What Does a Controller Do?

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People who pursue careers in finance regularly tackle complex problems that require innovative solutions. Finance professionals must be detail-oriented, able to make sense of large amounts of information, and ensure that accounts add up correctly. One career path for meticulous, thorough, and precise business professionals with expertise in finance is to become a controller.

Controllers are senior finance professionals who play a key role in overseeing organizations' daily financial operations. When exploring what a controller does, consider the value of a master's degree in finance. Master of Finance programs offer students coursework, real-world case studies, and hands-on experience that prepare them to sit for the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) exam and can be an ideal foundation for a career as a controller.

What Is a Controller?

Controllers manage organizations' financial health and stability. They oversee accounting operations and identify discrepancies and other issues in financial reporting. They also ensure that tax filings are current and compliant.

As organizational leaders, they provide oversight to accounting and finance teams and establish reporting cadences and methodologies. They ensure accuracy, consistency, and transparency.

Controller Duties and Responsibilities

Because financial operations affect so many aspects of a business, controllers typically work across several business units. Usually reporting to the chief financial officer (CFO), they ensure smooth daily financial operations and identify areas for improvement. While they do not specifically direct investment decisions, as finance managers do, they do provide analysis and recommendations.

Accounting Operations and Tax Compliance

All controllers need mastery of the generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP). If controllers work with publicly traded companies, they also need to be knowledgeable about the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulations and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX), which outlines specific financial recordkeeping practices.

They oversee accounts payable and receivable to ensure that incoming and outgoing payments occur on time and in accordance with contract requirements. They regularly balance the books and financial ledgers to track transactions such as payroll and vendor payments.

Budgeting and Financial Forecasting

Controllers are deeply involved in budget planning. They also ensure that departments remain on budget and approve overages as needed.

After comparing planned budgets with actual budgets, controllers present financial forecasts to different teams, outlining how much revenue needs to be generated and how much is available to spend on new or existing projects.

Strategic Planning and Supervision

Controllers use analytics and projection modeling to analyze financial data and plan for their organizations' future financial health. Providing leadership with insights about the performance of different business operations helps them make better decisions for the future. Controllers also recommend financial targets across departments.

Managing teams is another key part of a controller's job description. Regular communication and standard setting are crucial skills for these leadership positions.

Monitoring and Implementing Systems

Beyond accounting and finance employees, controllers ensure that everyone in their organizations follows best practices, such as adhering to specific processes for expense reimbursement and vendor invoice approval.

Types of Controllers

Controllers may work in various areas. The following are some examples:

- **Corporate controller:** Works for a corporation and manages all financial operations
- **Divisional controller:** Works in a specific business unit within a larger organization
- **Regional controller:** Focuses on the financial operations of a specific region
- **Plant controller:** Manages financial operations in a manufacturing or production plant

- **Group controller:** Oversees multiple subsidiaries or entities of a large corporation
- **Comptroller:** Works in government or nonprofit organizations

Steps to Becoming a Controller

A controller is a senior position for experienced financial professionals with a strong foundation in the field.

Education

All aspiring controllers should have a bachelor's degree in a field such as finance, business, or accounting. While a master's degree is not always required, it can help job applicants demonstrate their expertise and stand out to employers. A Master of Finance gives students insight into the day-to-day duties of a controller, as well as overall financial planning and strategy.

Experience

A controller is a senior position that requires significant experience. Most begin their careers in accounting rather than in fields such as banking, as accounting roles provide the necessary hands-on GAAP accounting and audit experience. From entry-level positions such as staff accountant or junior accountant, many advance into accounting manager roles before becoming assistant controllers and eventually controllers.

Licensure

Many employers prefer — although not always required — controllers to hold credentials such as Certified Public Accountant (CPA), Certified Management Accountant (CMA), or Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA).

The CFA credential is highly valued because the exams are known for being difficult — only 45 percent of candidates passed between 1962 and 2025. The CFA program is made up of three increasingly complex exams covering topics such as financial statement analysis, portfolio management, and investment tools.

Skills

Because it is such a specialized role, controllers usually have at least 10 years of experience in accounting or finance.

Essential skills that aspiring controllers should develop include the following:

- Accounting mastery
- Regulatory knowledge and compliance expertise
- Budgeting and forecasting skills
- Advanced expertise in GAAP and tax codes
- Ability to translate complex financial data into actionable insights
- Ability to communicate across departments

Controller Salary and Job Outlook

The median annual salary for financial controllers was approximately $100,000, while corporate controllers earned a median of around $122,000, according to May 2026 Payscale data.

Positions for financial managers, including controllers, are projected to increase by 15 percent between 2024 and 2034, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) — almost three times the national average.

Learn How to Become a Controller With a Master of Finance

The Master of Finance program at the A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University prepares students for high-level careers in finance with advanced courses in financial theory, market behavior, and economics. You will also dive into case studies and real-world examples to learn how to translate your education into business contexts.

Our business school’s Master of Finance offers specialization tracks in corporate treasury, investment banking, asset management, financial data analytics, and sustainable finance. Coursework focusing on financial analysis, risk management, and corporate finance can be particularly useful for a career as a controller. You can earn a master’s degree in finance and be prepared to sit for the CFA exam in as little as 10 months.

Find out how our business school’s Master of Finance program can help you realize your ambitions of becoming a controller.

Sources:

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