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DOMAIN INTELLIGENCE · CLINICAL RESEARCH & PHARMA

Transitioning Into Clinical Research & Pharma

A Practical Guide for Immigrants and Career Changers

Insights from a multi-speaker panel with Dr. Osezuah Momoh and Dr. Ronald Ikpe

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Overview

This guide distils insights from a multi-speaker panel webinar organised by Clinops Academy with Dr. Osezuah Momoh and Dr. Ronald Ikpe, focused on breaking into clinical research and pharma — especially for immigrants and early-career professionals. It covers the mindset, strategy, and real-life actions needed to build clarity, confidence, capability, and community in a competitive industry.

Executive Summary

Clinical research and pharma remain some of the most impactful and competitive fields for internationally trained professionals. Yet many newcomers struggle with clarity, confidence, and the lack of local experience required to enter the sector.

A central message is that clarity — knowing why you want this career and what direction you are pursuing — forms the foundation of every transition. From clarity comes confidence: the ability to articulate your value through resumes, networking, and interviews. Career success does not happen in isolation — a strong community is essential for mentorship, guidance, emotional support, and access to hidden opportunities.

> *"Your previous experience, no matter how unrelated it may seem, carries significant value — value that can be translated, strengthened, and positioned for new opportunities."*
>
> — Dr. Ronald Ikpe

1. Understanding the Core Challenge

Transitioning into clinical research and pharma is rarely straightforward. Many newcomers arrive with rich professional backgrounds — clinical experience, laboratory work, academic training, or healthcare roles — but find themselves struggling to navigate a system that prioritises local experience and industry-specific knowledge.

A major barrier is the disconnect between prior experience and local expectations. Employers frequently request "local experience" or expect specific exposure to regulated research environments — creating a difficult paradox: you cannot get experience without an opportunity, and cannot get an opportunity without experience.

> *"Many people want the outcome of a transition, but not the discomfort required to get there. Those who succeed are those who stretch themselves beyond comfort, treat learning as a habit, and remain patient with the process."*

2. Clarity: The Foundational Pillar

Clarity is the single most important starting point for anyone entering clinical research. Without it, individuals waste time, pursue misaligned roles, or jump between pathways without understanding the long-term

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implications.

Clarity involves answering three critical personal questions:

- **Why do I want to enter clinical research?** Is it passion, financial security, work-life balance, or long-term career vision?
- **What role fits my strengths, personality, and previous experience?**
- **What am I willing to commit** — emotionally, financially, and logistically — to achieve this goal?

Clarity is not a one-time event — it evolves as newcomers engage with their environment, gain exposure, and learn more about the field. Treat clarity as a living process, continuously refined through introspection and exposure to real-world insights.

3. The Three C's and Four C's Frameworks

Two complementary frameworks emerged as powerful tools for navigating career transition:

The Three C's: Clarity, Confidence, Community

These three pillars form a "career tripod" that stabilises the transition process. Confidence becomes easier when clarity is strong; community becomes essential as challenges arise.

- **Clarity** — Knowing your direction and your why
- **Confidence** — The courage to step forward, backed by self-belief and preparation
- **Community** — Support systems that reinforce motivation, provide opportunities, and create accountability

The Four C's: Clarity, Communication, Community, Change

This expanded model adds two crucial dimensions — Communication and Change. Entering clinical research requires not only technical readiness but also emotional and behavioural adaptation.

- **Communication** — The ability to articulate value, skills, and experience in resumes, interviews, and networking
- **Change** — Accepting that transition demands real shifts in mindset, routine, financial planning, and willingness to learn

4. The "Why" Question: Your Long-Term Anchor

One of the most impactful insights shared was the importance of defining a deep, personal "why." This becomes a stabilising force during the inevitable challenges of transition — rejections, unclear direction, family pressures, or moments of self-doubt.

- Persist through setbacks
- Resist comparison with peers
- Stay aligned with long-term goals
- Avoid pursuing roles that don't fit your values or strengths

5. Confidence as a Skill, Not a Trait

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Confidence was reframed not as something innate, but as something built through preparation, competence, and clarity. True confidence develops when individuals understand their transferable skills, learn to articulate their experiences in industry language, and see how their previous work maps onto clinical research roles.

- Learn the language of clinical research — GCP, trial phases, protocols, monitoring workflows
- Engage in simulated or real-world exposure through shadowing or structured mentorship
- Practice explaining your experience using the CAR method: Context → Action → Result

6. The Power of Community

A recurring message throughout the panel was that career transition is not a solo project. Community enriches clarity, builds confidence, and opens doors that cannot be accessed through online applications alone.

Communities play several roles:

- Providing mentorship and sharing hidden opportunities
- Offering emotional support and validating skills
- Helping translate experience into local language
- Creating introductions that bypass hiring barriers

Community also protects individuals from discouragement. When speaking to people outside the field, newcomers may receive inaccurate or demotivating advice. Only those on a similar journey truly understand the complexities involved.

7. Leveraging Previous Experience: Nothing is Wasted

A major misconception among newcomers is that professional experience from their home country is irrelevant. The panel stressed that experience is never wasted — it only needs to be translated.

Previous Experience	Clinical Research Language
Teaching	Training delivery, facilitation, curriculum design, documentation
Clinical work	Patient safety, protocol adherence, documentation accuracy, stakeholder communication
Administrative roles	Data handling, scheduling, reporting, quality assurance
Laboratory work	Sample handling, regulatory processes, quality control, protocol compliance

8. The Local Experience Dilemma — And How to Overcome It

One of the most persistent barriers in regulated industries is the request for "local experience." Even entry-level roles may request 1–3 years of experience, creating a paradox for newcomers.

Volunteering — including Creative Forms

- Volunteer in hospitals or academic institutions where research teams operate
- Use physical proximity to network with research staff during breaks or downtime

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- Gain an internal organisational email address — boosting credibility and access
- Apply for internal-only job postings that external candidates never see

Internships

Paid or unpaid internships may require short-term sacrifice, but they are one of the fastest ways to build validated experience. Even 3–6 months can transform your portfolio.

Strategic Survival Jobs

When a survival job is necessary, choose it intentionally — preferably in an environment or schedule that creates room to pursue long-term goals.

- Customer service roles with quiet overnight shifts allow time for studying or certification prep
- Hospital-based roles (porters, clerical, patient support) create exposure to research teams
- Administrative jobs in healthcare organisations serve as stepping stones to internal postings

9. Alternative Pathways into Clinical Research

Several routes newcomers often overlook but which can be easier entry points than direct clinical research coordinator roles:

- **Allied healthcare roles in research environments** — clinical assistants, ethics office assistants, research administrative support, data entry or quality assurance assistants
- **Digital health and project management** — pivot via digital transformation, health informatics, or project support roles in hospitals
- **Short-term contract work** — temporary contracts often lead to permanent roles because internal hiring favours those already inside the system
- **Certifications as door-openers** — GCP, introductory clinical research courses, or project management certifications give newcomers vocabulary and foundational understanding

> *"Certifications alone do not secure roles — but they reduce risk for employers, making them more likely to consider someone without local experience."*

10. Mastering Communication: The Hidden Multiplier Skill

Communication was identified as the "multiplier skill" — the ability that transforms clarity into opportunity. When individuals cannot explain their value, employers cannot see it.

Resume Communication

- Translate previous experience into industry language with action verbs aligned to research environments
- Include key competencies: documentation accuracy, protocol adherence, patient interaction
- Connect past responsibilities to research-related competencies such as compliance, accuracy, cross-functional collaboration

Networking Communication

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- Be clear: "I am transitioning into clinical research and seeking guidance…"
- Be respectful of time and specific in what you ask
- Follow up with gratitude

Interview Communication

- "Why clinical research?" — have a concise, authentic answer
- "How does your previous experience align?" — use the CAR method
- "Tell me about handling documentation, compliance, or patient interaction" — use real examples

11. The Reality of Change

Transition requires sacrifice — emotional, financial, and practical. Many people underestimate the scale of adjustment required.

- Changing daily routines to make time for study
- Taking entry-level roles despite senior experience abroad
- Adjusting to new cultural norms and work expectations
- Learning industry terminology from scratch

> *"Many people want the outcome of a transition, but not the discomfort required to get there. Those who succeed stretch themselves beyond comfort and treat learning as a habit."*

12. Persistence and Adaptability

Career transitions rarely happen in a straight line. Adaptability means accepting interim roles while pursuing long-term goals, revisiting clarity when circumstances shift, and adjusting expectations as needed. Persistence is not merely "trying harder" — it is trying smarter, using community support, reflective thinking, and continuous alignment with your why.

Actionable Transition Strategy

A structured five-phase plan from exploration to acceleration:

Phase	Duration	Stage	Key Actions
Phase 1	2–4 weeks	Exploration	Attend webinars, speak to professionals, identify target role and gaps
Phase 2	1–3 months	Preparation	Take GCP + foundational courses, rewrite resume and LinkedIn, begin networking
Phase 3	1–6 months	Exposure	Volunteer, shadow, intern, engage in project-based learning
Phase 4	Ongoing	Positioning	Apply for entry-level roles, join communities, attend research events, seek mentorship

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Phase 5	Post-hire	Acceleration	Pursue specialist certifications, build professional relationships, document achievements

If You're Starting Today — Do This First

Days 1–7

- Define your "why" and choose 1–2 target roles
- Study 10 job descriptions in your target area
- Follow 20 professionals in clinical research on LinkedIn

Days 8–30

- Complete GCP certification
- Draft a research-focused resume translating your experience
- Start reaching out to professionals weekly
- Attend at least one virtual industry event

Months 2–4

- Apply for 10–15 targeted roles weekly
- Explore volunteer or administrative roles in hospitals or academic institutions
- Pursue shadowing or mentorship with someone already in the field

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need a science background to enter clinical research?

Not necessarily. Many non-clinical roles — project coordination, data management, regulatory support — do not require a science degree. What matters more is understanding of research processes, GCP compliance, and communication skills. Transferable skills from healthcare, administration, teaching, or project management are highly valued.

How do I build a network if I don't know anyone in clinical research?

Start with LinkedIn. Search for clinical research professionals, attend virtual webinars, join relevant groups, and send personalised connection requests. Networking is not about asking for a job — it is about learning from others, understanding pathways, and expressing your interest professionally.

Is it realistic to shift into clinical research from scratch?

Yes. Many professionals in the panel began with no research background and successfully transitioned. What made the difference was clarity about the role they wanted, willingness to learn, strategic use of volunteer or administrative roles, consistent networking, and translating previous experience effectively.

Should I accept an entry-level role even if I was senior in my home country?

In many cases, yes — as a strategic move. Entry-level roles provide local experience, credibility, exposure to systems and workflows, and opportunities for internal mobility. Most newcomers rise faster after getting their first break. Think of it as a temporary investment, not a step backwards.

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Conclusion

Transitioning into clinical research or pharma is not a linear journey, nor is it a path defined by shortcuts. It is a process shaped by clarity, persistence, curiosity, and the willingness to adapt. The individuals who succeed are not always the ones with the most experience or the perfect circumstances — they are the ones who approach the journey with intention, humility, strategy, and support.

Your previous experience, no matter how unrelated it may seem, carries significant value that can be translated and positioned for new opportunities. With the right guidance, those skills can be aligned to the needs of clinical research, regulatory environments, patient-facing roles, or project-based work.

> *"You are capable. You are equipped. You are closer than you think."*
>
> — Dr. Ronald Ikpe & Dr. Osezuah Momoh

About Clinops Academy

Clinops Academy was created to solve a real problem faced by thousands of newcomers and aspiring professionals worldwide: the struggle to break into clinical research without clear guidance, practical exposure, or a supportive community. Their mission is to demystify clinical research careers and empower learners with the competence, confidence, and clarity to take their next step.

- **Practical Clinical Project Management Course** — real-world workflows, downloadable templates, scenario-based learning for trial operations and project management
- **Clinical Research Question Bank** — comprehensive exam preparation for the ACRP certification examination

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About the Author

Dr Ronald Ikpe is a digital health strategist, project manager, and career development expert with extensive experience supporting healthcare professionals transitioning into non-clinical and research-focused roles. He helps clinicians and newcomers gain clarity, confidence, and practical pathways toward meaningful careers in digital health, clinical research, and healthcare transformation.

Drawing from his background in health informatics, NHS digital transformation, and professional training delivery, Dr Ikpe specialises in simplifying complex topics and equipping learners with actionable strategies that accelerate career progress.

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