Successful Technology Integration Partnerships:
A COALITION OF THE WILLING

Most eClinical technology users aren't looking for bells and whistles. They want solutions that work as promised, are easy to use, and let them focus on running the trial. Choosing specialized eClinical products over a one-size-fits-all system lets trial managers use the best possible technology for each part of the trial. This is often achieved by selecting technology from multiple partnering vendors, each focused on a specific element of the trial. However, effectively managing these partnerships can be a challenge.

The idea that one monolithic technology solution will address 100% of your needs is outdated both in the clinical trial management technology/services space and across most other industry verticals. Today, we operate in a larger ecosystem where partnerships and collaboration are critical to success.

The term "partnership" refers to an arrangement where two or more parties cooperate to advance mutual interests. Increasingly, technology firms are partnering to provide highly tailored solutions to address complex customer needs, pain points, and strategic initiatives. This helps the partnering companies win more business by combining components of their technology and service offerings/portfolios. Customers benefit because they get the best specialized solutions without the integration headaches that can come with combining technologies that simply aren't designed to work together.

In contrast to this kind of "coalition of the willing," partnerships are also created when a customer asks an incumbent supplier to work collaboratively with another firm to achieve the customer's goals. This latter case is tricky to pull off since the two firms' business objectives may not be in complete alignment.

With all this in mind, having experienced both sides of the equation — as a customer and as a supplier — I'd like to offer some observations on how customers can ensure success in this brave new world of technology partnerships. Following, in no particular order, is my abridged checklist:

Shared Goals

It is critically important that the partners understand your goals and demonstrate this in everything that they do. This is easy to express in an RFP response or PowerPoint presentation. It's much more difficult to accomplish in the day-to-day delivery of a solution. Look for signals that your partners truly "get" what you're trying to do.

Complete Transparency

There is no substitute for complete transparency between the partners. Both parties should be empowered to raise concerns in all areas such as architectural design, integration points, or the availability of the right people with the right core competencies to accomplish the mission.

Technology Convergence

Your partners will undoubtedly have roadmaps running three years into the future that outline their planned development. It is important to evaluate whether these roadmaps are harmonized over time. It's possible that today's "partners" could end up competing with one another before your project is complete.

Consolidated Bid (and bid defense)

If your partners are serious about working together, they will produce a consolidated bid response that includes pricing. They will also not only sit together during the bid defense, but will support each other as well. If they insist on separate bids (or stare at each other stoney-faced during the bid defense), start asking a lot of questions about the strength and commitment of the "partnership."

Roles, Responsibilities, and Accountability

Clearly defined roles are essential with any partnership. Avoid gray areas. Ambiguity about who owns what will cost you time, create frustration and, in a worst case scenario, could derail your initiative.

Escalation

Things go wrong. If the escalation path is not jointly defined and understood by all parties early on, it's a recipe for finger-pointing and worse.
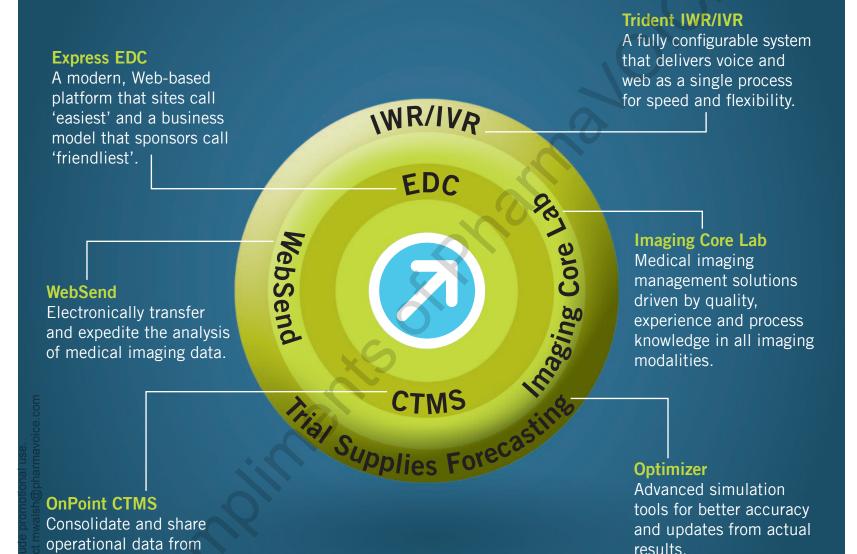
Personal Ownership

Partnership can be good thing, but like all other aspects of a project it must be actively managed. Never take yourself out of the equation by ceding decision-making responsibility to your partners. Once the path forward is agreed-to, assiduously monitor results and remain fully in the game. In the end your partners will thank you for this. If they are bothered by your leadership responsibility — and for holding them fully accountable for results — then you may have selected the wrong partners. ⓟⓥ

GARRY D. JOHNSON, *Executive Vice President and Chief Technology Officer, BioClinica Inc.*

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