

Cencora: When Should Nucleus Scale?

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Strategy case for MBA students and working professionals

Decision date: October 4, 2026

Information cutoff: October 4, 2026, end of day (U.S. Eastern)

Case convention: Constructed teaching case using public information. The decision scenario is hypothetical; it does not describe a private Cencora meeting or an undisclosed management decision.

The decision

On June 17, 2026, Cencora announced a phased pilot of the next generation of Nucleus, its inventory-management solution for specialty physician practices. The planned pilot spans more than 20 sites. Cencora said it would assess system performance across practice settings and gather feedback. It expects to begin scaling production and installation later in 2026, **pending pilot outcomes**. [S1]

By October 4, public information still did not show the pilot's results, site mix, baseline measures or scale thresholds. The announcement set a direction but left the decision criteria open. How should Cencora move from pilot to broader deployment? Should it prepare to scale on schedule, release in controlled waves, or hold expansion until more evidence is collected or the product is adjusted?

Assignment: Advise a hypothetical Cencora leadership team on Nucleus's next deployment phase. Recommend rollout pace, the types of practices to add, which workflows to standardize or adapt locally, and the operating evidence that should trigger expansion, redesign or pause. State the assumptions behind your recommendation and the evidence that would change your mind. Use only information public by the cutoff.

A product at the intersection of inventory and care delivery

Cencora describes itself as a pharmaceutical solutions company serving manufacturers and providers. Its Q3 FY2026 release identified specialty, digital transformation and talent among the company's strategic priorities. Those are company-wide priorities, not proof of Nucleus results or a designated Nucleus budget. [S2]

Nucleus combines physical equipment and software/interface changes. Cencora describes a modular cabinet that can support different workflows, a larger touchscreen for patient and inventory data, workspace changes, and a more unified interface. Core functions include real-time inventory tracking, demand forecasting, automated billing support and reporting. The company says the design is intended to improve visibility into inventory and patient-specific medication needs and to coordinate work from ordering and tracking through storage and administration. [S1]

These claims describe the product's design and intended value. The release does not report measured effects on inventory accuracy, availability, waste, billing, staff time, training, patient delays, safety or practice economics. Nor does it say which parts of the platform can be configured for local workflow or what configuration requires.

Medication inventory connects operational and clinical work. A practice needs the right drug available for a scheduled patient, accurate records as products move, and processes that staff can carry out without avoidable delay or rework. Inventory visibility could help a practice coordinate stock across locations. A common interface could simplify training and reporting. But a workflow built for consistency across sites may not fit the staffing, specialty mix, existing systems or medication-handling practices at every clinic.

An open scale gate

The June announcement says the pilot is phased across more than 20 sites and will span a range of practice settings. It does not identify participating sites, specialties, site-level experience, pilot duration, baseline performance or how feedback will be evaluated. It names no go/no-go thresholds. The release says that broader deployment depends on pilot outcomes, but public sources do not show whether any threshold has been met. [S1]

That leaves several feasible approaches:

1. **Prepare for a broad standard rollout.** Use a common implementation and training package, standard workflows and consistent performance criteria to make the solution available to existing and new customers. This could accelerate learning and establish common operating practices. It could also scale before the pilot represents the range of workflows and systems that future sites bring.
2. **Expand in evidence-gated waves.** Set minimum reliability and workflow criteria, then add practices in groups chosen to test readiness and variation. Standardize core data and safety steps while allowing selected workflow adaptations. This may preserve learning and reduce rollout risk, but it requires clear criteria and may slow broader availability.
3. **Extend or redesign before expansion.** If pilot evidence is mixed or omits important site types, add observation time, recruit underrepresented practices, or change product or implementation processes before committing to broader production and installation. This may expose integration issues before scale, but can delay deployment and customer learning.

The alternatives can be combined. A leadership team could, for example, authorize production preparation while limiting customer installations to readiness-qualified sites. But preparation itself does not establish that the pilot succeeded. The choice is how to sequence deployment commitments and learning while the evidence remains incomplete.

Exhibit 1. What is public about Nucleus at the cutoff?

Public statement	What it supports	What it does not establish
Phased pilot across more than 20 specialty-practice sites	Cencora planned a multi-site evaluation.	Site identities, site count by phase, specialties, baseline systems, representativeness or completion.
Pilot will assess performance across settings and gather feedback	Performance and feedback are intended inputs to broader deployment.	Metrics, measurement period, data quality, success thresholds or feedback method.
Modular cabinets, unified interface, real-time tracking, forecasting, billing support and reporting	Product design and listed functions.	Actual adoption, accuracy, time savings, waste reduction, billing gains, safety or customer economics.
Scaling production and installation later in 2026, pending outcomes	Conditional company plan as announced June 17.	That outcomes were positive, scale began, or all customers can be served.

Source: Cencora, June 17, 2026 release, opening, feature list, and final pilot paragraph. [S1]

What would count as a useful pilot?

The research suggests that installation and operational integration should be tracked separately. A system can be present without being routinely used; improved inventory visibility can coexist with extra staff work or interface failures. Studies of oncology workflow describe variation in staff roles and system interfaces. Inventory studies show that accuracy, visibility, inventory value and turnover are distinct metrics, and that results can differ by location. None gives Cencora a ready-made target. [S3-S8]

The pilot could be evaluated on a set of measures such as:

- Inventory accuracy and the proportion of items visible in the system.
- Medication availability for scheduled care, stockouts, expirations, transfers and waste.
- Billing or charge-capture exceptions and the accuracy of patient-specific records.
- Time required for inventory tasks, training and exception resolution.
- Adoption by role, workarounds, workflow interruptions, support needs and system reliability.
- Patient-facing delays or errors where data can be collected consistently and safely.

These are possible decision measures, not reported Nucleus outcomes. A fair comparison would require baseline data, common definitions and observation long enough to separate a temporary implementation dip from durable performance. The pilot would also need to compare sites by specialty, existing systems and readiness rather than relying only on an overall average. Management would have to decide which measures are hard gates, how to handle mixed results, and whether sites with different workflows need different standards.

The alternatives practices may already use

Cencora's public announcement describes Nucleus's functions, but does not state which inventory tools the pilot sites used before the pilot. McKesson markets Lynx for oncology inventory, ordering and management across locations; The US Oncology Network describes Lynx Mobile as offering inventory management, charge capture, reporting and links to practice-management software or electronic health records. These are vendor/network descriptions, not independent product tests, and they do not show feature or performance parity with the next-generation Nucleus product. [S9-S10]

Historical McKesson case studies give examples of customer priorities, with important limits. A vendor case says Redwood Regional Medical Group moved in 2006 from Lynx Station, a Pyxis-developed predecessor, to Lynx Mobile; it quotes the practice COO on the prior product's fit with private-practice and multi-site reporting needs. Another historical vendor case reports Lynx Mobile/iKnowMed use, ordering integration and charge-capture results at a two-location practice. These cases are not current independent comparisons and cannot establish current preferences or performance. [S11-S12]

Public sources do not identify whether a Nucleus pilot site evaluated Lynx, how customers rank alternatives, or current product prices, adoption, switching costs or market shares. Practices may also continue with existing software, cabinet, spreadsheet or manual processes. For Cencora, customer choice and systems compatibility remain empirical questions. It would be premature to claim Nucleus is unique, superior, cheaper or more interoperable.

A wider specialty-care context

Cencora's February 2026 acquisition of a majority interest in OneOncology and its September 2 launch of Accelerate Pharmacy Solutions' cell and gene therapy enablement are evidence of broader specialty-care activity. The September 30 leadership perspective discusses advanced-therapy infrastructure and community oncology operations. These disclosures provide portfolio context only: public sources do not connect OneOncology, CGT enablement and Nucleus in a single operating program or shared resource pool. [S2, S13-S15]

The latest periodic company filing by the cutoff was the Form 10-Q for the quarter ended June 30, filed August 5. On October 2, Cencora said fourth-quarter and full-year FY2026 results would be released November 4. Those results were not available by October 4 and are not part of this case. No Nucleus pilot update was found in the official company materials checked through the cutoff. [S2, S16-S17]

Exhibit 2. Evidence from related inventory settings

Study	Setting and design	Finding reported in abstract	Why it is not a Nucleus estimate
Shi et al. (2024)	One tertiary hospital oncology pharmacy; quasi-experimental; 114 matched items.	Accuracy +6.02 percentage points; visibility +98%; turnover change not statistically significant.	Single hospital, EHR-integrated system and narrow item sample.
Monastra et al. (2026)	Descriptive quality-improvement project; one 881-bed academic center; infusion cancer pharmacy and perioperative satellite.	Infusion inventory value fell 22.15% and turnover rose; perioperative turnover moved in the opposite direction.	One health system, no controlled counterfactual, results differed by setting.
Glazier et al. (2026)	Ten-week pre/post passive-bin pilot at two ambulatory clinics; selected medications.	Inventory valuation fell by \$34,000 but difference was not significant; survey results mixed.	Short, single-center pilot; volume limits extrapolation.
Fan et al. (2026)	Multisystem pharmacy interface case study.	Abstract reports fewer discrepancies after mapping interfaces and workflows.	No quantitative effect estimate or clinic-scale causal evaluation.

Sources: [S4-S7]. Abstracts only for the three 2026 AJHP studies; full-text access was not available for this research.

Discussion questions

1. What is the decision Cencora can make from public evidence at the cutoff? Which parts depend on pilot information not yet public?
2. Compare broad standardization, evidence-gated waves and extending/redesigning the pilot. What are the strongest arguments against your preferred approach?
3. Which practices should be added next to make the next phase informative? How would you balance readiness with representativeness?
4. Which workflow elements should be standardized across sites, and which should be configurable? What evidence would distinguish productive adaptation from unsafe workarounds?
5. Select a small set of expansion gates. Define the measure, baseline, observation period and how mixed or missing data should affect the decision.
6. What customer and alternative-solution evidence should Cencora gather before making claims about differentiation or broader market fit?

Sources

Source IDs point to the research source register, which gives publication dates, exact locators, reading depth and limitations.

- **S1.** Cencora, next-generation Nucleus pilot release, June 17, 2026 (P3).
- **S2.** Cencora FY2026 Q3 Form 10-Q and Q3 results release, Aug. 5, 2026 (P1-P2).
- **S3.** Harris et al. (2025), hospital-physician integration review (A1).
- **S4.** Shi et al. (2024), EHR-integrated oncology-pharmacy perpetual inventory system (A6).
- **S5.** Monastra et al. (2026), infusion/perioperative inventory automation (A7).
- **S6.** Glazier et al. (2026), ambulatory passive-bin inventory model (A8).
- **S7.** Fan et al. (2026), multisystem inventory interface case (A9).
- **S8.** Oncology workflow and implementation studies Samal, Neubauer and Novak (A3-A5); design evidence only.
- **S9.** McKesson Lynx product page (C1).
- **S10.** US Oncology Network technology overview (C2).
- **S11.** McKesson Redwood Regional Medical Group historical case (C3).
- **S12.** McKesson North Shore Oncology Hematology Associates historical case (C4).
- **S13.** Cencora OneOncology acquisition and Q3 filing disclosures (P1-P2).
- **S14.** Cencora Accelerate Pharmacy Solutions CGT enablement release, Sept. 2, 2026 (P4).
- **S15.** Cencora leadership perspective, Sept. 30, 2026 (P5).
- **S16.** Cencora Form 8-K, Sept. 25, 2026 (P6).
- **S17.** Cencora FY2026 Q4 earnings-date notice, Oct. 2, 2026 (P7).

The alternatives, hypothetical advisory assignment and discussion questions are constructed for teaching. No private meeting, quotation or undisclosed management intention is represented. No post-cutoff results are included.