

# Pharm-IT-Build-or-Buy-Data-Flow-Can-Be-Key

*Specialty Pharmacy Continuum*



**By Karen Blum**

Las Vegas—The marketplace for pharmacy technology is fragmented with no single solution that will work for all, but there are certain features that all good specialty platforms should have, according to an industry expert.

Whether you build your own platform from scratch or purchase a commercial product, the “golden rule” of pharmacy operations is to limit duplicate data entry, said Nicholas Saraniti, the CEO of Solera Specialty Pharmacy, speaking at the 2016 Asembia Specialty Pharmacy Summit.

Data for pharmacy operations, prior authorizations, shipping and delivery may all reside in different systems, Mr. Saraniti said, and copying information from one system to another creates chances for error. “The more times we touch or transcribe data, that’s where we make mistakes,” he noted.

Specialty pharmacy platforms also should be kept relatively simple, without lots of prompts; contain a central data repository against which queries/reports can be populated; and should maintain ownership of the data, Mr. Saraniti pointed out. Most specialty pharmacies, at minimum, have a pharmacy dispensing system, but many commercial systems are geared more toward retail or grocery store chain pharmacies, not specialty, he noted, with just basic reporting forms.

The best-designed platforms should be able to integrate pharmacy dispensing with other functions such as prior authorization and copays, shipping and delivery, and sales, Mr. Saraniti said. Solera spent about two and a half years developing its own platform internally at a cost of well over \$1

million; the system can integrate the information described. For example, he said, the sales force can track sales calls and conversations with providers, and note the number of prior authorizations for a particular physician's office. It's easier to pull statistics for manufacturer reports, such as how long it took a prior authorization to be completed. Furthermore, integrating with the human resources system means it's easy to identify which employees have access to what parts of the facility at different times, as well as who has alarm code access.

The system significantly improved Solera's shipping and delivery systems, Mr. Saraniti said. Shipping addresses are now automatically populated with current information from the pharmacy dispensing system. The platform has a built-in algorithm to prevent shipping refrigerated products out on a Friday, with risks for sitting in a hot delivery truck over a weekend, and shows different delivery rates for UPS and FedEx so staff can choose the least expensive shipping option. These changes alone have saved about \$4 to \$4.50 per shipment, he said.



### ***The Best IT Platforms Integrate Multiple Systems***

***CRM***, customer relationship management; ***DSM***, disease state management; ***IT***, information technology

Mr. Saraniti also recommended that master data be kept in the pharmacy dispensing system and repopulated from there to other programs, and turning off any text memo notes in the system, partly because they are difficult to access during queries. His company removed Microsoft Excel from every computer to prevent accidental emailing of personal health information in spreadsheets to competitors or posting of such information to the internet.

Some pharmacy dispensing systems “are much friendlier than others,” said Mr. Saraniti, who chose not to recommend a particular platform. Pharmacists should look for the system that best matches their workflow and gives real-time access to their own data, he said.

### DIY Pros and Cons

There are several advantages and disadvantages in building your own platform, Mr. Saraniti said (Table). On the plus side, the system will be customized to your workflow and will work exactly how you want it to. In addition, you can quickly input any changes, and data ownership is clear. One strategy his company has found helpful is having developers spend time with a patient navigator or pharmacy technician to see their workflow. By the time they returned to their work space, they could make some adjustments that eliminate three clicks, according to Mr. Saraniti.

**Table. Building Your Own Pharmacy Software System**

	Insource	Outsource
Cost		✓
Control	✓	
Code ownership	✓	
Code quality	✓	
Speed to develop		✓
Long-term value	✓	
Internal tech “savvy”		✓

Table. Building Your Own Pharmacy Software System		
	<b>Insource</b>	<b>Outsource</b>
Cost		?
Control	?	
Code ownership	?	
Code quality	?	
Speed to develop		?
Long-term value	?	
Internal tech “savvy”		?

“Three clicks may not sound like a lot, but when you’re optimizing work volume, it saves a tremendous amount of time,” he pointed out. “The less they have to do in the system, the [fewer] mistakes they can make.”

Disadvantages in building your own system include cost and time to implementation. “You can’t go out tomorrow morning and hire 10 developers and expect to have a functioning system tomorrow afternoon,” Mr. Saraniti said. “This is something that happens over months or years—and it never ends.” Make sure to build in time and budget for ongoing maintenance, and have someone on staff with technical knowledge who can manage the developers, he noted.

A big decision to be made in building a platform is whether to hire your own developers or outsource the job, he added. Looking only at costs and speed, outsourcing is a clear winner, Mr. Saraniti said, because you don’t have to pay benefits, but it may be difficult to get an outsourced agency on the phone to describe what you want. It’s much easier to manage if the developers are physically on-site, he noted. In addition, if you outsource, make sure the platform code is owned by your company so they can’t rebuild and sell your system to a competitor.

For some companies, the cost for building a home-grown pharmacy software platform is so prohibitive that it may make sense to consider purchasing a commercial product, Mr. Saraniti pointed out. You can purchase it today and have it working later in the week, which is a huge advantage, he noted. It’s less expensive to buy off the shelf and you know you will meet industry standards; furthermore, it may be easier to convince your management team to purchase a concrete platform versus invest in building your own, he added.

However, be sure to purchase from a reputable vendor who will be around to take your call if there’s a problem and push any security updates, Mr. Saraniti cautioned. Consider that you may need to adjust



your workflow to use the product; customizations are unlikely or very expensive. Watch out for duplicate data entry, and make sure the back end database is open so you have access to your data to put into a repository for reports.



### **Sam's Club Opts for Outsourcing**

The retailer Sam's Club opted to purchase Asembia's Asembia1 platform for pharmacies in 23 of its locations (12 with specialty clinical certificates) so they could get up to speed in supporting their health professionals, said Melissa Heibult, MBA, the company's senior manager of clinical and specialty programs. In the six months that the pharmacies have been using the platform, she said, "one efficiency our pharmacists and their prescribing partners have appreciated is how the platform has helped them navigate some of the complexities of the prior authorization processes that exist for many of the medications in this space. When this process runs smoothly, it can make a big difference for the patient and open up more collaborative channels with their physician."

They also like having a vendor who is flexible and open to taking feedback, Ms. Heibult added.

### **Henry Ford Health's Approach**

In contrast, Henry Ford Health System and its Pharmacy Advantage specialty pharmacy, in Detroit, opted to build its own system about three years ago because the pharmacists felt that none of the products available at the time could manage the entire spectrum of processes for specialty pharmacy patients, and making any changes in the existing programs would have been cost prohibitive, Daniel Kus, BS Pharm, RPh, told *Specialty Pharmacy Continuum*. Mr. Kus is the health system's vice president of ambulatory pharmacy services.

The health system now has a dedicated team of eight developers contracted through a local firm and, in two and a half years, has spent more than \$1 million building its own platform, which integrates with the pharmacy dispensing system and will integrate with its electronic health record system, in

the next three months.

“Our software, I think, is the most robust in the marketplace because we use it every single day and can see where enhancements need to be,” said Mr. Kus, who is in talks with several companies to market his product. “If you don’t expect to be a major player within a certain section of the country, you’re probably better off buying a turnkey program that’s already available on the market [which costs about \$60,000-\$100,000 per year]. But you really need to look at what’s available—is that better than what you have now? If you can find a software that is being used by clinical pharmacists on a daily basis and developed by clinical pharmacists, I think you’ll find a superior product.”

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The interviewees reported no relevant financial relationships.