Clinical Researcher ™

The Authority in Ethical, Responsible Clinical Research

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Photographs by Steven McBride

ABOUT OUR COVER: Pictured from left to right, Natalie Stone, MS, CCRC; Dr. David Morin, Director of Clinical Research for Holston Medical Group (HMG); and Denise Brummitt, Regulatory Specialist at HMG's HQ in Kingsport, Tenn. Above, more members of Dr. Morin's team.

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Features

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Five Smart Strategies to Develop Your Clinical Research Career

This article focuses on five strategies to develop one's clinical research career. The strategies discussed are: **1)** keeping up with new technology, **2)** learning new regulations or guidelines, **3)** expanding networking skills, **4)** updating knowledge in a clinical specialty, and **5)** targeting volunteer efforts. By introducing career development strategies, explaining their significance, and offering methods to accomplish each step involved, this article is intended to help those seeking promotions, better jobs, or increased job satisfaction.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVE
After reading this article, learners should be able to identify ways to advance their clinical research careers, develop strategies to be successful at career advancement, and describe professional development methods to assist in achieving career goals.

DISCLOSURES
Patricia Kasper, MS, CCRA:
Consultant with P. Kasper & Associates, LLC

The Basics (and Beyond) for Making Things Better

The best way to get a promotion, find a better job, or increase satisfaction with your present job is to actively develop your clinical research career in ways that inspire you to learn and grow so you feel motivated and in control of your own career.

> *"There is only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self."* – Aldous Huxley

The basis for advancement in any career is learning how to function effectively on the job. As you move into clinical research, there are many competencies to learn, practice, and demonstrate.

The basic competencies for a clinical research coordinator or clinical research associate/monitor are taught in classes and workshops—such as knowing that every patient needs to sign an informed consent prior to participating in a clinical trial. However, as you move into the complexities of research, it is more important to show a thorough understanding of all the permutations of each competency.

For example, a more skilled coordinator needs to know how to deal with complex consenting situations, such as those involving short forms, assents, translations, or legally authorized representatives. Demonstrating increased competency in your current position is an excellent way to advance in your career.

There are many time-consuming and expensive ways to advance your career, such as pursuing an advanced degree; however, this article focuses on five areas that are often overlooked when you are busy with your everyday job. Even targeting the small steps to keeping abreast of new technology and staying engaged with those around you can lead to big differences on the job.

Keeping Up to Date with New Technology

By learning a new technology, you become efficient and effective at your work and marketable to potential employers. The booming technological industry is churning out more tools that help clinical researchers be better, faster, and more accurate at their jobs. Here are some technologies you should learn to boost your performance:

- **Excel—**Improving your spreadsheet skills will allow you to calculate study budgets and more.
- **Microsoft Project—**Creating granular timelines for study startup helps everyone on the site study team.
- **Electronic data capture systems—**Using these to enter data efficiently is growing as a major trend for the future of clinical trial conduct that will soon be here to stay.
- **New software for electronic informed consent—**Becoming familiar with the various new e-consent options now available will help you choose the one that offers the greatest advantages to you, your fellow researchers, and your patients.

There are many ways to keep up with technology. One handy method is viewing YouTube videos to learn a particular feature of a new software program. These two-to-four minute presentations keep your interest and teach a small skill in a short amount of time. If you are confused about a certain topic, you can go back and review the content.

There are many other ways to learn a new technology, so choose one that fits your learning style and time availability:

- Webinars are available on various topics from the Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP),[1] Society of Clinical Research Associates (SoCRA),[2] and many clinical research training companies
- Online courses
- Local college classes
- Tutors may be useful for helping you learn a specific skill one-on-one
- Expert consultants may be the best way to train your team all at once on more complicated topics
- Ask a question on Ask.com

What new technology do you need to learn to stay current in your career? Write down a need and a possible opportunity to fill that need.

Learning New Regulations and Guidelines

By staying current on new regulations, you actively participate in the clinical research world and demonstrate competency to potential employers. There are always plenty of new guidance documents and regulations with which to become acquainted.

By the very nature of the pharmaceutical and medical device arena, clinical researchers work in a highly regulated environment. In fact, over the past few years, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has released an increasing number of guidance documents and new regulations. By checking the FDA website regularly, you will see that new guidance documents are posted often.[3] Clinical researchers need to learn these new regulations and be aware of the current thinking of regulatory agencies.

When you're reading up on new regulations, make sure you know...

- The exact citation of the regulation
- The effective date of a new guidance

- How to implement the regulations in real-life situations:
  - » Will it affect an ongoing study?
  - » Will it change the cost of a study?
  - » Will it be a factor when starting a new study?

Here's how to stay updated with the new regulations:

- Review the new guidance list on www.fda.gov
- Listen to webinars on regulatory topics from ACRP, SoCRA, or the Drug Information Association[4]
- Take an online course on regulatory compliance
- Attend local/national meetings of professional organizations for insights from others on the latest regulations
- Invite a subject matter expert on regulatory trends to lead a team meeting at your organization

What could you do to keep up with regulations and be more knowledgeable about guidance documents? Is there a new regulation or a change in a law you've been meaning to read? Write down a need and a possible opportunity to fill that need.

Expanding Networking Skills

In order to enhance your career, networking is imperative. When you network, you are perceived as engaged, friendly, and active in the clinical research community. Furthermore, if you are friendly and open with others who are in the same profession, your opportunities expand exponentially.

These opportunities expand to jobs you have not considered and individuals who have unique perspectives on the industry. Networking is a skill, and by practicing you will become more and more skillful.

Think of networking as a way to give assistance as well as receive it. You may be asked to answer questions about how you got into clinical research. At first glance, the help that you give will not benefit you at all; but if you think about it, the goodwill you gain can only help you in the future. Ultimately, networking is all about giving forward, and you make the world a better place when you help others.

Think beyond "lunch" when planning to network. While lunch is a great way to get to know others, it can be quite hard to do if you are busy

By learning a new technology, you become efficient and effective at your work and marketable to potential employers.

QUICK TIPS

1.

Find out how much funding you have in your training budget. Talk to your manager about how you could use these funds to benefit the department and your own personal career growth.

2.

Print "business" cards with your personal e-mail and phone number so you are always ready to hand it to a potential contact. This is not associated with your current position or company, but is rather a personal contact card.

3.

Keep your resume up to date by creating a file folder (electronic or paper) where you add accomplishments every quarter. Spend a few minutes listing what you have done. Be as specific as possible and include lots of details. This way you don't forget key accomplishments, and it will be invaluable when talking about your next career move or adding to your resume.

4.

ClinicalTrials.gov is a website with a wealth of information about what trials are being conducted in different geographical areas by sites, centers, or sponsors. Look at this website and use it as another tool in your job search.

and working at great distances from those who would be most valuable for you to contact. Instead, find as many ways as possible to network.

Here are a few ways to meet new people:
- Attend ACRP Chapter meetings in your city or region; nonmembers are welcome to many chapter events (ACRP members also have access to a members-only Online Community on which they may share questions, answers, and resources related to their day-to-day duties)
- Attend national/international professional gatherings such as the annual ACRP Meeting & Expo (formerly known as the Global Conference), and consider presenting a session or workshop if you have a great topic to share
- Look for people with whom you have shared contacts and backgrounds on LinkedIn
- Explore Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Talkbiznow for more sources of news and views on what's happening in the clinical research enterprise

When networking, it's also important to maintain and enhance connections with your existing colleagues. Here are some ways to do this:
- Call a colleague to ask a question that falls in his/her area of expertise
- E-mail links to timely articles to colleagues who you think can use the information
- Share an interesting blog with a colleague at work as a point for discussion

Being great at networking takes practice; you have to practice meeting new people and develop a method to keep track of them all. You'll need to remember who you talked to, what you discussed, and what needs to be followed up.

Here is a system to remember everything. It's called being **"GREAT"** at networking.[5]

G = Get a business card
R = Remember key facts about the people in your network
E = Enter their names in your tracking system
A = Always follow up
T = Thank them

Let's go more in depth on each part of this system:

GET A BUSINESS CARD.

Getting someone's contact information is critical to keeping up a dynamic network. Ask for his or her card as you offer one of yours.

REMEMBER KEY FACTS.

You gain tidbits of information about friends and colleagues during your conversations. You can use these little details to keep track of what interests them. Whether it is a mutual connection or an intellectual pursuit, make a note of it. These facts are useful for follow-ups.

ENTER THEIR NAMES INTO YOUR TRACKING SYSTEM.

You can use an Excel spreadsheet to track all the contact information for each person in your network. Enter their names, nicknames, titles, companies, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers. This is also where you can enter key facts that you want to remember.

ALWAYS FOLLOW UP.

This is a critical activity if you want to have a robust networking system. If you spend the time to connect with others in your field, it behooves you to circle back with each one of them. Find an area of common interest and follow up the next day. This strengthens the connection and shows that you were paying attention.

THANK THEM.

If someone has given you advice, a connection, a good idea, or a job lead, by all means send them a thank you note; and when you thank them, do it not once but three times. First, send a quick e-mail shortly after your conversation. This sets a professional tone, and now this person has your e-mail address, too. Second, if you feel this is a great contact, mail them a letter within the next few days. Personal mail is not common these days, so it will set you apart. Finally, two weeks later, find a reason to send another e-mail that touches on a topic of mutual interest. This reinforces the connection you just made, and can be a dynamic way to stay engaged.

How could you do a better job at networking by meeting new colleagues and keeping up with current ones? Write down a need and a possible opportunity to fill that need.

Updating Knowledge in a Clinical Specialty

By keeping up to date in your clinical specialty, you demonstrate professional responsibility and become an expert at your job. Clinical researchers have a professional responsibility to understand the drugs, devices, and treatments used in their specialty, especially in terms of ensuring patient safety by knowing the signs and symptoms of potential adverse events, and the influence of

experimental products on any concomitant medication(s) that the individual needs.

As you seek to stay up to date, look for gaps in your knowledge. Then, educate yourself proactively; don't wait until the manager says you are out of touch.

For example, when moving into cardiology, you have to learn to read an electrocardiogram. You may not have this skill at the beginning, but you could learn it by taking a course through the local community college. You would buy calipers, listen to lectures, and learn all about QRS intervals and ST segments. By the end of the class, you'd be able to identify things like a 1 mm ST segment depression, and you'd feel confident, capable, and efficient.

There are many resources from which you may learn specific skills or increase your knowledge of targeted disease states. Here are a few suggestions:

- Webinars
- Local lectures
- YouTube videos
- Textbooks
- Journal articles
- Mentors

How could you keep up with your clinical specialty? Write down a gap in your knowledge and a possible opportunity to fill that gap.

Targeting Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteering is a smart strategy during your career or job hunt. Volunteering increases your network, adds to your resume, and provides additional opportunities to build new skills. It also increases your confidence because you realize you have a lot to offer.

So, how do you find the right volunteer opportunity? First, consider where your passion lies, how much time you have, and where you will meet like-minded people. Then, look for a blend of these factors.

If you like being a mentor, seeing clinical research colleagues, and increasing your leadership skills, volunteering at the local chapter of a professional organization to which you belong may be the place for you. Also, you may find a lot of connections through your activities there.

A lot of people jump into volunteering; they join an organization that has been humming along for several years and decide they have all the answers. Recently, a woman shared that she had started volunteering with a group, and at the first meeting she told the chairperson, "The title of that event

doesn't make any sense—you should change it." Of course, her comment was met with resentment, as she hadn't been on the committee for even a full day at that point. Ideally, you should start slowly and carefully in any new volunteer role.

There are many tried-and-true "dos and don'ts" to help you determine the right fit as you seek to transition into a volunteer role for an organization (see Table 1 for some examples).

TABLE 1: Factors to Keep in Mind When Looking for a Volunteer Role

DO	DON'T
Find your passion.	Let it take away from your career in time or focus.
Make it a good fit.	Take on a task that is a burden.
Get to know the organization.	Do it just to make an impression.
Start slowly.	Be inconsiderate, skip meetings, or be late.
Think about why you are volunteering.	Expect to be the boss when you're starting out.

Can you identify a need in your career growth that could be augmented by volunteering at a relevant organization? Write down this need and a possible opportunity to fill that need.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Now that you've learned five strategies to develop your career, apply them to your own life before you forget! Here's a way to keep you moving: Pick two strategies that interest you and make a goal to complete them. Select a date on your calendar in about a month's time. Plan to set aside an hour of that day to make progress on your career. You could even plan to do this with a friend.

Keeping up to date with technology, understanding new regulations, networking, learning more about your clinical specialty, and volunteering are five smart strategies to developing your career. Improving these areas will make you efficient, confident, and knowledgeable. Whether you seek to gain a promotion, move into a specific job area, or become more satisfied with your position, go forth and, to quote Aldous Huxley once more, improve your own corner of the universe.

When you network, you are perceived as engaged, friendly, and active in the clinical research community.

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Patricia Kasper, MS, CCRA, (customerservice@ pkasperassociates.com) is founder and head of P. Kasper & Associates, a provider of clinical research training programs in Monte Sereno, Calif., and vice president of the Northern California Chapter of ACRP.