The Hidden Costs of Power BI: Why Tableau is a Better Choice

What IT and data leaders need to know when evaluating analytics and business intelligence platforms

We're Tableau, the world's leading AI-powered analytics platform that users love.

We help people see, understand, and act on data.

If you're weighing the pros and cons of Microsoft Power BI because it seems free, you're in the right place.

Let's run through why the perception of "free" is far from it, so you can decide for yourself.

We'll cover four main hidden costs:
1. Cost of bundling
2. Cost of curiosity
3. Cost of chaos
4. Cost of compute

Executive summary

Despite the initial allure of Power BI being a "free" solution, it entails several hidden expenses that can accumulate significantly over time. This includes:

- Licensing costs: While Power BI offers a free version, its capabilities are limited. Upgrading to reach full functionality leads to higher costs, especially as organizational needs grow.

- Implementation and maintenance: Power BI demands substantial time and money for setup and maintenance efforts, paired with less flexibility for utilizing existing investments in your data and analytics architecture when compared to Tableau.

- Training and adoption: The complexity of Power BI often necessitates extensive training in the M and Dax coding languages. Tableau, known for its user-friendly interface, typically requires less time for users to become proficient, reducing training costs.

- Scalability: As organizations grow, the scaling costs with Power BI can become a significant financial burden compared to Tableau, which is designed to scale more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Our goal is to provide an understanding of why Tableau is often a better choice for organizations seeking a powerful, scalable, and cost-effective analytics solution. By examining these hidden costs, leaders can make more informed decisions that align with their strategic goals and budgets.

1. The hidden cost of bundling

Microsoft offers two product bundles that include Power BI: **Microsoft/Office 365 E5** is a productivity suite with advanced analytics, security, and compliance; **Microsoft Fabric** is an analytics and data platform.

To maximize their investment in these bundles, Microsoft recommends that customers utilize all their services without paying for other duplicate applications. What Microsoft doesn't tell you, especially when it comes to Power BI, is about the associated migration costs, integration issues, missing features, and change management that make it not only costly, but insufficient for most organization's data, analytics, and AI needs.

Microsoft suite customers looking to standardize on Power BI can expect to uncover some hidden costs: first, the cost to migrate, replicate, or connect their data in Azure (Power BI is Azure only) and rebuild reports; secondly, the cost to hire developers that know the DAX and M languages; and finally, the cost to replace or extend Macs—outside of using a browser (which can come with its own performance issues), Power BI only works on a Mac with additional virtualization software.

Unlike Power BI, Tableau is designed to fit your information architecture as is, giving customers the most choice and flexibility—so you can make the most of your investments today and as your data strategy evolves. From how to deploy to what data to connect to, the choice is yours. With Tableau, there are no hidden costs or caveats when rolling it out to build your own data culture.

Upon uncovering these challenges, many Microsoft customers adopt Tableau as their AI-powered analytics platform. In these cases, Power BI is either not made available to users, or it is kept for limited, basic use cases. Tableau integrates deeply with the Microsoft ecosystem—including Microsoft Teams—making standardizing quick and easy.

2. The hidden cost of curiosity

Microsoft wants to make Power BI quick, easy, and free so that customers have the experience of "five minutes to sign up, five minutes to WOW!"

The thing is, after that five minutes of "WOW!" there will be hours of "HOW?"

Microsoft tells you Power BI has advanced data analysis tools, AI capabilities, and user-friendly reporting. Microsoft does not tell you that once you get beyond just basic visualizations, you need coding skills–specifically knowledge of DAX and M–which is where the hidden cost of curiosity enters the equation.

A novice user just doesn't pick up DAX or M coding abilities by trial and error. Building these skills requires formal training as an actual developer. If you have someone like this already on the payroll (and with the necessary bandwidth), consider yourself lucky. If you don't, you'll need to hire someone–or your teams might either give up or lose hours trying to make it work in Excel.

Unlike Power BI, Tableau uses a proprietary visual query language called VizQL, which translates interactions into database queries. In other words, exploring data is as simple as dragging and dropping–all without deep expertise or learning to code.

Tableau also offers natural language capabilities that help you get insights by asking questions in plain words. Tableau Agent is a capability that can assist in creating calculations during data prep, generating definitions for data assets in a catalog, or building and editing visualizations from text prompts. Essentially, any data worker or business user–even without any prior knowledge of query languages–can explore their data using Tableau. It's like Tableau comes with a developer built in to unlock the power of analytics for everyone.

Don't forget that if you choose Power BI and go the developer route for your BI needs, you'll also risk creating a bottleneck of demand that can stifle data-driven decision making and limit the growth of your organization's data culture. With only a handful of developers performing necessary analytics, your organization can quickly form a serious backlog that shuts down the ability to take action while the insights are most relevant.

3. The hidden cost of chaos

Power BI is delivered on the same global infrastructure as other Microsoft services, which offers peace of mind when it comes to security and compliance. However, those assurances are not without constraints, which makes governance complex. Power BI has only limited permission options that can be associated to semantic models, reports, and workspaces. Furthermore, the overlapping policies across Power BI workspaces, apps, data sources, and reports–coupled with the inability to "deny" access–encourage the proliferation of data without governance.

Without the proper controls in place, users are free to create their own dashboards with various business rules and definitions. The result, unless rigorous data processes are put in place, is an environment of conflicting numbers and sources, which compromises trust. Without data trust, no one will be able to confidently believe insights or take meaningful action.

Unlike Power BI, Tableau offers advanced, but flexible controls and governance process guidelines to build a data culture that builds data trust. Data trust means that when teams and leaders uncover new insights or trends, they can act on that data without hesitation to capture new revenue opportunities, reduce costs, or improve efficiency.

The hidden cost of data chaos comes in the currency of missed opportunities. Data is useless if it can't be trusted. Organizations that do not recognize this reality end up wasting thousands, if not millions, in data infrastructure that cannot be actioned by anyone.

4. The hidden cost of compute

Power BI is offered on a per user and per capacity basis, depending on the plan selected. Power BI pricing per Azure capacity scales up based on the node type and the number of nodes deployed.

While Microsoft publishes transparent plans that outline specific features and price points, it is not as transparent when it comes to its consumption-driven upsell model. As customers start on the lower end of the Power BI spectrum of plans (Free Desktop, Pro), adoption over time leads to the need for increased functionality and the shift to a capacity pricing model at an increased price. In other words, more functionality, more users and more usage quickly escalate to a costly Azure bill. While apparent over time, these incremental computing costs are hidden based on just the initial base price comparisons.

Unless properly planned for ahead of time, these hidden costs of compute on Azure can grow quickly, especially as analytics adoption increases. This can often be overlooked initially, and become very challenging to plan for financially over time–especially for cost-conscious organizations.

Unlike Power BI, Tableau offers a range of transparent licensing options to bring AI-powered analytics to every corner of your organization and meet your needs. Tableau customers know exactly what they're getting when they sign up for the service, and won't be forced into more expensive plans or add-ons based solely on product adoption. Premium features and services are available at an incremental cost based on the additional value they deliver–and that's it.

Buying capacity isn't anything new in today's world of cloud computing; however, these costs tend to emerge over time if organizations don't recognize the pricing model and strategy at play. Not understanding this can dramatically shift cost comparisons short term for organizations deciding between making Power BI or Tableau their analytics platform of choice.

Conclusion

That was a quick tour of four hidden costs of Power BI: bundling, curiosity, chaos, and compute.

Deciding between Tableau and Power BI as your analytics platform of choice based on licensing costs alone is a risky endeavor. Not only does Tableau deliver differentiated value above and beyond Power BI, but there are hidden costs to Power BI that are often overlooked.

If you're looking to transform your organization and build a data culture that unlocks insights, empowers teams to take action on trusted data, and is flexible enough to work with any IT infrastructure, then Tableau is the best choice for you.

For more information on Tableau vs. Power BI, please visit tabsoft.co/pbi

Additional Resources
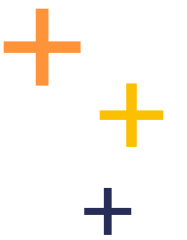
[Try Tableau](#)

[Why Tableau?](#)

[Compare Tableau](#)

[Training & Tutorials](#)

[Tableau Community](#)

[Solutions](#)

[Buy Tableau](#)

About Tableau from Salesforce

Tableau is the world's leading AI-powered analytics platform. Intuitive data experiences, backed by generative and predictive AI capabilities, elevate insights where you work most. Offering a suite of analytics and business intelligence tools, Tableau turns trusted data into actionable insights so you can make better decisions every time. Tableau offers the most choice and flexibility for your architecture as your technology and AI strategy evolve. With security, data governance, and compliance in mind, your organization can maintain agility as new demands on data arise.

Tableau is committed to supporting the unique needs of organizations around the world with the largest partner and success ecosystem, including the passionate Tableau Community that can teach, support, challenge, and celebrate you at every stage of your AI journey. The future is limitless when you start with data and move forward with Tableau.

For more information, visit **www.tableau.com**

+‡+ +ableau®