The Great Rebound: Successful Clinical Trials Office (CTO) Staffing Strategies

Background & Goals

Great Resignation affected all industries, leading to a record-breaking turnover rate. As a result of this trend, the University of North Carolina (UNC) Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center (LCCC) experienced an unprecedented staffing shortage. This was further exacerbated by pre-existing local, regional and industry factors such as UNC LCCC's location in the Research Triangle Park where competition for clinical research professionals is fierce and pharmaceutical pay, benefits and historically far exceeded academic research center. LCCC's staffing crisis was further compounded by a hold on raises for state employees during this timeframe, and a lack of a commensurate increase in staff to support substantial portfolio growth in 2019 which the number of open to accrual studies and interventional treatment accrals increased by 58% and 34%, respectively. In May 2021, LCCC hit its staffing low with 62 vacancies out of 174 positions. By spring 2022, current and regulatory vacancies led to accrual and clinical trial activation hold.

The goal of this initiative was to quickly onboard qualified staff and to increase office capacity while also retaining current staff to enable the LCCC Clinical Trial Office (CTO) to fulfill our mission: Extraordinary Research, Exceptional Care.

Solutions & Methods

Staff Recruitment: To address immediate staffing needs several initiatives were put into effect: 1. Increased use of contract agencies (Figure 1). 2. Expanded use of direct reach out as a recruitment tool. 3. Development of roles that required no prior research experience which created an entry point for undergraduate students to join the workforce (Figure 2, 3 and 4). 4. Creation of remote/hybrid roles to allow for nation-wide recruitment (Figure 3). 5. Development of a workflow pipeline through internships (Table 1), and 6. Realignment of salaries to appropriate benchmarks (Figure 5).

Figure 1. Contract Agencies

Figure 2. Staff Recruitment

Figure 3. Functional Group Recruitment/Retention Methods

Table 1. Building the Pipeline Internships

Outcomes

The most successful recruitment efforts were the increased use of contractors from a variety of agencies and the creation of entry-level positions allowing for recruitment of undergraduate students. Salary increases and career ladders were the most successful retention methods when coupled with a positive workplace culture. Building workplace culture was driven by teambuilding activities, decreasing the staff to manager ratio allowing for increased staff support, and creating subject matter expert training positions to alleviate the training burden placed on managers and staff. To ensure the continuation of staff recruitment and retention efforts, LCCC clinical research designed strategic planning in 2022. Strategic planning led LCCC to initiate organizational structure optimization including hiring a Director of Workforce Development & Administration to lead and sustain focus on staff recruitment, development and belonging.

Figure 4. New/Expanded Career Ladders

Figure 5. CTO Salary Growth (2013 compared to 2016)

Figure 6. CTO Teambuilding (2023 planning)