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Roadmap for Managing Multiple CRO Vendors

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ABSTRACT

When working with CROs, the relationship established between the two organizations is critical for successful outcomes. Increasingly, sponsors and CROs exist in the same ecosystem, looking to share standards, processes, and people. Many times, a sponsor works with multiple CROs, partnering with some while having a study-to-study relationship with others. Based on the type of the relationship, a CRO can provide certain functions to the sponsor. As with any relationship, investing time to understand and establish ground rules will help in the building of a healthy relationship. This paper discusses the relationship of a sponsor to a CRO as a partner with high-level information on how the information flows back and forth. Also discussed are implementations of CDISC standards using tools available such as published standards, sponsor interpretation guides and document templates. It also notes advantages and pain points, and how these can be managed to ensure a successful partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Sponsor companies are focused on bringing innovative therapies to the market as they strive for competitive advantage. To achieve this there is a need to streamline processes, and to further lower the R&D costs by using Clinical Research Organizations (CROs) to share risks and rewards. When working with CROs, the strength of the relationship established between the two organizations is critical for successful outcomes. For Sponsor companies, Governance Operating Model enhances oversight capability. This enables management to assess risks including operational and financial costs. The CROs support clinical studies or Therapeutic Area programs in a variety of ways, from functional services to long term partnerships. Often, cooperative agreements can be adjusted to the needs of the Sponsor, bringing together people and tools from both organizations. This paper identifies methodologies and proposed solutions for ensuring positive outcomes, for Sponsors, and ultimately, for patients.

METHODOLOGIES

From Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, methodology is defined as "*a body of methods, rules, and postulates employed by a discipline*". In a business environment (per businessdictionary.com), methodology can mean "*a system of broad principles or rules from which specific methods or procedures may be derived to interpret or solve different problems within the scope of a particular discipline. Unlike an algorithm, a methodology is not a formula but a set of practices."*

Following are the methodologies that could be employed when working with CRO Partner to create a successful relationship:

1. Establish behavior driven culture to create atmosphere of trust and open communication
    a) Work as "WE" instead of "them vs us"

       This can be accomplished by including the CRO Partners in development of standards. Provide a common goal that supports a culture of straight talk, demonstrate respect, creates transparency and encourage loyalty for constant communication to build trust.

    b) Identify teams with combined membership from both organizations to complement each other

       The opinions of each organization count. This structure supports a collaborative effort that fosters all members to listen with respect, hold yourself and others accountable, clarify expectations and provide solutions to deliver results (e.g. review, provide input and

UAT for creating or maintenance of standards) there by lends towards business continuity.

c) Clearly define roles and responsibilities

There has to be an agreement of who does what and when between a Sponsor and CRO Partner. The Sponsor should clearly define oversight expectations. For example, when there is a delivery of SDTM, the team needs to decide what tools to use to check compliance; who runs the checks and what standardized reports can be expected to be generated.

d) Set clear expectations on milestones and deliverables

The workflow process needs to be fully defined so that the deliverables can be anticipated and also the timing of deliverables agreed. The project plan is a living document and can be adjusted according to resources and unforeseen data issues. There should be no penalty for moving interim milestones as long as the final milestones are met.

2. Create a Standards Roadmap with long and short term goals

a) Discuss and provide CDISC standards interpretation

At a minimum, standards versions need to be agreed upon at the beginning of each clinical program and for each step (Collection, Tabulation, Analysis and Tables, Listings and Figures). This can be used for each corresponding study within a clinical program.

b) Implement Sponsor Standards Library at CRO and release after UAT

Performing a User Acceptance Test (UAT) of the implemented Sponsor standards at the CRO is important and allows the CRO Partner to test the standards requirements provided by the Sponsor.

c) Share in the evaluation and implementation of CRO Processes and Tools

The CRO Partner shares their tools and processes available to implement the specifications of the Sponsor. Based on the tools available, the combined team can assess the best solution that can reuse the tools and processes of the CRO. By listening to each other, the Sponsor and CRO Partner are able to jointly develop tools and workflows that improve the speed and quality of the work.

3. Share knowledge across organizations

a) Oversee to ensure compliance of Data Standards are aligned to regulatory agency needs

The Sponsor and CRO teams need to share industry best practices and regulatory agency needs in order to make sure the submissions are compliant to the agency requirements.

b) Share experiences of using standards during study implementation

The CRO Partner should ask questions and resolve issues by communicating with the Sponsor to identify areas for improvement.

c) Conduct lessons learned after each standard implementation

This is an important step where the CRO Partner and Sponsor share their experiences with other team members from both organizations to improve the process.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS

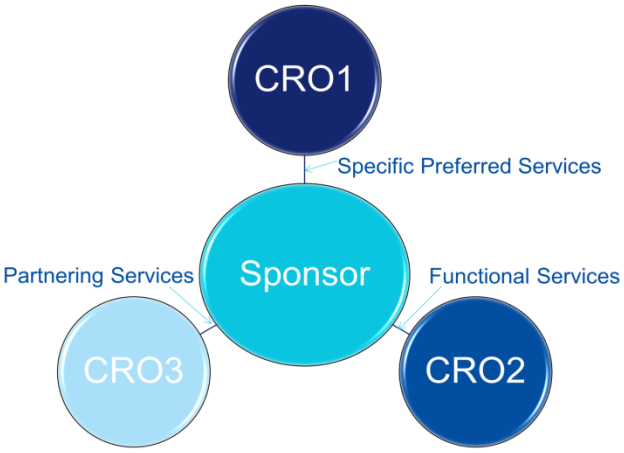

Figure 1

The figure above depicts the types of relationships that can occur between a Sponsor and CRO.

- Specific Preferred Services: This relationship is transactional. The CRO provides a specific defined service. Here the CRO will be tasked to provide a specific service (for e.g. Local Laboratory) to the sponsor. This will be very limited for that particular study.
- Functional Services: This relationship is transactional. The CRO provides support as a functional area service and acts as subject matter expert (SME) for the Sponsor's chosen service. For the studies and programs the CRO adjusts staffing according to sponsor needs at any point in the lifecycle.
- Partnering Services: In this relationship the CRO provides end to end services as a partner to the Sponsor, sharing risks and success and is invested longer term. Here the CRO enters in a contractual partnership with the Sponsor. The agreement includes items such as the key performance indicators and other metrics.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

This section discusses some of the problems encountered and proposed solutions that enable better management of multiple CROs.

Problem 1: There is no consistent and repeatable decision making framework for use in Clinical Studies.

One of the solutions is to establish a management framework for Standards Governance that oversees the development and use of Data Standards used by internal teams and CROs.

Problem 2: There is no way to ensure the same information is communicated across the organization that enables the implementation of Sponsor standard Specification.

The proposed solution consists of both technology and business process improvements:

- Use technology solutions (e.g. SharePoint) as a collaboration platform to share documents and meeting minutes.
- Provide metadata documentation to the CRO for a consistent implementation of standards across Clinical study teams.
- Conduct team meetings at the standards level and provide mutually acceptable solutions by working through advantages or constraints of the CRO tools and processes.

Problem 3: When the combined teams work with each other, it is important to ensure CROs follow established guidance and best practices.

The proposed solution consists of the following

- Use industry available standards that can be readily used for developing Sponsor templates and make them available for study team use. This includes available industry documents such as CDISC standards for CDASH, SDTM, ADaM, Define XML or Therapeutic Area user guides; PhUSE templates and best practices such as nSDRG, cSDRG, ADRG, white papers for visit numbering and screening and Study Data Standardization Plan (SDSP); Technical Conformance Guide and Data Standards Catalog from regulatory authorities.
- Train both Sponsor and CRO teams on expected standards through e-learnings, CDISC trainings and communicating on standards at regular intervals.
- Develop tools that evaluate compliance to established standards and that ensure oversight by collecting, reviewing metrics at regular intervals.

Problem 4: Investment of tools and processes for a combined solution that shares success and mitigates risks

The proposed solution involves collaboration with other functional areas of both the organizations as there will be a need to discuss combined vision and budget consideration that impact the decisions. For example, it is important to discuss and agree on who will pay for the tools, will it be a co-investment, or whether to build or buy the tools.

INFORMATION FLOW BETWEEN SPONSOR AND CRO PARTNERS

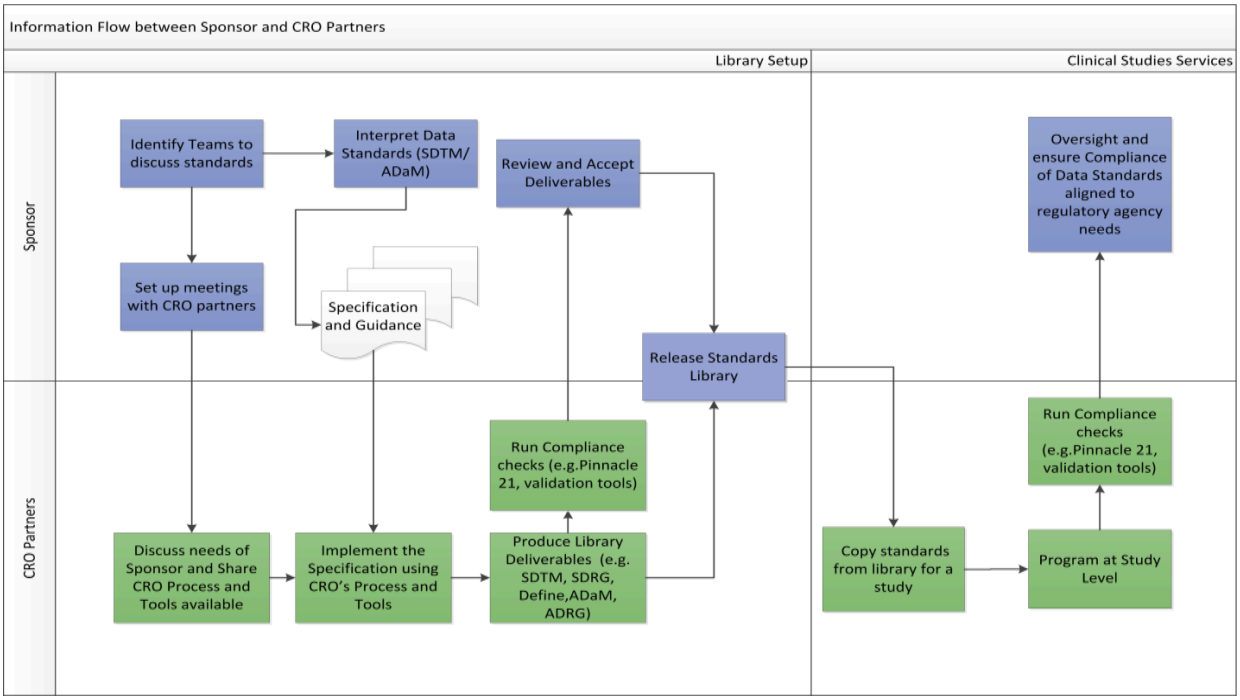

Figure 2

Figure 2 above shows and example of the information flow that has to be established between the Sponsor and CRO Partner for a successful partnership. When a partnership is established, it is very important to have the following:

- A Standards Governance structure: This ensures that there is a forum to discuss standard related topics.
- Identify teams and team members that represent cross functional areas and different subject matter expertise or domain knowledge.
- A charter that discusses the roles and responsibilities on how the team operates.
- Define the frequency of meetings including the agenda and expectations.

Below are details for the steps shown in Figure 2:

Identify Teams to discuss Standards

It is the first step to identify team members who are the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) from Sponsor and CRO Partners

Setup meetings with CRO Partners

Identify the lead from the team to set up recurring meetings where the subject matter experts can come together and share the information

Discuss needs of Sponsor and Share CRO Process Tools Available

The meetings can be used to discuss the Sponsor needs, evaluate CRO process and tools, and get agreement on the combined goals**.**

Interpret Data Standards: Sponsor define specifications

The sponsor team will interpret data standards (e.g. SDTM/ADaM) and needs of internal Therapeutic Areas or programs and define the specifications and provide best practices. CROs are to be consulted and any input has to be implemented. These specification and guidance will be shared with the CRO Partners.

Implement the specifications using CRO's Process and Tools

CRO implements the specifications using the tools and processes in their environment.

CRO Produce Library Deliverables

The deliverables of the CRO include library documents such as SDTM/ADAM compliant datasets, SDRG/ADRG, and Define XML.

CRO Run Compliance Checks

The CRO runs validation compliance checks (e.g. Pinnacle 21 Validator) and includes the report in the deliverables, as well as any other agreed-upon reports.

Review and Accept Deliverables

Sponsor will review the deliverables of the CRO and accept to release the Standards Library for use with live studies.

Release Standards Library

The Standards Library is released with the library implementation available to the CRO Partner study teams.

Use of Standards Library in a study

To use the standards, the CRO Partner copies the Standards spreadsheet from the library implementation for a study implementation.

Program at Study Level

The CRO Partner programs study-specific content for a study that does not exist in the library.

Run Compliance checks

The CRO runs validation compliance checks (e.g. Pinnacle 21 Validator) and includes the report in the deliverables for a study.

Oversight and Ensuring Compliance to Data Standards

It is also important for a Sponsor to oversee the CRO deliverables for a study and discuss the use the global standards library at the clinical program level. There is a need to collect metrics on studies within a clinical program and across programs that use Sponsor's standards and where such standards are not used due to study needs. It is important to keep track of such departures to improve the standards. This ensures that Sponsors interpretations of standards are properly used by the CRO Partner, and provides oversight on the compliance of standards.

CONCLUSION

Managing CROs is an art critical to a successful relationship, and requires a balanced approach of adjusting to CRO processes while ensuring Sponsor-interpreted standards are followed. This relationship is stronger if the rules of engagement include mutual respect and using a “WE” mentality. This poster highlights solutions for common pain points to remove roadblocks for a successful partnership.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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