ABSTRACT

Building a statistical programming team from scratch is a big challenge, and building the team on a remote site is an even bigger challenge in all aspects of recruiting, training, roles & responsibilities, and communication. The author discusses, from her own experiences, the challenges and solutions in building a remote programming site that functions effectively as part of a large multi-site global biopharmaceutical company.

INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, Amgen decided to expand statistical programming function to a remote research site. I was hired from a local biotech company to lead the new expansion team of programmers. The initial headcount was twelve. Human resources provided a lot of help in recruiting and hiring. In the mean time, a number of contractors were also hired to help the remote programming team for the immediate workload. Except for a small number of early development and pre-clinical statisticians, we are the only department from clinical development that operates remotely from that location.

In order to ensure that the remote team is engaged in the projects early on, the department assigned a few busy products to the new site. We were required to work cross functionally and cross sites because all other functions are in other locations. We also needed to work with programmers at other sites.

Over the years, we have formed programming teams with members working seamlessly from all different sites.

The first couple of years were critical due to numerous challenges. The most visible challenges were: recruiting, training and communication across sites.

RECRUITING

In addition to the usual requirement for SAS technical skills and problem solving abilities, we also emphasize on communication skills and leadership quality when evaluating a candidate.

Within seven months, we hired twelve different levels of programmers and established a foundation for future growth. Some of the requirements we used in evaluation are as follows:

- technical skills,
- communication skills,
- team work,
- flexibility/adopt well to change,
- planning/organization skills,
- problem solving skills,
- initiative, and
- leadership quality.
TRAINING
Going hand-in-hand with recruiting is the initial task of "on-boarding". A comprehensive checklist has been developed to effectively bring the new hires on board. It runs through important milestone time points such as:

- upon acceptance of offer,
- 2 weeks prior to start date,
- 1 week prior to start date,
- day 1,
- day 2,
- day 3-5,
- first month,
- first quarter, and
- first 90 days.

Some categories of typical tasks are as follows:

- HR related tasks,
- administrative tasks,
- IS related tasks such as computer account set-ups,
- training on company policies and departmental policies,
- project area training, and
- SAS programming.

Each product team has their own product specific trainings ranging from programming environment to output delivery systems.

We also relied on the department buddy system, mentorship program to help with staff development.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES (R&R)
With the addition of new sites and new employees, there came challenges regarding resource management, timeline management, scope discussions, cross-sites collaborations, and cross-functional negotiations. The department produced role and responsibility matrixes for the following job titles:

- Department Head,
- Therapeutic Area (TA) Head,
- Regional TA Head,
- Site Head,
- Global Lead Programmer,
- Regional Lead Programmer.

Each of the above roles carries its unique set of responsibilities.
COMMUNICATION
With teams dispersed in different locations and different time zones, communication is of critical importance. Although face-to-face meetings are much encouraged, they are limited due to time and budget issues. The two most-used communication methods involving multiple people are emails and telecons. However attending a virtual meeting and participating actively is not trivial.

The department developed a set of best practices to help staff members achieve their communication goals for both emails and telecons.

Here are a few examples of email etiquette. This is by no means a complete list.

To: include only the person/s expected to act on your message
Cc: Person/s who are sent the message for their information only
Bcc: As a general rule – do not use Bcc.
Subject: Concise, meeting summary of your email. One email per each subject.

Likewise, best practices for telecons are introduced to staff members. Interestingly, the top issues for telecons in the first six months were technical issues such as low speaker volume, people not speaking into microphones and net-meeting or webex not working. During the later months, the issues were more about facilitating and participating skills; how to engage remote attendees and how to participate from remote sites.

In general, every site (remote or not) will experience some issues in communication, but with enough training and practice people will get it and will feel comfortable attending telecons. Right now telecons have become part of our daily routine.

COMMITMENT FROM MANAGEMENT
Before I accepted the job as the site head for this new programming site, my biggest concern was how this new site would be utilized. Will it be treated as a just consulting model? Or will it be treated as a natural extension of the work force? How will staff development work?

The first thing my supervisor did was to move two important products to our new site. Each product was managed by a new senior manager, with programming members at the same site supporting them. With the on-boarding and training mentioned above, in a relatively short time period, the new staff have grown to be an integral part of a global development team.

My superiors came to visit us multiple times a year in the first 2-3 years. The VP of statistics and VP of Biomedical Sciences also came several times a year for the first couple of years, and at least once a year in the following years. It may seem just a short visit each time, but it is the commitment from the management to make the new site a success. This has greatly helped with staff members’ level of engagement and motivation.

CONCLUSION
In general, remote or not, there always will be the challenges of recruiting, training and communication when expanding the workforce. Pharmaceutical industry requires a lot of cross functional and cross-site collaborations due to outsourcing, contingent worker initiatives, CRO and FSP (functional service provider) models.
Communication becomes the key to success. On-boarding, training and face to face meetings can all be considered different kinds of communication. The take-home message is ‘communicating often, communicating precisely, and communicating efficiently’.

RECOMMENDED READING


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