



Critical Aspects of Effective Hiring

Karen E. Felsted, CPA, MS, DVM, CVPM

No matter what other issues we deal with in veterinary medicine—a changing economy, declining pet population, pet owners who believe everything they read on the Internet—finding and keeping great employees remains critical to providing outstanding patient care and making the practice financially successful.

Effective hiring is the starting point. A practice can offer great pay, have highly skilled managers and a terrific training program, but if they don't hire the right people, those things cannot overcome poor hiring decisions.

THE HARDEST JOB

About 10 years ago, an article in the *Dallas Morning News* quoted the CEO and president of a large craft store chain as saying, "If the person came in and filled out the application, we basically hired them unless they were followed by a policeman." At least, in this respect, times haven't changed much—most practice owners and managers don't really like interviewing or making hiring decisions, and often don't do it as well as they could or should.

Hiring is difficult because the skills that determine whether a person will be successful in a job are hard to evaluate. Most people focus on determining the quality of an applicant's technical skills, yet only 11% of employees fail because they lack the technical competence to perform the job. Instead, people fail because they lack:

- Coachability, 26%
- Emotional intelligence, 23%
- Motivation, 17%
- The temperament needed for the job, 15%.¹

If the hiring process doesn't focus on nontechnical competencies, it will fail.

THE HIRING PROCESS

In order to hire the right people, the practice hiring process must be systematic and disciplined. Key steps include:



- **Define the skills and traits** valued by the practice and needed for the job.
- **Determine the pay scale** needed to attract the right people.
- **Conduct structured, in-depth interviews** (telephone screens, in-person, working).
- **Verify outside information** (references, degrees, licenses/certifications).
- **Make a careful hiring decision** based on the skills and traits needed for the job.

1. Define Job Skills & Traits

The first step in effective hiring is defining the technical and nontechnical competencies valued by the practice and needed for the specific position. Hiring managers tend to focus on knowledge, work experience, and technical skills for two reasons:

1. These competencies come to mind first when defining a job.
2. It's often easier to determine if a candidate has them (eg, demonstrating how to insert a catheter).

However, it is more important to define the critical nontechnical competencies needed. For example, if it's a position that requires contact with clients, such as a receptionist, the candidate must have a friendly and sympathetic manner and the ability to accurately gather data from clients and communicate recommendations and other information.

If the practice has well defined, current job descriptions, critical nontechnical competencies should be added to the descriptions, if needed. If the practice doesn't have job descriptions, they should be developed and outline both technical and nontechnical skills and traits that are required for the job. [See Job Description Resources for information on developing job descriptions.](#)

When refining job descriptions, think through what a person in this job has to do every day and what skills it takes:

- Does the person need to be able to work without supervision and identify what needs to be done without being constantly monitored?
- Does the job require attention to detail?
- Is communicating with clients a significant job role?
- Must the person work well within a team?

While there are usually similarities in what a technician or receptionist does across practices, every practice has some nuances that are unique. These need to be identified in order to find the best candidate for the position and the practice.

2. Determine the Pay Scale

When hiring for a specific position, you need to determine the salary range. As with most things in life, you get what you pay for. Money isn't the only reason candidates accept a particular position, but it is a major consideration (along with benefits) and the salary offered must be competitive; generally no less than the 75th percentile to attract the type of employee you would like to hire.

Other aspects of the work environment—recognition, training, a good corporate culture—won't replace a poor salary, but they enhance the value of a moderate salary. Information about compensation and benefits typically seen in veterinary hospitals is readily available from [Compensation and Benefits](#) (AAHA Press; tinyurl.com/AAHACompensation-Benefits) and [Compensation and Benefits Survey](#) (VHMA; tinyurl.com/VHMABenefitsCompSurvey).

The Internet is also a great resource for salary information for veterinary-specific jobs (eg, technician) and nonveterinary-specific jobs (eg, receptionist.) Websites, such as [Salary.com](#), [CareerOneStop.org](#), and [BLS.gov](#) (Bureau of Labor Statistics) have salary information on particular jobs within certain cities or geographic areas.

3. Conduct Structured, In-Depth Interviews

Interview questions should be designed keeping in mind the traits and skills that the practice has determined are critical to the position—the goal is to use these questions to identify whether job applicants are right for this particular position and practice. Thoughtful, well-defined job descriptions, competencies lists, and interview questions help interviewers evaluate candidates during telephone, in-person, and working interviews (see [Interview Techniques & Descriptions](#) and [How to Remember Candidates](#)).

4. Verify Outside Information.

An important component of the selection process includes checking references and verifying information included in the resume or application.

Job Description Resources

- [Job Descriptions and Training Schedules for the Veterinary Team: aahanet.org/Store/ProductDetail.aspx?type=All&code=JOBDE](#)
- [Veterinary Hospital Managers Association, Inc, Job Descriptions: vhma.org/associations/1346/files/VHMAJobDescriptions.pdf](#)
- [Don't Downplay Job Descriptions: veterinarybusiness.dvm360.com/vetec/article/articleDetail.jsp?id=550134](#)

Interview Techniques & Descriptions

Behavioral interviewing is widely recognized as the best technique to identify how prospective employees will behave in certain situations. It is based on the theory that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior.

- The interviewer asks questions about how the candidate has handled situations in the past and compares those responses to how employees are expected to act in the interviewer's workplace.
- Defining the job and necessary skills is the key to preparing behavioral interview questions. See [Behavioral Interview Questions](#), page 73, for examples of these questions ([Examples 1 and 2](#)).
- If a job candidate has not faced a situation previously, the question can be presented as a hypothetical situation ([Example 3](#)).

Working interviews have become popular because they help determine whether a candidate is the right fit for the practice. These interviews range from a few hours to a day in length and candidates may be asked to observe or demonstrate essential skills. However, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- If the candidate will be required to work during the interview, he or she may legally be considered an employee, even if only for a short period of time.
- The practice's liability may be greater due to safety issues, such as working with animals, anesthesia, and drugs.
- Talk to your human resources consultant, attorney, and insurance carrier before moving forward with a working interview, clearly defining:
 - » Whether the interview is voluntary.
 - » What the candidate will be asked to do.
 - » What the candidate will be paid.
- Educate your team about:
 - » Goals of the working interview
 - » What questions they can legally ask
 - » Guidelines regarding what the candidate can be asked to do.



How To Remember Candidates

One of the most difficult tasks of hiring is remembering all the candidates and their responses

to your different questions/tests.

1. Before you even start the hiring process, **set up a standard form** to use throughout the process to evaluate each candidate.
2. **Take notes throughout the process**—while reviewing the application or resume, during the phone screen, and while conducting in-person interviews. Identify key strengths and weaknesses.
3. **Include the interview questions and answers** on the form and leave room to document other questions/comments that come up during meetings.
4. **Use the same interview questions for each candidate**; this will help you better evaluate their answers as well as compare them to each other.

Remember: Only include information and observations related to job duties (nothing about the candidate's age, sex, race, religion, country of birth, disabilities, or other nonjob related items.)

Checking References. Ask the candidate to provide a contact for each company included in the employment history; the best person to talk to is the candidate's supervisor. Personal references are generally not useful; candidates, for obvious reasons, include people who will say favorable things about them.

Checking references may seem to be a waste of time but it is an essential step in the hiring process. It is a rare company that will not confirm employment dates, job titles, and whether the employee is eligible for rehire. Even if this is the only information acquired, it confirms the accuracy of the application's information. In addition, the previous employer's reply about eligibility for rehire provides insight into the candidate's behavior and qualifications.

While large companies are less likely to give additional information, small companies often will.

- Ask as many questions as you think are applicable (see **Twenty Questions for Checking References**, page 75). All the person at the other end of the line can say is no.
- Start with easy factual questions; then move to more open-ended questions.
- Listen carefully for what is NOT said:
 - » Are there pauses or hesitations before a question is answered?
 - » What tone of voice is used?
 - » Are the questions answered using very precise language?
- Don't just take answers at face value; probe a bit. If you don't understand what the person is saying, ask for more information. Again, all they can do is say no.

License/Certification Verification. Unfortunately, not all candidates are honest when providing information in a resume or application. Therefore, verify all licenses and certifications through the appropriate organizations. Verify key educational information as well. Much of this can be done online.

Background Checks. Some practices do background checks for criminal convictions, credit information, or driving records. Some of this information can be obtained directly from governmental databases; other times practices use third-party data providers.

There are a number of laws regulating the dissemination and use of this information due to its sensitivity. Further discussion of background checks are beyond the scope of this article; however, if you are considering them, consult your attorney and/or human resources consultant first.

5. Make a Careful Hiring Decision.

Once you've gathered all the information about the various applicants, it is time to make a decision. You should have a fair amount of data by this time—findings gathered from the job application, cover letter and resume, telephone screen and in-person and/or working interview, reference checking, and the verification of degrees and licenses/certifications.

When making the final decision, remember the following:

- Use the same requirements to judge everyone.
- Make sure the evaluation is based on the competencies needed for the job.
- Don't overemphasize technical competencies; spend time evaluating nontechnical strengths and weaknesses.



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BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Example 1 (Based on Previous Experience)

Necessary Job Skill	Must be able to communicate well with clients in stressful situations.
Interview Question	Can you give me an example of a time when a client/customer was angry at you or the business and how you handled the situation?

Example 2 (Based on Previous Experience)

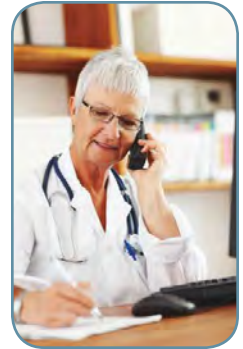
Necessary Job Skill	Must be able to work well as part of a team.
Interview Question	Can you give me an example of a time at school or in your last job when you felt one of your colleagues had been unfair to you? What did you do?

Example 3 (Based on Hypothetical Situation)

Necessary Job Skill	Must be able to communicate well with clients in stressful situations.
Interview Question	What would you do if the owner of the practice came out to the reception area and loudly chastised you in front of clients and staff about something you didn't do?

- Be specific about why a particular candidate is the right person.

It's not enough to say, "I just liked so and so and thought he'd be a good fit for the job." Instead, think through the exact strengths this person has and whether they fit the practice and the job. Good reasoning for a hiring decision should sound like this: "This candidate is a certified veterinary technician, has 3 years experience in general practice, was appropriately dressed for the interviews, sounded friendly and professional on the phone, and had references that checked out."



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IN SUMMARY

Hiring is tough and no practice is going to get it right every time, even when using an effective, structured hiring process. The final thing to remember is that when you have to terminate someone, analyze carefully what went wrong. Many managers say that, in hindsight, there were clues during the interview process that indicated potential trouble, but in a rush to get someone on board, these clues were ignored. Learn from your mistakes; the next time will be better! ■

Reference

1. leadershipiq.com/why-new-hires-fail/

(Continued on page 75)

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(Continued from page 73)

TWENTY QUESTIONS FOR CHECKING REFERENCES

1. What is the name and position of the person providing the information on the candidate?
2. What were the start and end dates of the candidate's employment?
3. What was the candidate's job title, duties, and responsibilities?
4. What was the candidate's starting and ending salary?
5. Why did the candidate leave?
6. Is the candidate eligible for rehire? (If the previous employer says no because the company's policy is not to rehire, ask whether he or she would rehire if that policy didn't exist.)
7. After you briefly describe the position you are looking to fill, does the previous employer think the candidate would be successful in this position?
8. Was the employee honest and did he/she have integrity?
9. Did the candidate arrive for work on time?
10. Was the candidate absent an excessive amount of time?
11. What was the candidate's quality of performance?
12. What were the candidate's strengths and weaknesses?
13. Did the candidate work well with clients and other staff?
14. Was the candidate able to work well independently?
15. Did the candidate possess satisfactory technical/computer skills?
16. Did the candidate have supervisory duties?
17. What were the duties and how well were they performed?
18. Did the candidate advance at the company?
19. What promotions did he/she receive?
20. Is there any other information that would be useful in making an employment decision?



Karen E. Felsted, CPA, MS, DVM, CVPM, is the owner of Felsted Veterinary Consultants, Inc, which offers business consulting to both private practices and the animal health industry. She is the treasurer for VetPartners (vetpartners.org) and the CATalyst Council (catalystcouncil.org) as well as a member of the Certified Veterinary

Practice Manager (CVPM) board of directors (vhma.org). She previously served as the CEO for the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (ncvei.org). In 2011, she received the Western Veterinary Conference Practice Management Continuing Educator of the Year award. She received her BA in marketing from University of Texas at Austin, her MS from University of Texas at Dallas, and her DVM from Texas A&M University. She practiced small animal and emergency medicine while maintaining a veterinary accounting and consulting practice. She has also provided services to Brakke Consulting, Inc, and Gatto McFerson CPAs, a veterinary-focused financial and consulting firm.

(Heartworm Hotline continued from page 87)

Avoiding side effects is important; therefore, corticosteroids should be used at the lowest dosage possible. After successful resolution of the treated problem, they should be discontinued gradually. If the clinical situation does not allow tapering the dosage to zero, using the lowest dosage possible, every other day, is a relatively safe alternative. ■

HWD = heartworm disease; HWI = heartworm infection; NSAID = nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug; PTE = pulmonary thromboembolism

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Clarke Atkins, DVM, Diplomate ACVIM (Internal Medicine & Cardiology), is the Jane Lewis Seaks Distinguished Professor of Companion Animal Medicine at North Carolina State University. He is also a member of the Today's Veterinary Practice Editori-

al Peer Review Board and American Heartworm Society's Executive Board. Dr. Atkins received the 2004 Norden Award for excellence in teaching. His research involves canine and feline heartworm disease and pharmacologic therapies for cardiac disease. Dr. Atkins received his DVM from University of California-Davis and completed his internship at Angell Memorial Animal Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts.