
TALKING HEAD

VALERIE RAINEY, CFO, INTTRA



Prior to joining INTTRA, Valerie was Director of Finance at Pitney Bowes in their International Mail Services division, where she reorganised the finance team and drove financial focus and accountability throughout the organisation. Before that, she held roles at the AICPA and Ernst and Young.

“Over the course of my career, I have certainly seen finance become more strategic. And as part of that trend, I think it’s been important to battle the perception of finance as being ‘overhead’ and not a strategic function.

Now, the emphasis is on looking more to the future and playing a strategic role through the use of futuristic projections. That of course includes providing financial data to support the business owners to make good decisions.

And that trend has, in my view, largely been driven by the desire of individuals coming into the profession to do more beyond traditional finance roles. I also think, at least here in the US, that we have had to work to raise the awareness of what the finance function could be. That has meant working both with accountants to develop their skills, but also with business leaders to underline the value that the accounting profession creates.

At INTTRA, we in finance support the business units. In return, those units know that they are expected to work with us. And if you can align finance around certain business units and make it crystal clear where you want to support them, you can really start to give good financial insight to the leaders in those business units.

And our approach to developing a business partnering strategy is simple. Just this year, we started to create financials for our different business and product lines, and we set up monthly meetings with the business owners to go through and analyse their financials in a digestible way. It was very enlightening to the business teams because they had never seen the data presented that way.

And that allowed them to get a true picture of the profitability of their product: They were able to see what they were spending on R&D, what the maintenance costs were, what it cost to go out to the market and drive adoption, for instance. As a result it really got people very ‘laser-focused’ on improving performance. And as a result of that, we saw products that weren’t profitable becoming profitable, and profitable ones becoming more so.

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Thankfully, the leaders of the business units are receptive to our approach. In fact, I believe this is what they want from finance: they want to understand their profitability and the factors that drive performance. And of course, nobody wants to have the least profitable product, so it’s actually very healthy, in that it creates a little bit of competition.

And finance can only do that if it’s independent. And it is important to say that the CFO is the guiding light on the issue of independence. It is an absolutely central part of my job. So for example, when we started to report directly on lines of business and sales costs and so on, people started to lobby my vote to allocate costs differently to this or that line of business to make their own look more profitable.

That is exactly what you have to guard against: you need an independent objective voice to say; ‘No, this is the way the costs should be allocated and here’s why’.

If the CFO fails to do that, there is a danger they can become a pawn in the game. So you need a strong leader at the top of finance to stop that happening.

Of course you need the right people to support this vision of a 'value-added finance function', so we look for strong accountants first and foremost. Once we have found them, we then look to develop them and broaden their skills base.

And there is another element of this that needs to be recognised: Within every profession, not just accounting, you are going to have certain people that are going to be your strong technical people and they're going to rise to a particular level and not move beyond that.

And then there are those that rise to the top because they are able to do both parts – demonstrate sound technical skills as well as having the interpersonal and management skills.

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As CFO, I spend a lot of time on developing my people and equipping them with a range of skills because I think it is important. I also do it because it's what I did in my own career. I didn't take the traditional route to CFO. In fact I spent half of my career running business units marketing, operations and so on.

And I honestly believe that because I walked in the business owners' shoes, I remember what I wanted from my CFO at the time, and as a result it helped me understand where both sides are coming from."