

Microsoft Insists on Staying Healthy

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The tech company's joint venture with GE, which provides a suite of services for doctors and hospitals, gets a name

Say what you will about Microsoft, the company sure has some incredible resolve.

On Monday, Microsoft and General Electric revealed that Caradigm will be the name of their health-care joint venture. The new company should come to life sometime in the first half of this year, employing about 750 people in the Seattle area. Caradigm will take a stab at modernizing health care through applications that help hospitals, doctors, and patients manage health records and the information pouring in from various machines and databases. The general idea is to give health-care providers a way to see tons of information with one log-in and to start gathering huge amounts of information in a way that could illuminate insights about patients.

(Apparently, a California organization already came up with the idea of merging "Care" and "Paradigm" into a fancy name and owns the related website. But discussions are under way that would let Microsoft and GE have the Caradigm site and inflict the name on a wider audience.)

If you're like most people, you have no idea that Microsoft has been banging away at health-care technology for quite a few years. It has the HealthVault Web service that lets people store their prescriptions, health records, and other personal data. The company has also offered a software and service package called Amalga to health-care providers, allowing them to see a patient's X-rays, lab results, MRI scans, and similar records in one spot. Amalga met with a cool reception and sort of fizzled out, but it will be brought back to life through Caradigm, which has a more comprehensive set of products for the health-care industry.

As ever, Microsoft proves willing to keep charging after areas it views as hard and important no matter how long they take to bring to fruition. In that respect, the company seems to operate like a planned economy, setting five-year and even 10-year agendas. Much of the impetus for this approach comes from Chief Executive Steve Ballmer, who is determined to diversify Microsoft's product line, no matter the cost. "We better keep moving," he told me in a recent interview. "There's just more to do from an applications innovation perspective."

What adds some measure of intrigue to Microsoft's continued push into health-care technology is that its main rival, Google, has moved away from such technology. When Larry Page took over as Google's CEO last year, he cut a number of projects, including Google Health, a rival to Microsoft's HealthVault introduced in 2008. In an unusual move, Google urged its customers to move their data to Microsoft's service.

Health-care information stands as some of the most valuable data on the planet, yet Google has basically ceded this ground to Microsoft for the time being. Google will keep investing in such areas as social networking, where it can aim ads at consumers, but it has backed down from the thorny problem of trying to negotiate the complexities of the health-care industry.

Microsoft may well fail to make anything of Caradigm. Still, there's something to be said for its willingness to make a plan and stick to it in this era when the beta culture-throw stuff against the wall and quickly scrap what doesn't stick-seems to dominate.

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