Category: Training, Career Development, and Staff Retention – Idea

Bridging the Gap Between Training and Practice: a Competency Checklist for Clinical Research Staff

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1. Background

At Winship Cancer Institute, all newly hired research staff are required to complete a standardized onboarding training program and pass a post-training assessment. While this approach has effectively increased both general research knowledge and cancer center-specific policy knowledge, staff often encounter challenges when translating this knowledge into practice. To address this gap, we plan to implement a structured competency checklist for clinical research staff. This tool will be designed to ensure staff can consistently and accurately perform essential job responsibilities, strengthening the connection between training and real-world application.

2. Goals

The primary goal of this initiative will be to enhance the practical readiness and performance of newly onboarded clinical research staff at Winship Cancer Institute. By introducing a structured competency checklist, we aim to ensure that staff can reliably demonstrate the skills required to carry out essential job functions. Additional goals include standardizing expectations across disease teams, reducing variability in training quality, and improving the transition from theoretical learning to applied practice. Ultimately, the effort will seek to improve operational efficiency, data quality, and protocol compliance by equipping staff with validated, job-specific competencies.

3. Solutions and Methods

To address the observed gap between foundational training and practical application, we will develop and implement a structured competency checklist for newly onboarded clinical research staff. Competencies will be organized into categories such as informed consent, screening and eligibility, essential log completion, reproductive status assessment, preparing for a research visit, and management of participants on study. Each competency will be mapped to specific, observable behaviors. Staff will complete each task under supervised observation, with evaluators documenting proficiency and providing targeted feedback.

The checklist will be created collaboratively to ensure alignment with essential job functions across disease teams. Implementation will include evaluator training to promote consistency in competency assessment. Completion metrics and evaluator feedback will be analyzed to assess performance trends, identify training gaps, and guide continuous improvement of the onboarding process.

4. Outcomes

Implementation of the competency checklist is expected to strengthen the practical readiness of newly onboarded clinical research staff by validating their ability to perform core job functions with consistency and accuracy. Completion metrics and evaluator assessments will help identify common competency gaps, supporting targeted training interventions and informing future curriculum improvement. Ultimately, these outcomes aim to enhance research operations, improve protocol compliance, and support a more efficient transition from onboarding to independent practice.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Future efforts will focus on refining the competency checklist based on completion trends, evaluator feedback, and identified training gaps. Additional role-specific competency checklists are planned to support continuous skill development beyond initial onboarding. We also aim to integrate digital tracking tools to streamline documentation, enhance visibility into staff progress, and facilitate real-time quality monitoring across disease teams. Long-term goals include evaluating the impact of competency validation on operational efficiency, protocol compliance, and staff retention. Insights gained from this initiative will inform broader training standards and support the development of a comprehensive, competency-based professional development framework.