

Jet engines on a bicycle

April 26, 2026

Put jet engines on a bicycle and it will certainly pick up speed. But it will still be a bicycle.

That is the problem with many finance transformations. The technology is real, the investments are real, and the capabilities are real. But if the architecture underneath was never designed for the new technology, acceleration does not create control.

Many organizations implement new systems by using the old environment as the benchmark. The project begins with a promise of transformation, but the legacy environment quickly becomes the baseline. Existing reports are treated as the benchmark because they feel familiar. Exceptions are retained because removing them could complicate the transition. Temporary bridges survive because comparability must be protected. The old architecture becomes the acceptance test for the new technology. That feels prudent. It reduces implementation risk, reassures stakeholders, and avoids disruption. But it also changes the nature of the project. What could have been a moment of architectural judgment becomes a migration exercise. The organization does not ask whether the old model still represents the business properly. It asks whether the new system can reproduce it faster, cleaner, and with fewer manual steps. That is how old blindness is copied into the new machine.

A few years ago my group controller described his finance function's output with complete honesty: what we produce is a report for the banks. The group had multiple ERPs, a consolidation platform, and years of heavy investments in technology. It could produce covenant compliance, debt service ratios, and consolidated results. It could not tell management which business units were genuinely profitable, where margin was eroding, or which projects were running beyond anything the bids had anticipated. The architecture was working exactly as designed. What it had been designed to do was not enough.

That is what a jet engine on a bicycle means. It is not a metaphor about technology being useless. The engines are powerful. The problem is the frame. The steering, brakes, balance, and structure were never designed for that level of propulsion, more power does not improve the vehicle. It makes the weakness more dangerous.

AI makes this even more important. A self-healing dashboard sounds attractive. It detects anomalies, fills missing values, normalizes outliers, resolves mismatches, and produces cleaner reporting. But finance often learns precisely from the exceptions: the unexplained reconciliation difference, the recurring timing break, the movement that does not fit the model, the classification that keeps being challenged. Not all friction is waste. Some friction is diagnostic. And it should be. If automation removes that friction too early, the organization may not become more intelligent. It may become less sensitive to stress. AI does not learn from economic reality in raw form. It learns from the

representational structure it is given: classifications, mappings, allocations, definitions, and historical patterns. If those structures are distorted, AI does not stand outside them and correct the problem. It inherits the distortion. It may even stabilize it.

That is the real risk. Not that AI produces obviously wrong answers. The deeper risk is that it produces coherent, persuasive, internally consistent answers built on assumptions no one has examined closely enough. Architecture, not automation, decides whether intelligence improves control. More propulsion does not fix a frame that was never designed to carry it. It only increases the speed at which instability becomes dangerous