



Data System Trumps Paper, Scissors, Glue

By Salvatore Salamone, Bio-IT World

BOSTON (02/18/04)—Specialty pharmaceutical developer Berlex Laboratories has slashed the time its scientists spend getting data into lab notebooks. Part of the solution involved banishing paper after an internal study indicated that scientists were spending about 14 percent of their time cutting and pasting computer-generated data into notebooks, old-style, with scissors and glue.

The company knew it needed a new system to collect data electronically but wanted an approach that would let researchers continue using their existing Word and Excel files for recording experiment results. That's one of the reasons Berlex chose to build its global R&D information system on the Documentum Enterprise Content Management (ECM) platform. (Documentum recently became a division of storage giant EMC.)



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- Charlie Sodano, Berlex**

Support for the existing data collection routines was very important in getting researchers to use the system. "We let the users design it," says Charlie Sodano, Berlex's manager of information services.

Berlex could quickly customize the application because Documentum ECM works closely with Microsoft Office. Using Visual Basic, the company designed Office forms and templates for collecting data. Berlex chemists, for example, record parameters in Word documents, and biologists doing high-capacity screening prefer Excel spreadsheets. "They might have thousands of chemical compounds and thousands of results," Sodano says.

When introducing the system to a department, "we would hook up the users with a [Documentum] developer," Sodano says. Working with company scientists to develop the information system made the rollout much easier, he adds.

One group knew it "wanted the searching to be more comprehensive, and they wanted more fields that would track information and relate [it] to other work in the company," Sodano explains.

To save on storage hardware, Berlex decided to use keyword searches rather than full-text searches. "If you index everything [for a full-text search], you need roughly double the disk space," Sodano says. "As long as you design your metadata well, people don't have to do full-text searches."

Provided courtesy of CENSA, Inc. Charlie Sodano is a leading member of CENSA.

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Documentum ECM typically runs on an application server, and requires plenty of storage space for documents, but did not require major hardware upgrades at Berlex.

Faster Filing

Patent application preparation and FDA filings have been accelerated at Berlex. The system collects and time-stamps all information, but more importantly, researchers can do a keyword search and quickly find all the documents needed to support an application. FDA submissions begin with copying all documents associated with a new drug into a Documentum repository, where they can easily be found at filing time. Paper versions of documents are bar-coded and stored offsite; the corresponding bar codes are included in the electronic (PDF) versions stored in the Documentum repository.

"There are big gains for departments that do repetitive work," Sodano says. For example, a researcher starting a new experiment can use a form that already contains information, such as equipment configurations, that would otherwise have to be duplicated manually.

"If [scientists] need information for a report or presentation, they can cut and paste, reducing the time it would have taken to copy the information from a paper lab notebook," Sodano says. Berlex's Documentum system currently holds more than 40,000 documents, and supports researchers in the U.S., Japan, and Germany.

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For more information on this implementation or ones similar to it contact Charlie Sodano at Berlex BioSciences, or Dr. Rich Lysakowski at 781-935-9600 x202.

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