IBM Executive Compensation Planner Tool - planning is a high-stakes, confidential, and strategic activity

Adarsh Chara
Senior UX Designer

adarshachara@gmail.com
998059489

As the Lead UX Designer, I was responsible for:

Enterprise Design Thinking (EDT) Workshops
Facilitated cross-functional workshops to align executives, HR, finance, and developers around user needs, risks, and business goals.

Stakeholder Insight Synthesis
Consolidated workshop findings, interviews, and business inputs into clear themes, priorities, and opportunity areas.

User Journey & Decision Flow Design
Mapped CEO and leadership workflows to ensure intuitive, step-by-step compensation planning and approval processes.

I collaborated closely with few executives, HR leaders, finance stakeholders, and developers to ensure the tool aligned with real decision-making needs.

Interaction Model & Information Architecture
Structured the platform to present complex compensation data in a clear, logical, and decision-friendly format.

High-Fidelity UI Design
Designed executive-grade UI screens with clean dashboards, scenario views, and budget visualizations.

Usability Validation & Iteration
Tested prototypes with pilot managers and leaders to refine clarity, reduce cognitive load, and improve decision efficiency.

Business Context

Previously, the workflow relied heavily on manual spreadsheets, static reports, and email-based coordination, leading to inefficiencies and alignment delays.

Executive compensation planning at IBM is a high-impact, confidential process involving multiple stakeholders across HR, Finance, and Business Units.

The process requires balancing:

- Performance ratings
- Budget constraints
- Equity and fairness considerations
- Strategic talent retention
- Governance and compliance

Research & Discovery

**A collaborative workshop
was conducted with:**

- CEO and executive
  representatives
- Band A, B, C level leaders
- HR and Compensation
  teams
- Finance stakeholders
- Developers and product
  teams

Workshop outputs highlighted
workflow friction, decision
pain points, and the need for
clearer data visualization,
simplified navigation, and
more intuitive approval flows.
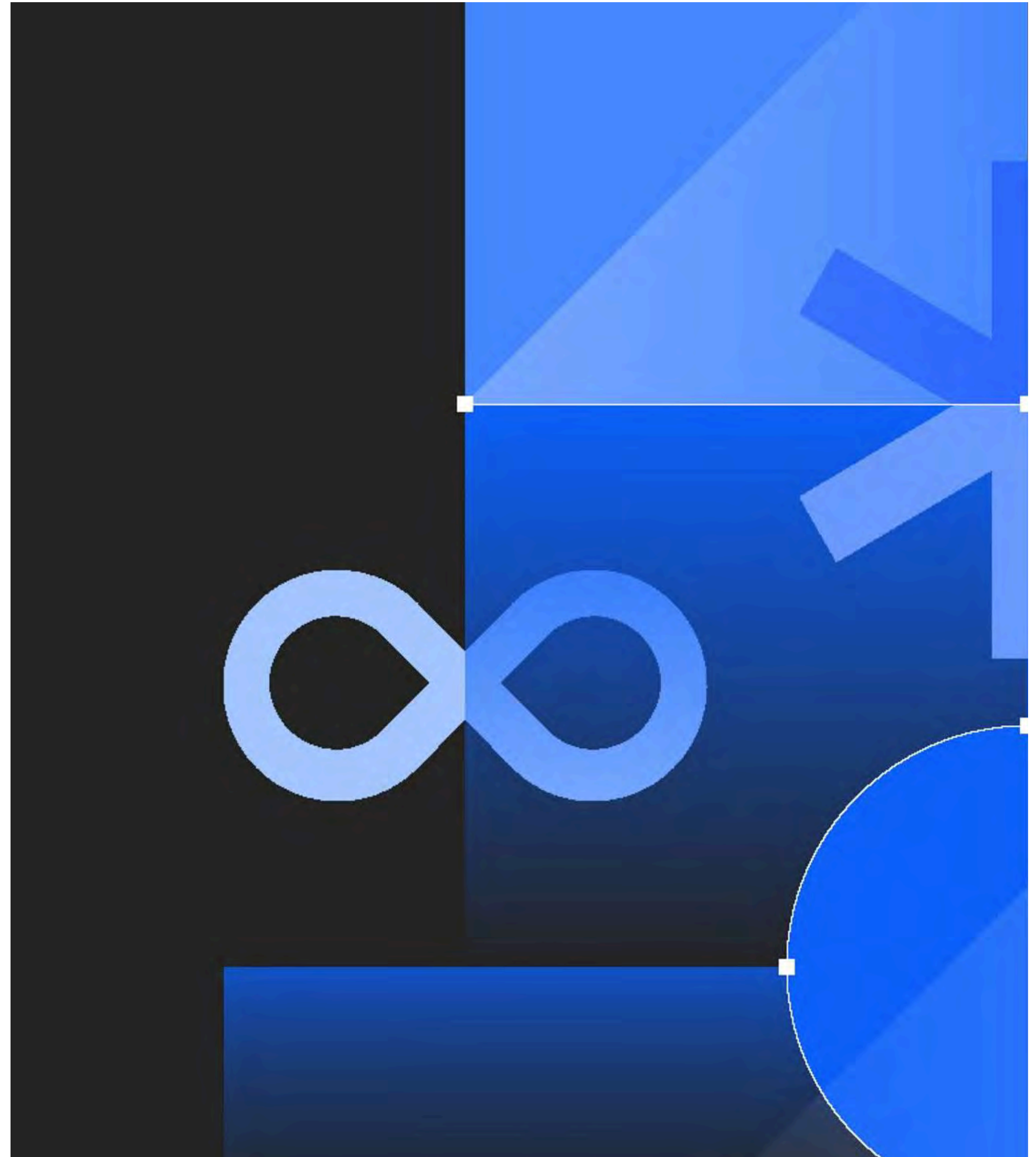
Executive-focused design simplifying complex compensation decisions.

1

Executive Decision Dashboard
- Consolidated performance, compensation, and budget metrics
- Clean KPI visualization
- Real-time budget utilization tracking

2

Scenario Simulation Engine
- "What-if" compensation modeling
- Real-time recalculation of budget impact
- Side-by-side scenario comparison

3

Structured Approval Workflow
- Clear review and approval steps
- Role-based visibility
- Automated notifications and status tracking

4

Governance & Transparency Layer
- Documented decision rationale
- Audit-ready data trails
- Compliance validation checkpoints

Challenges & Solutions

Heading	Challenge	Solution
Fragmented Data	Compensation, performance, and budget data were spread across multiple systems and reports.	Centralized all executive data into a unified, single-source-of-truth dashboard.
Spreadsheet Dependency	Manual spreadsheets caused calculation errors, version conflicts, and inefficiencies.	Automated real-time calculations with structured and controlled workflows.
Limited Scenario Planning	Leaders could not easily simulate compensation changes before finalizing decisions.	Enabled interactive "what-if" modeling with instant budget impact visibility.
Slow Cross-Functional Alignment	Back-and-forth coordination between HR, Finance, and Business Units delayed approvals.	Designed structured, role-based workflows to streamline collaboration and approvals.
Governance & Compliance Risks	Inconsistent documentation increased audit and compliance risks.	Embedded audit trails and structured decision rationale capture within the system.
Cognitive Overload	Complex financial data made executive decision-making overwhelming.	Simplified dashboards with clear KPIs, visual indicators, and prioritized insights.

Project Overview

The goal was to replace fragmented spreadsheets and static reports with a centralized, secure, data-driven digital platform.

The Executive Compensation Planner Tool was designed for senior leadership at IBM to streamline and structure executive compensation planning. The primary user of this tool is the CEO, along with CHROs and senior finance leaders, who use it to allocate compensation packages for executives based on performance, business impact, budget constraints, and strategic priorities.

Problem Statement

The lack of an integrated system created friction in a process that required precision, confidentiality, and speed.

Within the IBM Executive Compensation Planner, there was a need to:
1. Centralize compensation and performance data into a single, unified platform.
2. Enable faster executive-level decision-making with real-time insights.
3. Reduce spreadsheet dependency and minimize calculation risks.
4. Provide advanced scenario simulation ("what-if") capabilities.
5. Improve governance, auditability, and transparency in decision-making.
6. Accelerate cross-functional approvals between HR, Finance, and Business Units.
7. Ensure real-time budget tracking and allocation visibility.
8. Standardize compensation workflows across bands and business units.
9. Strengthen data security with role-based access controls.
10. Reduce executive cognitive load through intuitive dashboards and structured views.

UI & Interaction Design

1. The UI was designed to support executive-level clarity:
   - Minimal cognitive load
   - Clear hierarchy of financial data
   - High-contrast, enterprise-grade design
   - Simple approval and adjustment actions
   - Structured comparison views
2. The interface balanced data depth with decision simplicity.

Usability Validation

1. Pilot managers and leadership participants tested early prototypes. Key improvements included:
   - Enhanced visibility of budget impact
   - Simplified navigation for compensation adjustments
   - Clear labeling of performance ratings and impact indicators
2. Iterations reduced friction and improved confidence in decision-making.

Key Pain Points Identified

Within the IBM Executive Compensation Planner, there was no single, consolidated view that combined executive performance metrics, compensation history, and overall budget allocation in one place. For the CEO and Band A, B, and C level executives, information was scattered across multiple reports and spreadsheets, making it difficult to quickly evaluate the full financial and performance impact of compensation decisions and slowing strategic alignment.

Lack of Holistic View
Data was fragmented across multiple systems and reports, making it difficult to see performance, compensation, and budget impact together.

Manual Spreadsheet Dependency
Heavy reliance on Excel caused version-control issues, calculation errors, and inefficiencies.

Limited Scenario Planning
Leaders could not easily simulate compensation adjustments before finalizing decisions.

Alignment Delays
Approval cycles were slowed by back-and-forth coordination between HR, Finance, and Business Units.

Compliance & Governance Risks
Inconsistent audit trails and justification documentation increased risk exposure.

Cognitive Overload
Large volumes of financial and performance data were presented without clear prioritization, increasing decision fatigue.

Problem Statement

The CEO and executive leadership needed:

1

A centralized platform that consolidates all executive compensation, performance, and budget data, eliminating spreadsheet dependency and version conflicts.

2

Real-time dashboards that provide transparent insights into executive performance metrics, rating distributions, and overall financial impact.

3

Interactive "what-if" simulations that allow leadership to model compensation adjustments and instantly view budget implications before final approval.

4

Enterprise-grade, role-based access controls that ensure data confidentiality while enabling secure collaboration across leadership teams.

5

Streamlined workflows that accelerate coordination and approvals between HR, Finance, and Business Units, significantly reducing decision cycle time.

6

The existing process lacked real-time insights, structured decision support, and intuitive visualization.

Business Impact

1

Operational Impact
- Reduced spreadsheet dependency
- Faster executive compensation cycles
- Improved cross-functional alignment

2

Governance Impact
- Stronger audit readiness
- Better documentation of compensation rationale
- Reduced compliance risks

3

User Experience Impact
- Reduced cognitive load
- Improved transparency
- Increased confidence among CEO and Band-level executives

Thank you