



## Research Support Specialist -- Bridging Excellence from Cage Side to the Bench Top

Once viewed as a tactical position, today's RSS is a more strategic component for biomedical lab environments.

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One of the most critical roles in today's animal research laboratory falls in the hands of a Research Support Specialist (RSS). Research Support Specialists serve as a constant resource with critical information flow between the research and animal facility teams. They form a bridge that connects the gap between the work produced at cage side to the research personnel at the laboratory bench.

In today's demanding, competitive laboratory environments, the search for advanced biomedical answers involves more frequent and detailed information. The transfer of this data between the performance of hands-on animal procedures and the utilization of it for the research components is as delicate as ever. Even the smallest gap or failure to deliver, or effectively translate, can result in the loss of information that can severely hamper optimal research procedures and results.

The RSS is the individual responsible for performing all of the hands-on animal work necessary to carry out the procedures listed on the animal study proposal. They are hired as, and considered to be an expert with the species and related procedures. The RSS is relied upon to perform these actions consistently and accurately at all times.

This is advantageous for several reasons. First, it decreases and eliminates potential variables from the study. For example, if several individuals perform the same procedure but have different techniques, there is a potential for the procedures to produce inconsistent results, making it difficult to utilize historical data as a benchmark. It also serves as a direct link from the lab group to the facility staff for receiving and disseminating animal-specific information. It provides the staff with a consistent contact regarding animal health notices or questions, and the lab has the RSS to convey information in regards to colony maintenance and facility operations. This ensures that any and all pertinent information is communicated between the facility and the lab.

The Research Support Specialist's responsibilities have continued to expand beyond the original, traditional scope. In some cases, the RSS is responsible, not only for sample collection and/or data, but also for processing those samples, and in some cases, initial

analysis. Their role can be expanded to serve as the point of contact for the protocol concerning animal health during off hours, weekends, and holidays. In many cases, the RSS is the person who is responsible for making many of the decisions regarding the outcome of the animals.

The Research Support Specialist is also consulted within the development stages for new and upcoming protocols. Many times, the RSS is the most skilled individual in determining the best way to manipulate the animals, to conduct the experiment, and gather the information of interest to the investigator. There are many other procedures the RSS may be responsible for, such as performing irradiations, imaging, surgical procedures, training newly hired investigative staff on animal handling and technical procedures, as well as sharing their expertise with other colleagues.

It can be a very difficult task to locate, recruit, and hire individuals that are capable of handling the increase in responsibility, and possess the necessary technical skill set. Often times, the best candidate for the job is an internal employee, in most cases, a seasoned lab animal technician who has been trained in technical procedures and possesses a strong proficiency with the optimal abilities and knowledge.

However, it is important to note that not all highly skilled technicians make a good Research Support Specialist. The position requires an employee to work very well independently and possess excellent communication skills. It is also important and encouraged that the individual strives to understand the science behind the procedures they are performing. This ensures their work is more meaningful, and assists them with understanding why the slightest mistake or miscalculation can be disastrous to the research.

The ideal RSS is unique to every lab as the group evolves and integrates with the skill set they provide. In general, a strong knowledge and understanding in the areas of biology, chemistry, and lab animal science are valuable. They have a good understanding of the regulatory requirements for conducting lab animal handling and care to ensure standard operating procedure and animal study proposal compliance. They possess an extremely strong technical background, while demonstrating the ability to work independently and communicate with all employees involved with the care for the animals and their environment, as well as the principle investigator conducting the study. They also must be able to communicate with program and facility management. This keeps the group informed if there should be any issues that need to be resolved to assure the research is carried out appropriately.

If the Research Support Specialist is developed and integrated into the facility and research teams with the expectations listed, they will not only become a true asset to the lab's mission for sound research, but also enhance the animal care program's objectives in supporting good animal care. They will truly become the missing link between the animal facility and research teams as they facilitate bridging the gap from cage side to bench top.

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