

Why You Should Fortify Your Use of Spreadsheets With an Integrated Data Hub & Reporting Strategy



Recognizing The Strengths of Spreadsheets While Respecting Their Limitations

Spreadsheet apps like Microsoft Excel are very capable tools for handling general data analysis, creating data visualizations, and developing budget scenarios. But spreadsheet users should have a healthy respect for the limitations of spreadsheet programs.

Why? Because individual spreadsheets or groups of them that capture your business data for reporting, planning, and performance analysis do not equate to a secure, centralized data management and reporting environment that ensures accuracy and scalability.

Stepping Outside of The Spreadsheet Comfort Zone

A scalable data management hub that connects a diverse set of analytics and performance metrics will compliment your organization's spreadsheet use, establish true collaborative workflows, and protect against risks associated with relying on spreadsheets for tasks they were not intended to handle.

With a data hub in place, your sales, operations, marketing, and finance teams can work from a cohesive, verified set of transactional data and have flexibility in how they access the data, such as from shared reporting views with drillable layers of detail. Data hubs are proficient at handling large data sets from multiple sources (corporate-, third-party and user-generated data) and making sure analysts see current, aligned, and complete data from whatever app of choice they are viewing the data.

Questions & Suggestions Presented in This Guide

Click a key topic below to learn why Silvon recommends moving from a spreadsheet-heavy mode of doing business to a centralized data hub with integrated planning and reporting apps.

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Why Be Concerned About Spreadsheets Used in Isolation?



Here are some things to watch out for when relying primarily on spreadsheets for planning and reporting.

Outdated Data & Thwarted Collaboration: Spreadsheets can become static and outdated if they are not connected to a central data hub and automatically refreshed from that source data on a daily or more frequent basis. Spreadsheets can become isolated, disconnected data sets that lead to misinformed analysts and frustrated data scientists.

Effective collaboration is at risk, too, if static spreadsheets get shared as one-offs via messaged attachments. That sets up unwanted situations of teams looking at different sets of data or the wrong iterations of plans or other types of reports built from the data.

Tedious Maintenance & Inaccurate Info: Manual set up and maintenance of spreadsheets is only as good as the expertise and accuracy of the people maintaining them, and ongoing maintenance activities can be a drain on user productivity. That depletes the time users could have spent understanding, discussing, and acting on the data.

Also, depending on people alone to maintain existing plans and visualizations can lead to content errors. Beyond typo risks, there's risk of new data missing for products and customers added to your business over time and old legacy data not being cleaned up in a timely manner for discontinued items and accounts.

Inconsistent Treatment of Data: Groups of independent spreadsheets developed by different teams can lead to misaligned or inconsistent representations of your data. Values might get formatted or labeled differently from one spreadsheet to the next. These files can lack vital mechanisms behind the scenes for keeping data aligned and validated. Alignment and validation are critical for knowing where values belong in the larger schema of dimensions, categories, and other groupings that your company relies on to properly organize its data.

Poor Match for Handling Big Data: Spreadsheet performance deteriorates as the size of data being captured in them climbs. Big data and complex calculations built over that data aren't intended to be managed from a single file saved locally or in the cloud. A spreadsheet is not a data warehouse or database. Also, a spreadsheet does not have a tight set of security rules around the data within it.

Missing Performance Alerts: Spreadsheets lack automated features for alerting users to important conditions that require attention such as low inventory, high return rates, idled manufacturing lines, or underperforming products.

Inadequate Data Exploration & Writeback Features: Being able to drill up and down through layers of detail or to other resources for additional context generally is not supported in today's spreadsheet applications. This missing feature impacts ease of use for users who want to quickly explore related data not present in the active spreadsheet. Disconnected spreadsheets can impede planning activities, too.

A more preferred option is to have reports directly connected to the same data hub with built-in features to roll changes made at one level of detail up/down to all other related layers of detail precisely and immediately. Writeback features in the reports take care of making sure aggregated data and totals reflect changes in all areas related to the edited piece of data.

In the [next section](#) of this guide, we'll explore how a centralized data hub and integrated suite of business planning and reporting apps can counteract the spreadsheet challenges we just identified.

Why Are Business Intelligence & Reporting Solutions Backed by a Data Hub the Better Choice?



There are millions of casual users and expert data analysts relying on the content presented in spreadsheets. That's millions of reasons for doing all you can to make content trustworthy, capable of being worked with in flexible and collaborative ways, and well connected to the greater framework of your transactional enterprise data.

Accurate data that can be analyzed on its own and with other data for comparative or more detailed evaluation is achievable when spreadsheets are combined with or replaced by a broader system of data management and reporting/planning resources. Folding spreadsheet use into the mix of that larger system helps guard against the risks outlined in the [previous section](#) of this guide.

Dynamically Update Data While Collaborating With Others:

Creating a temporary sand box for planning and analysis via a spreadsheet is a common activity, but make sure that sand box doesn't become permanently adrift from the entire ocean of data that drives your business. Content sourced from a data hub and connected to a squad of powerful business intelligence apps helps prevent data from becoming stale. It also makes certain that a single-version-of-the-truth exists no matter how or where users access the info.

Collaboration gets a boost from shared views of data in modern business intelligence and reporting apps like [Stratum by Silvon](#), which also has layers of security in place to protect data as it's used or updated by collaborative users. For example, administrators determine who has rights to see certain groups of data and who can adjust budgets and forecasts. In addition, dashboard features of today's sophisticated reporting applications are another excellent team communication advantage, acting as focused spots for teams to share reports, compare current plans to actual results, and link to background details that helps users understand highlighted conditions.

Complete Data Presented in Focused Reports: A data hub brings together values from multiple sources, then carries out rigorous verification and realignment tasks so data is always in an analytics-ready state. Nightly and on-demand update features of the hub keep the source data current. There's no questioning if the data is the latest and greatest, compared to the questioning that might happen when opening up an individual spreadsheet.

Performance monitoring apps built around the hub can supplement spreadsheet data or become your new tools of choice for navigating through information in focused ways. Ideally, the core apps partnered with the hub will have pre-built reports that track key performance indicators and mission-critical info while also allowing for custom reports and visualizations.

Other major benefits derived from a hub's foundation of accurate and complete source data are summarized on the [next page](#) of this guide.

How Do Data Hub-Driven Reports & Analytics Outperform Spreadsheets?



Improved planning, sharing, and timely access to data also await companies that switch from informal, isolated spreadsheets to integrated analytics tied to a central data hub for reporting and analysis. See the [previous page](#) of this guide for other types of benefits.

Data Sharing & Planning Between Apps: Integrated planning resources and trusted data sharing functionality built into core data hub apps are necessary for more robust data augmentation and sharing. Look for hub/reporting app technology that allow for secure, direct editing of planning-enabled data from its reports. This set-up is better than using disconnected sets of spreadsheets because planning/forecasting teams aren't using data in isolation from other relevant data that impacts their decisions. Another benefit is that edits are processed into the hub right away after they're submitted by users. Changes ripple through to impacted levels and refresh other reports containing the data.

Core reporting apps should also allow secondary apps/add-ins (like Power BI) to securely retrieve data out of the hub, but make sure there are auto-refresh features for keeping downloaded data current. Finally, core reporting apps should have import options to bring in data from other sources. Finance teams, for example, could pull hub data from prior periods into spreadsheets as a starting point for new forecasts then upload details back to the hub for comparative analysis with transactional data and to monitor plan performance over time. Forecasting or marketing applications also can be sources of imported data.

These types of features add efficiencies to planning/forecasting tasks and create a bridge between spreadsheets and the data hub. A data hub will skillfully merge valid data into the hub's overall schema and tables while rejecting invalid data.

Timely Navigation & Exploration of Big Data: Unlike spreadsheets, data hubs are 100% focused on carefully and efficiently handling big sets of data from multiple sources. A hub's specialty is data collection, management, and access. Users can open reports of data quickly and in very focused ways. Paging, sorting, filtering, and other customization capabilities present information to users in manageable sets that are easy to navigate. Drilling features let users click to drill up or down through layers of information and control how much detail shows in a report. And linking features can be enabled to connect reports to each other or open external resources relevant to the main report. In spreadsheets, this isn't possible.

Automatically Share Reports & Performance Alerts: Apps linked to a data hub with features for monitoring data and communicating conditions directly to vested users places less demand on employees to manually identify business performance issues. Changes to business conditions can be spotted and acted on quickly and accurately through the use of automated alerts that are shared with key stakeholders.

Links to recurring weekly, monthly, or other regularly scheduled reports can be sent out via email, too, so report administrators don't have to generate a message and report every time one is due to users. Tracking features in reports can be enabled to highlight conditions that need attention, easily keeping team members informed while linking them to the most current view of report data. Also, filters can be set up over these automated reports to further focus the content for the intended audience. Capabilities like these aren't possible with traditional spreadsheet programs.

Explore End-to-End Data Management & Reporting Solutions to Avoid a Risky Overreliance on Spreadsheets



Next Steps to Improve Your Reporting & Analytics

Spreadsheets from applications like Microsoft Excel have a long-standing place in the world of reporting, planning, and analysis. But if your community of spreadsheet users is looking to elevate their planning and forecasting game and you are looking for enterprise-wide data management and sharing functionality, then you should ideally seek out a data hub-driven approach to your analysis and reporting.

We invite you to consider Silvon as your one-stop data management and reporting solution when you evaluate companies that are capable of delivering the approach recommended in this guide. Silvon helps manufacturing and distribution analysts better track and understand data to drive superior operational performance. Our domain expertise sets us apart from other business intelligence solution providers. Our Stratum solution offers built-in analytics for measuring performance across the enterprise, a secure data hub for managing multi-source data used to drive your reporting and analytics, and tight integration with 3rd party apps like Power BI and Excel to provide ultimate BI value.

Discover Other Resources About Integrated Business Intelligence Solutions

Here's a few more resources to learn about Silvon's Stratum solution and topics covered in this guide:

- [Discover Stratum by Silvon](#)
- [See How Stratum Compliments Excel](#)
- [Learn More About The Importance of Data Hubs](#)

Reach out to Silvon at info@silvon.com for more information about these topics.

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