

What we learned from the AABP human resource management survey

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Abstract

Veterinary practices are small businesses, and subject to the same challenges that other small businesses face. As the business grows it becomes necessary to add personnel, both professionals and support staff, to serve customers and support a host of other necessary tasks. Veterinarians have identified human resource management (HRM) as an important need for growing practices. Ideally, better HRM will help veterinary practices achieve several important outcomes, such as customer satisfaction, high employee performance, strong business results, employee fulfillment, and minimal employee turnover. This presentation reports on results of the AABP human resources management survey.

Key words: AABP, human resources, survey

Résumé

Les pratiques vétérinaires sont de petites entreprises qui sont sujettes aux mêmes défis que les autres petites entreprises. À mesure que l'entreprise se développe, il devient nécessaire d'ajouter du personnel (professionnel et de soutien) pour servir les clients et accomplir plusieurs autres tâches nécessaires. Les vétérinaires ont identifié la gestion des ressources humaines (GRM) comme un besoin important pour les pratiques en développement. Idéalement, une meilleure GRM va aider les pratiques vétérinaires à atteindre des résultats importants comme la satisfaction de la clientèle, un haut rendement des employés, de solides rendements de l'entreprise, l'épanouissement des employés et un roulement minimum du personnel. Cette présentation présente les résultats de l'enquête de l'AABP sur la gestion des ressources humaines.

Introduction

The American Association of Bovine Practitioner's (AABP) Practice Management committee commissioned a survey of AABP members to better understand HRM practices used in private veterinary practices. This survey asked veterinarians who were members of AABP to describe their practices, HRM used in their organizations, and a few important outcomes such turnover and perceptions of business performance.

Materials and Methods

The researchers developed a survey based on similar research previously completed with other professionals¹, standard measures of employee turnover, and several items adapted for this veterinary audience. The survey was made available on the AABP website beginning on November 19, 2018 and respondents were required to log in using their member accounts to complete the survey. Weekly email notifications were sent to the approximate 4,789 members of the organization with active email addresses, encouraging them to participate. The survey closed after being open slightly more than 4 weeks on December 19, 2018.

There were 111 responses to the survey received out of the 4,789 AABP members with an email address, yielding an overall response rate of only 2%. Since we were only interested in responses from AABP members who were actively engaged in private veterinary practice, responses from those who were not involved in private practice were terminated, further reducing the number of possible respondents. Two responses were deleted from the data, 1 was incomplete and the other was a duplicate, leaving 109 usable responses in the dataset.

Results

Demographics

The majority, 68 of the 109 (62%) respondents, were owners in their business; a minority, 41 (38%) indicated they were associates. On average, respondents had been at their current organization for 15.2 years, ranging from a minimum of less than 1 year to a maximum of 50 years. Respondents indicated their total number of years as a veterinarian on average was 17.9 years, ranging from a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 51 years.

Respondents indicated their type of practice as large animal (50; 46%), mixed (57; 52%), and small animal (2; 2%). Table 1 describes the size of practices included in the data ranging from a solo practitioner to large practices with up to 32 veterinarians and 100 support staff.

We asked respondents to indicate whether their practice employed a manager "whose responsibilities include human resource management." Most practices (63; 58%) indicated that they did not, while 45 (41%) did have a manager specifically with HRM responsibilities.

Table 1. Number of employees in the practice. (N = 109).

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Number of veterinarians	1	32	5.21	4.65
Number of support staff	0	100	10.17	13.74

Turnover

Veterinarians have indicated that turnover is a problem. We asked respondents to indicate the number of veterinarians and support staff who had left over the past 2 years. We asked how many of each group had left because they were terminated or released by the business (involuntary turnover), and how many quit the organization on their own (voluntary turnover).

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) provides benchmarking information to help organizations compare certain HRM metrics. SHRM's 2017 benchmark report of 1,175 member organizations placed total turnover at 18% and voluntary turnover in 911 organizations at 13%.² The average total turnover and voluntary turnover, shown in Table 2, for all personnel, support staff and veterinarians compares favorably to the SHRM benchmark averages. Maximum turnover levels indicate that turnover can be much higher in some circumstances.

Human Resource Management

We asked members to indicate their level of agreement with statements about HRM practices used in their business. A 5-point scale was used ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with a neutral option in the middle. Because HRM practices sometimes differ between veterinarians and support staff, we asked participants to respond separately for each group of employees.

Figure 1 illustrates HRM used with veterinarians and support staff ranked in order of most to least-used with veterinarians. Providing flexible hours and engaging employees in suggesting improvements were the most common practice used with both groups of employees. The least-used practice with veterinarians was standard operating procedures (SOPs), and the least used with support staff was hiring in-

centives. There were considerable differences in how certain HRM practices were used between veterinarians and support staff, such as training, rigorous hiring practices, and bonus or incentive pay.

Perceived Employee Performance

We asked members to rate their perception of employee performance in their practice, again separating veterinarians and support staff. Overall, respondents were satisfied with the performance of both veterinarians and support staff in their practices, indicating strong agreement with positive statements about their willingness to increase workload, put in extra effort, and go above and beyond job requirements.

Perceived Business Performance

Members rated their perception of how the practice was performing as a business. Most agreed strongly that they did a good job of satisfying customers with a mean rating above 4. Their perception of how satisfied others in the practice were was somewhat lower at around 3.5. On average, respondents slightly disagreed that their company was achieving its full potential.

Relationships Between HRM and Veterinary and Support Staff Turnover

There are many factors that lead to employee turnover; some factors are within the control of management and others are not. In our study we measured 2 types of turnover: total turnover and voluntary turnover, each with veterinarians and support staff. Voluntary turnover occurs when an employee chooses to leave on his or her own. This kind of turnover tends to be more harmful to a business, because good-performing employees are seldom asked to leave. From a business point of view, voluntary turnover is the unwanted kind and the one that HRM is designed to prevent. We conducted Spearman's correlation analysis to see which of the 22 HRM practices we measured were correlated with turnover.

For support staff there were no significant relationships between HRM practices and total support staff turnover or voluntary support staff turnover. We found several significant, negative relationships between veterinary total and voluntary turnover and HRM practices. A negative relationship indicates that as the prevalence of the HRM practice increased, turnover tended to decrease.

Table 2. Total and voluntary turnover of staff and veterinarians per year.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Total turnover	109	0.00	2.25	0.15
Total voluntary turnover	109	0.00	0.50	0.09
Total support staff turnover	105	0.00	0.70	0.14
Voluntary support staff turnover	105	0.00	0.60	0.10
Total veterinary turnover	109	0.00	2.00	0.14
Voluntary veterinary turnover	109	0.00	1.00	0.08

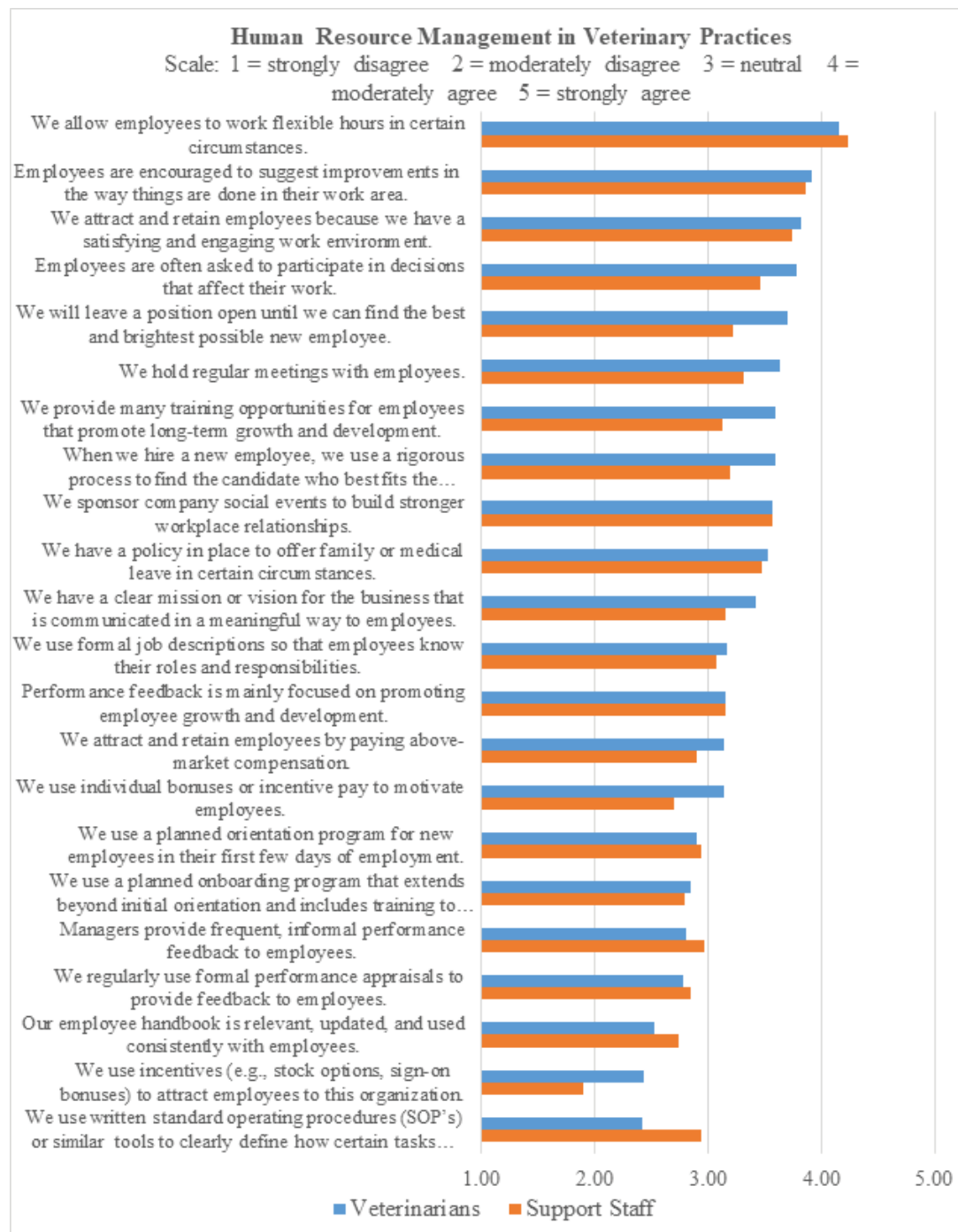


Figure 1. Human resource management in veterinary practices.

For veterinarians, we found 2 weak but significant correlations between HRM and total turnover; providing the opportunity to suggest improvements ($r_s = -0.214, p < 0.05$), and providing an engaging work environment ($r_s = -0.254, p < 0.01$).

For voluntary veterinary turnover, meaning the veterinarians chose to leave, we found several more weak-to-moderate, significant correlations. These included: having a

mission statement ($r_s = -0.318, p < 0.01$), leaving a position open for the right candidate ($r_s = -0.209, p < 0.05$), providing orientation to new veterinarians ($r_s = -0.200, p < 0.05$), asking veterinarians to participate in decisions ($r_s = -0.254, p < 0.01$), encouraging employees to suggest improvements ($r_s = -0.343, p < 0.01$), and providing an engaging work environment ($r_s = -0.310, p < 0.01$).

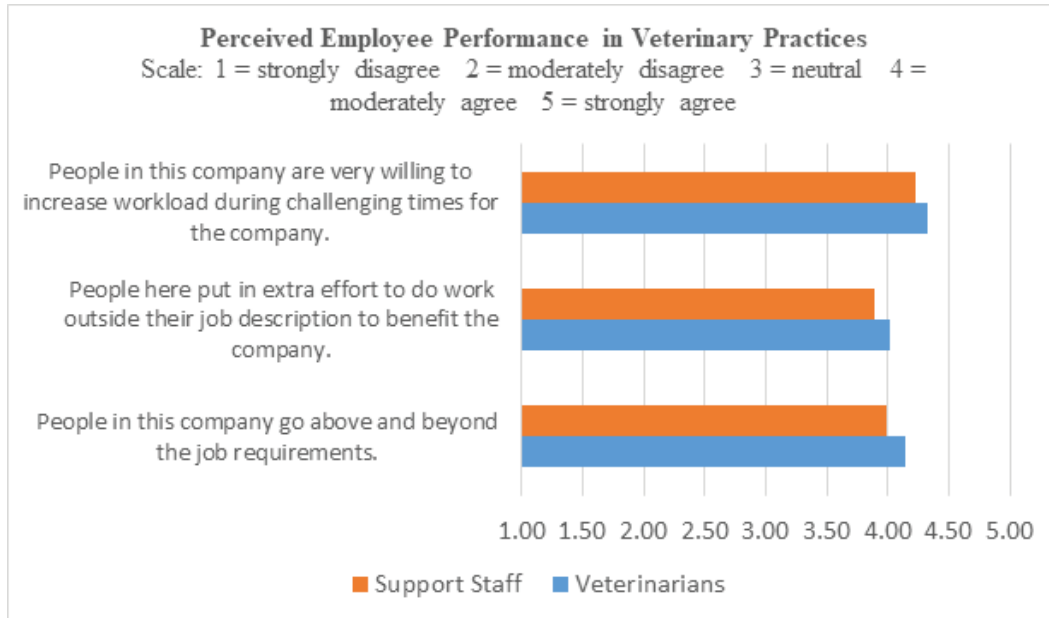


Figure 2. Perceived employee performance in veterinary practices

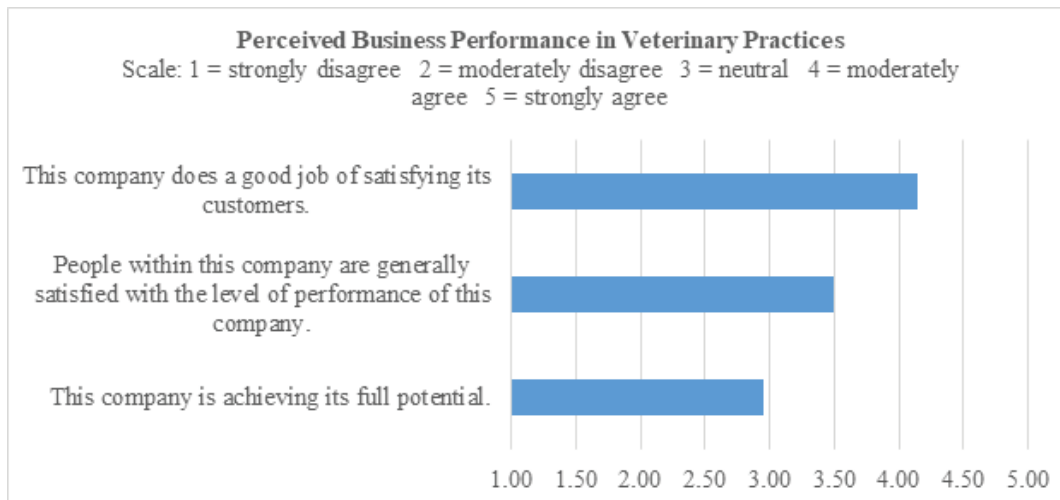


Figure 3. Perceived business performance in veterinary practices.

Conclusions

Veterinary practices are making good use of several important HRM practices; practical benefits such as flexible hours are important to many employees. The opportunity to participate in decisions and to make suggestions for improvements are 2 important indicators of engaging employees. Interestingly, both of these items are associated with reduced voluntary veterinary turnover. Taking an aggressive approach to selecting the right candidate in the first place should lead to better hiring choices; this may be reflected in the relationship we found between reduced veterinary

turnover and leaving a position open for the right person. Finally, providing orientation should help new veterinarians get started well and may be related to keeping them longer.

References

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