FINANCE I QUICK CARD FI-04

The few numbers that matter

Fifteen minutes, one page, and the questions a good coach would ask you.



The practice

Most owners have more numbers than they can use and fewer than they need. The management accounts arrive six weeks late and run to eleven pages, while the numbers that would have warned you (how full next quarter is, how long clients take to pay) sit in someone's head or nowhere.

The practice is a page: six to eight numbers, some looking back and some ahead, each with a target and an owner, on the same day every month, with one action for each number off track. A 25-person consultancy's first page showed cash at six weeks of costs and lock-up at 70 days; one action, billing retainers in advance, fixed both.

Your six numbers

A number that looks back (fees billed, profit)	
A number that looks ahead (pipeline, bookings)	
A cash number (weeks of costs, lock-up days)	
A people number (paid time, leavers)	
A client number (largest client's share, reviews held)	
The number you check first when you are worried	

If you cannot say what you would do differently if a number changed, it does not belong on the page.

Try this this week

Write down the six numbers you would most want to see on the first working day of each month, and who could give you each one. Do not worry about targets yet. Twenty minutes.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CARD

Coach yourself

Fill in the front first. Then take fifteen minutes with these, in writing. An answer looks surprisingly different once it is on paper.

1. Read your six back. For each one, what would you actually do differently if it changed?
2. How many of your six look ahead? If none do, which one would warn you earliest?
3. What surprised you last year that one of these would have shown you coming?
4. Who could produce this page without you, and by which day of the month?
5. Which number have you been avoiding looking at, and why?
6. Which meeting will this page open, and who would notice if it stopped arriving?

If you catch yourself saying...

You hear yourself say	Try asking instead
"I've got it all in my head"	What happens to the numbers when you are on holiday?
"We need to get the data right first"	What would a good-enough first page look like?
"The accounts come when they come"	What would it take for your accountant to have them by the tenth?

ONE HARDER QUESTION

Which number did you stop looking at because you did not like what it said?

Keep it going

Decide now who produces the page, by which working day, and which meeting it opens. Put three dates in the diary: 3, 6 and 12 months from today. If it slips, cut it to the four numbers you use.

When to get help

Your accountant produces the management accounts and can usually make them arrive sooner. If the first page shows several numbers in serious trouble at once, talk to them this week, not next month.

What a coach adds

This card gives you the questions. What it cannot do is notice which one you avoided. It is one of the SMARTer practice cards, covering the ten key areas of a business that sells expertise.

> Talk yours through with your SMARTer coach and mentor: book a Discovery Call at smarterentrepreneurs.co.uk

Quick card FI-04 v2, October 2026. Sources: Office for National Statistics, Management practices in the UK: 2016 to 2023 (2024); Brown, Cowling and Sun, Enterprise Research Centre (2024). © 2026 SMARTer Entrepreneurs. Free to share with other business owners, unchanged and with this notice.