Global Call Centers for Life Sciences Organizations

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When we think of call centers, images of the past tend to come to mind. We are reminded of the switchboard ladies in Mad Men, or outsourced client service centers where operators may not have the right linguistic or industry-specific knowledge to fully assist the customer.

However, for today's clinical trials (many of which are conducted overseas), the call center represents an important step forward. Equipped with modern-day technology and staffed by professional operators with subject-matter expertise, call centers can route calls from anywhere in the world and ensure that callers can ask questions and receive a response in their native languages.

According to an FDA report, 40-65 percent of FDA regulated studies were conducted outside the US in 2008. This shift towards a preference for international study sites has made 24/7/365 multilingual phone support all the more crucial.

How Multilingual Call Centers Affect Clinical Development

With many pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies now conducting their clinical trials in emerging markets, the need for multilingual communication methods has grown. Many sponsors and CROs have mandated that principal investigators speak English fluently, but this same requirement doesn't necessarily carry over to other site personnel. Asking investigative site staff to conduct studies in English when it is not their native language has myriad risks, including: miscommunication between investigative sites and study teams at the sponsor or CRO level, potentially resulting in a protocol deviation; incorrectly including or excluding study subjects; or mis-dosing a study subject, putting the patient at risk and compromising trial results.

To date, a handful of sponsors and CROs have realized the risk of providing content and study support in English only and have instituted Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and processes to reduce that risk. Many have been more proactive in localizing the protocol and other study information that is necessary to successfully execute an international clinical program. Along with localizing study information, it is equally important for the investigative site personnel to communicate in their native language with the study teams and all vendor partners. Whether that means the sponsors and CROs need multilingual clinical research associates (CRAs) and project managers or that they need a multilingual support line to assist the investigative site personnel, careful consideration must be taken to provide effective support so study subjects can be enrolled as expeditiously as possible.

What to Look for in a Call Center Provider

Sponsors and CROs should look for call centers that can support the study for all countries and languages and that offer technology not only to receive calls, but also to track calls and provide reporting metrics that can be accessed by relevant study stakeholders on a real-time basis. At a minimum, call centers focused on clinical development should be able to support and collect meaningful information from the following types of providers: electronic data capture (EDC), central laboratories, safety management, and subject recruitment, as well as those outsourced by site personnel to manage studies. The improved communication and reporting provided by global call centers provides enhanced visibility for study stakeholders, higher quality study management, and better monitoring of study subjects.

To stay truly connected in a competitive environment and accelerate clinical development, life sciences organizations will have to address the growing international needs in the industry. Sponsors, CROs, and other vendors supporting product development that provide global connectivity will not only have a better relationship with investigative site personnel and study teams, but will also significantly increase the likelihood of a successful study outcome.