

When Excel is no longer enough: a checklist and a spreadsheet structure

Five signs, a worksheet to see what Excel costs you, and a structure that lasts for years. Even if you stay in Excel.

For owners and operations people whose company runs on Excel, email and the phone. It takes 20 minutes to fill in. At the end you will know whether you need a system or just a tidier spreadsheet.

Since 2023 we have delivered 15+ production projects. Most of them started with an Excel file that someone “had in their head”.

1. Five signs Excel is no longer enough

Tick what applies to you.

- ☐ **Everyone has their own Excel.** You hear “I have a different Excel” at least once a week.
- ☐ **One answer means opening several files.** Where is the order, who handles it, what price did we quote.
- ☐ **The process lives in the formatting.** Orange means “quoted”, red means “urgent”. It’s written down nowhere.
- ☐ **One person holds the file.** When they’re on holiday, nobody knows why the formula in column K looks like that.
- ☐ **A mistake has already cost money.** A wrong quote, an overwritten row, an invoice paid twice.

How many you ticked	What it means
0	Leave Excel alone. A new system would save you nothing.
1	Tidy the structure using part 3. Come back in six months.
2 or more	It’s worth looking for something else. Continue with part 2.

2. What Excel costs you: a worksheet

Without a number, the decision about a system is a gut feeling. Fill in the table for one normal week. An estimate is enough; precision isn’t the goal.

Manual work	How many people	Hours a week per person	Total hours a week
Copying data from emails and PDFs into the spreadsheet			
Searching for information in files and emails			
Checking and fixing errors in the spreadsheet			
Calls like "where is it, who has it"			
Putting together a report or overview for management			
Total			

Multiply the result by four. That's the hours a month you pay today for work that software should do.

Then ask one question: **where would the saved time go?** An hour saved in sales can become an order. An hour saved in admin often just dissolves. Start where the time has somewhere to go.

Also write down the last mistake that cost money. One wrong quote often weighs more than the hours.

3. A spreadsheet structure that lasts

These rules always help. If you ever move to a system, the move will be much easier.

1. **One row is one thing.** One order, one customer, one item.
2. **One sheet is one kind of thing.** Customers separately, orders separately.
3. **Every row has its own ID.** An order points to the customer by ID, not by name.
4. **Status is a column, not a colour.** "quoted", "confirmed", "done".
5. **Who handles it is a column too.** Not a note in a cell.
6. **History isn't written by overwriting.** A change is a new row with a date and a name.
7. **No merged cells** and no empty rows as separators.

Three patterns you can copy

Process	Sheets and columns	Rule
Orders	Customers (ID, Name, Company ID, Contact) · Orders (ID, Customer ID, Date, Status, Owner, Amount)	Status only from a list. The amount is never overwritten; a change is a new row.

Process	Sheets and columns	Rule
Customers (CRM)	Companies (Company ID, Name, City, Account owner, Status) · Contacts (Company ID, Name, Role, Phone, Email) · Activities (Date, Company ID, Who, What happened, Next step, Due date)	The company ID is the key, not the name. Activities are only ever added.
Inventory	Items (Code, Name, Unit, Minimum, Stock, Reorder) · Movements (Date, Code, Type, Quantity, Document, Who)	Nobody types the stock level; it's calculated from movements. A stock count is a new movement with the difference.

Stock formula: `=SUMIFS(Movements[Quantity], Movements[Code], [@Code])` . Receipts positive, issues negative.

A tidy-up in one afternoon

- ☐ Select each range and use **Format as Table**. Name the table.
- ☐ Give the Status and Type columns **Data Validation** with a list of values.
- ☐ Add an ID column where one is missing.
- ☐ Turn colours that mean something into the Status column.
- ☐ Remove merged cells and empty rows.
- ☐ Put the file on OneDrive or SharePoint if several people write to it.

A word on sharing: co-authoring in Microsoft 365 doesn't give you per-person permissions or input control. Pasting from the clipboard even gets around Data Validation.

4. What instead of Excel

Not always a custom system. You have three options.

Situation	What to choose
A few people, one list, mistakes are cheap	Stay in Excel and tidy the structure
A standard process that works the same everywhere (invoicing, attendance)	Off-the-shelf SaaS, if you can get your data out
A process that sets you apart, or SaaS can't do the one thing you need	Your own system, one process at a time

Five questions before you sign up for SaaS

- ☐ Can I export the data myself, without support?
- ☐ Is the export CSV or Excel, not just PDF?
- ☐ Do I pay per user? What will it cost when more people join?

- ☐ Can it do exactly the step I'm leaving Excel for?
- ☐ What do I get when I leave, and by when? Is it in the contract?

5. Moving without chaos: four rules

1. **Don't start with a big migration.** At the freight forwarding company KIABA, the new system was half empty for the first weeks. One rule helped: on every call with a carrier, the dispatcher adds or updates the carrier in the system. Attach the system to work people already do every day.
2. **Leave a way back.** An export to Excel calms even the biggest sceptic.
3. **One process at a time.** In our own accounting we replaced only invoice processing. One invoice took 10 to 15 minutes; today it takes under a minute. 70 % go through without a human.
4. **Export safely.** Excel can run text that starts with "=" as a formula. Ask your vendor about it.

6. What to prepare before the first conversation

You don't need a specification. Three things are enough:

1. the documents or quotes you send today, PDFs are fine,
2. the Excel file the process lives in, even if it's messy,
3. this completed checklist and the worksheet from part 2.

Is your Excel at its limit?

In 15 minutes with Filip we go through your completed checklist. We tell you honestly whether a system makes sense or a tidier spreadsheet will do.

Book 15 minutes with Filip: digitaliko.com/contact

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