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Bookkeeper vs. Controller vs. Fractional CFO: Which Does Your Business Need?

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Updated September 28, 2026 · Written for owners of businesses doing $250k–$10M

The short answer

A bookkeeper records what happened. A controller makes sure it's right, on time and under control. A fractional CFO decides what to do next. Most businesses under $1M need accurate books with CPA review; between $1M and $3M a controller layer pays for itself; above $3M, or whenever lenders or investors are involved, you need CFO-level thinking.

The bookkeeper: what happened?

Bookkeeping is the data layer. Transactions are categorized, accounts reconciled, and a profit and loss statement and balance sheet produced. Software now automates much of this, which is why bookkeeping prices keep falling. What software can't do is notice that your margin slipped four points or that a contractor was paid twice.

The controller: is it right, and under control?

A controller owns the monthly close. The books are finished by a set date, reconciliations are reviewed rather than just performed, and payroll, sales tax and payables are watched. The controller is also where cash visibility starts.

- Books closed by a deadline every month
- Budget vs. actual reporting with commentary
- Payables and receivables oversight

- Payroll and sales tax compliance
- A rolling 13-week cash forecast

The fractional CFO: what should we do next?

A CFO uses clean numbers to make decisions: pricing, hiring, debt, raising capital, preparing for a sale, and structuring the business so taxes are planned. Across the market in 2026, light founder-facing fractional CFO work runs about $2,500–$4,000 a month and standard engagements $4,000–$8,000.

Which one you need

Revenue	What you usually need	Typical monthly cost
Under $1M	Bookkeeping with CPA review, plus a tax plan	$500–$1,500
$1M–$3M	Controller layer: close, cash forecast, compliance	$2,000–$4,000
$3M–$10M+	CFO-level planning on top of controller work	$4,000–$8,000+

You don't need three hires. One firm can deliver all three layers, with bookkeeping largely automated and senior time spent where judgment matters.

General information based on federal law for tax year 2026, not tax advice for your situation. State rules vary.

Want this applied to your situation? Book a free 30-minute call with Akanchya Acharya, CPA at acharyacpa.com/contact or email akansha@acharyacpa.com.

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