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Path of change – from Market Research to Clinical Trials

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ABSTRACT

After 14 years working in Market Research, changing to Clinical Trials was and still is a challenging and driving experience. How do you adapt? How do you use previous knowledge in a new domain? How flexible are you to take in the new? Is the data still the same data? Adapting to a new industry brings technical learning, but there is something in common with previous experience: people. I have taken this experience step-by-step and used my previous knowledge to build and shape things, along the way adapting to the specifics. Curiosity helped greatly in the learning process and bonding with the team. Having a mentor and support is crucial in adapting to a new industry and bringing in ideas. This paper explores the journey I have started in transitioning to a career in a new industry.

INTRODUCTION

Continuous learning is a trademark for professional and personal development, as well as part of our daily life. Some of us can adapt easier to a change, others may need more time. Questions are raised: When is the right moment to make a change? Have I done everything in my current position? Will I be as good as I expect in my new position in a new domain?

One can find serious arguments against a career change, but also many arguments for doing it. When I took the decision to leave Market Research for Clinical Trials, I decided to take the opportunity I was given and take the risk.

BACKGROUND

Being a Sociology student, my dream was to become an anthropologist. Soon enough, I have learned that I won't be an anthropologist, simply because there is not a business need for that. No need to mention, I have lost all my enthusiasm, but I had no choice but study for my Statistics exam, which I did not like nor understood. But life happened and statistical values started to have meaning for me and in a very short time I realized that I am getting better and better at Statistics because figures are not empty figures, but they hold a meaning, and surprisingly enough I have started to enjoy statistics.

Right after graduating from University, I got my first job in Market Research as a statistician. I still remember, at my job interview I had to perform a cluster analysis. I was very young and had no idea how long I would work in this industry and how much I would enjoy it. But I had a manager, who was very passionate about mathematics and statistics, and his passion and work ethics was passed to me as well. I learnt from him not only statistics, but also to do your job with great respect and dedication, a learning I still greatly treasure and trying to pass on.

It turned out that I became passionate and driven to find out more and I always told new colleagues that data speaks to you, because my data spoke to me and this kept me 14 years working in market research with data that had a meaning.

NEXT STEP

But from working with data, I was given the opportunity to lead a team. I had no idea what to do, how to do and what does it mean to lead a team. What I knew is that I had great managers and mentors and my manager at that time gave me the freedom to follow my ideas and apply them. I felt trusted and encouraged and I was also asked to lead the team at a European level.

It was a great challenge and I had the opportunity to implement my plans on a European level: training plan, new procedures, new hiring process and above all working with people. I became passionate about leadership and having a team to manage. I enjoyed every minute for six years.

I loved my team, I loved market research, but I felt that there is time for a change, to learn something new. At this point I got interested in Clinical Research. I still wanted to work with data and to lead a team and, when thinking of this, the main thought was that data is still data, people are still people…how difficult can it be?

This question was answered when Cmed gave me the opportunity to lead the Statistical Programming team.

I had basic knowledge on clinical trials, I had no knowledge on the industry or of what statistical programmers were doing, but it seemed very interesting and challenging.

What I knew is that I wanted to learn something new, still work with data and wanted to manage a team. With optimism and enthusiasm, I started at Cmed in September 2017.

The main challenges were:

- Shifting gears to a different way of seeing data
- What is the data telling me?
- Understanding clinical trials
- Fully understand the work process
- New team
- Different technology

Starting with the assumption that data is still data, is not the right approach. Usually, in Market Research there is one dataset to work with, that is in most of the cases a respondent level dataset. As in Clinical Trials you have a multitude of datasets to work with and the content is diverse (i.e. SDTM domains). For someone joining from other research field, it is paramount to learn how to read the data. Let's take as an example the Laboratory Data. To work with laboratory data, first one needs to understand what the units mean and how these are converted to the standard units.
The big challenge is to learn how to read the data so you can see at a glance if something is not right. How do we treat unscheduled visits? How do I map them?
In the industry I was coming from, you had some room to be creative when working with data, but in Clinical Trials we know that rules are strict and must be followed. The Implementation Guide gives you clear instructions and the Protocol tells you everything about the study. Once familiarized with all the standards, it is also comforting to know exactly what to do in all situations.
My advice for someone joining clinical trials from other related fields is to get familiar with all the relevant guides and understand the data. Once the meaning of data is known, inconsistencies can be easily seen and mapping rules are understood.

In my one year's experience, so far with Cmed, one of the most important item I have learned is that, for me as team leader, clarity of the work process is paramount.
I am resourcing the statistical programmers and without understanding in detail what the work process is, resourcing would be impossible. As you all know, we are not resourcing for few days, but for year(s) in advance.
What I have done is to break down the study process into pieces and learned what each of them mean, what programmers need to do, what is the outcome and what is the purpose of the outcome. By doing this, I have managed to understand the resource need, which period during the study live cycle that tasks must be done and the time-frame needed.
This learning also helped while recruiting.
We are all aiming to recruit the best people, but the best people in one industry might not be the right people for you. How do I know who is the right professional for statistical programming? By knowing and understanding the tasks they are supposed to perform.
Someone who is not consistent and organized has high chances to lose track of procedures, someone who is not technical can feel lost using the Implementation Guide. I can tell you that the first interviews were quite interesting.
When recruiting for more experienced levels, the discussion was focused on exact topics. If as recruiter you do not have knowledge on these topics, the interview will lose focus and as an interviewer you won't be able to properly evaluate a candidate.

My advice, if you have experience in any other field and you are about to begin in clinical trials, get a mentor. A mentor can guide you through all the gaps that you might have and it is a great asset to introduce you to the team's history, which for someone leading a team is very important. If you are in a leading position, consider having as a mentor someone who has access to the same information as you have so you can also talk if needed about confidential information.

Of course, my previous experience helped a great deal. It helped me to assess the training needs, especially for soft-skills. As a result, together with the Human Resource and Training Department, training sessions were organized so we could offer the best working experience to external and internal customers.
The onboarding process for new hires was greatly influenced by my Market Research experience: new onboarding process was written and the training matrix was redefined.

Regardless of the area one is working on; the leading experience is something to be carried. Therefore, the constant interaction with my team and nurturing a good relationship between direct report and line manager is a constant variable across areas.

Looking at the technical side and after years using SPSS (Statistical Tool for Social Sciences), especially writing scripts using this software, creates a great base for adapting to another statistical software like SAS. One might not

be expert from the beginning but. having the knowledge of any other statistical tool. creates an easier learning path for something else.

CONCLUSION

After one year working in clinical trials and leading a team, from my experience, the following should be considered:

- Know the work process very well
- Understand each step of the work process
- Learn about the industry
- Talk to people
- Find a mentor
- Use any knowledge from previous experience

Being a good team leader/manager does not depend on industry and, if your previous experience is anyway related to working with data, adapting is not a very difficult process. Be curious and document yourself, learn about the new and do not expect to be an expert from day one, give yourself some time and, without realizing, you will be already adapted.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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