

Customer Profile



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William Goure, Ph.D.
VP of Business Development,
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Acumen Pharmaceuticals: Pharmaceutical R&D Firm Leverages IT Outsourcing Accelerating Development of Vaccines and Diagnostics for Alzheimer's Disease

In the intense competitive biotech and pharmaceutical industry, every day counts as companies race to secure patents for breakthrough diagnostic and therapeutic solutions. In the drive to innovate, the last thing any R&D organization needs -- especially a start-up -- is to get bogged down in managing an Information Technology infrastructure. A stable IT operation is a requirement for success.

A case in point is Acumen Pharmaceuticals, Inc., of South San Francisco, Calif., a developer of antibody and vaccine products for the prevention and early detection of Alzheimer's disease. Acumen's computer and communications environment -- built, maintained and operated by outsource IT provider Info Partners of San Mateo, Calif. -- encompasses advanced yet proven technologies and strategies necessary for the company to rapidly develop and bring products to market.

"The most critical element is our server-based laboratory information system," says Bill Goure, vice president of business development and director of chemistry at Acumen Pharmaceuticals. "We could live without phones and videoconferencing for a day or two, but server downtime could mean the loss of data being entered in real

time from laboratory equipment -- it might take months to re-do the experiments."

The solution for Acumen has been to turn over the IT operation to a seasoned full-service provider. "We are fully IT-outsourced and plan to stay that way for as long as possible," Goure says. "Without question, our IT partner is more cost effective than in-house staff, and provides a much greater range of expertise."

Acumen Pharmaceuticals, Inc. is a pre-clinical drug company focused on developing the first effective therapeutics and diagnostics for Alzheimer's disease and other memory-related disorders. Founded in 1996, Acumen owns or has licensed the critical patents underlying the biological mechanism now widely viewed as leading to Alzheimer's disease. Merck has committed up to \$48 million to Acumen for the right to develop an antibody against Alzheimer's and another \$48 million if it succeeds in bringing to market a viable vaccine.

After initially operating as a 'virtual' company, Acumen leased a facility in March 2004 to provide a workplace for its 12 full-time and several part-time employees. Putting down roots entailed creating a

comprehensive data, voice and video infrastructure. Requirements included an integrated information management system to link all of the company's scientific research systems, as well as standard business and office productivity applications, telephony, and video conferencing -- the latter mandated by strategic partner Merck.

"The prospect of putting together this diverse infrastructure ourselves was daunting," recalls Goure. "We evaluated several vendors as partners but most specialized in computer, voice or video, but not all three. We needed a vendor who could make decisions in every area and just make it happen. Finding a partner that offered a one-stop shop for voice, video, and data services -- and doing it cost-effectively -- marked an important milestone for us."

An important element in Goure's decision was the service provider's willingness to communicate clearly "in plain English" about the technologies to be implemented. "They put together a comprehensive proposal and their CEO and project team walked us through it step by step, covering even the details of firewalls, spam filters, data security, etc. -- all in lay terms. We were never in doubt about why we needed each component, the risks of not having it, and the options for implementing it," he says. "With some other vendors we looked at, we got lost in their technical jargon."

Beginning in May, Acumen's technology services partner stepped up to the plate and completed installation of all systems on schedule in several weeks. In line with Acumen's priorities as an R&D firm, the laboratory systems were installed first, then the office systems. The networked servers and clients included PCs hardwired for large amounts of data transfer, and a wi-fi system for users who want the flexibility to take their laptops anywhere in the building. In setting up the phone system, the services provider selected and negotiated terms with a voice carrier, designed the wiring scheme, installed all phones, and set up voice mail. Installing the videoconferencing system entailed communicating with Acumen's partner Merck to ensure complete interoperability.

Subsequently, the service partner has provided an onsite technician -- currently part-time but available full-time if needed as the company grows -- and a 24x7 hotline for technical support, including remote diagnostics and repair.

Acumen is now just past its first year anniversary with no systems or communications infrastructure problems "beyond the occasional T1 line that goes down but is soon back up with a service technician visit," says Goure. "Our technology outsourcing strategy has paid off handsomely by freeing us from having to think about the operational details of the business and allowing us to focus on our core R&D mission."