

CRA for Hire

Job Search Best Practices

If you are currently employed as a CRA and are looking for a new position, or have recently been laid off, here are some tips for researching new possibilities, interviewing for positions, and finding a win-win fit for both you and your next employer.

As pharmaceutical companies continue to outsource the site monitoring function of clinical trials to contract research organizations (CROs), some clinical research associates (CRAs) have unfortunately lost their jobs, and hiring for the position has slowed or stopped at many sponsor companies. According to several recruiters in the industry, there are currently more CRAs in the market looking for positions than there are positions available, and many of the positions that are available are on a full-time rather than contract basis. Ongoing acquisitions and mergers among large pharmaceutical firms will also contribute to a competitive market for CRA positions in the near future.

The good news, however, is that CROs are predicted to keep up a steady pace of growth for the foreseeable future as firms continue to outsource monitoring. If you are currently employed as a CRA and are looking for a new position, or have recently been laid off, here are some tips for researching new possibilities, interviewing for positions, and finding a win-win fit for both you and your next employer.

Characteristics and Qualifications for a CRA Job Candidate

My interviews with hundreds of job candidates for regional CRA and consultant openings for pharma/biotech and CROs over more than five years reveal these top characteristics and qualifications for a CRA job candidate:

- flexibility
- team player
- positive attitude
- comfortable with change and new situations
- problem-solving skills
- strong communication skills
- strong interpersonal skills
- therapeutic area experience
- overall industry experience
- device and electronic data capture experience
- strong interest in the company
- interest in professional growth
- enthusiasm
- knowledge of one's own strengths and weaknesses

Where to Begin

The first step is to talk and network with former colleagues and let them know that you are looking for a new position. They are likely to know of positions available or openings within their companies, and many companies have referral programs in which the referrer receives a bonus if a referral is hired. In many companies, CRA positions are often filled through referrals that come from within.

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Pay attention to research job listings at the key industry organizations, including the Drug Information Association, the Association of Clinical Research Professionals, and Center-Watch, all of which have employment-related resources where you can post a resume and search openings.

Join social networks such as LinkedIn, Plaxo, and Facebook to communicate with distant friends and colleagues about your job search. Note, however, that you should not post this information on one of these networks if you do not want this to become public information.

Industry recruiters are another good resource to help with your search; use them, but do not rely on them exclusively. If you do use recruiters, be sure to stipulate that they must get your permission every time they send out your *curriculum vitae* (CV) to a company. Many pharmaceutical companies and CROs use multiple recruiters, and you do not want your CV sent more than once.

Be your own recruiter; research companies in the industry so that you

can actively market yourself. It is amazing what opportunities one can find with a simple Google search. There are hundreds of companies within our industry throughout the country, and you can research them through industry associations, industry websites, and industry publications.

Not all companies, especially CROs, post their jobs through recruiters or online job portals; they may be listed only on their websites. Additionally, many companies post their positions in order collect CVs throughout the year, even when they are not actively hiring. The only way to find them is to do your research.

Your CV

There are many available resources online and elsewhere on the basics of putting together a professional CV. Additional tips for this field including highlighting your experience, including years as a monitor and experience with specific therapeutic areas, electronic data capture products, devices, and study phases, as well as other technical skills, early in your CV.

Highlight up front anything that sets you part from other candidates—such as awards, promotions, or unusual contributions. Also remember, a longer CV is not necessarily a better CV; do not include the title of every study you have ever worked on.

If you have a significant break in your employment history, address it. Including a job that did not work out and acknowledging that the fit was not optimal is better than leaving a large, unexplained gap in your record. In a nutshell, tailor your resume to differentiate yourself from the competition and to highlight how your experience makes you the ideal fit for the position.

A few more things to remember:

- Make sure your CV is organized, up to date, accurate, and not too

detailed or difficult to follow. Simplicity of flow and format is the best. CRAs must be organized, and the CV is the first sign of their abilities in this regard.

- One spelling or grammar error on a resume could cost you a job. Some companies run spell checks on CVs before management even reviews them. The assumption is that if you do not bother with such details on your own CV, then your trip reports and other documents would probably be of poor quality if you got the job.
- Some managers ask for a copy of a CV during an interview, just to see if the candidate had the foresight to bring a copy.
- Your CV and initial contact for the position are your first attempt at showing the company your writing skills, so put some thought into the effort. You need these skills to be a good CRA.
- Ask a trusted colleague or mentor to review your CV and provide feedback prior to submitting it for a position.

It is very common in the industry for CRAs to be interviewed initially by phone. In some cases, this will be the only interview.

The Phone Interview

The phone interview is obviously critical to your making a good impression; take it very seriously and prepare for it as you would for a face-to-face interview. It is very common in the industry for CRAs to be interviewed initially by phone. In some cases, this will be the only interview, so ask how

the employer's hiring process works so you'll know in advance.

Set aside at least an hour for the interview, and hold it in a quiet space where you will not be disturbed or distracted by other phone calls, children, pets, or someone at the door. Do not conduct the interview from a cell phone in your car; in fact, use a land line whenever possible to ensure a clear connection throughout the interview.

A candidate without any questions simply does not seem very engaged in the interviewing process or enthusiastic about the position.

Be aware of your rights as to what questions the interviewer can and cannot legally ask you. Also, do your homework and learn as much as you can about the company with which you are interviewing. The company's website will likely communicate a wealth of information about its history, focus areas, unique differentiators, and more.

Know the name and title of the person with whom you will be speaking and the responsibilities of the position for which you are applying. Before the interview, review the job description closely, and make notes to match your experience and skills to the requirements of the position. In your conversation, make sure to focus on the experiences that are most relevant to the position. Communicate professionalism throughout the interview, and use your voice to communicate confidence.

Be prepared to answer questions with concrete and applicable examples about past challenges or problems you have experienced at sites. It

is not uncommon for the interviewer to ask you about this, and about how you reacted to or dealt with different types of challenges. Employers are looking to see that candidates have strong communication and people management skills and that they can think on their feet, resolve issues/problems, and work successfully at a variety of sites, because no two sites are exactly the same. If a candidate says he or she has never had any major challenges or difficulties at a site, it raises a level of concern regarding the candidate's experience level, because this is so rarely the case. Common challenges and problems include staff turnover, data inaccuracy, missed deadlines, and even study misconduct.

Additional questions that are likely to come up may focus on your long-term career goals, where you see yourself in five years, what you like the most and least about your current position, how you work in a team environment, and the types of management styles you encountered and how you worked with them.

Pay close attention to the questions the interviewer is asking you. The interviewer will likely focus either on positive things that stand out on your CV or areas where he or she is concerned about your experience level or some other issue. Listen for those cues and make sure you address them. An unresolved concern about your qualifications does not bode well for a job offer.

Be upfront and truthful about your flexibility, such as any travel restrictions you may have. Flexibility around travel and travel time is critical for most CRA positions, as you will typically be required to visit investigator sites regularly.

It is always good to have questions for the potential employer—both about the company and about the position for which you are interviewing. A candidate without any questions simply

does not seem very engaged in the interviewing process or enthusiastic about the position. Ask the interviewer what he or she is looking for in a candidate, what his/her expectations are, and what the company culture is like. However, the phone interview is not the time to ask about salary or benefits; save these questions for the human resources department or until you receive an offer. At that time, you should be prepared to ask questions about benefits and the total compensation package.

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Ask the interviewer if he/she thinks you are a good candidate for the position. This gives you the opportunity to address any issues that are perceived as weaknesses to your candidacy. Do not forget to ask what the next steps are, what the timeline is for making a hiring decision, and when and with whom it would be appropriate to follow up. If you feel strongly that you want the position, do not be afraid to state this; attitude is very important, and can count for as much as experience. Lastly, do not be afraid to show enthusiasm for the position during the entire interviewing process.

Here are some things to avoid during phone interviews:

- Do not keep your barking dog in the room.

- Do not call from your current job and whisper.
- Do not type on your computer keyboard or click around the Internet.
- Do not answer other phone lines or put the interviewer on hold for any reason.
- Do not discuss your personal life.
- Do not tell the interviewer that there are certain types of trials that you will not work on (if you want the job).

The Face-to-Face Interview

As mentioned previously, not all companies do face-to-face interviews when interviewing CRAs. However, if you do have a face-to-face interview, remember a few key points. First, dress professionally; even though a lot of people dress “business casual” today, you should always be dressed profession-

ally for an interview. Bring an extra copy of your CV. Again, know who you will be meeting with at the interview. If you are running late or get lost, call immediately and let the company know. Build some extra time into your travel to the interview. Remember that body language is important. Take notes and do not be afraid to show enthusiasm for the position.

Follow-Up

A thank you letter via e-mail is acceptable today, and the speed of decision making often precludes regular mail as a practical follow-up method. Use your thank-you letter to again highlight briefly the experience and skills that make you the ideal candidate for the position. Be prepared to provide references for a reference check. Prior to providing the reference contact information, contact the references and make certain they are comfortable and

available to speak on your behalf. Prepare your references on the job you are applying for and the expectations for the position.

Conclusion

Despite some of the challenging trends in the life sciences space today, there are definitely jobs out there for CRAs of all experience levels. Do your homework to find the company and position that is an ideal fit for you and your long-term career goals. Good luck! **ACRP**

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