Beyond the conference room: Building a strong remote team for Statistical Programming

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to adopt remote work or work-from-home arrangements across all the industries worldwide. In response to health and safety concerns of their employees, many companies swiftly transitioned their operations to remote setups to comply with social distancing measures and minimize the risk of virus transmission in the workplace. This shift has brought about both challenges and opportunities for businesses and employees alike.

Remote work enabled business continuity during times of COVID-19. It also provided employees with greater flexibility, avoiding long commutes and offering a better work-life balance. This made it mandatory to adopt to new digital tools to facilitate seamless communication and collaboration among remote teams. It also brought many challenges, such as getting acquainted to new technologies, lack of teamwork/communication, a feeling of 24 hr available job profile and difficulties in maintaining work-life boundaries. When it came to pharmaceutical or healthcare industry; it was the most busy industry with lots of covid vaccine trials undergoing the same time; all in a race to discover the vaccine, first of the kind in the world. Post COVID too, remote work still remained a significant aspect of the modern workplace, requiring effective management strategies especially in healthcare sector, people working in clinical trial reporting/ statistical programming.

Clinical data reporting and representation is an important component of monitoring the patient safety and effectiveness. Data reporting activities start by extracting the data from the database, processing/transform the data into different clinical data standards like CDISC SDTM (Study Data Tabulation Model), analyzing the data in specific manner (ADaM Analysis Data Model), and the tabulation and representation of analyzed data (TLG Tables, Listings and Figures). We need to consider few points during building the remote team of Statistical Programmers including but not limited to:

1. Roles and Responsibilities: Based on the requirements of the compound/study; clearly outline the roles you need which include data analysts, biostatisticians, data engineers/ statistical programmers. Clearly state the responsibilities of each role to ensure transparency and efficiency.

2. Recruitment: Once the required roles and responsibilities are charted out; onboard candidates with strong statistical backgrounds, clinical domain knowledge, programming skills in Advanced SAS or R, other software skills and methodologies. Conduct interviews including technical assessments, communication skills to evaluate candidates' skills. This ensures they have the expertise needed for the role and can work effectively in a remote environment.

3. Communication and Collaboration Tools: To maintain steady progress of project, it is necessary to have clear communication channels by leveraging audio-video tools for video conferencing, instant messaging, and project management platforms to maintain connectivity and collaboration among team members. This can be achieved by using tools like Microsoft Teams, Agile methodology/Scrum Master, Trello, or Jira to track progress, assign tasks, and manage workflows.

4. Establish Processes: Define clear processes for project management, code development and review, version control, one stop storage/SharePoint space

access, programming tools licenses (like SAS and R) and documentation. This ensures consistency and facilitates collaboration among team members.

5. Clearly, draft the project outlines, output required to be generated as per the eCTD requirements by referring to the ICH (International Council for Harmonization) efficacy guidelines used in pharmaceutical industry. It being a clinical statistical programmer team working remotely, the team should be trained in GDPR, GCP.

6. Remote Work Policies: Develop efficient remote work policies that address expectations regarding working hours/time zones, availability, communication, business continuity. Corrective methods should be established to ensure business continuity in case of technical downtimes, laptop issues, power and internet outages. Flexibility is key in remote work environments, but it's also important to establish boundaries to maintain productivity and work-life balance.

7. Provide Training and Support: Offer training sessions or resources to help team members stay updated on the latest statistical techniques, programming languages, and tools. Encourage knowledge sharing and innovation within the team to foster a culture of continuous learning.

8. Cultural Considerations: If people are scattered in different states or countries, value the time zones, their work schedule, holidays, their cultural differences. Different models like 'follow the sun' approach can be implemented to have a healthy and motivated team.

9. Regular Check-ins and Feedback: Besides adhoc meetings, schedule regular status meetings to discuss project progress, address any challenges, and provide feedback to team members. Again, one can use different Project Management tools like Scrum Master to stay on track and update the status. Create a supportive environment where team members feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas.

10. Evaluate Performance: Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the performance of individual team members as well as the overall team at regular intervals. Keep an open communication between the leadership and employees to hear about any requirements/feedback towards the company leadership or management too to help the organization improve and grow professionally.

By following these steps, one can build and manage a successful remote team of statistical programmers, leverage data-driven insights to inform decision-making, drive innovation and meet project objectives.

References:

1) ICH Efficacy guidelines, https://www.ich.org/page/efficacy-guidelines
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4) What do you do if your remote statistical collaboration is facing challenges? (linkedin.com)

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