A BRIEFING FOR GROWTH-STAGE FOUNDERS

The Finance Function for Founders Who Want to Run a Business, Not Manage Accountants

Why growing SMEs are overpaying and under-served by the traditional finance hiring model — and what an all-in-one finance partner can do instead.

INTRODUCTION

The middle-ground problem

Somewhere between $2M and $10M in revenue, the finance function for most growing SMEs gets stuck in an awkward middle ground. The bookkeeper who served the business at $500K and $1M revenue can no longer keep up with the complexity that is now emerging. The natural next move — hiring a controller, or a fractional CFO, or both — turns out to be more expensive, more fragmented, and more management-intensive than founders expect.

The numbers tell a familiar story. Hiring a controller in-house typically runs $120,000 to $180,000 per year, all-in. Adding a fractional CFO on top of an existing bookkeeper and tax accountant adds another $4,000 to $12,000 per month. Hiring a full-time CFO — the textbook answer — sits in the $200,000 to $350,000 range and is genuinely overkill for most SMEs at this stage. None of these figures are quotes; they are directional, and we revisit them throughout this document.

What founders end up with is a finance stack that costs more than it should, delivers less than it could, and quietly consumes their own time. The bookkeeper is reliable but operating at the edge of their scope. The controller is excellent but only covers a narrow slice. The fractional CFO is helpful but turns up for two days a month. The founder is the integration point — and the integration point is not where a founder should be spending their week.

The all-in-one finance function model exists to solve this. It is not the only good answer, and it is not the right answer for every business. But it is the most under-recognised option for SMEs in the $2M to $15M range, and the purpose of this document is to explain what it is, when it works, and when it does not.

What you will find in this document

- A walkthrough of the traditional finance hiring path and where it tends to break down.
- The hidden costs of fragmented finance — the ones that do not show up on the P&L.
- What the all-in-one model actually is, and how its economics work.
- A worked example comparing both paths for a representative growth-stage SME.
- An honest section on when the all-in-one model is *not* the right fit.
- A decision framework and an evaluation checklist you can use to assess any all-in-one partner.

The case we make here is not subtle. We believe the all-in-one model is the right answer more often than the market currently recognises. But credibility on that claim requires honesty about the cases where it is not — and the document spends real time on those too.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Disclaimer

ILLUSTRATIVE FIGURES AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY

This document uses illustrative examples and estimated cost figures only. All entity names, scenarios, and financial figures are fictional or directional. Cost ranges and savings figures are approximations intended to illustrate general market dynamics and should not be relied upon as quotes or precise benchmarks. This document is provided for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute professional accounting, financial, hiring, or HR advice. Consult your advisors for guidance on your specific situation.

THE STATUS QUO

The traditional path — what most founders actually do

Most growing SMEs build their finance function the same way: incrementally, role by role, as each new stage of complexity makes the last setup inadequate. The path is predictable, and so are the failure modes. The four stages below describe what we typically see.

01

STAGE 1 · $0–$2M REVENUE

Founder plus bookkeeper

The founder handles strategy, vendor questions, and anything that touches a decision. An external bookkeeper handles transactions, monthly close, and basic management reports. Typical cost: $400 to $2,500 per month, depending on volume and complexity.

What it covers well: day-to-day bookkeeping, payroll inputs, basic P&L and balance sheet, tax-ready records.

What it does not cover: technical accounting (revenue recognition, capitalisation policy), audit prep, board-level reporting, strategic finance. Most founders still spend five to ten hours per week on finance work themselves.

02

STAGE 2 · $1M–$3M REVENUE

Add a tax accountant

The business outgrows what the bookkeeper can handle on tax compliance, and a separate tax accountant joins the picture — typically a small local firm. Combined cost: $2,000 to $5,000 per month. The bookkeeper does the books; the tax accountant files the returns.

The limitation: there is still no senior accounting ownership. Questions that require judgement — how to treat a multi-element contract, when to capitalise software costs, how to structure intercompany flows — have no clear owner. The founder is the default decision-maker on technical accounting questions they were never trained to answer.

03

STAGE 3 · $3M–$10M REVENUE

Add a controller, a fractional CFO, or both

This is where the wheels typically come off. The business has outgrown the bookkeeper-plus-tax-accountant setup, but is not large enough to justify a full-time CFO. Four options present themselves, and most founders try at least two of them in sequence.

Option A — Fractional controller. Approximately $3,000 to $8,000 per month. Adds a review chain, technical accounting capability, and audit-prep capacity. Does not include strategic finance.

Option B — Fractional CFO. Approximately $4,000 to $12,000 per month. Adds strategic finance, board pack support, fundraise preparation, modelling. Does *not* replace the controller-level work; an experienced CFO will not close your books for you.

Option C — Both fractional roles. Combined monthly cost of $7,000 to $20,000. Full coverage on paper. Fragmented across two or three external vendors in practice.

Option D — In-house controller. $120,000 to $180,000 per year, all-in. Brings the function in-house but typically buys more capacity than the business needs at this stage.

The fragmentation problem. By Stage 3, the founder is managing two or three external finance relationships, each with their own scope, cadence, and definition of "done." The founder is the integration point — the person reconciling what the bookkeeper said with what the controller flagged with what the CFO recommended. This is where coordination overhead starts to dominate.

04

STAGE 4 · $10M–$15M+ REVENUE

Full-time CFO and team build-out

Eventually the business is large enough to justify a dedicated in-house finance function. A full-time CFO at $200,000 to $350,000 per year, plus a controller, plus an accountant or two. This is where the traditional path makes the most sense — the business genuinely needs the capacity, the strategic bandwidth, and the in-room presence of a senior finance leader.

The problem is not that the traditional path leads to a bad endpoint. The problem is the three to five years of fragmentation between Stage 2 and Stage 4, where most growth-stage SMEs spend their formative years.

ON THE COST FIGURES ABOVE

Cost figures shown are illustrative estimates only. Actual costs vary significantly by region, complexity, experience level, and specific engagement scope. These figures are intended to give a directional sense of order-of-magnitude differences and should not be used as quotes or benchmarks for hiring decisions.

The hidden costs of fragmented finance

The direct monthly cost of a fragmented finance stack is the part that founders see. It is also, in our experience, the smaller part of the total cost. The larger part is what fragmentation does to the founder's time, the quality of the work product, and the gaps that emerge between scopes. We list the six costs we see most often.

1. Communication overhead

Two or three external finance vendors means the founder is the integration point. Every cross-functional question routes through them: the bookkeeper asking how to classify a payment, the controller flagging a policy question, the fractional CFO wanting context on a contract. In a typical week we see founders spending three to five hours on finance-stack coordination — answering questions, reconciling inconsistent information, and managing handoffs.

The arithmetic is uncomfortable. At a $250 effective hourly rate, four hours per week across fifty weeks is roughly $50,000 per year in founder opportunity cost. That number does not appear on any invoice.

2. Duplicate work and inconsistent ownership

The bookkeeper closes the books. The controller reviews them. The CFO references them in the board pack. Three people touch the same numbers, on different cadences, with different workflows. Reconciling discrepancies between their outputs becomes a recurring task in its own right.

3. Quality inconsistency on occasional work

Bookkeeping is a steady cadence and tends to be solid. Controller-level work — technical memos, audit prep, policy documentation — is occasional. Each occasion is effectively a cold start: the controller has to re-familiarise themselves with the business, the bookkeeper has to pull supporting evidence, the founder has to brief everyone on context. Quality varies engagement to engagement.

4. No single point of accountability

When something goes wrong — a missed close, an audit finding, a misstated metric — finger-pointing between external vendors is the default response. The bookkeeper says the controller should have caught it; the controller says it was outside their scope; the CFO says they were not given the underlying data. The founder is left holding the bag, and usually fixing the issue themselves.

5. Hidden gaps between scopes

The most expensive failures in growth-stage finance are not the ones inside someone's scope — they are the ones *between* scopes. Revenue recognition policy that no one is responsible for documenting. Working capital that no one is actively optimising. Board reporting that is half-prepared by the bookkeeper and half-finished by the CFO and consistently late. These gaps are invisible until they are not, and when they surface they are usually expensive to fix.

6. Switching cost

Each external vendor relationship has its own onboarding tax. Changing any one provider — even if the others stay in place — triggers a cascade of re-onboarding, document re-sharing, and context-rebuilding across the rest of the stack. Founders we speak to often delay changing a provider they know is underperforming, specifically because the switching cost feels too high.

Fragmentation is the cost that compounds. None of the six items above show up as a line on the P&L — but together, they are typically the larger half of what a fragmented finance stack actually costs.

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THE ALTERNATIVE

The all-in-one finance function

The all-in-one finance function is not a new category of service — it is the integration of services that have historically been delivered separately. Done well, it replaces the bookkeeper, the controller, and the fractional CFO with a single firm operating under a single engagement.

What is included

- Bookkeeping and monthly close.
- Controllership: review chain, technical accounting, accounting policy documentation, audit preparation.
- Fractional CFO services: strategic finance, board reporting, financial modelling, cash and working capital management, investor support where relevant.
- One point of contact, typically a senior CPA principal supported by a small dedicated delivery team.
- One workflow: a unified close cycle, a single review chain, and integrated reporting.
- One fee: typically a single monthly retainer scaled to the stage and complexity of the business, with explicit add-ons for occasional work (a fundraise, an M&A diligence, a specific technical memo).

Who delivers it

The model is typically delivered by smaller, senior-led firms — not by large accounting firms (which price the model at Big Four rates for capacity they do not need to deploy) and not by pure offshore providers (which lack the senior credentialed oversight required for the controllership and CFO layers). The firms that get this right are usually owner-operated, CPA-led, and structured around the principal's review authority.

How the economics work

The all-in-one model is not magic. It is a structural answer to a structural problem — the same problem that drives every firm-of-record consolidation in professional services. The economics rest on three things.

First, scope integration. Bookkeeping, controllership, and fractional CFO services share a substantial amount of underlying work — the same data, the same close cycle, the same management reports. When delivered by one team, the duplicated effort across three separate vendors collapses into a single integrated workflow.

Second, senior leverage. A senior CPA principal does not need to spend their time closing the books. They need to spend their time on review, on technical judgement, and on the strategic finance work

that justifies their seniority. A well-structured delivery team handles the preparation work, and the principal's time is reserved for the work that requires it. This is the same model that every successful audit firm runs on.

Third, delivery-team economics. The senior delivery team that handles bookkeeping and controllership preparation can be located in a lower-cost geography — Karachi, Manila, Eastern Europe — while review and accountability remain with the senior onshore principal. The cost arbitrage is real, but it is genuinely arbitrage only when the senior oversight is genuinely senior. Pure offshore delivery without senior review is a different (and lower-quality) product.

Illustrative cost comparison

The table below shows the typical monthly cost dynamics across the most common configurations a growing SME might consider. The figures are directional and intended to illustrate order-of-magnitude differences, not to serve as quotes.

Approach	Typical monthly cost	What you get
Traditional: bookkeeper + tax accountant	$2,000–$5,000	Transactions and compliance. No strategic finance.
Traditional: bookkeeper + fractional controller	$4,000–$9,000	Transactions plus close ownership and technical accounting. Limited strategic finance.
Traditional: bookkeeper + controller + fractional CFO	$7,000–$15,000	Full coverage on paper. Fragmented across two to three vendors in practice.
All-in-one finance partner	**$3,500–$9,000**	Bookkeeping, controllership, and fractional CFO under a single engagement.

> **ON THE COST FIGURES ABOVE**
>
> *These are illustrative estimates only. Actual costs vary significantly by region, complexity, and engagement scope. The table is meant to show order-of-magnitude differences in cost dynamics, not to function as a benchmark for any specific business. Use it as a directional reference, not a quote.*

The point of the comparison is not that the all-in-one model is always cheaper — sometimes it is, sometimes it is comparable in dollar cost. The point is that for similar or lower direct cost, the founder gets a unified workflow, a single point of accountability, and the strategic finance layer baked in rather than bolted on.

WORKED EXAMPLE

XYZ Inc. — two paths over three years

The scenario below traces a fictional company through the same three-year growth period under both finance models. It is illustrative; it is not a benchmark and should not be read as a prediction for any specific business.

> THE BUSINESS
>
> **XYZ Inc., a Shopify-based DTC apparel brand**
>
> Approximately four years old, multi-channel (own Shopify site plus marketplaces), currently at $5M annual revenue and roughly break-even on profitability. The founder is the only operator and the only decision-maker. The business is profitable enough to self-fund growth and is not pursuing outside investment.

Path A — the traditional finance stack

Year	Revenue	Finance stack	Monthly cost
Year 1	$1M	Bookkeeper $1,200 + tax accountant $400	$1,600
Year 2	$3M	Bookkeeper $2,000 + tax accountant $500 + ad-hoc controller help $1,500	$4,000
Year 3	$5M	Bookkeeper $2,500 + tax accountant $700 + fractional controller $4,500 + occasional CFO consulting $1,500	$9,200

Plus the unbilled cost: the founder spends four to six hours per week managing the finance stack — answering questions, reconciling outputs, chasing follow-ups. At a $250 effective hourly rate, this is approximately $50,000 per year in founder opportunity cost not captured by the table above.

What broke along the way. By the end of Year 3, several things had gone wrong in ways that are typical for this stage:

- Revenue recognition policy was never properly documented. The first conversation about ASC 606 happened during audit prep, not before.
- Audit-readiness work took roughly four months of cleanup before the auditor could begin meaningful procedures.
- The monthly board pack was consistently late and frequently incomplete, with the strategic narrative pulled together by the founder in the final 48 hours.

- Two month-end closes contained errors that were caught after the books had been distributed, requiring republication and explanation.

Path B — the all-in-one finance partner

Year	Revenue	Engagement scope	Monthly cost
Year 1	$1M	All-in-one engagement, bookkeeping tier	$1,500
Year 2	$3M	Scaled to add controllership scope	$3,500
Year 3	$5M	Full controllership plus fractional CFO	$7,000

Founder time: approximately one hour per week, almost entirely in scheduled review meetings rather than ad-hoc coordination.

Side-by-side, Year 3

Dimension	Traditional stack	All-in-one partner
Direct monthly cost	$9,200	$7,000
Founder time on finance management	4–6 hours per week	~1 hour per week
Coordination overhead	Three external relationships	One engagement, one point of contact
Strategic finance	Occasional consulting, ad hoc	Built into the engagement
Quality consistency	Solid bookkeeping; controller and CFO work uneven	Single team, single workflow, consistent cadence
Audit readiness	4 months of cleanup	Maintained on an ongoing basis

> **ON THE FIGURES IN THIS SCENARIO**
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> *Every number in this worked example is illustrative and directional. Actual cost outcomes vary significantly by the specific business, geography, and engagement scope. The scenario is intended to illustrate the order-of-magnitude dynamics between the two paths, not to serve as a benchmark or prediction.*

The point of the comparison is not that Path B is dramatically cheaper in dollar terms — it is somewhat cheaper, but well within the range where two competently-run stacks could land in either direction. The point is that for similar or lower direct cost, Path B eliminates the founder time tax, removes the

coordination overhead, and builds strategic finance and audit readiness into the operating rhythm rather than treating them as special projects.

THE HONEST SECTION

When the all-in-one model is *not* the right fit

The all-in-one model is the most under-recognised option for SMEs in the $2M to $15M range. It is not the right option for every business, and the cases below are where we tell prospective clients that something else makes more sense. Naming them is not a marketing exercise — it is the foundation of why the positioning is credible in the first place.

The model is overkill

Very early stage. Below roughly $500,000 in revenue, an all-in-one finance partner is usually overkill. A competent bookkeeper plus a tax accountant covers the genuine need. There is not yet enough complexity to justify the controllership and CFO layers, and paying for capacity that goes unused is wasteful.

The model is the wrong shape

Highly specialised regulatory needs. Some industries require specialist finance and accounting capability that a generalist all-in-one firm typically does not carry on staff. Registered investment advisors, healthcare businesses with complex third-party billing, government contractors with cost-accounting standards exposure — these benefit from specialists rather than generalists. An all-in-one firm may complement a specialist in those settings, but it does not replace one.

Specific tax-jurisdiction depth. If your tax position requires deep practitioner-level expertise in a specific jurisdiction — UK tax, a particular US state with unusual nexus rules, a non-trivial international structure — the all-in-one firm is usually not the right substitute for local tax counsel. The all-in-one firm covers the accounting; the local specialist covers the tax filing.

Crisis or turnaround situations. Distressed businesses or active turnarounds often need a CFO with specific restructuring experience and the ability to be in the operator's seat day-to-day. This is a different product from the all-in-one model. A turnaround CFO is the right call here.

The founder wants something the model cannot provide

Heavy in-house finance culture. Some founders want their finance lead in the room for every strategic meeting, every commercial negotiation, every product review. A full-time in-house CFO is the right answer for that — the all-in-one model provides senior partnership, not full presence.

Equity participation expectations. Some senior CFO candidates expect meaningful equity participation as part of joining a growing business. Fractional engagements do not typically include equity. If you are recruiting a CFO specifically to give them ownership in the business, hire one.

The business has outgrown the model

Above $15M to $20M revenue with multi-entity complexity. At some scale, an in-house finance team becomes the more efficient answer. The exact threshold varies — an asset-light services business can stay on an all-in-one model longer than a multi-entity, multi-currency manufacturing operation — but the principle is universal: there is a size at which the in-house function pays for itself in capacity alone.

Where the model fits best

The all-in-one model is the strongest fit for growing, healthy SMEs in roughly the $2M to $15M range, with multi-jurisdictional or moderately complex operations, that need senior finance partnership without the cost or commitment of a full-time hire. If that describes the business, the model is worth a serious conversation.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

A three-question decision framework

The decision to move to an all-in-one model is rarely about a single factor. The three questions below cover the dimensions that matter most. They are designed to be answered in five minutes, not to replace a serious evaluation conversation.

QUESTION 01

Are you in the $2M to $15M revenue band with complexity that has outgrown what a bookkeeper can handle?

- → **Yes** — the all-in-one model is worth evaluating. This is the band the model is designed for.
- → **No, smaller** — a competent bookkeeper plus tax accountant is likely sufficient for now. Revisit when complexity rises.
- → **No, larger** — an in-house finance function is likely the more efficient answer at your scale.

QUESTION 02

Do you spend more than three to four hours per week managing finance vendors, reviewing books, or chasing follow-ups?

- → **Yes** — fragmentation is already costing you real money in founder opportunity cost. Consolidation will pay back quickly.
- → **No** — the current setup may genuinely be working. The case for change is weaker on operational grounds.

QUESTION 03

Have you been frustrated by gaps — revenue recognition, audit prep, board reporting, working capital — that fall between your bookkeeper's scope and what you would expect from a CFO?

- → **Yes** — these are exactly the gaps an integrated model is designed to close. The case is strong.
- → **No** — integration may not be the urgent need yet. The current setup is closer to working than it might feel.

Yes to two or more of the three questions is, in our experience, the threshold at which a serious all-in-one conversation is worth having. Yes to one is worth a watching brief; no to all three suggests the current setup is fine.

DUE DILIGENCE

What to look for in an all-in-one finance partner

If you have decided the model is worth evaluating, the next question is how to tell a good all-in-one firm from a mediocre one. The market has a wide quality range — the term "all-in-one finance" covers everything from credentialed CPA-led practices to pure offshore bookkeeping shops with marketing teams. The checklist below is the one we would apply ourselves.

- ✓ **Credentialed leadership.** The principal should be a CPA, ACCA, CMA, or equivalent. "Experienced accountant" is not a credential. Ask who signs off on technical accounting positions and what their qualification is.
- ✓ **Documented review chain.** Every deliverable — close, memo, board pack, audit-prep file — should be reviewed by a senior credentialed staff member before it leaves the firm. Ask to see the review workflow.
- ✓ **Transparent pricing.** A single monthly fee with clearly defined scope, and explicit change-order discipline when scope expands. If the proposal is opaque or the change-order policy is vague, that opacity will compound over time.
- ✓ **Honest about delivery economics.** If the firm operates with offshore delivery and senior onshore review, they should say so plainly — that is the structure that makes the economics work. Firms that are coy about where the work happens are usually hiding something.
- ✓ **Industry experience in your vertical.** SaaS revenue recognition is different from DTC inventory accounting is different from professional services WIP. Ask for specific examples of work done in your vertical, not just claims.
- ✓ **Tooling alignment.** The firm should be fluent in your accounting platform (QuickBooks, Xero, NetSuite, Sage), your billing system, your reporting tools, and any audit-readiness software you use. Switching cost is real; tool alignment minimises it.
- ✓ **Stated communication cadence and SLA.** When is the close completed? When is the board pack ready? What is the response time on an ad-hoc question? These should be in the engagement letter, not a verbal expectation.
- ✓ **Professional indemnity insurance.** The firm should carry it, and should be willing to disclose the coverage limit. This is table stakes for any credentialed firm; firms that decline to share are a red flag.
- ✓ **Sub-processor and data-residency disclosure.** Where does the data live? Which jurisdictions process it? Which staff have access? If your business has any data-protection sensitivity (GDPR, sectoral rules, customer contractual obligations), this matters.

- ✓ **Willingness to decline work outside their capability.** The most reliable signal of a serious firm is what they say no to. A firm that promises full coverage of every conceivable specialist need is overpromising; one that names the boundary clearly and tells you where to look outside it is the one to trust.
- ✓ **Real client conversation available.** Not just a case study or a testimonial pulled from a sales deck — a referenceable client willing to take a 20-minute call. The willingness of clients to do this is a leading indicator of quality.

IN CLOSING

The case, restated

The case we have made in this document is straightforward. For growing SMEs in the $2M to $15M revenue range, the traditional finance hiring path — bookkeeper, then tax accountant, then fractional controller, then fractional CFO — produces a stack that is more expensive, more fragmented, and more management-intensive than founders realise until they are inside it. The all-in-one model exists to replace that stack with a single integrated engagement, delivered by a senior-led firm with the right team structure underneath.

The model is not new and is not universal. It is the wrong answer for businesses below $500,000 in revenue, for businesses with highly specialised regulatory exposure, for businesses in active turnaround, and for businesses large enough to justify a full in-house finance function. The honest framing of where the model does not fit is what allows the framing of where it does fit to mean anything.

Where it does fit — the healthy, growing SME in the middle band, with moderate complexity and an operator-founder whose time is better spent on the business than on the finance stack — we believe it is the most under-recognised option in the market. The purpose of this document is to make that option visible.

What to do next

Two practical suggestions. First, run the three-question decision framework against your own business. If you answer yes to two or more, the model is worth a serious evaluation. Second, if you do evaluate it, use the checklist on the previous page. The quality range in this market is wide, and the checklist is designed to surface the differences quickly.

Whichever path you choose, the goal is the same: a finance function that does its job without consuming yours.

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