Creating a Virtual Community to Provide Centralized Access to Research Resources and Services

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Purpose

Thomas Jefferson University (TUJ) is a rapidly growing, geographically dispersed academic healthcare system. Research personnel must navigate essential resources and services buried within a multitude of siloed platforms and websites. Jefferson Clinical Research Institute (JCRI) provides centralized support to research personnel and investigators and recognizes the need to efficiently connect staff with these resources. TUJ launched a new platform that allows employees to access benefits information, payroll, time-off, and mandatory learning. This platform also features virtual “community” designed for networking and sharing information. JCRI created one such community to link personnel with resources and services (Figure 1). We evaluated its effectiveness using traffic and survey data.

Methods

We identified resources and services relevant to research personnel by exploring TUJ websites via small working groups of subject matter experts. Services and resources were grouped into the following categories: Support Services, Training & Education, Requests & Approvals, Clinical Research Systems, and Policies & Procedures. Subpages were created for each resource and service that included: description, point of contact, how-to-guides, job aids, links to relevant websites, SOPs, and other related information (Figure 2).

Results

The survey was distributed to 1,500 research personnel, and 210 responses were received (14%) response rate. Forty-three percent of respondents identified their primary role as investigators/scientists, while 26% identified their primary role as being involved in subject interaction or recruitment. The majority of respondents (62%) had >5 years of clinical research experience, with only 10% having <1 year. Sixty-three percent of respondents reported using the virtual community, and 74% of users found it helpful (24% very helpful; 50% a little helpful).

The most common reason for use included announcements, RFPs, and locating resources. Users were more likely than non-users to indicate they can always find: needed resources, contact information, and troubleshooting advice. Users were also more likely than non-users to know how to find: data requests, SOPs/policies, database requests, and new personnel training (Figure 3). The total number of users increased monthly with ~680 employees joining since the launch of the community, and traffic averaged just over 1,300 page views per month (Table 2).

Table 1: A selection of questions from feedback survey

Table 2: Traffic data for the virtual community by month

Conclusions

Results indicate the community is positively perceived by staff and appears to provide utility in connecting personnel with job-related services and resources. Limitations of the survey include a potential participation bias. Additionally, the community has been active for less than a year. There remains a need to further connect our research personnel with services and resources. Ongoing improvements include developing additional content and continuing efforts to promote use. We will actively monitor uptake and seek feedback as research at TUJ continues to expand.