

Cultural Environment of the Veterinary Profession: Change is Possible

Amanda M. Shelby, BSc, RVT, VTS (Anesthesia & Analgesia)

E-mail: gasgirl.vts@gmail.com

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/amanda-shelby-194436211>

Description: Change is Possible! This presentation focuses on identifying why in the veterinary profession we are losing veterinary support staff from clinical practice to other career paths within and out of veterinary medicine. The goal is to focus on actions we, employers and the employees, can make to improve the culture of veterinary medicine, improved mental health of our colleagues and offer resources for implementing change.

Learning Objectives:

Learn suggestions to offer change into our profession to improve longevity of the veterinary technician's career path.

Learn contributing factors to the destruction of the veterinary technician and how to optimize retainment and engagement from a peer perspective.

Summary:

To date, veterinary medicine is hemorrhaging veterinary professionals—support staff, veterinary technicians and veterinarians to other markets or worse. The average career span of a veterinary technician is reported to be under seven years. This short retainment of our trained veterinary professionals coupled with the increasing demand from pet ownership is crippling our profession.

In the NAVTA 2016 Demographic Survey, just under half of the veterinary professionals who indicated that they have left clinical practice indicated they have left the veterinary professional industry all together! This while the growth of clinical veterinary practice demands is ever increasing in report after report from business growth to pet ownership to veterinary professional demand, we are left to wonder how do we reinspire our colleagues to stay the course of their once passionate career. Therefore, it's imperative we work together to identify and recognize the cause for short tenure in veterinary clinical practice and implement change.

The NAVTA 2016 Survey listed primary causes include insufficient pay, lack of respect from employer (underutilization of skilled technicians), burnout/compassion fatigue and lack of benefits. What is interesting however, is that 80% of respondents in this survey did however have some paid vacation and reduced/discounted pet care, 70% received health insurance, paid holidays and CE expense assistance and 60% had a retirement plan available. Likely the increase in benefit extension is associated with the great increase in corporate practices compared to that of privately owned. In 2019 just under 15% of veterinary hospitals were owned by large groups/corporations and this number is only growing—in 2019 alone, there was an estimated 7-8% increase in community clinic buyouts to corporate-large groups. This could likely result in less expensive, more wide spread extension of benefits to all employees within the structure of these facilities. And often within these veterinary controlled large groups are veterinarians. This emphasizes the importance of veterinary technicians asking for a seat at the table as a Chief Nursing Operations Officer.

While the 2020 median pay for a veterinary technician according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics was just over \$36,000/year and the projected rate of growth in the number of veterinary technician jobs of 16% is much greater than average job market growth. The 2008 Biennial Economic Survey of US Veterinarians found that per hired credentialed veterinary technician, hospital revenue increased greater than \$160,000! This relatively dated value of revenue reinforces the value credentialed veterinary technicians provide a clinical practice. Veterinary support staff are the highest expense to a veterinary business. These expenses include salaries, employer's share of employee taxes and workman's compensation and of course, benefits they provide. However, a veterinary business cannot be profitable without its employees. Place value in the staff you hire and use them to their full potential—this means maximizing all veterinary support staff—client services, veterinary assistants and credentialed veterinary technicians. This will not only bring all veterinary professionals job satisfaction and loyalty but also maximize hospital revenue allowing the practice owners to return that investment into their employees' salaries and benefit packages.

As part of the veterinary team, our compensation and job duties will differ but our benefits extended to us via our employer should not. We are members of the same team—in soccer, only the goalie can use their hands but they rarely score goals to win a game. Thus, the veterinarian is tasked with diagnosis and prescribing and the credentialed veterinary technician with patient care and assessment, execution of treatment plan and monitoring and often client communication, client services with initial assessment of urgency, client communication, fee collection and scheduling etc. To maximizing hospital revenue isn't to limit benefit but rather extend them, attract the best team members and then utilizing them to their fullest capacity—this means not just what their degree or licenses allow them to accomplish within your states practice act but rather, recognize individual strengths and weaknesses and delegate responsibilities based on these strengths. This means, don't lose or pass up on someone who demonstrates unique talents that could benefit your business and don't reward longevity with increased responsibility but rather compensation. This is the ultimate cause for loss of any team members from our profession, improper and underutilization of each individual team member's unique strengths which limits loyalty and sows discontent resulting in departure from practice and eventually the field.