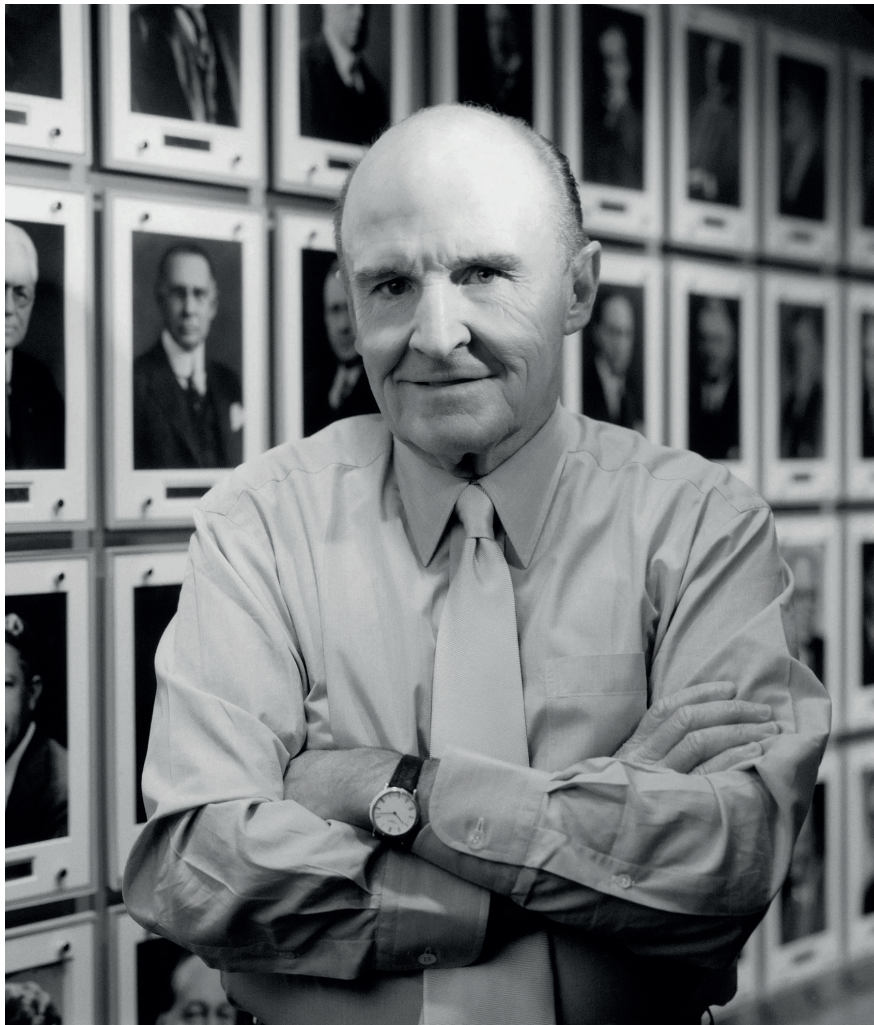


# Resistance to Change in the Office of the CFO

Written By Jonathan Lee



“Change before you have to.”

- Jack Welch

# Resistance to Change in the Office of the CFO

Are you as open to change as Jack Welch? I worked with a guy once. He was also called Jack, but not nearly as adaptable as Welch. I won't name the company, but Jack had worked in the finance department for coming up on a decade. He was good at his job, the kind of detail-oriented triple checker that any CFO wants in their team. Jack had ambitions for climbing the ladder, but he also had his routines. He knew how things worked and liked them that way.

If there's one thing we can say for sure about business in the modern day, it's that things won't stay the way they are for long. The pace of change is only getting faster. And that's how it was for us: eventually the finance department we worked for wanted to automate. When change came for Jack, he was resistant.

I remember him, one rain-slicked night in Soho, proclaiming over post-work pints: 'Change only makes things more complicated – it's rare it actually makes things better.' He wasn't alone in his scepticism. Many of our colleagues shared the same concerns.

Finance professionals like Jack aren't unique in their hesitation. Across industries, finance teams are known for their precision, attention to detail, and reliance on structured processes. This very mindset, while essential for ensuring accuracy and compliance, can also make them resistant to change. For some, the introduction of new technology, process updates, or shifts in corporate strategy can feel more like an unnecessary disruption than an opportunity for growth.

From automation and artificial intelligence to shifting regulatory requirements, the world of finance is transforming rapidly. In the fast-evolving business landscape of the day, resisting change can have serious consequences. Those that fail to adapt risk falling behind, while those that embrace change can unlock new levels of efficiency, accuracy, and strategic insight. As Jack found, it can even make a job simpler.

## Understanding the Root of Resistance: Why Change Feels Risky to Finance

Jack had built his career on a foundation of reliability. He knew every formula in his spreadsheets by heart, and his familiarity with the company's financial processes made him an indispensable member of the team. Every transaction, every balance sheet, every audit followed a carefully crafted workflow that had been refined over time. It was a system that worked—so why change it?

The truth is resistance to change often stems from a desire for stability. Finance professionals, in particular, operate in a world where accuracy is paramount. Even the slightest deviation from established methods can introduce risks, errors, or compliance issues.

## **The Fear Factor: Concerns About Job Security and Skill Obsolescence**

Jack's reluctance wasn't just about learning a new tool. It was also about preserving the sense of control and certainty he had worked so hard to build. There were also worries among our colleagues, whispered in quiet corners of the office, that automation would put our jobs at risk – or maybe flat-out replace staff.

That worry is not uncommon. There's a lot of talk these days about artificial intelligence taking up human jobs, but the reality is that what really happens is more like a shift to flexible, more human-oriented work. The rote, mechanical (or should I say robotic) part of the job: the filing and inputting of invoices for example, can be given up, but machines can't do everything.

Human finance professionals are needed now more than ever to make sense of the advanced reporting and data collection that automation provides – ultimately more rewarding work than day-in-day-out fiddling with paperwork.

From the comfort of a routine, change looks like a risk. But what if resistance to change was actually the biggest risk of all? New technology wasn't coming for Jack's job, but someone that knew how to harness it was.

## **Legacy Systems Loyalty: When Familiarity Becomes a Barrier to Progress**

There were also concerns in the office that new systems would disrupt carefully maintained workflows, and that they would be left struggling to adapt while the CFOs expectations remained high. These concerns are not unfounded. Change, especially in finance, comes with growing pains.

Years of leading businesses through automation has shown me that clinging too tightly to old ways leaves you vulnerable to inefficiencies, errors, and missed opportunities. I think that's what Jack Welch was getting at. My old colleague Jack had to figure that out the hard way.

As weeks passed, frustration within the finance department grew. The automated system had been implemented, but few were actively using it. Jack and a couple of our other colleagues continued to rely on their traditional methods, convinced that they were more reliable than the new software.

Within a few weeks, newer, more junior team members who had adopted the automated tech were flying through work stress-free. They were working less overtime and producing better results. One of them even used their newfound time to save the company a sizable chunk of cash, and saw part of the savings put back in her pocket as a bonus.

The next time we went for after-work drinks it was just Jack and I. He admitted to me that worries

about the learning curve had been holding him back. I had to admit the training we'd been given was light at best, but my drinking buddy's attitude was more like: 'Why learn something new when I'm already very good at what I do?' I took a shot at old Jack's ego by saying what I'd just heard was: 'What if I'm not as good at doing things the new way as I was at the old?' I then offered Jack a few pearls of wisdom that I hoped would take root...

## **The Learning Curve: Overcoming Skill Gaps in the Adoption of New Technology**

Jack's concern is one that I've seen again and again throughout my career. People worry that adopting new technology will require excessive time and effort, detracting from their day-to-day responsibilities. The apprehension of feeling incompetent with unfamiliar tools can also be discouraging, especially for those who – like Jack – have spent years mastering existing systems.

To ease this transition, I always stress that organisations provide comprehensive training programs and ongoing support. A team should be ready for the rollout, not playing catch up.

Hands-on workshops, mentorship programs, and phased rollouts all help finance teams gain confidence in using new tools without disrupting operations.

None of this happened for Jack or his colleagues, or when it did it was minimal. Nobody had reminded the team that the long-term benefits of automation – reduced workloads, greater job satisfaction, increased efficiency and reduced errors – were not just benefits for the company, but benefits for them too.

By framing learning as an opportunity rather than an obstacle, companies can help finance professionals embrace technological advancements with confidence rather than resistance.

## **Bridging the Gap: Building Trust Between Finance Teams and Software Providers**

In many ways Jack's resistance to change was understandable. By under-training Jack's team, the CFOs were missing a trick. They'd failed to build trust in the new system. Why is trust important?

Many finance professionals fear that higher-ups or companies rolling out automation don't fully understand the intricacies of their work or the compliance risks involved. It's important to foster trust between the people that are deploying the software and the people that are using it.

To bridge this gap, we at Zahara always push the need for open collaboration. CFOs should involve finance teams early in the software development process. If someone had asked Jack right from the outset what he thought were the pitfalls and bottlenecks of his job, he'd have been full of answers – he knew the role inside out.

But when his CFO forced a change without asking for his team's input, he made the team feel like the software wasn't for them, or wasn't implemented with the goal of improving their jobs. The CFO had cultivated suspicion where he could – and should – have cultivated trust.

When finance teams feel heard and respected, they are far more likely to embrace new tools rather than resist them.

## **Show Me the ROI: Addressing Scepticism with Tangible Results**

Finance professionals are inherently data driven. To win over sceptics like Jack, organizations must present clear, measurable benefits of adopting new tools. Key metrics such as reduced processing times, fewer manual errors, and improved compliance tracking can provide compelling evidence.

Case studies from similar companies that have successfully implemented new financial technologies can also help illustrate the long-term benefits. When finance teams see concrete proof that change leads to better outcomes, they are far more likely to get on board.

Jack eventually discovered that embracing the change made for less stress in his day-to-day life (especially at month's end). But what I remember most out of this little business parable is that Jack ended up discovering he was actually much better at financial analysis than he was at data input.

When I left that company, Jack had managed to jump a few rungs higher on the career ladder and was no longer grumbling over post-work pints – instead his chat was full of positivity.

## **The Role of Leadership: How CFOs Can Drive Change with Confidence**

I'm not sure where Jack got to in life. We lost contact a few years after I left that company. The way Jack's career was going when we parted ways, I wouldn't be surprised if he was a CFO himself by now. Which got me thinking... with the negative experience he'd had, what would Jack's take on implementing change be?

My feeling is it would go something like this: Strong leadership is essential in overcoming resistance to change. CFOs play a big role in shaping how their teams perceive and respond to transformation. If leadership expresses uncertainty or fails to provide a clear vision, employees will be more resistant.

When it comes to driving change effectively, I've always said CFOs should focus on three key things:

- Communicate a compelling vision for why change is necessary.
- Provide ongoing support and training.
- Lead by example – actively use and endorse new systems.

You'll find yourself unable to bring anyone along with you if you don't demonstrate confidence in the change you want to implement. Building confidence in change creates an environment where employees feel empowered rather than threatened by change.

Drive that training. Make sure staff are comfortable with the software that's coming. Ensure they understand the benefits it will bring them.

## **Cultural Barriers: When Organizational Mindsets Clash with Innovation**

Resistance to change is tough. Breaking it down can't be done by strong leadership alone. It must also be done at an organisational level.

Even the most well-planned rollout can fail if corporate culture resists change. In organisations where 'we've always done it this way; is the prevailing mindset, innovation struggles to take root. Leaders must work to shift the cultural narrative by:

- Encouraging a mindset where learning is valued.
- Celebrating early adopters and small wins.
- Creating an open forum where concerns can be discussed and addressed.

Changing an entrenched culture takes time, but a strong focus on education and positive reinforcement can gradually shift employee perspectives.

It's important to remember too that organisational culture is a two-way street. Jack Welch knew that – he was very hot on getting the whole team on board, on breaking traditional down barriers between roles.

If you're going to make a change it's got to be done in a way that everyone can get behind. Jack went to his CFO the next morning and told him he wasn't prepared enough for the rollout. His CFO listened. Together they devised a training program to get the rest of the team up to scratch. Within a few weeks Jack and our more resistant colleagues were on board, walking a two-way street of communication, solving problems together and reaping all the benefits that were promised to them from automation.

Jack no longer looked glum over Friday night pints. I remember raising a glass to his promotion around that time. Teething problems aside, the process of change had actually allowed Jack to mature in his role.

And that, if you're still wondering, was the pearl of wisdom that I imparted on my friend Jack way back in the midst of his woes: Change isn't straightforward. It's rarely painless. But without it we will never grow.



*Written by Jonathan Lee - 2025*



