

Building your bullpen

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Abstract

According to the AVMA, 20% of veterinarians are expected to retire in the next decade. This means that nationwide there will be a need to replace this highly qualified workforce. However, 1 of the top complaints on list-serves for veterinary clinic owners is the inability to find and retain quality employees, specifically veterinary associates in rural America.

For years, veterinary clinics have been able to rely on the tried and true “job listing ad” to garner replacement associates for their private practice. However, for a variety of reasons, today’s generation of veterinarians is more likely to choose an alternative path into corporate, urban, or relief-type work.

To compete with these areas, we must rethink our recruitment process, beginning earlier, evaluating continuously, and offering aggressively. Fostering long-term relationships with job candidates that span years, not weeks, and wooing them with contract offers that extend beyond traditional salary and benefit packages.

To compete in today’s aggressive hiring economy, we must adapt and pursue other avenues that make our practices more appealing to the next generation of veterinarians.

Key words: new hires, associates, HR, recruitment, contracts

Introduction

Every practice wants to find that “diamond in the rough,” the student or associate that is a long-term solution to their vacancy. In fact, the inability to find such a candidate is one of the top complaints in most clinic ownership groups.

However, many people expect their ideal candidate will just “appear” when they need them, or when their job listing is posted. The days of such a possibility are gone. Due to debt load, salary discrepancy, decreases in desired hours, location and a myriad of other factors, associates are not responding and applying to such a classic approach. This is not all bad, it just means the current plan is not working, therefore we need to change the plan, not the goal.

What it does mean that it is you are responsible for adapting, not the applicant. You can foster this shift in mentality by creating a system that continuously grows and exposes students and associates to your clinic’s values and culture. In turn, fostering an environment that perpetually turns out good job candidates.

We can begin this shift by understanding the core principles of why people take a job. Potential employees

want to work where they feel heard, valued, needed, wanted, respected, and invested in. Employers placing value in these areas will be able to compete with other offers of higher salary or benefits, but these concepts are extremely hard to convey in a 1-day or 1-week clinic visit.

This means we cannot just invite candidates a couple of weeks before graduation. We need to have them visit the practice as many times as possible during their 4th year to evaluate them. But many times, that is also too late to start the recruitment process! Unless you have a highly desirable work area or huge salary offering, you will likely be unable to compete with other clinics.

So how do we improve our odds?

Finding Candidates

The author believes that 1 key to finding great hires is starting the recruitment process early and often. This means playing into the statistics game. According to the US Census,² 72% of adult Americans live in or close to the city they grew up in. This is due to the desire to be close to family, familiarity, and a low cost of living. Additionally, of the 28% of those who do move away from home, one-third stay in the same state.

If we can harness these statistics to help us build a “bullpen” of potential recruits locally, we would, in fact, have time to build a relationship with them. Consider these statistics for a second. If your clinic would send 4 students from your area per decade to veterinary school, up to 3 of them are likely to return home. That would mean an instant upgrade in terms of finding candidates and retaining them in the long term.

So, we need to start building our “bullpen” early. How early? The author believes that this relationship should begin in middle or high school and extend through veterinary school. Along the way, you want to be educating the individual on your clinic’s culture, techniques, and system. Showing them how you value and grow your employees and their opportunities.

As a model, the author proposes the following system:

- Middle Schoolers – ½ days 1 to 2 times per year
- High Schoolers – 1 to 2 days 1 to 2 times per year
 - Plus offering of a job if a good candidate
- College Students – 3 to 4 days 1 to 2 times per year
 - Plus offering of summer or break-time jobs
 - If virtual learning is engaged, full-time or part-time employment is an option as well
- Vet Students – 2 to 4 weeks 1 to 2x per year
 - Any time they are free they can visit
 - Acceptance of any ambulatory students from your local school

- Open advertisement as an externship site nationally to veterinary schools/student groups

This type of a system fosters the individual's growth in the industry as well as the long-term interest in the clinic. When students visit, remember that this is a potential candidate and try to always build the relationship in a positive manner and as if they were a current applicant.

Whether building a pool of future candidates or combing through current applications, you will want to continually be evaluating and training participants. Again, with the mentality that each student, no matter the grade level, experience or background could be a future employee. This will allow you to build up a database of good candidates, especially in the case of visiting ambulatory or veterinary students.

Evaluation

It goes without saying, but you should always be on the lookout for the next great veterinarian who could potentially be 1 or more of your long-term ride-alongs. You never know who will be interested in working for you. Students usually visit for 1 to 4 weeks at a time, providing you and your practice a great chance to evaluate their talents and really get to know them.

These ride-alongs are a good time to practice your informal interview and evaluation techniques. In veterinary medicine the formal interview process is generally just that, a formality. CVs are often similar between applicants, and GPA is not always a good indicator of medical prowess. Therefore, developing a consistent and thorough informal interview is key, and ride-alongs provide a great chance to develop these skills.

So, how do you conduct this less-formal interview and evaluation process? It begins as more of a 2-way street. You want to foster an environment where the potential candidate becomes comfortable asking questions of you and about the practice. Practice giving the full truth as a result. Sugar coating answers is never the way to go when seeking a long-term employee; it paints a false image and leads to mistrust in the long term.

When you are in this setting, you can also get a sense of the candidates' goals, aspirations, specialties and begin to paint a picture of how they might fit into your practice. During this image painting, candidly share the pros and cons of each of their visions and begin to build trust with them.

The final thing I like to do is a little working interview. Even if the ride-along is just a student, I like to see what their skill level is (this is a bonus if another practice calls for a reference later as well).

One of my favorite things to do is put a little strain on them; push them to their current knowledge limit. You can do this by asking the veterinary student to IV, pump or do surgery on a cow or younger students to place a halter or move a cow, both of which should *always* be supervised activities. See how they perform. It is not hard to hide flaws

or shortcomings in conversation, but when you "Get a little sh*t on it," you really get to see what they are made of.

Additionally, I like to see my ride-alongs communicate with clients and see how they talk, relate, and connect with them. Because, as we know, how they present an idea is often more important than the information they are presenting.

The final thing I encourage all owners to do with all ride-alongs is establish 3 to 5 things that the student must be able to do. Consider it a checkoff of core-competencies to even be considered for a job. For our clinic, any potential job candidate must be able to complete:

- US pregnancy check to 28 days
- Cut a D/A solo (time is not as important)
- Have a consistent physical exam

We can train almost every other major skill after that, so we just want to focus on the 90% of the productive work they will have to complete for us. You want to make these core competencies something you can use to weed out potential candidates, which will help you avoid a lot of headaches later.

Overall, focusing in on a consistent standard for evaluation in an informal setting is key to identifying potential candidates as well as evaluating current candidates. Placing them in real world situations of stress, core competencies, and client communication can also help identify a winning candidate. However, just know, if they score high marks in their evaluation you will still have to do a lot of work to land them in the hiring process!

Hiring

So, you are finally ready to make a move and "call-up" one of your bullpen? How do you make sure your offer is not a flop?

First, we must remember that a job offer is just that, an offer. Again, the times have changed. Gone are the days of someone taking the first job they get offered. Instead, we must prepare for a "no." But "no" doesn't mean no, so don't give up. If your first offer was not good enough, you may need to counter with a more valuable one. But fear not, you might not have to just rely on an increase in the salary that was offered. There are other ways to increase the offer's value.

Much like this generation's desires for "practice type" have changed, so too has their "value system for contracts." While salary and benefits play a huge role in the negotiations, there are other ways to add value to your offer. I have listed and described several of these below:

- Loan Repayment – While this cannot be used as a benefit according to the government, it can be stated that you will consider or you will provide, X dollars a year towards their loans. This amount can be up to \$5,500 per year and represents a considerable benefit to potential candidates.
- Housing – Many students graduate with debt loads too high to purchase their own home. This requires rental of a property. Providing this housing, rent

free, can be an excellent value and could save them \$10,000+ per year.

- Vacation – We are not talking straight vacation days. What if, instead, you allowed for 1 international CE event a year or an international practice visit to “improve” your practice. Many people love to travel but lack funds or time; this could provide them the means and justification they would need to do that.
- Flexible Hours – Some people do not like early AM; some love it. Provide them flexible start times or flexible workdays. Help a new mom or dad foster a relationship with their kiddo, and perhaps they will come work for you rather than a standard M-F 8 to 5 clinic.
- Health Care – The ever-increasing cost that really can kill a family budget. While not a small expense on your part, it can go a long way in contract negotiations; and don’t forget the 26-year-old age cutoff for parental insurance when negotiating.
- In-Clinic Daycare/Schooling – COVID has changed everything. But with or without COVID, kids need to be watched and taught by qualified individuals. With daycare running at a national average of >\$10,000 per year/kid it would be possible to provide that in-house as a significant benefit to your employees. A similar model could be used for schooling as well to improve the child’s learning and reduce the risk of disease spread.
- 401K/Retirement Plans – Many contracts already include a plan of some kind, but you can always increase the contribution to the plan and show them just how much that means over time. Additionally, using external sources (provided via the clinic) to educate the employee regularly on financial matters can be a great value add as well.
- Fringe Benefits – While this area rarely is a huge dollar value, it can add up quickly. Providing for work use mileage, clothing, disposables, internet,

computer, etc. can add a ton of value to a contract that will also improve employee attitude and quality of life. Consider providing a larger dollar figure in this area and see how employees respond.

Break out of the stereotypical box and create unique value in your contract offering. Match it to your practice values as well as the candidate’s values and you will be able to find a common ground.

Conclusion

In the end, the author encourages all owners to adopt the Walter Lippmann model of, “Where all think alike, no one thinks very much.” Attack job recruitment in a different way than the rest of the industry. Seek to grow your “bullpen” from a young age on up, continually evaluating all potential candidates and offering unique compensation models to prospective candidates.

While this model will not always produce major league talent, it will help to increase the likelihood of the right fit at the right time for your practice.

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