**Supporting the professional development of trial managers: how can you help?**

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**Abstract**

Clinical trial managers are central to the successful design and delivery of clinical trials, making them crucial within the research landscape. Yet, despite their vital contribution, many trial managers report feeling undervalued, under-supported, and insufficiently recognised for the expertise they bring to their teams. Unlike other research roles, there is no clearly defined career pathway for trial managers, and opportunities for professional growth are often limited. In the UK, those working on academic-led trials are usually employed within universities or NHS trusts, frequently based in UKCRC-registered Clinical Trial Units. In this article, we provide practical guidance for both trial managers and their employers on how to strengthen professional development opportunities and better support this essential workforce.

**INTRODUCTION**

Trial Managers[[1]](#footnote-1) play a vital role in the design and delivery of clinical trials and are an essential part of the research landscape (1). A trial manager is a highly skilled professional responsible for overseeing the full lifecycle of a clinical trial, including managing numerous operational, regulatory, ethical, and logistical aspects of a trial - often acting as the central point of coordination across multiple stakeholders. Due to the complexity of the role, trial managers wear many hats, functioning as project managers, regulatory experts, data analysts, problem-solvers, team leaders, and communicators all at once. Professional development in many different areas is critical to developing an experienced and resilient trial management workforce.

Despite this, they have historically lacked recognition for the role they play, and, as a result, trial managers can feel their professional development is sometimes considered an afterthought (2). Trial managers continue to tell us they feel undervalued, unsupported and considered unequal to other members of the team.

We previously reported that employers faced significant challenges retaining staff working in trial management positions (3), particularly in the post-Covid era due to advancements in technology and hybrid working, reflecting fluidity in the job market generally. While this immediate ‘crisis’ has eased, retaining skilled staff remains critically important to ensure delivery of UK clinical trials to the highest standards. Supporting professional development and identifying ways to ensure trial managers learn new skills and feel inspired and stimulated in their work should encourage staff retention.

Having a supportive line manager is considered the most important aspect of professional development for working as a research methodologist, a broad description for people working in many different roles, including trial managers (4). Many trial managers are based within UKCRC-registered Clinical Trials Units (CTUs) (<https://ukcrc-ctu.org.uk/>, hereafter referred to as CTU): at the time of writing (August 2025), 1163/1707 (70%) members of the UK Trial Managers’ Network (UKTMN: [www.tmn.ac.uk](http://www.tmn.ac.uk)) are based within a UKCRC-registered CTU. Arguably, for trial managers based in a CTU, their line manager may be someone who understands the role, though this is not always the case. For trial managers not based within a CTU (i.e. 554/1707; 30% UKTMN members), it is less likely they will be managed by someone who has experience of the role themselves, which could potentially heighten the issues that trial managers face regarding professional development. In addition, in our experience, employers of trial managers (i.e. universities, NHS Trusts) rarely fully understand the role of the trial manager and thus are unable to support their professional development in a meaningful way.

Here, we offer ideas and guidance to line managers and employers on how they can support the professional development of trial managers. Our focus is on trial managers of academic/investigator-led trials. The ideas presented are a culmination of experiences from different research groups based in UK universities, the NHS and other non-commercial organisations, representing the breadth of the UKTMN, following informal and formal discussions with UKTMN members over many years, e.g. during professional development workshops at UKTMN conferences and surveys of the membership.

Supporting trial managers is critical if we are to retain skills essential to the development and delivery of clinical trials in the future. Indeed, supporting under-represented disciplines and specialisms is an area of strategic focus by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), the UK’s largest non-commercial funder of clinical trials (5). The NIHR funded Methodology Incubator (https://methodologyincubator.org.uk/) also has a particular focus on raising awareness of the importance of research methodologists, such as trial managers (6).

**SUPPORTING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TRIAL MANAGERS**

**Training and qualifications**

When surveyed in 2019, trial managers reported the biggest enabler to professional development was training (2). Similarly, in 2024, the PROSPER study of research methodologists, which included trial managers, reported ‘having time to attend training courses relevant to methodologists’ in the top three priorities for professional development (4). Though many institutions are currently facing financial challenges, training trial managers is essential to retain a skilled workforce capable of delivering trials, which make a major contribution to the UK life science industry.

We use the term ‘training’ here as a catch-all for a variety of activities a trial manager may wish to access for them to seek new or refresh existing skills and to facilitate their ongoing professional development. For example, attendance at training courses, leadership programmes, training courses leading to a recognised qualification and attendance at short online events, e.g. webinars and conferences. Trial managers should also be encouraged to present their work by submitting abstracts to relevant conferences.

Many universities are signatories to The Concordat to support career development of researchers (7) and trial managers based in these institutions who are employed on a research/academic pathway are therefore entitled to engage in 10 days of professional development (pro rata per year). The Concordat also states that institutions should provide training and structured support for researchers. Irrespective of whether the trial manager’s employing institution is signed up to The Concordat or whether a trial manager is employed on a research/academic pathway, supporting trial managers with time and funding to attend training is crucial and should be considered in grant applications and individual training plans.

Fellowships are personal awards to support professional development and are offered by a range of funders. UKTMN have long provided feedback to funders that whilst fellowships may be desirable to some trial managers, they are not the solution to professional development for everyone. Instead, provision of other smaller funding opportunities that trial managers could access for training could be more helpful for some. Applying for smaller awards can also provide trial managers with experience which could give them confidence to apply for higher-value awards, including fellowships, in the future. That said, fellowships do provide a much-desired professional development opportunity for some trial managers. They are typically offered at a range of levels, depending upon experience, for example, pre-doctoral, doctoral or post-doctoral. Undertaking a part or full-time fellowship could be a way for some trial managers to undertake research relevant to clinical trials and for them to have protected time to access training relevant to their development.

Many trial managers are educated to a high level (2), e.g. with a Masters’ qualification or PhD and, for many institutions, this is a pre-requisite to an appointment. However, many trial managers do not have a PhD, and whilst we don’t believe this is an essential requirement to be a good trial manager, we do recognise that having a higher-level academic qualification can be helpful for ongoing professional development and external validity within a higher-education institution (HEI) setting. A doctoral fellowship could enable the undertaking of a PhD. But for trial managers who may not want to or are unable to undertake a fellowship, but who may have a body of published work, they could consider undertaking a PhD by publication, which is offered by many UK universities, enabling them to gain a qualification whilst continuing in their trial manager role.

**Contribution to grant applications and trial design**

Typically, trial managers get involved in a clinical trial once it has been designed and funding has been awarded (1). They are often involved in protocol writing, though it is not uncommon for trial managers to start managing a trial once the trial protocol has been developed, leaving little room for their intellectual input. Yet, trial managers accumulate an abundance of experience from runningtrials that could be enormously helpful at a much earlier stage, when designing the trial and applying for funding. Involving trial managers earlier not only could improve the design of a trial, since they may appreciate barriers and enablers from a trial delivery perspective, but their involvement means they get recognition by being a named investigator or collaborator on a funding application. Particularly for trial managers based in universities who are employed on a research/academic pathway, demonstrating grant income is crucial for their professional development. In addition, involvement in the early design stages of a trial can be intellectually stimulating for trial managers, enabling them to better manage the trial if funding is subsequently awarded, and in our experience, having knowledge of the trial from the outset can help with successful trial delivery throughout.

**Authorship**

Trial managers make substantial contributions to the design and delivery of clinical trials and meet the four authorship criteria outlined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICJME) (8) for publications arising from a clinical trial. Despite their significant contributions, they are often under-recognised in academic publications. Given their critical role in the running of a clinical trial, which directly influences the quality and integrity of research findings, inclusion of a trial manager on authorship of journal articles should be considered the norm rather than the exception. The UKTMN, recognising that many trial managers are not given the recognition they deserve on publications, provided a statement to support trial managers being included in trial publications (9). In addition, trial managers and the wider trials’ community may mutually benefit from providing expert peer review to papers relevant to clinical trials, though may need support in doing this initially.

**SWATs and methodology research**

Undertaking research into how we design and run clinical trials, i.e. trials methodology, is crucial to increase efficiencies and reduce research waste. In the same way that clinical investigators develop research questions arising from clinical uncertainties, trial managers are well-positioned to understand the challenges in clinical trial design and management and, therefore, propose alternative solutions that could be evaluated in trials methodology studies. These could be embedded in trials, i.e. by undertaking a Study Within a Trial 10) or by conducting standalone methodology studies. Leading on the generation of research questions on trial design and conduct – i.e. akin to the expectations of a typical academic researcher – can therefore be a valuable professional development activity, empowering trial managers to move beyond delivery and become active contributors to trial methodology. If funding is required for the conduct of the methodology study, the trial manager is also exposed to developing a funding application and generating grant income, though may need support for these activities. Aside from the comparisons to a more typical academic researcher, involvement in activities outside of the day-to-day running of a clinical trial can provide interest to trial managers enabling them to learn new skills, potentially leading to academic publications and enabling them to demonstrate innovation and leadership skills, which could, in turn, help retain them within the profession. Involvement in additional activities, outside of the day-to-day running of a trial, was considered the third highest enabler to professional development in a cross-sectional survey of trial managers (2). The role of a trial manager is hybrid – part researcher, part project manager and increasingly trial managers are considered as research methodologists (4, 6). Whilst this terminology encompasses a broad range of roles, we feel this could help in part to enable trial managers to feel valued, as it is more widely recognised and understood by those in the trial community.

**Buddying / mentoring others**

In a profession where learning is largely on the job, peer support and learning from others is crucial. Trial managers could benefit from accessing others within the professional field to provide them with independent support and guidance. Sometimes an alternative perspective, outside of the institution in which the trial manager is based, can provide fresh ideas. Conversely, trial managers can also develop professionally by providing peer support, mentorship and buddying to others in the field, benefiting from mutual learning. This type of activity allows trial managers to strengthen their interpersonal skills, actively listening, providing feedback and adapting communication styles, all key competencies for leadership roles. Engaging in mentorship builds a sense of professional community, encouraging knowledge sharing and development of professional networks for future collaborations.

**Working with others in the same department on other trials / different areas**

Many clinical trials are managed by teams based within a CTU. CTUs are ideally placed to offer multiple opportunities for trial managers to be exposed to a range of clinical trials, utilising different trial designs and, often, focusing on different clinical areas. There are limited training opportunities for trial managers and, as described, training is mostly ‘on the job’. Line managers should therefore consider how trial managers can work across or shadow different trials, gaining skills in different tasks and activities and potentially building up a bank of specialist expertise. This activity can broaden experience, strengthen collaboration, and enhance the adaptability of the individual. Whilst for trial managers based outside of CTUs, it is more challenging to work across different trials, line managers and Chief Investigators could consider whether cross-trial working could be beneficial for mutual learning.

**Being valued within the team**

Trial managers have repeatedly, over many years, expressed feeling undervalued within the clinical trial team, with some investigators referring to trial managers as ‘glorified administrators’ or ‘the back office’. In a recent survey of CTU staff (n=484), of which around half (225, 46%) held a trial management role, lack of appreciation and recognition were identified as themes contributing to job dissatisfaction (11). However, we think the tide is changing, albeit slowly, with investigators and major funders recognising the important role that trial managers play. But this long-standing under-appreciation appears to have led to a self-fulfilling prophecy, with many trial managers doubting their own abilities, not feeling they add value to the team, and often being the member of the team to push their ideas to one side in favour of others. It is unclear why this may be the case, but one explanation could be that many people working in a trial management role are females. In fact, at the time of writing, around 80% of UKTMN members are female. Whilst lack of confidence, self-esteem, and self-doubt can affect anyone it is well-documented that these issues are more predominant in women (12-14).

Trial managers and those who support them could consider using the UKTMN competency framework ([www.tmn.ac.uk](http://www.tmn.ac.uk)) which not only focuses on specific trial activities but, importantly, focuses on the core skills and behaviours needed to be an effective and efficient trial manager. Assessment of these skills and behaviours could lead to improved self-belief and self-value. Leadership development and training may also be appropriate for some trial managers, potentially leading to recognition of their own worth and increased confidence, also important for professional development. Information about leadership training specifically for trial managers is available at

<https://www.tmn.ac.uk/resources/aspire-the-uktmn-leadership-programme>.

**Being nominated for expertise on oversight committees**

Typically, clinical trials appoint oversight committees, such as trial steering committees and data monitoring committees, which include independent members to oversee the trial conduct and trial data. The expertise required on such committees is dependent upon the trial itself but typically includes individuals with specific clinical and methodological expertise, and public partners. Trial managers have substantial methodological expertise in the design and delivery of clinical trials and could add value as an independent member of a trial oversight committee. Invitation to join a committee is a marker of prestige and a demonstrable sign of an individual’s expertise and could be important for a trial manager’s professional development. This would also serve as an important recognition of the significant role of the trial manager within the broader framework of trials methodology. CTUs are well placed to ensure that trial managers have opportunities to be invited to comprise membership of oversight committees, as the CTU Network enables easy sharing of communications.

**Encourage participation in departmental, institutional, national and international groups**

Similarly, whilst giving input into clinical trial oversight committees is testament to the skills and expertise trial managers have, they should also be encouraged to join other groups to give their input. For example, joining an institutional/departmental committee or a task and finish group. Whilst contributing trial managers’ expertise is helpful to the endeavour itself, trial managers will also learn by being exposed to new ideas, concepts and people, all of which can help contribute to someone’s professional development. Depending upon the level of experience of the trial manager, they may be able to add value to opportunities which arise internally and externally, for example, funding committees, ethics committees, working groups, task and finish groups on trial management/conduct issues, leading patient and public involvement groups or development of new processes/SOPs within a department.

**Advocacy for alternative career pathways**

UKTMN have previously reported the need for a proper career pathway for trial managers (15). Trial managers join the trial management profession through a variety of routes and from a variety of different backgrounds, and, irrespective of whether they are employed by a university or the NHS, have an unclear career pathway. For trial managers in HEIs, they are typically employed on either a ‘research/academic’ or a ‘professional services’ pathway, where promotion or regrading criteria are not relevant or fit for purpose for the role. We continue to advocate for institutions conducting clinical trials, and therefore employing trial managers, to consider alternative career pathways for trial managers. For this to happen, trial managers and their line managers need to advocate for change locally, by talking to institutional Human Resources departments or those responsible for developing promotion criteria, regrading and career pathways. Efforts continue nationally to raise awareness of these difficulties, but local advocacy is also important.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper we present ways in which trial managers can be supported in their professional development. We recognise that not all trial managers want to ‘climb the ladder’ seeking promotion to the next level, and therefore, not all the ideas presented in this article may be relevant. Similarly, some ideas may be more suited to trial managers at different stages of their careers. The definition of professional development does not merely focus on career progression, though the two terms are often used interchangeably. According to the Cambridge dictionary, professional development is “training that is given to managers and people working in professions to increase their knowledge and skills”. Learning new skills and increasing knowledge can also make the day-to-day activities of the trial management profession more rewarding.

Colleagues, institutions, and research networks can play a crucial role in the professional development of trial managers by promoting opportunities for involvement in methodological research, encouraging authorship and recognition, facilitating mentoring and cross-trial collaboration, embedding professional development into organisational culture.

Trial managers should also take responsibility for their own professional development, seeking out opportunities when desired and leaning on others for support when required. The UK is very fortunate to have a large community of trial managers, providing an enormous skills bank to the clinical trials industry, and trial managers should support each other within this large professional community.

By investing in the growth of trial managers we will build and retain a skilled workforce, who have the skills, innovation, knowledge, resilience and expertise to deliver high-quality clinical trials in the future.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

CTU Clinical Trials Unit

HEI Higher Education Institution

UKCRC UK Clinical Research Collaboration

UKTMN UK Trial Managers’ Network

**DECLARATIONS**

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1. Throughout this article we refer to trial managers as the generic term for individuals working in a trial management role. We recognise the huge variance in job titles and levels of seniority within the trial management profession. Many of the issues raised in the article are relevant to individuals working in a trial management role, irrespective of their level of seniority. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)