Behavioural and Fit Questions (Corporate Finance / FP&A)

Interview preparation summary · FP track

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INT.FB.1.a · Motivation, company fit and answer structure

Explain why corporate finance or FP&A rather than banking or audit, using one or two reasons about the work itself, one piece of your own evidence and an honest trade-off.

Why corporate finance or FP&A is usually asked early because it shows whether you understand the job and are likely to stay interested in it. Finance teams inside a company build the budget and forecasts, explain variances, support investment cases and manage cash, and they do it for one business over many years, close to the people who run it. A weak answer lists traits that fit any finance career, such as being good with numbers or wanting stability, or it spends its time criticising banking and audit. A strong answer names a part of the work that appeals, backs it with something you have actually done, and says what you want more of rather than what you want to avoid. Be honest about trade-offs: practice varies by employer, the learning may be narrower than in a practice that serves many clients, and you should say what you want to learn first. The usual mistake is a memorised speech that collapses at the first follow-up question.

WORKED EXAMPLE: TURNING A SOCIETY BUDGET INTO A WHY-FP&A ANSWER

Priya Anand is an invented candidate. Her first draft says she likes numbers and wants a stable career. She was treasurer of a university drama society. Its spending budget for the year was 6,400 and actual spending was 7,072. Venue hire was budgeted at 1,800 and cost 2,320. Costumes were budgeted at 900 and cost 1,052. Every other line was on budget. She explained the overspend to the committee and rewrote next year's venue line using a written quote. Turn this into a short why-FP&A answer with one number she can say aloud.

Answer: Overspend 672, or 10.5% of budget, of which 520 (77.4%) was venue hire. Spoken version: I want to work in FP&A because I enjoy the loop of comparing a plan with what happened, finding the one or two lines that explain the gap and telling the owner. As society treasurer I found we were 672 over a 6,400 budget, 10.5%, and that venue hire explained 520 of it. I told the committee and we rewrote the venue line from a written quote. I would like to learn the whole close and reporting cycle in one business first.

> **Interview tip:** Give one number from your own experience and be ready for the next question: what did you change afterwards? If you cannot answer that, choose a different example.

INT.FB.1.b · Motivation, company fit and answer structure

Build a why-this-company-and-industry answer from three or four published facts, say what each fact does and does not prove, and link it to the finance work you want to do.

Why this company is the question where preparation shows. Use public sources: the annual report and results presentation, the careers page, the graduate programme description and anything staff told you. Look for facts that bear on finance work: how revenue splits by segment, whether sales and margins are growing, how much is spent on capital projects, how seasonal or commodity-driven the costs are, and how the programme rotates trainees. Then say what each fact implies for the finance team. A manufacturer with volatile input costs makes forecasting and pricing interesting, a retailer with seasonal stock makes cash and working capital interesting, and a software company with subscriptions makes revenue timing interesting. Separate fact from inference: the report says growth was 7.7%, you infer that planning must handle fast change, and you want to ask whether that is right. Do not claim to have read what you have not, do not repeat the strapline, and do not praise the brand without a link to the job. The usual mistake is a list of facts with no implication, or flattery with no evidence.

WORKED EXAMPLE: THREE PUBLISHED FACTS AND WHAT THEY IMPLY FOR FINANCE

Marcus Tan is an invented candidate applying to the graduate programme at Brackenfield Foods, an invented food manufacturer. From its annual report he notes: revenue 840m, up from 780m; segments bakery 504m, snacks 210m and frozen 126m; operating profit 67.2m; capital spending 33.6m. The programme has four six-month placements. His draft says only that Brackenfield is a well-known name. Build a credible answer from the facts.

Answer: Growth 7.7%, bakery 60.0% of revenue, operating margin 8.0%, capital spending 4.0% of revenue. Spoken version: Brackenfield grew revenue 7.7% to 840m and bakery is 60% of it, so I would expect finance to spend a lot of effort on price, volume and mix in one segment. A margin of 8% means small cost movements matter, which is the kind of analysis I want to do. I do not know what drove the growth, and I would like to ask.

> **Interview tip:** Say what you read, what you infer from it and what you would like to ask. That order makes it hard to catch you out.

INT.FB.1.c · Motivation, company fit and answer structure

Structure a behavioural answer in about two minutes with a short situation, your own actions and a measured result, and close an interview with two questions that show real curiosity about the work.

Most behavioural questions begin with tell me about a time. A simple structure is situation, task, action, result and what you learned. Keep the situation and task to about a fifth of the answer, spend about half on what you personally did, give a result with a number, and end with a short reflection. At a normal speaking pace of roughly 130 to 150 words a minute, two minutes is about 260 to 300 words, so a long set-up leaves no room for the action. Use I for your own work and we for the team, and be ready for the follow-up, because interviewers probe what you did and what you would change. At the end you will usually be asked what questions you have. Ask about the work, such as how the forecast is used or what a good first six months looks like, not about pay or things on the website. The usual mistakes are an all-we story, no result, a result you cannot measure and a story with no reflection.

WORKED EXAMPLE: FITTING A WEEKEND-JOB STORY INTO TWO MINUTES

Leila Rahman is an invented candidate. At a weekend job in a garden centre she built a spreadsheet that compared the till takings with the stock list for each week. The weekly stock check used to take 3.0 hours and after her change it took 1.8 hours. She worked about 40 weeks a year. She wants to tell this in two minutes at 140 words a minute. Split the answer and compute the headline result.

Answer: The check fell from 3.0 to 1.8 hours, a 40% cut, worth about 48 hours a year, in a 280-word answer split 56, 140, 56 and 28. Spoken version: I cut a weekly stock check from 3.0 hours to 1.8, which is 40%, by building a sheet that compared till takings with the stock list.

> **Interview tip:** Time yourself once out loud. Most people discover their situation takes a minute and the action gets 20 seconds.

INT.FB.2.a · Working with others under pressure

Describe how you work with sales, operations or product colleagues: ask what decision they face, run a quick analysis in their units and agree a next step, including when the answer is no.

Finance business partnering means helping non-finance colleagues make better decisions, not policing them and not simply producing what is asked. Interviewers ask for an example of explaining numbers to a non-specialist, or how you would answer a discount or purchase request. A strong answer starts by asking what decision the person faces and what they are trying to achieve. It then runs a quick analysis in their units, such as extra volume needed, days of sales or payback, rather than in accounting terms. It shows the assumption that matters most, offers an alternative if the first idea does not work, and agrees who does what next. Good partners say no with evidence and early, and they do not hide behind jargon or send a model nobody can read. The usual mistakes are acting as a gatekeeper who only says no, acting as an order-taker who never questions the request, and presenting a result without saying what would change it.

WORKED EXAMPLE: A QUICK ANALYSIS FOR A SALES MANAGER

A sales manager asks for a 10% discount on a product. The list price is 50, the variable cost is 30 and about 12,000 units are sold a year. Ignore fixed costs and assume the unit cost does not change. How much extra volume is needed to keep total contribution the same, and what would you say aloud?

Answer: A 10% discount cuts unit contribution from 20 to 15 and needs 16,000 units, 33.3% more than 12,000, to earn the same 240,000. Spoken version: a 10% price cut needs a third more volume just to stand still. How confident are we in that volume? If it is not likely, here are two other options.

Interview tip: State the single number that matters, then ask a question that moves the decision on. Do not leave it at no.

INT.FB.2.b · Working with others under pressure

Explain how you prioritise, check and communicate when a deadline such as month-end close is at risk, without trading away accuracy or hiding the problem.

Finance work runs to a calendar: month-end close, quarterly forecasts, the annual budget round. Interviewers ask about deadlines and pressure to see whether you plan, prioritise and speak up. Month-end close typically works to a timetable of several working days in which accruals, reconciliations, journals, reviews and variance commentary must be finished in order, so a late early task delays everything after it. A strong answer lists the tasks with time estimates, orders them by dependency and risk, does the items that block others first, keeps the checks that catch large errors, and tells the manager as soon as the plan no longer fits, with the options. Typical checks include agreeing balances to control totals, comparing to last month and looking again at anything that moves by more than a threshold. Do not say you never miss a deadline. Interviewers prefer a candidate who raises a risk early and says what was dropped and why. The usual mistake is silently cutting a check to save time or saying nothing until the deadline has passed.

WORKED EXAMPLE: A CLOSE PLAN THAT IS TWO HOURS SHORT

An invented analyst has five working days for a month-end close and can do 6 productive hours a day. The tasks are bank reconciliations 6 hours, accruals 8, payroll journals 3, intercompany matching 5, fixed asset schedule 4 and variance commentary 6. Intercompany matching cannot start until the payroll journals are posted. Decide what to do and what to say.

Answer: Work 32 hours against 30 available, a gap of 2 hours or 6.7%. Spoken version: I would flag on day one that the plan is 2 hours over, protect the reconciliations and accruals, and trim the commentary to the largest movements, if my manager agrees.

Interview tip: Show that you would raise it early and keep the checks. Interviewers listen for what you protect.

INT.FB.2.c · Working with others under pressure

Handle a stakeholder who pressures you to present numbers favourably by checking the facts, stating the principle calmly, offering a legitimate alternative and knowing when to escalate.

Ethics and difficult-stakeholder questions test judgement. A typical prompt is that a manager asks you to move a cost, soften a forecast or leave out a bad number. Strong answers follow an order. First check the facts and assume there may be an innocent reason, because you may be missing information. Then state the principle without accusing anyone: costs and revenue belong in the period when the work is done or the goods are delivered, forecasts should reflect the best evidence, and users of the numbers rely on them being accurate. Explain the effect in the stakeholder's terms and offer a legitimate alternative, such as showing the timing explanation clearly or presenting a labelled adjusted view. If the person still insists, say that you would raise it with your line manager or the finance controller, and that firms typically have a policy or a confidential route for concerns. Do not simply comply, do not go over their head before speaking to them, and do not make threats. The usual mistakes are sounding self-righteous, or being so vague that you never say what you would do.

WORKED EXAMPLE: A REQUEST TO MOVE A COST INTO NEXT MONTH

An invented operations head asks an analyst to book a maintenance invoice of 120,000 in April, although the work was finished in March. The March spending budget is 2.00m and spending including the invoice is 2.05m. The April budget has a 120,000 maintenance line that is otherwise unused. Work out the effect and plan the conversation.

Answer: March spend is 50,000 or 2.5% over with the invoice and 70,000 under without it, and the invoice is 5.9% of spend. Spoken version: I would check the facts, explain that the cost belongs in March, show the timing clearly, and escalate to my manager if it was still requested.

> **Interview tip:** Say what you would do first, second and third. Do not sound shocked, and do not offer to look the other way.

Summary of the Charta interview-preparation topic. Companies and figures in the examples are invented. Draft content, not yet expert reviewed.