

Are you a great team player?

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that being a team player is essential for managing projects successfully and great collaboration within a team brings fruitful results. No matter the role and position, everyone is important in achieving common goals, meeting timelines, providing the exemplary service and reaching the best customer satisfaction.

I am ready to bet that at least once during their career every person, whether it is a junior programmer or team lead, has doubts regarding their productive contribution to the project. After that it is normal to reflect on your teamwork performance. Moreover, it is so pleasant to receive an email saying: "It was a great pleasure to work with you and I hope there will be a new opportunity for our collaboration next time".

Also, excellent team player skills are an essential part of the job description for all positions within the statistical programmer's society. Surely, it is not something that could be easily measured in contrast to programming skills, nevertheless it is the trait that is highly valued.

In this paper the author

- discusses what it means to be a good team player depending on your role and position,
- describes common characteristics of good team players,
- suggests tips on how to improve your must have teamwork skills and
- shares her own experience in becoming a good team player from "let sleeping dogs lie" to "a true role model".

INTRODUCTION

Based on my experience I would define a team as a group of people joint by the single goal to achieve a common result. Wikipedia defines a team as a group of individuals (human or non-human) working together to achieve their goal. These two definitions above are remarkably close, almost the same, but the one I introduced is more focused on the result as the essential part of the people`s interaction. Surely there could not be more motivative thing in the life than to enjoy the result of your challenging work. But focusing only on the result could be misleading as the process is particularly important and should be satisfying too. Looking at the product what are your first thoughts? Mine is about the team and all its efforts made to let this product appear and be needed. Here we come to team and how to make your stay in the team pleasant and comfortable to yourself and other people.

The life itself is more than ever a team sport. All our life is about collaboration and communication, which starts in the family and continues through all your entire living. So, once you become an expert in a teamwork branch, you become successful in business.

Clinical trial is a long troublesome process with a lot of people involved starting from development of active molecular of the drug and ending by successful submission of result to authorities which afterwards saves people lives or do it much better thanks to the treatment received. A lot of efforts are put to perform this, and we can say that the team which consists of hundreds and even thousands of people worked on it and did the amazing job.

In this article, I would focus on the smaller team performing almost final part of this huge project i.e., programming team, which executes statistical analysis to identify safety and efficacy of the drug. Based on my experience mostly working in CRO companies let us talk about the internal programming team performing a project alongside with the client team reviewing it. Call it a study team. Figure 1 displays a study team in CRO company. Quite similar structure has a programming team within Pharm company, which is displayed on the Figure 2. The main difference is that all processes of review and result checking are developed internally. I believe that this difference does not have an essential impact on the interaction

in the team, the only thing I must admit is that the CRO company gives more possibilities to work in different teams with diverse tasks in a brief period.

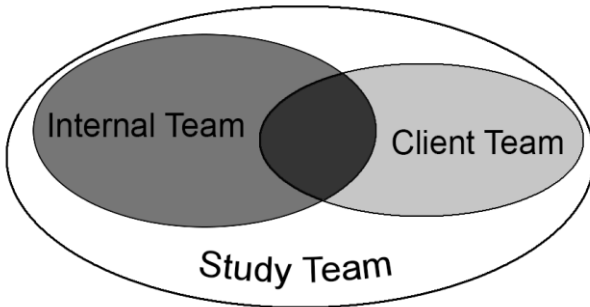


Figure 1. General Structure of Study Team in CRO Company

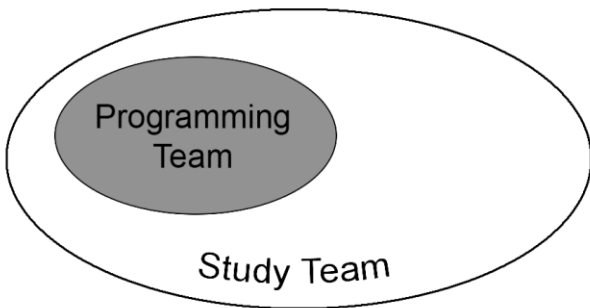


Figure 2. General Structure of Study Team in Pharm Company

Nevertheless, the thoughts in this article are general ideas that could be applicable to bigger diverse teams. The real situations and own authors experience complement all thoughts and the recommendations listed below.

WHAT MEANS TO BE A GOOD TEAM PLAYER

Let us think a little about what means to be a good team player depending on your role and position. The most common positions (or titles) and the roles you can meet are displayed in Table 1.

Position (or title)	Role
Intern	Project Manager
Junior programmer/statistician	Lead Programmer
Middle programmer/statistician	Back-up Lead Programmer
Senior programmer/statistician	Lead Statistician
Principal programmer/statistician	Back-up Lead Statistician
Associate director	Oversight

Table 1. Position and team roles

Surely the role is more important aspect in the team than the position of a person, but still there is a correlation between your title and your role, e.g., usually someone with the role senior or above is assigned as Lead programmer. Mostly your title does not show how good you are in a team, but it gives an information about your experience as a teammate, e.g., if you are principal programmer with 6+ years of experience it could mean that you have experience in different situations working in a team. Also, your years of experience do not give you any advantage over other people with a smaller number of working years in this industry. A lot depends on what projects and tasks the person had a chance to work with, it could be more valuable.

Each role in the team requires the corresponding set of skills, but there are some general rules which apply to everyone in terms of being a good team player.

Also, one of the important aspects in teamwork is personal temperament. Even more important is how you can incorporate your personality into the group and create the profitable work atmosphere for everyone. It is important to find common ground, to listen and understand each other. Because if people like you they will do business with you, if they do not like you, they will do whatever they can to use your ability to be successful itself, bringing nothing to the team. All people are different. There are persons which prefer to work alone with the minimum of interaction with other people. On the contrary, for other persons it is extremely important to be a part of a group and have as much communication as possible. It does not mean that first are worse team players, but these personal characteristics have impact on the ways and the amount of communication within the team: quick call, emails, chats. I should be considered to avoid appearing the unintentional feeling from putting a person under pressure by amount of active communication.

I suggest you answer few quick questions which eventually can help to identify generally if you are a good team player. After each question there is the reason why this information could be important working in a team:

- How much do you know about your teammates: their occupation in terms of responsibilities in the team; where they are located, the situation in the country they are located in, their time zone and working hours; family/children and possible regular time they are off due to any family reasons; working conditions; are they working from the office or home?
This personal information could help to get closer, to show that you are interested to know more about his personality, not only working abilities.
- Are you okay with where you are? Do you have any doubts that you are on the right place?
The answer could show if you like your job, team and if you are happy with your role in the team, or you are at this job only because of some additional stuff (insurance, etc.) or salary.
- Are you ready to show you code in any moment?
It could show how care you about this job and if this is quite important for you to be here.
- Are you okay with your work-life balance? Do you have Outlook/Teams on your phone and check any new emails in you non-working hours? What mood you start your work with?
The most important question to answer to admit where you are now. It could be a good indicator of upcoming burnout at work or if this job puts you under the instant pressure and you always feel stressed. Undoubtedly, your well-being has strong correlation with your productivity.
- Are you completely aware about your responsibilities and tasks in the team i.e., what you should cover, what is your zone of responsibility? Do you know whom you should contact in case of any specific or general question?
This could show your awareness of work process in general and what is your role in all of this.
- Are you a workaholic or the opposite doing only the bare minimum you have to do and nothing more?
It could be good indication of your wiliness to invest in team and common goal.
- Are you familiar with procrastination and panic monster which awakes up close to deadline? .
It shows if the main motivation for you is upcoming deadline and if you need enhanced control from the manager or lead.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD TEAM PLAYERS

Really lengthy list of the common characteristics of a good team player can be presented. It varies on your role and functions, but I would like to highlight only few major features, which I believe matter a lot. Usually, most HR and managers categorize all characteristics into hard and soft skills. Often the lack of the soft skills can become a reason of your insufficient performance in the team. The hard skills can be easily measure by the test or task, while soft skills hard to measure precisely as it depends on personality and her willingness to grow professionally.

In the book "Ideal Team Player" by Patrick Lencioni the author introduces three virtues which every good team player should have. Only combination of all of them will bring you success in the team. Below I have tried to look on these 3 qualities considering our industry:

1. Humility. This means to be about others, to put others ahead of ourselves. It is about trust and respect when you worry first about the fruitful atmosphere in the team, when everyone is happy doing their work. It is when you care about people opinions and how everyone's interests are satisfied. Humble person will do anything to make you happy even if it will cost titanic efforts from her side without rest.
2. Hunger. This means hunger about getting work done. A person with this characteristic works hard in everything he does, and he does it now without putting it into a long box. It is not about being obsessed workaholic; it is about taking entire identity of work. It means to have high standards, to follow these standards, never do the bare minimum and be passionate about the work and put maximum efforts on it.
3. Smart. It is not about intellectual smart, it is about ability to understand the process, to organize workload, to resolve the problems when they appear, to be flexible, to learn new things, to adapt, to understand connections and to provide the result.

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Lead of the team, no matter if it is lead programmer or lead statistician in addition should possess the specific set of skills to run team as he has more responsibilities and additional tasks to perform compared to other team players. Among these additional tasks there are defining the workload, creating the timelines and project plan to follow, planning resources, assigning tasks, then constant control of progress, internal communication within the team, external communication with the client and reporting about the study status, meeting the timelines, assuring the quality of work and as a result the general client satisfaction. This list could be extended to infinity.

After reading this lengthy list, you may think about mastering the multitasking to manage the lead responsibilities, but the problem is that the multitasking is a myth. According to last multiple studies the human brain cannot deal with few more complex tasks at the same time, so trying to split your attention between tasks that require concentration means one or both will suffer and either you will slow down on one of the tasks or will start to do mistakes. Instead try the method of concentration on one task for some time and then switch to another, which bears fruit and lower the stress from the feeling that you do not cope with all your tasks.

Despite all additional imposed load on the lead the responsibility for the outcome should be equally shared with all team players. It is a main teamwork principle which allows everyone to understand that they are involved and important. This in turn unsure openness and transparency of the everyone's activity, the lead is obliged to share all decisions made with the client and other team members from their side must report and discuss any issues they face during performing their tasks. Any suppression can turn against you, as it is just a question of time when this problem will pop up and surely better to find it on the initial stages of performing project when the process of taken actions is not complex and time consuming.

In addition, lead should have advanced soft skills to run team successfully. It might already seem quite complex. In fact, it becomes even harder with adding human factor and dealing with different personalities. And at times you can think that you can do it alone and you will do it better than anyone, but it is the biggest trap you can be in. The strength is in unity and life proves us it every day.

TIPS ON HOW IMPROVE YOUR TEAMWORK SKILLS

This section is dedicated to the ways how easily you can improve your teamwork skills. Some of the tips are obvious and simple and you can think it is already clear without any explanation. I thought so too before I faced with the opposite.

THINK AND ASK

When I have only started my career, I had poor knowledges about the full cycle of clinical trial, about all stages, had no background. I did not have full understanding about the reasons it should be done this way and what result we should receive at the end. Besides, for me it was never just numbers, counts, statistics, etc., I was also thinking about the human aspect and every patient, which stands behind this numbers. Also, I was trying to interpret the received data, to understand what it means, if it is realistic to have such results. I always THINK. I must admit it helps me a lot in my professional career and more often I start to receive the question from my colleagues, how I can predict all possible cases and consider all of them in derivation? It became so naturally for me than now when I am looking at the task, I can easily predict what issues will arise.

But sometimes it is not enough just to think, you should ask. The only thing is - ask efficiently. Frequently, people are afraid to ask question because they do not want to seem silly by asking as they could think stupid question. The good news is that if after your question you hear: 'It is a good question!', you can exhale, you find thing that surely should be further discussed. Anyway, one of my colleagues I value said that there could not be stupid questions. I agree, the only thing it that it could be millions of questions you receive every day.

During my first study as a lead, I faced the challenge, when 80% of my working time was wasted on answering the questions. There was five people in the team, and they asked an enormous number of questions. My issue was that I thought I must answer all this questions immediately and to provide as much detailed answers as possible. Going back, I understood that this wasn't the best strategy. There are few things which helped me to reduce this time to 20%: delegating questions to other teammates I am confident they can answer it, referring to documents where the answer could be found and allocating some fixed time during the day for answering questions. The result was amazing, a lot of my time was saved, and other team players start to think more and come to me with interesting, good questions. My good counterpart used to ask questions to rubber duck, before bothering other co-workers. He has a massive collection of the different rubber ducks to talk with. In software engineering this method is called 'rubber duck debugging', when while you are explaining your problem aloud you hit upon the solution in the process of explaining the problem.

COMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

It is well-known that the international language in all business areas is English. Thanks to it we can communicate and share our thoughts, ideas, and opinions with people from completely different countries and cultures. Surely, it is obligatory to speak one language in a team which interacts actively, and our clinical trial community is not an exception. You can have an ascent, ridiculously cute one, or feel extremely uncomfortable, doing mistakes during your speech, but keep speaking. Despite of my long years of learning English in the school and the university, I still remember my first meetings with the client trying not to lose consciousness during my speed, blaming myself for every word. I became confident only after few years of frequent meetings and talks with foreign colleagues. So, keep trying! The curious situation happened when Francophone office started to speak English all time only because of one new employee from UK.

It is good practice to use international language in the joint chats, in the office, during the lunch. Primarily, it will create favorable atmosphere, also it is good motivation to improve your English. There is email culture, which is good to know. The main principles include, but not limited, such informal rules as:

- Plan you vacation in advance, also unsure that the team is aware about your time off and if possible, it will not have major impact on your tasks or there is back-up to replace you.
- Set up the automatic reply in case you are off due to the public holidays or vacation with mentioning the person who can be contacted concerning your work.
- It is favorable to receive answer for usual email during the next 24 hours, with high importance during 2 hours within your working hours.
- It is expected to send the answer for meeting invitation, if you cannot join during suggested time, you

can propose more appropriate time as alternative.

FEEDBACK

Ask feedback. No matter what your role are: principal director or intern, it is still important to know if you are good in what are you doing. Your colleagues are your best helpers in improving your teamwork skills as they are interacting with you every day, they see your strong sides and your weaknesses. Surprisingly, people can be afraid to give any feedback before you ask them, even if they have something to say, because for example you can be more experience that they are. One of my managers sends the whole team emails before New Year giving the feedbacks and asking to do the same for her. At the beginning, it was quite unusual, but it helps to highlight your blind areas, so you can work on it and progress.

Also, not be afraid to give the negative feedback. It is much harder than to give a good one, but it is especially important also to share the weaknesses. After all you are interested in constant growth of every team player and as a result evolution of the whole team.

Giving feedback you should be unbiased in your judgments. Try to put off the table all your stereotypes and think out of the box. Your opinion about the teammate as a person should not impact anyhow your professional feedback, only if not impact his soft skills.

SMALL TALK

Usually, you talk about the weather or some extremely popular news over the world. You can do your small talk more personal but still professional. It is quite important not to pass the personal borders by tons of questions. Usually people do not listen, they just wait their turn to talk. This could happen due to varied reasons for example they are extremely busy or have very overloaded workload and want to start discussing work questions asap. My advice is to try to remember what this person was telling you last time, maybe he was on vacation: you can ask how his vacation was or ask about his pet if any. At the same time try not to talk too much about your problems as your goal is to become closer to this person, but not to overload him with your personal problems.

APPRECIATION

Say Thank you! Even if the job done is the direct person`s responsibility admit it if it is done good. Do not skim on praises. It is so pleasant to receive an email saying: "It was a great pleasure to work with you and I hope there will be a new opportunity for our collaboration next time" or quick message "I really appreciate your help on it". Saying the compliments, you admit the person`s efforts and let him know that he is valuable, and he manages good. The most unusual compliment I had in my life was "You are my rock star", "You are number one in knowing (something)". Try to be sincere and say something more extraordinary than "Thank you a lot for your work!". You will smile sending this message, and on the other side there will be even double smile. Using emoji can also give more space for creativity and creation of good mood.

WIN-WIN SITUATIONS

Create win-win situations. If you decline something to be done, because you think it is useless or you think it is incorrect or you think it does not make sense, consider and suggest other way to solve this task, your decision can be even better than the initial plan, you need just think a little bit on it.

OPTIMIZATION OF PROCESS

You do not have to reinvent the wheel, there are already so many useful things to help you with your routine tasks.

Starting my long way as statistical programmer I worked with windows SAS. As it was the only thing, I knew I was more than happy with it. Becoming more experienced I also worked with SAS Studio, SAS Enterprise Guide (EG), SAS Enterprise Miner (EM). The trickiest moment was to write the code in notepad without any coloring and pop-up hints and run it using Linux. Surely, SAS EG is on the top of all programmers` dreams as it is the friendliest, there are many helpful build in tools which make programmers life easier. However, sometimes you must deal with usual old windows SAS and the worst

situation which could happen is when after quite lengthy period of work with SAS EG you have to switch to windows SAS.

Nevertheless, there are ways to upgrade your windows SAS and extend your programming possibilities. Remarkable, the wiliness to work with improved windows SAS increases several times. Every time I see the usual SAS panel in editor and log on anyone's laptop, I suggest adding few helpful buttons to simplify this routine. Sometimes newly introduced colleagues wonder if my SAS version differs from their due to these additional features.

Display 1 shows custom buttons for editor after red vertical line (from left to right): to clean log; to clean lst output; to clean results; to close datasets one by one; to clean log, lst output and run program.

Display 2 shows custom buttons for log after red vertical line (from left to right): to go to top of the log; to go to the bottom of the log; to find and go to error message; to find and go to warning message; to find and go to harmful note message about conversion of numeric value; to find and go to harmful note message about conversion of character value; to find and go to harmful note message about initialization of the variable; to find and go to harmful note message about lack of unique key for merge procedure; to find and go to harmful note message about unexpected generation of missing values.



Display 1. Customized Editor Panel in Windows SAS



Display 2. Customized Log Panel in Windows SAS

CODING CULTURE

Imagine that you are writing a masterpiece. The same is with your code, try to do it so nice, so people could look on it for ages and tell other their colleagues how good it is. You can become famous; you can even introduce your own style and when someone will open your code there will be no need to check with the name of the author to understand who created this.

GPP (Good programming practice) help to do you code readable and easy to read and understand. Based on my experience I would like to highlight few moments which make it difficult to read and understand the programming code:

- Messy code with tones of data steps.
- Difficult algorithm for derivation, for example one SQL without no comments. Surely it could be interesting to write this code, but it could be difficult to other programmers to understand and update it if required. The solution could be adding the comments and remarks.
- Re-derivation of one variable few times in various places in code, so you cannot follow it.
- Inefficient code which requires much more time for running.

CONCLUSION

Teamwork is everywhere. Our life and especially the industry is evolving at an incredible pace, so every day we face new challenges, which require constant improving of our communication and teamwork skills to find new better ways to manage the problems. Hope everyone will find something interesting and useful in this article and can implement it in his everyday teamwork routine.

REFERENCES

Patrick Lencioni, 2016. The Ideal Team Player. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass A John Wiley & Sons, Inc. imprint

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Good SAS® Programming Practice*

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