

Impact 3: The Selection and Retention of Fantastic Staff

Introduction

The veterinary market is becoming more challenging in a great many respects: increasing competition, downward pressure on drug prices and profit, ever greater client expectations, to name but a few. In such an environment, the recruitment and retention of professional, loyal and dedicated staff becomes an even greater issue. Why is this?

Firstly, to meet these challenges will require the synergistic efforts of the practice team – an effective, efficient team all singing from the same hymn sheet will be better placed to turn the threats created by change into opportunities. In order to achieve this you need to employ the right people; those professionally adept at doing a good job and with personal characteristics which dovetail with and complement the skills of the rest of the team.

Secondly, high staff turnover is an expensive business. To advertise, interview and train people costs a great deal of time and money – valuable resource, which would be better invested in developing your business and getting it ready to tackle the challenges which lie ahead.

Finally, and importantly, staffing issues cause a big headache for everyone, not least the managers! Anything that reduces stress at work has to be a positive thing, so improving your selection processes and retaining good people once you've got them, has to be a positive step in the right direction.

In summary, ***your staff are your practice***. Investing time and effort in selection processes results in the right people projecting the right image of your practice. In choosing people who fit comfortably with your practice culture, the chances of them moving on is reduced – therefore less resource is used in recruiting and training new staff.

Get it wrong? At best you will find yourself recruiting for the same position before too long. At worst, you will be stuck with a square peg in a round hole who is the cause of declining morale in the practice – in other words, a complete disaster!

Employing Fantastic Staff: Recruitment Procedure

1. Job description and candidate specification

Before you embark upon “sticking an ad in the job pages” a bit of preparation will go a long way in ensuring that you end up with the pool of candidates necessary to make a good choice. Firstly, ensure that you have an up to date job description for the vacant position and a candidate specification.

Job descriptions

A job description describes the tasks and responsibilities of a job, and is often used for existing staff to clarify their role and record changes as they occur. In the recruitment process the job description provides applicants with guidelines of what is likely to be required of him or her. The key elements of a job description are as follows:

- The job title
- To whom the job holder reports
- Primary objective or overview – the job’s main purpose
- A list of key tasks

Examples of key tasks for a receptionist might include the following:

- To answer the telephone, handle client enquiries and book appointments
- To produce a monthly reception rota in accordance with required staffing levels
- To complete insurance forms and other paperwork within the timelines specified by practice policy

Candidate specification

The candidate specification is a description of the ideal person for the job. It lists the skills and characteristics that will be looked for during the selection process - your job description will assist you in defining exactly what these are. One approach for drawing up a candidate specification is shown below. Each category should be considered twice - once with regard to the minimum acceptable standard and once with regard to the desirable standard.

The Seven Point Plan

- Physical Make-up: health, appearance, speech, manner (the latter two are very important when dealing with clients on a regular basis).
- Attainments: qualifications, experience, education, achievements.
- General Intelligence: intellectual capacity.
- Special Aptitudes: specific skills, e.g., surgical skills, manual dexterity, verbal communication, and so on.
- Interests: outside interests; social, physically active, practical (this may seem irrelevant for most positions but you can often glean a lot of useful information about a persons attitude and psyche when discussing outside interests).
- Disposition: dependability, interaction with others, ability to operate as part of a team.
- Circumstances: ability to work weekends and other on call times, family commitments, and so on.

When deciding on minimum acceptable requirements, be careful to set them neither too high, nor too low. Remember to balance the needs of the practice with the needs of the clients.

Once the job description and candidate specification is complete, it is time to make decisions about the salary and benefits which the job will attract. You may wish to consider the following:

- The 'going rate': what are other practices offering for a similar position?
- What might be included in the overall package, such as CPD allowance or pension.
- Also, bear in mind *the value* of an ideal candidate, should you be lucky enough to find someone who is ideal in every respect. Some employees are worth more than others in terms of the skills and experience that they may bring to the team, and from a purely commercial perspective they may have the potential to generate greater practice income. Allowing for some flexibility in the package will enable you to accommodate an outstanding candidate, should they come along, but remember to ensure that the job description is changed to include any additional responsibilities, which may be reflected in improved remuneration.

2. Attracting candidates

There is a shortage of good candidates for jobs in the majority of sectors, including veterinary – however, they are out there. The next part of the process then is to find these people and motivate them to apply; this involves placing an attractive proposal right under their noses – but how do you locate good talent in the first place?

In addition to the journal advertisement there are a number avenues to follow; many of these are more specific, and therefore more likely to be successful in finding the right candidate.

These include making direct approaches:

- Asking the staff if they know of anyone who might be suitable for the vacant position
- Contacting people you know in the profession and asking them for the names and contact details of anyone that they rate
- Keeping details on file of anyone you have met or have previously interviewed who have made a positive impact – renewing contact with them and updating yourself with their current situation may reap rewards

And non-direct approaches:

- Advertising the vacancy on your web-site or other internet sites
- And not forgetting, the ubiquitous journal ad!

3. Designing an advertisement

The look of the advert may be the first impression of the practice that the prospective candidate has, so use the practice logo (if you have one) and brand it with your practice's identity. Choose a clear, easily read typeface and layout and think about whether you want to use the job title itself or an attention grabbing catchline.

Content. A good recruitment ad should contain the following:

- Job title
- Job content
- Location
- Type and size of practice
- Description of minimum requirements
- Rewards and prospects (if any)
- Clear instructions as to how to respond

As well as design and layout, your ad should contain some sort of USP (unique selling point). It may be that you have good road and rail links to London, or you are in a very pretty rural location, or that you have invested in the latest equipment and technology.

Your advert may look something like this:

(Your logo placed somewhere at top)

Want to have some fun at work?!!

Are you keen to develop your nursing skills in a friendly, fun-loving practice where the emphasis is on employee and client satisfaction? If so, then read on!

We are looking for a full time qualified nurse to join our mixed practice, situated in beautiful rural Devon. Dedicated to providing the highest possible levels of veterinary care to our clients, we are very well equipped, and are committed to the provision of ongoing CPD for our staff. We offer an excellent package and good prospects for the right candidate.

If you are highly motivated, keen to develop your expertise within a well equipped practice situated in a lovely area, and a good team player, then please ring us for a chat and further information. Ask for Sue: telephone 01222 12345 or alternatively e-mail: Majicvets@devon.com

4. Selection techniques

Consider using the following, in addition to interview:

- Practical tests can be used where an easily tested skill is required. This would apply equally well to a receptionist, nurse or vet since all these roles require practical skills.
- Psychological tests are used to assess aspects of a candidate such as motivation, personality type and attitudes, and can be a very useful tool to use (pharmaceutical companies use these routinely, and they are readily available in a variety of forms - but you will have to be prepared to pay). However, they should only ever be used as a guide to support your initial judgment; too much emphasis in unskilled hands is positively dangerous!
- References can be useful but treat them with caution. You may get a more informative reference if you telephone the referee; in this way you can form a better impression of the referee's true opinion of the candidate – a voice often betrays underlying emotion!
- Involve your existing staff in the selection process. When employing a new receptionist for example, it may be useful to have them sit with someone on reception for a while. A nurse or vet could be given a guided tour of the practice by another member of staff. Feedback from existing staff is invaluable.

5. The interview

Interviews can be formal or informal, but the principal aim is to determine whether the candidate is interested in, and competent to do the job. In a veterinary practice you also need to consider how well they will fit into the existing team and how the candidate might be received by clients.

Produce an assessment form, which includes the elements of your seven point plan and allows a scoring of 1 -5 for each candidate. This will be used during the interview, along with any notes you wish to make. This will ensure some objectivity in what can become a very subjective process!

The following structure may be useful:

- Opening
Explain how you are approaching the interview, its format, and how long the interview will take.
- Give information
Give some background about the practice and the position you are interviewing for and why.
- Collect information
Start talking to the candidate about areas with which they are comfortable, such as their current job, then work backwards to discuss previous experience and, finally, forwards to find out their ideas of the future. Plan your questions beforehand, in order to cover all aspects of your seven point plan.
- Questions and queries
Allow time for the candidate to ask questions about the position and the practice.
- Closing
Ask the candidate how they feel about the job and the practice, and confirm that they are still interested. Close by telling them when they should expect to hear from you. Make sure you do indeed get back to them by the agreed deadline; it is unprofessional and unfair to do otherwise.

Interview Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- Explain that you will be taking notes throughout the interview. Bear in mind that the candidate has the right to see any notes you have taken, so take care in what you write down.
- Listen! Listen to what the candidate is saying and not saying and observe their body language
- Encourage the candidate with your own body language: look interested, nod, and smile
- Ask short, specific, open-ended questions – who, why, what, when, and how? Open questions encourage the other person to speak.
- Press for answers to questions that the interviewee appears to be avoiding
- Pause after answers. If there is a gap after the answer, don't rush to fill it. If you remain silent the candidate will often go on to offer information, which may not otherwise be revealed.
- Most importantly, plan your questions beforehand so that you obtain evidence of the characteristics you are looking for. For example, 'are you a team player?' will evoke a 'yes' from most, if not all, candidates. Instead you may ask for an example where good team work has really made a difference to them, or for their thoughts on what constitutes an effective team. You may also present them with a scenario and enquire as to how they might react in that situation (responses may reveal a tendency to work alone or to involve others).

Do Not:

- Ask closed questions (yes/no)
- Take notes the minute the candidate has made a slip up - note it later
- Ask for information already on the C.V. or application form unless you need the candidate to expand on it
- Make assumptions or guess answers
- Patronise the interviewee
- Ask leading questions
- Ask questions which may be construed as sexist, ageist, racist or focused on disability.
- Most importantly, do not talk more than they do!

6. Making your choice

- Make an initial 'gut feeling' decision immediately after the interview, e.g., definitely not/marginal/suitable/ideal
- Look again at the original criteria and compare each candidates performance against the criteria
- Wait until you have seen all the candidates before choosing
- Make the decision without delay, since a good candidate may receive other offers in the meantime
- Once the candidate has accepted the position, reject the other candidates - tell them you were impressed and that it was a close decision, since you may need them in the future.

7. Patience is a virtue

However long it takes, you must wait for the right person! Stress levels created by under-staffing will not be eliminated when the wrong candidate joins the practice team – in fact, the situation could be made worse.

It is always worthwhile remembering that veterinary practice is a people business. So whilst locating staff with the right balance of skills and experience can be a lengthy process you should stick it out – however long it takes – and make sure that you recruit the right person. It will be worth it!

8. Retaining fantastic staff

Once you've recruited and built an outstanding team, it is imperative that you hang on to them; exceptional staff are like gold dust! For thoughts and ideas on how to do this, simply turn to the last two editions of Impact and read the articles entitled **The Art of Motivation** and **Building the Practice Team: Skill Development**. Therein, lies the answers to most of your questions.....the remainder will be answered in following editions of impact



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