

Managing a Blended Programming Staff of Permanent Employees and Contingent Workers

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this presentation will be my experience of managing a blended programming staff. The challenge of managing the shift to a small permanent programming staff, and a corresponding shift to an expanded contingent worker staff. It will highlight the impact of shifting roles on the permanent staff and the management techniques I used to ease this transition. I'll discuss the need to ensure that the changing environment does not impact programming deliverables. I will also key on techniques I used to manage contingent workers effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the programming function would be staffed by a large permanent employee staff and supplemented by a small contingent worker staff. The main function of the programmer was "heads down" RAP programming. Often technical expertise was the only requirement needed to define a good programmer. The shift from large permanent staffing to a small permanent staff with a large contingent worker base has changed forever this dynamic. The shift to this new dynamic has had a major impact on the role of programmers and how one manages a blended staff of permanent and contingent workers. This paper highlights some of the experiences I faced in managing this changing dynamic. Approximately eighteen months ago I became a manager of a blended staff of six permanent programming staff and on average twenty contingent programming staff. I have responsibility of managing the late phase statistical programming activity of two oncology compounds in the R&D group. In the past when we had a large permanent staff supplemented by a small contingent work base, we would hire independent contingent workers, the contingent workers were not affiliated with any agency. This changed with the shift in staffing as described earlier; we now need a steady source of contingent workers. Therefore our contingent worker staff is hired solely through several GSK approved agencies. Managing this shift offers challenges to not only the manager, but his permanent staff as well. You always have to keep in mind that pipeline deliverable cannot suffer. Further, the contingent worker is managed directly by permanent GSK staff and they work on GSK systems. This paper will not address the managing challenges and the dynamics of working with CROs or FSPs groups.

IMPACT ON PERMANENT STAFF

The first major change was the elimination of the "silo" mentality. The days of a lead programmer being permanently assigned to one compound and in some cases one indication within that compound are long gone. The lead programmer of today must be able to multi-task and shift from one study to another based on the priorities of the group. Also while I try to keep the shifting between compounds at a minimum, this is always a possibility. The second major change is the redefinition of their programming role. Technical expertise will always be highly valued. But your staff members will find that this is now not the only skill valued. In the new environment the successful programmer must not only be technically skilled, they must also have or develop skills in non-programming areas such as project management. This shift to an emphasis on non-programming roles often require a skill set that many programmers do not have or wish to embrace. The "just give me the specs" mentality has to change. All of your permanent programming staff must have excellent communication skills and the ability to interact at all levels of the expanded study team. The third major change to my staff was that all automatically became Lead Programmers. I no longer had the luxury of having staff programmers that worked in a supportive role. Such as just being a QC programmer or working on repetitive tasks. The lead programmers will now find out that their role has shifted from a dedicated "hands on" programming role to one that is certainly quasi-management. The lead programmer now has a staff for each of their studies. The programmer will find his supporting programming team(s) will be comprised entirely of offsite contingent workers. The lead programmer will still have the responsibility of being involved in study start up activities, study meeting attendance and any other traditional role of a lead programmer. What changes is the focus on actual programming activities. The contingent worker staff will be the primary source of the "hands on" programming. The new role requires developing study specifications, assigning programming tasks, interacting daily with the contingent worker staff, handling questions from the contingent workers, in some cases even dealing with minor personnel matters. But what can make the lead programmer most uncomfortable is having to rely on contingent workers to assume the traditional programming role that they themselves did. I had some staff member try to "keep" some of the programming responsibility for them. What they found was they couldn't always keep up with their

extended responsibilities as well as trying to do significant programming activities. I found that the stress level will increase with your permanent staff as they learn their new roles.

CONTINGENT WORKERS

There are multiple challenges in having a majority of your programming staff to be contingent workers. The contingent worker must in many ways have the same skill set as your permanent staff. The expectation is the contingent worker will be a highly skilled programmer. They too must have excellent communication skills. The contingent worker must be willing to know the study. By this I mean their focus will still be “hands on” programming, but an understanding of the protocol and RAP are expected. The lead programmer will be responsible for the specifications. The contingent worker must have the ability to be proactive and question specifications they may disagree with and more importantly offer suggestions that could improve the effectiveness of the programming effort. In short the expectation is that the contingent worker will become a complete study team member. We’ve have on a few occasions had the contingent worker be the lead programmer on a study. When a contingent worker takes on this role then they must have all of the attributes of a permanent staff member. The contingent worker will be required to be familiar with your SOPs and internal systems. It is essential that the contingent worker adheres to your company’s programming standards.

MANAGING THE BLENDED STAFF

To manage your permanent staff successfully start and end with training and communication. Some members of your staff may move seamlessly into the redefined role of lead programmer. Others will struggle. And still others may leave. The training should be expanded to include project management and communication training. You will need to look beyond the traditional programming based training. But programming based training should not be overlooked. A big fear express by the permanent staff is the fear that their programming skills will begin to erode. Look into training that will improve communication skills. Look for training that increases the understanding of the dynamics of study teams. When discussing communications, it is often overlooked that a big part of communication is listening. As a manager, I need to be more accessible and more importantly be willing to listen. Your lead programmer will be more familiar with the study nuances. You need to know when to get directly involved or let your lead programmer handle any issues. Sometimes the lead programmer will want your overt support at study team meetings or when there may contingent worker problems. While it is always easier to give positive reinforcement; do not be shy in giving negative feedback. This is a new role for even your most experience programmer. I make it a point to get involved in all study start ups. You need to be familiar with all your studies within your domain. As studies reach major milestones, make sure your lead programmers are aware of your support. Assess the skill set of your individual lead programmers and manage to their individual strong and weak points. There cannot be a “cookie cutter approach”. One size does not fit all. Be prepared to have more one to one meetings with your permanent staff. You will need these meetings as well to gauge not only the progress of your staff member development; their acceptance/comfortability level of their new role; but also the staff member’s stress level. Based on compliance issues as defined by the GSK legal department, the contingent worker at GSK is limited to eighteen consecutive months. The contingent worker then needs a six month “vacation” and they will be eligible to work on GSK studies for another eighteen months. Most of our late phase oncology studies will go beyond the eighteen month limit. So the planning of hiring and replacing contingent workers is challenging. The concern of study knowledge loss is very real and offers a difficult challenge. One way to mitigate this knowledge loss is on insisting on strict documentation requirements of the programming activities of the contingent worker. The reality is the contingent worker will often not complete the eighteen month term. As their eighteen month limit nears, it is only natural that they will be looking for another opportunity. Also you must have a zero tolerance approach toward contingent workers. If they are not working out, then you must jettison them. Contingent workers that do not perform up to expectations, not only jeopardizes the success of the study, but adds to the stress level of your lead programmer. The removal of a contingent worker should always be done by you. Your lead programmer needs to be able to continue to work with the contingent worker team. In this case you need to be the bad guy. With the increased reliance on contingent workers, greater effort must be used to ensure that the contingent worker understands the importance of their work. Do not shy away from including contingent workers in team meetings. Also, it is important to include contingent workers in any new program related training initiatives. A logistical challenge with working with contingent workers is that they must be off site. Plus they may be residing in a different time zone.

CONCLUSION

The management of a blended staff is definitely a challenging one. When you have a large contingent worker base you find that you have a greater involvement in study budgeting. When I became a manger the review of programming budgets and interacting with contingent worker agencies was new me. Another major concern is study knowledge loss. Oncology studies have tendency to never go away. So having detailed documentation of study

programming activity is a must. The smooth transition of contingent workers on and off studies is difficult. I cannot emphasize enough the increase stress level this new role can place on your permanent staff. They were not hired under these new set of rules. So the game has changed on them and it is your responsibility to do whatever is necessary to give them the skill set to succeed in this role. An increase level of hands on management will be required, at least in the beginning. Once you have the measure of your permanent staff ability and acceptance of this new role, you can focus on those that need increase attention and ease back on those that don't. The determination to become directly involved in the day to day activities of a study can be a tough decision. You do not want to undermine your lead programmer. That is why a constant awareness of your staff's development and where they are in their studies is critical. I have found with some staff members it is just a question of confidence. Your involvement in that case can be more of that of a silent partner. Lastly the management challenges will increase as we move into the world of working with CROs and FSPs. The role of your staff will necessarily evolve as well.

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