

# Engineering work-life balance opportunities into your veterinary practice through non-traditional work schedules and a ProSal compensation system

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## Abstract

Work-life balance is a concept that is a major discussion point within many businesses, not excluding large animal veterinary clinics. There are endless definitions and views on how this “balance” can be achieved, and is reflective of each individual’s needs. It is important to note that work-life balance not only benefits the individual veterinarian but also the health of the business. One approach to offering a tailored approach to individuals is through unconventional work schedules and a ProSal compensation system. While these are not the answer to all work-life balance issues, these may provide some options for veterinary businesses to consider.

**Key words:** practice management, work-life balance, ProSal, veterinary business

## Introduction

The idea of work-life balance is a hot topic that has seen increasing amounts of discussion within veterinary businesses. Achieving this concept of balance is variable among individuals, based on their individual needs. There are several studies showing that this concept of work-life balance is beneficial for both the well-being of the individual veterinarian, as well as the veterinary business. Ways to provide this balance can include unconventional work schedules as well as a hybrid compensation system which pays based on work completed. These allow individuals to customize when they work, and for the business to fairly pay individuals who are on variable work schedules. While these two concepts do not need to be used in conjunction with one another, they complement each other well.

## What is work-life balance?

One of the biggest struggles in this conversation of work-life balance is found in the definition. Other terms might include work-life integration and work-life synergy. These are all describing a search for a healthy balance between one’s personal life and their professional life. This ambiguous definition leads to the realization that one veterinarian’s idea of work-life balance may be 20-hour workweeks with no on-call, while another veterinarian’s may be 60-hour workweeks with the guarantee of every Sunday off. The definition is as unique as the veterinarian themselves.

This gives insight to the many non-workplace life activities that individuals view as important within the discussion of work-life balance. Historically, work-life balance has been dominated by discussions of work-family balance,<sup>3</sup> however, it is important to note (as shown in Figure 1) that there are many areas individuals look to spend time outside of work. Within large animal veterinary medicine, better integration between worked hours

and personal life may be driven by life domains examples such as pursuing a hobby, caring for children, advancing education (board certification, MBA, etc.), traveling as well as a later-career “slow down” (in place of a traditional retirement).

## Why does work-life balance matter?

For the veterinarian, work-life balance has the potential to cause profound improvements in their mental health and job satisfaction. Merck Animal Health’s “Veterinary Wellbeing Study 2020” found that veterinarians have as a profession room for improvement with mental health. They have higher levels of burnout than physicians, even though they work fewer hours. Veterinarians also are 2.7 times more likely to think about suicide than non-veterinarians. Women veterinarians were found to have statistically increased levels of psychological distress than men when compared to the results of the 2017 Veterinary Wellbeing Study. The same Wellbeing Study found that predictors of high wellbeing included work-life balance and spending time with friends and family.<sup>5</sup>

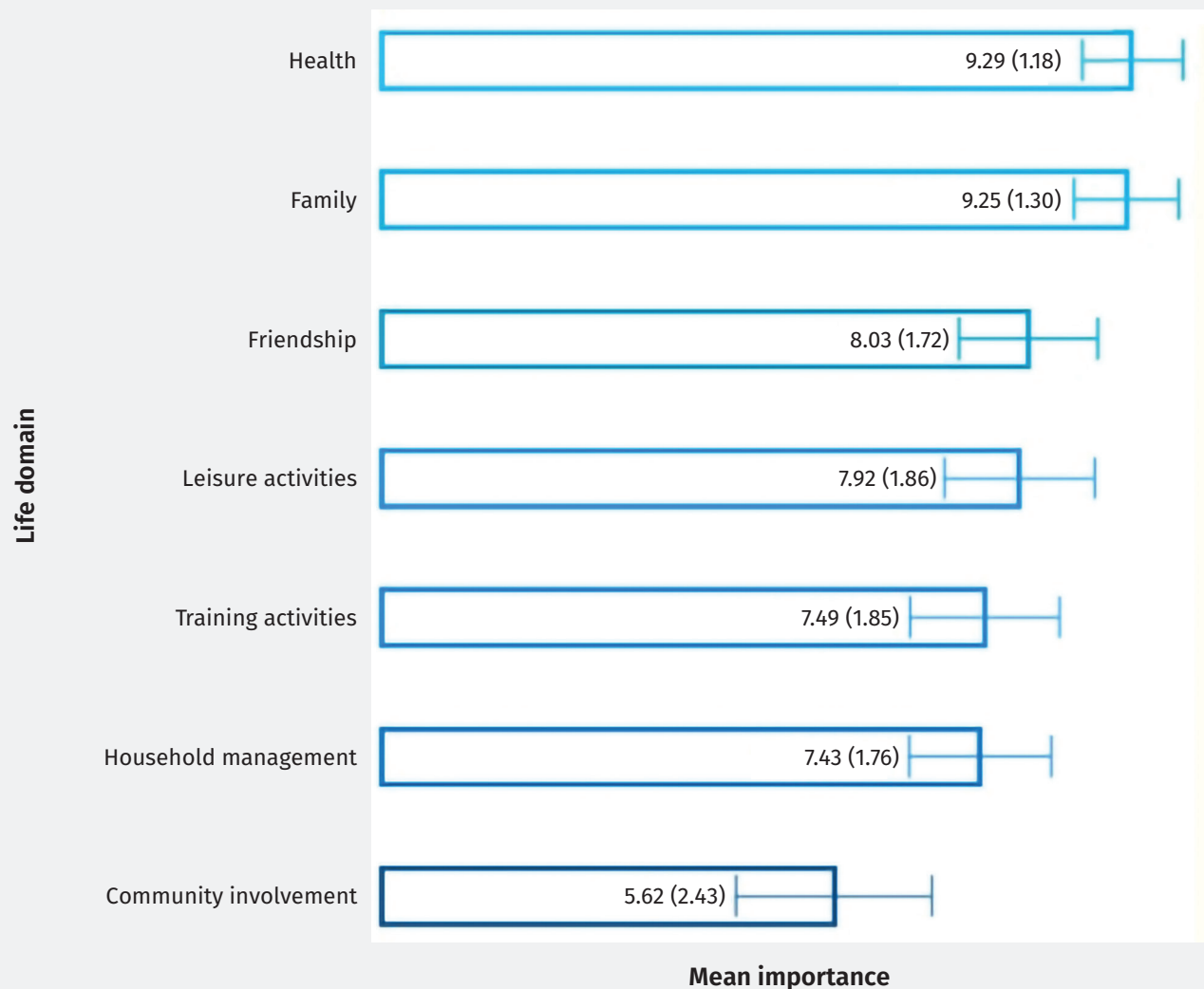
From a business-owner or supervisor’s standpoint, offering and encouraging work-life balance practices have many potential benefits to the business as well. Work-to-family conflict has been shown to have a direct impact on job satisfaction. This is especially true for women, parent workers, and elderly workers, who have a greater link to job satisfaction with work life balance.<sup>4</sup>

Several studies have found that improved work-life balance can decrease employee turnover. Work life practices can also “increase attachment, loyalty and commitment to the organization.”<sup>2</sup> Company policies that are family-friendly and therefore offer greater balance in the first and most-valued life domain (Figure 1) have been associated with higher commitment to the organization as well as reduced turnover and retention problems.<sup>1</sup> Higher productivity has also been found in employees who have greater work-life balance.<sup>6</sup>

## Providing work-life balance

Within a large animal veterinary practice, the starting point of providing work-life balance is understanding what an individual desires for their unique version of a healthy balance. This requires on-going communication as an individual’s needs, interest and goals can change over time. Through such discussions, a personal understanding of another’s work-life balance needs is not required. However, a respect of them and their needs is needed to move forward.

**Figure 1:** Shows the many different life domains that individuals may deem important when considering work-life balance.<sup>1</sup>



## Unconventional work schedules

One approach to offering improved work-life balance is considering work schedules that are unconventional. This may include a creative arrangement of days worked per week, hours per day and on call structures.

For example, let's assume the traditional large animal veterinarian works 60 hours in a week: Monday through Saturday, plus one evening on call. If instead a practice has two veterinarians that work 3 days each, 30 hours/week each and are on call every other week. In this scenario, the 60 hours are still worked in the week and the clients are served. There is little net change from a financial standpoint. While there may be small increases in cost to an employer to cover benefits (insurance, retirement, etc.), these amounts may be offset by decreased veterinarian turnover and increased veterinarian productivity.

Being able to think outside of the constraints of "what has been" allows for endless possibilities of "what can be." In human medicine, it is not uncommon to find nurses working 3 or 4 days a week at 10-12-hour shifts. Another example is also seen in human medicine where an employee may work two 12-hour shifts on Saturday and Sunday plus one shift during the week to achieve full-time status. This individual is often paid a higher

"weekend differential" and removes the need for individuals to work during the day on weekends, thus reducing the burden of weekend on call shifts to the rest of the team.

## Pay structures

The main premise of work-life balance is offering fewer or different working hours to allow for increased time spent in other life domains. Within this discussion is also the topic of how to pay for unconventional or unequal work schedules. If a veterinarian is working 4 days a week while their colleagues are working 5 days a week, equal salaries amongst all can create resentment by those working more and guilt by the one working less. In these situations, a form of production-based pay is a logical system that is often appealing to both groups.

A strictly production-based pay provides veterinarians compensation for work they performed only. If an individual does not work for an entire month, then their paycheck is \$0. This is an extreme, contrasting the equal salary pay structure.

A hybrid of these systems is a PROduction + SALary system known as "ProSal."

**Figure 2:** Example of production percentages for billed services in ProSal system

	A	B	C
1	Account ID	Account Description	Multiplier
75	401	Nutritional Per Cow Fee	0.5
76	405	Sales-Call Charges	0.4
77	406	Sales-Emergency Call Charges	0.7
78	409	Sales-Chiropractic	0.5
79	410	Sales-Services	0.5
80	411	SALES OB time	0.5
81	412	SALES Surgery	0.5
82	413	SALES-Consulting	0.5
83	414	SALES-Nutrition Consulting	0.5
84	415	SALES-Milking Equipment Consul	0.5
85	416	Sales-Small Ruminant	0.5
86	417	Spanish Training	0.5
87	418	Sales-Radiology	0.5
88	420	Sales-Dispense Drugs	0
89	421	Sales-DRUGS DROP SHIP	0
90	422	Sales DRUGS INTERNET	0
91	423	Sales Drugs Administered	0.5
92	425	Sales-Merchandise	0
93	430	Sales-Lab in house/culture	0
94	430.1	Sales-Lab in house special	0.5
95	431	Sales-Lab BioPRYN	0
96	432	Sales-lab Johnes blood	0
97	433	Sales-Blood lab other	0
98	434	Sales Bedding Lab	0
99	435	Sales-WVDL Outsourced	0.16
100	436	Sales-Marshfield Outsourced	0.5
101	437	Sales-Chemistry by small anima	0.5
102	438	Sales-Other labs outsourced	0.16
103	439	Lab Feed Testing	0
104	440	DUMMY ITEM CLASS	0
105	449	LA 2% Management Fee	0
106	450.21	Sales-Small Animal	0
107	450.22	CARE CREDIT SA INCOME	0
108	455	Sales-Miscellaneous Services	0.5
109	456	Sales-Miscellaneous Products	0.045
110	460	Year AP adjustment artificial	0

Advantages to this system are that those working harder than others are recognized and rewarded with greater pay. It removes guilt from the veterinarian who wants to work less but feels obligated to work the same hours as others. It also reduces resentment that may be harbored toward the veterinarian working less. Veterinarians who work to expand services and specialties they offer will also be rewarded financially, thus encouraging business growth.

The greatest disadvantage to the ProSal system is that it can encourage competition among vets to hoard work for themselves and to choose higher producing calls over less lucrative appointments. Another disadvantage is if the system does not account for non-billable work (truck maintenance, building maintenance, business management, etc.), this type of work will be effectively discouraged. Business expansion and growth can also be stifled with the system if support is not provided during the significant amount of upfront non-billable time needed to begin a new program.

## ProSal model

This author's clinic instated a ProSal pay system in 2018. Since the inception, the system has been changed over time and will continue to evolve. The current structure is shown here as a suggestive template for other clinics to work from.

There are two portions of the production pay portion of the ProSal system: Invoiced services and non-invoiced services. Invoiced work is credited to the veterinarian at a mostly 50% rate. As shown in Figure 2, any time billed (GL Account ID 409-418) is given a 0.5 multiplier. The emergency call charges are higher where the veterinarian receives 70% of the call charge (GL Account ID 406) to support veterinarians who are running emergency calls. For any products physically administered to an animal (GL Account ID 423), the veterinarian receives 50% of the markup. For products dispensed or drop-shipped, the veterinarian receives no ProSal payment (GL Account IDs 420-422) as shown by the "0" multiplier value.

In addition to billed work, non-billable work has been paid for. Table 1 shows an example from the author's clinic of how to pay veterinarians for non-invoiced work. Veterinarians are paid for being on call during nights and weekends. Based on this system, if the veterinarian is on call for a weeknight evening and receives no calls, they will be paid \$200. If that veterinarian were to receive calls that night, they would receive \$200 plus their percentage of any invoiced work.

These values are intentionally high values to the extent that many weekends, the clinic is subsidizing the on-call program. The intention is to reward veterinarians for being in the on-call rotation.

Other non-invoiced veterinarian payments include continuing education (\$100 per CE hour), paid days off (\$200 per unworked day), and in-clinic work including but not limited to building maintenance, business management and human resources management, etc. (\$40 per hour).

The salary component of ProSal at this clinic consists of any business profit remaining after all expenses (including production payments) have been paid. The ratio of production to salary in the ProSal system is a very flexible and fluid number. This can be influenced based on changes in clinic profits and changes in multiplier amounts for various services. This clinic used Microsoft Excel formulas and Excel Pivot Tables to compute monthly values quickly and accurately.

**Table 1:** Example pay scale for non-invoiced work in ProSal system.

Extra	Rate
Vacation (per day)	200
Disability (per day)	
Clinical Advancement (CE) (per hour)	100
Brand (per day)	0
In-clinic work (per hour)	40
On-call week night(per night)	200
On-call short (per weekend)	500
On-call long (per weekend)	1000
On-call holiday (per night)	500

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While there are many positive and negative points to consider in this pay structure, it is interesting to note that Merck Animal Health's Veterinary Well-Being Study found that the highest percentage of veterinarians who are "extremely satisfied" with their compensation systems are in a ProSal pay system (as compared to production only, salary with bonus, and salary).<sup>5</sup>

Unconventional schedules and a ProSal pay system are options which may be used together or on their own in an effort to engineer work-life balance opportunities in a large animal clinic. It is also important to note that these are not the only solutions which may help improve work-life balance in large animal veterinary businesses. Those not included in this paper but that should also be considered include maternity leaves, significant paid time off programs, and in-clinic day care facilities. All of these suggestions are not exclusive to veterinarians and should be considered for all members of a veterinary team.

## Conclusion

The topic of work-life balance is becoming increasingly discussed within large animal veterinary clinics. There are many views on this topic, which exhibits the varying life goals and stages of each individual veterinarian within a practice. Studies have shown that work-life balance efforts not only benefit the individual veterinarian but also the business and its owner. Two ways presented to offer a tailored approach is through unconventional work schedules and a ProSal compensation system. These both provide ways for veterinarians to better structure their professional hours with other life domains of importance to them. They are just two of many options a veterinary business should consider to improve their team members' balance between personal and professional interests.

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