

How a LIMS Is Priced, and What Per-Seat Does to a Lab

The number on the quote is the least interesting part of LIMS pricing. The model behind it decides who in your lab gets a login, and therefore where your records end up.

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IN BRIEF

A LIMS is priced by seats, modules, samples, or the working groups a lab is organised into, on top of a subscription or licence plus implementation and support. The model matters more than the number: per-seat pricing rations access, and every person kept out keeps records somewhere else. Ask how the price grows when you hire a technician.

Key takeaways

- Ask how the price changes when you hire one technician. The answer reveals the pricing model faster than the quote does.
- Every person without a login is a record kept on paper, in email, in a spreadsheet or under a shared account.
- A shared login saves one seat and breaks the one-account-per-person rule an auditor checks first in any investigation.
- Pricing by working group lets everyone who touches a sample be in the system, including receiving, QA and the customer.
- Implementation and validation usually cost more than the first year's licence. Fix the growth path, not the opening number.

Everyone who searches for the cost of a LIMS wants a number, and every vendor page that answers gives a range so wide it says nothing: from a few thousand to a few million, depending. The range is honest. It is also the wrong question, because two quotes for the same figure can do completely different things to a laboratory over five years.

What decides that is the pricing model, meaning what the vendor counts when the price goes up. Seats, modules, samples or working groups each push a lab toward a different shape, and one of them pushes it toward keeping records outside the system it just bought. This article sets out the models, what each does to a lab in practice, why the business case usually mis-states the largest cost, and the five questions that reveal a model before the quote arrives.

What are the ways a LIMS is priced?

Four things get counted, and most quotes combine two of them.

Seats. A price per named user, or per user logged in at once. It is the oldest model and the easiest to explain, and it is the one this article is mostly about, because it decides who is allowed in.

Modules. A base system plus a price for each capability switched on: instrument integration, stability, inventory, a customer portal. Cheap to start and expensive to grow, because the lab discovers which modules it needs after it has bought the base.

Samples or volume. A price per sample logged, per test run or per band of annual throughput. Common in cloud offers, and attractive to a small lab, but it turns growth in the lab's own business into a rising software bill and makes a busy month more expensive than a quiet one.

Working groups. A price per team or department the lab is organised into, with no limit on the people inside each. Rarer, and the one that changes behaviour most, because adding a person costs nothing and the lab stops thinking twice about giving somebody access.

On top of whichever is counted sits the form of payment: a perpetual licence with annual maintenance, or a subscription that includes hosting and support. And beside all of it sit the costs that are not the software at all: implementation, data migration, instrument interfaces, validation and training. On most projects those exceed the first year's licence, and the implementation is where the real money and the real risk sit.

What does a per-seat licence do to a lab?

It rations access. When a licence is counted in seats, every login has a price, and someone in the lab has to decide who is worth one. The bench gets seats because the bench enters results. The stockroom does not, because the stockroom only receives deliveries. The QA reviewer gets a read-only login if there is budget this year. The customer never sees anything, because a customer seat is a seat that does not do billable work.

None of those decisions is unreasonable on its own. Together they produce a system that holds part of the lab's work and a set of people around it who touch samples every day and are not in it. The stockroom keeps a receiving log on paper. The reviewer asks for a printout. The customer telephones. Each of those is a record kept somewhere the system cannot see, and each is a reconciliation somebody does at month end.

The rationing also gets worse over time, not better. A lab hires a technician and the software bill goes up, so the technician shares a login for the first six months. A second site opens and its people are given a single generic account "for now". The seat count on the invoice stays flat while the number of people using the system doubles, and the audit trail records that four people called Lab User did everything.

WHO TYPICALLY GETS A LOGIN UNDER PER-SEAT PRICING

Bench analysts entering results

5 likelihood, indicative

Supervisors and lab management

5 likelihood, indicative

QA reviewers

3 likelihood, indicative

Sample receiving and stockroom

2 likelihood, indicative

Field samplers and couriers

1 likelihood, indicative

The customer who sent the sample

0 likelihood, indicative

Pattern observed across LabLynx implementations and prospect conversations; not a survey

Where do the records go when a person has no login?

They go where they always went before the LIMS. To paper, because a receiving book on the bench is quicker than asking someone with a login to enter a delivery. To email, because a reviewer without access asks the analyst to send the result, and the analyst's reply is now the record of the review. To a spreadsheet, because the field team has samples to schedule and no screen to do it on. And to a shared account, which is the subject of the next section.

The cost of this is not in the licence. It is in every question the system cannot answer because the answer was never in it. Where is the sample now? The system says received; the stockroom book says it was moved to cold storage on Tuesday. Who reviewed this result? The system says the analyst released it; the email thread says the reviewer approved it two days later. An auditor who finds the system and the paper disagreeing does not conclude that the paper is wrong.

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The people kept out are, almost always, the people whose records matter most to traceability: those who receive, move, store and dispose of samples, and those who review and release results. The bench analyst's work is the best-recorded part of any laboratory. It is the handoffs around it that go missing, and per-seat pricing is designed to keep the people at the handoffs outside the system.

Why is a shared login a compliance problem, not a saving?

Because every regulation that governs electronic records assumes one account per person, and an audit trail that says "the lab account did it" answers nothing. The US rule on electronic records requires that access be limited to authorised individuals and that each electronic signature be unique to one person and not reused or reassigned. The European equivalent and the accreditation standards for testing laboratories ask for the same thing in their own words. A shared login satisfies none of them, whatever the licence says.

The saving is also smaller than it looks. A shared account saves one seat. It costs the lab the ability to answer who did anything, which is the question every deviation investigation, every customer complaint and every inspection begins with. When the answer is "one of the four people who use that login", the investigation widens to all four, and the finding is not about the result. It is about the system of control.

NOTE

A vendor who offers a discount for concurrent-user licensing is offering a shared login with a different name. Concurrent seats limit how many people are in the system at once, which means someone is waiting to log in, which means someone else stays logged in and lets them use the screen. The audit trail records the person who logged in, not the person who did the work.

One account per person is the lab's obligation, not the vendor's. But a pricing model that puts a price on each person is one that makes the obligation expensive to meet, and the lab that meets it anyway pays for compliance in seats. The model that counts something other than people removes the incentive to cut corners, which is why the model matters more than the number.

What should you ask a vendor about price?

Five questions, asked before the quote, reveal the model and what it will do to the lab. The answers are more useful than the figure.

- How does the price change when we hire one technician? If the answer is a number, access is rationed by person.
- Can our sample receiving, stores and field staff have their own logins, and what does that cost? If it costs, they will not have them.
- Can a QA reviewer have full access to review and release, and can our customers see their own results? Or are those extra seats?
- What is included in implementation, and what is billed separately: data migration, each instrument interface, validation documentation, training?
- What does year three cost, with the modules we will have discovered we need by then, and how is that price fixed?

The fifth question matters because the first-year figure is the one vendors compete on and the one that least predicts the total. Implementation and validation effort usually cost more than the first year's licence, and the module the lab did not know it needed usually arrives in year two. A quote that fixes the growth path is worth more than one that undercuts on the opening figure.

Count the people in your lab who touch a sample and are not in the current system. That number is the size of the records problem the pricing model has to solve, and the right model is the one under which that number goes to zero without a conversation about budget.

What LabLynx charges for, and does not

LabLynx has sold LIMS under most of the models above over the years, and the customer portal was the product that made the argument for us: a lab whose customers can see their own work stops fielding the telephone calls, and that only happens when the customer's access costs nothing.

How LabLynx handles this

LabLynx One is priced by the working groups a laboratory is organised into, not by the people in them. A licence covers a number of groups, the lab creates as many as it likes and decides which the licence is spent on, and every person who needs to be in one, including receiving, stores, QA and the customer, is. What we charge for beyond that is implementation, integration, validation and support, quoted as work rather than bundled into a seat count. We do not sell concurrent or shared logins, because one account per person is your obligation and our pricing should not make it expensive.

Frequently asked questions

How much does a LIMS actually cost?

Anywhere from a few thousand a year for a small cloud subscription to several hundred thousand for an enterprise system with many instrument interfaces, and the software is rarely the largest line. Implementation, migration, interfaces, validation and training usually exceed the first year's licence. The more useful question is what the vendor counts when the price goes up, which decides how the lab uses it.

What is per-user LIMS pricing?

A model in which the price is set by the number of named people who may log in, or by how many may be logged in at once. It is easy to explain and compare, and it rations access: every login has a cost, so the lab decides who is worth one, and the people at the handoffs around the bench are usually left out.

Is unlimited-user LIMS pricing real?

Yes, when the vendor counts something other than people: the working groups a lab is organised into, the sites it operates, or a flat subscription. Read the terms for what is actually counted. Some offers described as unlimited limit concurrent users, which is a shared-login model with a different name. A genuinely unlimited-user licence is one under which adding a technician costs nothing.

What is included in a LIMS subscription?

It varies, and the variation is where quotes become hard to compare. Most include hosting, upgrades and standard support. Many bill implementation, data migration, each instrument interface, validation documentation and training separately, and some charge for additional modules or storage. Ask for the year-three cost with the modules you expect to need, and for what is fixed rather than what is quoted.

Why does the LIMS pricing model matter more than the price?

The model decides who in the lab gets a login, and the people without one keep records somewhere the system cannot see. Two quotes for the same figure can produce a system that holds the lab's work, or one that holds the bench's work and leaves receiving, review and the customer outside. The reconciliation cost of the second is not on the quote.

Sources and references

1. 21 CFR 11.10 Controls for closed systems

Electronic Code of Federal Regulations

2. 21 CFR 11.100 General requirements for electronic signatures

Electronic Code of Federal Regulations

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Brandon Holland is LabLynx's Marketing & Operations Digital Solutions Architect. He builds and runs the digital systems behind the company's public surface, from the website and content architecture to the tooling that keeps product information accurate everywhere it appears. He writes about laboratory informatics from the systems side: how lab records get structured, searched, and kept defensible as a lab scales.

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