG, driving operational efficiencies, or even leading and incubating a smaller business alongside the finance function,” says Katara.

Internally, pathways from CFO to CEO are gaining traction. CFOs who demonstrate strong business leadership competencies are often given expanded portfolios—combining CFO with COO responsibilities. There’s also a growing expectation for CFOs to harness technology. The rapid pace of AI adoption has altered what companies require from finance leaders. The ability to leverage AI for efficiencies and cost savings is no longer optional—it’s a critical competency.

UNCONVENTIONAL PATHS

Aspiring finance leaders can sharpen their readiness for the top job by stepping beyond the boundaries of their function and gaining a wider perspective of the business. Bhaduri says this begins with immersion—spending time in operational areas like sales, the factory floor, or customer service.

Some CFOs choose to become a “shadow CEO,” observing leaders up close to absorb their approach to communication, crisis management, and inspiration. It’s also about learning how to translate complex financial concepts into compelling narratives. Kashiramka stresses the importance of adopting a growth mindset: “The CFO path teaches precision and certainty, but leadership at the next level requires adaptability, humility, and the ability to navigate ambiguity. The sooner you embrace that shift, the more prepared you’ll be.”

Jain believes the biggest hurdle for CFOs aspiring to become CEO is overcoming perceptions. “The key challenge is the mindset of people first looking at you as the CFO, which means the ‘finance guy’ only,” he says.

Breaking that mould, Jain explains, begins with self-transformation: “This requires a change in yourself, or rather in the way you present yourself. Once you succeed in that, the journey ahead becomes much easier.” BT