

Engagement isn't a "one and done" activity. Ensuring that stakeholders remain engaged throughout the research study requires ongoing effort. Even the most enthusiastic team members can find maintaining their involvement in the study challenging, particularly during a multi-year study where there may be long gaps of time between activities. Everyone on the team plays a role in keeping the team connected, informed, and interested across the life of the study. Doing so will help ensure that every phase of the study benefits from the valuable contributions of all team members, helping research results be more patient-centered and useful.

1 **Keep Engagement Flexible to Be Responsive to Stakeholders' Interests and Availability.**

Stakeholders may have different goals and interests. Being flexible about how and when stakeholders engage allows stakeholders to specify their involvement based on their interests and personal or professional commitments. For example, a member of a Stakeholder Advisory Group may be passionate about planning the study, but not as interested in collecting the data. Reducing their roles and responsibilities during the data collection period allows them to focus their engagement on what matters most to them. It is important to ask stakeholders to regularly identify or confirm their passions, interests, and availability, and then adjust their involvement as needed throughout the study.

Try this: When creating engagement plans, consider how individual stakeholder interests and availability may vary across stages and activities in the study. Avoid creating "one size fits all" plans where everyone engages at the same level across the study. Instead, match roles and responsibilities with stakeholder preferences so that more of their time is focused on activities that matter most to them and align with their schedules.

2 **Help Stakeholders Share Changes When They Occur.** Many things can affect the level of stakeholder involvement during a multi-year study, such as career changes or changes in health and/or family responsibilities. When changes occur, it's important that stakeholders know how to share these changes with the team so that their roles and responsibilities can be adjusted.

Try this: Help stakeholders understand from the beginning that changes are expected and okay. Establish a clear process to help them communicate any changes that may affect their involvement in the study. The process should specify: (1) with whom they communicate (e.g., Principal Investigator, Engagement Coordinator, Project Manager) and (2) how they communicate (e.g., check-in meeting, email). It should also provide options for stakeholders to share potentially sensitive information privately and comfortably.

3 Maintain Communication Between Activities. Gaps of time between study activities are one reason that stakeholder engagement may wane, especially when four or more months pass between activities or meetings. Brief updates on the progress of the study can help team members feel involved and “in the know.” Ideally, updates and communication between activities and meetings should be specific and remind stakeholders about the importance of the study and their role in making it successful.

Try this:

- Many teams hold occasional meetings, even during periods when study activities may be reduced, such as during data collection. These meetings are opportunities to check in with stakeholders, bring them up to date on the study’s progress, or inform them about an aspect of the condition or intervention being studied. The meeting doesn’t need to be long but should serve as a reminder that the study is ongoing and will be more active in the future.
- Consider sending a brief, but regular email update to the team. The update can feature a stakeholder to help others get to know them and why they feel a connection to the study topic.

4 Focus on Maintaining Individual Relationships. Remember that engagement is first and foremost about relationships. Maintaining a positive relationship with each stakeholder is critical to keeping them connected to the study. Creating personal connections with stakeholders may include celebrating positive life events and showing support during difficult times.

Try this: Brief check-in calls or emails between meetings or activities can help communicate an interest in the person beyond their contributions to the study. Make a point to create genuine and personal connections, get to know your team members, and spend time together, for example, sharing a meal outside of team meetings.