Title: Investigation of factors affecting recruitment and retention in the UK veterinary profession

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Abstract

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Background

Recruitment and retention is currently of major concern and resulted in the veterinary profession being returned to the UK's Shortage Occupation List in 2019.

Methods

An online questionnaire of veterinary employees and employers investigating factors contributing to leaving/staying in current employment and the profession. The questionnaire was distributed via specialist veterinary associations' email lists and social media from September to October 2018.

Results

Respondents had few job changes (median 3), however, 43.7% (n=2390) reported that they were likely or very likely to leave their employment within two years. Vets who were recently qualified, on lower salaries and female were more likely to plan to leave. Most frequently chosen reasons to stay in a position were: team, location and family. Most commonly cited reasons to leave were: work-life balance, management and salary. Respondents most disliked dealing with people, work-life balance and the physical/emotional impacts of the job. They would most like to change the hours worked, team aspects and management. Employers suggested that it was difficult to employ a veterinary surgeon, especially an experienced individual.

Conclusion

The current retention crisis is due in part to the differing requirements between modern-day veterinary employees, their employers, the public and the profession.

Introduction

Recruitment and retention in the veterinary profession have become major topics of interest. In 2017, the Society of Practicing Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) Recruitment Survey found that 52.3% of veterinary businesses were short staffed regarding veterinary surgeons,[1] despite the fact that the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) reported that the number of graduates increased from 650 in 2007[2] to 929 in 2016[3] (total veterinary surgeons on the register 22,162[2] and 29,407[3] respectively). Veterinary surgeons were removed from the UK's Shortage Occupation List in 2011, but returned to the list due to recruitment challenges[4] in 2019.[5] This recruitment challenge, in the face of increasing numbers of graduates, may indicate that the challenge lies primarily in retaining individuals in the profession.

According to the 2019 RCVS Survey of the Profession, 79.0% of veterinary surgeons plan on staying in the profession for the foreseeable future,[6] which although seemingly high, shows a decrease from 82.9% in 2014[7] and 84.0% in 2010.[8] Subsequently, the percentage planning on leaving the profession (for non-retirement reasons) has risen from 7.9%[8] to 9.3%[7] to 9.5%.[6] Those planning to leave have continuously cited dissatisfaction with veterinary work, specifically long working hours and stress, as contributing factors.[6,7]

Research supports these findings, and demonstrates a link between them. For example, work-related job stressors for small animal veterinary surgeons have been shown to include increased hours and out-of-hours work, while personal job stressors included increased work-life balance conflict and decreased job satisfaction.[9] Reports from the British Veterinary Association (BVA) expanded on these findings, suggesting those surrounded by a culture of long hours are at an increased risk of leaving.[10]

Another reason for leaving is not feeling rewarded or valued,[6] also seen in the 2015 VetFutures initiative, which identified that veterinary surgeons wanted to feel valued and respected, and for their career to be understood.[11]

Despite several surveys from organisations, the profession still seems somewhat unsure as to whether there is or is not a problem, and how significant it may be. This research aims to explore the interlinked recruitment and retention questions. This study complements the 2019 Survey of the Profession, through considering movements within, as well as away from, the profession.

This article's aim was to report and interpret the findings of the study which explored the following questions:

- How likely are veterinary surgeons to be looking for new employment, and how often do they really change jobs?
- What demographic factors affect likeliness to be looking for a change in current employment or profession?
- What are the main reasons to stay at or leave a position?
- Into which fields are veterinary surgeons considering moving?
- How easily are employers able to recruit veterinary surgeons?

Method

<u>The Questionnaire</u>

The online questionnaire was created using Surveygizmo (surveygizmo.com). It consisted of closed (n=57) and open questions (n=7; plus 9 options to clarify closed answers) within three sections: "current employment", "about you", and "you as an employer". Participants could choose to skip certain questions if desired, and no incentives were offered.

The survey was launched on 13th September 2018 and closed on 31st October 2018. It was open to any veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse working in the UK, however, for the purposes of this article, only responses from veterinary surgeons were analysed (responses from veterinary nurses will form a separate article). Responses from outside the UK were also removed. The questionnaire was distributed by email through project team contacts at the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) and British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) through their membership databases. To increase breadth of distribution, social media was also used (e.g. BSAVA and BEVA channels, Vets StayGoDiversify, and Vets Voices).

This study was approved by the Royal Veterinary College's Social Sciences Research Ethical Review Board (SR2018-1650).

Data Analysis

Responses were analysed using Microsoft Excel and Graphpad Prism 8. Descriptive statistics were performed, with inferential statistics being used to compare three demographics regarding one question which exemplifies the recruitment and retention issues: 'likeliness to be looking for a new job in the next two years' (gender, Mann-Whitney U; length of time qualified and salary, Spearman's correlation).

Quantitative content analysis was performed on open text questions and for the 'other' options offered for questions with categorical choices. Quantitative content analysis was performed by the authors JH or TK in line with the description by O'Cathain and Thomas[12] which has previously been used in health care research.[13] In summary, the responses to each question were read and once the author was familiar with the content of responses, they were coded based on their meaning. Similar codes were joined into larger categories that explained the whole data set. For example, regarding the question 'what would you be looking to do if you plan on leaving your current position', responses such as 'specialise', 'residency' and 'continuing education' were grouped into 'skill development'. Where responses to 'other, please specify' questions were very similar to pre-provided tick box options, these were coded into the established categories. For example, if someone responded 'kids/children/maternity leave' regarding reasons for leaving a position, this was categorised into the pre-existing category 'family'. Percentages of respondents whose data were coded into each category are included.

Results

Demographics

The numbers of survey responses received and included in the analysis are shown in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Personal demographics, work context and work pattern of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Salary (n = 2386)			Gender (n = 2472)		
< £25k	239	10.0	Female	1898	76.8
£25-35k	679	28.5	Male	565	22.9
£36-55k	1018	42.7	Prefer not to say	8	0.3
£56-75k	285	11.9	Gender Fluid	1	0.0
£76-100k	98	4.1			
>£100k	67	2.8			
Age (n = 2449)			Country of Qualification (n = 2461)		
< 25	232	9.5	United Kingdom	2013	81.8
26-35	1081	44.1	Non-UK	448	18.2
36-45	634	25.9			
46-55	325	13.3			
56-65	156	6.4			
> 65	21	0.9			
Nature of Current Job (n = 2396)			Work Environment (n = 2394)		
Clinical Practice	2164	90.3	Clinical Practice, First Opinion	1983	82.8
Other	131	5.5	Academia	134	5.6
Teaching	46	1.9	Clinical Practice, Referrals	131	5.5
Research	35	1.5	Other	120	5.0
Administration	20	0.8	Government Veterinary Service	15	0.6
			Research Institution	11	0.5
Predominant Species (n = 2399)			Employment System (n = 2089)		
Small Animal	1792	74.7	Corporate	1171	56.1
Equine	273	11.4	Non-corporate	918	43.9
Mixed	188	7.8			
Farm Animals	77	3.2			
Other	37	1.5			
Not Applicable	29	1.2			
Poultry	3	0.1			
Working Hours (n = 2372)			OOH Rota (n = 2474)		
<20	125	5.3	Weeknights	982	39.7
21-40	1013	42.7	Weekends	1264	51.1
41-60	1130	47.6	Both	940	38.0

>60	104	4.4

Table 1. Demographics of respondents in relation to including salary, country of qualification, nature of current job, work environment, predominant species, employment system, working hours, and out-of-hours rota.

Likelihood to be looking for a new position

Respondents were asked to rate how likely they were to be looking for a new job in the next two years on a scale of 'very likely', 'likely', 'unlikely', 'very unlikely', or 'not sure'. In total, 43.7% (n=1040) responded likely or very likely and 244 (10.3%) were not sure.

The median career length was 10 years (interquartile range (IQR) 15 years). Within their careers, respondents had changed employer between 0 to 30 times, median 3 (IQR 3). The shortest duration in years of employment was <1 year (median, IQR 2 years), and 81.2% had jobs lasting less than two years within their career.

Demographic factors affecting likeliness to be looking for a job

The 'not sure' respondents regarding likeliness to be looking for a new job were removed to leave a scale and results were compared between genders, length of time graduated and salaries.

Women were significantly more likely to be looking for a new job ($p = 0.029$) with 50.7% of women and 42.4% of men responding 'likely' or 'very likely' (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

There was a significant positive correlation between increased number of years since respondents received their veterinary degree and decreasing likeliness to be looking for a new job ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.0001$). A significant but milder positive correlation was seen between increasing salary bracket and decreasing likeliness to be looking for a new job ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.0001$).

Reasons to stay or leave a position

Veterinary surgeons planning to stay in their position were asked to choose the three most important reasons as to why. Twenty options were provided, plus an 'other, please specify' category. Only participants answering the question as requested (i.e. providing three responses) were included in this analysis (total respondents = 701). The three most frequent responses were: team (56.7%), location (48.3%), and family (34.3%).

The same question was given to those planning to leave their position (total respondents =536), asking for the three most important reasons for leaving. The three most frequent reasons were work-life balance (41.2%), management (39.6%), and salary (33.8%).

Employers were asked what they believed were the main reasons for their employees leaving their practice. It should be noted that this question related to employees of all professions, and it was not possible to remove responses relating to other professions, such as veterinary nurses and receptionists. This question used similar response options to those above, however, it had additional options including 'We asked them to leave'. The most frequently chosen option was family, chosen by 32.6% of employers, followed by 'we asked them to leave' (24.1%), location (22.2%), work-life balance (22.0%) and other (22.0%). There were few similarities between the free text responses; consequently, quantitative content analysis was not performed on the other option. To compare these results with employees' results, 'asked to leave' and 'other' were removed. Subsequently, the three most frequent reasons cited for their employees leaving were: family, location, and work-life balance.

Most disliked aspects of the profession

Participants were asked to identify one thing they dislike most about being in the profession. Content analysis of the 2365 respondents demonstrated that they rarely restricted themselves to one answer, with responses incorporating up to nine codes. The most frequent category was dealing with people (50.4%), which included mostly client specific codes, such as dealing with complaints, coping with unrealistic expectations, feeling undervalued and negative public perceptions. As examples: "Constant fear of litigation and feeling like you have to cover your back at every opportunity" and "The public thinking we do not care and that we are only in it for the money". Work-life balance was the second most frequent category, including out-of-hours working and overtime expectations (26.6%). Impact of the job, in terms of physical and mental (stress), including fear of making mistakes, was third (19.6%). These categories often related to a remuneration category, itself being mentioned by 10.1% respondents, for example: "The poor salary despite high stress, high demand, long hours." (Also see supplementary material).

When asked what one thing they would change about their current job, content analysis of the 2169 respondents identified the most frequent three categories as: working hours (29.6%), more team support (16.9%) and management (14.7%). Working hours included responses of work-life balance, less or no out-of-hours/weekends/on call, flexible hours, and holiday allowance, e.g. "I would work in an environment which better prioritised work-life balance for all staff". More team support included responses of larger team, less admin work, excessive workload and no/less sole charge, e.g. "fully staffed". Management included responses of organisation, autonomy, more business experience, realistic expectations and less bureaucracy/regulation, e.g. "Improved organisation of daily running". (Also see supplementary material).

<u>New fields of work</u>

Participants were asked about their potential plans upon leaving their current position (total responses = 1354). Some were considering leaving the veterinary field (9.2%) or taking a break (8.0%); total 17.2%

leaving the profession. However, most respondents were looking to do the same type of work but with a different employer (51.5%) or different work in the veterinary field (31.7%).

Quantitative content analysis of 326 comments identified that of those looking for different work in the veterinary field, 12.4% were looking for more opportunities for skill development (e.g. residency, internship), 10.5% wanted to become self-employed (e.g. practice owner, locum), and 7.0% aimed to change the predominant species with which they worked (e.g. equine to small animal). The remaining responses were divergently categorised as 'other'.

Of those looking to leave the veterinary field (102 comments), 52.9% were unsure what they wanted to do, while others were looking at moving into new occupations including running their own business/self-employment, acting, baking, and horticulture. Respondents wanting to take a break (100 comments) were interested in traveling (45.0%) and spending more time with their families (29.0%). The remaining respondents fell into an 'other' category.

Restarting careers

Respondents were asked if they would become veterinary surgeons again. The modal category was 'maybe' (44.3%) (Figure 3).

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Quantitative content analysis of the 1091 comments from those who would want to start their career over again demonstrated that the largest group (39.0%) wanted a career in human medicine. Following this: scientist (9.2%), finance (6.7%), law (5.4%), engineering (5.0%), and teaching (4.3%). The remaining responses were disparate and collated as an 'others' category.

Ease of recruitment

Employers took between less than a month and five years to recruit a veterinary surgeon (median 4 months, IQR 3 months). Figure 4 demonstrates the distribution (the '12+' category ranged from 12 to 60 months, mean 16.3 months).

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Number of applicants per position was 1 to 50, however, over half of employers (52.6%) only had one to three applicants apply for their last open veterinary surgeon position with a median of 3 (IQR = 3).

When employers were asked to rate the difficulty in recruiting experienced veterinary surgeons and newly qualified graduates, most respondents found it difficult to recruit either. However, experienced

veterinary surgeons were considered more difficult: 91.4% rated experienced veterinary surgeons 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to recruit, compared to 52.5% for new graduates.

Discussion

The demographics of respondents reflected the population of veterinary surgeons in practice.[1,3] Overall results were similar to the recent RCVS Survey of the Profession,[6] however, this survey adds to published research via its consideration of moves within the profession, as well as leaving the profession, and its incorporation of both employee and employer views.

In consideration of recruitment, the 2017 SPVS Recruitment Survey showed that veterinary surgeon positions were filled within between three to six months,[1] similar to the current results whereby the highest number of positions were filled in a similar time period (3-5months – 35.7%). However, a number of employers required more than this, with, for example, 17.0% requiring over 12 months. Given that 52.6% of practices only had one to three applicants apply for their last open position, finding the right veterinary surgeon may be difficult and take an extended period.

Employers supported this assumption, suggesting that it was challenging to hire experienced veterinary surgeons. Given the reduced likelihood of veterinary surgeons with experience leaving a position, as identified in this study, this is perhaps not surprising. However, the difficulty reported in hiring a new graduate is more surprising, as they appear more willing to move, and results from RCVS 2019 Survey of the Profession demonstrated that the time for a new graduate to find a position has reduced from three months to just 1.87 months in 2019.[6] It is likely that there are contextual factors, such as job type and location which may make it more challenging for some employers to recruit than others, which requires further research. This is reinforced by the large range in number of jobs the respondents had had within their careers, spanning 1-31. The low median number of employers (3) perhaps suggests veterinary surgeons do not often move positions.

The desire for more team support as a key area for change highlighted the challenges in attracting a sufficiently well-rounded team. The SPVS Recruitment Survey[1] found that over half of practices were understaffed causing an increased workload for staff. Understaffing is a problem in the UK National Health Service and has been reported in a BMJ Acute Perspective as having a notable effect on recruitment and retention because of poor morale.[14] Understaffing not only adds to the stressors that veterinary surgeons face, and can affect retention, but can also decrease the treatment quality a practice can provide.[15,16]

The concept of retention within this study pertained to staying within a position and within the profession. The number of veterinary surgeons planning to leave the profession in the near future was similar between this survey (17.2%) and the RCVS 2019 Survey of the Profession (20.8%).[6] Those planning to leave the profession were largely unsure of what route they would follow, or were considering a break, while those who identified occupations wanted to go into a career dissimilar to veterinary medicine. In contrast, those who would have chosen another career, if given the opportunity, most frequently named human medicine (39.0%), suggesting it may not be the medical or scientific nature of the work content itself affecting veterinary surgeons.

In the following sections, the main reasons to leave or stay in a position as identified in this questionnaire will be explored, in comparison to other veterinary and non-veterinary literature.

It has long been known that veterinary students do not always join the profession to work with people, and indeed a study from 2010 showed that almost double the number of respondents wanted to work with animals (98.9%) compared to people (49.8%).[17] As such, is it perhaps not surprising that the most frequent category of responses regarding the factor veterinary surgeons most dislike about their job was people, which mostly related to dealing with clients including complaints and being undervalued. This is in contrast to the RCVS Survey of the Profession results which identified client relationships as the fourth best thing about working in the profession, as identified by 31% of respondents, while also supporting leaving the profession due to lack of value.[6] Concerns over complaints, including litigation, were frequently explored within this study's free text comments, and are echoed in qualitative studies of GPs' decisions on whether or not to stay in direct patient care.[18] Clients may well therefore be one of the best and one of the most challenging parts of veterinary work. This negative perception of dealing with people contrasts with the aforementioned result that human medicine was the most frequently chosen alternative career. To understand this disparity, further research to explore veterinary surgeon's perceptions of a career in human medicine would be valuable.

Within the current study, the practice team was the most frequently cited reason for staying in a position, and good relationships with colleagues has been identified as a protection against stress in professions such as midwifery.[19] However, conversely within the 'dealing with people' category, there were also comments relating to teamwork within veterinary practice as the factor participants most dislike. In addition, management specifically was a key reason to leave, as well as being identified as an aspect of work a respondent would most like to change.

Management was not identified as a top reason to leave by the managers themselves. When asked about the reasons they thought previous employees had left, results indicated external factors; family, location and work-life balance. Previous research has suggested that the young increasingly female workforce face more family responsibility and may desire different work schedules, and may be less willing to take on certain job responsibilities.[20] This may lead to the disconnect demonstrated in the current research between employers' and employee's views, suggesting that management is unable or failing to understand their workforce.

Veterinary medicine is not alone in management challenges. Dissatisfaction with management was identified as a reason to leave midwifery,[21] and a systematic review of adult nursing staff indicated that good supervisor support, including managerial style, was an influence to stay.[22] As identified in a 2016 systematic review, it seems that there are still improvements to make in developing a more business-related curriculum in veterinary schools, with integrated content which has impacts on future behaviour.[23] Within a business-related curriculum, a focus on aspects such as correct charging is important, and is supported by free text comments from this study relating to 'dealing with money' (supplementary material). However, the free text comments regarding aspects of the profession which respondents dislike and would like to change, also reinforces the concept of a curriculum which fosters such management skills as support, value, realistic expectations, and a no-blame culture. Due to respondents' discomfort with dealing with money, this approach should be positioned within the context of the potential tension between the practice as a business and the caring profession which serves the needs of their patients and clients.

The second and third most frequently cited reasons to stay, after team, were location and family. These aspects appear to suggest that there may be a pressure on veterinarians to stay in a job because of their responsibilities to local family, rather than for intrinsic reasons. This requirement to stay for the family is at odds with the intention to leave, for the sake of work-life balance, the prime reason identified in this study. This balance has also been identified in other professions, such as nursing, with one study comparing work-family culture which reduced intention to leave versus family variables, such as childcare, which increased intention to leave.[24]

Work-life balance was the second most frequent category participants disliked about their job, with hours being the top aspect they would like to change. Work-life balance issues were also highlighted in the present study via the demographics, suggesting that most participants worked 41-60 hours per week with 51.1% working weekends and 38.0% working out-of-hour rotas that consisted of both weeknights and weekends. These figures indicated long working hours, and are supported by the RCVS Survey of the Professions findings: mean hours worked in a week, excluding on call, was 37.8 hours, with full-time equine practitioners typically working 50.5 hours.[6] The number of veterinary surgeons who are given a minimum rest period of 11 hours for every 24-hour period, has, however improved with 73.7% always or usually having this rest in 2019, compared to half of respondents in 2014.[6] Long working hours have previously been cited as negatively impacting various aspects of work, for example, having links to most negative health outcomes, such as depression and sleep conditions, across occupations,[25] worse psychological health specifically in veterinary surgeons,[26] and reasons to leave the profession in paramedics[27] and junior doctors.[28] Linked to these findings is the identification in the current study that negative mental impact (stress) and physical impact of the job were the third most frequent category of aspects participants dislike about their job. Physical demands have also been identified as contributing to the decision to leave the profession in paramedics.[27] However, the links between job stress and intention to leave are not necessarily simple, and job satisfaction and depressed moods have been identified as middle steps in the pathway, with decision to leave a position preceding that to leave a profession.[29]

Another factor appearing in the three most frequent responses to the identified questions within this questionnaire was salary, which was the third highest reason to leave a position. This is supported within the result that respondents on lower salaries were more likely to be looking for a new position in the next two years. Salary for UK veterinarians has been described as ‘stagnating’, and shown recent decline.[30] With university tuition and student debt increasing and a decreasing salary, there is concern for the sustainability of the profession.[11] Many respondents combined the ideas of poor remuneration and work-life balance or job demands, suggesting this issue is more complex than simply what veterinary surgeons earn, and is linked to an effort-reward imbalance. This effort-reward imbalance has been shown to lead to healthcare professionals leaving their jobs, while a general work-life imbalance led more directly to burnout.[31]

There are several areas for future research that these findings highlight. It is important to note that 24.1% of employers had recently asked an employee to leave their position. This consideration of retention from the employers’ perspective requires further research. In addition, continuing research on the impacts of feminisation of the profession, due to the increased likelihood for women looking to change jobs, and the impact of the millennials and the subsequent generation (known as ‘generation Z’), due to the increased likelihood for more recently qualified veterinary surgeons to intend to move jobs would be valuable.

There are limitations of this study. This questionnaire sought to report certain aspects of recruitment and retention, however, a decision to leave the profession is likely to be a very complex one. It was not possible within the scope of the study to delve into the perceptions of participants through qualitative methods such as interviews, however, this would be a useful endeavour. Regarding the specific questions within the questionnaire, differing options for questions such as the employee's and employer's perceptions of reasons to leave should have had the same factors to aid direct comparison, and in the employer's question it was not possible to consider if perceived reasons for veterinary surgeons leaving were different from other professions. The free text data was only analysed by one author per question, however, responses to each question were short and similar and therefore one reviewer was considered sufficient for this quantitative content analysis. This in-depth research of the free-text choices is a strength of the current research. The questionnaire was widely distributed using both email addresses and social media, however, the online nature may have limited responses from veterinarians without internet access, and the circulation by certain associations may have limited the reach to other groups, such as farm animal veterinary surgeons (3.2% of the respondents; though this is identical to the areas of work figure for farm practice in the 2019 Survey of the Professions[6]) and those in non-public facing roles such as research. Thus, care should be taken in generalising to all UK veterinary surgeons. Given the global impact of COVID-19, which may affect how we view aspects of our lives, this article proves a useful baseline for future research.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the retention issues within the veterinary profession are due in part, at least, to the differing requirements of modern-day veterinary surgeons, their employees, the public and the profession. The current workforce are dissatisfied with long working hours, perceived as a historical expectation of the profession, mixed with their current experience of understaffing, poor management, and decreasing salary. These challenges may make veterinary medicine a less appealing profession to join or remain within. While this study demonstrates that we are far from alone in this challenge, veterinary surgeons care for animals every day, and we should increase efforts to take care of ourselves and our profession.

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Captions

Figure 1: Demonstrating the process of inclusion of 2474 questionnaire responses within analysis

Figure 2. Female and male veterinary surgeons are significantly different in their likelihood to be looking for a new job in the next two years

Figure 3. Demonstrating responses to the question ‘would you become a veterinary surgeon again’

Figure 4. Demonstrating that of the options provided, most employers took 3 to 5 months to fill a job position (n=456)

Table 1. Demographics of respondents in relation to including salary, country of qualification, nature of current job, work environment, predominant species, employment system, working hours, and out-of-hours rota.