BT ticks all boxes for pharma company

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>
> **Cormac Dunne**
>
> Global IT Manager, Data Centre Services, ICON

BT

Challenge

Headquartered in Dublin with offices in 37 countries, ICON has grown over 25 years to become a world-leading Clinical Research Organisation (CRO) Multinational pharmaceutical companies rely on ICON to conduct clinical trials that lead to the development and commercialisation of new drugs, fulfilling complex regulatory requirements needed to get their products approved and reimbursed.

So stringent is data security around the research process that the company's data centre is typically audited once a week by customers and annually by industry bodies. This was proving to be a major challenge for internal IT resources because the data centre was on premise in the Dublin HQ. As the company grew, inspections highlighted potential issues that could compromise data security.

"We held our hands up because we're not experts in things that are bread and butter for experienced data centre teams," said Cormac Dunne, Global IT Manager, Data Centre Services. "The company was growing fast through acquisition and the in-house data centre was nearing capacity so the obvious solution was to find a third-party."

A precedent had already been set for co-location at the US headquarters in Philadelphia, where infrastructure had been moved out to a data centre as part of a two-year consolidation process. With a green light to find a provider in Ireland, ICON whittled a long list down to three. After a site visit and references were explored, BT was chosen.

"Other vendors only wanted to compete on price yet struggled to meet the minimum that BT provide as standard. Price is always a consideration, but the basic needs must be met first," says Dunne. "BT met all our requirements."

Solution

BT strengths around co-location aligned perfectly with ICON's reason for moving to a third-party data centre – a focus on capacity, functionality, efficiency (particularly around Power Usage Effectiveness), and operational integrity built around people and processes, wrapped up in 24/7 support service and 99.95 per cent uptime guarantees.

Crucial service standards were also in place. From an Information Security Management perspective, ISO 27001 certification was crucial, the standard for implementing, operating, monitoring, and managing sensitive company information. ICON's internal team had recently achieved ISO 27001 status and it was a must-have from the service provider too. BT has had certification for longer than any data centre in Ireland, covering people, processes and IT systems. Over 10 years it has been rigorously audited on an annual basis to ensure the environment is not just up to standard but demonstrates continuous improvement.

Best practise ITIL service management with ISO 20000 is embedded in the culture of the BT team. The international standard signals adherence to recognised integrated processes that ensure BT will fulfil agreed service requirements for customers like ICON, and reach the highest standards possible in terms of design, delivery and ongoing improvement.

BT also offers cloud infrastructure that is GxP complaint. Our data centre hardware and management processes are documented in a Quality Management System (QMS) designed around computer system validation principles that conform to GxP requirements.

Connectivity was also important for ICON. Not just the gigabit connection that BT provides from its data centre to the Dublin headquarters, but interconnections to the rest of the world. BT data centres offer carrier neutrality; customers can leverage BTs local and global network reach but can also access over 25 carriers – ICON accesses two of them. "The number of providers that terminate at BT was impressive compared to the competition," said Dunne.

Going forward, BT can facilitate the changing requirements of companies like ICON. As they take more services from the cloud, for example, BT's hybrid strategy enables clients to consume services in a variety of different ways – from public and private clouds as well as on premise.

Benefits

Using BT for co-location has delivered all the benefits that ICON was looking for. Auditing is a much quicker process. Power and cooling can be left to the experts and the dedicated caged area that ICON currently occupies in the Dublin data centre can be quickly scaled to accommodate further growth. Running out of capacity is no longer an issue, in terms of physical space, infrastructure or the connectivity needed in and out of the data centre.

ICON was particularly impressed by the calibre of the BT people that stand over its service. It knows that the procedures and operations outlined in the run book, which forms the basis of the contractual agreement, are rigorously adhered to. "It's great to work with BT because you always know what you are going to get," said Cormac Dunne. "It's a simple thing to say you are going to do something but to actually deliver on it on a consistent basis, as BT does, is a significant competitive advantage and keeps the customer happy."

The consistency and reliability of BT has become fundamental to ICON's business. It has dramatically improved the near-weekly audits that are carried out to ensure that data is secure, and relieved the internal IT department of the burden involved in managing highly specialised requirements.

"I'm very happy with BT," said Dunne, summing up what he describes as a two-way partnership. "We have a data centre in the US which I can compare it to and I can say that BT definitely adds value to our global datacenter operation."

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Partnering with BT and keeping data safe is now fundamental to the business model of ICON as it conducts clinical trials for large pharmaceuticals. "We're very much a data company," said Dunne. "Our ability to keep it safe and secure is something we have to guarantee to clients.

Before BT, the challenge for Cormac Dunne and the IT team was striking a balance between operational tasks around the data centre and delivering more innovative projects that add value to the business. Since BT was brought onboard, the balance has switched in favour of the business. "Anything that can reduce the operational footprint to free up our time for more strategic projects is good for the business," said Dunne.

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