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Target Health: A New Tool

Categories help the brain make sense of the world. Blurring the lines between categories can make life interesting or confusing. This is especially true inside my *journalistic* brain, which lately seems to occupy twice the volume of a normal brain, but contain only half as many working neurons.

Target Health is a good example of a company that defies categorization. With 22 employees, a fifth of whom are software developers, it is a small contract research organization (CRO) in Manhattan. But Target also develops its own commercial-grade applications for electronic data capture (EDC), as well as clinical data and trial management. "The technology is not where it's at," states Jules Mitchell, Target's president. "It's putting it all together. That's the key. We can all go to the same store, buy the same ingredients, but it doesn't taste the same."

As with a number of leading CROs, it's difficult to deposit Target Health into either a service- or a technology-oriented category. They have a foot in both worlds. "We think we've bridged it," says Mitchell, who worked at Pfizer and elsewhere before striking out on his own. "We don't position ourselves just as a CRO or just as a technology company."

The company is about to release Target II, a suite for doing and coordinating EDC as well as data and trial management. Target II consists of server modules and applications that allow users to set up an electronic clinical trial without knowing Web languages or programming. (Yes, knowledge of SAS will be essential.) You can go from Target II to a WYSIWYG case report form. You can automatically generate test scripts for edit checks. You can still use other clinical applications - commercial or homegrown.

Mitchell says Target II has been in development for two years. It is an outgrowth of existing tools used at the company. But he wanted to put more horsepower in the hands of end-users. "How could we make it so that more people could use it?" Mitchell asks. "What do people really need? The original need was to get data in the database. We had already designed a system for data entry. What do people need now that they can't do? Now it's built to interface better with SAS and data management."

Mitchell says he is content to let the EDC companies fight over Big Pharma. "I don't think we compete," he says. Still, Target is providing services for two trials at an unnamed Fortune 50 company and is an approved EDC vendor for another anonymous Fortune 100 company. Not small potatoes. It also provides e-clinical technology for some of the largest, publicly traded CROs. Explains Mitchell: "The clients bring in other CROs to do the monitoring. We do the training. They're so big, the [CROs] view us as partners. They won't let us come to the presentation. But they're using our system."

Joon You, Target's chief technology officer, adds that some of the development was driven by customers who wanted to replicate what happens in-house at Target. Says You: "Sponsors came and said, 'Can we program what you do?' No. They would have to learn Javascript, HTML and C#. It's not what they want to do."

As with many solutions in this space, there is recognition of the importance of being able to adjust the workflow. For better or worse, customers want flexibility. "What we are giving them a pinball construction set," says You. "If they don't like the game, they can change it. We create technology that is usable by the people who will be using it."

The solution includes a way to generate regulatory documents. "We also look at the QA department, who needs to look at the documents," You says, noting the company can export data into PDF, Access, SAS transport files, XML, flat files, Excel or ODBC-compliant formats - basically anything a customer needs.