

UNVARNISHED REVIEWS

GitLab vs. GitHub Actions vs. CircleCI: The CI/CD Pricing Verdict

Unvarnished Reviews Research

Market Position: Three Platforms, Four Different Billing Units

CI/CD pricing comparisons are unusually hard to get right, because the three dominant platforms meter usage in three different units entirely. GitHub Actions and GitLab CI bill by the minute, but at different per-minute rates that change depending on the operating system. CircleCI bills by credits, an abstraction layer over compute time that makes a headline rate meaningless without knowing the credit-to-minute conversion for a specific machine size. A comparison built on list prices alone, without converting everything to a common unit, tells a buyer almost nothing useful.

Despite that complexity, a real pattern holds. GitHub Actions has become the default choice for teams already living in GitHub's ecosystem, backed by the largest marketplace of reusable actions (15,000-plus) and the most consistently cited satisfaction numbers in this comparison. GitLab CI is the consolidation play, bundling CI/CD with source control, a container registry, issue tracking, and built-in security scanning in one platform, at a meaningfully higher per-seat price. CircleCI remains the specialist's choice, the platform most often picked for build performance and native Docker layer caching, at the cost of credit-based billing that independent reviewers consistently describe as hard to forecast.

The December 2025 pricing announcement matters because it exposed something every buyer in this category should already assume but rarely gets to see confirmed: The infrastructure cost of orchestrating CI/CD, even for runners a customer owns and operates themselves, is real, and vendors in this category are actively working out how much of that cost they can pass on before their customers push back.

GitHub Actions: The Upside

GitHub Actions holds the strongest satisfaction numbers in this comparison by a wide margin, and the platform's integration with GitHub itself, rather than a bolt-on CI/CD product, is the structural reason why. Users rate GitHub 4.7/5 across roughly 2,336-2,399 reviews, the largest review population of any platform in this comparison; that rating reflects the broader GitHub product (repositories, collaboration, and Actions together), not a CI/CD-specific listing, a distinction worth keeping in mind when comparing it to GitLab's or CircleCI's standalone ratings.

Hosted-runner pricing is the most transparent of the three following the January 2026 rate cut: Linux 2-core runners dropped to \$0.006 per minute (a 25% reduction from \$0.008), with 2,000 free minutes a month on the free plan, 3,000 included on Team, and unlimited minutes for public repositories. The marketplace of 15,000-plus reusable actions is the largest in this category, reducing the configuration a team has to write from scratch.

GitHub Actions: The Downside

The self-hosted runner fee that was proposed and postponed is the most consequential finding in this report, and it applies to GitHub Actions; see the Red Flags section. GitHub said it would hear from customers before deciding on any new pricing and has set no new date. Teams building CI/CD strategy around self-hosted runners staying permanently free should treat that assumption as contingent, not settled.

macOS and Windows builds cost more than Linux. GitHub's list rates are \$0.006 per minute for Linux 2-core, \$0.010 for Windows, and \$0.062 for macOS, a roughly 10x multiplier for macOS, a cost driver for any team doing mobile or Windows-native development. GitHub Actions is also GitHub-only: a team using GitLab or Bitbucket for source control cannot use it without migrating repositories first, a lock-in neither GitLab CI nor CircleCI shares.

Runner startup time is independently documented as the slowest and most variable of the three platforms, and GitHub Actions never exceeded roughly 124 simultaneous jobs in one documented test despite a nominal 500-job concurrency allowance. A team evaluating GitHub Actions for high-concurrency, large-scale pipeline needs should test actual throughput against their workload rather than assuming the advertised concurrency ceiling reflects real-world performance.

GitLab CI: The Upside

GitLab CI's consolidation model, CI/CD, source control, a container registry, issue tracking, and built-in SAST/DAST security scanning in a single platform, is a real structural advantage over assembling the equivalent stack from separate tools. Teams that would otherwise pay separately for a security-scanning product get that capability built in, a cost offset against GitLab's higher list price that a line-by-line pricing comparison alone would miss.

GitLab's compute pricing is simple at the plan level but not flat by runner. Premium includes 10,000 compute minutes a month and extra minutes cost \$10 per 1,000 (\$0.010 per minute) on the default Linux runner, but GitLab's documentation applies cost factors that consume minutes faster on larger machines: medium Linux runners at 2x, macOS M1 at 6x (beta), and Windows at 1x (beta). A macOS minute therefore costs about \$0.06 at the overage rate, roughly equal to GitHub's \$0.062, so GitLab does not undercut GitHub on macOS or Windows. Users rate GitLab 4.4-4.5/5 across roughly 893 reviews, a strong rating from the smallest review population of the three.

GitLab CI: The Downside

GitLab's free tier is the smallest of the three. It offers 400 compute minutes a month and is limited to five users per group, against GitHub Actions' 2,000 minutes and CircleCI's 6,000 build minutes. Premium costs \$29 per user per month, billed annually, with no lower paid tier, against GitHub Team's \$4, and self-managed pricing is the same per user as GitLab.com.

At common team sizes GitLab is the most expensive of the three, not the cheapest, despite its all-in-one value proposition. A 20-person team on Premium pays \$6,960 a year in seats alone, against \$960 on GitHub Team, so consolidation savings have to be specific to a team's existing toolchain to offset that gap.

CircleCI: The Upside

CircleCI's native Docker layer caching, a capability GitHub Actions lacks natively, and its multi-host repository support (GitHub, GitLab, and Bitbucket, not locked to any single source-control platform) are real, specific differentiators. For teams with Docker-heavy build pipelines or a multi-repository-host environment, these are not marginal conveniences, they address real technical limitations in the other two platforms.

Users rate CircleCI 4.4/5 across roughly 509-511 reviews, with strong sub-category scores: Meets Requirements 8.8, Ease of Use 8.5, Ease of Setup 8.4, and Quality of Support 8.2. A separate review source rates it 9.3/10 from 53 reviews, praising GitHub integration and parallel build performance. The free plan includes 6,000 build minutes on the small Docker class (30,000 credits), the most generous free allowance of the three, though the credit abstraction makes comparison to the other two platforms' minute-based tiers inexact.

CircleCI: The Downside

Credit-based billing is independently and consistently documented as hard to forecast, the most specific, recurring complaint about this platform across multiple review sources. Costs are described as escalating quickly as usage grows, and the abstraction layer between credits and actual compute minutes makes it harder to predict a monthly bill than either GitHub Actions' or GitLab CI's direct per-minute pricing.

CircleCI's Performance plan can auto-refill credits mid-month, billing usage without a separate approval. A team that wants predictable monthly costs should confirm whether auto-refill can be disabled or capped before treating the advertised base price as a ceiling. Credits purchased on paid plans expire after 12 months.

Product Direction and Reporting are CircleCI's two lowest-rated sub-categories (7.9 and 7.8, against 8.2-8.8 for its other dimensions), a modest signal that reviewers have reservations about reporting depth and roadmap confidence relative to core CI/CD execution.

Platform Ratings at a Glance

Platform	G2 Rating	G2 Reviews	Trustpilot	Note
GitHub Actions	4.7 / 5	~2,336-2,399	No meaningful Trustpilot presence identified	Rating reflects the broader GitHub product, not a CI/CD-specific listing
GitLab CI	4.4-4.5 / 5	~893	No meaningful Trustpilot presence identified	Strong rating from the smallest review population of the three
CircleCI	4.4 / 5	~509-511	No meaningful Trustpilot presence identified	TrustRadius corroborates at 9.3/10 (53 reviews); Product Direction and Reporting are the lowest-rated sub-categories

All three platforms carry strong G2 ratings clustered closely between 4.4 and 4.7. GitHub's figure should be read with its methodological caveat in mind, it's a platform-wide rating, not CI/CD-specific, which likely inflates it somewhat relative to GitLab's and CircleCI's more narrowly scoped listings. None of the three show a meaningful Trustpilot presence, consistent with this being a developer-tool category evaluated primarily through G2, TrustRadius, and PeerSpot rather than consumer-style review platforms.

Pricing (October 2026)

Platform	Free Tier	Mid Tier	Top Tier	Pricing Model
GitHub Actions	2,000 minutes a month; unlimited for public repositories	Team: \$4 per user per month, 3,000 minutes included	Enterprise: \$21 per user per month, 50,000 minutes included	Per minute, rounded up per job: Linux 2-core \$0.006, Windows \$0.010, macOS \$0.062 (January 2026 rates); self-hosted runner fee postponed
GitLab CI	400 compute minutes a month, up to 5 users per group	Premium: \$29 per user per month, billed annually, 10,000 minutes included, \$12 in Duo credits per user	Ultimate: custom quote, 50,000 minutes included	Extra minutes \$10 per 1,000 on the default runner, with cost factors for larger machines and macOS (6x, beta); self-managed costs the same per user
CircleCI	6,000 build minutes (small Docker class), up to 5 active users	Performance: from \$15 per month with 30,000 credits and 5 users included; extra users \$15 each per month; extra credits \$15 per 25,000	Scale and Enterprise: custom quote	Credit-based; credits expire after 12 months on paid plans; larger resource classes and macOS consume credits faster

Vendr purchase data puts the median CircleCI contract at about \$67,680 a year (279 purchases, about 11% average discount). A third-party tracker lists GitLab's median buyer at \$430 a year from 51 purchases, which it calls thin data, so neither median reflects a 20-engineer team.

TCO Comparison: 20-Engineer Team, 20,000 Linux Minutes a Month, One Year

Scenario: 20 engineers, 20,000 Linux minutes of builds each month on hosted runners, at list prices. CircleCI assumes the Linux medium class at 10 credits per minute (\$0.006).

Line Item	GitHub Actions	GitLab CI	CircleCI
Seats	$20 \times \$4 \times 12 = \960 (Team)	$20 \times \$29 \times 12 = \$6,960$ (Premium)	\$15 base plus 15 extra users at \$15, $\times 12 = \$2,880$ (Performance)
Compute beyond included allowance	$(20,000 \times \$0.006)$ less 3,000 included minutes (\$18) = \$102 a month, \$1,224 a year	$(20,000 \text{ less } 10,000 \text{ included}) \times \$0.010 = \$100$ a month, \$1,200 a year	$(200,000 \text{ credits less } 30,000 \text{ included})$ at \$15 per 25,000 = \$102 a month, \$1,224 a year
Year 1 total	\$2,184	\$8,160	\$4,104

GitLab's Year 1 total runs 3.7x GitHub Actions' and about 2x CircleCI's at this scale. Adding 2,000 macOS minutes a month would add about \$1,488 a year on GitHub (\$0.062 each), about the same on GitLab (a 6x cost factor), and a higher credit draw on CircleCI. The ranking, GitHub cheapest and GitLab most expensive, holds across scenarios, but none of the three totals includes the engineering time to migrate pipeline configuration, which is not portable between platforms.

Costs the Pricing Table Misses

- **The postponed self-hosted runner fee could return in some form.** GitHub has set no new date, so build contingency into long-term projections for self-hosted runners.
- **CircleCI's billing mechanics can add unplanned charges.** Auto-refill can add mid-month charges beyond the base price, extra users cost \$15 each, view-only users reportedly count, and paid-plan credits expire after 12 months.

- **GitLab's consolidation only saves money if a team would otherwise pay separately.** Merge request approvals and code owners require Premium, there is no tier between Free and Premium, and a team already using free or licensed tools for registry, scanning, and issue tracking gets none of that offset.
- **macOS build minutes are the largest compute cost driver for Apple-platform teams.** GitHub charges \$0.062 per minute and GitLab applies a 6x cost factor, so a pricing comparison built on Linux rates understates the cost of iOS and macOS builds on every platform.
- **None of the three platforms' list prices include the engineering time to migrate an existing pipeline from a competitor.** Configuration formats (GitHub Actions workflows, GitLab's .gitlab-ci.yml, CircleCI's config.yml with orbs) are not portable; budget real migration time if switching platforms, not just the new subscription cost.

Complexity Comparison

Dimension	GitHub Actions	GitLab CI	CircleCI
Implementation	Lowest friction for teams already on GitHub; zero integration work since the platform is already part of the existing repository host	Moderate; straightforward for teams already on GitLab, a real migration project for teams coming from another source-control platform	Moderate; independently described as easy to set up, with reviewers praising fast integration with GitHub repositories regardless of CircleCI being a separate platform
Admin dependency	Moderate; documentation requires relatively deep YAML knowledge for complex, multi-workflow pipelines, a real friction point independently documented by reviewers	Moderate to high; the broader platform (registry, security scanning, issue tracking) means more surface area to administer beyond CI/CD alone, though consolidated into one admin console rather than several	Moderate; credit-based billing requires ongoing monitoring to avoid the auto-refill and forecasting issues documented in this report's Downside and Red Flags sections
Learning curve	Low for basic workflows given the 15,000-plus action marketplace; steeper for complex, multi-job pipelines requiring custom YAML logic	Moderate; reviewers note a learning curve for advanced features but a generally approachable experience for teams already comfortable with GitLab's broader platform conventions	Moderate to steep for advanced features; reviewers describe a steep learning curve for beginners despite an otherwise intuitive core interface

The pattern across all three tracks follows each platform's core identity. GitHub Actions is lowest-friction for teams already committed to GitHub, and that advantage disappears for teams on another source-control platform. GitLab's complexity is proportional to its consolidation: more capability bundled in means more to administer. CircleCI's complexity is concentrated in its billing model, not its core CI/CD functionality.

Red Flags

Every finding below is independently documented and material enough to influence a purchasing decision.

GitHub Actions	GitLab CI	CircleCI
• A \$0.002 per-minute self-hosted runner fee was announced December 16, 2025 and postponed. It was scheduled for March 1, 2026 and was postponed after community backlash, with GitHub saying it would hear from customers before deciding on any new pricing. Monitor GitHub's changelog rather than assuming the current state is permanent.	• The free tier is the smallest. 400 minutes a month and five users per group make a meaningful trial hard without a paid commitment. Budget for Premium early.	• Auto-refill can bill credits mid-month. Confirm whether it can be disabled or capped before relying on the advertised price as a ceiling.

- **GitHub Actions locks a team to GitHub for source control.** There is no path to using Actions with repositories hosted on GitLab or Bitbucket. Factor this into any migration decision.

- **Runner startup and concurrency are reported weaker than advertised.** Reviewers describe the slowest and most variable startup of the three, and one reported test measured concurrency well below the advertised ceiling. Test throughput against your pipeline.

- **GitLab is the most expensive at common team sizes.** Premium is \$29 per user per month with no lower paid tier, and its macOS and Windows rates do not undercut GitHub's. Confirm the consolidation savings are specific to your toolchain.

- **Compute cost factors are easy to miss.** Larger machines and macOS consume minutes at multiples of the default runner, and macOS and Windows runners are listed as beta. Model your runner mix.

- **Credit-based billing is hard to forecast.** Reviewers describe costs escalating as usage grows. Request a credit-to-minute conversion for your machine sizes.

- **Seat rules can interrupt builds.** A tracker reports builds can stop if an unprovisioned user signs in until an admin buys a seat, and extra users cost \$15 each. Confirm seat enforcement.

The Decision Framework

Choose GitHub Actions if:

- Your team is already on GitHub for source control, and the zero-integration-work advantage and largest marketplace ecosystem (15,000-plus actions) outweigh the platform's documented runner-startup and concurrency limitations.
- Your build workload is primarily Linux-based, where GitHub Actions' \$0.006 per minute after the January 2026 cut is the lowest hosted rate of the three.
- You've confirmed current status on the postponed self-hosted runner fee against GitHub's official changelog, rather than assuming the current free status is permanent.

Choose GitLab CI if:

- Consolidating CI/CD, source control, container registry, issue tracking, and security scanning into one platform offers real, specific savings against tools your team currently pays for separately.
- You have modeled your Windows and macOS volume, since GitLab's cost factors mean its rates are not lower than GitHub's there.
- You have confirmed what Premium's \$29 per user per month buys against the separate tools you would replace.

Choose CircleCI if:

- Native Docker layer caching and multi-host repository support (GitHub, GitLab, and Bitbucket) are specific, real requirements neither competitor meets natively.
- You've confirmed auto-refill billing settings and have a plan to monitor credit consumption actively, rather than assuming the advertised base price is a hard ceiling.
- Build performance and parallelism matter more than the most predictable monthly bill, and your team has the discipline to actively manage credit-based billing.

Key Decision Factors

Design decides what you are buying. GitHub Actions is CI/CD inside the GitHub ecosystem with the largest marketplace. GitLab CI is one part of an all-in-one platform. CircleCI is a specialist with Docker layer caching and support for any source-control host, at the cost of credit-based billing.

Audience decides which one fits. GitHub Actions suits teams already on GitHub. GitLab CI suits teams that want consolidation. CircleCI suits Docker-heavy pipelines and multi-host repositories.

Price follows the billing unit, and the ranking is stable. For 20 engineers on 20,000 Linux minutes a month, GitHub Actions runs about \$2,184 a year, CircleCI \$4,104, and GitLab \$8,160. GitLab's premium rests on consolidation, not on cheaper macOS or Windows minutes. The postponed self-hosted runner fee is the finding to weigh: GitHub has set no new date, so treat free self-hosted runners as the current state, not a guarantee.

The bottom line:

- A team on GitHub running mostly Linux builds should choose GitHub Actions and watch the status of the self-hosted runner fee.
- A team that wants one platform for source control, CI/CD, and security scanning should choose GitLab CI and confirm that consolidation offsets the \$29 per user price.
- A team with Docker-heavy pipelines or several repository hosts should choose CircleCI, with auto-refill and seat rules configured before launch.