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HOW TO OVERCOME BUSINESS CENTRAL'S TOP 7 REPORTING CHALLENGES

Learn how to overcome the usability and performance gaps in the out-of-the-box reporting tools available in Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central cloud.

Data is the currency of today's fast-paced, rapidly evolving business landscape. No matter what industry you reside in, the key to continued growth and profitability is to have the right information in front of you in a format that is easy to understand and act on. As a Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central customer, you're already one step ahead of your competition.

Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central is one of the top ERP solutions in the world. In fact, the Forbes Advisor Small Business team recently ranked Business Central as the **best overall cloud ERP software system of 2023**. It's one of the few cloud ERP solutions out there that is well suited for every size business – robust enough to fit a growing business and affordable enough for a small business. But as with any ERP, Business Central's strength is how it collects data and manages business workflows – not how to get that data into a format that's consumable for your executives, managers, and business users.

Although Business Central comes with reporting functionality out-of-the-box, it does not often meet the unique financial and operational reporting requirements of most modern small to midsized businesses. As a result, many organizations spend several days a month just trying to manually collect and sort their data, instead of actually analyzing it to steer proactive actions or implement strategies for a more profitable, efficient business.

As a Business Central cloud customer, there are a variety of tools to choose from when it comes to reporting. You may find manual workarounds to the gaps in Business Central native reporting, invest in custom development, seek a third-party reporting software in the cloud or on-premise, or build your own reporting system. The purpose of this whitepaper is to help you decide which reporting solution fits your business and reporting requirements best.

Keep reading to learn about the top 7 challenges in Business Central native reporting and how to overcome them. You'll also find a handy Business Central reporting comparison chart to help in your evaluation!

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Top 7

Business Central Reporting Challenges

Every Business Central instance includes a selection of reporting and analytics tools that can be accessed directly out-of-the-box, from Financial Reporting (previously known as Account Schedules) to Microsoft Excel and RDLC templates to Power BI integration. Native Business Central reporting also comes with several **built-in reports** for finance, sales, purchasing, inventory and warehousing, projects, fixed assets, assembly management, manufacturing, and service management.

While the functionality and capabilities included may seem abundant, built-in Business Central reporting is quite complex. Not only does it have significant report formatting and customization limitations, but many of Microsoft's tools require different levels of knowledge and technical expertise to use them effectively. Whether you're upgrading from on-premise NAV to Business Central or you've already made the move to the cloud, that means you need a plan and solution for your business users to build and modify reports with any data they need, in the format they want.

After discussing these pains with hundreds of Business Central users, ranging in size and data needs, these were 7 top Business Central reporting challenges most experienced:

Report Formatting

Technical Expertise

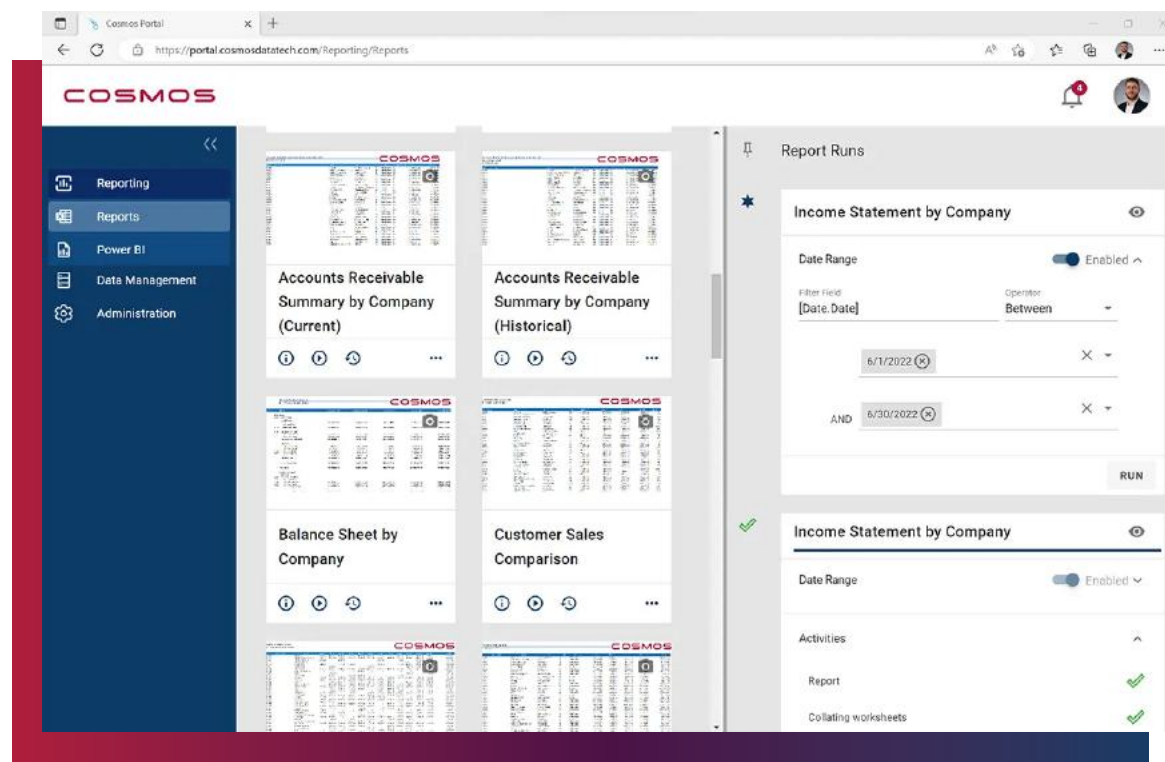**Multiple Entities**

Extension Integration

Data Accuracy

Power BI Integration

On-Premise Complexities

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Report Formatting

The reporting delivered with and embedded inside Business Central has limited formatting and customization options without specialized development help.

All businesses use a combination of financial and management reports to assess financial performance, analyze key metrics, track business goals, and make strategic decisions to drive business outcomes. These types of reports can have a standard layout, but every organization needs to be able to format reports to fit their own specifications. In Business Central, this process can be a challenge without help from a specialized, experienced developer.

Business Central comes with two primary, built-in reporting features. The embedded, standard RDLC reports delivered out-of-the-box, and the recently updated 'Account Schedules' functionality, now called **Financial Reporting**. While the standard RDLC reports are extensive, covering everything from finance to inventory (Microsoft provides a full list of which ones are included **here**), modifying these report formats or data inclusion in any way requires RDLC development (more on that in the next section).

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Financial Reporting in Business Central allows you to access and report on financial data stored within your general ledger, budgets, and dimensions. A helpful tool but not the easiest to modify and change on your own.

These rigidly structured row and column reports do not allow for much in the way of formatting variations and changes unless you export them to Excel, at which point they become static, manually compiled reports.

All this to say, due to the lack of flexibility and formatting capabilities in Business Central, most customers wind up spending an extensive amount time and money customizing report templates or building new reports from scratch to fit their reporting requirements. Or they take matters into their own hands by exporting the report into Excel and manipulating the data to get the format they want. This approach not only takes up valuable time from your employees, but it can also lead to more complications concerning data validation and accuracy down the road.

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Technical Expertise

Business Central reporting requires extensive development and technical expertise to tailor standard reports to include the data you want, the way you want.

To get the most out of your Business Central data, reporting should be something easily accessible and achievable to any member of your company. Unfortunately, reporting inside of Business Central is not built for everyday users – it's meant for skilled developers and technical experts.

A salesperson might be able to create or modify a basic report in Word and Excel, but they wouldn't be able to take advantage of RDLC report layouts, as they need to be familiar with using SQL Server Report Builder or Microsoft RDLC Report Designer. Ultimately, this means that unless you plan to hire a developer with this niche skillset, you will likely end up paying for and relying on costly external developers and consultants to create and modify all your financial and operational reports in Business Central.

While Microsoft has included some incredible reporting and analytics tools in Business Central, building or customizing them is far from user-friendly and requires advanced training.

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Multiple Entities

Reporting delivered within Business Central can only manage one company at a time and requires complex data consolidation for multiple entities.

It's normal for a company today to manage separate business entities in one system. Whether you have several subsidiaries under one roof or need to account for different locations, Business Central fully supports multi-company consolidation. Unfortunately, the native reporting functionality included in Business Central does not make it so easy.

The reality is that you can only report against one company at a time in Business Central. It might sound surprising but from the reporting side, it only fits organizations with single entities and simple reporting needs.

To make up for this serious reporting limitation, businesses with multiple entities must run one report for each company, export them into Excel, and manually consolidate every line item – every day, every week, every month. Copy and pasting in Excel doesn't just waste a ton of valuable time, it's highly error prone and puts your business at risk.

Inaccurate data often results in bad operational decisions, but it can also lead to reputational damage, economic loss, penalties, fines, and legal action.

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Extension Integration

Business Central out-of-the-box reporting does not inherently or automatically integrate with any AppSource or custom developed extensions.

Most companies running Business Central fully leverage additional productivity-enhancing apps or industry-specific extensions available in Microsoft AppSource or developed and delivered by their implementing partner. From advanced payable add-ons to industry compliance extensions, these applications customize and enhance the base, foundational system so it better fits each operation and user needs.

Let's explain. Extensions and add-on solutions for Business Central come with additional code, tables, fields, and capabilities outside of the core Business Central database. When you try to report from these add-ons, Business Central won't automatically read or include that data until a developer writes you a custom report inside Business Central to access it.

Once again, we're back to the problem of having to hire a developer anytime you need a report. While a lot of newer Business Central extensions include some reporting capability, they don't always. When you consider the fact that most Business Central customers have more than three extensions, it can cost you critical time and money in the long run.

The problem is that native Business Central reporting doesn't automatically integrate with these extensions or third-party solutions in general.

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Data Accuracy

Business Central reporting does not include the data analysis and validation functionality required to analyze your numbers and where they came from.

Reporting in Business Central is highly accurate inside the system itself. It connects accounting, sales, purchasing, inventory, and customer data across your entire business so you can analyze real-time performance and make informed decisions from anywhere.

The data accuracy problems are introduced when you export a report into Excel – a pervasive and common practice, especially amongst finance executives and managers who are familiar with and who prefer spreadsheets.

Due to the formatting limitations in Business Central native reporting, many users end up exporting their reports to Excel to get them in the format they want. When you do that, your reports become disconnected from the source data and they're basically just numbers on a spreadsheet. Any change or calculation compromises the integrity of your report, the accuracy of the data, and the continuity of analysis across different decision makers.
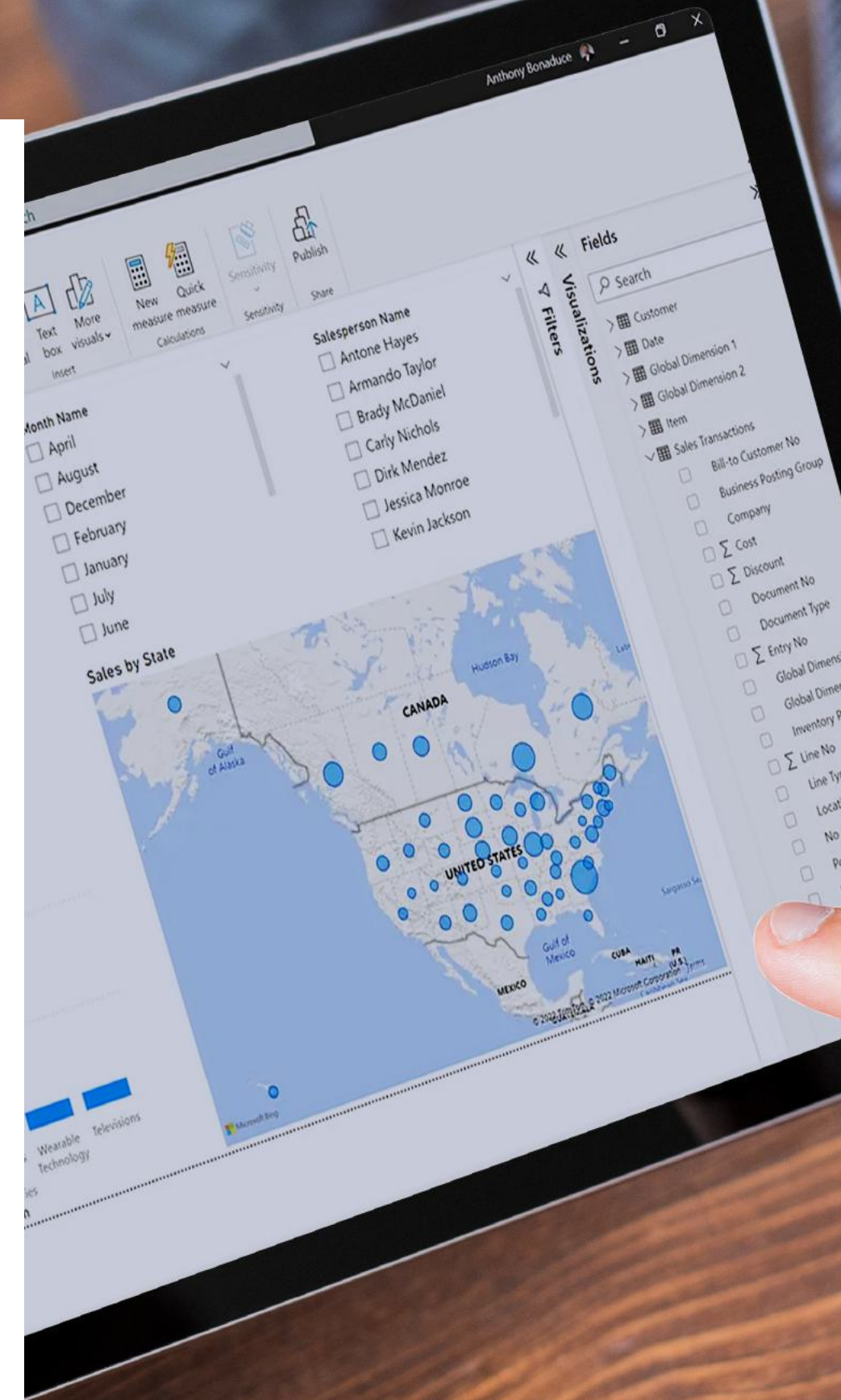
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Power BI Integration

Business Central's embedded Power BI functionality requires clean, organized data to deliver accurate dashboards and data visualizations.

Power BI is considered one of the fastest-growing analytics and data visualization platforms on the market. With Business Central, users get a free Power BI license that provides access to the most common features in Business Central and Power BI. You can also purchase a Power BI Pro license that provides access to additional features.

But Power BI has its own limitations and challenges. While it is a highly sophisticated visual analytics tool, it is difficult to use without an understanding of complex data modeling and experience with SQL code and DAX language. Power BI allows you to connect to all your data, but it's useless to everyday users if that data is not organized, accessible, or formatted correctly for use in Power BI.

4 LIMITATIONS OF POWER BI AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

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On-Premise Reporting Complexities

Business Central has a library of third-party reporting solutions to extend your reporting capabilities, but most are on-premise.

While Business Central has flourished as an all-cloud ERP, even discontinuing licensing for net-new on-premise installations in October of 2022, the community of add-on products that users and partners rely on for advanced, specialized functionality hasn't entirely caught up. The most popular third-party reporting tools were never designed or built for Business Central cloud, and it shows. They were made to run on-premise and on legacy ERP systems.

Many are incompatible and experience incredibly strained performance, with reports taking hours to run, tying up Excel, lacking congruent capabilities, and delivering poor user experience. This ends up resulting in:

- **High report customization costs**

- **Reliance on your Microsoft partner for new reports and technical support**

- **Additional hardware and maintenance fees**

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Compare Your Business Central Reporting Options

One of the best parts about Business Central is the fact that as a Microsoft cloud platform, it seamlessly connects with bigger, badder reporting and analytics solutions. So now that you have a better understanding of the reporting limitations in Business Central, let's compare your options.

We've provided an in-depth analysis of 4 different reporting tools, comparing the platform, features and frontend functionality, performance, and data management:

1. **Business Central**

   Set of basic financial and operational reports delivered standard with Business Central.
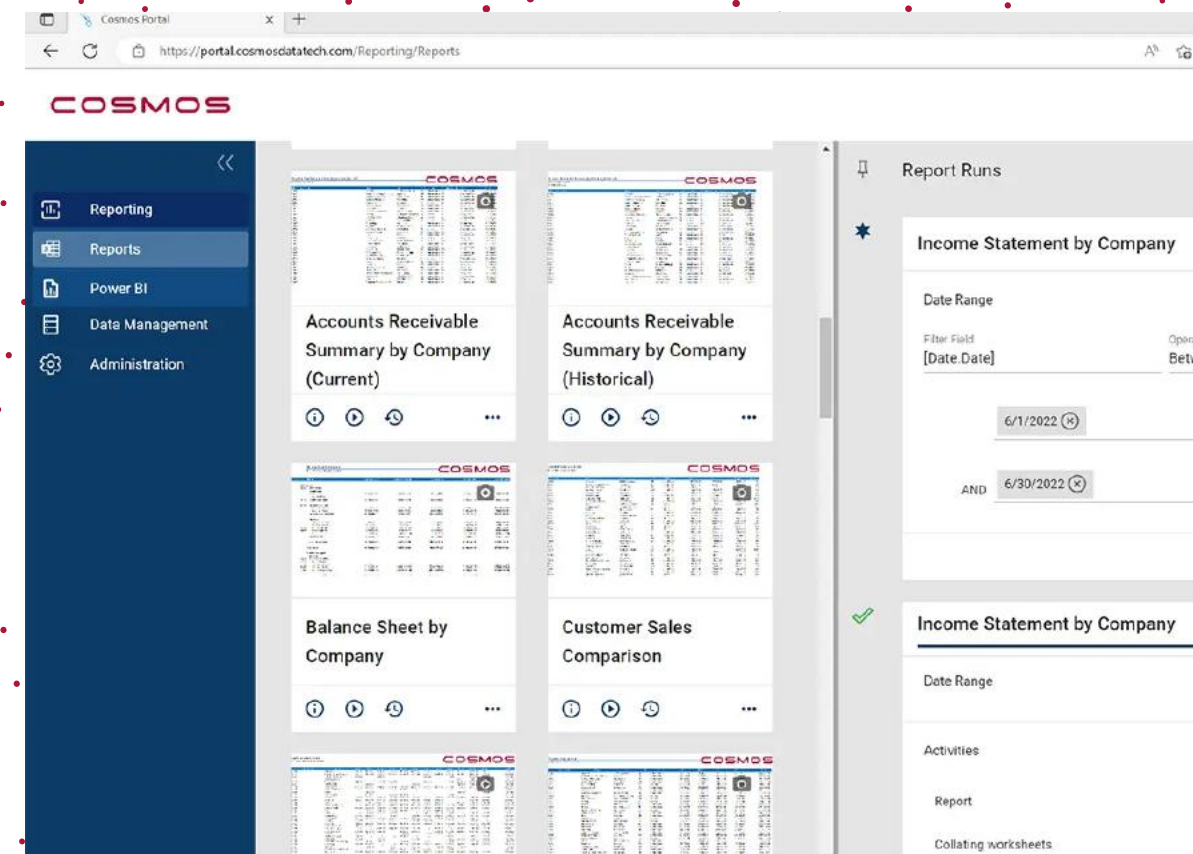
2. **Power BI**

   Interactive data visualization software across any data source offered from Microsoft.

3. **Cosmos**

   Lightning-fast reporting and analytics in Excel, built for Business Central Cloud.

4. **Build Your Own**

   Do-it-yourself approach to custom reporting and analytics.

GET THE BUSINESS CENTRAL REPORTING COMPARISON CHART

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How Cosmos Solves the Reporting Challenges in Business Central Cloud

Unless you have a talented team of Microsoft developers on staff, every organization with Business Central will inevitably reach a tipping point where its lack of self-service reporting and the costly manual processes add up. To get information out of Business Central in a meaningful, fast, and easy way, you need third-party reporting software built for Business Central cloud. The only cloud reporting solution out there that was built specifically for Business Central cloud is Cosmos.

Cosmos is a revolutionary cloud reporting and analytics platform designed to make your Business Central data intuitive and easy to work with. It provides the data access, speed, and self-service reporting capabilities needed to create, run, and manage all the financial statements and operational reports you need, in the format you want, at the click of a button.

Here is how Cosmos helps you overcome the formatting, customization, and technical challenges of native Business Central reporting:
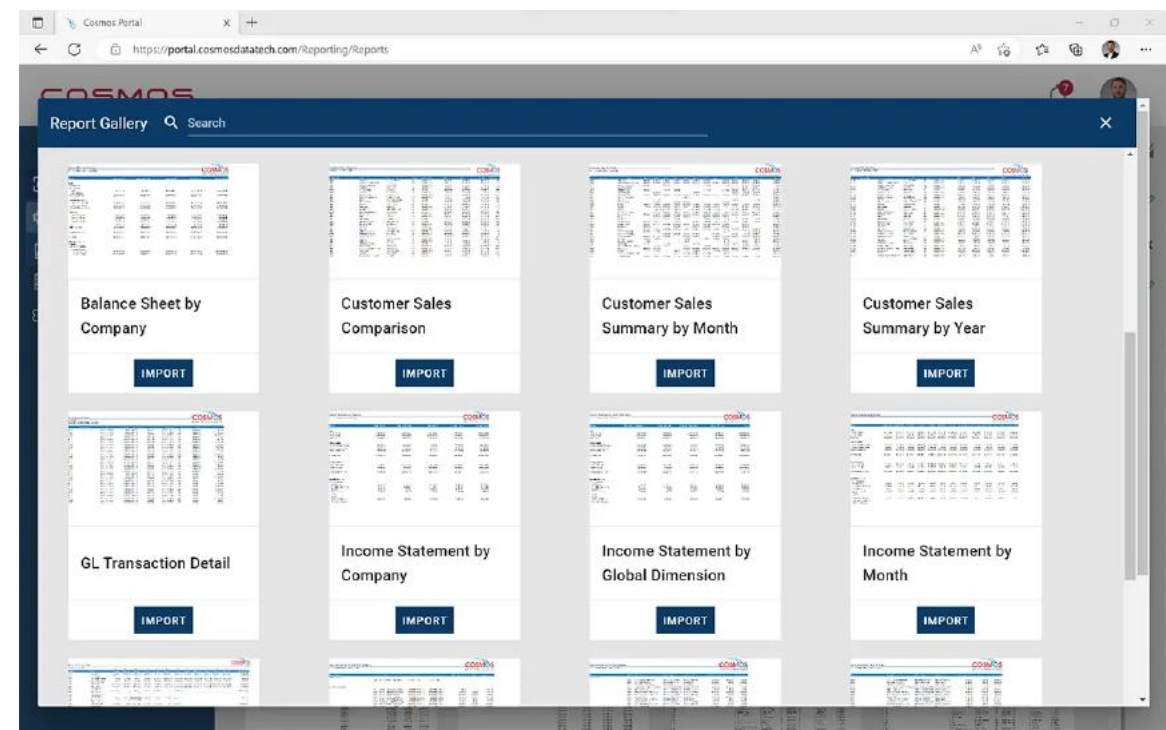
1. Report Formatting

Cosmos removes the complexity of report design by providing intuitive, self-service report building tools and fully optimized data directly in Excel. Users can modify and create reports immediately with access to 30 pre-built, fully customizable Business Central reports directly out-of-the-box.

2. Technical Expertise

Intuitive and easy to use, Cosmos provides a single, unified platform for everyday business users to create, customize, and share financial and operational reports without worrying about the underlying data structure or requiring technical expertise. The Cosmos built-in data model automatically connects all your Business Central data together so creating any report or dashboard you need requires no specialized development.

3. Multiple Entities

Cosmos brings together all of your Business Central data, across all of your companies, into one centralized user experience and cloud platform – so consolidated reporting is simple, easy, and automatic.

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How Cosmos Solves the Reporting Challenges in Business Central Cloud

4. Extension Integration

Cosmos is seamlessly integrated with your entire Business Central database and environment from day one, including any custom tables and fields as well as any per tenant extensions. Immediately start using Cosmos to report on all of your data.
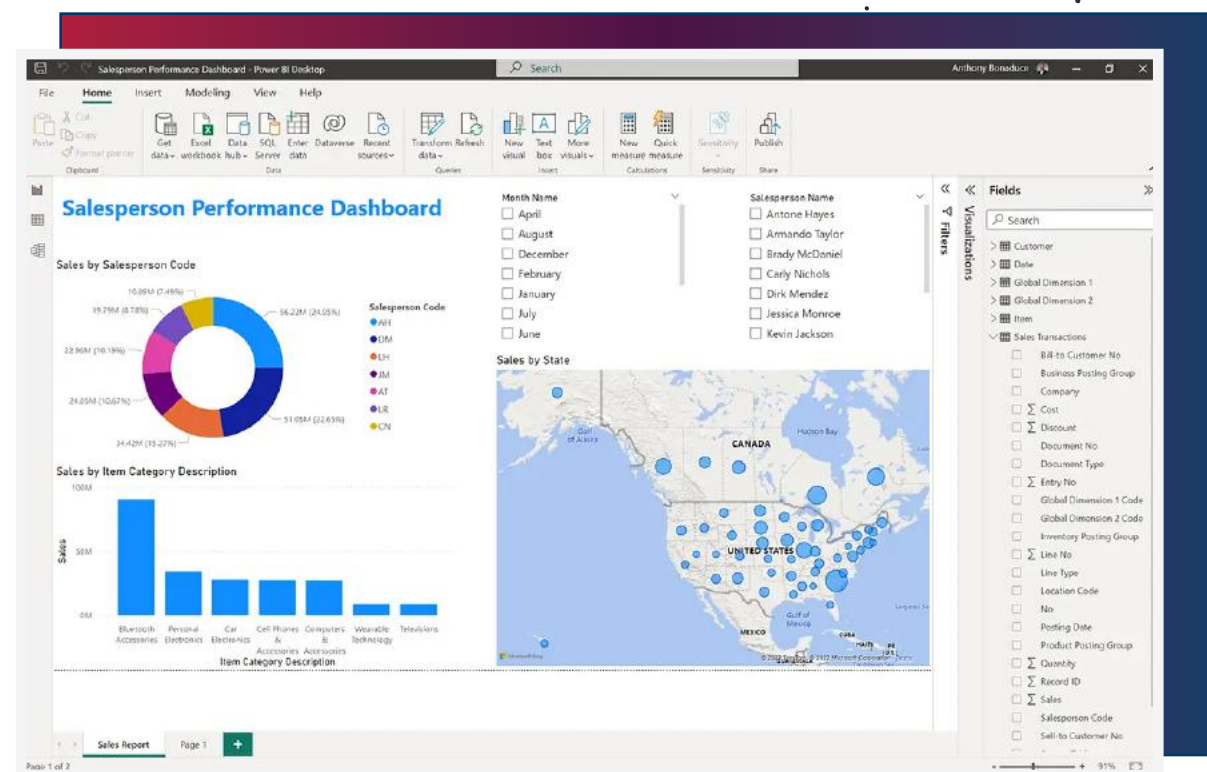
5. Data Accuracy

Cosmos eliminates error-prone, manual processes and the need to export data from Excel by streamlining and automating how you access your data and create reports directly inside of the Excel application. With reports running **48x faster than other Excel-based tools,** Cosmos provides extensive time savings and ensures data integrity so your employees can spend time on high value tasks and meaningful work.

6. Power BI Integration

Cosmos cloud reporting removes the complexities of **Power BI** by providing access to clean, optimized data and reducing the need for advanced technical knowledge. With a complete Power BI integration using a custom API that hooks directly to your Cosmos Data Model, you instantly have the ability to create robust dashboards and powerful data visualizations. No coding required.

7. On-Premise Complexities

Powered by **Microsoft Azure cloud**, Cosmos is the first (and only) reporting and analytics solution designed specifically for Business Central cloud. Reports are easy to create, run at lightning speed, refresh simultaneously (so they don't tie up your Excel instance or desktop), and require no technical expertise to design and share custom reports and Power BI dashboards quickly and easily.

DOWNLOAD THE FULL PRODUCT BROCHURE

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Business Central cloud customers are widely demanding a full cloud experience and environment to fulfill their needs in scalability, mobility, flexibility, security, performance, and lower maintenance and cost overhead – and now they can get it.

With Cosmos, you can get up and running with your first reports on day one.

Easily accessible to the entire team, Cosmos reports run 48x faster than other Excel-based tools while offering simultaneous reporting, a centralized user experience, two-way Power BI integration, and a short learning curve. Best of all, it installs in 30 minutes and comes with 30 pre-built report templates. See for yourself by booking a discovery call and tailored demo below.

BOOK A DEMO

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ABOUT COSMOS DATA TECHNOLOGIES

Cosmos is the first true cloud-based reporting, analytics, and data management system built for Business Central. It provides instant access to the insights, trends, and visualizations you need now – without the expensive investment in additional hardware and knowledge of complex data structures.

Cosmos Data Technologies was founded in 2019 by three industry veterans who saw an opportunity to provide a cutting-edge reporting, analytics, and data management solution specifically for Business Central cloud. Designed for business users, not technical resources, Cosmos is lightning-fast, easy to use, secure, and fully cloud-based via Microsoft Azure – reports are known to run at least 48x faster than other Excel reporting solutions.

Learn more at **www.cosmosdatatech.com**