

## **How to Be Heard Loud and Clear in a Complex Organization**

**By Kristy Averette**

Anyone who has worked in clinical research for a few years is aware that the complexity of clinical trials has increased over time. There now seems to be a different online platform or a separate office for nearly every aspect of a trial, especially at large organizations like academic medical centers (AMCs) and pharmaceutical companies. Increasing complexity and fragmentation of responsibilities means that communication requirements have increased exponentially. Depending on your role, you may have to communicate regularly or from time to time with hundreds of people.

Not only must each communication be clear but it must also go to the correct people in the correct form at the correct time. Just keeping track of who needs which communications, how and when they prefer to communicate, and the technology they prefer to use has become a major undertaking. To compound this problem, the rapid rate of technology adoption and people moving in and out of positions means that everything is in flux. Misunderstandings can easily arise from hurried or delayed electronic communications, especially email, between people from different cultures and from different generations.

In addition to the study team itself, AMCs have various therapeutic departments and different offices for regulatory compliance, ethical review, contracts, budgets, billing, pharmacy, etc. Study sponsors have their own organizational complexities, often including numerous solution providers that can vary from study to study. And we cannot forget about study participants.

To communicate effectively, your first task is to create and maintain a list of the people with whom you communicate. You can maintain this list in a spreadsheet, a database or on paper, depending on the size of your list and your own preferences. Your list should include, at minimum, people with whom you communicate regularly and people whom you may need to contact on short notice about important matters (e.g., technology platform technical support). In addition to their roles and contact information, you can add notes about their communication preferences to your list. For example, do they prefer face-to-face conversations, emails, telephone calls (office or home), online meetings (Zoom, Teams, etc.) or online forms? What time zone are they in? Do they prefer to schedule communications in advance? Do they have an online directory you can check for current contact information?

You probably will not have time to periodically verify all the information in your list, but you can certainly update it when you notice a change. If multiple people in your organization are communicating with the same people, you can maintain a shared list.

Many of the people you communicate with probably share your communication challenges. Help them out by including your contact information in your email signature. You may want to send some people an email with more complete contact information and your own communication preferences.

The current remote-work environment justifies the following reminders for effective communications:

- Communicate in a manner that builds relationships, even in remote communications.
- Maintain a demeanor that is friendly, respectful, professional and as positive as possible, no matter how many promises they have broken, how badly they are behaving or how pressing your emergency.
- Remember that you are not only representing yourself, but also your team and organization.
- Choose the best medium of communication — email vs. phone call vs. meeting — based on the nature of the exchange and people’s preferences. Do not be afraid to suggest changing the medium.
- Communicate in a timely manner; do not keep people waiting longer than necessary for a reply.
- Be clear in your communications. Especially when you are asking someone to do something, provide context and specifics to avoid errors, delays and further exchanges for clarification.
- Use out-of-office messages appropriately when people cannot expect a timely response.
- Spare a minute to engage about something outside the task at hand.
- If you are stressed out, tell people, so they can make allowances.

As a final note, remember that electronic messages can live forever and end up in the hands of people not intended to see or hear them. Messages that contain confidential information or display unprofessional behavior can damage you, your organization and the mission of clinical research.

### **Author**

Kristy Averette, MSN, RN, CCRP, is a Research Practice manager at Duke University School of Medicine. Contact her at 919.681.5797 or [kristy.averette@duke.edu](mailto:kristy.averette@duke.edu).