

Build an Effective and High-performance Team

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ABSTRACT

People management is the process of hiring, leading, and developing team members to support the growth trajectory of an individual and build teams to align with the organization's overall mission. This paper will discuss different approaches on how to ramp up new hires, develop optimal skill sets, and manage resources across different time zones to optimize performance. We will share experiences particularly from COVID-19 vaccines trial within the last 3+ years.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic was an unprecedented outbreak with global impact. In the face of this worldwide crisis, Pfizer was committed to fighting against COVID-19 and delivering a solution to help millions of people across the world return to normalcy. The route to a COVID-19 vaccine required teams to execute trials and develop solutions at a "lightning speed." This record timeline for development, submission delivery, and approval required a nuanced people management approach.

It took COVID teams' herculean efforts to get 18 Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) approvals for primary vaccination and bivalent booster for adults and pediatrics. In addition, 2 Biologics License Application (BLAs), 13 European Union (EU) and 7 Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee (VRBAPC) were also delivered in the past 3 years. The critical submissions included 100+ database releases, thousands of outputs, 70+ electronic submissions (eSUB), and 15+ inspections by the regulatory agencies. Pfizer submitted initial EUA within 4 days from the Database Release (DBR), and subsequent submissions were delivered within days or couple of weeks after the last database release.

People management encompasses a wide range of responsibilities and is a process of hiring, leading, and developing colleagues while simultaneously supporting an organization's overall mission. Effective people management can produce efficient and quality outcomes while improving morale and engagement, reducing attrition, and strengthening communication. It also involves understanding the people who make up the organization and their personal and career goals. Resource management requires a lot of preparation, assuring everything and everyone is doing their task properly. It also requires involving collaboration and coordination across different organizations.

Below we discuss the people and resource management strategies used by the Pfizer statistical data sciences and analytic (SDSA) team to manage "lightning speed" vaccine trial submissions to regulatory agencies. This includes ramping up resources, developing optimal skill sets, building efficiencies,

developing processes for issue escalation and resolution, and operating under a “Follow-the-Sun” model for seamless global operations.

RAMPING UP RESOURCES

The speed of vaccine trial submissions required the SDSA team to revise our hiring and onboarding strategy to bring on new team members more quickly.

The hiring team was assembled with the necessary resources and the hiring process was streamlined. The hiring timeline was significantly reduced from 1-2 months to approximately 3-4 weeks from resume review to offer acceptance. The hiring team streamlined the interview process by establishing clear process with expected duration for each step from resume review to onboarding, daily review of resumes by the hiring managers to short list candidates and weekly meetings to discuss the potential candidate to make quick decisions. New tools were designed for tracking hiring. These efforts resulted in hiring approximately 50 colleagues to the statistical data sciences and analytic vaccines organization within the past 3 years.

Upon entry, new hires embarked on a 45-day entry plan developed by the COVID-19 SDSA team. This plan allowed new hires to access key systems within days of joining the organization and outlined new-entrant activities by priority. Additionally, each new hire was assigned a mentor, which proved valuable to accelerate learning. Within a month, new hires were meaningfully contributing to projects.

OPTIMIZING SKILL SETS

In an effort to build a team that could deliver results at exceptional speeds, we hand-selected members with experience and knowledge in different programming areas along with leaders who had end-to-end experience with programming activities. We gave our colleagues autonomy over assignments and encouraged them to think out of the box. This provided opportunities for team members to learn from each other and expand their knowledge and skill set. The COVID-19 SDSA team established clear expectations regarding the role and responsibility of each team member to avoid confusion and duplication of effort.

Additionally, to meet evolving business needs, the COVID-19 SDSA team created opportunities for team members to develop their skills in particular areas. For example, a senior colleague who didn't have submission experience was given opportunity to plan for submission, few colleagues shadowed on regulatory inspections meetings. These skill development opportunities were provided in conjunction with traditional development opportunities, including mentorship, trainings, and regular check-ins. We challenged and encouraged our team members to take risks to reach their full potential and we simultaneously found appropriate opportunities for their growth. This environment of continuous learning and development produced engaged, productive and committed team members.

PROCESS FOR ISSUE ESCALATION & RESOLUTION

Constant collaboration and communication between the different facets of the team was necessary for efficient progress. Therefore, the COVID-19 SDSA team formed a group comprising programming leadership and experts from each component, which met weekly. Any issues the team encountered—from regulatory queries, resource constraints, timeline development, system problems, to programming issues—were discussed with this group. The varied experiences of the technical group proved useful in developing solutions, as the “lightning speed” of COVID-19 vaccine development resulted in unprecedented overlap between different technical areas.

As managers we knew the tremendous pressure under which our teams were working; acknowledging the pressure and worked to create an open and friendly environment where team members felt comfortable sharing their concerns. We made significant efforts to address team member concerns, and proactively applied successful solutions from one technical area to others.

BUILDING EFFICIENCY

Essential to the success of the COVID-19 SDSA team had a strategy to review the programming processes and determine where efficiencies could be implemented, in conjunction with other functional lines. To gain efficiency, every deliverable was proactively and diligently planned. The team identified activities that could run in parallel and determined how the baton would be passed seamlessly for successive activities. Prior to every deliverable, the team conducted a dry run to ensure efficiency and accuracy. Information for all subject matter experts (SME) was collated and shared with the team so the appropriate folks could be immediately contacted in case of any issues.

FOLLOW-THE-SUN MODEL

Pfizer continues to expand the follow-the-sun model. We expand hiring in other geographic locations such as China, India, the UK, Greece, etc. to have availability across multiple time zones to avoid time restraints. We see the geographical difference between teams as an advantage we can utilize as opposed to an obstacle we have to work around. The requests and deliveries can be handled by and passed between sites in different time zones, increasing responsiveness and minimizing delays. We collaborate across the sites, increase the training, share the ownership of all deliveries, and clear roles, processes, and communication; knowledge is seamlessly transferred from one team to another. We close the gap of handoffs for pending tasks and queries by using trackers and end-of-day hand-off emails/team chats. The follow-the-sun model increases efficiency while maintaining quality and gives our colleagues work and life balance. We strive to keep colleagues healthy, happy, and motivated as an organization. We will still be able to provide round-the-clock support to maintain continuity of workflow.

CONCLUSION

We continue to build effective and high-performance teams with our COVID-19 vaccines experience. We carry out the experience to other clinical trial to increase productivity. This great experience is critical to our professional development, successful team dynamic and positive leadership.