The Per-Head Tax on a Free Language: Oracle Java vs. Azul vs. Corretto & Temurin

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The contradiction: Java is free. It has been open source for nearly two decades, and identical, TCK-certified builds of it are available at zero cost from Amazon, Microsoft, IBM, the Eclipse Foundation, and Azul. Oracle's price for the same runtime: $15 per employee per month — every employee, including the receptionist, the warehouse crew, and per the contract's own definition, your contractors and outsourcers, whether or not any of them has ever heard of Java. A 500-person company running Java on thirty servers owes Oracle for 500 people. This is the only major software subscription we have reviewed where the metric has no relationship whatsoever to usage.

How the trap is built

In January 2023, Oracle replaced its per-processor and per-user Java SE licensing with the **Java SE Universal Subscription**, priced per employee per month. Oracle's own FAQ states it plainly: Pricing starts at $15 per employee per month, with published tiers falling to $5.25 for organizations above 50,000 employees. Total cost scales with headcount, never with Java footprint.

Two clauses do the real work. First, the definition of "employee": The price list counts all full-time, part-time, and temporary employees **plus** the employees of your agents, contractors, outsourcers, and consultants supporting your operations. Redress Compliance notes organizations routinely discover in audits that they undercounted — a 500-person company with 80 contractors and temps licenses 580.

Second, the enforcement. Java audit activity rose materially through 2024–2025, and Gartner has predicted that one in five Java-using organizations will face an Oracle audit by 2026. The tactics are distinctive: Palisade Compliance reports Oracle reps no longer ask how much Java you run — they arrive citing how many times your company downloaded Java from Oracle's site and your public headcount. A single developer pulling the Oracle JDK out of habit is the tripwire; your LinkedIn employee count is the invoice.

Pre-2023 legacy contracts remain valid but cannot be expanded — a slow squeeze toward the employee metric at every renewal.

The alternatives are not "almost Java." They are Java.

OpenJDK is the reference implementation, and the free distributions pass the same Technology Compatibility Kit as Oracle's build:

- **Eclipse Temurin** (Adoptium) — free, community-governed, the default choice for most estates.
- **Amazon Corretto** — free, Amazon-supported, LTS-aligned, run at Amazon scale internally.
- **Azul** — the commercial middle path. Zulu builds are free; Azul Platform Core sells support per JVM or per core — a metric that tracks what you actually run — with extended support reaching back to Java 6/7/8 for legacy estates. Azul carries no Oracle audit exposure.

Migration, per Redress benchmarking across 30–40 Java estates, is rarely technical: Oracle-specific dependencies are uncommon outside WebLogic and a small set of JavaFX cases. The work is inventory and testing, not rewriting.

The math: A 500-person company, thirty Java workloads, three years

Oracle Java SE Universal Subscription (list, $15 tier):

Counting only the 500 employees: 500 × $15 × 12 = **$90,000/yr → $270,000 over three years.**

Counting the way the contract counts — add 80 contractors/temps: 580 × $15 × 12 = **$104,400/yr → $313,200.**

Azul Platform Core (commercial support on the same thirty workloads): Redress benchmarks Azul at typically 20–40% of the Oracle equivalent for this profile — indicatively **$18,000–$36,000/yr → $54,000–$108,000 over three years.** (Azul prices per JVM/core; get a real quote — the point is the metric, not the exact figure.)

Corretto or Temurin: License cost **$0.** The real spend is the one-time migration: An estate inventory (which apps, which JDK versions, which download sources), swap and test, plus ongoing patch discipline your team now owns. For thirty standard workloads this is weeks of engineering time, not a program. There is no annual line item at all.

Per employee, the Oracle math gets worse the more plainly you say it: At this company, Oracle charges $180 per year for every person in the building to run software that is free, in exchange for support most teams open a ticket against approximately never.

The counterargument, taken seriously

What does Oracle's $270,000 actually buy? Integrated support across the Java ecosystem, GraalVM entitlements, indemnification, and — for organizations deep in Oracle middleware — one throat to choke. If you run WebLogic, use Oracle-proprietary extensions, or your risk office requires the vendor of record for the runtime to be the runtime's steward, the subscription is defensible. And the Universal Subscription is genuinely simple: No counting processors, no true-up anxiety on the metric itself. You are buying an audit-shaped peace of mind — from the party conducting the audits.

Who should do what

- **Running Oracle JDK out of habit, no Oracle-specific dependencies:** Migrate to Temurin or Corretto. This is the highest-ROI licensing move in enterprise software right now — a six-figure recurring cost eliminated for a one-time testing effort. Sweep your estate for Oracle download activity first; that history is what audits are built on.
- **Legacy Java 6/7/8 estates that need supported patches:** Azul's extended support is the purpose-built answer, at a metric tied to your JVMs instead of your org chart.
- **WebLogic and deep Oracle middleware shops:** You are the customer this subscription was priced for. Negotiate the tier, cap the escalator (8% annual escalators appear in the wild — cap it in writing), and above all challenge the employee count: The cheaper move in most reviews is not a better rate but a

smaller counted estate.

- **Everyone:** Establish a JDK provenance policy today — which distribution, which download source, documented per install. The companies that get hurt are the ones that cannot answer "where did this JDK come from" when the letter arrives.

The bottom line

Oracle's Java pricing is a masterclass in decoupling price from value: The metric is your payroll, the enforcement is your download logs, and the product is available elsewhere for free — same standard, same compatibility kit. For a narrow band of Oracle-committed enterprises, the subscription buys real integration and cover. For everyone else, it is a tax on not having gotten around to a migration that, on the evidence, is mostly an inventory exercise. The 20% audit prediction is the deadline; do the inventory before Oracle does it for you.

Sources and verification notes

Pricing tiers ($15 down to $5.25 at 50k+ employees): Oracle's own Java SE Universal Subscription FAQ. Employee definition including contractors/outsourcers: Oracle's Global Price List language as quoted by Azul. Audit tactics (download logs, public headcount): Palisade Compliance as reported by Azul. Audit-activity rise, legacy-contract squeeze, migration findings (30–40 estates, Oracle dependencies rare outside WebLogic/JavaFX), Azul at 20–40% of Oracle equivalent, undercounting pattern, 8% escalators, smaller-estate-beats-better-rate finding: Redress Compliance (2026). Gartner one-in-five audit prediction: As reported in licensing-advisory coverage — attribute as Gartner prediction, reported. **Source conflict flagged:** For a 10,000-employee enterprise, Redress states $1.8–2.4M/yr while JavaNegotiations' tiered table implies ~$990K at the $8.25 tier — the discrepancy is tier assumptions; our 500-person scenario uses Oracle's own published $15 starting tier and is unaffected. Azul dollar figures are derived from the Redress percentage benchmark, marked indicative.