FREE GUIDE

When You Need a CFO vs. a Bookkeeper

How to tell where your business is financially — and what kind of support you actually need.

Many businesses pay bookkeeper prices for a CFO-level problem — or pay CFO rates for work a bookkeeper could do. The right answer depends on your stage, complexity, and the decisions in front of you.

Three roles, three jobs

	Bookkeeper	Controller	CFO
Core question	What happened?	Is it accurate and on time?	What should we do next?
Focus	Recording transactions, reconciliations, AP/AR	Month-end close, accruals, controls, financial statements	Strategy, forecasting, capital, pricing, KPIs
Looks	Backward (daily/weekly)	Backward (monthly)	Forward (quarters/years)
Typical output	Categorized books, reconciled accounts	Accrual-basis financial package	Budget, forecast, models, board/lender reporting

You probably need a bookkeeper if…

- You're spending your evenings and weekends categorizing transactions.
- Bank accounts haven't been reconciled in months.
- You don't know who owes you money right now.
- Your CPA charges extra every year to 'clean things up' before filing.

You probably need controller-level help if…

- You need accrual-basis financials for a lender, investor, or buyer.
- Month-end takes weeks — or doesn't happen at all.
- You have inventory, deferred revenue, or multiple entities.
- Numbers change after you've already reviewed them.

You probably need a (fractional) CFO if…

- You're growing fast and unsure whether you can afford the next hire.
- You're profitable on paper but always short on cash.
- You're raising capital, applying for a significant loan, or considering selling.
- You don't have a budget or a forecast you trust.
- Pricing decisions are made by gut feel.
- You can't name your top three KPIs and where they stand today.

GOOD TO KNOW A fractional CFO works part-time — a few days a month — giving you executive-level financial leadership at a fraction of a full-time salary.

Rough guide by stage

Annual revenue*	Typical support
Under ~$500K	Bookkeeper (part-time or outsourced) plus a CPA for taxes
~$500K – $3M	Bookkeeper plus controller-level month-end close; fractional CFO for planning and key decisions
~$3M – $20M	Staff accountant or outsourced team, controller, and a fractional CFO
$20M+	Finance team with a full-time controller; full-time or substantial fractional CFO

**Ranges are illustrative. Complexity — inventory, multiple entities, investors, rapid growth — matters more than revenue alone.*

The foundation comes first

Strategy built on inaccurate books is guesswork. The order is always the same: **clean, reconciled books** → **a reliable monthly close** → **forecasting and strategy.** If your bookkeeping isn't solid, start there — every later step depends on it.

NEXT STEP Not sure where you stand? Bean Counter Buddy offers a free 30-minute financial review to assess your books and recommend the right level of support.

This guide is general information for small business owners and is not tax, legal, or accounting advice. Rules, rates, and deadlines change — confirm specifics with your CPA or the relevant agency.