



PERSONAL WELLNESS

How to Retain Valued Employees

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Veterinary support staff are essential for a successful client experience and exceptional patient care. These valued team members hold many roles including client service representatives, kennel staff, veterinary assistants, and certified veterinary technicians or veterinary nurses. Despite their critical role in practice success, many team members feel undercompensated, underappreciated, and overworked. These feelings can contribute to high employee turnover rates, which impact overall morale of the team and the clinic's bottom line.

The cost to hire and train an employee can be as high as 50% to 75% of the annual salary for that position.¹ These costs add up quickly if multiple positions are turning over annually. Beyond this, a revolving door of team members may lead to a disruption in team dynamics and productivity, especially during the training period or times when employees are doing the work of multiple people simultaneously due to understaffing.

There are many factors that play a role in employee turnover. Some of the top challenges faced by technicians include low pay, lack of recognition, underutilization, and burnout.² While all team members should be appropriately compensated for their work, there are many ways beyond a higher

paycheck that veterinary clinics can improve employee retention.

SHOW APPRECIATION

Employees who never hear a word of thanks will be more likely to feel unappreciated and may struggle to find satisfaction in their work. Often, support staff take the brunt of an upset client's anger and may not receive the thank-you notes, positive reviews and gifts that veterinarians receive. While there is a week in October every year for veterinary nurses, all members of staff should be shown appreciation, and this should not be limited to a single week of the year.

Showing appreciation for staff can be done in many ways and range from very simple tasks, such as offering a word of thanks, to more involved employee appreciation events. Here are examples of what some clinics do:

- Offer individualized thank-you notes or words from doctors and the practice management team regularly.
- Provide popular snacks or treats as a thank-you or purchase lunch for the staff during a particularly taxing day or week.
- Recognize the exceptional contributions of team members publicly at staff meetings. Some clinics will have a "kudos jar" that all



team members can contribute to in order to thank their co-workers for specific tasks.

- Educate clients about the important role these team members play in patient care and encourage clients to include team members in their letters and positive reviews.
- Plan a team outing such as a sporting event, a local escape room, or a barbeque. Some clinics go above and beyond a single event and provide a team vacation, such as a cruise. Events such as these not only show appreciation for staff, but also allow for team-building outside of the workplace.

No matter how your clinic decides to show appreciation for team members, make sure that all team members are included.

TRAIN THE ENTIRE TEAM

All team members should be appropriately trained for their jobs to maximize efficiency. Workplace conflict is likely to escalate when some team members feel overworked due to poor training of others, ultimately leading to poor morale. Invite experienced employees to participate in training newer team members, which allows them to take ownership of their position and improve their own skills through teaching others.

A crucial aspect of training is providing timely feedback. A problem with employee performance cannot be fixed if the employee does not know there is a problem. Management teams should address problems as they develop instead of allowing them to fester. Effective managers should also encourage employees to address small problems between themselves instead of always needing a supervisor to intervene.

Finally, the entire team should be trained and encouraged to play a role in client education and communication. When clients hear the same message from multiple staff members, such as the importance of preventive care, they are more likely to follow recommendations made by the veterinarian. Client service representatives, veterinary nurses, and assistants often have more time to discuss recommendations with clients and lay the groundwork for acceptance of doctor recommendations, ultimately leading to healthier patients, increased revenue, and satisfied staff.

UTILIZE CERTIFIED STAFF MEMBERS EFFECTIVELY

Certified veterinary nurses have an especially high rate of turnover in the veterinary industry, with only half staying in the profession long-term.² Despite the fact that these hardworking individuals spend extensive time and money training for their jobs and pursuing certification, the average career of a veterinary nurse is only 5 to 7 years.³ In many clinics, the skills of well-trained veterinary nurses are vastly underutilized, contributing to feelings of underappreciation.

Clinics that do not take advantage of their veterinary nurse's skills are missing opportunities to improve efficiency, streamline workflow, and increase gross income.⁴ Empowering certified staff members to utilize their training will improve patient care, employee morale, and workplace efficiency for all team members, including the veterinarians.

INVEST IN WELLNESS

The topics of wellness and burnout have become common concerns for veterinarians, but the conversation needs to include technicians and support staff as well. These individuals are also emotionally invested in cases and may have a closer connection to some patients and clients than the attending clinician, depending on the intensity of their case involvement. Support staff are equally demoralized by negative social media, and in severe cyberbullying situations they can be the targets of threats.

Veterinary clinics can invest in wellness for their entire team in many ways, such as:

- Ask employees how they are doing regularly, but especially in times of high stress, such as during a social media onslaught or after the loss of a special patient.
- Ensure employees have a support network both inside and outside the clinic.
- Provide programs to promote physical health, such as healthy eating challenges or group workouts. Ask your employees what areas of their health they want to improve and provide encouragement for these goals.
- Encourage employees who are struggling to seek counseling or other professional help and give them the time off that they need to pursue this help.
- Encourage employees to maintain work-life balance and invest in activities outside of the clinic and the veterinary profession.

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■ Consider flexible scheduling to promote work-life balance. Ask employees about their ideal work week and try to accommodate these requests. While some employees may enjoy a traditional 5-day work week composed of 8-hour shifts, others may find working fewer shifts of longer hours more conducive to a happy life outside of work. Perhaps they have a particularly long commute or need to care for a child or other family member on certain days and would benefit from more days away from the clinic.

THE BOTTOM LINE

In order to successfully care for patients and clients, veterinary clinics must first care for their employees. By working to create a workplace culture that exhibits appreciation, utilizes team members effectively, and supports wellness and work-life balance, veterinary clinics will create a positive workplace environment and improve retention of valued employees. **TVP**

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