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The Shortlist Series:
Succeeding in Private Equity.

What makes a standout Chief Financial Officer?

With 28 years of experience in recruiting executive and non-executive directors for PE-backed businesses, Directorbank supplemented team knowledge with opinion from its network of PE investors and high-achieving Board directors. We then paired this with Assessio's rigorous, science-backed approach to leadership assessment - including personality and work values questionnaires - to uncover the deeper personality traits, competencies and motivations behind standout candidates.

Assessio is a pioneer in evidence-based leadership assessment, combining decades of validated psychometrics with cutting-edge technology and deep business context.
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What makes a standout PE CFO?

Private equity moves fast, and it expects its CFOs to move faster. In PE-backed businesses, the CFO is rarely just a financial steward - they are a deal partner, the data room, a transformation engine, and often the person who determines whether an exit story holds together under scrutiny. Getting this hire right is one of the most consequential decisions a PE investor and their portfolio company management team will make. Getting it wrong threatens the value creation plan, trust and confidence, and eats into the window of time needed to deliver targets and prepare for exit.

So, what separates those CFOs who thrive in PE-backed environments from those who don't?

With 28 years of experience in recruiting Board level directors for PE-backed businesses across the UK and Germany, the team at Directorbank Executive Search supplemented their own knowledge with opinion from our network of PE investors and Board directors.

Here's a summary of the top 5 findings.

1/

They've traded comfort for pace.

CFOs who have spent their careers inside large corporates often arrive with deep technical expertise and impeccable process. What they often lack is the tolerance for ambiguity and the bias for speed that PE demands. The best PE CFOs have typically operated with lean teams, incomplete information and aggressive timelines … and they've learned to make good decisions anyway. They don't wait for perfect data. They act.

2/

They think like investors, not just operators.

The PE CFO understands what drives enterprise value. Not in theory, but in practice. They can walk into a room with the investor's deal team and speak fluently about EBITDA bridge, working capital normalisation, covenant headroom, and how exit multiple shifts under different scenarios. This isn't a peripheral skill. It's the job.

3/

They can build while they run.

Mid-market PE businesses rarely have the finance infrastructure of a listed company. The incoming CFO often needs to professionalise the function - implementing better reporting, tightening controls, upgrading systems - while simultaneously hitting targets and managing lender relationships. The candidates who thrive have done this before. They know what 'good enough for now' looks like, and they know when to push for more.

4/

They are credible both upwards and downwards.

Board and investor credibility is non-negotiable. But the best PE CFOs are equally effective and respected with operational teams who may have little patience for finance. They translate numbers into decisions. They build trust quickly, because in PE there often isn't the time to build it slowly.

5/

They have exit in their DNA.

Even if the exit is three or four years away, the best candidates are thinking about it from day one. They understand that every strategic decision, every acquisition, every reporting change will be scrutinised in a data room, eventually. They build accordingly.

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Personality Traits, Competencies and Role Requirements

Part strategist, part operator, wholly commercial - the standout PE CFO doesn't just report on the numbers, they shape the trajectory of the business. In a growth environment, they are the CEO's closest partner and the Board's most trusted voice on value creation.

But which competencies, skills, and personality traits set apart a standout CFO in a PE-backed environment?

To dive deeper, we paired 28 years of experience recruiting board-level directors for PE-backed businesses with Assessio's rigorous, science-backed approach to leadership assessment, including personality and work values questionnaires, to uncover the deeper traits and competencies behind high-achieving candidates.

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DEFINING PERSONALITY TRAITS

▶ Commercially hungry
Sees financial data as competitive intelligence - always connecting numbers to market position and growth opportunity.

▶ Influential communicator
Builds conviction in the boardroom and credibility across the business. Makes complex financials land with any audience.

▶ Creative under constraint
Finds innovative funding routes where others see dead ends - balancing ambition with financial discipline.

▶ Adaptable and resilient
Thrives in ambiguity. Recalibrates quickly as market dynamics shift, and keeps the team anchored on what matters.

▶ Disciplined guardian
Embeds financial rigour as a cultural value, not a policing function - elevating standards without slowing momentum.

▶ Systems thinker
Joins the dots across operations, tech, and people - designing controls and metrics that drive decisions, not just compliance.

CORE COMPETENCIES

Business acumen - Reads the competitive landscape and uses internal data to anticipate the consequences of decisions before they're made.

Strategic thinking - Translates trends into actionable financial roadmaps and connects daily execution back to long-term value creation targets.

Leading teams - Builds cohesive, high-performing finance functions; resolves tensions early and drives accountability without micromanagement.

Analytical thinking - Breaks down complex, data-sparse problems with rigour, and is comfortable with uncertainty and acting on imperfect information.

Influencing others - Earns buy-in through the quality of argument, not the weight of title; aligns stakeholders across the organisation, and with the PE investor.

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Planning and organising - Manages competing priorities at pace, ensuring the finance team delivers on both the immediate and strategic horizon simultaneously.

Technological mindset - Leverages modern finance tools, automation and data infrastructure to create scalable, insight-led reporting.

Building relationships - Cultivates a trusted network of lenders, advisers and industry contacts that become assets at critical junctures.

KEY ROLE REQUIREMENTS

Strategic financial milestones
A demonstrated record of hitting - and accelerating - revenue, margin and expansion targets ahead of schedule.

Innovative financing solutions
Track record securing creative debt and equity structures that fund growth while protecting stakeholder value.

Financial controls and metrics mastery
Builds robust KPI and control frameworks that give real-time visibility and keep strategy grounded in data.

Strategic financial partnership
Finance as a strategic function, not a back office - data-led guidance that shapes how the business allocates effort and capital.

Working capital management
Optimises liquidity across operations and growth, minimising debt facility reliance to protect PE returns.

Strategic growth co-development
Partners effectively with the CEO to author, execute and support growth strategy, not just finance it.

"The best PE CFOs don't wait to be asked. They arrive at the Board with a point of view on the business, not just a set of numbers - and they make growth feel both ambitious and credible."

If you're thinking about your leadership team or your personal career ambitions, we'd welcome a confidential conversation.

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CFO Remuneration Study 2026:
If you are interested in reading our latest CFO remuneration study, click here. This analyses CFO remuneration in the UK mid-market, drawing on information from 373 finance professionals across private equity-backed, privately owned and listed businesses.

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AssessioAI

AssessioAI is an innovative leadership assessment platform that equips organisations with the clarity and confidence needed to make smarter decisions in hiring, succession planning and leadership development. Combining decades of validated psychometrics with business context, the platform offers more data, sharper insight, and AI-driven guidance. Above all, it helps to decrease risk through improved hiring efficiency, reduced bias, and the greater likelihood of candidate success in a role.

AssessioAI is part of the Assessio Group.

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