

A partnership for success: Tips for retaining associates and tips on getting the most out of your first year in practice

Amy Bartholomew, VMD, CVA

Batholomew Enterprises, LLC
Benson, VT 05743

Abstract

Large animal practices have historically had a difficult time recruiting new veterinarians into the profession. Recently, the data on retention has shown that veterinarians are leaving large animal practice for other sectors of clinical practice. Onboarding new associates is different in ambulatory practice when compared with companion animal practice. Setting up the new associate for success will benefit both the existing practitioners as well as the new veterinarian. Spelling out expectations, communicating these expectations, and flexibility will help retain the new associate. This paper gives some tips on ways to increase the retention of associates as well as tips for the new graduate veterinarian on how to make the first year in practice a success.

Key words: practice management, onboarding, new graduates, associate retention

Introduction

Retention in large animal practice

We've all been there. The new veterinary school graduate, eager to go out into private practice and get our hands dirty. Literally. Most of us have been associates, hopeful that the new grad will work out, so we can get some sleep and have time to expand our knowledge base and medical abilities. A few of us are practice owners. Owners are busy. Managing a thriving veterinary business, no matter the size, is a full-time job on top of the veterinary duties. We all want the new associate to work out.

Large animal practice has different challenges when onboarding a new associate. Typically, we work solo, away from support staff, textbooks and access to the internet. We are on the client's farm where we don't know where to park, where the water source is or how to find help. In small animal practice, a veterinarian can easily get a second opinion by bringing their patient to the back. There, a veterinarian can review the physical exam findings and treatment plan to make sure you are on the right track. In large animal practice, immediate feedback is not always available, and the new associate must do their own very best for the patient.

There has been a debate for many years on whether there is a shortage of large animal veterinarians, or if the problem is that some rural areas cannot sustain a large animal veterinarian. AABP recently looked at membership trends for recent veterinary school graduates. Only 40% of new graduates who start off as AABP members their first year out are still members of AABP after 5 years in practice.¹ What is happening to these new graduates and where are they going? A lot of work has gone into recruitment of rural veterinarians, but little has been done on retention.

Why are veterinarians leaving?

I recently did a poll on the Vet Truck Facebook page, a social media platform for veterinarians interested in working with cattle. The question was "If you have left large animal clinical practice, what were the top 3 reasons why you left?" Thirteen different reasons were listed. If something that was important in their decision wasn't listed, poll takers could add it as a choice to be used by other veterinarians. Approximately 190 veterinarians completed the poll. The top 3 reasons were salary/compensation, emergency duty and practice atmosphere/culture.

To entice a new graduate into large animal practice, salaries will need to increase. This translates to higher costs for the clients. It is imperative that we be transparent about why our charges have increased. Explain that in order to have a veterinarian available to come to their farm, you had to offer a higher salary to attract the vet to the position in the first place. Without veterinarians on staff to do the work, farms will be left without veterinary coverage.

Emergency duty is something that is here to stay in large animal practice. Practice culture is something that you can change, especially if you are flexible and open to new ideas. In the tips section there are some solutions that have worked for various large animal clinics.

Why do veterinarians stay?

A second poll was posted on the same bovine Facebook forum about reasons why veterinarians stay in large animal practice. "What are the things you love/why do you stay in large animal practice?" Over 300 veterinarians logged in their answers. The top reasons were that they enjoy and formed a strong relationship with clients, enjoy working in agriculture and enjoy working outside.

What attributes are beneficial for longevity in clinical practice?

A third poll was done on a Facebook page that is only practice owners, most of who are in companion animal practice. The question was "What traits do you think contribute to longevity in private practice?" A smaller pool to pull from, there were only 42 veterinarians who responded. The top responses were the ability to separate case outcomes from view of self, support outside of work (family, community) and in a tie for third: flexibility in all aspects of daily life and a realistic expectation of what private practice entails.

What are new graduates looking for in their first position?

A 2022 poll of University of Arizona veterinary students² and my recent poll of University of Pennsylvania third-year large animal students listed mentorship as number one. Every practice mentors their new associates. But do you have a written protocol or plan? Do you discuss it in your interview process? What changes can you make to help the new graduate?

The following are some ideas on what practices can do to improve associate retention based on the surveys and what worked for our practice. But, like all relationships, this is a two-way street. It is important that new graduates understand that they play a major role in their success during their first few years in practice. Lastly, how can veterinary schools help set up the new graduates for success in large animal practice?

Tips for the practice owner and existing associates

1. Set them up for success. Have written mentorship plans that are well defined. When you do send them out on their own, pick calls that you are pretty sure are going to be straightforward and successful.
2. Have them ride with you. A lot. Get them to know your favorite clients and be the first to palpate, the first to do the physical, the first to ask the questions. Use that time to shape them into the kind of practitioner you want them to be.
3. Send them to the good clients. Your best day will be when your favorite client requests the new vet.
4. Be open with your own struggles with medical decisions you have made that were maybe not the best. We make decisions based on our medical knowledge and experience at that time in our career. There rarely are “failures”, just less than desirable outcomes based on our knowledge at that time.
5. Have meetings. Try to get the whole practice together as well as meetings with just the veterinarians. Routinely meet with the new veterinarian. What worked for us was “driveway meetings” daily. If you are not available, let the new grad know which veterinarian is able to field their calls and questions that day. Perform a one-on-one review at 3 months, and annually after that. Your goal is that any employee knows what is going to be said at the yearly review because you’ve said it already. Make sure you give them an opportunity to give their opinion/recommendations and respect them. The attached review template has places for both you and your employee to discuss what is going on in the practice in an open and non-confrontational manner.
6. Send them to all the continuing education. It is a win/win situation. If it is an expensive CE, set up some sort of plan going forward. This might include that the veterinarian has to stay on with your practice for a pre-determined amount of time or pay back a percentage of the cost/travel expenses.
7. Let them practice the style of medicine they want to practice. Don’t micromanage. You cannot be everywhere, and things are not going to be done exactly as you would have done it. As long as the outcome is good, and they are learning from their decisions, it will be OK.

8. Be appreciative. Say thank you. These people are out there getting cold, wet, dirty, sweaty, run over by cows, and driving in blizzards for your practice.
9. Be flexible. The “normal” large animal practitioner is changing. Think outside the box to keep your good associate. Creative scheduling, on call options such as co-ops or having a person just doing nights/weekends and utilizing a haul-in are just some of the things that veterinarians are doing. At our practice we had multiple veterinarians on part-time schedules that dovetailed with other schedules. Sometimes veterinarians are going to have a big request for time off for a newborn, a mission trip, a long bicycle journey or early mornings for skiing. Usually temporary, we did our best to give the time off in hopes that they would reciprocate when another veterinarian was on vacation.
10. Be aware of gender, racial and lifestyle bias, both within the practice and with the clients. A recent study showed that gender bias is more likely to be reported by recent graduates than experienced practitioners.³ Often, it was coming from the clients rather than the co-workers or employers. You might not see it. It’s OK to not know, just acknowledge it and react by being supportive.
11. To stay competitive, salaries for large animal veterinarians are going to have to increase. Right now, small animal positions are offering starting pay that rivals that of experienced companion animal veterinarians with 30 years of experience. Corporate small animal practices are offering sign-on bonuses as high as \$250,000. Be transparent with your clients about why the cost of veterinary care has increased. There has been a lot of media coverage about veterinary medicine and the struggles faced by veterinarians such as loan repayments, burnout, staffing issues and mental health. Use this information when you explain that price increases allow you to offer a competitive salary. Without this, it will be difficult to staff the practice and you might not be able to continue servicing the farms.

Tips for the students and new graduates

1. Spend as much time as you can in private practice rotations. Utilize your clinic time well while in school. Take every opportunity to learn before you are out on your own, even if it’s nights or weekends. The more you have seen and done, the easier your first year will be.
2. Come to the new job with a skill you can offer the practice from day one. This could be veterinary related such as palpation, surgical skills or small ruminant farm management. But it could also be something else that the practice that might be lacking such as IT skills, or organizing and presenting client education meetings.
3. Try to immerse yourself in the community and build up a support network for yourself. Ask your new coworkers what they do in their time off and how they ended up with their own support network.
4. Realize that veterinary practice is practice. Change your expectations so that you are aware that you are going to have cases that don’t go well. It’s OK! Learn from the experience and move on. If you are struggling with this – it is normal.
5. Clients will want to know that you are interested in them, their families, their animals and their operation. Take the time to make the connection and build that bond.

6. Protect yourself. You can only care as much as the client. Not every case is going to live. Sometimes owners call too late. Just do your best. You can do everything perfect and still have a bad outcome. That's just the way it is. Mother Nature rules all and she can make you look bad or good.
7. Coping with stress is challenging. Acknowledge that whatever you are experiencing is difficult and remind yourself that this scenario is difficult for lots of people. You are not alone in your feelings. Talk to your boss or another associate in the practice. If you are doubting yourself, start your conversation with "The story I am telling myself is...." Most likely, they have been there themselves and can help you.
8. Spend extra time expanding your medical knowledge. This might include reading up after hours, going out on an extra call at night to see something you've never seen before, or taking that late day call knowing that you have someone available to help you. Read the trade journals. When clients ask about a *Hoard's Dairyman* article make sure you have seen it, better yet, read it. Yes, it will be extra hours for you when you are off the clock. But those first few years are a wild ride so extra studying will make it easier for you.
9. Explore what you love and find your niche. There is nothing better than doing what you love every day. Find it and take it over. If it will take a sizable financial or time commitment from the practice, present a plan to the owners about how you envision this will benefit the practice and how it will pay for itself over time.
10. Realize that there is no balance. There are priorities which are ever-shifting. You cannot be everything to everyone. Be flexible, communicate and look for options outside of the box. If you feel that you need to make a change within the current structure of your position, bring some solutions to the table when you sit down with your boss to discuss it.
11. Be kind to yourself. There is no one harder on you than you. Practicing more self-compassion is not letting yourself off the hook. You will be able to dig deeper and take feedback, which will allow you to grow as a practitioner.

Tips for veterinarians in academia

1. Encourage, recruit and accept more students from rural and agricultural backgrounds.
2. Give the students the most realistic picture of private practice. Invite area practitioners to come in and talk with students about what they do.
3. Encourage practice rotations at clinics that will let the students do some of the work.
4. Let the students do more. Have the students come up with a medical plan on their own. Try to gently redirect to prevent disasters, but if it is not life threatening, give them some autonomy. Get the students to practice hands-on skills and participate in some of the client communication.
5. Role play – give the students a scenario and have them work through it while you are driving around between calls.
6. Discuss your own struggles or times when you wished you had done something different with a case.
7. Include classes on financial management and debt repayment in the curriculum.

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Employee Review Template

Amy D. Bartholomew, VMD

Employee fills out all items. Supervisor fills out improvements, essential items doing well and essential items in need of improvement.

Assess Yourself

Improvements since the last review: (not applicable at the initial 3-month review)

Three essential items you are doing well:

Three essential items in need of improvement:

What can you do to help yourself with the improvements?

What can we do/other staff do to help you with these improvements?

List 3 professional goals for the next year:

Practice Assessment

Your biggest frustrations are:

What can we do to eliminate the frustrations?

How do these issues affect the practice?

Co-worker discussion: e.g., are they helpful, things they could do to make your life easier, ideas for development, praise, constructive criticism, etc. May leave blank if everything is good.

(List here individual names of all owners and employees)

Your ideas for the practice:

Action Plan

Outline our plan to work on your goals and items in need of improvement:

Is there anything else we should discuss?

Thank you!

Employee_____ Supervisor_____ Date_____

