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— QUADRATIC BUYER'S GUIDE 01

# Spreadsheet vs. BI: a buyer's guide for modern *analysis workflows.*



*Most teams choose between a spreadsheet, a BI platform, or both based on habit or budget. This guide is organized around intent — what you are actually trying to accomplish — and the five dimensions that predict tool fit.*

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01 DECISION AT A GLANCE

## Choose by intent — not by feature list.

The right question is not which tool has more capabilities. It is which tool is designed around what you are actually trying to accomplish.

CHOOSE	WHEN
<i>Spreadsheet</i>	Work is exploratory, local, flexible, or file-based.
<i>BI</i>	Reporting must be governed, standardized, distributed, and managed at scale.
<i>Both</i>	Exploration happens in spreadsheets, and standardized outputs move to BI.
<i>Quadratic</i>	You need spreadsheet flexibility with live data, code, AI, collaboration, and repeatable workflows.

**THE FRAMING**

Excel, Google Sheets, and Tableau are strongest when users bring data into the tool, define the analysis, and produce a model or report. Microsoft Fabric and Quadratic point to a more workflow-oriented criterion: **how well the platform reduces the handoffs among raw data, analytical logic, collaboration, and decision-making.**

02 TWO ENDS OF THE SAME MISTAKE

## The two opposite ways teams get this wrong.

The most common buying errors in this space sit at opposite ends of a continuum. Teams stay in spreadsheets long after the work has outgrown them, patching complexity with more tabs until something breaks. Or they reach for a full BI platform before complexity demands it, and spend time configuring infrastructure instead of answering questions.

### *Reaching for BI too early*

Choosing a BI tool when you need a spreadsheet means paying for deployment complexity, IT overhead, and a learning curve your team did not need. Tableau's per-user licensing scales sharply with seats; Fabric absorbs Power BI into a platform with a complex compute-capacity model and regional pricing.

### *Staying in spreadsheets too long*

Choosing a spreadsheet when you need BI means analyses that cannot scale, reports that go stale the moment they are shared, and no consistent version of the truth across teams. Excel and Sheets are powerful for individual and small-team work; they were not designed for governed, repeatable reporting across an organization.

Quadratic occupies a different middle ground: a spreadsheet interface with live data, AI, code, collaboration, and repeatable workflows built into the same workspace.

*The teams that choose well are the ones who understand what they are actually trying to do — before they evaluate tools.*

03 WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

## Three buyer profiles.

**ANALYST**

**Independent work — models, cleaning, ad hoc analysis.** Data comes from multiple sources that do not always connect. The question is whether a spreadsheet can handle the complexity, or whether the work needs more.

**OPS / FINANCE**

**Recurring reporting — monthly P&Ls, pipeline, budget-to-actual, account consolidations.** The question is whether to invest in a BI platform, or use a flexible tool with less overhead.

**CROSS-FUNCTIONAL**

**Shared visibility across systems — databases, financial accounts, operational tools.** The question is how to give stakeholders consistent, current analysis without a centralized data team in the loop.

**04** THE FIVE DIMENSIONS THAT PREDICT FIT

## Five questions that matter more than feature lists.

Rather than comparing feature lists, this guide evaluates tools across five dimensions. Use them to predict whether a tool fits your real work conditions — not its demo conditions. One dimension follows per page.

**01** **Deployment** — *the first signal of what kind of problem a tool expects.*

Spreadsheets are easy to adopt because they fit existing user behavior. BI and data platforms require more planning because they introduce governance, permissions, data modeling, and rollout decisions. The more infrastructure a tool requires, the more sure you should be that the workflow actually needs it.

## BY TOOL

<b>TABLEAU</b>	Cloud and server deployment options, each with different administrative requirements.
<b>MS FABRIC</b>	Requires planning around capacity, workspace governance, permissions, and how Fabric fits into the broader Microsoft data stack.
<b>EXCEL</b>	Installed on a desktop or accessed through a browser with no configuration required.
<b>SHEETS</b>	Browser-based; little setup for users already in Google Workspace.
<b>QUADRATIC</b>	Browser-based; no installation required.

**BUYER TAKEAWAY**

If the team mainly needs faster analysis, easier collaboration, or better communication around data, heavy platform deployment may be premature. If the organization needs governed reporting at scale, the overhead can be justified.

04 THE FIVE DIMENSIONS (CONT.)

## Static file vs. live connection.

The architecture of a tool determines how much effort is required to keep data current — whether what the analysis reflects is what the source actually says right now, or what it said the last time someone clicked refresh.

### 02 Data architecture — *the difference between live and remembered.*

A live connection built into the workflow is structurally different from a refresh you have to remember to run. The first stays current by default; the second decays the moment the file is shared.

BY TOOL

<b>TABLEAU</b>	Live connections to databases or warehouses (Snowflake, SQL Server, BigQuery). Queries hit the source rather than a saved extract.
<b>MS FABRIC</b>	Live and real-time data workflows across event streams, lakehouse/warehouse, and alerting — powerful for organizations standardizing on Fabric.
<b>EXCEL</b>	Live connections through Power Query; VBA for custom scripts; native functions for sources like market data.
<b>SHEETS</b>	Custom scripts to fetch from external APIs; IMPORTRANGE auto-syncs between sheets.
<b>QUADRATIC</b>	<b>Direct connections to PostgreSQL, MySQL, Snowflake; queries run live inside the spreadsheet.</b> Plaid reaches 12,000+ financial institutions enterprise tools do not cover. GA4, Mixpanel, QuickBooks, market data via API.

**BUYER TAKEAWAY**

If data freshness is a recurring problem rather than an occasional inconvenience, the architecture of the tool matters more than its features.

05 AI PHILOSOPHY & TRANSPARENCY

## Assistant on top vs. intelligence built in.

The AI features built into spreadsheets and BI tools fall into two fundamentally different categories. The difference determines what the AI can actually be trusted to do – in the moment, and over time.

### 03 AI philosophy – *two fundamentally different categories.*

In most tools, AI is an assistant layer added on top of existing architecture – useful in the moment but unable to persist reasoning or produce work the next person can inspect. In a small number of tools, AI is built into the analytical environment itself, writing executable code that stays in the file.

BY TOOL

<b>TABLEAU</b>	Anomaly detection, trend identification, NL queries. Pulse and Agent – its two most capable AI features – require a Tableau+ premium license above Creator.
<b>MS FABRIC</b>	Three layers: Copilot in Power BI (NL questions), Fabric data agents (deeper reasoning), Fabric operations agents (monitor & act). Integrated with Microsoft Foundry and Copilot Studio.
<b>EXCEL</b>	Claude via Anthropic's add-in (and as a Copilot model option) – assistant-driven formula help, analysis, charts, and workbook review.
<b>SHEETS</b>	GPT for Sheets for bulk LLM processing (translation, enrichment, research); Gemini in Sheets for guided assistance and visual outputs.
<b>QUADRATIC</b>	<b>Writes AI-generated code that executes directly in the cell – Python, SQL, or formulas.</b> The code stays in the spreadsheet, visible to anyone who opens the file. AI agents operate as visible collaborators with full tool support: anything a human can do, the AI can do.

**BUYER TAKEAWAY**

If the AI result needs to be verified, inherited, or audited, the question is not whether AI is available but whether the reasoning it produced stayed anywhere you can find it.

05 AI PHILOSOPHY & TRANSPARENCY (CONT.)

# What happens after the result is produced.

Producing an answer and being able to trust it are two different things. The logic that produced a result may live somewhere other than the result itself — a formula chain across tabs, a data model only the data team can access, or a conversation that closed when the session ended. The question is whether anyone who needs to verify the answer can find the reasoning behind it.

04 *Transparency — where the logic lives once the answer is delivered.*

For exploratory work, opaque logic is manageable. For analysis that will be reused, audited, or inherited by someone else, it becomes a real problem. The question is whether anyone who needs to verify the answer can find the reasoning behind it.

BY TOOL

<b>TABLEAU</b>	Calculations live in a separate data model from the visualization. Reading a dashboard rarely lets you interrogate the calculation. Appropriate for governed reporting; a friction for exploratory analysis.
<b>MS FABRIC</b>	OneLake unifies ingestion → storage → transformation → analysis → visualization, reducing handoffs across the six stages of the data lifecycle.
<b>EXCEL</b>	Cell-level formula visibility; Claude in Excel can trace relationships across hundreds of interdependent formulas — high transparency even for inherited workbooks.
<b>SHEETS</b>	Same cell-level visibility plus Gemini AI. Shared editing creates a version-control problem: history shows <i>that</i> a formula changed, not <i>why</i> .
<b>QUADRATIC</b>	<b>Every analytical operation is code that can be opened, examined, and edited directly in the cell.</b> For compliance models, financial reports, or audited analyses, the logic becomes part of the audit trail — logic and output live in the same place.

**BUYER TAKEAWAY**

The further analysis travels from its author, and the longer it needs to remain trustworthy, the more transparency of the underlying logic matters. A result no one can explain is not an asset.

*Two sides of the same question: does the AI's reasoning live anywhere you can find it later — and can anyone besides the author interrogate it?*

06 LAST-MILE OWNERSHIP

# Who actually produces the final answer.

Most tools handle recurring, well-defined reporting well. The breakdown comes with ad hoc requests, evolving questions, and outputs that need to stay current without manual intervention. Whoever delivers the number to the stakeholder owns the last mile — and that ownership shapes how quickly an organization can actually act on its data.

05 Last-mile ownership — *the gap between data and stakeholder answer.*

BY TOOL

<b>TABLEAU</b>	A data team models and publishes data; stakeholders consume dashboards. Recurring and well-defined: works. Specific, ad hoc, or evolving: stakeholders depend on the data team queue.
<b>MS FABRIC</b>	Strong for recurring, governed reporting. Ad hoc questions outside an existing dashboard require a data team or a technically capable user. NL Q&A operates on modeled — not raw — data. <b>Power BI Q&amp;A is being retired in December 2026;</b> users are directed to Copilot AI.
<b>EXCEL</b>	Analyst-as-last-mile, building ad hoc answers manually or with Claude in Excel. Works until the analysis depends on data the spreadsheet cannot access, or is too consequential to live in a file one person controls.
<b>SHEETS</b>	Excel's last-mile pattern plus shared cloud access. A report in Drive reflects what the analyst last exported — unless the report is itself a Google Sheet, in which case it can sync with the source.
<b>QUADRATIC</b>	<b>Lowers the barrier for non-technical users to produce last-mile analyses themselves</b> via natural-language queries. Scheduled tasks deliver outputs without anyone requesting them. Live connections mean the analysis does not expire between when it was built and when it is used. Build once; it runs, stays current, and anyone can interrogate the logic.

**BUYER TAKEAWAY**

**The last mile fails for reasons most tools don't address.**

It fails most often not because no one built the analysis, but because no one built it in a way that **stays current, stays accessible, and can be understood** by the person who eventually inherits it. The five dimensions above predict whether a tool will close that gap or push the problem onto someone else's calendar.

07 WHEN EACH TOOL IS THE RIGHT ANSWER

## Best for, breaks at, buyer implication.

Three rows. One direction each. The headers — *best when, starts to break when, buyer implication* — are deliberately not feature columns. The goal is to predict where each option will hold up, and where it will not.

OPTION	BEST WHEN	STARTS TO BREAK WHEN	BUYER IMPLICATION
<i>Excel / Google Sheets</i>	Work is flexible, local, familiar, and file-based.	Data freshness, governance, automation, or handoff matter.	<i>Use for everyday analysis and lightweight team workflows.</i>
<i>Tableau / Fabric</i>	Reporting is standardized, governed, and distributed at scale.	The team needs fast exploratory analysis or low-overhead iteration.	<i>Use when governance and distribution justify platform overhead.</i>
<i>Quadratic</i>	Teams need spreadsheet flexibility with live data, code, AI, collaboration, and repeatability.	The organization needs a fully governed enterprise BI layer for broad dashboard distribution.	<i>Use as the analysis layer between static spreadsheets and full BI.</i>

### *Traditional spreadsheets*

Excel and Google Sheets are the right answer when the data can be managed in a single file, the analysis is exploratory or one-off, and the results are for personal use or a small team. They are also the right answer when stakeholders require a specific file-type delivery and have no interest in changing that workflow.

Power Query is built directly into Excel (and Fabric) for data transformation — connect to external sources, clean and merge automatically, load into Excel. It automates the manual work that often breaks spreadsheets.

### *BI power tools*

Tableau and Microsoft Fabric are the right answer when the organization needs standardized dashboards published to a large audience from governed, centralized data sources. Reporting consistency matters more than analytical flexibility, and IT resources are available to manage the infrastructure.

Power BI now sits inside the broader Fabric strategy. For organizations already deep in the Microsoft ecosystem this is a strength; for teams that want a reporting tool without a platform commitment, it adds overhead. Tableau's per-seat pricing — at every tier, including viewers — makes it expensive to scale broadly.

08 BRIDGING THE GAP

# Where Quadratic fits between spreadsheets and BI.

Quadratic is the right answer for the space between the two extremes — for teams that have outgrown file-based spreadsheets but are not ready to commit to the overhead of a full BI stack.

## *Where the middle ground is the right answer*

Two profiles fit cleanly: teams that have outgrown file-based spreadsheets but are not ready to commit to a full BI stack, and analysts who need live data, persistent code, and scheduled outputs without building a separate data infrastructure.

## *Concrete examples*

- AUDITABILITY**      Organizations where the reasoning behind analytical results needs to be accessible and auditable — rather than hidden in a conversation or locked in a data model.
- FINANCE**            Finance teams working with bank or investment account data that enterprise BI tools do not reach natively. Plaid connects 12,000+ financial institutions inside the spreadsheet.
- CROSS-FN.**            Cross-functional teams that need shared visibility into live data without requiring a centralized data team to field every request.

**WHY "BOTH" IS A REAL CHOICE — NOT A HEDGE**

*In practice, teams use Quadratic to explore patterns, test ideas, and build repeatable analysis workflows — then use a BI tool to publish standardized, business-critical reporting at scale. Quadratic does not replace governed enterprise BI; it fills the space where flexible, code-backed, AI-native analysis happens before — and sometimes instead of — a dashboard.*

**THE FIVE DIMENSIONS, APPLIED**

**All five — in one workspace.**

**Deployment:** browser, no install. **Architecture:** live database, SaaS, and financial connections — no manual refresh. **AI:** writes executable code that stays in the cell. **Transparency:** logic and output live in the same place. **Last mile:** stakeholders produce their own analyses; scheduled tasks deliver outputs without anyone initiating them.

09 THE SUMMARY COMPARISON

# Knowing which of these describes your actual situation is the only decision framework you need. *Choose by intent.*

Tableau and Microsoft Fabric are not the wrong answer for every team — their overhead is worth it when the payoff is consistent, governed reporting at scale. The 2025 shift of Power BI into Fabric means organizations evaluating it today are making a platform decision, not just a reporting tool decision.

Excel and Google Sheets remain good tools for a significant share of analytical work. The addition of Claude in Excel, GPT, and Gemini in Sheets brings them into the modern use of AI for data analysis.

Quadratic fills the gap that none of the others were designed to handle: connected, code-backed, AI-native analysis in a spreadsheet interface analysts already understand — with the transparency and automation of a real data workflow, without the overhead of traditional BI.

TAKE IT FURTHER · 01

## Self-service analytics, in one workspace.

Stakeholders transform raw data into actionable insights without routing every request through a centralized data team.

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Try it free — [app.quadratichq.com](https://app.quadratichq.com)

TAKE IT FURTHER · 02

## Request a demo.

See your own analysis workflow inside Quadratic. We will work from a workbook of your shape — or one of your own.

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[quadratichq.com](https://quadratichq.com) / [book-demo](#)

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