

The Hidden Heroes of Retinal Research: Essential Strategies for Study Coordinator Success

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED JAN 24, 2025 | INFOCUS INSIGHTS

Study coordinators are central to the conduct of retinal clinical trials. They balance regulatory requirements, manage patient data, support protocol adherence, and coordinate communication with investigators and sponsors. InFocus Clinical Research gathered feedback from retina research coordinators across its network to identify practical strategies for success.

Building on Celebrating Excellence in Retina Research, this article explores the skills and practices that support effective trial delivery. It offers a practical guide for both experienced coordinators and those entering the field.

Core Skills for Study Coordinator Success

Study coordinators in retinal research rely heavily on a combination of organizational expertise, technical knowledge, and effective communication to drive successful clinical trials.

Organizational Skills

One of the most critical aspects of a study coordinator's role is managing multiple ongoing trials, each with its unique protocols, timelines, and regulatory demands. Several survey respondents emphasized that proactive planning is crucial for keeping trials on track. One coordinator shared, "We start the week by going through eCRF queries to action items in a timely manner, ensuring everything is ready before patient visits." Another added, "Being well-organized and pro-active are key. Clear communication and up-to-date spreadsheets facilitate collaboration between departments and ensure PI oversight."
This meticulous approach to organization helps coordinators anticipate issues and adapt to changes quickly, minimizing disruptions.

Technical Proficiency

Given the complexity of retinal research, coordinators need to understand imaging technologies such as spectral-domain optical coherence tomography (SD-OCT) and fluorescein angiography. One participant noted, "It's important for sponsors to understand that, despite our best efforts, sometimes the best image possible may still have limitations due to patient conditions." This highlights the importance of balancing technical accuracy with real-world patient constraints. Familiarity with electronic data capture (EDC) and clinical trial management systems also supports accurate records and reliable study workflows.

Effective Communication

Strong communication skills are a cornerstone of successful coordination. Coordinators act as a bridge between the clinical staff, principal investigators, sponsors, and patients. Many survey participants shared that establishing clear communication channels early on helps avoid misunderstandings and ensures that investigators are always informed of trial progress. As one coordinator shared, "We always ensure patients have multiple contact points—study coordinators and the treating investigator—and find out each patient's preferred method of communication." By maintaining open channels, coordinators can improve patient compliance and build trust, ensuring better trial outcomes.

Strategies for Overcoming Common Challenges

Despite their vital role, study coordinators face several challenges that can impact the smooth conduct of clinical trials. From managing shared staff to ensuring patient compliance, the ability to overcome these obstacles is what sets successful coordinators apart.

Managing Shared Staff

In many research settings, coordinators must share staff with the regular clinic, which can create scheduling conflicts and delays. One respondent explained, "Our BCVA examiners are shared with the regular clinic, so we schedule patients in grouped sessions to minimize conflicts. Occasionally, trial patients overlap with regular clinic sessions, and we ensure an orthoptist is available to assist." Proactive scheduling and clear communication were highlighted as effective strategies for mitigating staff-related challenges.

Addressing Staff Strain

Another recurring issue was the strain on key team members, such as imaging technicians and VA assessors. To address this, several coordinators recommended cross-training clinic staff and scheduling patients with adequate gaps. One survey respondent noted, "We generally schedule patients 30 minutes to one hour apart, ensuring that staff aren't overwhelmed and patients don't pile up." This careful planning creates a more manageable workload and a better overall experience for staff and patients alike.

Ensuring Patient Compliance

Patient engagement is critical to trial success, but coordinators often encounter issues with compliance due to various factors, such as time commitment and transportation. One coordinator highlighted the importance of empathy, stating, “Many trials are the last hope for patients in preserving vision. Providing a safe space where they can ask questions and feel valued makes a significant difference.” Ensuring patients are well-informed and motivated improves their long-term participation.

Best Practices for New Coordinators

For those just beginning their journey as study coordinators in retinal research, adopting certain best practices can significantly enhance their performance. Mastering regulatory requirements, technical procedures, and site-specific workflows should be a top priority. One coordinator suggested, “Understand how your specific institution works behind the scenes. During initial conversations with sponsors, be transparent about timelines and requirements.” Building strong relationships with PIs and staff also fosters smoother operations. Additionally, “Start the week by prepping files, ensuring all tests are ready, and checking open con meds and AEs to capture accurate information during patient visits.” These proactive practices help coordinators stay ahead of potential issues.

Study coordinators balance complex responsibilities with precision and care. Organizational skills, technical knowledge, and clear communication help them anticipate problems and support patients throughout a trial. The strategies shared here offer practical guidance for new and experienced coordinators alike.