

Connecting the Dots of Employee Retention: How to Create “Sticky” Hospitals for Veterinary Teams

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A common challenge experienced by veterinary hospitals of all types is the inability to hire and retain veterinary team members. A 2020 Compensation and Benefits survey¹ reported that veterinary employee turnover rate was 23%. It was highest for receptionists (32.5%) and veterinary technicians (23.4%). 38% of veterinarians surveyed for a 2021 AVMA economic study² stated that they had explored leaving the profession.



What is driving dedicated animal care providers to walk away from the veterinary profession? In a recent AVMA report², the top three reasons impacting veterinarians' decisions to leave are work-life balance (75%), workplace culture (47%) and the desire to earn a higher compensation (34%). Factors

influencing veterinary technicians to change careers include excessive workloads, lack of autonomy and financial compensation³.

Research highlighted in a 2021 McKinsey⁴ article found that veterinary medicine is not alone in high rates of employee turnover; four in ten employees from five countries and a variety of industries reported that they were likely to leave their current jobs within the next six months. Because employers are failing to provide healthy workplaces, 40% of US employees that had quit their jobs in the six months preceding the survey did not have another job lined up.

How can veterinary hospitals become the employer of choice? We must create healthy environments for our teams; otherwise, why would they stay?

Three Components of Healthy Workplaces to Help Employees “stick”

As discussed in the McKinsey article⁴ employees want workplaces that provide and support purposeful work, meaningful relationships with colleagues, shared values, and a sense of community. Employees want the autonomy to create impactful work, flexibility in how they work and better work-life balance. Consider how well your hospital delivers in the following three areas:

Psychological Safety:

Psychological safety is present when teams share the belief that the group is safe for interpersonal risk taking. This allows team members to feel comfortable being vulnerable with each other, by asking for help and admitting that they made a mistake.

Importantly, “When employees feel safe in their workplace, they are more likely to want to continue in their current jobs, with their current co-workers.”⁵ Teams that feel safe with each other trust one another and are supportive.

In cultures of psychological safety ‘companionate love’ (the degree of affection, caring and compassion that team members feel and express toward one another) is high. Based on warmth and connection, companionate love in the workplace results in higher employee satisfaction and teamwork, improved patient care and lessened emotional exhaustion⁶. If this emotion is missing in the workplace, team members are indifferent or callous toward one another. When things aren’t going well in the hospital, there is a sense of ‘every person for themselves’. Fearing negative reprisals, employees cover up mistakes. This negatively impacts job performance, increases stress and emotional exhaustion, and negatively impacts patient outcomes.



What are some ways you can begin to build psychological safety in your hospital? Feelings of safety in the workplace begin by knowing the people with whom you work. When team members share and learn each other’s backgrounds, life challenges, responsibilities, vulnerabilities, and dreams,

they build trust. This helps to create safety by answering the question “Can I count on you, and for what?”

A second way to foster psychological safety is by creating alignment in the workplace through shared purpose and common identity⁷. This is a collective effort, with the entire team providing input. Start by asking questions like

- Why do we come to work each day?
- Why does what we do matter and who does it matter to?
- What is the role of each of us play in the shared purpose of our hospital?
- How do we work together to deliver our shared purpose?

When teams find the answers to these questions, the outcome is a shared belief in workplace vision and the responsibility to uphold it.

Autonomy:

Why is autonomy important in employee retention? The work done by medical professionals, including those in veterinary medicine, brings a significant sense of purpose to their lives. One study⁸ found that human physicians who spend more than 20% of their time on work that is most meaningful to them are at lower risk of burnout, had higher career satisfaction and decreased rates of turnover.

When talented veterinary team members cannot engage in purpose driven work, they often choose to leave the profession. In veterinary medicine, we hire for a position and expect the employee to carry out the tasks within that position, without tailoring the work to match their preferences. When employees have the latitude to shape their jobs to their needs, abilities and preferences, the outcomes

are improved engagement, well-being, and job performance⁹. Observe your team members at work; when are they most engaged? This is one way to identify what motivates them. Another is to ask them how they would like to craft their jobs. The answers might surprise you. One team member might want to take ownership of creating protocols and procedures, another may prefer to create client education videos that can be housed on your website and a third might be passionate about creating safety programs for both patients and people. Provide dedicated time during the work week for employees to focus on passion projects.

Another way to increase autonomy in veterinary hospitals is to provide employees more control over their work schedules. Ask employees what schedules work best for them. For some, it will be a compressed schedule where the employee works three consecutive twelve hour days. For others, it might be midday hours that align with school schedules, so the employee is available for childcare before and after



school. What positions can be done off-site, such as answering phones, follow-up calls and cultivating client retention? The days of non-customizable work are over; employers need to be flexible and creative in meeting the needs of their employees.

Create Learning Cultures:

Studies have found that employees with opportunities to learn, grow and develop in organizations are less likely to leave. As stated in the McKinsey article⁴,

“Employees are looking for jobs with better, stronger career trajectories. They desire both recognition and development. Smart companies find ways to reward people by promoting them not only into new roles but also into additional levels within their existing ones.”

Traditionally, private practice veterinary medicine is a stagnant career path. An employee is hired to do the work in a particular position, and there is no advancement opportunity. There is a lack of transparency regarding pay and benefits, with the most tenured employees often receiving the highest salary. Due to a lack of differentiation within positions, there is no incentive to develop new competencies. The perception that their efforts make a difference decrease, job satisfaction declines and turnover increases.

The solution to this problem is to create tiered levels within each position. The expectations for each level are clearly outlined, as is the pay and benefit package for each position. For example, a tiered program for veterinary technicians could look like the following:

- **Veterinary Technician Level 1** is a graduate of an accredited two- or four-year technology program who can perform basic technical, computer and client interaction skills as defined by the hospital. When the employee has mastered competencies in this level,

they can progress to Veterinary Technician Level 2.

- **Veterinary Technician Level 2** meets all the qualifications of Level 1, plus is a credentialed technician.
- **Veterinary Technician 3** meets all qualification of the preceding levels, and will develop competency in advanced technical, computer, client interaction and basic leadership skills as defined by the hospital. When these skills have been mastered, the credentialed technician can opt to pursue the next level.
- **Veterinary Technician 4** meets all qualifications of the preceding levels. Within this level, the master becomes the teacher, taking an active role in mentoring new hires, team training and developing advanced leadership skills. Level 4 Veterinary Technicians may pursue Veterinary Technician Specialist (VTS) certifications.
- **Veterinary Technician 5** meets all qualifications of the preceding levels and is certified as a VTS in a specific area of focus.

When each position within a hospital, from kennel attendant through veterinarian, has tiered systems in place the outcomes are increased workplace engagement, improved job satisfaction, a greater level of trust in hospital leadership and individual investment in hospital success. The employee has the autonomy to manage their career and the choice to either pursue new levels or not. Longevity is no longer the criteria for higher salaries; hospital leadership can recruit new talent into the appropriate level based on the skills of the applicant, with proper compensation.

Dialogue within the veterinary industry about workforce shortages is focused on training more employees, as veterinarians,



veterinary technicians and perhaps an advanced care technician with an expanded scope of practice. While there is likely a need for more trained professionals, this solution alone will not solve the staff shortages plaguing the veterinary profession. Retaining talent...aka making them “sticky”, is the new recruitment. Until veterinary hospitals create healthy workplaces, talented professionals will continue their exodus; the costs to the individual are too high for them to stay.

About the Author

Wendy Hauser, DVM is the founder of Peak Veterinary Consulting and has practiced for 30+ years as an associate, practice owner and relief veterinarian. She has worked in the animal health industry as a pet insurance executive and as a



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