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Airtable vs. Smartsheet vs. Notion: What No-Code Actually Costs

Based on verified user data   No vendor advertising

No sponsored findings   No spin

Explosive finding: Smartsheet's 2024-2025 licensing overhaul automatically converts anyone with editor permissions into a paid seat — no admin approval required — and bills you for it at the next quarterly reconciliation. You cannot refuse the charge.

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Full report with pricing tables, hidden-cost breakdown, and decision framework.

Unvarnished Reviews Research

This report synthesizes verified user reviews and practitioner community posts collected from G2, Capterra, Reddit r/nocode and r/notionso, and independent pricing-tracking sources including CheckThat.ai, CostBench, SpendHound, Vendr, and SaaS Price Pulse. Pricing data reflects vendor pricing pages and independent procurement analysis current as of July 2026. Research Notes available on request at editorial@unvarnishedreviews.com.

The Verdict Up Front

Airtable is the most database-capable of the three, built on a genuine relational model with linked records, lookups, and rollups. It carries the highest per-seat price of the group (4.5–4.6/5 on G2) and a billing structure with three separate meters — seats, records per base, and automation runs — any one of which can force an unplanned upgrade with no middle tier available.

Smartsheet (4.4/5 on G2) is the spreadsheet-native choice, immediately familiar to Excel-fluent finance and PMO teams, with the deepest project-management feature set of the three: Gantt charts, dependencies, resource management. It also carries the most aggressive automatic-billing mechanism in this category: The 2024-2025 User Subscription Model auto-converts editor-permission users into billed seats without requiring anyone to approve it first.

Notion (4.6–4.7/5 on G2) is the all-in-one workspace: Docs, wikis, and light databases in one tool, at the lowest entry price of the three. Its 2025-2026 pricing changes moved in the opposite direction from a discount — AI was quietly pulled out of the affordable tier and locked behind a mandatory full-price upgrade, then layered with a new metered-credit system in 2026 that can silently pause automations mid-cycle.

The category theme connecting all three: None of these vendors is hiding its base price. What's harder to see upfront is the *mechanism* that converts a stable, budgeted subscription into a bigger one — a record cap, an auto-provisioned seat, or a bundled feature you can no longer buy separately. Each platform has its own version of this mechanism, and each is easy to miss until the invoice already reflects it.

The Billing Model: Three Different Traps

Airtable: Three Meters, Any One Forces the Upgrade

Airtable bills per editor — read-only viewers, commenters, and form submitters are free on every plan, which is a genuine advantage for stakeholder-heavy teams. The catch is organizational, not mathematical: Edit access spreads. The contractor who fixes one field, the founder who checks in quarterly — each becomes a full seat for the month.

Beneath the seat count sit two more limits that matter more. The Team plan caps records at 50,000 per base and automation runs at 25,000 per month. Records are counted per base, not per table, so a base with ten tables at 5,000 records each is already at the ceiling. Exceeding either limit forces an immediate move to Business — a **125% per-seat price increase, with no intermediate tier.** Automation runs are counted per trigger invocation regardless of what the automation does once triggered, and failed or empty runs still count against the cap.

Plan	Price (annual)	Records/ base	Automation runs/ mo
Free	$0	1,000	100
Team	$20/seat/mo	50,000	25,000
Business	$45/seat/mo	125,000	100,000
Enterprise Scale	Custom (~$65–100+/ seat)	500,000+	500,000+

Two more line items rarely show up in the initial budget: Portals, for external stakeholder access, start at $120/month for 15 guests on Team; AI credits run roughly $120/month for a 10,000-credit pack, with top-up packs at $40 for 20,000 more when the monthly allocation runs out. Integration middleware like Zapier or Make typically adds $200–300/month on top of the base subscription for anything beyond Airtable's native automation engine.

Smartsheet: Auto-Provisioned Seats You Can't Decline

Smartsheet's pricing looks straightforward at the surface: Pro at roughly $9/user/month annual, Business in the high-teens to low-$30s/user/month depending on when and where you're quoted (Smartsheet has raised Business-tier pricing more than once in the past year — verify the current figure directly before budgeting), and custom Enterprise pricing. Contributors, who can view, comment, and submit forms, are free and unlimited on every plan.

The mechanism that changes the math is the User Subscription Model, rolled out in 2024–2025. Historically, Smartsheet allowed unlimited free collaborators; under USM, any user who is granted editor permissions is automatically converted into a "provisional member" and added to your paid seat count — without requiring admin sign-off first. You find out at the next quarterly true-up, and Smartsheet's own documentation is direct that these charges cannot be refused once triggered. One practitioner account puts it bluntly: The new model may force some organizations to reconsider Smartsheet within two years, once enough previously-free collaborators convert to billed seats.

Plan	Price (annual)	Member minimum	Notes
Pro	~$9/user/mo	Capped at 10	New customers only
Business	~$19–32/user/mo	3 minimum	Pricing varies by quote date — verify current rate
Enterprise	Custom		

	10 minimum	SSO/SAML often required, adds significant cost

Beyond seats, premium apps are sold separately and are not small line items: Dynamic View, once $12,700–$15,000/year standalone, has been repriced down to a $240–600/year minimum in some configurations, but remains a real add-on cost most budgets don't anticipate. Prebuilt Connectors for Salesforce and Jira run roughly $20,000 and $15,000 per year respectively — enough that a 50-user Enterprise deployment adding both can face $25,000–$40,000 in annual add-on costs beyond base licensing. Enterprise-tier SSO/SAML requirements have been documented adding 200–400% on top of list license cost in some deployments; verify this against your specific contract before assuming it applies.

Notion: The AI Add-On That Became a Forced Upgrade

Notion's per-seat pricing is the most straightforward of the three on paper: Free, Plus at roughly $10/user/month annual, Business at roughly $20/user/month annual, and custom Enterprise. Guests are free and unlimited on every paid tier. What doesn't scale with usage is notable in Notion's favor: Pages, databases, storage, and API calls are not billed dimensions the way they are for Airtable. Your bill scales with headcount alone.

Where the model changed materially: Until May 2025, Notion AI was a $10/user/month add-on ($8 annual) available on any plan, including Free. In May 2025, Notion discontinued standalone AI sales entirely and bundled full AI access exclusively into the Business tier. A team that previously ran Plus-plus-AI at roughly $18/seat now has exactly one path to AI: The full Business tier at $20/seat, which also includes SSO, private teamspaces, and extended version history whether the team needs them or not — a bundle, not a discount.

Plan	AI Access	Notes

	Price (annual)		
Free	$0	Limited one-time trial	7-day history, 5MB uploads
Plus	~$10/ user/mo	Trial only, not purchasable standalone	30-day history
Business	~$20/ user/mo	Unlimited, bundled	SSO, private teamspaces, 90-day history
Enterprise	Custom	Unlimited + data controls	SCIM, audit logs, zero data retention w/ model providers

A second, newer mechanism layered on top in 2026: As of May 4, Custom Agents — user-built autonomous multi-step workflows — run on metered Notion Credits at $10 per 1,000, pooled workspace-wide, billed monthly, with no rollover. If the workspace exhausts its credit pool mid-cycle, every Custom Agent pauses immediately; scheduled runs that were skipped during the outage do not execute retroactively once credits are restored. For any team leaning on Custom Agents for time-sensitive workflows, that's an operational risk as much as a cost one.

What Users Actually Report

Airtable: What Works, What Doesn't

G2 and Capterra reviewers consistently credit Airtable's relational data model, flexible views (grid, Kanban, calendar, gallery), and visual polish — several reviewers specifically rank it above Notion and Smartsheet for database flexibility. The recurring complaint is the inverse of the praise: Performance degrades noticeably on large bases, and the price jump between Team and Business is frequently cited as a point of frustration, with several reviewers explicitly flagging the lack of a middle tier.

Smartsheet: What Works, What Doesn't

Reviewers consistently praise Smartsheet's project-management depth — Gantt charts, dependency tracking, resource management — and its familiar grid interface for teams coming from Excel. The most common complaints are a steep learning curve for advanced features and, increasingly in 2025-2026 reviews, rising costs as teams scale and discover the auto-provisioning behavior under USM.

Notion: What Works, What Doesn't

Notion's UI and flexibility draw the strongest praise of the three, along with its AI writing assistant. The recurring criticism: It can become slow at larger scale, and it lacks the execution-focused project management features (dependencies, resource views) that Smartsheet and Airtable both offer natively.

TCO Comparison: 25-Person Team, One Year

Platform	Estimated Annual Cost	Key Variable
Airtable (Business + Portals + AI)	\$13,500–\$27,000 + \$2,400–\$3,600 add-ons	Record/automation caps forcing tier; portal and AI credit add-ons
Smartsheet (Business + one connector)	\$7,200–\$9,600 + \$15,000–\$20,000 connector	Auto-provisioned seats; premium app and connector costs

Notion (Business, AI included)	$6,000	Custom Agent credit usage on top if used heavily

One documented data point worth including here: A mid-market team's move from Airtable to Notion, once the Airtable bill included Business-tier overage and portal costs, is reported to have cut that portion of their software spend by roughly 47%. That's a single case, not a universal outcome — Notion's lighter database model is not a substitute for Airtable's relational depth for every use case — but it illustrates how much of Airtable's cost premium is structural rather than feature-driven for teams that don't need the full relational model.

The Decision Framework

Choose Airtable if: Your work genuinely needs a relational database — linked records across tables, rollups, lookups — and your editor count is stable and auditable. Budget for the Business tier from the start if you're managing real operational data; the Team plan's limits are easy to outgrow within a year.

Choose Smartsheet if: Your team thinks natively in project-management terms — Gantt charts, dependencies, resource allocation — and you're prepared to actively audit editor permissions every quarter to avoid surprise true-up charges under USM.

Choose Notion if: Your primary need is documentation, wikis, and light databases rather than heavy relational data or execution-focused project tracking, and you're comfortable with AI living exclusively in the higher-priced tier.

The Pre-Signing Checklist for All Three

- Model your actual record count, automation trigger volume, and editor headcount before accepting any quoted price — not your current usage, your usage in twelve months
- For Airtable: Audit who has edit access quarterly; the seat count that creeps is rarely the seat count anyone planned for
- For Smartsheet: Request a written explanation of the User Subscription Model's true-up mechanics before signing, and confirm whether SSO is genuinely required for your compliance posture or being sold as a bundle
- For Notion: Decide whether you need AI before you price Plus vs. Business — there is no longer an incremental path between them
- Run competitive quotes from all three; per-seat pricing on all sides has moved meaningfully within the past 18 months and list price is a starting point, not the answer

The Bottom Line

Airtable, Smartsheet, and Notion solve overlapping but distinct problems, and the right choice depends more on what kind of data you're managing than on which platform has the lower list price. Airtable wins on genuine database flexibility, at the highest price and with the least forgiving upgrade cliff. Smartsheet wins on project-management depth, with the most aggressive seat-auto-provisioning mechanism of the three. Notion wins on price and flexibility for documentation-first teams, at the cost of a now-mandatory bundle to access AI at all.

The universal first step before any decision: Count your actual editors, records, and automation triggers — not today's count, next year's — and run that number through each platform's current pricing page directly. All three vendors have changed their billing mechanics within the past eighteen months, and the version of the page you read six months ago may no longer be accurate.

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