

GIVE AND TAKE An effective, successful mentorship is a two-way conversation in which both the mentor and mentee share a desire to learn from each other.

PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Evolution of Mentorship for Veterinary Professionals

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I have been fortunate to have many mentors throughout my veterinary career. Some have worked alongside me in the clinic while others have been peers or mentors I have met through my involvement in organized veterinary medicine. Then there are the mentors I've never met in person but have gotten to know through virtual relationships. Each of these mentors has offered a different perspective and level of support that I would not have had if I engaged in only traditional in-clinic mentorship.

One of the most exciting aspects of mentorship is the variety of forms it can take throughout an individual career. While mentorship's role is most recognized in the early-career period, it can have a positive impact on a veterinary professional's career at any stage, including during school and major job or life transitions. Both veterinarians and veterinary nurses can benefit from mentorship, as mentors and mentees. The number of ways that mentorship can be provided is growing and changing, allowing more people access to mentorship opportunities if they know where to look.

WHY MENTORSHIP MATTERS

Mentorship is considered crucial to success in the veterinary profession, particularly for early-career veterinarians and veterinary nurses.¹⁻³ Despite the

known importance of mentorship, many veterinarians share stories of dissatisfaction with the mentorship they received, or sometimes didn't receive at all. One of the top reasons a new graduate veterinarian leaves their first practice is a lack of mentorship.^{4,5} In a time where clinics are struggling to maintain a full staff, offering mentorship can make a difference in attracting and retaining young veterinarians.

Traditional in-clinic mentorship often focuses on the development of clinical skills. This is a critical area of support for new graduates who are entering practice with a large amount of knowledge but don't always have the practical knowledge needed to apply it. Additionally, they are trained in gold standard medicine but are often unprepared for offering options within a spectrum of care and working within client financial limits. This can be a particularly large source of stress for new graduates.² The most effective mentors also support the development of communication, leadership, and wellness skills. These non-clinical skills are areas where many early-career veterinarians feel particularly underprepared.^{2,6}

The heart of mentorship is the development of a relationship that is built on mutual respect and trust between mentor and mentee. In establishing the relationship, both parties must set clear expectations

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and goals for each other and the outcomes they want to achieve. Ultimately, when done well, the relationship is mutually beneficial to both mentor and mentee, supporting personal and professional development for all involved.

A TEAM OF MENTORS

In larger practices, mentorship responsibilities can be spread between multiple doctors. This benefits the mentors by decreasing the time commitment for each individual while still providing robust support to new colleagues. For the mentee, having access to a variety of mentors, each with different skills, experiences, and perspectives, can be invaluable. The concept of having multiple mentors who each provide support in different areas is known as mosaic mentoring.³

A large advantage of mosaic mentoring is that the mentee can gain support in many areas and continually develop new mentorship relationships to support the changing needs of different career stages. Just as a veterinarian may excel in a certain discipline, mentors will have areas they are particularly strong in providing support and training. For a given mentee, one mentor may focus on teaching surgical skills while another provides guidance in cases and client communication. A third mentor may be a peer from veterinary school or a veterinarian in another city who provides support and guidance for managing the emotional stresses of transitioning from student to doctor.

VIRTUAL MENTORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

With the development of new technology, mentor

relationships are no longer confined to the 4 walls of the clinic. In fact, you may never work in the same clinic as your mentor or even meet in person. Some virtual mentorships develop as informal relationships while others are structured, formal programs. Both types of virtual mentorship can help complete a full mosaic of mentors to ensure that every area where a veterinarian needs support is covered.

Many informal mentor relationships start on social media platforms, which allow veterinary professionals from around the world to connect in a virtual environment. Often referred to as “pocket mentors” because most communication happens on a smart phone, these mentorships are generally conducted via private messaging, email, or social media. This type of mentorship can be particularly helpful for someone who is seeking advice or guidance in non-clinical skills or about their career trajectory and not specific hands-on skills training. For a veterinary professional who wants to provide mentorship but doesn't have the time to dedicate to an intense in-clinic mentorship, pocket mentoring offers the opportunity to engage in mentorship on a more flexible basis.

More formal virtual mentorship opportunities exist through several online platforms and programs. Pawsibilities VetMed (pawsibilitiesvetmed.com) offers mentorship and professional development resources through its online platform, Pawsibilities. This program focuses on providing support to those from underrepresented backgrounds in veterinary medicine to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the profession. Pawsibilities welcomes veterinary professionals of all backgrounds as mentors and provides mentorship training.

MentorVet (mentorvet.net) also provides mentorship training to interested mentors as part of their program. They offer evidence-based programming and mentorship for early-career veterinarians, one of the populations most vulnerable to mental health challenges in the veterinary profession.⁷⁻⁹ The program offers peer mentoring groups, financial and mental health coaching, professional skills training, and pairing with a trained veterinary mentor for one-on-one support. Mentors complete a RACE-approved continuing education training program to help prepare them to best support their early-career mentees.

While virtual mentorship can most easily address non-clinical skills and provide support for the mentees,

clinical skills mentorship is also accessible. Several programs developed by the Veterinary Information Network's Veterinary Mentorship Academy (vin.com/vma) offer globally accessible opportunities to receive and offer mentorship for companion animal veterinarians at any stage of their career. The flagship program is the Virtual Veterinary Internship, a year-long virtual curriculum that rotates through all major subspecialties. It boosts clinical skills through case-based interactions with boarded specialists and peers and offers monthly seminars on non-clinical skills including communication, financial skills, and self-care. Interns are paired with their mentor and virtual intern class and backed up by Vets4Vets counseling services, ensuring the program can offer 360-degree personalized care.

FINDING A MENTOR

Most veterinary professionals will have multiple mentors throughout their careers. Some relationships will be short-term, focused on developing a specific skill or providing support through a particular career stage. Others will be long-term and may span over years. It is never too early or too late in a career to seek out a mentor or to give back by taking on a mentee.

There is no shortage of places to look for a mentor—both traditional in-person mentorship and virtual. Reaching out to local, state, and national veterinary associations is a good starting place, as well as the more formalized virtual mentorship programs.

Looking for someone who is in your field or career path of interest or who has experienced similar job or life

transitions can be a good starting place. Prospective mentees should never be afraid to reach out to a desired mentor to gauge their interest. Be clear about your professional goals and what you are looking for in the mentor relationship. Don't be offended if you get a "no." Some professionals may not have time to properly mentor, even in a virtual environment, or don't feel they have the skills necessary to mentor successfully.

THE FUTURE OF MENTORSHIP

The landscape of mentorship has changed as new technology created more opportunities for virtual and long-distance mentorship. Virtual mentorship allows mentees to benefit from the support of multiple mentors without being limited by location. It also offers those who want to mentor the opportunity to engage in mentorship on their own schedule. Mentorship can be very rewarding for both the mentor and mentee, and veterinary professionals are encouraged to engage in mentorship opportunities at all stages of their career. **TVP**

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