

Increasing Retention of Clinical Research Assistants

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1. Background

At Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center (OSUCCC), our Clinical Trials Office (CTO) disease teams include clinical research assistants (CRAs) who are responsible for data entry. This position requires only a bachelor's degree, and most CRAs are hired directly out of undergraduate studies. Historically, the majority of CRA positions turned over after about one year in the role, causing most trials to be reassigned yearly. Without the continuity of staff, knowledge was lost, monitors frustrated, and quality impacted. Training and onboarding dozens of new CRAs yearly put a strain on our regulatory, manager, and training team resources.

2. Goals

Increase retention of clinical research assistants after their first year in the role.

3. Solutions and Methods

CTO leadership worked with human resources to create a senior CRA role. The job description includes the data abstraction and entry that are the main functions of the CRA, and additional duties such as maintaining monitoring visit tracking logs, creating case report forms for IITs, and precepting across different diseases. The qualifications are a bachelor's degree in biology/health sciences plus one year of research experience. Soft skills such as quality of work and initiative are also considered. The senior CRA position is not intended for new staff but instead is a promotional opportunity for existing CRAs with an approximate 15 percent pay increase.

The senior CRA role was launched in June 2023. Ten existing CRA staff members were identified for immediate promotion. Managers continue to promote their qualified CRAs to senior CRAs as warranted.

4. Outcomes

Turnover of CRAs has decreased by 23 percent since implementing the senior CRA role. This leads to better continuity and quality of work, as trials change hands less often. We now have >50 percent of our CRA workforce with over one year of experience. These staff have an average of 28 months of experience in the role. This is double the number of experienced staff and length of experience compared to before we implemented the senior CRA role. Other benefits of less CRA turnover include fewer key personnel changes for our regulatory team to process, and less pressure on our training team for onboarding. Managers can spend more time focusing on quality of work and supporting existing staff. Having fewer CRA openings allows our managers to be more selective with hiring choices, leading to more skilled, reliable staff with fewer performance issues. Morale and comradery on the teams has improved as they work together longer.

5. Learned and Future Directions

Adding the senior CRA position to our career ladder has changed the landscape of our department. Many senior CRAs continue to grow and eventually move to CRC positions. With their additional experience they are more prepared to take on this challenging role. Even CRAs who are not promoted to a senior CRA immediately are staying longer and working toward this goal. The pay increase has been incentive for several senior CRAs to stay in the position as they pursue advanced degrees at OSU. The

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senior CRAs contribute to process and quality improvement projects. We continue look for opportunities to utilize their expertise.