

## **Building a positive research environment with dedicated HR support**

In March 2020, Britney Sears stepped into a new Dalhousie HR Consultant term role dedicated to supporting the needs of principal investigators (PI) and grant-paid employees. She said the timing was fortuitous as she came into the position just as the COVID-19 epidemic started and impacted business as usual for the university's research community.

"It was the best time my role could have become a full-time position because things completely changed over night," says Sears. "It was a challenging time and the university really needed someone focused on working with PIs to help navigate remote work, new funding, and staffing issues."

Grant-paid staff are integral to Dalhousie's research mission. The employee group consists of approximately 1,500 full time, part time, student, and casual staff, who work for PIs on research projects and are funded by external granting agencies, industry partners and other organizations.

Now that we've entered a post-pandemic period, Sears says things have returned to a new normal. She notes the value of having an HR person in place dedicated to PIs and grant-paid employees has made a large impact to the research community. With the assistance of the Government of Canada's Research Support Fund, Dalhousie transitioned the role into a permanent, full-time position beginning in May 2022.

The Office of Research Services talked to Britney to learn more about her work.

### **Who do you support?**

Anyone who receives funding from an external granting agency, such as the Government of Canada's Tri-Agencies, and wants to hire a grant-paid employee for their research project. I'm here to support Dalhousie's PIs, grant-paid employees themselves, administrators, and research centres and institutes— essentially anyone that is involved with grant-paid positions.

### **How do you support the PIs who manage grant-paid employees?**

I offer a full continuum of service. If a PI needs help initially to build out a budget for staff in their grant proposal, I can help with that. But for the most part, I get involved after they have received the funds from a granting agency. I walk them through creating a job description, the hiring process, offer letters and on-boarding, compensation, and overall terms and conditions of employment. I also assist if there are any performance-related issues and in the management of employment contracts when the employment relationship ends.

### **How do you support academics who are unfamiliar with HR practices and processes?**

It really is about education and guiding them through the different processes. Through supporting PIs, you get to know them and build strong relationships. They have a lot of questions, because HR is not their area of expertise, and most haven't been involved in it previously. So, they are relying on me as a resource to help guide them through these processes. I also bring relevant Dalhousie policies and employment legislation to help PIs make informed decisions for their HR matters.

**Why is it important to Dalhousie's research mission to have a HR professional dedicated to grant-paid staff?**

As the research enterprise at Dalhousie continues to grow, it's about creating a collaborative and productive research work environment. We are making sure that grant-paid employees have a positive work experience, which in turn helps attract future sought-after talent to the university.

**Research Support Fund**

Established in 2003, the Research Support Fund (RSF) helps Canadian universities and colleges, along with their affiliated health research institutes and research hospitals, with the indirect costs associated with federally funded research.

At Dalhousie, the RSF, which includes both the RSF Grant and Incremental Project Grant (IPG), supports the HR Consultant, Grant-Paid Employment position.

In 2022-23, the RSF/IPG is providing \$10,296,988 to support the indirect costs of research at Dalhousie and affiliate hospitals.