R&D INFLUENCER

Jill Johnston

President, Study Planning and Site Optimization Division
WCG, Clinical Services Organization

BREAKING DOWN THE ROADBLOCKS TO SITE ACTIVATION

My focus is on getting life-saving drugs to patients as quickly as possible by reducing the time it takes sites to enroll patients into trials.

There's a big difference between people with a vision and those who can execute on that idea. Jill Johnston, president of WCG's study planning and site optimization division, has proven she can do both.

Jill is committed to helping sponsors and investigational sites reduce the time and cost of the clinical study start-up process — from getting patients into studies faster, and enabling those studies to be completed on time or ahead of schedule. She's also committed to furthering WCG's focus on the patient voice by bringing industry leaders together to talk about the challenges patients face — everything from informed consent, to payments for patients, to simply making it easier for patients to participate in clinical trials.

Some of biggest roadblocks to site activation, she says, are: quick IRB turnaround; contract and budget delays between sponsors, CROs, and sites; and identifying the right investigators in the first place. Another barrier is communication, especially at the start of a trial. Jill says there are a thousand tasks that have to be done concurrently at the beginning of a clinical study, and the people who do well in that space are exceptionally organized and great communicators.

Jill has proven she has what it takes to move mountains. While at a previous company, she headed the Fast 50 project, which sought to reduce time and cost with Phase II and III clinical trials by 50%. To do this, the team had to think big, throw out the traditional model, and start afresh. And while the team didn't quite achieve 50%, it did consistently get to 35% — a remarkable achievement. This was a pivotal career point for Jill, who discovered that her blend of clinical development and operations experience, technology and data knowledge, and business acumen was rare. "I've done it all, except for medical monitoring and stats, but I know how this works when done well," she says. "I also know how the business needs to use technology and I know the value of the data within those systems. The third piece is my strong business acumen and the passion to make changes within the industry."

Today at WCG, she's bringing her innovative approach to problem solving to her global team, counting in the hundreds, which is focused on the front end of clinical trials, study start-up, and study planning. She encourages team members to think outside the box. "One of WCG's main goals is to reduce the time and costs of a clinical trial," she says. "We are committed to getting rid of the major delays in clinical research by doing things differently. This is what attracted me to my role, and I get to do this every single day I walk into the office. I couldn't be happier having free rein to figure out how to change our outdated approaches and continue to improve on it every day. I encourage my teams to think big and not to be afraid to try something new."

It's not easy to bring about change in a risk-averse industry, but Jill says if people have the right mindset, they can do wonderful things to speed up the clinical trial process. PV

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