CRO Market Share 2026: Top Contract Research Organizations

Published July 31, 2026 35 min read

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Executive Summary

The global contract research organization (CRO) industry enters the second half of 2026 larger, more consolidated, and more volatile in its short-term demand signals than at any point since the pandemic-era clinical trial boom. Independent market research firms disagree sharply on the exact size of the CRO services market, a discrepancy this report treats as a data point in itself: MarketsAndMarkets puts 2026 CRO services revenue at $93.02 billion (Source: marketsandmarkets.com), Fortune Business Insights at $99.87 billion (Source: fortunebusinessinsights.com), Mordor Intelligence at $92.98 billion (Source: mordorintelligence.com), and Precedence Research at just $82.90 billion (Source: precedenceresearch.com), a spread driven largely by differing definitions of what counts as "CRO services." By contrast, the industry's own trade group, the Association of Clinical Research Organizations (ACRO), reports that 11 responding member companies generated an estimated $89.4 billion in collective 2025 revenue (Source: acrohealth.org).

Among the disclosed clinical-services figures reviewed, IQVIA Holdings reported $8,896 million in full-year 2025 Research and Development Solutions segment revenue (Source: businesswire.com) and a contracted backlog that reached $34.2 billion as of June 30, 2026 (Source: sec.gov). ICON plc posted full-year 2025 revenue of $8,251.3 million (Source: sec.gov) and by Q2 2026 was reporting the strongest bookings momentum among the large public CROs, with a net book-to-bill ratio of 1.51 (iconplc.com. Thermo Fisher Scientific's PPD-branded clinical research business, folded into its Laboratory Products and Biopharma Services segment, generated $7,915 million in FY2025 revenue (Source: sec.gov). Fortrea Holdings, the CRO spun off from Labcorp in 2023, reported $2,723.4 million in FY2025 revenue but a GAAP net loss of $986.2 million driven by a $797.9 million non-cash goodwill impairment (Source: ir.fortrea.com), underscoring that Labcorp itself, now a diagnostics and central-laboratory company with $13.95 billion in FY2025 revenue (Source: ir.labcorp.com), is no longer itself a comparable CRO.

Consolidation has reshaped the competitive landscape since 2021: Thermo Fisher's $17.4 billion purchase of PPD (Source: sec.gov), ICON's $12 billion acquisition of PRA Health Sciences (Source: reuters.com), EQT and Goldman Sachs Asset Management's $8.5 billion take-private of Parexel (Source: prnewswire.com), and the 2023 Elliott Investment Management, Patient Square Capital, and Veritas Capital consortium buyout of Syneos Health for approximately $7.1 billion (Source: sec.gov) have left roughly half of the top-tier CRO market in private-equity hands. That consolidation trend continued into 2026 with Thermo Fisher's $8.875 billion acquisition of clinical-trial data provider Clario Holdings (Source: sec.gov) and Worldwide Clinical Trials' acquisition of Catalyst Clinical Research (Source: businesswire.com). Bookings data through mid-2026 point to a bifurcated demand environment: emerging biopharma funding hit $35 billion in Q2 2026, more than double the year-earlier figure according to BioWorld data cited by IQVIA management (Source: investing.com), yet Medpace still logged a sub-1.0x book-to-bill ratio of 0.88x in Q1 2026 before rebounding to 1.13x in Q2 (Source: sec.gov) (Source: sec.gov), a reminder that the industry's recovery is uneven across sponsor size and therapeutic focus.

Introduction and Background

A contract research organization, commonly abbreviated CRO, is a company hired by pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and medical device sponsors to plan, manage, and execute clinical trials and related research activities on an outsourced basis. CROs range from full-service global operators that run every phase of drug development, from preclinical toxicology through post-approval real-world evidence, to boutique firms specializing in a single therapeutic area or region. The industry has become structurally central to how new medicines reach patients: the trade association ACRO, citing Straits Research, states that nearly 75% of all clinical trials are now outsourced to CROs (Source: acrohealth.org), while Statista data show the outsourced share of pharmaceutical services expenditure climbing from about 34% in 2014 to roughly 49% by 2023 (Source: statista.com).

This report addresses the "CRO market share 2026" search question by comparing competitive scale rather than calculating a global percentage-share ranking. It reviews the most recent verifiable revenue, backlog, and bookings disclosures from **Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC)** filings, investor-relations disclosures, and Hong Kong Stock Exchange filings for major operators, then explains why their differing business scopes do not support a reproducible global market-share calculation. It also synthesizes divergent market-size estimates published by named research firms and traces the consolidation wave that has redrawn the competitive map since 2021.

The context for 2026 is distinctive. ACRO's own State of the Industry report, published in March 2026 using full-year 2025 data, found that seven responding member companies conducted or participated in 7,634 studies involving 1.4 million patients and volunteers during the year (Source: acrohealth.org). Meanwhile, industry analysis firm Citeline's Annual Clinical Trials Roundup found 10,503 Phase I through III clinical trials were initiated in 2024, a 5.5% year-over-year increase in trial starts (Source: citeline.com), and GlobalData's Clinical Trials Database recorded a clear increase in global clinical trial initiations in the first half of 2025, reversing a multi-year slowdown (Source: clinicaltrialsarena.com). At the same time, mid-tier CROs have reported discounting billable labor rates by 10% to 15% to win business as large pharmaceutical sponsors delay non-essential projects by four to six months amid an approaching patent-cliff-driven budget squeeze, according to Third Bridge industry analysis (Source: thirdbridge.com) (Source: thirdbridge.com). Life-science organizations evaluating CRO partners, technology vendors, and internal analytics capacity in this environment need a grounded view of who actually leads the market, how the leaders are performing financially, and where consolidation and demand volatility are likely to create risk or opportunity. Advisory firms serving the life sciences sector, including consultancies that specialize exclusively in pharmaceutical and life-science industries such as biotech, medical devices, diagnostics, and CROs (Source: intuitionlabs.ai), increasingly find themselves supporting sponsors and CROs alike on the data integration, commercial analytics, and AI adoption questions that this report's Implications section addresses.

Global CRO Market Size and Growth Outlook Through 2031

No single, universally accepted figure exists for the size of the global CRO market, and this report treats that disagreement transparently rather than picking one number and presenting it as consensus. At least eight named research firms publish independent CRO market-size estimates, and their 2025 or 2026 base-year figures range from roughly $70 billion to nearly $100 billion depending on how narrowly or broadly "CRO services" is defined.

MarketsAndMarkets values the global CRO services market at $85.41 billion in 2025, rising to $93.02 billion in 2026 and $140.32 billion by 2031, an 8.6% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) (Source: marketsandmarkets.com). Fortune Business Insights estimates the market at $92.27 billion in 2025, growing to $99.87 billion in 2026 and $199.28 billion by 2034 at a 9% CAGR (Source: fortunebusinessinsights.com). Mordor Intelligence sizes the market at $92.98 billion in 2026, reaching $138.34 billion by 2031 at an 8.27% CAGR (Source: mordorintelligence.com). Precedence Research, in its CRO services report, puts the 2025 figure at $77.00 billion, rising to $82.90 billion in 2026 and $158.58 billion by 2035 at a 7.49% CAGR (Source: precedenceresearch.com), while a separately scoped Precedence Research "CRO market" report puts 2025 revenue at just $69.56 billion, forecast to reach $133.75 billion by 2035 at a 6.76% CAGR (Source: precedenceresearch.com). Global Growth Insights lands in between, at $78.78 billion for 2025 and $88.08 billion for 2026, projecting a surge to $240.34 billion by 2035 at an 11.8% CAGR, the most aggressive long-range forecast among

the sources reviewed (Source: globalgrowthinsights.com). Persistence Market Research estimates $94.8 billion in 2026, rising to $137.9 billion by 2033 at a more conservative 5.5% CAGR (Source: persistencemarketresearch.com). ACRO, citing The Business Research Company, reports a narrower trajectory of $59 billion in 2024 growing to $65 billion in 2025 and a projected $94.61 billion by 2029 (Source: acrohealth.org).

The spread largely reflects scope differences rather than genuine analytical disagreement. Grand View Research publishes three separate, narrower market definitions: a "healthcare CRO" market estimated at $55.84 billion in 2024, projected to reach $105.73 billion by 2033 at a 7.42% CAGR (Source: grandviewresearch.com); a narrower "pharmaceutical CRO" market at $45.33 billion in 2025, forecast to $83.31 billion by 2033 (Source: grandviewresearch.com); and a still-narrower "biopharmaceutical CRO" market at $28.47 billion in 2024, forecast to $59.63 billion by 2033 (Source: grandviewresearch.com). Technavio, which isolates clinical research as an application segment, values that segment alone at $50.58 billion in 2024 and forecasts the broader CRO market to grow by $51.87 billion at an 8.9% CAGR between 2025 and 2030 (Source: technavio.com) (Source: technavio.com).

Table 1 below summarizes the base-year estimates and growth forecasts from the eight research firms reviewed for this report.

RESEARCH FIRM	BASE YEAR VALUE	NEAR-TERM FORECAST	LONG-RANGE FORECAST	CAGR
MarketsAndMarkets	$85.41B (2025)	$93.02B (2026)	$140.32B (2031)	8.6%
Fortune Business Insights	$92.27B (2025)	$99.87B (2026)	$199.28B (2034)	9.0%
Mordor Intelligence	n/a	$92.98B (2026)	$138.34B (2031)	8.27%
Precedence Research (services)	$77.00B (2025)	$82.90B (2026)	$158.58B (2035)	7.49%
Precedence Research (CRO market)	$69.56B (2025)	n/a	$133.75B (2035)	6.76%
Global Growth Insights	$78.78B (2025)	$88.08B (2026)	$240.34B (2035)	11.8%
Persistence Market Research	n/a	$94.8B (2026)	$137.9B (2033)	5.5%
ACRO / The Business Research Company	$65B (2025)	n/a	$94.61B (2029)	n/a

The regional split is similarly variable across sources but consistently identifies North America as the largest geography. Fortune Business Insights found North America held 50.10% of the global CRO services market in 2025 (Source: fortunebusinessinsights.com), with Europe at 26.10% ($24.16 billion) (Source: fortunebusinessinsights.com) and Asia Pacific at 19.00% ($17.5 billion) (Source: fortunebusinessinsights.com). Mordor Intelligence puts North America's share lower, at 38.92% (Source: mordorintelligence.com), and Precedence Research's CRO market report puts it at 44% (Source: precedenceresearch.com, while Grand View Research's narrower healthcare CRO definition instead finds Asia Pacific dominant at 46.40% share in 2024 (Source: grandviewresearch.com), reflecting the concentration of preclinical and lower-cost clinical operations in China and India. By service type, clinical research consistently dominates: Mordor Intelligence found clinical research services held 61.45% of CRO market share in 2025 (Source: mordorintelligence.com), MarketsAndMarkets found 57.6% (Source: marketsandmarkets.com), and Persistence Market Research found approximately 49% (Source: persistencemarketresearch.com). Oncology is the dominant therapeutic area across every source that segments by indication, with MarketsAndMarkets finding a 35.5% share in 2025 (Source: marketsandmarkets.com) and Fortune Business Insights projecting 29.63% for 2026 (Source: fortunebusinessinsights.com).

Major CRO and Life-Sciences Services Scale Comparison, Not a Global Market-Share Ranking

Because most large full-service CROs are either publicly traded, owned by a publicly traded parent, or issue public bond ratings that require periodic financial disclosure, it is possible to construct a verified revenue ranking for the majority of the sector's largest players, distinct from the modeled market-size estimates above. Marketing research firm IBISWorld separately estimates that IQVIA Holdings accounts for approximately 17.3% of total industry revenue within its Contract Research Organizations classification, the largest single share it identifies for any operator (Source: ibisworld.com).

IQVIA Holdings (NYSE: IQV) leads the sector on a segment-revenue basis. Its Research and Development Solutions (R&DS) segment, the company's clinical-CRO business, generated $8,896 million in full-year 2025 revenue, up 4.3% year-over-year, alongside a separate Technology and Analytics Solutions segment that generated $6,626 million, up 7.6% (Source: businesswire.com), for total company revenue of $16,310 million (Source: ir.iqvia.com). IQVIA's 10-K reports approximately 93,000 employees in over 100 countries, of whom roughly 51,000 work in R&D Solutions (Source: sec.gov) (Source: sec.gov).

Thermo Fisher Scientific's clinical research business (the former PPD) is third among the three largest disclosed FY2025 clinical-CRO revenue figures discussed here, behind IQVIA's R&D Solutions and ICON, generating $7,915 million in FY2025, up from $7,836 million in 2024 and $7,691 million in 2023 (Source: sec.gov), nested inside the company's much larger Laboratory Products and Biopharma Services segment, which itself generated $23,984 million, or 53.8% of Thermo Fisher's $44.56 billion in total FY2025 revenue (Source: sec.gov) (Source: sec.gov). Thermo Fisher's 10-K explicitly describes the clinical research business as offering "comprehensive, integrated clinical development and analytical services" across Phases I through IV (Source: sec.gov). The parent company employs more than 120,000 people across all businesses (Source: sec.gov).

ICON plc (NASDAQ: ICLR) reported full-year 2025 revenue of $8,251.3 million, essentially flat year-over-year at 0.8% growth (Source: sec.gov), with approximately 40,100 employees across 97 locations in 55 countries (Source: sec.gov). ICON's full-year 2025 disclosures also included an accounting restatement, with revenue overstated by 0.8% of total FY2023 revenue and 1.1% of FY2024 revenue following an internal review (Source: sec.gov).

WuXi AppTec, the larger of China's two publicly traded WuXi entities, reported RMB 45.46 billion (approximately US$6.3 billion at prevailing exchange rates) in total FY2025 revenue, up 15.8% year-over-year, with revenue from continuing operations reaching RMB 43.42 billion, up 21.4% (Source: wuxiapptec.com) (Source: wuxiapptec.com). Its backlog from continuing operations reached RMB 58.00 billion, up 28.8% (Source: wuxiapptec.com). Its affiliate **WuXi Biologics** generated RMB 21.8 billion (approximately US$3.0 billion), up 16.7%, with total backlog of US$23.7 billion and 945 integrated projects at year-end 2025 (Source: wuxibiologics.com) (Source: prnewswire.com) (Source: prnewswire.com).

Charles River Laboratories (NYSE: CRL) reported $4.02 billion in total FY2025 revenue (Source: sec.gov), split across three segments: Discovery and Safety Assessment (DSA) at $2.40 billion, down 2.0% (Source: sec.gov); Manufacturing Solutions at $766.4 million, down 0.4% (Source: sec.gov); and Research Models and Services at $846.1 million, up 2.0% (Source: sec.gov).

Fortrea Holdings (NASDAQ: FTRE) reported FY2025 revenue of $2,723.4 million (Source: ir.fortrea.com), with approximately 14,300 employees operating in about 100 countries (Source: sec.gov).

Medpace Holdings (NASDAQ: MEDP), the fastest-growing of the large public CROs, posted FY2025 revenue of $2,530.2 million, up 20.0% year-over-year, with Q4 2025 alone up 32.0% to $708.5 million (Source: businesswire.com) (Source: businesswire.com), with approximately 6,200 employees across 46 countries (Source: sec.gov).

Parexel International, private since its 2021 take-private by EQT and Goldman Sachs Asset Management, generated approximately $4.9 billion in trailing-twelve-month revenue through September 30, 2025, according to S&P Global Ratings, with an adjusted EBITDA margin around 14.5% forecast to improve to about 15.5% in 2026 (Source: spglobal.com) (Source: spglobal.com).

Syneos Health, taken private in September 2023 by a consortium of Elliott Investment Management, Patient Square Capital, and Veritas Capital, does not publish audited financials, but Fitch Ratings projects approximately $5.1 billion in 2025 revenue with EBITDA margin rising from 9% in 2024 to 10% to 11% in 2025 (Source: fitchratings.com) (Source: fitchratings.com).

Additional specialty and regional operators have limited public financial disclosure: **Worldwide Clinical Trials**, which completed its acquisition of Catalyst Clinical Research on February 16, 2026 to reach roughly 4,400 employees across more than 70 countries but does not disclose revenue (Source: businesswire.com); Novotech and Premier Research, both frequently cited in industry rankings but without verifiable primary-source revenue figures; and PRA Health Sciences, a former standalone CRO that merged into ICON in 2021. *Table 2* summarizes the verified figures for the companies with disclosed financials.

COMPANY	SELECTED FY2025 REVENUE DISCLOSURE (SCOPE VARIES)	OWNERSHIP	EMPLOYEES	BACKLOG (LATEST DISCLOSED)
IQVIA Holdings	$8,896M (R&D Solutions)	Public (NYSE: IQV)	~93,000 (~51,000 in R&DS)	$34.2B (Jun 2026)
ICON plc	$8,251.3M (company revenue)	Public (NASDAQ: ICLR)	~40,100	$23.4B (Jun 2026)
Thermo Fisher (PPD/Clinical Research)	$7,915M (clinical research business)	Public (NYSE: TMO)	120,000+ (companywide)	Not separately disclosed
WuXi AppTec	RMB 45.46B (~$6.3B; total company revenue)	Public (SSE/HKEX)	Not disclosed in this research	RMB 58.0B
Syneos Health	~$5.1B (Fitch estimate)	Private (Elliott/Patient Square/Veritas)	Not disclosed	Not disclosed
Parexel International	~$4.9B (TTM)	Private (EQT/Goldman Sachs)	17,000+ (2021 figure)	Not disclosed
Charles River Laboratories	$4.02B (total company revenue)	Public (NYSE: CRL)	Not disclosed in this research	Not disclosed
WuXi Biologics	RMB 21.8B (~$3.0B; total company revenue)	Public (HKEX)	Not disclosed in this research	$23.7B
Fortrea Holdings	$2,723.4M (company revenue)	Public (NASDAQ: FTRE)	~14,300	$7,800M (Jun 2026)
Medpace Holdings	$2,530.2M (company revenue)	Public (NASDAQ: MEDP)	~6,200	$3,027.2M (Dec 2025)

The disclosures are useful for comparing scale, but they are not a like-for-like CRO market-share ranking: IQVIA's figure is R&D Solutions revenue, Thermo Fisher separately reports clinical-research revenue, while Charles River, WuXi AppTec, and WuXi Biologics figures are company totals that include non-CRO activities. On the directly disclosed FY2025 figures for the three largest clinical-CRO businesses listed here, IQVIA ranks first, ICON second, and Thermo Fisher's clinical research business third. No market-share percentage should be inferred by dividing the mixed-scope company figures by a published CRO market-size estimate.

Competitive Scale Comparison: IQVIA vs. ICON vs. Fortrea vs. Thermo Fisher's PPD

A common point of confusion in comparing "IQVIA vs ICON vs Labcorp" market share is that Laboratory Corporation of America Holdings (Labcorp) has not operated a full-service clinical CRO business since July 3, 2023, when it completed the spin-off of its Clinical Development and Commercialization Services unit as the independent, publicly traded company Fortrea Holdings (Source: ir.labcorp.com). As part of that transaction, Fortrea made a cash distribution of approximately $1.6 billion to Labcorp (Source: ir.labcorp.com), which Labcorp used partly to fund a $1.0 billion accelerated share repurchase program and pay down $300 million of debt (Source: ir.labcorp.com). Fortrea began trading independently on Nasdaq under ticker FTRE on July 3, 2023 (Source: ir.fortrea.com). Today's Labcorp is properly understood as a diagnostics and central-laboratory company, with $13.95 billion in FY2025 revenue (Source: ir.labcorp.com), while Fortrea is the entity that actually competes with IQVIA, ICON, and the other full-service CROs on clinical trial contracts.

On that corrected comparison, IQVIA's R&D Solutions segment ($8,896 million FY2025) and ICON ($8,251.3 million FY2025) are the two largest full-service CRO operators by disclosed revenue, running roughly neck-and-neck, with Fortrea ($2,723.4 million) and Thermo Fisher's clinical research business ($7,915 million, though embedded within a much larger parent) occupying different competitive tiers. IQVIA's scale advantage is reinforced

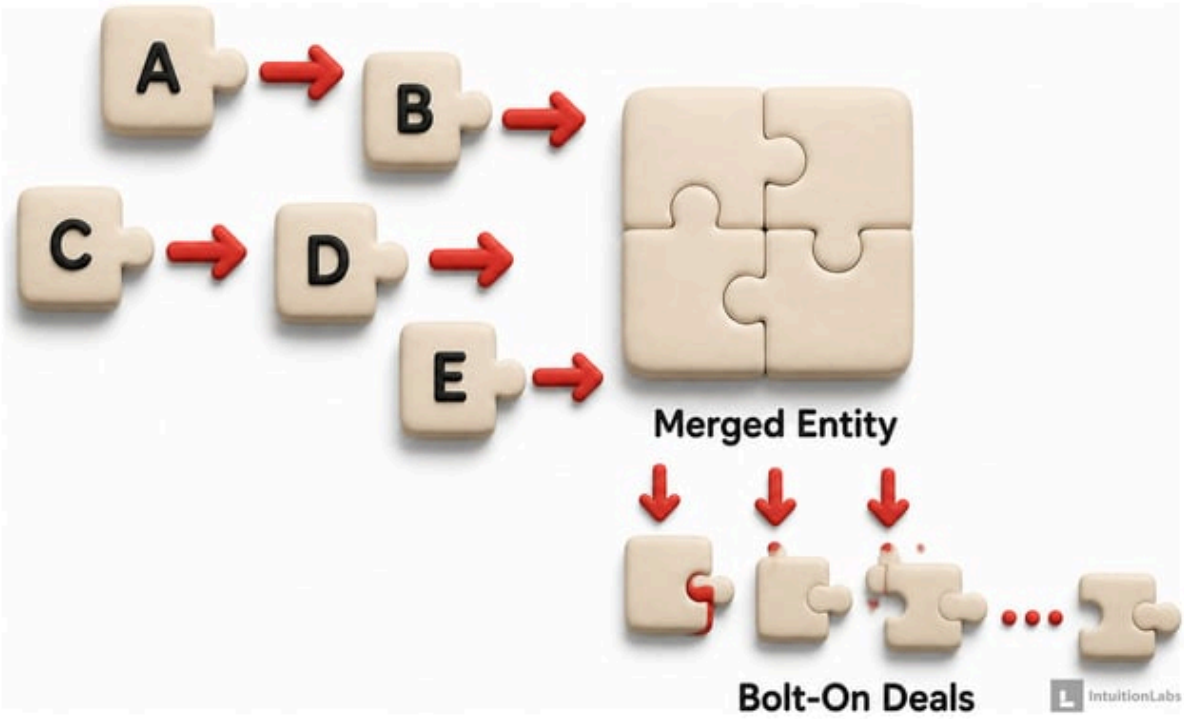
by its Technology and Analytics Solutions segment, which generated an additional $6,626 million in 2025 and gives the company a data and real-world-evidence capability that pure-play CROs like ICON, Fortrea, and Medpace do not natively possess (Source: businesswire.com). On its Q2 2026 earnings call, IQVIA management disclosed that emerging biopharma clients now represent 35% of R&D Solutions revenue, a proportion management characterized as exceeding the emerging-biopharma exposure of its CRO peers (Source: investing.com).

ICON's competitive position was complicated in 2025 and 2026 by a disclosed accounting restatement affecting FY2023 and FY2024 revenue recognition, described in the company's own Q4 2025 results release (Source: sec.gov), even as the company simultaneously showed the strongest bookings momentum of any large public CRO through the first half of 2026, with a Q2 2026 net book-to-bill ratio of 1.51 (iconplc.com, though ICON's own management cautioned that a portion of that figure reflects pass-through cost bookings, with the "direct fee" book-to-bill ratio, a cleaner measure of the company's own service revenue growth, running lower at 1.2x (iconplc.com. Fortrea, meanwhile, is the clearest example of a company still working through the operational aftermath of separation from a much larger parent: its 10-K disclosed that migrating IT infrastructure away from Labcorp, involving more than 27,000 devices, applications, and servers, was largely complete only by early 2025, roughly a year and a half after the spin-off closed (Source: ir.fortrea.com).

MarketsAndMarkets' competitive evaluation matrix, one of the few named research-firm sources to make an explicit qualitative market-position judgment, identifies IQVIA as the sector leader, describing the company as leading "with commanding market share and global operational reach" (Source: marketsandmarkets.com. No named research firm reviewed for this report published a full percentage-point market-share breakdown across all four companies, a gap this report notes honestly rather than filling with unsourced estimates from lower-tier aggregator sites.

CRO Industry Consolidation and M&A Trends

The CRO industry's current structure is largely the product of a wave of megadeals concentrated in 2021, followed by a second, quieter wave of bolt-on acquisitions and ownership transitions running through 2024 and 2026. Thermo Fisher Scientific completed its acquisition of PPD, Inc. on December 8, 2021 for $17.4 billion in enterprise value, also assuming approximately $3.0 billion in PPD net debt (Source: sec.gov) (Source: prnewswire.com). Seven months earlier, ICON plc had announced, on February 24, 2021, its acquisition of PRA Health Sciences in a deal valued at approximately $12 billion (Source: reuters.com), which closed July 1, 2021 and created a combined organization of roughly 38,000 employees across 47 countries (iconplc.com, with PRA shareholders receiving $80 in cash plus 0.4125 ICON shares for each share held (iconplc.com. Trade publication Fierce Biotech characterized the transaction as the return of "megamerger" activity to the CRO sector (Source: fiercebiotech.com).



That same year, on July 2, 2021, EQT Private Equity and Goldman Sachs Asset Management agreed to acquire Parexel from Pamplona Capital Management for an enterprise value of $8.5 billion (Source: prnewswire.com), at a time when Parexel employed more than 17,000 people conducting clinical trials in more than 95 countries (Source: prnewswire.com); the deal completed on November 15, 2021 (parexel.com. Two years later, Syneos Health agreed on May 10, 2023 to be acquired by a consortium of Elliott Investment Management, Patient Square Capital, and Veritas Capital for $43.00 per share in cash, in a transaction valued at approximately $7.1 billion including debt (Source: sec.gov); Reuters reported the underlying equity purchase price at $4.46 billion (Source: reuters.com). Stockholders approved the deal on August 2, 2023, and it closed September 28, 2023 (Source: syneoshealth.com).

Fortrea, having launched as an independent company in mid-2023, spent much of 2024 and 2025 refocusing its portfolio. In March 2024, Fortrea agreed to sell its Endpoint Clinical and Fortrea Patient Access businesses to Arsenal Capital Partners for up to $345 million, a transaction the company said "further streamlines Fortrea's strategic focus as a pure-play contract research organization" (Source: reuters.com). That strategic narrowing did not prevent financial distress: Fortrea's FY2025 GAAP net loss reached $986.2 million, or $(10.81) per diluted share, driven substantially by a $797.9 million non-cash goodwill impairment charge recognized in the first half of 2025 and tied to share-price declines and a higher discount rate (Source: ir.fortrea.com (Source: ir.fortrea.com). The company also faced a proposed shareholder class action filed in June 2025 alleging it had overstated the strength of its post-spin-off business model and 2025 EBITDA targets, covering a class period from the July 2023 spin-off through February 2025 (Source: law360.com).

Consolidation continued into 2026. Thermo Fisher Scientific completed its acquisition of Clario Holdings, a provider of endpoint data solutions for clinical trials, on March 24, 2026, for $8.875 billion in cash, with the deal originally agreed in October 2025 (Source: sec.gov) (Source: clinicaltrialsarena.com). Beyond the initial purchase price, Thermo Fisher agreed to pay Clario's sellers an additional $125 million in January 2027 plus up to $400 million in performance-linked earn-outs through 2027 (Source: clinicaltrialsarena.com). Among mid-tier private CROs, Worldwide Clinical Trials completed its acquisition of oncology-focused Catalyst Clinical Research on February 16, 2026, a deal Axios reported at approximately $500 million, expanding the combined company to roughly 4,400 employees across more than 70 countries (Source: businesswire.com) (Source: medcitynews.com). Smaller regional deals have also continued: ABE Capital Partners and Columbus Venture Partners agreed in March 2026 to acquire a majority stake in Spain's Sermes CRO (Source: sermescro.com), while private equity firm Arlington Capital Partners was, as of March 2026, preparing to market Toronto-based Everest Clinical Research for sale (Source: pharmasource.global).

The net effect of a decade of consolidation is that roughly half of the top-ten CRO franchises by revenue are now either subsidiaries of much larger diversified life-science tools companies (Thermo Fisher's PPD business) or privately held by financial sponsors (Parexel, Syneos Health), rather than standalone public CRO pure-plays. That ownership structure has direct implications for capital allocation, pricing discipline, and the pace of technology investment discussed later in this report.

Data Analysis and Evidence: Book-to-Bill Ratios, Backlogs, and the Funding Cycle

Book-to-bill ratio, the dollar value of new business awards divided by revenue recognized in the same period, is the CRO industry's primary forward-demand indicator, analogous to a backlog-to-revenue ratio in other project-based industries. A ratio above 1.0x signals that new bookings are outpacing revenue recognition, building future revenue visibility; a ratio below 1.0x signals the opposite. Reported ratios among the major public CROs diverged sharply through the first half of 2026, reflecting an uneven recovery in sponsor demand.

IQVIA posted the strongest absolute bookings performance: Q2 2026 R&D Solutions net new bookings reached $3.15 billion, up 19% year-over-year, for a 1.22x book-to-bill ratio (Source: sec.gov), pushing last-twelve-months net new bookings to $11.3 billion, up 13% (Source: sec.gov) and R&D Solutions contracted backlog to $34.2 billion (Source: sec.gov), up from $32.7 billion at year-end 2025 (Source: ir.iqvia.com). ICON's bookings ran even hotter on a headline basis: Q1 2026 net business wins of $2,880 million produced a 1.42 net book-to-bill ratio and a closing backlog of $22.7 billion (iconplc.com (iconplc.com; Q2 2026 pushed net business wins to $3,120 million and the book-to-bill ratio to 1.51, with backlog reaching $23.4 billion (iconplc.com, though ICON management flagged that the comparable "direct fee" book-to-bill, stripping out pass-through costs, ran lower at 1.2x (iconplc.com.

Medpace told a more volatile story. Its Q1 2026 net new business awards of $618.4 million produced a book-to-bill ratio of just 0.88x, below the 1.0x threshold (Source: sec.gov), even as backlog still grew 2.9% year-over-year to $2,929.2 million (Source: sec.gov). On the Q1 earnings call, management acknowledged that cancellations had reached their highest level in over a year and that requests for proposals (RFPs) were down both sequentially and year-over-year, though the chief financial officer characterized the cancellations as project-specific rather than broadly funding-related, stating "nothing struck us as specifically funding related" (Source: alphaspread.com) (Source: alphaspread.com). By Q2 2026, Medpace's

book-to-bill ratio rebounded to 1.13x on net new business awards of $795.7 million, with backlog rising 4.9% to $3,014.2 million (Source: sec.gov) (Source: sec.gov), a swing management attributed to record net bookings, declining cancellations, and RFP volume rising both sequentially and year-over-year, producing what one report characterized as "high-quality opportunities" (Source: thestockobserver.com).

Fortrea reported a Q1 2026 book-to-bill ratio of 1.15x, its third consecutive quarter above 1.1x, with trailing-twelve-month book-to-bill of 1.05x (Source: ir.fortrea.com) and quarter-end backlog of $7,846 million (Source: ir.fortrea.com), while its 2025 full-year TTM book-to-bill ratio had stood at 1.02x with year-end backlog of $7,728.0 million (Source: ir.fortrea.com). Charles River Laboratories is the notable outlier in this comparison: the company does not report a book-to-bill ratio or dollar backlog figure in its earnings releases at all, disclosing instead qualitative proposal-volume trends by client segment (Source: vectorshift.ai), a reminder that book-to-bill disclosure practices are not standardized across the industry. *Table 3* summarizes the most recent disclosed book-to-bill and backlog figures.

COMPANY	LATEST QUARTER	BOOK-TO-BILL RATIO	BACKLOG
IQVIA	Q2 2026	1.22x	$34.2B
ICON plc	Q2 2026	1.51x (1.2x direct fee)	$23.4B
Medpace	Q2 2026	1.13x	$3,014.2M
Fortrea	Q2 2026	1.06x (1.12x TTM)	$7,800M
Charles River Laboratories	FY2025 (Dec. 27, 2025)	Not disclosed	Not disclosed

The demand backdrop behind these figures is genuinely mixed. On one hand, IQVIA management reported on its Q2 2026 call that emerging biopharma funding hit $35 billion in the quarter, more than double the year-earlier figure according to BioWorld data (Source: investing.com), with RFP flow growth described as double-digit both year-over-year and sequentially across all client segments (Source: investing.com). Charles River's new chief executive, Birgit Girshick, told investors on the Q1 2026 call that biotech demand had improved over the prior two quarters amid a reinvigorated funding environment exiting 2025 into 2026 (Source: vectorshift.ai), even as she cautioned that small and early-stage biotech demand remained "sluggish" given still-constrained funding for that cohort (Source: vectorshift.ai). Third Bridge's industry analysis reconciles the apparent contradiction between surging biotech capital markets activity and softer CRO bookings: the XBI biotech stock index surged 89% over the prior year and H1 2026 biotech M&A deal value reached $106 billion amid a looming $300 billion patent cliff, yet actual clinical trial volumes for mid-market CROs have not risen proportionally (Source: thirdbridge.com), with mid-tier CROs discounting billable labor rates 10% to 15% and large pharma sponsors delaying non-essential projects by four to six months while demanding lower vendor prices (Source: thirdbridge.com) (Source: thirdbridge.com). Underlying trial-volume data support a cautiously positive read for the industry overall: GlobalData recorded a clear increase in global clinical trial initiations in the first half of 2025 that reversed a multi-year slowdown, driven by stronger biotech funding and fewer cancellations (Source: clinicaltrialsarena.com), and Citeline's Annual Clinical Trials Roundup found 10,503 Phase I through III trials initiated in 2024, a 5.5% year-over-year increase in trial starts and a 3.6% rise in industry-sponsored studies (Source: citeline.com).

Case Studies and Real-World Examples

Fortrea's Post-Spinoff Restructuring: A CRO Learning to Stand Alone

Fortrea Holdings offers the clearest real-world illustration of the operational cost of separating a CRO from a larger corporate parent. After launching independently on July 3, 2023 (Source: ir.fortrea.com), the company spent much of the next two years untangling shared infrastructure from Labcorp, a process its own 10-K disclosed involved migrating more than 27,000 computers, mobile phones, applications, and servers, largely complete only by early 2025 (Source: ir.fortrea.com). In March 2024, the company sold its Endpoint Clinical and Fortrea Patient Access businesses to Arsenal Capital Partners for up to $345 million, narrowing its focus to core CRO services (Source: reuters.com). Despite that focus, FY2025 delivered a GAAP net loss of $986.2 million, dominated by a $797.9 million non-cash goodwill impairment (Source: ir.fortrea.com, and the company drew a securities class action alleging it had overstated its post-spin-off business model and EBITDA targets between the July 2023 spin-off and February 2025 (Source: law360.com). By its Q2 2026 report, Fortrea's revenue trajectory had stabilized at $678.2 million for the quarter, with management raising full-year 2026 guidance to $2,620 million to $2,690 million (Source: sec.gov) (Source: globenewswire.com), illustrating that even a well-established CRO franchise can require several years to normalize operations after a corporate carve-out.

IQVIA's Agentic AI Platform and the SCRI Oncology Alliance

IQVIA's largest 2026 strategic move was the March launch of IQVIA.ai, a unified agentic artificial intelligence platform announced at NVIDIA's GTC conference and built using NVIDIA technologies including Nemotron, the NeMo Agent Toolkit, Dynamo, and LangChain (Source: businesswire.com) (Source: businesswire.com). By the time of the announcement, IQVIA said it had filed more than 100 AI-related patents and deployed more than 150 intelligent agents, with 19 of the top 20 pharmaceutical companies incorporating them into their workflows (Source: businesswire.com). Separately, in May 2025, IQVIA announced a strategic collaboration with SCRI Development Innovations, the CRO arm of Sarah Cannon Research Institute, to accelerate global oncology trials (Source: iqvia.com), an area where IQVIA states it already manages roughly one in five oncology trials conducted in the United States (Source: iqvia.com). The collaboration uses SCRI's "Accelero" operational model, which the companies describe as seamlessly integrating electronic health record data directly into electronic data capture systems (Source: iqvia.com), a workflow-automation approach that mirrors the broader industry push toward reducing manual data entry in trial operations.

ICON's Clinical Technology Integration: Medidata and Mural Health

ICON plc pursued a parallel but distinct technology strategy centered on deepening partnerships with established clinical-data platforms rather than building a single unified AI stack. In March 2025, ICON became, by its own description, the first large CRO to fully integrate Medidata's Clinical Data Studio artificial intelligence tool into its clinical data workflows, building on a 20-year relationship that had already supported more than 1,700 studies, with over 400 active at the time of the announcement (Source: nasdaq.com) (Source: nasdaq.com). That same month, ICON announced a partnership with Mural Health Technologies to use the Mural Link platform for participant payments and support, including what the companies described as the industry's only fee-free debit card option, aimed at expanding recruitable trial populations including historically underrepresented groups (Source: iconplc.com) (Source: iconplc.com). Earlier in January 2025, ICON had expanded its own AI tool portfolio with iSubmit, which automates clinical trial document management, and FORWARD+, an AI-enabled resource-forecasting tool backed by an Enterprise Ireland grant (iconplc.com. Notably, ICON's own biopharma survey found that a meaningful share of sponsor companies, 13% of respondents, reported struggling to scale AI adoption across trial programs despite heavy AI usage in isolated pockets, a caution against overstating the pace of AI transformation across the sector (iconplc.com.

Medpace: A Phase III Success and a Regulatory Setback on the Same CRO's Ledger

Medpace's track record illustrates that CRO scale and operational competence do not guarantee regulatory outcomes for sponsors. In one documented case study, Medpace ran a pivotal Phase III registrational trial for a new antibiotic class targeting uncomplicated urinary tract infections across 150 sites and more than 2,000 subjects, ultimately achieving FDA approval through strategies including escalation calls between Medpace and the sponsor on non-recruiting sites (Source: medpace.com) (Source: medpace.com). By contrast, Actinium Pharmaceuticals, which had selected Medpace as CRO for its pivotal Phase 3 SIERRA trial of Iomab-B back in 2016 (actiniumpharma.com, received an August 2024 regulatory update stating that the FDA had determined the completed SIERRA trial was "not adequate to support a BLA filing," despite the trial meeting its primary endpoint of durable complete remission with strong statistical significance, 22% versus 0%, p less than 0.0001 (Source: actiniumpharma.com) (Source: actiniumpharma.com. The trial had enrolled 153 relapsed or refractory acute myeloid leukemia patients across 24 bone marrow transplant centers in North America (Source: actiniumpharma.com). The FDA instead required an additional survival-benefit trial before it would consider a Biologics License Application, a reminder that meeting a pre-specified statistical endpoint is a necessary but not sufficient condition for regulatory approval, regardless of the CRO's execution quality.

CRO Data Integrity and Regulatory Oversight: FDA's Raptim Research Untitled Letter

Not every 2025 to 2026 CRO news event was positive. The FDA issued a formal letter dated March 27, 2025 to Indian CRO Raptim Research, following an inspection originally conducted in April 2023 that had already produced an earlier general correspondence letter in August 2024 (Source: fda.gov. Indian financial press reported that the FDA declared all in vitro bioequivalence data generated by Raptim Research unreliable, asking pharmaceutical companies that had relied on Raptim-generated studies to repeat the affected work (Source: cnbctv18.com). The episode is a useful counterweight to the largely successful case studies above, illustrating that CRO data integrity failures can require sponsors to repeat affected studies when the data are essential to approval, regardless of how efficiently the original work was executed, and that regulatory due diligence on CRO selection remains as important as commercial due diligence. Parexel, by contrast, has built a public reputation around exactly this kind of regulatory rigor: the company's population pharmacodynamic modeling work supported bluebird bio's BLA for the gene therapy Zynteglo, which the FDA approved on August 17, 2022 for transfusion-dependent beta-thalassemia (Source: parexel.com), with the models built from peripheral blood vector copy number and HbAT87Q data included directly in the marketing submission (Source: parexel.com). Parexel's consulting team has since been credited with supporting nearly one-third of all sponsor NDA and BLA submissions approved by the FDA in 2024 (Source: newsroom.parexel.com).

Implications and Future Directions

Several structural trends are likely to shape CRO market share over the next several years. First, the ownership bifurcation between publicly disclosed operators (IQVIA, ICON, Medpace, Fortrea, Charles River, WuXi AppTec, WuXi Biologics) and privately held or subsidiary operators (Thermo Fisher's clinical research unit, Parexel, Syneos Health) is unlikely to reverse, and it means that a genuinely comprehensive market-share picture will always require blending SEC filings with credit-rating-agency estimates such as those from Fitch and S&P Global Ratings, since private-equity-owned CROs have no obligation to disclose quarterly results to the public. Second, the divergence between headline book-to-bill ratios and "direct fee" book-to-bill ratios that ICON began separately disclosing in 2026 suggests other large CROs may follow suit, since sponsors and investors increasingly want to distinguish organic service growth from pass-through cost reimbursement when assessing genuine demand strength.

Third, artificial intelligence adoption is moving from pilot programs to platform-level commitments among the largest CROs, evidenced by IQVIA's unified IQVIA.ai platform and its claimed deployment of over 150 intelligent agents across nearly the entire top-20 pharma client base (Source: businesswire.com) and ICON's parallel investment in Medidata's Clinical Data Studio and its own iSubmit and FORWARD+ tools (iconplc.com. Yet ICON's own survey data, showing 13% of biopharma respondents struggling to scale AI beyond isolated use cases (iconplc.com, suggests the industry remains in an early-adoption phase rather than a mature one, with real capability gaps between the marketing claims made at conferences like NVIDIA GTC and the operational reality inside individual sponsor organizations. Thermo Fisher's own research, an independent Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development analysis published in June 2025, found that its integrated Accelerator CDMO-CRO model could reduce Phase I through III study timelines by up to nearly three years (Source: ppd.com), a scale of efficiency gain that, if broadly replicable, would meaningfully alter the economics of drug development regardless of which CRO captures the resulting business.

Fourth, the funding recovery visible in emerging biopharma capital markets, with Q2 2026 EBP funding of $35 billion more than double the year-earlier level (Source: investing.com), has not yet translated uniformly into CRO bookings growth, a lag that Third Bridge's research attributes to large pharma sponsors simultaneously tightening budgets ahead of an approaching patent cliff (Source: thirdbridge.com). Sponsors and CROs navigating this gap between capital availability and outsourcing demand will likely lean more heavily on data integration, real-world evidence, and commercial analytics capabilities that sit adjacent to core clinical operations, an area where specialized life-sciences advisory firms increasingly play a role. For sponsor organizations building internal analytics or evaluating Veeva-based commercial and clinical data platforms alongside their CRO relationships, firms offering AI, GenAI, and advanced analytics for pharmaceutical and life-science operations, including regulatory-compliant data engineering, business intelligence, and enterprise integration services, are positioned as complements to, rather than substitutes for, CRO relationships (Source: intuitionlabs.ai). This complementary role, connecting the data a CRO generates during a trial to the commercial and regulatory systems a sponsor relies on afterward, is likely to grow in relevance as AI-enabled trial technologies proliferate faster than most sponsor organizations can absorb them internally.

Finally, further consolidation among mid-tier and regional CROs appears likely to continue, following the pattern set by Worldwide Clinical Trials' acquisition of Catalyst Clinical Research and the ongoing sale process for Everest Clinical Research. Private equity ownership structures, now common across several of the industry's largest players, create natural exit pressure that will likely produce additional M&A activity, IPO attempts, or dividend recapitalizations, of the kind S&P Global Ratings flagged for Parexel in December 2025 (Source: spglobal.com), over the next two to three years.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Which company has the largest CRO market share in 2026? By disclosed segment revenue, IQVIA Holdings leads with $8,896 million in FY2025 Research and Development Solutions revenue (Source: businesswire.com), closely followed by ICON plc at $8,251.3 million (Source: sec.gov). Market research firm MarketsAndMarkets separately identifies IQVIA as the qualitative sector leader by commanding market share and global reach (Source: marketsandmarkets.com, while IBISWorld estimates IQVIA's share of total CRO industry revenue at 17.3% (Source: ibisworld.com).

What is the global CRO market worth in 2026? Estimates from named research firms range from approximately $83 billion to $100 billion for 2026, depending on market scope: MarketsAndMarkets estimates $93.02 billion (Source: marketsandmarkets.com), Fortune Business Insights $99.87 billion (Source: fortunebusinessinsights.com), and Mordor Intelligence $92.98 billion (Source: mordorintelligence.com).

Is Labcorp still a CRO? No. Labcorp exited the full-service CRO business on July 3, 2023, when it spun off Fortrea Holdings as an independent, publicly traded company (Source: ir.labcorp.com). Labcorp today operates as a diagnostics and central-laboratory company with $13.95 billion in FY2025 revenue (Source: ir.labcorp.com).

What is a good book-to-bill ratio for a CRO? A ratio above 1.0x indicates new business bookings are outpacing revenue recognition. Among large public CROs in the first half of 2026, ratios ranged from Medpace's 0.88x in Q1 2026, which it described as a temporary dip driven by elevated cancellations rather than a structural funding problem (Source: sec.gov) (Source: alphaspread.com), to ICON's headline 1.51x in Q2 2026 (iconplc.com.

Is the CRO industry consolidating? Yes, significantly. Since 2021 the industry has absorbed Thermo Fisher's $17.4 billion purchase of PPD (Source: sec.gov), ICON's $12 billion acquisition of PRA Health Sciences (Source: reuters.com), Parexel's $8.5 billion take-private (Source: prnewswire.com), and Syneos Health's $7.1 billion take-private (Source: sec.gov), plus Thermo Fisher's 2026 acquisition of Clario Holdings for $8.875 billion (Source: sec.gov) and smaller deals such as Worldwide Clinical Trials' purchase of Catalyst Clinical Research (Source: businesswire.com).

How many trials do CROs run each year? Seven responding ACRO member companies conducted or participated in 7,634 studies involving 1.4 million patients and volunteers in 2025 (Source: acrohealth.org), while Citeline counted 10,503 Phase I through III trials initiated across the industry in 2024 (Source: citeline.com).

Conclusion

This article uses the term “market share” in its title to address the topic readers search for, but its evidence supports a CRO competitive-scale comparison rather than a comparable global percentage-share ranking. Participants report different business scopes, several large operators are private, and market-research firms use materially different market definitions. The disclosed revenue, backlog, and bookings figures are therefore scale indicators, not a global market-share ranking.

The industry's structure has been reshaped by a decade of consolidation that shows no sign of stopping, from the 2016 merger of Quintiles and IMS Health that formed QuintilesIMS, through the 2021 megadeals involving ICON/PRA Health Sciences, Thermo Fisher/PPD, and Parexel, to the 2023 Fortrea spin-off and Syneos Health take-private and the 2026 acquisitions of Clario Holdings by Thermo Fisher and Catalyst Clinical Research by Worldwide Clinical Trials. Demand signals through mid-2026 remain genuinely mixed: strong emerging biopharma funding and robust bookings at IQVIA and ICON coexist with a temporary dip below breakeven book-to-bill at Medpace and persistently sluggish demand from smaller, earlier-stage biotech sponsors even as larger players report improving conditions. For sponsors, investors, and advisors evaluating this market, the practical takeaway is that revenue rank alone is an incomplete guide to competitive strength; backlog quality, book-to-bill trends net of pass-through costs, ownership structure, and technology investment pace all shape which CROs are best positioned to capture the next cycle of clinical trial demand as the industry moves through 2026 and toward the market sizes projected for the early 2030s by the research firms surveyed in this report.

Tags: cro market share, contract research organizations, cro industry 2026, iqvia, icon plc, fortrea, medpace, cro consolidation, book-to-bill ratio, clinical trials outsourcing

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