

Career Development Seminar Summary – Careers in Clinical Trials Management

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March 17, 2015

For the March installment of the FelCom Career Development Series, a panel discussed their backgrounds and current careers in clinical trials management, including their job responsibilities, how they moved into these positions, and what experiences might make an applicant a more attractive candidate for this field.

The first panelist to open the discussion was JoyAnn Phillips Rohan, PhD. JoyAnn works on project and program management for the Molecular Characterization Laboratory at Leidos Biomedical Research, Inc. JoyAnn earned her PhD in Molecular and Cellular Biology at Baylor College of Medicine and completed post-doctoral fellowships in programs focused on complementary alternative medicine at Morgan State University and minority health and health disparities at Georgetown University. Early in her career, JoyAnn knew that she did not want to be at the bench and pursued opportunities that allowed her to diversify her background, like serving as a project manager for the Clinical Assay Development Program in the Division of Cancer Treatment and Diagnosis at the NCI. Also, her participation in the Health Communications Internship Program at the NIH allowed JoyAnn to enhance her communication and program coordination abilities, thereby making her more competitive for industry positions. This internship broadened her experience outside the lab and helped her segue into other projects that steered her to her current position. In her position at Leidos, JoyAnn oversees program budgets and milestone completion (how and when they are accomplished), and must frequently coordinate meetings with many people throughout the day. To become a more competitive applicant for this kind of position, JoyAnn suggested gaining communication and program management skills in your current work environment or somewhere close to where you already work. For instance, the NIH has a plethora of opportunities available, such as participation in FelCom, to gain leadership skills.

Next, Kara Kuntz-Melcavage, PhD, a Senior Research Associate for Medical Policy at Johns Hopkins HealthCare, presented on her career trajectory. Kara earned her PhD in Neuroscience from Pennsylvania State University. With an interest in traumatic brain injury, Kara entered the field of clinical trials management following an encounter in which she shared her interest with an NINDS staff member. From their conversation and Kara's previous work experience, she was given the opportunity to complete a nontraditional post-doc at the NIH to establish and manage a clinical trial, which involved interacting with patients and clinicians at the beginning of the trial and during follow-up visits. Although her graduate committee was less than enthused about this endeavor, Kara continued on this path as it was the right decision for her; Kara's graduate research bridged the fields of molecular and behavioral neuroscience so she was confident enough in her interests to pursue opportunities with a translational bent. In Kara's current position at Johns Hopkins HealthCare, she works as a consumer of clinical research studies where she completes evaluations of trials and helps determine what impact studies have on medical insurance policy coverage decisions. To become a more competitive applicant for this type of position, Kara suggested expanding your experiences outside of the lab, especially in the clinical realm. For example, gaining Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)/fire and rescue squad training (or volunteering), certification through the Society for Clinical Research Associates (SOCRA), volunteering in a hospital, or attending meetings of the NIH Human Subject Research Committee (HSRC) would give an applicant practical experiences to enhance their resume.

Finally, Lindsey Garver, PhD, a Senior Research Scientist/Malariologist at ClinicalRM, under contract at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, spoke about her career transition. Lindsey earned her PhD in Molecular Microbiology and Immunology from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Following her graduate work, Lindsey continued her research as a post-doctoral fellow at NIAID where she also served in several leadership positions including the NIAID representative to FelCom, chair of the FARE committee, and member of the NIAID Fellows' Review Board. Lindsey heard about her current position by word-of-mouth. Her current duties as a Senior Research Scientist are to oversee/manage primary research studies and manage/help design the entomology-related parts of clinical trials. Much of her position is to test vaccines or repellents for vector-borne diseases including malaria, dengue, and emerging infectious diseases like chikungunya. For this position, it is important to have an understanding of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and ethical regulations. This position also requires you to effectively communicate with patients and clinicians participating in the trial (lots of meetings, emails, coordinating), grant writing, and people management. To become more competitive for this position, Lindsey suggested taking a course to help you learn some of these skills, like the Scientific Leadership course she took at Montgomery College. Lindsey also spoke about other types of positions in this field that might be of interest to someone wanting to join the clinical trials environment such as: regulatory (Quality Assurance/Quality Control), human subjects protection, assay development, statisticians/modelers, downstream end-points (e.g. immunologists), document management, and personnel management.

Overall, the panelists agreed that they liked the high impact nature of their careers (the intrinsic motivation that they get to see the end result stemming from bench work). They also enjoy job stability (although this can vary), comfortable salaries, normal work hours (8-9/day), and a flexible work schedule that they commented is family-friendly (two panelists mentioned the benefits of this since they have young children). Finally, the panelists agreed their careers afford them the opportunity to work with many people from patients to clinicians so they must be able to effectively communicate and manage their time.

Key Takeaways:

- 1.) Diversify your resume/CV hybrid with relevant experiences. Ideally these would be related to the clinical environment, but even those involving project/people management and communication/coordination skills will help make you more competitive.
- 2.) Tailor your resume/CV to the positions for which you are applying and put those experiences in the "high real estate" area at the top of your resume. Make sure to use the words as they are written in the job application; for example, if the posting says 'PCR' vs. 'polymerase chain reaction', make sure you include 'PCR' to ensure your resume gets through the initial scanning procedure.
- 3.) Communication skills are a must for this field.
- 4.) Having clinical experience can make getting into the field easier and will give you a competitive edge, but is not necessary.
- 5.) Become familiar with the common terms/processes used in the field. For example, learn about IRB approvals when working with human subjects.