

Your "Free" EDC Is Costing You More Than You Think

A cost-reality check for academic research teams



The promise of free doesn't hold up

REDCap and similar tools look appealing when grant budgets are tight. But "free" only describes the licensing fee — not what your team actually pays to run it.

The hidden time tax

Based on surveys of academic research coordinators, managing a free EDC system costs teams significantly more staff time than supported commercial platforms:

- **Initial setup:** 60–80 hours vs. 15–20 hours for commercial systems
- **Monthly maintenance:** 20–25 hours vs. 2–3 hours
- **User training:** 40–50 hours vs. 8–12 hours
- **Troubleshooting:** 15–20 hours per month vs. under 2 hours with dedicated support
- **Data quality/query resolution:** 30–40 hours per month vs. 8–10 hours with automated validation

Annual total

1,500–1,800 hours per study — the equivalent of nearly one full-time research coordinator position spent managing the system, not running research.



Role

Research coordinator @ \$35/hr

PI time @ \$85/hr

IT support @ \$55/hr

Data manager @ \$45/hr

Annual Hidden Cost

\$52,500–63,000

\$8,500–17,000

\$16,500–27,500

\$13,500–22,500

Total Hidden Labor Cost

\$90,000–\$130,000 per active study

The risks that don't show up in the budget

Beyond time and labor, free EDC systems create specific vulnerabilities for academic teams:

- **Compliance gaps** — 100+ hours of staff time preparing for regulatory inspections that a commercial system handles automatically
- **Scalability ceiling** — REDCap's data model limits large-scale or multi-site studies; migration to a commercial platform can cost \$25,000–75,000
- **Grant funding risk** — Inadequate audit trails or documentation issues can trigger study suspension or funding loss
- **Real-world impact** — One academic cancer center spent \$67,000 in staff time over 18 months addressing user errors and system complications that dedicated support would have prevented. An academic site faced a \$180,000 penalty and 18-month study suspension when auditors discovered inadequate audit trails in their free EDC system during an FDA inspection.

The actual cost comparison

	Free EDC (true cost)	Commercial EDC (OpenClinica)
Hidden labor costs	\$90,000–130,000	Included in pricing
IT infrastructure	\$8,000–12,000	Hosted, no added cost
Risk & compliance	\$5,000–25,000	Built-in compliance documentation
Software cost	\$0	\$8,000–15,000/study
Total annual cost	\$103,000–167,000	\$8,000–15,000

Potential annual savings with a purpose-built academic EDC: \$85,000–152,000 per study.

The choice isn't between free and expensive. It's between hidden costs and transparent value.

OpenClinica is built for academic research teams — with grant-aligned pricing, IRB-ready compliance, and a dedicated support team that doesn't disappear after go-live.



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