

## **From Surviving to Thriving: How Culture and Training Transformed the Markey Cancer Center–Clinical Research Office**

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### **1. Background**

The Markey Cancer Center–Clinical Research Office (MCC-CRO) is responsible for the coordination and facilitation of clinical cancer trials at Kentucky’s only NCI-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center. Previously, the MCC-CRO had earned a reputation as a “revolving door,” with the average rate of employee turnover from 2018 to 2020 being 18 percent. The job market in Lexington, KY is lean for anyone with research experience, so in order to boost morale and maintain the office’s continued survival, we identified the hiring and retention of new employees as our top priorities.

### **2. Goals**

Our main goals were employee retention and transforming our office culture. The culture of our office was one of “just surviving,” but we wanted it to be “completely thriving.” We planned to completely revamp our training process in order to increase the percentage of employees who receive their certification and who are eligible for promotion.

### **3. Solutions and Methods**

We developed and implemented the following strategies to achieve our two goals:

- Promoted a culture of development: we searched for candidates who wanted to grow with MCC-CRO, rather than simply hiring to fill open positions.
- Categorized employees into two groups for training: Individuals who were brand-new to clinical research, and another for individuals who had been with MCC-CRO for at least one year and were approaching their eligibility window for certification. The groups met bi-weekly with an agenda of Good Clinical Practice, MCC-CRO best practices, and certification preparation.
- Implemented a buddy system: Each new hire was paired with an established peer. The established peer acted as part of the new hire’s support system to ensure their acclimation to the office.
- Created a weekly rotating schedule for new hires: The rotating schedule ensured that new hires received exposure in all disease sites during onboarding.
- Scheduled weekly check-ins with one of the MCC-CRO managers: To ensure that new hires were completing their training and allowed managers to directly answer their questions.
- Scheduled monthly one-on-ones: Held with each employee, both new and established, to promote continuous development.

### **4. Outcomes**

Our turnover rate decreased to 15 percent in 2022, then to 8 percent in 2023. In 2023, we had six CRAs pass their SOCRA certification and earn promotion from CRA I to CRA II. Currently, we have 10 CRAs preparing for certification in August 2024. The overall culture of the office has completely changed. In a departmental survey, employees expressed their feelings that leadership cares about their development and supports internal promotion.

### 5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

- New hires want constant check-ins: they do not want to feel as if they have been forgotten.
- Training and development must continue past initial onboarding. Employees want to know that they are being developed and prepared for the career ladder.
- When we positively transformed our overall office culture, hiring became easier. Our reputation within the university also changed—we now have candidates contacting us about open positions because they have heard of our office culture and work-life balance.
- Training needs to be web-based in addition to in-person. The development of web-based trainings will be our next step.

Figure

