



The CFO's guide to maximizing commercial card ROI



Commercial card programs are essential infrastructure for middle-market companies, large enterprises and public sector organizations. Yet for some organizations, much of their value still remains untapped. Cards may be widely issued, suppliers may accept card payments and transactions may flow across business units, but you begin to realize stronger ROI when you move beyond default configurations into fit-for-purpose optimization.

Optimization is not a feature checklist. It's a process of aligning your card program to four strategic outcomes: greater efficiency, stronger risk mitigation, better working capital management and lower operating costs. When you approach program design with this outcome-first mindset, your card program shifts from a transactional utility into a financial lever that actively supports your broader goals.

Whether your card program is new or your company's needs are evolving, revisiting your payment processes ensures your strategy continues to propel you forward. Focusing on the following four outcomes will strengthen performance and improve the return on every dollar spent.

FOUR OUTCOMES THAT DRIVE CARD ROI

1. Drive efficiency

Research from PYMNTS shows that 44% of CFOs cite workflow streamlining as a top reason they use commercial cards,¹ highlighting the growing importance of efficiency in payment operations.

¹ ["CFOs Tap Commercial Cards for Control, Not Just Payables," PYMNTS, October 2025.](#)

But efficiency gains don't appear automatically. They come from reshaping how transactions are captured, classified, approved and posted – and from eliminating the manual steps that drain time from your accounts payable (AP) and accounting teams.

Strengthen the data footprint of every card transaction

Organizations using Level 2 and Level 3 transaction data sharply reduce reconciliation times because line-item data, invoice identifiers, tax details and merchant specifics flow directly into your enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, reducing exceptions and the need for manual corrections.²

What are Level 2 and Level 3 transaction data?

Level 2 and Level 3 transaction data refer to extra information sent with a commercial card payment. Level 2 adds specifics like tax amounts and customer codes. Level 3 includes line-item detail such as product descriptions, quantities and invoice numbers. This richer data may also help certain transactions qualify for lower processing costs.

To fully capitalize on enriched transaction data, configure your card program so that all relevant details flow automatically from your gateway or issuer into your ERP system. Ensure that transaction data – such as vendor names, GL codes, departments and cost centers – is mapped accurately and consistently. By doing so, your card program shifts from being a reconciliation tool to becoming an engine for automated financial insights that streamline operations and support smarter business decisions.

Expand virtual card usage for high-volume, recurring suppliers

Most recurring supplier invoices include standardized details such as amount, timing, merchant identity and contract references. When you use virtual cards, you can automate the payment process based on these predictable elements, streamlining transactions and reducing the need for manual intervention.

This eliminates the need for PDFs, approval follow-ups and manual data entry. Automation and ERP integration are fundamental to B2B payment optimization.³

Given this convenience, consider paying utilities, SaaS vendors, maintenance contracts and logistics providers using virtual card and establish automated approval rules. Paying more of your suppliers with virtual card reduces manual work, eliminates back-and-forth verification cycles and saves you both time and money.

Rebuild your approval workflows to mirror actual spend behavior

Your finance team may be using complicated approval processes that slow things down. Instead, you can use information like merchant category codes MCCs, vendor groups and purchase amount thresholds to set up smart rules. These rules can automatically approve routine, small or low-risk purchases, while still requiring approval for larger or riskier expenses. This way, your team spends less time reviewing every transaction and focuses only on the ones that really need attention, making the process faster and more efficient.

When you redesign your process around enhanced data, virtual card payments and updated approval logic, your card program becomes a throughput engine, accelerating month-end, improving accuracy and freeing your team from administrative tasks that add little value and erode productivity.

2. Strengthen risk defenses

Today's fraud threats demand stronger responses than many legacy payment methods can provide. PYMNTS describes 2025 as a turning point in fraud complexity, with AI enabling new forms of social engineering, account takeovers and synthetic identity attacks, raising the cost of weak controls.⁴

Yet fraud exposure is often the result of outdated payment management practices, such as using static card numbers, loosely defined limits and after-the-fact reconciliation. Optimizing your program requires shifting to more effective, dynamic control architectures.

² ["Level Up: Optimizing the Benefits of a Commercial Card Program,"](#) *PaymentsJournal*, April 2024.

³ ["The key factors driving B2B payments optimization,"](#) *Fiserv*, 2023.

⁴ ["CFOs Confront the New Economics of Fraud,"](#) *PYMNTS*, October 2025.

Use virtual cards where they align with your controls and supplier agreements

Virtual cards create a moving target for fraudsters. Dynamic, single-use credentials can be restricted by supplier, date and amount. Virtual cards typically experience fraud rates well below one basis point – the lowest among common payment methods – and make fraud easier to detect and resolve through real-time transaction visibility.⁵

Prioritize virtual card payments for:

- Newly onboarded vendors
- High-risk spend categories
- Distributed field operations

This means fraud risk ends as soon as the payment settles, and controls stop any out-of-policy purchases from slipping through.

Implement vendor-specific rules and MCC governance

Build your governance around virtual cards' ability to restrict transactions to a specific supplier, purpose and spend limit. Specify MCCs that are pre-approved, blocked or conditionally allowed. Configure vendor-specific virtual cards for strategic suppliers so transactions attempted outside that supplier are automatically declined.

Improve visibility by capturing more transaction details

Deeper transaction detail improves auditability and anomaly detection because your finance team can identify unusual spend patterns earlier.

Actions you can take to boost your ability to find fraud faster:

- Require enhanced data for all virtual card transactions.
- Log every approval path digitally.
- Use real time fraud alerts, transaction notifications and spend monitoring dashboards to spot vendor changes or unusual spikes early.

Optimizing your card program for risk isn't about adding checkpoints. It's about engineering a system where unauthorized transactions can't occur in the first place.

3. Increase working capital flexibility

Commercial cards generate financial return as spend volumes increase, when transaction data qualifies for enhanced interchange and when payment timing aligns with card cycles. That return isn't incidental. It grows through systematic expansion of purchases made by card.

Virtual card payments give buyers immediate working capital benefit through float while maintaining supplier satisfaction.⁶ It's one reason why virtual card acceptance is accelerating.

Conduct a structured spend assessment

Identify categories best suited for card payments, including recurring services, software, facilities and professional services. Map your spend by category, vendor type, payment predictability and payment terms targeting suppliers with:

- High invoice volume
- Predictable amounts
- Strong relationship stability
- Existing digital payment readiness

Your goal is to maximize consistent card purchases, which serves as the foundation of predictable rebate yield.

Shift your recurring supplier payments to virtual cards at scale

Virtual cards streamline invoice handling by automating payments and recording transaction data directly, reducing manual entry and approval. As more of your vendors adopt virtual card payments, you'll reduce AP workload and accelerate payment processes.

Align payment cycles with your financial strategy

Work with your team to run card payments at intervals that maximize float without harming supplier relationships. This turns your card program into a working-capital optimization tool.

4. Reduce operating costs

Traditional payment methods often mask hidden costs. Manual approvals, reimbursement cycles, invoice matching and exception handling create friction that compromises scale as your company grows.

⁵ ["2022 Virtual Card Benchmark Survey Results," RPMG, 2022.](#)

⁶ ["The ROI of Commercial Cards: Turning Payments Into Savings," Stripe2b, September 2024.](#)

Enhanced data reduces your cost per transaction and minimizes rework. Using card-based payment processes helps prevent unauthorized purchases, makes it easier to follow company policies and reduces the manual work needed to match transactions and balance accounts.

Automate reconciliation end-to-end

Tie enhanced transaction data to auto-coding rules in your ERP. When purchases land in the correct cost center without intervention, reconciliation shifts from manual coding to process monitoring and exception management.

Use data to renegotiate vendor terms

With reliable, structured spend data, you can identify pricing inconsistencies, volume opportunities and contract renewal leverage points, reducing the cost of the underlying goods and services.

These optimizations are cumulative; each step removes overhead and improves compliance. Over time, cost reductions become embedded into your operating model rather than dependent on individual effort.



OPTIMIZATION: THE ENGINE OF CARD ROI

Like most companies, you likely have untapped opportunity in your current commercial card program. With the right discipline, it can deliver greater efficiency, stronger controls, higher rebate yield and lower overall costs.

The most effective programs aren't static. By redesigning workflows, adopting virtual cards at scale, enriching transaction data and proactively managing supplier payments routing, your commercial card program can deliver greater bottom-line value and support more resilient financial operations.

Discover where you may have untapped value in your commercial card program. U.S. Bank can help streamline business processes, strengthen fraud protection and reduce operating costs with our suite of transaction optimization solutions and services. We start by listening – so the strategies we recommend are tailored to your business priorities.

Connect with us to assess your commercial card program optimization potential.