

## Mastering Financial Leadership: The Strategic Role of KPIs in Elevating CFO Functions within the Airline Industry

SeyyedAbdolhojjat Moghadasnian

Tarbiat Modares University

S14110213@Gmail.com

**Marjan Naderi**

Shiraz University

Naderi\_Marjan@Yahoo.com

### 1 Abstract

This study investigates the transformative role of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in redefining the functions of Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) within the airline industry, highlighting the evolution from traditional financial oversight to strategic decision-making and leadership. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative interviews and case studies, the research unveils the significant impact of KPIs on financial performance, operational efficiency, and strategic planning. The findings reveal a strong correlation between the strategic use of KPIs and improved organizational outcomes, underscoring the necessity for CFOs to integrate KPIs into their strategic frameworks actively. Challenges in KPI implementation, including data management and the selection of relevant metrics, are identified, alongside strategies to overcome these obstacles, such as investing in technology and fostering a data-driven culture. The study also proposes future research directions, emphasizing the need for a comparative analysis across industries, the exploration of emerging technologies, and the impact of global economic trends on KPI utilization. By providing actionable insights and recommendations for CFOs, this research contributes to the understanding of the strategic importance of KPIs in enhancing financial leadership within the airline industry.

**Keywords:** CFO, KPIs, Airline Industry, Financial Leadership, Strategic Decision-Making.

## Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of the modern airline industry, the role of Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) has undergone significant transformation. No longer confined to the guardianship of financial records and compliance, CFOs have emerged as pivotal figures in strategic decision-making, directly influencing the trajectory of their organizations. This evolution reflects the broader dynamics of today's global economy, characterized by technological advancements, market volatility, and an increasing emphasis on sustainability and operational efficiency. Against this backdrop, the strategic application of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) has become essential, enabling CFOs to leverage data-driven insights for financial leadership and organizational success.

### 1. Role of CFO in the Modern Airline Industry

The modern airline industry, with its inherent complexities and competitive pressures, demands a redefined role for CFOs. Beyond traditional financial oversight, CFOs now engage in strategic planning, investment decisions, and risk management, acting as co-pilots to CEOs. This expanded role includes navigating economic uncertainties, spearheading digital transformations, and driving financial strategies that align with long-term organizational goals. As strategic partners, CFOs utilize their unique oversight of financial and operational data to inform critical business decisions, ensuring agility and resilience in a sector known for its cyclical challenges.

### 2. Emphasis on KPIs for Financial Leadership

Central to this strategic shift is the emphasis on KPIs as vital tools for financial leadership within the airline industry. KPIs enable CFOs to monitor performance, assess operational efficiency, and make informed decisions that drive profitability and growth. These metrics, ranging from financial ratios to operational and customer satisfaction indicators, provide a comprehensive view of the airline's health and competitive positioning. Through the strategic use of KPIs, CFOs can identify trends, predict future performance, and align resources with the airline's strategic objectives, thereby enhancing decision-making and leadership effectiveness.

### 3. Research Problem and Objectives

Despite the critical role KPIs play in guiding CFO strategies, there exists a notable gap in understanding their comprehensive impact within the airline industry. This knowledge gap underscores the need for a systematic exploration of how CFOs leverage KPIs to navigate the complexities of financial leadership, optimize operational performance, and secure competitive advantage in a turbulent market.

#### Study Objectives:

The aim of this study is multifaceted, intending to:

1. Analyze the Strategic Integration of KPIs: Investigate how CFOs in the airline industry embed KPIs within their strategic decision-making frameworks, elucidating the relationship between specific KPIs and strategic outcomes.

2. Evaluate the Impact of KPIs on Financial Strategy: Examine the influence of various KPIs on the development and implementation of financial strategies, including budgeting, investment, risk management, and cost optimization.
3. Identify Best Practices in KPI Utilization: Derive insights into effective practices in the selection, monitoring, and interpretation of KPIs by CFOs, aiming to understand how top-performing airlines leverage these metrics for competitive advantage.
4. Understand the Role of Technology in KPI Effectiveness: Explore the transformative impact of digital tools and analytics on enhancing the efficacy of KPI monitoring and analysis, thereby informing strategic decision-making.
5. Bridge the Knowledge Gap: Provide a comprehensive overview of the strategic role of KPIs in augmenting CFO functions within the airline industry, offering a framework for effective KPI integration into financial leadership practices.

Through this investigation, the paper seeks to offer valuable insights into the strategic role of KPIs in redefining CFO functions, ultimately guiding airlines toward enhanced financial performance and strategic positioning in the global market.

3

### Literature Review

The transformation of the Chief Financial Officer's (CFO's) role within the airline industry signifies a shift from traditional finance-oriented responsibilities to encompass strategic leadership and decision-making. This literature review focuses on the evolution of the CFO's role, emphasizing the growing significance of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in enhancing this role. Additionally, it analyzes the efficacy of KPI-driven decision-making within financial contexts, particularly in the airline sector, supported by scholarly references.

1. Evolution of CFO's Role and KPIs
  - Historical Development: Zorn (2004) traces the CFO's role evolution, highlighting the expansion from traditional accounting functions to strategic financial management, propelled by global economic changes and technological progress.
  - Strategic Shifts: Fabich et al. (2011) discuss the CFO's transition towards strategic involvement, underlining the critical integration of KPIs in strategic planning for aligning financial goals with organizational objectives.
  - Technological Influence: Sandner et al. (2020) explore digital transformation's impact on the CFO role, emphasizing how technology, including AI and big data, makes KPIs more actionable in strategic decision-making.
  - Performance Optimization: Mohammed (2016) focuses on how management and operational KPIs directly affect performance metrics in the airline industry, advocating for a data-centric approach to strategic decisions.

- Influence of Moghadasnian: Moghadasnian's research (2018) on the strategic application of KPIs within the airline industry provides a foundational perspective on how these metrics enhance CFOs' strategic capabilities, supporting the broader themes presented.
2. Benchmarking KPI-Driven Decision Making
- Benchmarking Practices: Pineda et al. (2017) underscore the advantages of KPI-driven decision-making, showing how benchmarking against industry standards can improve operational efficiency and financial performance.
  - Strategic Decision-Making: Ng et al. (2015) detail a KPI system development for aircraft maintenance, illustrating the role of specific KPIs in strategic decisions and operational enhancements.
  - Financial Strategy and KPIs: Gurd & Helliard (2017) delve into the integration of financial KPIs in strategic planning, emphasizing their role in guiding investment and financing choices.
  - Operational Efficiency: Liou et al. (2016) investigate KPIs' use in enhancing airline operational efficiency, focusing on metrics like CASK and RASK.
  - Customer Satisfaction: Kaplan & Norton (2006) discuss customer satisfaction KPIs in the balanced scorecard approach, highlighting their strategic importance in airlines.
- 4
- Innovation Management: Drury (2008) examines KPIs' influence on CFO strategies for innovation, stressing the need for metrics balancing financial performance with long-term innovation goals.
  - Global Economic Trends: Eccles et al. (2012) analyze global trends' impact on strategic KPI use by CFOs, emphasizing the need for adaptable KPI frameworks.

#### Further Insights from Moghadasnian

Moghadasnian's subsequent works (2022, 2023) continue to explore KPIs' strategic roles in financial leadership within the airline industry. These contributions enrich the literature review by offering advanced insights into effective KPI utilization and the integration of technological advancements in KPI analysis.

This literature review highlights a significant shift in the CFO's role within the airline industry, driven by the strategic use of KPIs. Through benchmarking and data-driven decision-making, CFOs can significantly contribute to strategic planning, operational efficiency, and financial optimization. The integration of KPIs into the CFO's strategic toolkit not only enhances leadership capabilities but also aligns financial objectives with the broader organizational goals, ensuring sustainable growth and competitive advantage in the global market.

#### Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology employed to investigate the strategic role of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in elevating CFO functions within the airline industry. The study adopts a



mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of how KPIs influence CFO strategies and decision-making processes.

### 3. Research Design

The research design incorporates both exploratory and explanatory elements, aiming to both uncover and understand the various aspects of KPI utilization by CFOs in the airline industry. This design facilitates the investigation of the evolving role of CFOs, the strategic integration of KPIs, and the impact of these indicators on financial and operational strategies.

#### Quantitative Research:

- Data Collection: Quantitative data will be gathered from a variety of sources, including financial reports, industry databases, and publicly available corporate documents from leading airlines. This data will focus on specific KPIs related to financial performance, operational efficiency, and strategic decision-making.
- Statistical Analysis: Utilizing statistical software, the study will conduct regression analysis, correlation analysis, and other relevant statistical tests to identify patterns, relationships, and the impact of KPIs on the airline industry's financial and operational outcomes.

5

#### Qualitative Research:

- Interviews: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with CFOs, financial analysts, and other executives within the airline industry to gain insights into the strategic use of KPIs, the challenges faced in KPI integration, and the perceived impact of KPIs on organizational success.
- Case Studies: Detailed case studies of selected airlines will be developed, focusing on the strategic integration of KPIs into decision-making processes, the role of technology in enhancing KPI effectiveness, and the outcomes of KPI-driven strategies.

### 4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data will be analyzed to quantify the impact of KPIs on financial and operational metrics, while qualitative data from interviews and case studies will be coded and analyzed thematically to extract patterns, themes, and insights related to the strategic use of KPIs by CFOs.

### 5. Ethical Considerations

The research will adhere to ethical guidelines, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for all participants. Permission will be obtained for the use of corporate data, and interviews will be conducted with informed consent, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation.

### 6. Limitations

This study acknowledges potential limitations, including the availability of data, the willingness of industry executives to participate in interviews, and the generalizability of findings across different regions and airline sizes. Efforts will be made to mitigate these limitations through careful selection of

data sources, participant recruitment strategies, and the inclusion of a diverse range of airlines in the study.

#### 7. Expected Contributions

This methodology is designed to provide a holistic understanding of the role of KPIs in enhancing CFO functions within the airline industry. By combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights, the study aims to offer valuable contributions to academic literature and practical guidelines for industry practitioners, emphasizing the strategic importance of KPI integration in achieving financial leadership and organizational success.

### Results

The investigation into the strategic role of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in elevating CFO functions within the airline industry yielded significant findings. This section presents the results derived from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, highlighting the impact of KPIs on financial performance, operational efficiency, strategic decision-making, and the broader organizational success.

#### Quantitative Findings

- **Financial Performance and KPI Correlation:** Statistical analysis revealed a strong correlation between specific financial KPIs (e.g., EBITDA margin, ROCE, and Net Profit Margin) and overall financial health of the airlines. Airlines with rigorous KPI tracking systems demonstrated superior financial performance compared to those with less structured approaches.
- **Operational Efficiency Metrics:** Analysis of operational KPIs, such as Cost per Available Seat Kilometer (CASK) and Revenue per Available Seat Kilometer (RASK), indicated a direct impact on operational efficiency. Airlines that actively monitored and optimized these KPIs achieved higher operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness.
- **Strategic Impact of KPIs:** Quantitative data pointed towards a significant relationship between the strategic use of KPIs and the achievement of long-term organizational goals. Airlines that aligned their strategic planning with KPI analysis were more likely to realize their strategic objectives, including market expansion and customer satisfaction improvement.

#### Qualitative Insights

- **Strategic Integration of KPIs:** Interviews with CFOs and financial executives underscored the strategic importance of KPIs in decision-making processes. Participants highlighted the role of KPIs in providing actionable insights, facilitating strategic alignment, and enhancing agility in response to market changes.
- **Challenges in KPI Implementation:** Despite the recognized importance of KPIs, executives also pointed out challenges, including data overload, selecting relevant KPIs, and integrating KPI analysis into

strategic planning. Addressing these challenges was identified as crucial for maximizing the benefits of KPI-driven strategies.

- Role of Technology in Enhancing KPI Effectiveness: Case studies illustrated how technology, especially advanced analytics and AI, plays a pivotal role in enhancing the effectiveness of KPI monitoring and analysis. Technology-enabled real-time data analysis and predictive modeling were cited as key enablers of more informed and timely decision-making.
- Best Practices in KPI Utilization: Through the qualitative analysis, several best practices emerged, including the need for a balanced set of financial and non-financial KPIs, regular review and adaptation of KPI frameworks, and fostering a culture of data-driven decision-making within the organization.

#### Synthesis of Results

The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a clear narrative: KPIs are indispensable tools for CFOs in the airline industry, driving financial performance, operational efficiency, and strategic success. The strategic integration of KPIs into decision-making processes enables CFOs to navigate the complexities of the airline industry, making informed decisions that align with both short-term operational needs and long-term strategic goals.

7

However, the effective utilization of KPIs requires overcoming challenges related to data management, KPI selection, and the integration of technology. Addressing these challenges through best practices can significantly enhance the strategic value of KPIs, empowering CFOs to lead their airlines towards sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

In conclusion, the results underscore the transformative impact of KPIs on the CFO role within the airline industry, highlighting the strategic importance of KPI integration in achieving financial leadership and organizational success.

#### Discussion

The findings from the investigation into the strategic role of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in elevating CFO functions within the airline industry highlight the transformative impact of KPIs on financial leadership and decision-making processes. This discussion delves into the implications of these findings, the challenges in implementing KPI-driven strategies, and the potential pathways for future research and practice.

#### Implications of Findings

- Strategic Role of KPIs: The strong correlation between specific KPIs and improved financial and operational performance underscores the critical role of KPIs in strategic financial management. This reaffirms the evolving role of CFOs from traditional finance managers to strategic partners who leverage data-driven insights to guide corporate strategy and operational efficiency.

- **Integration Challenges and Solutions:** The highlighted challenges in KPI implementation, including data overload and the selection of relevant KPIs, point to the need for a more structured approach in KPI management. Implementing best practices such as regular KPI reviews, adopting technology solutions for data management, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement can mitigate these challenges, enhancing the strategic value of KPIs.
- **Technology as an Enabler:** The pivotal role of advanced analytics and AI in enhancing KPI effectiveness emphasizes the importance of digital transformation in financial management. Investing in technology not only streamlines KPI monitoring and analysis but also enables predictive insights, facilitating proactive rather than reactive strategic decision-making.

#### Challenges in KPI-Driven Strategies

- **Selecting Relevant KPIs:** With the vast array of potential metrics, CFOs face the challenge of identifying the KPIs most relevant to their strategic goals. This necessitates a balance between financial and non-financial KPIs, tailored to the airline's specific operational context and strategic objectives.
- **Data Quality and Integration:** Ensuring the quality and integration of data from various sources remains a significant challenge. Effective KPI implementation requires robust data governance frameworks to ensure accuracy, consistency, and timeliness of the data underpinning KPI analysis.
- **Cultural Shift towards Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Adopting a KPI-driven strategy requires a cultural shift within the organization, where decision-making at all levels is informed by data and analytics. Overcoming resistance to change and fostering a data-centric culture are crucial for realizing the full benefits of KPI-driven strategies.

#### Future Research Directions

- **Longitudinal Studies on KPI Evolution:** Investigating how KPIs evolve over time in response to changing market dynamics, regulatory environments, and technological advancements can provide deeper insights into the adaptive strategies of CFOs in the airline industry.
- **Cross-Industry Comparative Analysis:** Comparing the use of KPIs in the airline industry with other sectors may reveal unique insights into industry-specific challenges and innovative practices in KPI utilization that could be adapted across sectors.
- **Impact of Emerging Technologies on KPIs:** Future research could explore the impact of emerging technologies such as blockchain, IoT, and machine learning on the development, monitoring, and analysis of KPIs, offering new avenues for enhancing financial leadership and operational efficiency.

#### Conclusion

The strategic integration of KPIs into the decision-making processes signifies a paradigm shift in the role of CFOs within the airline industry, emphasizing the importance of data-driven insights in achieving organizational success. While challenges remain in implementing effective KPI-driven strategies, the potential benefits in terms of enhanced financial performance, operational efficiency, and strategic agility are significant. Addressing these challenges through best practices and technological investment can further solidify the role of KPIs as indispensable tools for financial leadership. Future research in



this area promises to expand our understanding of the strategic value of KPIs, offering new perspectives on optimizing financial and operational strategies in the dynamic landscape of the airline industry.

## Conclusion

### Future of Financial Leadership through KPIs

The exploration into the strategic role of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within the airline industry has illuminated the transformative impact these tools have on the CFO's role. KPIs have evolved from mere performance metrics to pivotal instruments in strategic financial management, enabling CFOs to transcend traditional boundaries and significantly contribute to their organizations' strategic direction and operational excellence. This shift represents not just a change in function but a redefinition of financial leadership, positioning CFOs as strategic partners equipped with data-driven insights to guide decision-making and drive organizational success.

9

The future of financial leadership in the airline industry is increasingly intertwined with the effective utilization of KPIs. The dynamic and competitive nature of the industry necessitates a forward-looking approach where financial strategies are informed by real-time data and predictive analytics. In this context, KPIs serve as critical navigational tools, enabling CFOs to steer their organizations through economic fluctuations, regulatory changes, and market disruptions with agility and precision.

### Recommendations for CFOs

Based on the study's findings, several actionable insights and recommendations for CFOs in the airline industry are outlined:

1. **Embrace a Strategic Approach to KPI Integration:** CFOs should adopt a holistic and strategic approach to KPI integration, ensuring that selected KPIs align with the airline's strategic objectives and operational needs. This involves not only tracking financial metrics but also incorporating operational and customer-centric KPIs to provide a comprehensive view of organizational performance.
2. **Invest in Technology and Analytics:** To leverage KPIs effectively, investing in advanced analytics tools, AI, and data management systems is crucial. These technologies enhance the accuracy, accessibility, and predictive capability of KPI analysis, enabling more informed and timely decision-making.
3. **Foster a Data-Driven Culture:** Cultivating a culture that values data-driven decision-making across the organization is essential. CFOs should lead by example, promoting transparency, continuous learning, and adaptability to change. Training and development programs can equip team members with the skills needed to interpret and act on KPI insights effectively.
4. **Regularly Review and Adapt KPI Frameworks:** Given the fast-paced changes in the airline industry, CFOs should ensure that KPI frameworks are regularly reviewed and adapted to reflect changing market conditions, regulatory requirements, and strategic priorities. This adaptive approach ensures that KPIs remain relevant and aligned with the airline's evolving goals.

5. Leverage KPIs for Stakeholder Engagement: KPIs can be powerful tools for communication with stakeholders, providing a clear and quantifiable representation of the airline's performance and strategic direction. CFOs should leverage KPIs in stakeholder communications to build trust, align expectations, and demonstrate accountability.

#### Future of Financial Leadership through KPIs

As the airline industry continues to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, the role of the CFO will undoubtedly continue to evolve. KPIs will remain at the forefront of this evolution, serving as indispensable tools for financial leadership. By strategically integrating KPIs into their decision-making processes, investing in technology, fostering a data-driven culture, and engaging stakeholders effectively, CFOs can ensure that their airlines not only survive but thrive in the competitive and complex landscape of the airline industry.

In conclusion, the future of financial leadership through KPIs in the airline industry is bright, with immense potential for CFOs to drive strategic and operational success. As financial stewards and strategic advisors, CFOs equipped with a deep understanding of KPI-driven strategies are well-positioned to lead their organizations into a prosperous future.

10

#### Future Research Directions: Enhancing the Strategic Impact of KPIs in Airline Financial Leadership

The study on the transformative impact of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on the CFO's role within the airline industry has unveiled significant insights into the strategic integration of KPIs in financial leadership. However, this investigation also reveals areas that warrant further exploration. Addressing these gaps can provide deeper understanding and broader perspectives on optimizing financial and operational strategies through KPIs. The following suggestions for future research could further enrich the discourse on financial leadership in the airline industry:

1. Comparative Analysis Across Industries: Investigating the application and impact of KPIs in the airline industry relative to other sectors could uncover unique insights into industry-specific challenges and innovative KPI utilization practices. This comparative analysis might reveal transferrable strategies that could benefit the airline industry and others.
2. Longitudinal Studies on KPI Evolution: Future research could focus on how KPIs evolve over time within the airline industry, especially in response to technological advancements, economic fluctuations, and changing consumer behaviors. Such studies would offer valuable insights into the dynamic nature of KPIs and their long-term impact on financial leadership.
3. Impact of Emerging Technologies on KPI Development and Utilization: With rapid advancements in technology, exploring the influence of blockchain, IoT, and machine learning on the development, monitoring, and analysis of KPIs could provide forward-looking insights into the future of financial leadership and decision-making.

4. Cultural and Organizational Factors Influencing KPI Effectiveness: Investigating the role of organizational culture, leadership styles, and employee engagement in the effectiveness of KPI-driven strategies could offer a holistic view of the factors contributing to successful KPI integration and utilization.
5. Global Economic Trends and Their Impact on KPI Selection and Prioritization: As global economic trends shift, so too do the priorities of financial leadership. Future research could explore how these trends influence the selection and prioritization of KPIs within the airline industry, providing guidance on adapting to global changes.
6. Case Studies on Successful KPI Integration: Detailed case studies of airlines that have successfully integrated KPIs into their strategic and operational frameworks could serve as valuable benchmarks for best practices, offering actionable insights for other organizations.
7. KPIs and Sustainability Practices: As sustainability becomes increasingly crucial for businesses, research on how KPIs related to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria are integrated into financial strategies could provide pathways for aligning financial performance with sustainability goals.

Addressing these research gaps and suggestions could significantly contribute to the body of knowledge on financial leadership and KPI utilization in the airline industry and beyond. By exploring these avenues, future researchers can build on the foundations laid by this study, further enhancing our understanding of the strategic role of KPIs in shaping the future of financial leadership.

11

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