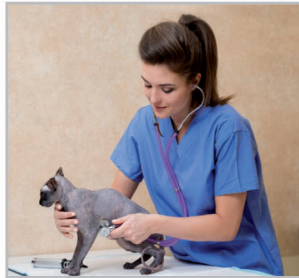


# VETERINARY focus

Special edition

The worldwide journal for the companion animal veterinarian



## A good start to your veterinary career



Philippe Baralon  
Antje Blaettner  
Pere Mercader  
Mark Moran

# **A good start to your veterinary career**

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*From left to right: Mark Moran, Philippe Baralon, Antje Blättner and Pere Mercader.*

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Philippe Baralon acts as a veterinary practice management consultant in the areas of companion animals, equine practice and animal production in 20 countries (France, European Union and overseas). His main areas of specialisation are strategy, marketing and finance. He is also involved in benchmarking the economics of veterinary medicine in different parts of the world. Philippe Baralon has authored more than 50 articles on veterinary practice management.

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Antje Blättner grew up in South Africa and Germany, graduated in 1988 after studying Veterinary Medicine in Berlin and Munich, and then engaged in her own small animal practice.

In 2001, she took part in a post-graduation course on training and coaching at the University of Linz, Austria, and founded “Vetkom” – a company dedicated to educating vets and vet nurses on practice management through lectures, seminars and in-house training. Antje Blättner is the editor of “team.konkret”, a German professional journal for veterinary nurses since 2005.

Nowadays she lectures and trains vets and vet nurses on client communication, marketing and other management-related topics in Germany and – together with Royal Canin – in over 16 countries worldwide.

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## Pere Mercader

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In 2008, he co-founded VMS (Veterinary Management Studies), a business intelligence firm that provides a benchmarking service for more than 600 veterinary practices in Spain, calculating a wide range of business indicators.

Pere was a co-founder of the Spanish Veterinary Practice Management Association (AGESVET) and remains a member of the board.

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## Mark Moran

Mark Moran has been a consultant to the veterinary profession for the last 15 years, having previously had more than 15 years senior management experience with leading "Blue Chip" organisations.

He is a director of Vets in Business Limited, where he provides business mentoring and support for veterinary owners and practice managers. He has a special interest in helping practices to develop their people, their organisation and their management processes.

He is a coach and a trainer, organising and leading group and one-to-one training in leadership, people management and customer service skills.

He is also project director for In Practice Learning Limited, which has developed a flexible learning program in Veterinary Practice Client Care, a distance-learning program for veterinary practice staff.

# Introduction



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Today, graduation does not guarantee a job and, consequently, there are some questions raised as to the ability of the universities to prepare students for their future professional life. This is true in many professions and, unfortunately, vets are no exception.

To be a good veterinarian today is considerably more difficult than it was 20 or 30 years ago. It requires not only scientific knowledge and technical ability but also good communication skills both to interact efficiently with the pet owner and with your colleagues and staff.

Veterinary practices have become more complex, for instance with the emergence of new specialist roles like receptionist or practice manager and also with the development of referral practices where the customer is not only the pet owner but also the referring vet. Whilst most veterinary practices are privately owned, so-called “corporate practices” have also developed in some countries and these have the characteristics of a large business.

In the past, a young graduate could behave like a “unicellular organism”, following the “trial-and-error” method of developing as a professional. Today, it is wise to ask yourself some important questions before starting your professional life.

This is why Royal Canin has asked four specialists in practice management to prepare this *Veterinary Focus Special Edition* to help you increase your chances of success. Whether you are considering starting up your own practice or starting your career as an employee in someone else’s practice, this magazine will give you valuable insights.

We hope you’ll enjoy reading it.



**Philippe Marniquet,**  
DVM, Dipl. ESSEC

# 1. Getting your first job

## > SUMMARY

Do you want to create your own practice? If not, do you want to be an employee in a small one or in a big one? This chapter will address these basic questions and will give you pieces of advice to help you impress during your interview and succeed in getting your first job.

## Introduction

Starting your professional career as a young graduate is one of the most interesting moments of your life, because so many choices are open to you. It is also one of the most stressful... because so many choices are open to you!

There are many ways in which a career in veterinary medicine can be developed:

- One of the first choices to be made is whether you wish to work only with pets and companion animals or in a mixed, equine or large animal practice.
- Should you get involved as an employee in an existing practice or should you decide early on to go it alone? This choice will be discussed later, together with an explanation as to why the first option is chosen by the majority of young vets and under which conditions the second may be considered.
- As a new vet, would you be better-off in a small independent practice or in a larger-sized group with several surgeries? The section focusing on this choice details the advantages and disadvantages of these two options.
- Should you commit early on to general practice or would you benefit from a period of additional training or an internship prior to a more specialised career? The answer, also discussed later, depends on

understanding your individual aspirations and areas of competence whilst ignoring the many preconceptions that exist in the sector.

## 1/ Employee or entrepreneur?

By definition, anything is possible as you embark upon your career in veterinary practice. Nevertheless, there is one golden rule you would do well to follow: It is better to get some experience under your belt as an employee before setting up your own practice.

Regardless of the quality of your initial training, there are several good reasons why you should heed this advice:

- Your priority as a new vet should be to perfect your technical training and to gain clinical experience.
- It is rare that as a new vet you will have the marketing and commercial expertise needed to promote your services and, subsequently, drugs and food or other relevant products (a subject covered elsewhere in this guide).
- Regardless of your talent or natural skills as a new vet, you will need to acquire and develop strong managerial skills; firstly to integrate into a team, then to supervise several colleagues, and finally to hire, motivate, train and retain employees.
- Few new vets will have specific experience of growing a business.



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### Three questions to ask yourself before deciding on your first practice

1. How much freedom will I have when prescribing?
2. How much time and support will I receive for continuing education?
3. What opportunities exist to develop my career in the future?

Doing your own job well is not the same as being able to develop the quality and quantity of work performed by a whole team, and is different again from being able to keep a practice's service provision up-to-date and relevant.

- As a new vet, it is almost impossible to identify opportunities for development or to choose those that can best be exploited using your own individual strengths. It is equally difficult to overcome the various obstacles hidden within the veterinary business environment.
- The new vet often finds it difficult to have immediate access to the financial resources needed to set up a successful business.
- Finally, setting up a new business at the start of your career may not necessarily be... good for business! In effect, young entrepreneurs have to bear the risks of setting up their new business without any guarantees of it making any decent returns in the short term. As a general rule, this initial drawback can become an advantage after several years of experience.

It may seem surprising that there are so many reasons not to start your own business very early on in your career, especially as this pathway has been widely chosen by many vets in the past. Simply put, times have changed and in the vast majority of cases it is not advisable to copy another person's career. Veterinary practices have evolved significantly over the past 20 years. They are now more structured, built around larger teams with differing specialities, and this technical expertise is more specialised and more expensive. In addition, veterinary practices based in larger facilities are often better located and better equipped. All these factors reinforce the obstacles, strategically known as "barriers to entry", that make the creation of independent practices more difficult, particularly for those at the very start of their careers.

The risk isn't so much one of total failure but rather of not having the means to succeed quickly enough, so becoming stuck in a suboptimal situation with a practice that is too small, making it impossible to take advantage of the different opportunities that may arise over time.

However, there are rare exceptions to the above principle; situations which combine exceptional maturity from a young vet with a specific opportunity in a given place or with a particular business model. These exceptions are more frequently found in emerging markets such as South-East Asia, Latin America or Eastern Europe, than in mature markets like Western Europe, North America or Japan. For those of you who, nevertheless, want to undertake the adventure of

### A young vet should prioritise on gaining clinical experience.



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**Young entrepreneurs have to bear the risks of setting up their new business without any guarantees of it making any decent returns in the short term.**

setting up your own practice at the start of your career, reading this *Special Edition* will provide you with valuable information to help you avoid many pitfalls.

## 2/ Working for a group or an independent practice

As you start looking for your first real job, as opposed to an internship, one of the most important considerations will undeniably be the human team with which you will be working. This team will define the working atmosphere as well as providing the technical and psychological support that are key aspects to starting out on the right track, and developing the confidence needed for personal and professional development. Nevertheless, beyond this small daily working group, it is worth paying attention to the wider environment in which you will take your first professional steps. Will you choose an independent clinic with a single or several surgeries, or would you prefer a larger group, operating across many sites, from a dozen to several hundreds?

First of all, it is worth pointing out that the first situation is much more frequent than the second, because large groups don't exist in all countries. Where such groups do exist, for instance in the USA, the UK, France, the Netherlands or Germany, they presently only operate a minority of the country's clinics, the exception being Scandinavia where the market is already dominated by very large groups. So, the question becomes: Are there any particular advantages or disadvantages to starting your career as part of a large group? Often the answer is nuanced, but there are some important issues that will have either a positive or negative influence, depending on your individual circumstances.

Hiring policies and, importantly, integration procedures often differ between groups and independent clinics, with groups tending to be more professional, although there can be notable exceptions to this rule. For new graduates, one advantage of choosing a group would be to benefit from an integration process that facilitates the assimilation of internal procedures and rules as well as outlining appropriate behaviours. This can be both formative and reassuring. The drawback, however, is that freedom and opportunities to show initiative can be limited while medical procedures are usually standardised (precisely the aim of larger groups), which therefore delays the experience of "real world" professional practice.

More generally, human resource management is often more formal and more professional in groups with frequent feedback, annual evaluation meetings, and opportunities to assess your progress and your potential for further development. It must be noted, however, that an increasing number of independent veterinary surgeries are adopting these same tools and methods and, in both cases, the key HR issue remains the professional skill of your direct superior (line manager).

In the longer term, the possibilities for personal development and advancement in a group or an independent practice become more apparent:

- In a group practice, you will often be able to take charge of an activity, a site or even a group of sites; however, whilst it is sometimes possible to subsequently invest in a share of the capital of the group, by and large this is fairly rare, as is developing your career to the highest levels.
- In an independent practice, it is often more difficult to have access to similar responsibilities at the beginning of a career because there are fewer opportunities available due to the small number of roles and surgeries; paradoxically however, it is often easier to become a partner or director, and this can occur much earlier than in a group setting.

It is very difficult to compare and contrast salary information for the two types of employment setting.

In the end, you should choose your work setting according to your individual aspirations, personality and, above all, according to the opportunities that are likely to be offered. Furthermore, the landscape of the veterinary industry cannot be split into large groups on the one hand and independent practices on the other. The reality is more and more a continuum from standalone practices to a local cluster of clinics belonging to the same owner or partners and to larger groups.

### 3/ How to succeed in an interview

Congratulations! You have been invited for a job interview and maybe even for a trial at the vet clinic where you would really like to work. So, it's time to prepare an awesome self-presentation to impress your new boss and other staff members who are going to sit in on the meeting with you.

#### A) Do a background check



Even if you have already done a background check for your application, it's advisable to go through all the available information about your new workplace again before your appointment to freshen up your memory. **Table 1** shows the information you should try to find out beforehand.

Background information can often be easily acquired via the clinic's website and other digital media like a Facebook page, as well as printed media-like flyers and practice brochures. The data you collect helps you to identify important staff members and get a "feeling" of the style in which this clinic conducts their business, in order to adapt your presentation so that you are able to point out where your abilities fit in perfectly.

#### B) Review your application



Up to this point, your application has solely been paperwork, now your strengths should be shown and "sold" to the team that is going to decide if you get the job or not. Check your application because you could miss out if you have omitted something important or forgotten to highlight special knowledge or skills that would give you a unique and strong advantage. Even if you have made a good job of describing your abilities, now is an ideal time to review what you have written to ensure that your strengths are at the front of your mind when you go into the interview. Additionally, it's a good idea to prepare a small piece of paper or a card containing the most important points from your CV that you can refer to shortly before your interview. Even if you don't need the backup, it may relax you to know that it's there.

| INTERVIEW CHECKLIST |  |
|---------------------|--|
| ✓                   | Background check done  |
| ✓                   | Application reviewed and at hand   |
| ✓                   | Clothes clean and ready  |
| ✓                   | Hair done  |
| ✓                   | Prepared for the questions (answering and asking)                                  |
| ✓                   | Transport planned with spare time (transport tickets/car ready, tank filled, etc.) |
| ✓                   | Relaxing activities and enough sleep scheduled beforehand                          |

**Table 1. Useful background information on a veterinary practice.**

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>People</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is "on board" in the team?</li> <li>• Names and job roles</li> <li>• Specialisations</li> <li>• Key responsibilities</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Organisation</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the team structured?</li> <li>• Who is in charge?</li> <li>• How many levels of hierarchy are there?</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Image</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the "image" of the clinic?</li> <li>• Do they have a "mission statement"?</li> <li>• How do they describe their vision?</li> <li>• How do they conduct their services?</li> </ul> |
| <b>Facilities</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which services are offered?</li> <li>• What facilities and equipment do they have?</li> <li>• Which services are being especially promoted and highlighted?</li> </ul>                    |

**Table 2. Questions to ask that can have a positive impact on the candidate's image.**

| Question   | The value of this question   |
|--|--|
| "I've been looking on your Web page and I have been impressed to see the list of medical services that you offer. Do you have any additional or new services planned for the near future?" | This question shows you have prepared for the interview and demonstrates an interest by having visited the center's Web page. It channels the discussion with the interviewer to a higher level, relating it to the center's services strategy.                    |
| "In this practice, what is expected of a young veterinarian?"  | This question shows your maturity and an orientation towards results.  |
| "On the basis of what criteria do you evaluate young veterinarians and how do you judge if they are fulfilling their work in a satisfactory manner?"                                       | This question allows you to obtain a clear understanding of how you will be evaluated and where to focus your performance efforts.   |
| "What are the distinctive characteristics of this practice with respect to others in the area? What do you offer your clients that is different or better than other practices offer?"     | Again, this question shows you have a global business vision and helps you better understand the business strategy and strengths of the clinic in which you hope to work.  |
| "Is the position for which I'm being interviewed newly created or is this a replacement for someone leaving the role?"   | This question allows you to better understand the context of your possible hiring (increase in work volume, rotation of personnel, etc.). It also shows your interest in the practice evolution as a business, beyond the specific issue of the selection process. |
| "How can my career evolve over the next 2 to 5 years if I join your practice?"   | This question shows strategic vision from the young veterinarian's side. In addition, it allows you to know if your future employer has a defined career plan for their veterinarians.   |

### C) Ask some questions



The best way to get on track for an impressive presentation is to ask yourself the following questions and to prepare "winning" answers:

- Why do I want to work in this clinic?
- Why should this clinic employ me?
- What specifically qualifies me for the job?

Often, you will be asked these or similar questions in a job interview; so preparing for them is essential to ensure you give self-confident answers.

Ideally, you should try to find three major points for each of these questions. More points might dilute your message, so concentrate on three good ones which will make it easy for you and your audience.

### D) Do a dress rehearsal



Now it's time to think about what you will wear to the interview and how you will present yourself. It is a good idea to have a dress rehearsal in front of an audience such as a good friend or relation whose opinions you trust, and who can give you constructive feedback on your performance. Choose clothes that are neat, but appropriate for a vet. This means don't dress up too much, because that could intimidate your audience and give the impression that you are more concerned about your appearance than about your work and your clients. Role play all the major points that you want to cover during your performance, refer to your notes (see above) to check if something is missing and adjust accordingly. Rehearsing in front of an audience gives you the chance to get the feel of the situation that is coming up, especially if this is your first interview, and helps to calm you so that you can concentrate on creating an awesome

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If you are asked to wait, don't take it personally. Practices are usually very busy. It just means that they need your help!

impression. A dress rehearsal will help you to handle small failures or unexpected situations flexibly and with humour. Prepared, you can now face the interview as composed as possible, knowing you won't go to pieces if something goes wrong.

## E) Tackle D-day



Now the interview is imminent, we want to give you some final advice for this important day! First of all, make sure you get enough sleep the night before, take time to schedule your travel to the clinic including some spare time for incidents like train delays or traffic jams. Be on time, but not too early (this might create the image of you being

over-eager or it might add pressure on the practice team with you sitting waiting for your interview). Try to arrive in a positive mood, be confident and trust yourself that you are well prepared and perfectly able to meet the requirements of the job.

If you have more than one interview, then it is important to keep your standards high right to the very last one, even if in your heart you might already have chosen another possible job offer. You actually never know the outcome of a meeting until the very end, so it's important that you go into all your interviews with the same diligence and the same positive attitude. Besides, each interview will teach you to perform better and better – so the last one may be the most important one. Remember – there is no second chance to make a first impression!

## 4/ Good questions to ask at a job interview

Achieving a good job without performing well in a job interview is highly unlikely. When we are interviewed in a selection process, they already know our CV, therefore, they will normally not be so interested in going over precise details of our previous academic or professional career, but in knowing us better as individuals. They will want to verify our communication skills; if we transmit enthusiasm and confidence, if our interest in the work offered is genuine or whether we are looking for the first job that appears.

In this context, a candidate that asks intelligent and well-considered questions has more chance of standing out from the rest. **Table 2** highlights some questions to ask and explains why they can have a positive effect on the candidate's image.

## 2. Becoming a good colleague

### > SUMMARY

As a vet, we tend to focus on the animal and we are not always wired to deal with people. However, the quality of the relationship you will create in your practice will help you to become a good vet. In this chapter, we will share some of our tips to enable you to succeed at being loved not only by the dogs and cats but also by your colleagues!

### 1/ How to be well accepted by the whole practice team

Whilst we would all like to think that our new colleagues would always want to accept any new team member into the fold, experience has shown that this cannot be guaranteed. The reasons may be very complex, however, they will most likely be due to past events at the practice that you will have had no control over, and not directly down to you personally. That said, there are simple steps that you can take that can encourage this process.

**Don't be shy, pay attention to others, greet your colleagues in a friendly way, say "good morning" and shake hands or use other physical forms of greeting as appropriate.**



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### A) Seek to earn the respect of your colleagues

Never assume that the respect of your colleagues or co-workers is a right, or that it can be assured because of your past achievements or your new role in the practice. You should always set out to "earn" the respect of your colleagues. Remember, your colleagues can only judge you by what you say or what you do, and so they will be watching and listening very carefully at the start as they try to form their own opinion of you. It is also worth bearing in mind that "first impressions" are important, because they can be difficult to change once formed.

### B) Show a genuine interest in them and their roles

Delivering good quality patient and client care requires contributions from all of the practice team. Exactly who does what will vary from practice to practice, reflecting the skills, experience and interests of team members. Because of this, the roles and responsibilities associated with job titles can differ quite significantly from one practice to another. Take the time to find out about your new colleagues. What is their background and experience, what role do they have in the practice, what are their special areas of interest? Ask them what you can do to make their job easier, and be sure to listen and act upon the advice given.



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**It is always best to ask questions so that you can explore and understand the reasons for the actions.**

### C) Question rather than challenge

Every practice will have developed their own way of doing things. These will reflect the values of the owners, the age and experience of the clinical team, relationships with key suppliers and local risks to animal health. Their ways may be quite different from what you have experienced before, or what you were taught in vet school. When you meet something new or unexpected, take care that you are not seen to “challenge” the status quo. It is always best to ask questions so that you can explore and understand the reasons for the actions. It is the difference between “Surely that’s not right!” and “I’ve not done it like this before; what are the advantages of doing it this way?”.

### D) Seek help when needed

One of the commonest complaints we hear in practice is that new staff members are so keen to demonstrate their worth that they avoid asking for help and advice. The result being more work for other members of the practice team to rectify issues, or even worse, a poor outcome for a patient or a client.

Your new practice will be aware of your past experience, and they will not expect you to know everything. Establish who you can seek advice from (if you have shown an interest in your colleagues you will know who to ask), and the best way to do this. Your colleagues will not thank you for being too proud or stubborn to ask for their help.

### E) Offer support to others

There is an old saying that “One good turn deserves another”. Make the time to help your colleagues and they will help you. The most

important things to remember are that you must always seek their permission first, so that your actions are not misinterpreted as meddling or worse, and that you should always ask what the best way to help them is. We all develop our own ways of doing things, and so the support and help we need will be personal to each of us. Never assume that what you would want is what your colleague would want too.

## 2/ How to say “no” without causing offence

At some time, it is inevitable that you will not agree with something that is said, is practice protocol, or that you are asked to do. Learning to say “no” in a constructive way is an important skill for all staff, however, it is especially meaningful for veterinary surgeons given the wide range of clinical options available, and the often conflicting supporting evidence. It will allow you to be assertive, whilst avoiding appearing aggressive or difficult.

### A) Ask effective questions

The most constructive way to “challenge” an idea or proposal that you have concerns about is to ask the proposer additional questions. As a general rule, if two reasonable people disagree over something, it is because one knows something of which the other is unaware. In other words, both parties are not in possession of all of the facts. Asking questions allows us to explore why the proposer has suggested their preferred route (giving them the opportunity to share their knowledge with us), or can allow us to help the proposer to see

**Never be too proud to ask for help from a more experienced colleague.**



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the shortcomings of their own position (allowing us to share our knowledge with them in a supportive, rather than combative, way). It is the difference, for example, between stating “But that won’t work when we are short of staff” and asking “How do you see this proposal working when we are short of staff?”.

### There are three types of questions that we can ask:

- **Questions to understand what is really being asked or stated**  
Such as “Can you clarify which cases you see this applying to?”
- **Questions to identify and agree shared outcomes**  
Such as “Can we agree that ensuring all staff are happy to support this proposal is important?”
- **Questions to identify the way forward**  
Such as “How can we ensure the stock we need is in place before we implement this?”

---

## B) Become a good listener

The golden rule for effective questioning is that if you ask a question you must be prepared to listen to all of the answer. Here are some more tips for becoming a more effective listener:

- Demonstrate by what you do and say that you care about the other person’s point of view.
- If you don’t want to hear a long answer, then ask the question in a way that encourages a short one.
- Maintain concentration throughout their response to ensure you do not miss something that is important, especially if you suspect you know already what they are going to say.
- Take time to weigh up what is being said before responding, even if this creates a silence.
- Use acknowledgements to give you thinking time such as “I can see why you feel that this is important...”.
- Develop questions to fill in the “gaps” in your understanding such as “You said this was important to many clients. Why do you feel this is the case?”.

---

## C) Seek points of agreement

Before choosing to highlight areas of disagreement, it is always helpful to first seek out the points on which we can agree. Even in situations where we might hold apparently divergent views from our colleagues, there is usually an underlying point of principle that we can identify and agree upon such as “The patient’s welfare is our primary concern”, or that “We must work together to achieve the best outcomes for our patients”. Finding points of agreement helps us to identify the true scope of our differences.



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**Learning to say “no” in a constructive way is an important skill for all staff.**

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## D) Demonstrate your support

Identifying where we are already in agreement also allows us to show our support to our colleagues by giving a “qualified yes” if necessary; that is, stating clearly what we can agree to. It is the difference between saying “I am not happy with this proposal”, and “I agree it would be beneficial for our patients if we were able to... and I am happy to work with others to find the best way to achieve this.”

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## 3/ How to resolve conflicts if they arise

Unfortunately, despite our best efforts we might find ourselves in a situation where we are in conflict with one of our colleagues. Conflicts can arise as a result of professional differences, or as a result of how either we or our colleagues react to stressful or unusual situations. So, whilst it is true that we should always treat our co-workers with respect and vice-versa, the reality is that issues can sometimes arise. If you find yourself in such a situation, here are some steps that you can take to help to resolve the matter quickly and with as little fuss as possible.

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### A) Always take a measured response

Conflicts are often the result of how individuals react to stressful or unusual situations; and as such, resolving them will often be easier once the underlying circumstances have returned to normal. Try to avoid adding fuel to the flames by responding in haste, and whenever possible allow both parties the opportunity to reflect before seeking resolution.

---

## B) Choosing the time and the place

Whilst the “wrong” may have happened in public, it is more likely that the resolution will be helped by a more private setting. Try to find a quiet time and place to hold your follow-up conversation. You should always be prepared to take the first step, and don’t wait for the other party to “blink” first. Leaving problems to “fester” does not help either party, it can create problems for your colleagues and sometimes it can even have a negative effect on patient outcomes.

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## C) Saying sorry (the power of the apology)

Aim to start the meeting by saying “sorry”. If, following reflection, you can see that your actions were a major contribution to the cause of the dispute, then of course you should be prepared to apologise for your actions and subsequent upset. Otherwise, given that we don’t tend to go into our workplace each day looking to deliberately upset our colleagues, we should at the very least be able to apologise for being party to causing an upset. That is not to say that you should admit to being in the wrong if you were not, just that you should always be able to sincerely apologise for the fact that in some way your actions led to a colleague becoming upset or a disagreement arising.

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## D) Find a point of agreement

Once you have apologised, find something specific that you can both quickly agree upon. This could be a point of principle (such as you both committing to trying to find a positive resolution), or ideally something closer to the final outcome you would hope for. Clearly, the closer this first point of agreement is to the likely solution, the better. However, the most important factor is that you find a point to agree upon. This first point of agreement is a vital starting point for the eventual outcome.

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## E) Question to explore a way forward

Use effective questioning and listening to explore your colleague’s views and to seek a route to solutions. Be prepared to ask them how they would like the matter to be resolved. Remember, they have had time to reflect too, and this question will often produce a response that you can willingly agree with (either as a whole or in part) and may help you to see that any points of difference that remain are quite small.

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## F) End with a positive commitment

Always end the discussion on a positive note, even if that is just a commitment to finding a solution, or that you agree that you will meet again, or to involve another party. Remember, if you do need to meet again, this final positive commitment will become your first point of agreement next time that you meet (such as; “When we met last time we agreed that..., didn’t we?”).

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# 4/ Understanding your boss

Whether you work in a traditional veterinary practice owned by one or more veterinary surgeons where the practice’s bosses will be partners, or a practice group owned by its shareholders (a company or plc) where the most senior people will be directors, forming an understanding of their role will help you to become a more effective employee, contribute to the development of the practice, and can enhance your future prospects. However your practice is structured, we will refer to these individuals as “your boss”.

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## A) The three roles of your boss

In addition to any clinical or managerial duties that your boss performs day to day, there are three key roles that your boss must undertake:

### 1. Setting and communicating the vision, strategy and values

Every veterinary practice is unique. What it is striving to achieve (its vision and mission), how it is going to achieve this (its strategy) and the way it will treat its patients, clients and staff (its values) has to

**A boss has to be flexible and have the ability to multitask.**



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be decided upon by your boss and communicated throughout the organisation. This key role is the most important, although in many veterinary practices it is somewhat overlooked. Depending on the size of the organisation, the process of developing and communicating the vision, strategy and values may be quite formalised, involving team meetings and with printed or even framed copies available for staff and customers to see, or it may be less formal with the practice's bosses happy to communicate verbally (see page 36). Whichever method your practice uses, you should make yourself aware of them and use them to guide your day-to-day actions.

## 2. Allocating the practice's limited resources

There is an old saying that "Money can only be spent once", and it is the role of your boss to decide how the practice's money and other limited resources such as staff and facilities are used to best effect. Because all organisations have limits on the resources available to them, there has to be a process to decide how they are used, and the ultimate responsibility for this falls to your boss. In general, there will always be lots of good ideas and suggestions for service improvements that will need resources to develop and deliver, so this process is as much about setting priorities and deciding on the order in which things should be done, as it is about whether or not they should be done at all.

## 3. Motivating and guiding the team

The third key role of your boss is to motivate and guide the team, and given that modern veterinary practice is very much a team activity this role has become increasingly important. Your boss must find a way to bring the best out of every member of the practice team. How active a role they play in this, or how much they choose to delegate to suitably qualified staff will depend on their own interests and experience, with the result that many differing processes exist across the veterinary profession, ranging from the very informal to more highly structured performance management systems.

## B) Being the right person

### 1. Being a good employee

Your boss will value you more if you make a conscious effort to be a good employee. Being a good employee means understanding what your practice is trying to achieve (its vision, strategy and values) and doing your best at all times to support these in everything you do. In addition, there are some simple things you can do that will demonstrate your support.

### 2. Know your "limits of authority" and follow them

Whatever your role in the practice, it will come with some limits of authority. These define the level of autonomy you have to act, and they will depend on your skills and experience as well as the organisational culture of the practice. Some practices will have defined limits of authority as



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**One of a boss' key tasks is to motivate and guide their team.**

part of a written job description, or included them with practice guides and protocols, whereas others will rely on oral rules being understood by all staff. However your practice chooses to communicate them, you should always make sure that you know your limits and keep within them. The golden rule is that if you are unsure, then ask!

### 3. Have a "can-do" attitude

Always try to think about what you can do, not what you can't. It is the difference between "I can't do that today" and "I could do that for you by lunchtime tomorrow". Having a positive attitude to your work demonstrates your support to your boss and to the rest of your team.

### 4. Be part of the solution, not part of the problem

Whenever a problem or issue arises, try to identify a solution based

**Having a "can-do" attitude demonstrates your support to your boss and the rest of the team.**



## How to manage your first boss?

One of the key issues that a young veterinarian must manage is the relationship with their boss, who is often also the owner of the veterinary centre where they work. Below, we list some key attitudes and behaviours that will help you to be rapidly considered a valuable asset for your clinic:

### ✓ Align expectations

“What is expected from me?” This question is the best way to avoid misunderstandings and to clarify the rules of the game at the practice. Other useful questions along these lines could be:

- “What qualities and attitudes do you like to find in a young veterinary employee?”
- “What criteria will you use to evaluate my performance over the coming months?”
- “What tasks and specific results do you expect from me?”

### ✓ Align your own interests with those of the practice where you work

A classic example is training activities. Instead of training yourself in something

that you like (for example, exotic birds), you could ask your boss “What areas of medical speciality are those that are of most interest to our clinic in coming years?” and/or “If I were to consider specialisation in any of these areas, would the clinic be prepared to support me?”.

### ✓ Be proactive

There is a saying that sums up this attitude perfectly: “For every problem, bring me three solutions”. Normally, the bosses already know the things that are not being done well at the practice and why they are happening. They don’t need a young veterinarian, trying to be a business consultant, contemptuously pointing out the clinic’s constant errors...

What they need are teams of people prepared to propose and involve themselves in solutions.

### ✓ Request feedback regularly

In some practices, there may be a formal performance evaluation system in place, and you will be given feedback in a structured and regular manner. In other practices, however, things can be a little



bit more informal and you may need to be more proactive by asking: “How do you judge my performance has been in the practice during these last few weeks?” and/or “Is there anything I should do to correct or improve in my performance?”.

### ✓ Carefully observe your boss and learn both the good and the bad

Remember that one day you could be the boss too. By analysing some of the executive behaviour of your boss (both what you like and what you don’t), you can learn lessons that are very valuable for your professional future.

on your own experiences rather than just reporting the problem to somebody else. You will need to bear in mind your limits of authority, which may mean that you will have to seek permission first before you can implement your idea. However, it is always better to put forward a solution rather than just reporting the problem.

## 5. Remember your boss is human too

Running a veterinary practice is a very complex business that can on occasions take up a lot of time, and requires a broad range of business and managerial skills. Your boss will on occasions find themselves overstretched, operating outside of their comfort zone, or having to deal with new and challenging issues of which they have limited experience. You can demonstrate your understanding of this by making sure that you always communicate and agree on the importance of any task that

they give you, and conversely any task that they agree to undertake on your behalf. Setting clear objectives in this way can prevent misunderstandings and allow you both to make most effective use of your time. In a similar way, understand that they are not “perfect” managers, in the same way that we are not perfect at our own roles.

## 5/ How to supervise and motivate staff

Whether or not your role in the practice includes the direct responsibility for other staff, it is highly likely that at times you will be asked to supervise the work of other team members. This could be the

team of nurses or technicians that are working with you in the operating theatre or the lay staff in a branch where you are the most senior staff member on site. Whatever your role, having an understanding of how to get the best from others will help you.

## A) Respect others

The most important rule for any supervisor is “to respect others at all times”. You should always demonstrate respect for your colleagues, whatever their role or background, or how well you perceive they carry out their roles. It is helpful to remember that everyone who works in a veterinary practice does so because they want to help animals have better lives, and so it would be extremely unusual for a member of the team to come to work with the deliberate intention of doing something wrong.

There is then no excuse for showing a lack of respect for our colleagues by shouting or raising our voice, behaving in an intimidatory way (bullying), referring to them by anything other than their chosen name, or making comments that refer to their gender, sexual preference or religious beliefs.

## B) Giving feedback

One of the key roles of a supervisor is to provide effective feedback to team members. Giving and receiving feedback is an important component both of improving the performance of individuals and for identifying process improvements.

There are many complex psychological models for giving and receiving feedback; however, one simple model that works in most circumstances is often called “The Feedback Burger”.

Giving effective feedback is like making a burger. You start with a base bun of praise, provide the meat for the filling by focusing first on your observation of the action you wish to review, then your perception of the effect of this action on the issue concerned, then question them for their ideas or suggest the improvement required, and finish off with the top bun consisting of a summary of the action agreed, and a layer of praise for agreeing to this outcome (**Figure 1**).

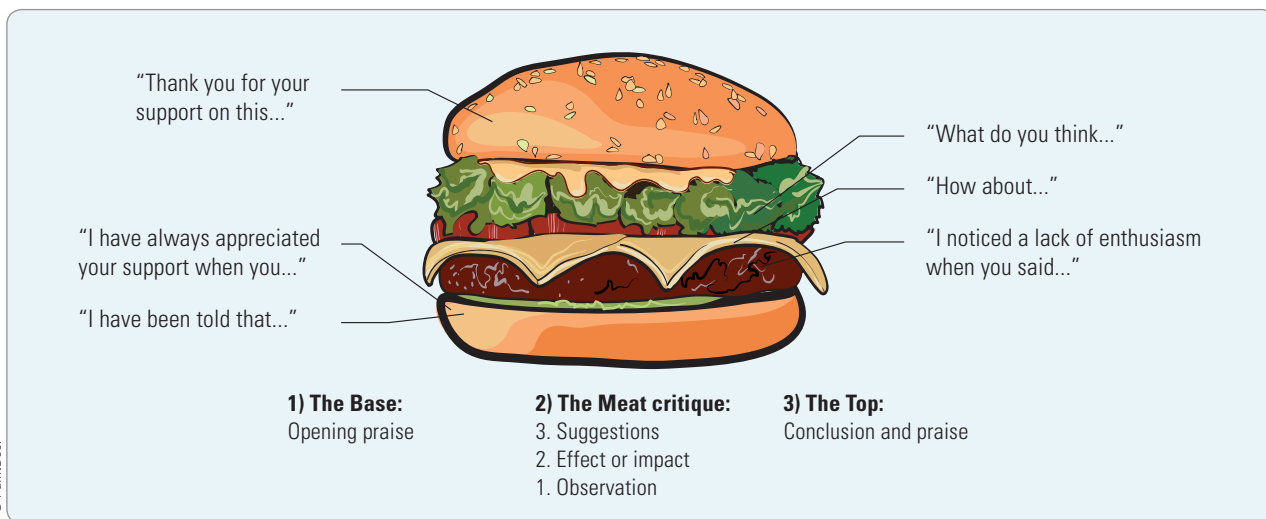
## C) Praise in public, criticise in private

Let’s be generous with the praise and discreet with the criticism. If there is any behaviour by our colleagues that bothers us, we should try to resolve it with them, by raising the matter in private. Your boss will not trust or support a young employee that systematically criticises their co-workers.

## D) The power of “thank you”

There is no better motivator than a simple, well-timed “thank you”. The more personal and specific the praise, the more powerful it becomes. When you say “thank you”, try to refer to the specific thing that your colleague has done, and tell them why the resulting outcome was beneficial to you, the pet, the client or the practice. For example, “By staying on late last night, you ensured that we were able to provide immediate care to the patient, which greatly increased our chances of achieving a positive outcome. Thank you!”

**Figure 1. A simple model for giving and receiving feedback: “The Feedback Burger”.**





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**Compliments can be paid in public, criticisms or negative feedback must always be a private matter.**

Another very effective way of giving praise is to repeat it to a more senior member of the practice team. This can be done verbally, or by including them in the distribution of an e-mail or memo. Seeing that you are prepared to praise them at higher levels provides additional recognition of their efforts and so reinforces the value of the praise.

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## E) Motivating through job enrichment

Good managers and supervisors constantly seek ways to motivate their staff through job enrichment. Care needs to be taken to ensure that a job is not “enriched” to the point that the employee can no longer comfortably perform the role, because if this occurs then they will quickly become dissatisfied. Communication and ongoing feedback is the key to striking the right balance (see Box “Examples of job enrichment”).

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## F) Developing staff for the future

Larger commercial organisations and increasingly larger veterinary practices are adopting a more structured approach to performance management to formalise the process of developing individuals within the practice. Whether your practice uses a formal system or a more informal approach, the concept will be the same; that the achievement of the practice’s goals and objectives can be best achieved by developing its people. Numerous studies have shown that a well-integrated approach to performance management shows benefits in terms of commitment, clarity of goals and job satisfaction.

In its simplest form (which is often suited to the scale of most veterinary practices), the performance management system will consist of 3 phases:

### 1. An appraisal

An annual appraisal is at the heart of all performance management systems. An employee and their immediate line manager sit down and review progress over the past year, and agree on the development objectives for the coming 12 months. Whether formal or informal, the annual review should be a positive, ongoing part of developing all staff (including you!).

### 2. Individual development plan

The key output from the appraisal is the individual development plan, which should set out how the development objectives identified during the appraisal are to be achieved. An important part of the plan is that the employee assumes responsibility for their own development, with the support of the practice and their immediate supervisor.

### 3. Regular review

Progress against the development plans should be reviewed at least once during the year and, ideally, each quarter so that progress can be monitored and adjustment made if required. Senior management should also review the overall performance of the performance management system to ensure that all employees have been appraised at the agreed time, and that their reviews are kept up-to-date.

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## 6/ How to get the best out of your first practice

Once the excitement at the thought of starting a new or even your first job has passed, you will want to reflect on how you can make the experience as worthwhile as possible. Meeting a new team can be a daunting prospect for many people and you will be keen to try to “fit in”. Here are a few simple steps that you can take that will increase the likelihood that your experience will be beneficial both to you and to your new employer.

### Examples of job enrichment

- Giving a person a complete unit of work
- Giving extra responsibility
- Introducing new and more difficult tasks
- Giving a person specific tasks so that they become “expert”

### 1. Understand your own goals

Take some time to reflect on what you are hoping to achieve both professionally and personally from your role in the practice. Be prepared to be both demanding of yourself, yet realistic with what the practice can provide for you. Set down not just what you want but what you will have to do to achieve this, and by when. Against each of your goals, set out what will be the benefit to you if you achieve it (the Gain) and what issues will be created if you don't (the Pain). By looking at the difference between the Gain and the Pain, you will be better able to judge how important a particular goal is to you.

### 2. Reference your goals in terms of the practice

When setting out your own goals, take time to reflect on what achieving your goals will contribute to the practice. Try to identify how if the practice supports your goals, these will help them to achieve their goals too. The greater the degree of mutual benefit, the more likely it becomes that the practice will support you. Conversely, if you can see that there is little or no benefit to the practice, then you cannot expect their support, and you will have to be prepared to make private arrangements or to reach a mutually beneficial arrangement.

### 3. Discuss them openly at the start

Your new employer will expect you to have ambitions and a desire to improve your own skills. Indeed, they may have asked you about them during the recruitment process. Failure to achieve personal ambitions is the most common cause of good employees leaving a practice. As such, you should not be afraid to discuss your goals openly with your employer, bearing in mind the advice above, and seek to work with them to develop a mutually beneficial pathway.

### 4. Maintain an ongoing dialogue (Review and Learn)

As we have discussed, to be effective the relationship between an employer and an employee should be mutually beneficial to both parties, and for this to be the case there will often need to be an element of compromise on both sides. There also needs to be an acceptance that the needs of both parties will change over time. As such, it is important to create and maintain an ongoing dialogue with your employer through your line manager. Ultimately, the employee should assume responsibility for their own development, and be prepared to take a proactive role in this process.

## 7/ How to make effective use of your time

Time is a unique resource; it cannot be stored, stretched, compressed or in any way changed. We have to make the best of it.

### A) Planning your time

It is often said that "Success is 90% preparation and 10% perspiration", meaning that time spent preparing to do something can be more than saved during the act of actually doing something.

|          |           |            |
|----------|-----------|------------|
| Planning | Execution |            |
| Planning | Execution | Time saved |

- So, always start the day with a plan!
- Make a list of everything that you hope to do today, then organise your time by prioritising your task list:
  - is the task urgent; is the task important; is the task both urgent and important; is the task neither urgent nor important?
- Plan to complete your task list in order of priority by completing:
  - first, tasks that are both urgent and important, then tasks that are urgent, and finally the tasks that are important. If a task is neither urgent nor important, ask yourself why you are doing it!

### B) Organising your time

Decide what to do first:

- Start with the simple or quick (to get them done).
- Group similar tasks together (to use your time efficiently).
- Move on to the bigger tasks.
- Consider delegating part of the task.
- If the task is neither urgent nor important:
  - review if it is necessary at all;
  - consider delegating some or all of the task to others.

### C) Directing your efforts

Set yourself realistic targets for what you can achieve and be prepared to create deadlines if this helps you to remain focused. Celebrate your success with breaks or treats to encourage yourself to complete tasks.

Directing your energies and efforts is the difference between:

**"Busyness" and Business**

### D) Coordinating with others

We work as part of a team so coordinating our efforts is vital. However, the time we spend together must be justified by the resulting outcome.

Managing our time together is vital if we are to make good use of our time, so set rules for meetings:

- Insist on punctuality; respect others and be there on time.
- Set a clear agenda which includes an objective for each item.
- Keep focused on the desired outcome, don't allow distractions.
- Record the outcomes; what, by whom, by when.
- Review and Learn – the last item on the agenda, how could we have made this meeting more effective?
- Finish on time.

### E) Avoid collecting “monkeys”

A “monkey” is a problem looking for a solution. When you have one, it usually prevents you from doing what you really want to do, as in; “If only I didn't have a problem with this (my monkey) that I have to sort out first..., then I could get on with that...”. We can find ourselves taking a monkey off a colleague in order to help them, as in; “Here, let me have that monkey, now you get on with...”.

It is all too easy to find that we have collected all of the “monkeys” in the clinic, such that we have no time to do our job, or to resolve all the “monkeys” we have collected. Avoid collecting “monkeys” by providing colleagues with the skills and authority to resolve the “monkey” problem for themselves. That way, they can deal with the monkey without your help if it ever comes back again. Remember that a “monkey” is a problem looking for a solution, so provide a solution, not a home for the “monkey”!

### F) Controlling our improvements

Create a “time log” to help you to see how you are using your time at present. You may well be surprised!

Review your “log” to identify improvement areas. Plan your improvements by identifying what you need to change and how you are going to achieve this.

Initiate the changes, then after a couple of weeks review your progress. Ask yourself what has gone well and what you have been able to learn (**Figure 2**).

Then identify improvement areas, plan your improvements, initiate changes, review your progress and ask yourself “What have I learned?”. Then it's off around the cycle again:

**We cannot manage time  
We can only manage ourselves  
with respect to time**

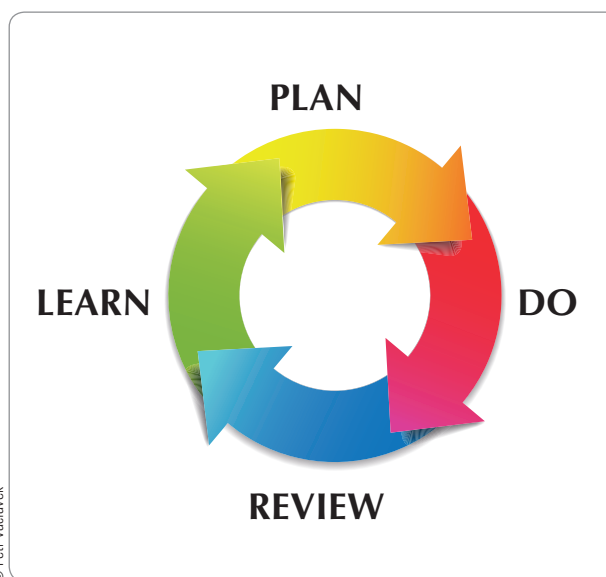


Figure 2. The improvement cycle.

### G) Managing your time with respect to your colleagues and your clients

An important element of time management is the fact that we are part of a team and as such, our actions are often linked to the actions of others. How we manage our time can have either a positive or negative impact on our colleague's management of their own time and vice versa.

Recognising the impact of your time management on others (both colleagues and clients) is an important part of working effectively as a team, and delivering high quality client service. So, for example, allowing a consultation overrun so that you can achieve a more positive outcome for that one client is likely to cause disruption to the many clients that are following on during that session, and may also impact on your colleagues if the whole session overruns as a result, and subsequent surgery or meetings have to be delayed or re-scheduled.

### H) Remember to be realistic

Whenever we are asked to do something by a client, colleague or our boss, there is always a great temptation to agree to an unrealistic timescale for fear of causing upset or disappointment. The result of these actions will inevitably be to let this person down and to develop a reputation for being unreliable. Take the time to question and agree to the required timetable so that you understand the urgency and importance of the task, and be prepared to negotiate if necessary to agree on a target that you are comfortable with.

If you find that you are continually being asked to achieve tasks in what you consider unrealistic timescales, then you need to discuss these issues with your colleagues or boss to identify if there is an underlying issue with the speed of your work, or your ability to manage your own time. Remember, every vet was a young and inexperienced practitioner at some time, so you will generally find that your more experienced colleagues are both understanding and supportive, and can help you with ideas and suggestions that they have learnt from experience.

## 8/ How to keep a healthy work-life balance

Most vets are very, sometimes even totally, committed to their jobs, working overly long hours and spending most of their lifetime at the clinic or attending continuing education. International studies have found higher levels of workplace stress and job dissatisfaction within the veterinary profession than in other comparable roles; factors which can cause significant psychological symptoms (*i.e.*, stress, anxiety and depression) and in some cases lead to alcohol and drug abuse. Given this fact, it is clearly a good idea for a young vet to be mindful of these concerns and to aim to establish a healthy work-life balance tailored to their individual needs and likes. Always keep in mind that a balanced life keeps you healthy, confident and will help you to reach your goals. It also helps those living and working with you because you will be a much more friendly and even-tempered person. If you ensure that you build solid relationships between your professional and private lives, you will establish a natural balance that enables you to cope with the daily challenges of life\*.

### 1. Act as a professional

The first and most important message for a functioning (veterinary) work-life balance is: Keep a professional distance between you, your clients and your team. Separate work life and private life strictly from one another in the sense that when you are at your job you are 100% available, but the moment you step outside of your working environment, you are a private person entitled to leisure time. Don't let pet owners contact you when you are shopping at the local supermarket or via phone and digital media. Be friendly, but consistent with the message: "I have received your request. At the moment I am off duty. Please contact the clinic to schedule an appointment." This message is also important when interacting with your team at the clinic. It can happen that someone approaches you and tries to load something to do on your shoulders, sometimes under the pretext that you are "so good" at this job or that "I have to rush

### Practical tips to keep a healthy work-life balance

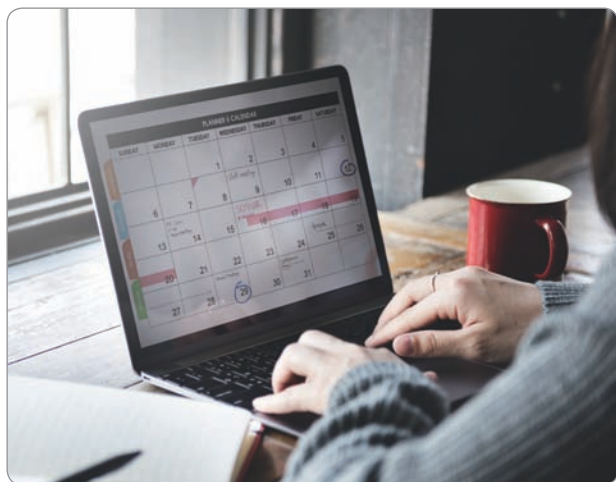
- Don't hand out your private phone number and e-mail addresses to clients
- Don't answer or ask the client to call the clinic, if you are contacted privately (some owners are very creative in getting your data!)
- Avoid giving advice or "mini consultations" outside of the practice
- Don't provide services outside of the practice
- Plan, structure and execute a tailor-made work-life balance for yourself
- Be sensitive to the work-life values at your practice
- Remember these points when you are the boss

home today". You may then even feel complimented and important, but actually someone is manipulating you to do their assigned tasks. This can be tricky, especially at the beginning of your career, because at first it might feel nice to be the "good guy". Be aware that if you walk into the "good guy trap", you might not get out again and seriously endanger your work-life balance. It's far better to be consistent with separating work and home life by making a small exception from time to time if extraordinary situations occur. This does not mean that you can't be a nice, empathic person – it just means that you should establish and maintain a healthy professional distance, even if it is difficult at times. Establish if your practice shares your values concerning work and leisure time, or if you are required to be available at all times. At the beginning of your career, it might be ok to accept working under suboptimal conditions for a certain amount of time, but, unless the clinic shares your values, you won't be happy in the long term and you may have to decide to look for a new and more suitable working environment.

### 2. Clear your priorities

To find out what's really important in life for you, make a list by writing down everything you like to do, even some things you haven't done yet. You are allowed to have visions, goals and even dreams. Next, split the list into two parts: private activities (family, sports, hobbies) vs. professional activities. Now you should rank the items from "very important" to "nice to do", creating a visual overview that shows clearly where your preferences are. The next step is to evaluate the time you already spend on these activities and the time you would like to spend, and to add this data to the important activities in your analysis.

\*JAVMA, Vol 240, N° 7, April 1, 2012 "Veterinarian satisfaction with companion animal visits".



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**You should allocate a balanced timetable for your favourite private and professional activities. It is a good idea to place this plan where you can refer to it, or even integrate it into your calendar app on your smartphone or laptop.**

### 3. Plan and structure

The next step after completing your list of activities is to create a plan that allocates a balanced timetable for your favourite private and professional activities from Monday to Friday (Saturday). This way, there is enough time for the things you have to do (duties), the things you want to do (more), as well as (free) time for the spontaneous and unplanned actions which are equally important to us, and should not be overlooked. In a balanced work-life environment, there should always be some space that allows you to do something new and

**Doing sports regularly is the best way to reduce stress and to compensate for the negative effects of one-sided muscle tension and strain during work.**



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inspiring and some time to do nothing at all. It's a good idea to place this plan where you can see it continuously, maybe you can even integrate it into your calendar app on your smartphone or laptop. This way, your agenda reminds you when it's time for certain activities you actually really want to do, even if you are, for instance, still treating an animal in emergency care. Being reminded makes you more sensitive to work-life issues and alerts you when you are in danger of shifting and unbalancing your own priorities.

### 4. Get moving

Working as a vet is clearly a physically and emotionally challenging job and often we feel exhausted at the end of a working day and so can't imagine doing anything other than chilling out or relaxing on the sofa in front of the TV. Whilst being a vet is not a sedentary job, it's actually not complimentary to your fitness. Research has shown that doing sports regularly is the best way to reduce stress and to compensate for the negative effects of one-sided muscle tension and strain during work. You don't have to run to the gym on a daily basis (that's impossible for a vet with a full-time job anyway), taking a rapid walk of about 30-40 minutes 3-4 times a week has been proven to have a relaxing and balancing effect. Allocate some time regularly to get out into the fresh air and clear your mind – it's a fabulous way to straighten out unbalanced priorities and to get focused.



## 3. Being a good vet

### > SUMMARY

The veterinary diploma is a passport to a lot of different “jobs”. After reviewing some of the options available to you, we will review the important role of client communication in achieving higher levels of compliance, and so greater benefit to your patients.

### Introduction

As a vet, you have the choice of a variety of professional pathways upon which to embark. This choice should be made with prudence, because the areas of activity in veterinary medicine today are often very specialised, and making a transition from one field to another, whilst not totally impossible, is at least not desirable. A change from one veterinary field to another such as from a small animal practice to a large animal practice implies a loss of acquired knowledge and some element of “starting again” from the beginning. Before making the decision as to which field of veterinary practice you want to work in, take time to:

- Think about your goals – where do you see yourself in five and in ten years? What changes are coming up for your preferred sphere of the veterinary profession? How will these changes influence you and your daily work?
- Get some insights and experience in the areas you favour, for example, by volunteering in this field, in order to help you make an educated decision regarding your future professional career. This way, you can get valuable information that you definitely can't get by reading and that can only come from first-hand experience!

Having said that you cannot get all the facts by just reading, you can still gain some good advice, and we have set out in this chapter some practical steps that you can take to make the best possible start to your career as a veterinary surgeon.

### 1/ Choose which field you wish to practice in

The first general decision to make is whether you want to work with small animals like cats and dogs or with large animals such as cattle and horses. If you are unsure where your future lies, here are some key factors to consider.

#### A) Think about the animals you will work with

Small animal medicine means providing solutions and services for pets living in a family, and that are playing the role of a companion or even the role of a child or life partner. Large animal practice is a very different kind of experience in which the vet is more of a livestock health manager for cattle or pigs, or as a doctor and coach for sports companions such as horses.

Vets that try to cover all of these fields of the profession today are a somewhat endangered species, not least because they generally suffer from a lot of stress trying to constantly keep up with the veterinary specialists that exist in all of these areas.

#### B) Think about the environment you will work in

If you choose to embark on large animal practice, you have to keep in mind that you will be working outdoors in every kind of weather, at every time of the day and night, often travelling large distances daily



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**Large animal practice requires a very different kind of expertise in which the vet is more of a livestock health manager for cattle or pigs.**

and mostly being on your own. Another important dimension is that the legal regulations for the treatment of food production animals in most countries are getting more and more complex and increasingly influence the way the vets work. Typically, they are increasing the time spent on organisation and administrative tasks; something that could have a significant impact on job satisfaction and career progression.

In small animal practice, it is more common to work in a team consisting of vets and support staff such as nurses or receptionists. Small animals are brought in to your facilities so that you can more easily control your working hours and environment, although there can be emergencies and house calls and, in some countries, mobile vet practices are becoming more and more popular. As with large animals, treating companion animals away from the clinic can be much more complicated when it comes to handling the pet, and is always limited from a diagnostic point of view. These are factors you should consider before deciding to be a mobile vet.

## C) Think about the mindset of the owners you will meet

Another important issue when it comes to your choice of veterinary profession is to take account of the owner's mindset, because this is something that you will have to deal with on a daily basis. The owner's attitude towards their animal varies largely between small and large animal medicine. Livestock owners make their living from breeding and/or keeping animals for dairy and meat production, whereas pets (with the exception of watchdogs and other companion animals that are used for commercial purposes) are mainly kept as a family member. These totally different aspects of animal husbandry lead to very different demands from your clients. In the role of the

large animal doctor, you are mainly confronted with managing herds and so when considering the treatment of a single animal it is very often a decision of life or death because a sophisticated treatment is likely to be uneconomic.

Even if pet owners are appearing more and more price-conscious, most decisions regarding diagnostics and treatment in small animal practice are not based on price alone – this business is much more emotional! Dealing with emotions and the often unrealistic expectations of owners is therefore a large part of small animal medicine; something that not all vets are prepared to deal with day after day.

## 2/ General practice or specialist?

A new value system has been gaining ground, initially in universities and subsequently among the younger generation of vets, that places "specialists" at the top of the professional hierarchy, well above "simple" general practitioners. It is important to understand that these are two very different occupations and that the most important thing is to practice the one that corresponds most closely to your own personal and professional aspirations.

General practitioners focus on preventative medicine, including screening, as well as primary medical and surgical care which can be carried out in good conditions in the large majority of veterinary practices and clinics. General practice therefore includes all disciplines of veterinary medicine and requires broad competence and a "multi-directional" focus to continued professional development. Clients who attend a general practice are owners of animals who are putting their trust in the practitioner.

Specialists practice in a single discipline, within which they carry out medical and/or surgical acts that require a particular skill and/or technical expertise and/or a team, and, as such, are available in just a small number of clinics or hospitals. Specialised services require an in-depth knowledge of a single disciplinary field and have, therefore, very focused continuing professional development.

### Practical tips when considering your choices

- As a novice you don't know where you fit
- Get insights – the more the better
- Try everything – you can't lose
- If you are undecided – move on
- Base your decisions on your own experiences

The two occupations cannot be compared in terms of technical or scientific skills, as specialists are expected to be more competent in one specific area but as a result are often much less skilled in all other areas.

There are also clear differences in the interpersonal relationship requirements:

- General practitioners mainly interact with owners and it is their mastery of communication that will allow their technical competence to be effective, by ensuring the owner has an appropriate understanding of their animal's condition, thus encouraging treatment compliance.
- Specialists communicate primarily with the general practitioner who referred the case to them, though this doesn't always make it an easier task. They may also have to interact with the animal owner, although this can vary significantly from one specialist to another.

The greatest differences between the two occupations are revealed through career progression, particularly at the start of the career pathway.

- General veterinary practitioners are expected to be able to work as soon as they obtain their veterinary degree, and can start in a veterinary practice immediately. Obviously, this does not mean that they have all the skills they need, and their technical training should continue intensively during the first few years of their professional lives. For the rest of their career, general practitioners must follow a particularly difficult path of continuous professional development, as it must include a wide variety of disciplinary

**If you choose to become a specialist and have communication skills, you will be able to become a speaker at veterinary congresses.**



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fields. While general practitioners must have appropriately high levels of technical competence and continue to maintain these for the duration of their career, any future career progression will depend on their other skills, including interpersonal, business and general managerial skills such as joining and assimilating into a group, leading colleagues, etc. Furthermore, in order to progress professionally general practitioners will have to acquire more advanced know-how in management and administration in order to take responsibility for an activity or facility within the organisation that employs them. Finally, general practitioners who become partners in an existing practice or who go on to create or buy their own practice will have to be capable of managing an entire business.

- Vets who want to become specialists follow an internationally recognised course of study, extending their studies with a medical internship, followed by a period of "apprenticeship" in a residency with a qualified specialist before taking their specialist examination (more details at <http://ebvs.eu/colleges>). This increases the initial training programme from four to five years. Subsequently, the first part of their professional career will follow an essentially technical and scientific path. Nevertheless, interpersonal, business and managerial skills should not be neglected. Their remaining career progression will either be entirely technical and scientific, for example, taking several roles in several different hospitals, or, more rarely, it may include a managerial and administrative element, as they become practice partners. New start-ups and buyouts are rarer for specialists because of the costs involved.

The career progression options defined above have differing financial consequences: Specialists earn far less than general practitioners during the early part of their careers, although the generalist's working conditions are harder. Subsequently, the differences are less pronounced and depend more on workplace structures. Particularly brilliant veterinary specialists often earn more, but some general practitioners can also achieve high salaries, particularly if they take on additional responsibility or set up their own practice.

In the end, the differences between the two occupations serve to highlight that the choice between them should not be based on any cultural value system or a "romantic" vision of either role, but that it should, where possible, be an informed decision based on personal aspirations and skills.

### 3/ Getting clinical experience

As a freshly graduated vet or as a vet changing the area of their professional career, it is very important to acquire clinical experience in "real-life" practice, no matter how extensive and sophisticated your



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**Getting clinical experience in the field is often the first step into the career you have planned.**

education in veterinary medicine at university has been. It is also a great opportunity to get a first-hand look at the reality of your working life and to confirm that the choice you have made really suits you. Getting clinical experience in the field is often the first step into the career you have planned. Sometimes it is a requirement for certain job offers and it is always a great asset and advantage when applying for your first real employment. Being proactive, searching for and grasping opportunities also shows any future employer that you have initiative, drive and the right mindset for the daily challenges of being a vet. Also, volunteers are often offered a job after having worked with a team for some time and displayed a good performance and attitude.

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## A) Look for options

Clinical experience is often acquired via volunteer work or internship, although sometimes you may have the opportunity of a paid job in which you can gather experience without having to take on responsibility, at least initially. Before you apply for volunteer work, you should be clear as to the field in which you want to concentrate your future professional career. For example, if you want to work as a small animal general practitioner, you should look for options in this specific field. Use the Internet and other sources to research opportunities that may be near your home or at a reasonable distance that you can manage daily. If, however, your goal is to be a small animal orthopaedic surgeon or a heart specialist, then you might have to travel a little further to be able to volunteer in a specialised clinic. Either way, it is always a good idea to start “at the bottom”, aiming to first gather experience in general practice, and then to move on to specialisations.

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## B) Be proactive

When you have identified some locations where you want to apply for volunteer work, you will then need to prepare an application setting out your credentials, academic achievements and including a current professional-looking picture of yourself. Also, think about how long you want your “apprenticeship” to be, a minimum of three months is advisable.

The next step is to contact the facilities in question to make an appointment for a personal interview with a responsible staff member or the owner of the practice. You should try to personally present yourself and your request for being a volunteer in search of a chance to acquire clinical experience, and only post or email your application where there is no alternative.

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## C) Check your choice

It is always a good idea to check out several options if possible, because then you can compare the offers! Here are some important points you should raise during your interview:

- Does the facility have experience of, or even a plan for, educating volunteers?
- What would the boss/the team expect of you? For example, are you allowed to take on simple tasks that match your abilities?
- What will your working hours be? Are you expected to be present or cover the emergency hours?
- Will there be a salary and/or reimbursement for travel costs?
- What is the minimum and maximum duration of a volunteer’s stay at the clinic?

Try to be relaxed and feel free to also ask any other questions that are important to you. There are no stupid questions; remember, you are a beginner! Take notes during the interview and end the meeting with an agreement as to how and when you will be told if you are going to be accepted as a volunteer in this facility, unless you are both so impressed that you agree to start work immediately! Never leave a clinic not knowing how your application is going to proceed! Afterwards, take some time to review your notes and the feelings you had during your meetings so that if you are fortunate enough to get an offer, you can reflect if you felt welcome as a colleague and whether it is somewhere you can gather valuable experience with someone that is willing to let you look over their shoulder. You should try to keep away from people and clinics that give the impression that you will be merely tolerated as a free staff member. Generally, they are not worth your time, even if you are slightly desperate to get the job, because there are always better options coming up!

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## 4/ Gaining confidence to make your own medical decisions

All beginnings are difficult, especially if you are working in a profession that demands many decisions on a daily basis – decisions that sometimes may have far-reaching consequences. Feeling the weight of responsibility of an animal’s health and well-being on our shoulders, often combined with the demanding behaviour of the owner, is challenging, especially if you don’t have a lot of professional experience. Luckily, you can influence the process of gaining the confidence to make medical decisions!

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### A) Get a good mentor!

Hopefully, you will be working in an environment where you have an appointed mentor that takes you under their wing to help you to take those first steps as a working vet. Having a mentor that trains and guides you is a very good start to your professional career, so you should ask about this during your first job interview. If you have started already and don’t have someone experienced assigned to be your coach, then try to find one amongst your team! If you discover that the people you work with don’t really care that you need help and guidance, then you should honestly think about a switch to another job. Absence of guidance and assistance during this crucial part of your professional life may lead to a permanently low self-esteem when it comes to making medical decisions.

Once you have a “medical coach”, you should keep in close contact and schedule frequent and regular meetings with them until you feel more confident working on your own. Help your coach to teach you by giving feedback on how their advice will reach you best (spoken, written, supervised experience) and tell them honestly where your strengths and weaknesses are.

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### B) Learn from your mistakes

When learning something new, you should always take into account that mistakes will happen – no matter how well educated and dutiful you are – and that they are a great opportunity to learn if you handle them professionally. Be honest with yourself and admit mistakes so you can investigate them thoroughly. Look into the incidents that led you to making a wrong or suboptimal decision together with your coach. Analyse medical cases step-by-step to help you to revise your diagnostics and decisions and discuss them with your supervisor or with an experienced vet whom you trust. Try to identify any circumstances besides being inexperienced that led you to make your initial decision. Perhaps you were distracted, under stress or even unwell, because these external factors once identified, can be eliminated quite effectively.

Remember too that there are some factors beyond your control, and which you can’t influence. Factors such as the animal’s internal status, factors that you can’t detect even if you performed a diagnostic routine with equipment you have at your disposal. In the medical profession, there is always the risk of undetected health issues that can badly influence the outcome of even the most sophisticated diagnostics and treatments performed by the most experienced and skilful doctors – these outcomes are not mistakes, just the facts of medical life!

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### C) Learn to walk alone

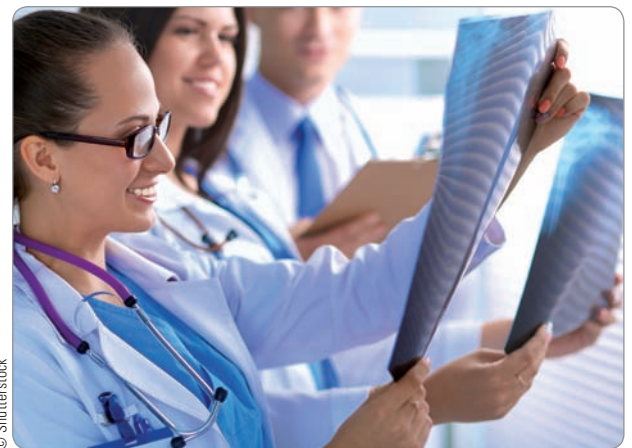
Once you have gained confidence in making medical decisions on your own, it’s time to reduce the frequency of the meetings with your coach and to gradually reduce the amount of guidance that you get from them. Until you are totally self-confident when it comes to handling medical cases on your own, you should still get feedback from experienced vets on a regular basis. Learning to walk alone is very important to prevent you from ending up being over-dependent on other colleagues throughout your professional career. Getting and giving feedback in a medical team means making decisions on your own and then discussing them with your colleagues. This helps to ensure that you haven’t missed something, enhances team communication and in addition, should help you to feel appreciated for your work. Continual feedback is something that you should maintain as an important routine throughout your professional life.

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### D) Build a network

Even if you have gained confidence and are able to make medical decisions on your own and to take full responsibility for your cases,

**It is a good idea to establish your own network of professionals as a kind of support group.**



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it's a good idea to establish your own network of professionals as a kind of support group. Find a mix of people whom you trust, who have a similar level of education as you and who have knowledge in different fields of the veterinary profession so that you can exchange ideas and support each other. Such a network can be very important when handling difficult cases, but can also help in everyday vet-life. Even if you are very confident from a medical point of view, there are often cases where we are uncertain, and it's helpful to discuss these with colleagues to get a second opinion and feedback.

Having a professional network is also helpful when managing the "human incidents" that come with the veterinary profession: your team and your clients. There are always some incidents that occur that can be funny and nice to share, but from time to time there can also be difficult situations that make your professional life really tough. This could be your first euthanasia of a dog belonging to an elderly person who is living alone or a big row with a client about your fees or the treatment of their pet. Discussing these events with somebody from "outside" can be very helpful because they are professionally distanced from the incident. As such, they can help us to review our own behaviour and to provide input and tips for handling such cases when they occur the next time.

A professional network also contributes to a healthy work-life balance because getting feedback from your fellow professionals means dealing with medical cases or human issues inside your profession rather than taking these cases home. Discussing cases with your family and friends prevents us from making the separation between our work and our private life. If some people in your professional network are also friends, then it should be part of the network-concept to discuss work at work and not at home, and "shop-talk" during gatherings with friends and family should be a tightly restricted exception.

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## 5/ Basic rules in client communication

Being a good vet from a medical point of view is the one thing that we should have learned at vet school, being a good communicator is something that we have to learn along the way. Unless we have a good mentor, communication skills are usually developed by a trial and error process during daily practice. Good communication is essential to build trust, to place and sell veterinary services and products, and to create value in the eyes of the client. Establishing good client communication is actually quite easy if you follow some basic rules! (Table 1).



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**To facilitate understanding, modify your language so that it connects with the general public, learn to translate technical terms and become "bilingual".**

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### A) Rule nº1 – A client is just a client

Always be conscious of your role as a veterinary scientist and be aware that your clients are depending on you to translate your medical language into normal, everyday language for them to understand and follow. You may have the impression that clients are able to grasp the content of your explanations just because they don't question you, but that assumption can be tricky because sometimes they are just too stressed or too overwhelmed to ask. To facilitate understanding, modify your language so that it connects with the general public, learn to translate technical terms and become "bilingual". You should check their understanding by getting feedback whenever you have explained something or made an offer to your clients. Simply ask "How does that sound for you?" and give your customers some time to answer. They will tell you what more they want to know and need from you.

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### B) Rule nº2 – Science is #1

During our studies as a "vet to be", science becomes the most important issue, especially when we are talking about passing exams or embarking on a scientific career at university. When we go into practice, the science remains as the basis for good veterinary medicine. However, the science is not enough on its own when it comes to creating a good relationship with your customers.

Communication specialists state that good communication is more than merely transporting scientific facts from a sender (you) to a receiver (your client). To pave the way for a motivating dialogue, your first action is to establish a positive relationship. Your "door-opener" should be to smile, make eye contact, ask the client "What can I do for you today?" and then to listen.

**Table 1. Do's and don'ts in client communication.**

| Do's  | Don'ts  |
|---|---|
| Greet client and pet warmly   | Mumble a greeting and call them with a hand signal                            |
| Smile   | Appear grim or distracted   |
| Make and maintain eye contact   | Look everywhere but the client  |
| Ask what you can do for the client & listen                               | Start your examination of the patient   |
| Speak clearly and accentuated   | Mumble something incomprehensible   |
| Explain what you are doing during the examination                         | Do a "robotic" exam without comments  |
| Explain in normal phrases and translate medical phrases                   | Speak in highly technical terms like a scientist                              |
| Explain that you can't hear them when using the stethoscope               | Ignore the client and what they are trying to tell you                        |
| Summarise your findings, get feedback and discuss options with the client | Just go on to treat the animal, leaving no room for explanations and feedback |
| Hand out a written report   | Leave the client to memorise everything you have said                         |
| Say a warm "thank you" for the client's visit                             | Just say a short goodbye  |

Don't interrupt and don't worry, clients don't usually talk for hours on end. Using this approach you build trust and give the client the feeling that they are really important, which prepares your customers perfectly for the remaining parts of the consultation and the offers you are going to make.

### C) Rule n°3 – Use a consultation strategy

A consultation strategy is something you should develop and use consistently throughout your professional career. It forms a framework for your client interactions and ensures that all your customers get the best individual offer and service you can provide. A concise strategy impacts well on your clients, creates value during the consultation and helps you deliver the best for their pet. If you do it right, your clients will want to come back again and they will form a really strong bond with you as their primary healthcare provider.

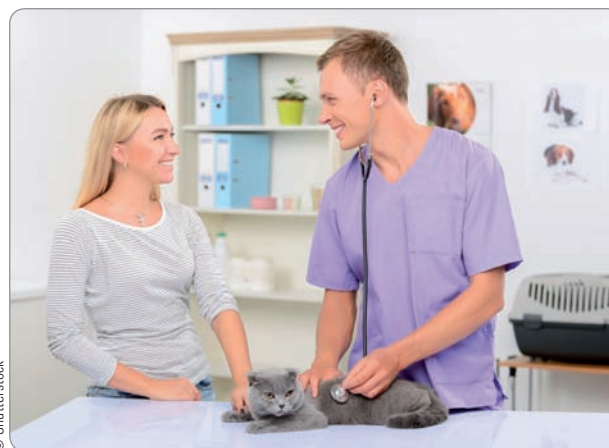
Setting up a consultation strategy is straightforward if you include the following points and once you have practised this strategy you will actually save a lot of time:

- Welcome the client and ask them about their pet and its requirements (see Rule n°2).
- Listen to the client, take notes and first decide what can be accomplished in the current consultation and what issues have to be postponed to a new appointment. Before you move on, you

should go over your notes with the client again, the choices you have made and get feedback and approval from them.

- Perform a comprehensive clinical exam "from nose to tail", commenting in short and clear messages what you are doing, why, and reporting your results.
- After the exam, you should present the client with a short and precise summary together with your solutions and offers (diagnostics, services and products). At this stage, it is crucial not to overburden the client with too much information – give them a maximum of

**Your "door-opener" should be to smile, make eye contact and ask the client "What can I do for you today?".**



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three important issues together with solutions and the benefits their pet will experience if they agree to your recommendations.

- Now it's time to come to an agreement and a commitment on the client's part as to which services and products are prescribed and sold to them. Get feedback on your offers by asking "How does that sound for you?". The client may have some additional questions, but if not, or after answering them, you can move ahead to perform diagnostics, to treat the animal, to explain medication and nutrition and to schedule the next appointment(s).
- Prepare a written prescription and consultation report for the client to take home. Sum up the key issues and the outcome of your consultation together with your prescriptions and the next appointment. This ensures important issues (nutrition, medication, other measures) won't be forgotten, and the good pet healthcare message is transferred to the owner's home so that the client's family will also be involved in the consultation and its outcome.
- When everything is completed, you should always end the consultation with a "thank you" to the client for choosing you as their doctor (there are a lot of others around) and give your best wishes for the pet's well-being. Then you say goodbye to the owner and pet, and tell them that you are looking forward to their next visit.

## 6/ Getting owners to comply with your recommendations

Studies undertaken by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) in both the USA and Spain showed that poor rates of compliance to veterinary recommendations were not only creating animal healthcare problems, but were also a significant cause of lost income to veterinary practices. As such, in-practice activities designed to support full compliance have been shown to have a positive impact on both outcomes for patients and on practice revenues.

### A) The importance of a clear recommendation

One key message from the AAHA studies was the importance of a clear initial recommendation being made by the veterinary surgeon. The studies also warn that many veterinarians have a poor perception of what constitutes a clear recommendation from the client's perspective. This is because clients often place undue emphasis on the way in which the recommendation is made, and this is especially so when they are being offered a choice of alternative therapies. Always ensure that your recommendation is made clear by using "positive" language

that is unambiguous. For example, instead of saying "We could run some blood tests to see what shows up, or we could wait a few days and see how the condition develops", say something positive like "What we need to do is find out what is causing the problem, and the best way to do that is to run some blood tests straight away."

### B) Acceptance by the client

Following on from the clear recommendation by the vet and, if appropriate, reinforcement from other team members, the next most importance phase is the acceptance by the client. It is a sad fact of life that even when the vet makes a clear recommendation many clients will still choose not to act upon it. This is because whilst they may have heard the recommendation they have not accepted it. It is all too convenient to blame this failure on the client, but this is to oversimplify the acceptance process.

Acceptance requires that the client not only fully understands the recommendation, but that they also understand why they need to act now, and the benefits to them and their pet of doing so. Achieving acceptance may take some additional steps:

#### 1. Give the client a clear and concrete offer

Make sure that you have translated your recommendation into a firm offer (and if appropriate an estimate of the cost) so that the client is clear about what is required of them.

#### 2. Give the client a reason to act now

Explain the benefits to them and/or their pet of taking this action at this time, and where appropriate, the consequences of not acting.

### The CRAFT equation (C=R+A+FT)

The AAHA summarised the process of achieving high levels of compliance with veterinary recommendations in the CRAFT equation:

$$C=R+A+FT$$

Where:

- **C** is Compliance
- **R** is Recommendation by the veterinary surgeon followed by
- **R** Reinforcement by the practice team
- **A** is Acceptance by the client
- **FT** is Follow Through by the practice team over time



### 3. Encourage them to ask questions (more than one)

It is important that the client understands both the recommendation and the benefits, so make it clear to the client that you are happy for them to ask you questions to clarify their understanding, and to allow you to respond to their concerns.

### 4. Get a positive commitment to act

Always take the time to get a clear commitment from the client to the agreed plan of action, before discussing the arrangements for the treatment to take place.

## C) Using the whole practice team to improve compliance

The AAHA created the “CRAFT” model to help practices to identify the key steps to achieving compliance; that is a clear recommendation, reinforced by the healthcare team, leading to acceptance by the client, and then followed through by the healthcare team over time.

The most important message from the studies is that compliance is a team game:

### 1. Reinforcing recommendations

To ensure that the team can reinforce and support the veterinarian’s recommendations, they have to know what these are likely to be, and this is the role and purpose of practice protocols and procedures. Protocols ensure that all clients receive a consistent message, and that staff feel able to make recommendations or to reinforce the recommendations of other members of the team without fear of contradiction.

Of course, if the clinicians within the practice hold differing views this can become confusing not just for clients, but also for the other members of the practice team. Part of the process of developing effective protocols is for the practice’s clinicians to agree how routine cases and conditions should be approached, taking account of the local levels of risk, emerging pharmaceuticals and developments in treatments. It is worth remembering that whilst we can sometimes demonstrate small outcome improvements using different clinical approaches, these differences are often small when considered against the very low level of compliance that the absence of a protocol creates.

The positive result of effective protocols has been demonstrated by studies undertaken by a number of separate drug companies, all of which have shown that the development and implementation of effective protocols for routine treatments (for example, for parasite control) have had a significant positive impact on overall rates of compliance.



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**The team should make full use of the practice management system, so that they can actively follow up if the client fails to return for a follow-up appointment, or to renew medication at the expected time.**

### 2. Follow through by the practice team

Once a recommendation has been accepted, or a treatment plan started, the role of the practice team becomes supporting the client and their animal by ensuring ongoing compliance. We should not forget that our clients may have busy lives, with many responsibilities competing for their time and attention, and so we can help them ensure that their animal’s needs are met. The team should make full use of the practice management system to set reminders for clients so that they can be reminded of the actions they need to take, and recalls so that staff can actively follow up if the client fails to return for a follow-up appointment, or to renew medication at the expected time.

## 7/ Ethics in business and veterinary medicine

As previously mentioned, the private practice of veterinary medicine is an activity that is very demanding professionally. It is expected that young veterinarians quickly become experts in the different medical disciplines, that they be skilful in communicating with the client, that they empathise with the patient but also with the client, that they do not forget the financial situation of the clinic that employs them, and so on. In short, this is a colossal challenge for any young professional.

Some studies on the mental health of the profession note a disturbingly high rate of stress and psychological problems amongst veterinarians. Qualitative research about the most stressful or disagreeable factors for clinical veterinarians shows that they dislike the most:

- Interactions with difficult clients.

- Arguments with clients due to money.
- Client-patient conflicts of interest.
- Euthanasia and the resulting emotional support for owners.

Many experienced veterinarians can describe stressful personal experiences that had an emotional impact on them such as:

- Owners who cannot (or say they cannot) pay for a treatment but who demand that the veterinarian proceed with this on the basis of a supposed vocational or professional obligation.
- Owners who question the suitability of a treatment plan proposed by the veterinarian and who accuse him or her of being motivated by mainly economic reasons.
- Well-meaning persons who collect abandoned or injured animals and who confuse the veterinary clinic with a charitable institution.
- Owners who request euthanasia for “convenience reasons” that are not personally acceptable to the veterinarian.

It is impossible to offer the young veterinarian a magic wand that resolves these complicated situations in a stress-free manner, but the following thoughts can be helpful:

- 1) Seek advice or support from your boss, your colleagues, vets in other practices, etc. whenever you face one of these heartbreaking dilemmas. Do not keep it to yourself, you need to share your feelings and listen to people who have experienced similar situations before.
- 2) Whenever you feel or perceive that there is a mismatch between your principles and those of your practice, you should raise the issue at the appropriate time and with the appropriate style: not challenging or criticising, but rather asking and trying to understand.
- 3) The veterinary clinic is a business activity with very tight profitability margins. Most veterinary clinics in the world obtain profits of less than 10-20% of their revenues. And this is before considering the impact of investments, financial expenses and taxes. In addition, in many countries, the veterinarians have salaries that are appreciably less than those of other qualified professionals with comparable levels of requirements and responsibilities. Therefore, when a veterinary clinic charges for the services it provides, it is not breaching any ethical or deontological standard whatsoever, nor is it betraying any vocation... It is simply fighting for its own survival as an organisation.
- 4) We are veterinarians, not managers of our clients’ personal finances. There is no scientific study that allows us to predict the degree of a person’s emotional attachment to their pet on the basis of their social class, their origin, the clothes they wear or the car they drive. It is therefore not incumbent upon the veterinarian to prejudge without asking what quality of medicine an owner wishes to give their pet. The veterinarian’s obligations are to be honest, objective and clearly present the medical options available. Always



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**Euthanasia of a pet is a very distressing experience (both personally and professionally) that vets have to face up to. They also have to deal with the clients’ grief.**

start with the best medical option as the first recommendation, and if the owner’s economic conditions make this infeasible, then only propose those alternatives that, whilst not optimal, do not compromise either your own integrity or the patient’s well-being.

- 5) We have to learn to diagnose the reasons behind an owner’s decision to say “no”. When an owner rejects the treatment plan proposed by their veterinarian, there may be multiple reasons and we must ask the owner why. Here are some typical responses:
  - “I don’t want to spend this amount of money on a pet”. “I love my dog, but in the end it’s a dog. It doesn’t seem right to spend this money on a pet.” This is a legitimate posture that we should respect without putting pressure on the client.
  - “I don’t have the money. I can’t afford it. If only I could afford it.” These are cases in which extending credit to the clients can be a very good solution, albeit one that has associated risks that must be managed. Many veterinary practices have been identifying credit solutions that they can offer to their clients, frequently through agreements with financing institutions.
  - “I don’t think this treatment is the solution to my pet’s problems.” “This veterinarian does not inspire me with confidence.” In this case, which occurs more often than we think, the client will usually give economic reasons to reject a treatment, but the real reason for their rejection stems from poor communication by the veterinarian.

The real challenge for the young veterinarian lies in acquiring the skill and sensitivity to be able to have a sincere conversation with their clients that say “no”, and to understand what is behind each one of these responses.



## 4. Understanding the business

### > SUMMARY

Throughout the world, we find vets who are very good at providing professional animal healthcare, but who are very poor at managing their clinic's finances. However, to provide good healthcare you need to run a profitable business. Both activities are linked, and in this chapter we will look at why and how.

### Introduction

The fundamentals of running a business do not change whether that business is very small or an extremely large corporation. What changes is the formality of the processes that are involved. In a very small organisation such as a veterinary practice with a single owner and a few staff, the processes can exist in the mind of the owner and be communicated to the staff in an ad-hoc manner. Whereas, in a large company, the process of making decisions is more collective and the communication of information more complex, so the process has to be formalised to be effective.

### 1/ How to run a business

#### A) A bit of business background

Many veterinary owners are wary of introducing what they see as "big company" management into their clinics because of a suspicion that these practices were designed for use in enterprises where the primary goal is the creation of wealth for shareholders, and they see their business as fundamentally different to such a profit-centred enterprise. However, vets are not unique in having a social conscience, and the strategic approach to business management now in use by many corporations takes account of the needs of other stakeholders such as the employees, the community it serves and the impact its activities have on the wider environment.

In this section, we set out the structure of a strategic approach which seeks to give business leaders a better understanding of how their companies are really doing regardless of the scale of their business, and which is appropriate for veterinary practices of all sizes. However, the implementation in very small veterinary practices may not need to be as formal as is being suggested.

#### B) Balancing conflicting goals

Where a business sets itself a wide range of goals rather than simply maximising profit, it is inevitable that some of the goals will appear to be in conflict. For example, a practice might state that "We will make ourselves accessible to our clients when they need us", whilst also stating that "We will provide all staff with a healthy work-life balance". The strategic approach that seeks to address these conflicts is often referred to as "Creating a Balanced Scorecard" after the work of Kaplan and Norton.

The Balanced Scorecard approach is ideally suited for use in veterinary businesses because veterinary owners often have wide-ranging goals and objectives. The approach needs to be adapted to reflect the size of most veterinary enterprises, and its scope restrained to reflect the level of management experience available. Practices that have adopted this approach achieve significant growth whilst developing their capability to respond to their customer's needs and improving staff satisfaction, whilst meeting the social and financial goals set by the owners.

## C) Implementing the Balanced Scorecard

The Balanced Scorecard is a concept linking strategic and business management throughout an organisation. As such, it needs to be implemented in stages, allowing time to develop the people and processes that are needed for it to succeed.

### Step 1 – Where are we going (our vision)?

The first stage is for the business owners to set out a clear vision for the practice in terms of what they want it to be, how they want it to be perceived, how they want it to impact on the other stakeholders and anything else that is important to them. The vision needs to be clear and succinct because it must be easy to communicate and simple to understand (Figure 1).

### Step 2 – What our vision actually means to us (our mission)

The main purpose of the mission is to communicate to all stakeholders the aspirations of the business owners, so that stakeholders can use these to inform their actions. Internally, this means that we want all staff to use the mission to guide their decisions and actions on a day-to-day level. In order to help them, the owners need to be clear about what they mean, and in particular give guidance on how to balance the sometimes conflicting goals. This can be achieved by providing additional detail, with day-to-day examples (Figure 2).

### Step 3 – Our plan for the coming year

In simple terms, if we know where we want to be, what are the key things that we should try to achieve in the next year to make progress on our journey? The objectives we set will need to reflect the need to remain “balanced” and be realistic given the resources available (see Box “Our objectives for the coming year”).

### Step 4 – Identify the key levers to achieve our goals

The next stage is to identify the activities that you will need to start to do, do more of or less of to achieve your goals. These activities are the “levers” that you are going to “pull” in order to achieve a different outcome. Setting out the levers you have chosen in the headings suggested by Kaplan and Norton can help to check that we have created a balanced set of key tasks and reduces the risk of creating unintended consequences (Table 1).

### Step 5 – Developing the key measures

For each of our key activities, we need to identify one or more measures that will show us that we are making progress towards our goals and that can be used to stimulate the “Review and Learn” process. Ideally, we want to be able to track activity that leads to the outcome, not just the outcome itself. So, for example, if we plan to increase the take-up of preventative treatments and believe that we can do this by

## SUNSHINE VETERINARY CLINIC



### Our vision:

To provide the very best, community-based, veterinary care where owners and their pets come first.

### Our mission statement:

We are a highly qualified and experienced clinical team, committed to providing outstanding value and care. Our modern, well-equipped practices offer a wide range of services. We endeavour to always do the very best for your pet and demonstrate this through excellence of customer service. We take care of the little, but important details with compassion and empathy underlining everything we do.

Figure 1. Example of a practice’s vision and mission statement.

## SUNSHINE VETERINARY CLINIC



### WHAT OUR VISION MEANS TO US

#### We will know that we are moving closer to our vision when:

- We see an increase in client numbers year on year
- All existing clinics have been re-branded to achieve a consistent image
- All staff demonstrate excellence of customer service and consistently go the extra mile
- Compliance of preventative healthcare will increase year on year
- All staff will be appraised every year, training needs to be identified and an individualised CPD program developed
- There is a clear management structure within the group with everyone aware of their line manager; who they will report to when appropriate

Figure 2. Example “What our vision means to us”.

## Example: our objectives for the coming year

### Objective 1: to grow our practice

We will do this by:

- Promoting and celebrating clinical excellence
- Looking after our existing clients
- Promoting our practice to new clients
- Developing our nurse-led services
- Introducing new products and services

**Table 1. Example key goals for the year.**

| Financial   | Customers  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Controlling labour costs within agreed levels</li> <li>• Controlling drug costs within agreed levels</li> <li>• Growing our pet health scheme</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving our call handling</li> <li>• Promoting ourselves to new customers</li> <li>• Engaging with our community</li> <li>• Increasing our use of digital communications</li> </ul>                             |
| Business processes  | Learning and growth  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing an effective vaccine reminder system</li> <li>• Promoting preventative healthcare at every interaction</li> <li>• Improving our capacity to inform clients about the value of specialised diets</li> <li>• Creating clear systems to manage our charitable work whilst protecting the practice finances</li> <li>• Ensuring staff numbers are maintained at agreed levels</li> <li>• Making more effective use of our vets</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring all staff reviews are held on time</li> <li>• All staff to have a development plan</li> <li>• Providing training to all staff</li> <li>• Creating opportunities for staff to contribute ideas</li> </ul> |

increasing the time we make available for our nurses to communicate healthcare messages to clients, then tracking the number of vet nurse consultations that take place could become a key indicator. In a similar way, if we plan to increase our use of digital communications then having staff asking clients for their e-mail address will be important, so measuring the percentage of active clients whose e-mail address is on record could become a key measure.

One or more measures need to be identified for each key action (Table 2).

### Step 6 – Reviewing and Learning from our progress

We need to review our progress on a regular (monthly) basis (Table 3). When reviewing measures, it is important that we make the process a positive experience. We did not plan to fail, and we employ good staff who aim to do a good job, so if outcomes are not as expected it is not that somebody has done something wrong, it is the process that has let us down.

When reviewing goals, we should have three questions in mind:

- Who can we praise? => We should look to praise at every opportunity. If the team did as they were asked, but the outcome was not achieved, we can still praise the effort.
- What have we just learned? => Whatever the outcome, good, bad or indifferent, it has shown us something. Identifying the Learning is key to making progress.
- What do we change? => What do we change and who do we tell to take the learning forward so that tomorrow is better than yesterday.

## D) To sum up

A strategic business management process embraces every part of the practice. Its implementation needs to be carefully judged to match the existing practice culture. For practices that are already following some form of regular management process, and who have a culture of using and reviewing performance data, the Balanced Scorecard will represent a natural progression, and should be relatively easy to implement. However, experience has shown that for many practices its introduction

**Table 2. Example key measures.**

| Activity  | Key measure(s)  |
|---|---|
| Improving our call handling   | Monthly mystery shopping score  |
| Promoting preventative healthcare at every interaction                      | Percent of active patients with vaccine status updated                                  |
| Creating opportunities for staff to contribute ideas                        | Number of team meetings held<br>Six-monthly staff survey results                        |
| Improve our capacity to inform clients about the value of specialised diets | Nurse consults for dietary advice<br>Total diet sales<br>Proportion of veterinary diets |

**Table 3. Sample monthly management report line for one objective.**

| Objective                                   | Key measure                    |     | Comments   |
|---|--------------------------------|-----|--|
| Controlling drug costs within agreed levels | <b>Drug cost % of turnover</b> |     | <b>Assess:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent work by Katie to reduce stock in vets' cars</li> <li>• Some stock not recorded correctly on receipt leading to higher stock levels</li> </ul> <b>Plan:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review correct stock receipt procedure with all staff</li> </ul> |
|   | Jan                            | 21% |  |
|   | Feb                            | 20% |  |
|   | March                          | 22% |  |
|   | April                          | 21% |  |
|   | May                            | 19% |  |

requires a significant development of their existing managerial capability, and successful implementation will require a longer timetable and additional help and support for key staff.

## 2/ Key indicators to understand the economics of a veterinary practice

The level of practice management skills and interest of veterinary practice owners can vary significantly. Some practice owners (fortunately, fewer each year) do not have the slightest idea about the economic performance of their clinics, while others (frequently more and more) are quite good at interpreting and monitoring the economic performance of their business.

This section looks at the relevance of some commonly used Key Performance Indicators (KPI's). In the same way that the parameters of a blood test give us insights about the health of a patient, KPI's spotlight the economic health of a business. **Table 4** shows the most revealing indicators that we will review.

### Veterinary practices generate revenue from three principal sources:

- 1. Providing clinical services**
- 2. The re-sale of drugs and specialised products**
- 3. General pet shop sales and grooming**

As a general rule, the veterinarian has a significant influence on the first two which usually take place during a consultation or procedure, and so the total of these two is referred to as "medical revenue". Pet shop and grooming revenue varies significantly between practices depending on their location and the space available, is less influenced by the veterinarian and so is excluded from many ratios.

## A) Key revenue indicators

### 1. Diagnostic ratio

This indicator is calculated by dividing the revenue generated by the veterinary practice in performing diagnostic tests such as external and internal lab tests, X-rays, ultrasound scans, endoscopies, electrocardiograms, MRIs, etc. by the total revenue from clinical services.

$$\text{Diagnostic ratio} = \frac{\text{Revenue from diagnostic tests}}{\text{Revenue from clinical services}}$$

The expected value of this ratio is considered to be somewhere between 20% and 25%. A value much lower than 20% can be indicative of an intuitive medicine style that is not well based in evidence. Conversely, values higher than 25% could indicate an

**Table 4. Key indicators.**

| Typical key performance indicators |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| a. Revenue quality indicator       | a.1 Diagnostic ratio   |
| b. Activity indicators             | b.1. Active patients per full-time veterinarian<br>b.2. Daily transactions per full-time veterinarian      |
| c. Cost indicators                 | c.1. Practice payroll cost as a percentage of revenue<br>c.2. Cost of every veterinarian's billable minute |

excessive dependence on diagnostic tests. It is very worthwhile to measure this indicator, not only for the entire veterinary practice, but also the individualised performance for each veterinarian, in order to be able to evaluate the degree of internal consistency in the practice's medical style.

## 2. Average revenue per medical transaction

This indicator is calculated by dividing the total medical revenue by the number of transactions to obtain an average amount. Many practice management software systems calculate this indicator directly.

$$\text{Average revenue per medical transaction} = \frac{\text{Total medical revenue}}{\text{Number of medical transactions}}$$

It is generally considered that the value of this indicator should be equal to approximately 2.5 times the amount of a consultation fee in the practice. Values well under this ratio may be indicative of a high percentage of basic, low added value, medical procedures such as vaccines or check-ups.

## B) Key activity indicators

### 1. Active patients per full-time veterinarian

This indicator is obtained by dividing the number of patients seen at the clinic during a year by the number of full-time equivalent veterinary surgeons employed.

$$\text{Active patients per veterinarian} = \frac{\text{Annual total patients seen}}{\text{Full-time equivalent veterinarians}}$$

It is estimated that a full-time veterinarian can provide a good quality service to between 750 and 1,100 patients annually. Figures outside of this range could be a clear warning sign regarding the size of the veterinary staff. A low figure indicating that veterinarians are working in areas other than those that directly generate veterinary income, and a high figure suggesting that they have insufficient time with each patient.

### 2. Daily transactions per full-time veterinarian

This indicator is obtained by dividing the number of medical transactions each year by the number of full-time veterinarians times the number of days they work per year.

$$\text{Daily transactions per veterinarian} = \frac{\text{Annual medical transactions}}{\text{Full-time veterinarians x number of days worked per year}}$$

The goal is for veterinarians to have an average of 10 to 12 medical transactions daily. So, in a country where veterinarians work 250 days per year, we would expect them to achieve 2,500 to 3,000 transactions annually. If we suppose that a patient will generate an average of about three medical transactions annually, then in most countries we need between 750 and 1,000 active patients per veterinarian to generate this volume.

## C) Key cost indicators

### 1. Payroll cost as percentage of revenue

In this calculation, we define a clinic's "payroll cost" as the entire set of costs associated with remunerating its personnel, including partners. In addition to gross salaries, the total will include labour-related taxes at the company's expense, and any fringe benefits or bonuses that make up the overall compensation received by the practice team such as private medical insurances or pensions.

$$\text{Payroll cost as percentage of revenue} = \frac{\text{Annual staff costs x 100}}{\text{Total revenue}}$$

If a veterinary practice's payroll cost clearly exceeds 40% of income, its economic feasibility begins to be at risk. Whereas figures significantly below this level may indicate that there is insufficient staff to provide a good service.

A typical error when estimating this indicator is the omission of a realistic market salary for the veterinary centre's owners if they work in the business.

### 2. Cost per billable minute of a veterinarian

The purpose of this indicator is to make the veterinary centre's owner and team aware of the value of the most prized asset they possess: their veterinarians' time.

It is calculated by dividing the clinic's fixed annual costs, which is all costs except for the purchase of supplies and merchandise, by the number of veterinary minutes that the practice can sell each year.

$$\text{Cost per billable minute of a veterinarian} = \frac{\text{Fixed annual costs of the clinic}}{\text{Sellable veterinarian minutes per year}}$$



To calculate the sellable veterinarian minutes per year, we have to take into account the number of hours worked each day by every vet, the clinic's opening hours and the number of days worked per year. Because it is impossible to sell every minute worked as a result of not always having patients and that some activities such as administration tasks cannot be billed, we will need to adjust the resulting figure using a so-called "efficiency factor". For service professionals such as veterinarians, it is estimated that on average we can hope to invoice clients for 65% of the available time.

$$\text{Cost per billable minute of a veterinarian} = \frac{\text{Total annual costs of the clinic} - \text{purchases of supplies and merchandise}}{\text{Veterinary hours worked each day} \times \text{days worked per year} \times \text{opening hours} \times 60 \text{ minutes} \times 65\%}$$

For the practice to be viable, the charge per minute made for services must exceed this figure by an acceptable profit margin. If they do not, and it is not possible to raise prices, then efficiency savings must be found.

### 3/ Understanding practice economics: why productivity is an issue

Let's imagine we ask a young veterinary graduate: "How much income would seem fair to you for your full-time work at a clinic?".

Let's also imagine that we receive the following answer: "Considering the difficulty of my studies, the responsibility of the work I will carry out, the physical as well as intellectual effort I'll have to deliver... I guess that about 2,500 Euros net per month would be a fair salary to start my career".

This proposal, which is completely legitimate from the young veterinarian's point of view, may collide head-on with the economic principles of labour productivity.

The following table shows a typical income statement (a yearly summary of revenue and expenses for a business) of many veterinary practices around the world (Table 5).

A first insight from this table is that, in order for a veterinary practice to be economically sustainable (with an EBITDA between 10-20%), it is necessary that the labour cost of the veterinarians be around 25% of the centre's income.

**Table 5. Typical income statement of a veterinary practice (all amounts expressed as % of revenue).**

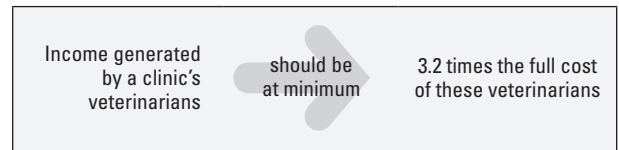
|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| <b>Total revenue</b>                                    | <b>100%</b> |
| Revenue from clinical services                          | 60%         |
| Revenue from drug sales                                 | 20%         |
| Revenue from pet shop and/or grooming                   | 20%         |
| <b>Total costs</b>                                      |             |
| Veterinary payroll (including partners)                 | 25%         |
| Support staff payroll                                   | 15%         |
| Purchases of supplies and merchandise                   | 25-30%      |
| Overhead (including rent)                               | 15-20%      |
| Profit before investments, financing and taxes (EBITDA) | 10-20%      |

x 3.2

At the same time, we see how 80% of the centre's income (in the form of clinical services and drug sales) is generated as a direct consequence of the veterinarians' activities.

Combining these two metrics (80/25 = 3.2), we can generate a ratio that will be very significant for the rest of our analysis:

Ratio 1



The first problem that arises with this formula is of a practical nature: Most employees are not aware of their full payroll cost as individuals to their business – in other words, how much they are costing their company. An employee usually knows their net salary (what they take home) quite clearly, but may be less aware of the structure of their gross salary (what they take home, plus the taxes on their income that the state withholds before they receive their salary). However, what they almost never know is their total cost to their company, which is equal to their gross salary plus all labour-related taxes (which in most countries are designed to help finance the public health service, unemployment subsidies and retirement pensions). The magnitude of these labour-related taxes may vary significantly from country to country, but they are clearly significant and in many countries they

may end up representing a very significant portion of the labour cost carried by an employer.

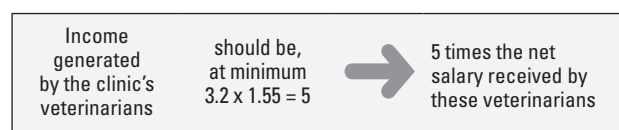
Whilst the actual proportions will vary depending on the income tax rates and labour-related taxes in place in each country, ratio 2 shows a typical example:

Ratio 2

| Net salary paid to employee | Gross salary earned before tax | Total payroll cost for the company |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| €1,000                      | €1,250                         | €1,550                             |

In this example, the actual labour cost for a veterinary practice is 1.55 times the net salary received by the employee.

If we now combine ratios 1 and 2, the result is:



Suddenly, the hard reality of this so-called "Economic law of veterinary productivity" clashes with the young veterinarian's legitimate hopes of receiving a nice starting salary: To make it possible for the clinic to pay the desired net monthly €2,500, he or she must generate for the clinic at least €12,500 monthly, or €150,000 annually.

Given that these figures for salaries and income generation may seem high or low depending on the local context of each country, **Table 6** describes these ratios for different salary levels.

At this point, the obvious question for the young veterinarian will be: "How probable is it that I will be able to generate revenue of €150,000 annually for my clinic so that the clinic can afford to pay me the net €2,500 I want to receive?"

The answer to this question will depend on a series of factors, not always under our young vet's control:

**The practice caseload.** Does the clinic have enough active patients so that each veterinarian can reach a minimum of 12-15 transactions daily? If not, it will be difficult to achieve the required income figure.

**The practice's pricing policy and discipline in collection.** Is all the work done in the practice adequately charged for? Is work discounted or even given free of charge on a discretionary basis? Because the lower the prices and higher the discounts, the more

improbable it will be to reach the high-income figures needed to pay good salaries to qualified staff.

**Quality of the medicine offered at the practice.** What proportion of medical acts carried out by the veterinarian will be vaccines and consultations in comparison to other procedures with higher added value?

**The veterinarian's communication and persuasion skills.** The veterinarian who communicates clearly and persuasively ends up providing many more services, and as a consequence generating higher revenue for the practice.

It is then so important for the young veterinarian to quickly understand that the more he or she produces for their practice, the more they will be able to receive. Salary and income generation are two sides of the same coin: It is the so-called "Economic law of veterinary productivity".

## 4/ Prescribing and selling medicine or foods

As a veterinary physician, your role will be to focus on providing medical and surgical care; this is the very core of your profession. It goes without saying that the economic success of any veterinary practice is based on the quality of services provided and the skill of the team in promoting and recommending these to customers. Nevertheless, as a vet you will always be recommending and hopefully selling drugs, food and accessories. For this reason, in this section we will assess the relative importance of those factors that contribute to successful prescribing and selling.

**Table 6. Monthly income to take-home pay.**

| Net salary of the young vet | Practice's payroll cost  | Income needed to be generated by the young vet |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| 1,000 €                     | 1,550 €                  | 5,000 €  |
| 2,000 €                     | 3,100 €                  | 10,000 €                                       |
| 2,500 €<br>(our example)    | 8,000 €<br>(our example) | 12,500 €<br>(our example)                      |
| 3,000 €                     | 4,650 €                  | 15,000 €                                       |
| 4,000 €                     | 6,200 €                  | 20,000 €                                       |
| 5,000 €                     | 7,750 €                  | 25,000 €                                       |



**The economic success of any veterinary practice is based on the quality of services provided and on the skill of the team in promoting and recommending drugs, food and accessories.**

It is important to note that significant differences exist between countries in the regulations governing the prescription and sale of veterinary services and pharmaceutical products. The provision of veterinary services almost always includes recommendations or prescriptions for items such as drugs, food and sometimes accessories.

However, there are significant variations in how these products can be sold:

- Even within the European Union, national regulations govern whether it is or is not possible to sell recommended or prescribed products.
- Depending on the competitive environment of each country, veterinary practices may or may not be allowed to compete on the open market.

## A) The importance of recommendations

In the veterinary world, “recommending” is often used to mean “selling”, although that word does not have good connotations within the profession! Recommendation is used to mean convincing an owner that, given the health of their animal – its physiological state and/or way of life and/or illness – the solution recommended by the vet represents the best option. This process is a purely commercial one, even if at this point it only involves selling an idea. It should be noted that recommendations not only relate to drugs or products, but can also be made for food or specific services. Successfully convincing an owner that their three-year-old Yorkshire Terrier, presenting with localised

gingivitis, would greatly benefit from having their teeth cleaned requires a recommendation process.

When vets need to administer drugs to an animal or change its eating habits – whether as prevention or treatment –, the recommendation process becomes a technical requirement. The process can be extended to include hygiene products such as those used for dermatological, oral or dental conditions. The quality of the recommendation process defines the level of compliance, mainly by ensuring that clients understand and consent to the proposals. Many of the compliance problems that vets complain about are the result of a poor or non-existent recommendation process.

## B) The relevance of distribution

In most cases, the recommendation process is therefore essential. However, a question that gets asked by many vets, where it is statutorily possible to distribute, is it better to sell the recommended products or to focus on providing services and recommendations? In summary, there are at least three advantages to selling drugs or food where possible:

- For owners, the ability to purchase items as soon as they have been recommended is an undeniable advantage in terms of convenience, as they get the recommendation and the products in one go, ensuring compliance. This concept is known as “one-stop shopping” and is particularly effective given the convenience it provides for the client.
- As a consequence, the animal is the second beneficiary of surgeries distributing products, because compliance improves when recommendations and sales are consecutive. The owner has no need to go elsewhere and there is no risk of them forgetting or changing their mind.
- Finally, for the practice, the sale of products and food provides an additional income stream that varies according to the competitive environment (see below).

## C) Successful recommendations

A successful recommendation process should include three key elements: It should be clear and unequivocal, it should follow a five-step process and it should be substantiated by a physical document.

A clear and unequivocal recommendation is completely different from one that ends in a list of possible alternatives, leaving the final choice to the owner. The latter method is regularly practised in some countries, often for ethical reasons, as vets strive to remain independent from pharmaceutical companies and petfood manufacturers. We

have absolutely no hesitation in stating that veterinary recommendations must be clear and unequivocal. This means they must contain one, and only one, name for a recommended product or food, along with a time-frame for administration. This information is essential to ensure good compliance and, in particular, to guarantee the client has understood. **Table 7** on the following page breaks down the prescription process into five stages.

Breaking down the prescription process into these five stages may seem pedantic, but in practice it seems that many vets skip the first and last steps. Highlighting the animal's needs is an absolutely essential step to ensure the owner understands that the prescription is adapted to their pet's particular circumstances. Explaining any potential practical issues helps to ensure greater compliance and can be complemented by a demonstration where necessary. In addition, while the concept of informed consent is included in all professional ethical codes, it can be difficult for vets to ask the key question, "Do you agree to this treatment or new food?". You should never forget that a recommendation is only a proposal and that it is the owner who has the final say; even if there is no technically valid alternative. Therefore, they must give their explicit consent.

## D) Creating the prescription

Recommendations should always be provided in writing, particularly if there is a statutory requirement to issue a prescription. The prescription and/or supporting document fulfils three functions:

- **Legal:** when a prescription is required.
- **Communication:** the prescription or supporting document sets out the main points mentioned by the vet during their discussion. This not only helps the owner remember the vet's recommendations but can also help them pass key information on to other people who were absent during the discussion but who may be involved in or will influence the decision-making process.
- **Educating:** helping the owner follow the recommended treatment, for example, a treatment calendar for internal or topical administration of antiparasitic products during the year, a dietary transition schedule, a ration plan or a diagram explaining how to apply ear solution.

These documents take time for often overworked vets to prepare. Therefore, it is important to design the recommendation process to be a team effort and to see what can be delegated. Although seeing a vet is essential for the first stages of the recommendation process, it is generally better to delegate the final stage of the process (practical issues and reminders) to the support team, if such a team exists and has



**Recommendations should always be provided in writing, even where there is no statutory requirement to issue a prescription.**

the time. Occasionally, it might also be possible to delegate part of the first stage as well, particularly gathering information relating to the animal's needs (*e.g.*, a lifestyle questionnaire for preventative treatment).

Additionally, the recommendation process is complex, and understanding it requires training, practice and experience. Many vets are not initially comfortable with all the stages, particularly addressing pricing or gathering informed consent, although it is rare for them not to improve once they have received training and simulated the process within their teams.

## E) How to sell products well

What are the main success factors when practices are able and willing to sell recommended products?

The first of these has already been addressed above: The main sales driver for medication and food in a veterinary practice is a recommendation from the vet. Without this recommendation, results are mostly disappointing.

The second is the creation of a specific proposal that makes it possible to ask for consent, particularly when dealing with chronic illness or preventative treatments. Let's look at two examples; in the first, we have convinced an owner to worm their cat four times a year, and in the second to adapt the diet of their seven-year-old Golden Retriever because it is now a "senior" dog. It is quite different to offer the first owner one, two or four worming tablets than to offer the second a small gifted bag of "senior" food to ensure a good transition and to check the dog likes it. The first is a specific recommendation that

carries with it an implied financial transaction to which the client must consent to proceed, whereas in the second, giving away a free sample does not by itself provide an opportunity to confirm client consent.

Generally, if a good recommendation process is followed and a specific proposal made, the practice should be able to sell regular treatments and successfully set up long-term treatment plans and dietary changes. However, the second scenario is rarely enough to engage clients fully. In fact, when the time comes for owners to renew their supply, the competition expands and other distribution channels effectively compete with the veterinary practice. At this point, competition management, the third success factor, becomes very important.

The first essential step to understanding the competition is to identify local as well as international competitors. The situation will vary from country to country and from product to product in relation to local regulations and market contexts. Generally, there is more competition for less regulated products such as food or over-the-counter medication. This is particularly the case for large, well-known brands, and especially for bulk packaging with a higher face value. Depending on the country, local competition will primarily include pharmacies, garden centres or pet shops and occasionally large supermarkets (although these mainly sell products that are very different to those

found in veterinary surgeries). In almost all countries, global competitors are now Internet-based marketplaces that distribute physiological and dietary foods and often over-the-counter or prescription drugs. In order to understand these competitors, vets must be aware of their performance in terms of convenience (location, opening times, delivery) and especially price.

The second essential step is to implement a pricing strategy designed to ensure the veterinary practice remains competitive within its competitive environment. Based on an awareness of the prices offered by its competitors for products recommended by their vets, practice directors can set their own prices using a “not more expensive than elsewhere” strategy. This means that prices closely match, but are still a little more expensive, than those found elsewhere. This difference is usually very small and not quite proportional (so it cannot be expressed as a percentage). In particularly competitive markets, it has been empirically noted that a difference of around, for example, 3 euros is acceptable for prices between 20 and 25 euros. This means that the price of a product in an extremely competitive market (namely food, over-the-counter medication and increasingly prescription drugs for long-term treatments) can no longer be set by adding a standard coefficient to the purchase price, but that it depends instead on an analysis of the competition.

**Table 7. The five stages of the recommendation process.**

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| <b>1</b> | First, the vet must define the animal’s needs, allowing the owner to understand that the recommendation is not standardised, but personalised to their animal. For example, “As you have a two-year-old child at home who often plays with your dog and is too young to understand proper hygiene rules, I strongly recommend monthly worming with (your recommended product name)”.  |
| <b>2</b> | Next, the vet sets out a response adapted to the animal’s needs; for example, “To validate our hypothesis of a food allergy, I suggest an exclusion diet for a maximum period of 8 weeks during which you only feed your dog a brand that is completely different to its usual brand. If the itching does not stop with this new diet, we can exclude a food allergy. If it does stop, the itching is probably caused by a food allergy and we will then go back to his normal diet to see if it comes back, which will confirm the hypothesis...”.   |
| <b>3</b> | The third stage is to formulate the specific recommendation, mentioning the name of the product, the dosage and duration.   |
| <b>4</b> | The fourth step is to get informed consent. Following the previous three stages, the owner should fully understand the vet’s technical and scientific plan. The only thing missing is to make them aware of the cost of the proposed solution, which can be expressed as a total figure for a one-off treatment or a regular cost (monthly figures are the best remembered) for preventative measures (such as topical antiparasitic treatments or medical food) or long-term treatments (for chronic illnesses or diet products). Prior to asking for the owner’s consent, we would recommend giving them an opportunity to ask one or more questions, to ensure they have fully understood the situation. |
| <b>5</b> | Finally, it is important to discuss the practical aspects of the recommendation. This includes any possible differences in product or food presentation, practical administration methods and how to monitor the animal (clinical symptoms, weight, etc.). This is also the stage at which reminders should be discussed if necessary.  |

Subsequently, a third stage is required. This involves setting up a reliable purchasing structure that allows the practice to achieve the best net price from its suppliers, whether these are pharmaceutical laboratories, petfood manufacturers or specialised wholesalers. Although the situation can vary from country to country, in several parts of the world, vets have managed to create very competitive purchasing structures by grouping together.

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## F) Is it profitable?

Taking the above into account, it is sensible to question the profitability of this aspect of the veterinary sector, particularly as it is still a relatively small part compared to producing and selling veterinary services. Indeed, many vets have decided that it is better to ignore this side of the business and concentrate instead on veterinary medicine and surgery. This conclusion is mainly based on the costs linked to product sales.

In order to sell effectively, vets need to ensure that:

- Their practice is well situated, visible, with ample parking spaces and a reception area that is spacious, light and where products can be displayed attractively with minimum storage requirements (even if supplier logistics are often able to provide frequent, low-cost deliveries to the surgery).
- They have staff available in the reception area with extended opening hours for convenient client access.
- They have stock, which requires working capital.
- They manage this income stream by monitoring the competition, setting sale prices, negotiating purchasing, etc., which takes time.

The total cost is therefore significant and it is easy to understand why it deters many vets. Nevertheless, if we look back at the requirements, we can see that a well-situated, visible surgery with ample parking spaces and a large, well-lit reception area, extended opening hours and reception staff is also necessary to ensure a good medical and surgical service. The only additional costs are a storage area, the stock itself, managing the income stream and, perhaps, some additional staff and space in the reception area. By taking this approach, it is possible to suggest that the additional income provided by drug and food sales contributes significant funds needed to ensure high levels of veterinary care.

Additionally, by far the main cost involved is the time dedicated to recommending products to clients. However, as noted previously, recommending products or treatments is an essential part of veterinary practice whether these same products and treatments are being sold on site or not. Given this fact, why not sell the products if it is possible to do so?

Another argument that is often put forward is whether it is better to concentrate on enhancing or providing additional services, and leave product sales to the more aggressive competitors? Of course, developing services quantitatively and qualitatively, enhancing them and innovating by offering new services are important priorities when growing a veterinary practice. So, the real question is how does developing product sales hinder a practice's ability to develop, improve or innovate its services?

The answer to this question is more complex than it seems and varies in relation to different clinical models, while being limited to countries in which the sale of drugs and/or food is legally possible.

Some key considerations are:

- In hospitals and specialised veterinary surgeries that work only with referred patients, product sales are often only a minor issue.
- In small general veterinary practices, with little space and few support staff, it may be more practical to focus on a service-based business model. However, it might also be worth considering the medium-term sustainability of these models.
- In medium and large general veterinary practices, with enough reception space and a small storage area, a business model that combines high-quality, enhanced services with high-quality products sold at competitive prices can be economically efficient as there is a strong relationship between these two activities. Economic performance can be further enhanced by managing the supply costs, through the rationalisation of purchasing and the optimised management of competition and sales prices. This is often achieved by several practices grouping themselves together.

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## G) Is it ethical?

The most extreme criticism of veterinary practices that sell drugs and food is often based on ethical arguments. Is it not a conflict of interest for vets to prescribe and dispense at the same time? If vets prescribe products and then sell them, will they not run the risk of being, or appearing to be, in the pay of the drug and food manufacturers? As with human medicine, these questions are often asked by policy makers, professional bodies and some consumer associations.

However, as long as some simple rules are followed it seems unwarranted to claim that all product sales violate the professional ethical code:

- Recommendations (for treatments as well as preventative measures, hygiene products and food) should only be made when necessary and according to scientifically valid protocols. The indications and protocols should be discussed and approved by the whole practice team, based on consensus recommendations issued by

the various international expert groups (such as ESCCAP<sup>1</sup> for parasitology or ABCD<sup>2</sup> for feline infectious diseases). For example, **Figure 3** below shows four targeted moments when preventative food should be prescribed.

- Products should be selected by the practice for recommendation and supply only if they are well known and meet the needs of animals treated by the practice.
- The range of products on offer should be limited and focused on key products. Veterinary surgeries are recommendation networks, so they should offer a limited choice. This is in contrast to garden centres, pet shops or Internet sites that are choice networks that do not provide recommendations. To maintain this distinction, veterinary surgeries should avoid the temptation to turn themselves into a general pet shop or create a pet shop space within the surgery.
- The prices for products offered should be comparable to those offered by other suppliers because price competitiveness is a key aspect to providing an ethical service.



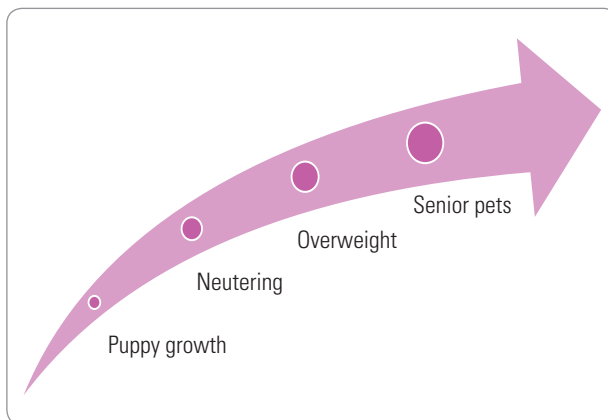
**Discounts are a toxic plague for the veterinary profession. They are the best alibis for a mediocre service.**

## 5/ Discounts and waived charges: a toxic plague for our profession

Many owners of veterinary centres acknowledge that discounts on the price of the services provided are given to clients on a far too regular basis. For example, many clinics omit to charge for rechecks or short consultations. In many hospitals, considerable oversights or omissions arise when charging for the services provided to hospitalised patients such as neglecting to charge for foods and medications administered.

<sup>1</sup> European Scientific Committee on Companion Animal Parasites  
<sup>2</sup> Advisory Board on Cat Diseases

**Figure 3. Four key opportunities to recommend preventative food to healthy pets.**



For businesses with low profitability margins such as veterinary practices, discounts and fee cancellations may have a serious impact on their financial viability.

Some studies have shown that up to 6% of a clinic's annual revenue may be lost in the form of discounts. In other words, between a third and half of the clinic's anticipated annual profits, equivalent to the owner working for between four and six months for free!

In most cases, this "discount culture" has not been created by the centre's young veterinarians, it is a tradition established by the owner(s) of the centre, who as a consequence lose all legitimacy when they ask their young employees to behave differently from themselves.

Discounts are especially harmful for the young veterinarian because:

- They encourage a toxic behaviour, financially speaking, that will probably accompany them for the rest of their career.
- They educate the client to expect a discount associated with each future service, creating confusion and dissatisfaction when this does not occur ("Why wouldn't the doctor give me a discount today? Is he angry with me?").
- Discounts are the best alibis for a mediocre service. When we expect to charge the full amount for all of our services, we automatically raise the bar of the standard of service we expect to provide because we remove the convenient "shortcut" of resorting to a discount when something doesn't go perfectly. Worse than that, we can try to get away with suboptimal results knowing beforehand that we can smooth it over with the discount...

- They considerably damage productivity and therefore impact our salaries. The veterinarians that habitually give discounts generate less income and, therefore, make themselves a hostage to lower salaries.
- Clients don't love or respect us more for giving them discounts. Clients love and respect us when we are competent and when we show respect, kindness and empathy towards them.



## 5. Looking to the future

### > SUMMARY

In this *Focus Special Edition*, we have sought to provide the young veterinarian with advice on how to get the best from their first years in their chosen profession, and guidance with the early decisions that will shape their veterinary futures. In this final chapter, we will look towards that future and consider some of the longer-term issues.

### 1/ Managing your professional development

The professional decisions the young veterinarian makes in the first few years of their career such as in which field to work and how to broaden their training will have a high economic and professional impact on their future. When making these choices, the young vet should be mindful of the following.

#### A) You should learn first in order to profit later

**Figure 1** shows the typical career pathway for many professionals. The first years are when the greatest increase in learning takes place. As a young professional, it is the best time with regards to your ability to absorb new knowledge and to integrate it and make it take root. However, the greatest salary increases will occur further in the future of your career, when the accumulated experience, personal and professional prestige, and your knowledge network in the sector often lets you get a better return on all your accumulated investment in your personal career development.

It is therefore a very serious strategic error to ignore the lesson of this graphic and to become focused on small salary increases at the beginning of your professional career. The key question for a young veterinarian with a vision of the future should be “In which of these clinics or alternative roles will I learn the most, so that in five or ten years I’ll be a more valuable professional in the market?”.

The salary differences between a successful professional and a mediocre one are much higher at the end of the professional career than at its beginning. Therefore, what is important is not to make more money in the first half, but in the second half of our career. It is a marathon, and the runner that wants to sprint at the start will create a serious risk of running out of steam on the way.

**Figure 1.** Typical career pathway for many professionals.



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## B) Balance continuous clinical training with organisational and personal skills

Recognising that for most veterinary surgeons their later career may well involve managing a practice and leading others, there are three areas of knowledge that deserve special attention from the young veterinarian:

- 1. Acquire communication skills.** These are essential in order to be successful not only with clients but also with your professional colleagues.
- 2. Acquire leadership skills.** Essential for anyone that aspires to someday direct teams of personnel.
- 3. Acquire business skills.** A good background in finance, strategy and marketing will be an excellent addition to the veterinarian's technical abilities.

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## C) Travel and learn languages

In a more global world, the professional that travels and masters languages has a decisive competitive advantage. Travelling to countries with more developed veterinary sectors and establishing relations with professional leaders from other countries and cultures can mark the difference between an average-level professional and an advanced-level one. The growing tendency in specialisation makes it essential today that any veterinarian wishing to stand out in a medical discipline has to travel and interact with centres of excellence wherever they may be in the world.

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## D) Specialisation, but with common sense

It is undeniable that veterinary medicine, as in the other health sciences, is tending toward specialisation. As we have discussed, as a young veterinarian you must soon choose if you want to be a good general practitioner or if you wish to follow the demanding and complex path to specialisation. Veterinary medicine, our clients and our patients need both career types so there isn't only one path to professional success. However, what is clear is that those young veterinarians that decide to chance everything on specialisation will need a bit of luck and a lot of skill when choosing their particular field. They will need to decide which specialities they think will develop most in the upcoming years and which of these has currently the lowest number of suitably qualified professionals, so providing the greatest opportunities. It is a difficult choice, with some suggesting Oncology, or Medical imaging, or Neurology or Gerontology.



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**The professional who travels and masters languages has a decisive competitive advantage.**

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## 2/ Setting realistic career goals

Veterinary medicine today offers a wide variety of career options and associated goals. At the beginning of a professional life, it's not always quite clear where the journey is going and which options will appear along the way. As such, it is always a good idea to look into more than one possibility and not to decide on a whim, or whilst feeling overwhelmed by all the options. Planning and consequently pursuing a career is something that takes time, but it's worth it!

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### A) Do an analysis

Before setting goals and starting to work towards them, performing a written analysis of your strengths and weaknesses is essential to point you towards the right path and realistic goals for the future. Looking into your professional and personal traits will give you a solid background for your decisions because it creates a transparent and easily accessible overview to compare with career and/or job descriptions that you have in mind or come your way. Take some time, make sure nothing will interrupt you and write down your strengths and weaknesses in two columns on a piece of paper just as they come into your mind. Allow yourself to "self-brainstorm" and let your thoughts flow easily. Then sort these traits into two further columns, one for professional and one for personal characteristics.

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## B) Find your fit

Having completed your strengths and weaknesses analysis, you can now start to think about career options that fit perfectly to your professional and personal strengths. If you are a very precise and ambitious learner, then you might want to look into scientific jobs. If you like teaching too, then it may be an option to consider a position as an assistant doctor at a veterinary university. However, if learning and researching intensively is something that does not suit your strengths, it is safe to assume that you would probably be very unhappy in a research laboratory.

For outgoing characters who love to have a lot of varying contacts with humans and animals, a job in small or large animal practice is an ideal environment where they can exercise their strengths. For vets who love small animal medicine but are not so much into communicating, it might be an option to steer their career more into specialisations like surgery or diagnostic imaging, which are both fields that mostly do not require the practitioner to engage too deeply with clients. Take some time and research both print and online-media as to which jobs are available and compare the descriptions to your profile. In this way, you will find out which options are appropriate for your first or the next step in your professional career.

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## C) Plan steps & goals

When it has become clearer in which direction you want your professional life to head, then it is time to plan the necessary steps that will take you there. In most cases, you will have to build your career in several stages, acquiring knowledge and experience as you move on. Plan your career “top to bottom”, starting with your final goal and then moving down to your current position stage by stage. In this way, you will create a realistic career pathway with achievable steps that stays focused on your final goal.

If you have done your “homework” consisting of analysing your strengths and weaknesses, and researching different options, then you will find a lot of offers that will take you to your final objective. If you find out that your final goal is not on the market yet, you could take this as an opportunity to invent a new service in the veterinary profession. Everything is possible so long as you conduct thorough research to find out, firstly if your new service is actually wanted by clients (and not just a “brilliant” idea), and secondly, how you would propose to offer this service and to get it into the market.

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## 3/ Investing in or buying out a business

At some point, in every professional veterinary career, the issue of owning or buying shares in a veterinary practice will come up. Everyone will have a different response, and our aim here is only to introduce a few issues for consideration.

The first point to highlight is that it is not “inevitable”. There is no “obligation” to become a practice partner or owner. It is possible to have a good veterinary career without taking this path. This is particularly true when working in large organisations such as hospitals, surgical groups, etc. where, as mentioned earlier, partnership is not the norm and where it is possible to have an increasingly responsible and well-remunerated technical or managerial career without ownership. However, in smaller practices and surgeries, career development often involves investing in, or taking over, the business.

It is important to understand what is involved. Becoming a shareholder or buying out a business does not mean that you continue in the same job as a vet but with a better salary in exchange for your financial investment. Your role will change completely because you will be taking on the role of a business director in addition to your existing role as a vet. This means that time and energy must be spent on running the business. That is not to say you will need to spend time preparing the accounts, or payroll, or paying supplier invoices, because these tasks can and should be delegated to a support team or external service providers, but rather on making the key decisions that any business director must make. The wider business decisions that are taken by owners include:

**The vast majority of entrepreneurs work more hours and sacrifice more family time for their work than employees.**



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- Making major strategic choices: What specialisations should be added or abandoned, how many surgeries to run, with whom should you merge, which business should you buy and to whom should you sell?
- Managing a team: recruiting, paying, evaluating, motivating, supporting, training and helping your employees to grow as well as where necessary, resolving conflicts and letting some people go.
- Managing key functions such as defining know-how, enhancing services, defining pricing and purchasing policies.
- Managing major investments such as equipment and facilities.

As you can see, none of these decisions relates directly to veterinary medicine or surgery. Indeed, if you dedicate time to some or all of these issues, you will have a correspondingly smaller amount of time for actual veterinary practice and will therefore have to accept that a step back from this part of your career may be necessary.

The two main questions to ask therefore relate to aptitude and desire: "Will you be able to do it?" and "Will you be happy to do it?". Of the two questions, the second is undeniably the most important as the best way of achieving good performance levels is through desire, training and a good support team. Such an important choice should not be made by default, because it is expected or because you feel you have no choice. Although historically all, or almost all, vets became business owners, these were usually small businesses in terms of staff, client numbers and amounts of investment. Although there is still plenty of variation from one country to another, and from one company to another, veterinary practices have grown and become more complex. They can now be owned and managed by a minority of vets or, in some cases, run by management professionals and owned by investors from other sectors.

At what point in your career should you move towards partnership or ownership? As we discussed earlier, it is rarely at the beginning. In fact, we can confidently say that it is better to be secure in your technical, interpersonal and business skills and, if possible, to have gained successful managerial experience as an employee before moving on to the next step. Depending on the individual involved, this can take 5, 10 or even 15 years. There is no standard answer, the time must be right for you.

For those considering entrepreneurship and having their own business, the following checklist may be useful:

- ✓ Do I understand clearly that to become an entrepreneur means greater financial and professional risks than those of a mere employee?
- ✓ Do I understand clearly that the vast majority of entrepreneurs work more hours and sacrifice more family time for their work than employees?

- ✓ Do I really like the fact that my work will have dimensions other than merely clinical? In other words, am I interested in and ready to lead personnel teams, to analyse my company's finances, to design communication plans for my company's clients, to make selection, hiring and firing decisions directly affecting the team?
- ✓ Do I already have some experience in these dimensions?
- ✓ Have I acquired any kind of training that helps me supplement my clinical knowledge with other more business-related knowledge?

## 4/ Finally

Finally, we should point out that regardless of the advice we have given, life is often about "taking" or not "leaving" opportunities as they present themselves. Even if they are unexpected and their timing is less than ideal. At that point, the decision is entirely yours to make.

**On your marks, get set, go! Now the decision is yours!**



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*This book has been prepared with the greatest care, taking into account the latest research and scientific discoveries. It is recommended that you refer to the specificities of your country. The publisher and authors can in no way be held responsible for any failure of the suggested solutions.*

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