

A Structured Sponsor–Cancer Center Partnership Model to Improve Trial Operational Excellence (Visibility, Responsiveness, Activation Readiness) and Enable Innovation

A. Almazar¹, T. Nghiem²

¹Mayo Clinic Comprehensive Cancer Center; ²AstraZeneca

1. Background

Operational misalignment between industry sponsors and academic cancer centers can contribute to delays in feasibility assessments, start-up, and issue resolution throughout the clinical trial lifecycle. Traditional communication pathways often lack predictability and clear ownership, resulting in limited visibility into upcoming studies and inconsistent responsiveness. To address these gaps, our cancer center and AstraZeneca (AZ) implemented a structured partnership model designed to enhance operational excellence and readiness for trial activation while fostering an environment that supports continuous innovation. Although the model was initially focused on feasibility and study start up, the improved operational predictability and communication structure have also generated positive benefits for participant enrollment and data-related activities.

2. Goals

This work-in-progress initiative aims to evaluate how a structured sponsor–site partnership can:

1. Improve visibility into pipeline and portfolio activities
2. Increase responsiveness and reduce friction across feasibility, startup, and escalation workflows
3. Strengthen activation readiness through shared planning and predictable processes
4. Build a foundation for collaborative innovation and continuous operational improvement

3. Solutions and Methods

The partnership model includes:

- **Dedicated engagement structure:** Concierge-style points of contact to streamline communication
- **Shared planning and visibility:** Routine joint reviews of the trial pipeline, resource needs, and readiness indicators
- **Regular operational touchpoints:** Scheduled feasibility check-ins, start-up progress reviews, and structured escalation pathways
- **Mutual commitments:** Expectations for timelines, communication standards, and follow-through that extend beyond activation into participant enrollment and data-related activities

Qualitative assessments (process mapping, observation, and stakeholder feedback) were used to identify friction points.

4. Outcomes

Early qualitative findings indicate:

Category: Cross-Cutting Innovation and Collaboration – Work in Progress

- **Improved visibility**, with clearer line-of-sight to studies across disease areas and timelines
- **Increased responsiveness**, driven by streamlined communication and dedicated contacts
- **Enhanced activation readiness**, supported by proactive coordination and predictable workflows
- **More efficient escalation processes**, allowing for faster issue identification and resolution
- **Better cross-functional alignment**, enabling more effective planning and problem solving

Quantitative results over the course of a year:

- Portfolio of enrolling AZ oncology studies increased by 31 percent
- Average activation cycle times decreased by 24 percent and sustained throughout 2025
- Participant randomization increased by 160 percent
- Data entry timelines improved by 48 percent

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

A structured sponsor–cancer center partnership model shows strong potential to improve trial operational excellence through increased visibility, enhanced responsiveness, and improved activation readiness. While the project is still in progress, early findings suggest that a dedicated engagement framework with shared planning and mutual accountability can reduce operational friction and create conditions that support innovation across the trial lifecycle. Additionally, positive effects on participant enrollment and data entry/query resolution timelines highlight the broader value of upstream operational alignment.