

Retention, Efficiency and Beyond Satisfaction: Creating Better Options

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Introduction

As the veterinary profession continues to evolve, significant forces affect not only medical practices but also the well-being of the professionals delivering care. To navigate these changes effectively, it's crucial to understand their nature and develop strategies for more sustainable practice models and improved working conditions. The current tone in the staffing field shows the solution involves a comprehensive approach that includes (1) recognizing the multiple roles within veterinary medicine, (2) optimizing the utilization of individual skill sets, and (3) fostering opportunities for career growth. Furthermore, open communication and collaboration among team members are essential for the benefit of both the patient and the professional. Ideally, this collaborative dynamic extends to include the client, creating a mutually beneficial environment for all involved.

However, the veterinary field still faces substantial challenges in team retention, financial margins, and increased stress levels among professionals. To address these issues, it is imperative to provide actionable tools that empower the individual and the team as a whole. This comprehensive “Teamification” approach is most powerful with a deep understanding of the profession's history vs. its current state, the roles of its various members, as well as implementable strategies to enhance efficiency and communication.

Background

The history of veterinary medicine traces back to ancient times, with evidence of animal care found in early civilizations. For instance, the practice of Trephination of cow skulls dates back to approximately 3000 BCE though the purpose is still unknown. Around this time, the Code of Hammurabi provided some of the earliest legal documentation related to veterinary practice, outlining payment structures for services to “patients” and owner compensation for their deaths. The Papyrus of Kahun from 1895 BCE is one of the first written examples of animal care and its economic and health benefits.

Shifting to a more recent era, the past three decades have seen the field become increasingly reliant on advanced medicine and highest possible levels of client service. This, in turn, has directly contributed to the emotional demands placed on veterinary professionals. We now have a critical situation, with many professionals experiencing substantial mental, physical, and emotional strain. The prevalence of suicide

in the profession underscores the urgency of addressing these challenges and reconnecting with the passion that drives individuals to pursue veterinary medicine.

Where are we now?

Through a more comprehensive review of the current state of the veterinary profession, we best understand factors that influence the industry. In examining the current state of the veterinary profession, several key factors emerge. There has been a rise in corporate and private equity-backed veterinary consolidators, employing over 40% of DVM's, and an increase in the number of new veterinary schools (12+). Additionally, new veterinary positions are emerging, such as Veterinary Physician Assistants (VPAs) and Veterinary Nurse Practitioners (VNPs).

Despite the challenges we face, there are positive indicators that should instill a sense of optimism. As of December 2024, there are 127,131 veterinarians in the US, and there are over 32,000 veterinary establishments. Each year, approximately 3200 new DVM graduates enter the profession, with the majority (98%) receiving job offers. Projections suggest continued growth in veterinary positions, from approximately 90,000 to 108,000 by 2032, with over 5000 DVM openings per year. Similarly, there is a large and growing number of veterinary technicians in the US, with projected growth of 21% by 2032 and over 15,000 Vet Tech openings per year.

However, challenges persist, particularly in rural and mixed animal practices, fragile client relations due to high medical costs, high staff stress, and low staff-to-patient ratios. Veterinary professionals work in a variety of practice settings, each with its unique challenges and opportunities. These include companion animal (69.3% of all DVM's), mixed animal (4.9%), equine (4.4%), food animal (1.8%), public practice, and academia (7.4%).

It is important to acknowledge both difficulties and successes within each sector of the veterinary profession. Private, corporate/PE, and hybrid models, as well as rural, urban, shelter, specialty, and mobile practices continue to open and, unfortunately, shut down. By recognizing the unique circumstances of the sectors, we recognize and address the challenges we face, which, in turn, fosters a sense of validation and understanding among our colleagues.

Of surveyed veterinary providers, 30% revealed they were about to leave their current practice, one-half of which indicated they were ready to abandon the field entirely. Looking ahead at various practice models and emerging trends shaping its future, the veterinary industry must continue to evolve in a direction to counter these perilous trends. The rise of telemedicine and online pharmacies also presents new avenues and considerations for the profession.

Teamification

The practice of veterinary medicine affects not only the pet industry. As evidenced by the earliest mentions in civilization regarding animal care, herd control and its impact on human health makes the field a substantial part of overall societal endurance. Continued analysis of the veterinary industry helps ascertain the impact on the various stakeholders, including patients, clients, staff, the practice itself, and the individual. The purpose of "Teamification" brings together the demographics and characteristics of veterinary professionals to show more who the professionals are and, just as importantly, what they want.

In response to the challenges facing the veterinary field, the concept of Whole-Team Utilization or "Teamification" is emerging as a key strategy. Defining a team involves recognizing a group of individuals working cohesively and collaboratively towards a shared goal. This approach focuses on improving retention, streamlining processes, and enhancing client satisfaction. A fundamental aspect of this strategy relies on clearly defining roles within the team and thus ensuring that each individual's abilities, knowledge, and skills are utilized to their full potential.

Defining a role involves considering an individual's or team's ability to perform specific tasks using available equipment and resources, within specific timeframes and locations, and with the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve the desired outcome. Each role within the veterinary practice, whether medical, client-facing, management/leadership, or ownership, plays a vital part in ensuring the patient's well-being. Effectively assigning roles empowers the right person for the right job which maximizes efficiency and job satisfaction.

We know that inefficiency drives career changes, decreased self-confidence and wellness, and even reduced interest in entering the veterinary profession. Inefficiency is directly correlated with poor allocation of roles and abilities. Traditionally, veterinarians are known to handle a wide range of tasks, but optimizing team utilization involves a shift in this paradigm. By maximizing the contributions of assistants and technicians (i.e., delegation), veterinarians can focus on tasks that require their specific expertise, leading to increased revenue, productivity, and reduced staff burnout. Better utilization of each staff member is the core of teamification.

Activating the Knowledge, Training, and Skills (KTS) Cascade

Identifying the unique Knowledge, Training, and Skills (KTS) for each team member is the initial step to building effective teamification. KTS is the set of proficient or higher attributes expected from anyone holding a particular position. Any role can be significantly empowered by acknowledging the diverse strengths, passions, interests, training, and career aspirations of the associated team member. Vice versa, an individual may be utilized far better (and be more satisfied) in a different role altogether based on the results of their KTS.

Medical KTS directly contributes to safe and efficient patient care, while management/leadership KTS ensures the practice's sustainability and effective service delivery. Client KTS facilitates client compliance, and ownership/organizational KTS supports the overall health of the facility and team.

To illustrate the practical application of KTS, it is helpful to consider the specific skills and responsibilities of different roles within a veterinary practice. Doctor KTS includes diagnosis/prognosis, treatment plans, prescribing medications, and performing surgery. Technician KTS includes a wide range of tasks such as rooming, history taking, TPR, vaccinations, blood draws, lab work, cleaning, equipment maintenance, scheduling, procedures, injections, IV catheterization, anesthesia monitoring, and client education. Assistant KTS often overlaps with Technician KTS, and may be more focused on restraint and kennel care. Each practice has different needs. Each organization must develop clear task responsibilities and KTS expectations for each role. By effectively utilizing the KTS of each team member, practices can reiterate the value of patient care, foster a dedicated and loyal team, increase profitability, and enhance personal satisfaction.

Teamification also strategically integrates various KTS to optimize career pathways and employee satisfaction. Taking team inventory to assess strengths, passions, training, career aspirations, and other relevant factors is powerful when routinely performed. When applied, the results offer infinite benefits, including attracting and retaining talent, fostering consistent client and patient care, and improving financial outcomes.

The Leadership-Culture Connection

Building an even stronger team requires more than just efficient role development and associated task delegation; it necessitates effective leadership and individual empowerment to implement these strategies. One of the top complaints by veterinary staff is the failure in leadership. Doctors and support staff are looking for consistency, fairness and accountability. This involves fostering common values, promoting open communication, and strengthening trust among team members – which also promotes ultimate patient care and overall team success.

In establishing easier pathways within a team, consider communication as the sharing of information, feelings, and needs. *Effective* communication is impactful and bidirectional in nature. To activate teamification, implementation of multi-modal forms of communication shall include verbal and non-verbal cues as well as ensuring that messages are clearly and effectively conveyed *and* received.

Furthermore, rather than a “me vs. you” mindset, team cohesion thrives within a culture of “us”. The us-mentality is shaped by trust. Trust fosters an environment where team members feel valued and supported – *empowered*. Conversely, mistrust directly hinders delegation, creates inefficiency, increases turnover, and decreases compliance. Building trust involves transparency, respect,

attentiveness, and effective (multi-modal) communication. Maintaining clear paths of communication and trust directly contributes to that successful us-based teamification.

Summary

The veterinary profession is currently navigating significant changes that impact both the delivery of care and the well-being of veterinary professionals. Adapting to these changes is no longer optional; it is crucial to establish sustainable practices and improve working conditions for our struggling professionals. This adaptation requires an ongoing understanding of the diverse roles within veterinary medicine and the strategic utilization of individual skills within a collaborative team environment. Teamification, a strategy centered on clearly defined roles, effective communication, with the uniqueness of each individual, is presented as a key approach to address challenges such as team retention, financial pressures, and professional stress. By optimizing team dynamics and empowering team members, veterinary practices can enhance efficiency, productivity, and overall satisfaction, ultimately leading to better outcomes for patients, clients, and the veterinary team – and the veterinary profession as a whole.

Action Plan → Plan of Progress

Design a “Plan of Progress” which is a strategic set of viable steps with known players in a determined timeframe. Include all the training, tools and other resources to execute successfully and progress from where you are now.

- ☐ What do you (does your practice) want?
 - Define the Mission Statement
 - Clarify the Vision
 - Identify Values for all involved by which you will serve
 - ☐ Clarify the roles within your organization
 - ☐ Learn the effective communication styles for each of your team members
 - ☐ Allocate the right person for the right role
 - Set clear expectations
 - Provide relevant tools and resources
 - ☐ What will need to get done?
 - Who?
 - What?
 - How?
 - Where?
 - When?
 - ☐ Learn from mistakes and Celebrate the successes
- ***Every *mis*-take is an opportunity for a *re*-take***

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