

AACI CRI Education and Operations Subcommittee

Onboarding and Retaining Clinical Research Staff - Recommendations and Benchmarks

December 2021

Overview

The AACI CRI Education and Operations Subcommittee, consisting of sixteen cancer centers, has met every other month since January 2021 to gather best practices for onboarding new clinical trials office (CTO) staff and retraining existing staff. In reviewing training programs, the committee saw a need to address centers' inability to retain staff and to identify ways to improve retention.

As part of the project, recommendations were made, and benchmarks set for clinic CTO training programs. Due to the scope of the project, the committee suggested breaking it down into three parts to facilitate data collection, with each cancer center reporting on the following:

- Descriptions of CTO roles
- Training curriculum for onboarding each position
- Expected timeframes for role-based training and outcomes

Fourteen cancer centers participated in the project (*see attachment 1*). Data collection started with each center identifying roles and responsibilities for each position within the CTO, pre-requisites for new staff, and expectations for existing staff seeking advancement in career ladder programs.

In the second part of the project, each center reported general training details, e.g., who administered the training, length of training, and courses offered for new employees.

For the third part of the project, each center provided information on specific classes offered for general cancer center onboarding and CTO training, as well as when "refresher" classes were offered to current employees.

The data showed that most centers had similar structures in place despite differences in job titles. In some instances, responsibilities were shared between two roles, such as a clinical research specialist doing data submission and other research related duties. Many cancer centers reported high rates of turnover during the pandemic, with centers losing nurses and experienced trial coordinators to other cancer centers, industry, and contract research organizations (CRO). Without a career ladder or institutional policies for salary adjustments, centers were unable to meet salary demands for staff considering industry positions.

Regarding training, most centers' training programs had similar lengths and course offerings (*see attachment 2 for classes offered at each center*). One observed difference was that not all centers have a dedicated educator role or training department. Eight of the 14 (57%) cancer centers surveyed had a position within their CTO responsible for training new hires and reassigned staff. A few centers have recently created a position, and/or have a general education department. Two of the 14 (13%) centers do not have a dedicated educator position but are planning to create one or hire an educator in the future.

Recommendations and Benchmarks

Retention

- The COVID-19 pandemic forced cancer centers to permit remote work and it has now become the norm for most centers. It is recommended that most cancer centers continue to offer remote or hybrid work options to enhance work/life balance and provide advantages such as reductions in commuting times and transportation expenses.
- Cancer centers should review and revise their current staff positions annually to ensure that salaries are competitive with the oncology industry and minimize staff turnover. Consider pay increases to promote retention and to better align salaries with market analysis.
- Create tiers based on job responsibilities to provide progressive management levels for staff seeking advancement opportunities or as challenges to experienced staff.

Training

- Utilize a dedicated educator role within the cancer center CTO to create a positive impact on training, onboarding, and continuing education. Such a role can enable the CTO to assess levels of competency among the newly hired and existing employees and to offer refresher courses where needed.
- Have in place an organized training curriculum to provide rapid and effective training to counter staff turnover.
- Provide leadership training to staff members who are promoted within the career ladder system to address the gap in leadership and management skills.



Association of American Cancer Institutes Clinical Research Innovation

Attachment 1 - 2021 AACI CRI Education and Operations Subcommittee who Participated

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