What We Learned from the AABP Human Resource Management Survey

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Abstract

Introduction

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.

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 as turnover and perceptions of business performance.

Materials and Methods

The researchers developed a survey based on similar research previously completed with other professionals\(^1\), 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 four weeks on December 19, 2018.

There were 111 responses to the survey received out of the 4,789 AABP members with
email address, yielding an overall response rate of only 2%. 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, one
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.

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

**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 two 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).

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

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 were hiring incentives. There were considerable difference in how certain HRM practices were used between veterinarians and support staff, such as training, rigorous hiring practices, and bonus or incentive pay.
Figure 1. Human Resource Management in Veterinary Practices

We use written standard operating procedures (SOP’s) or similar tools to clearly define how certain tasks…

We use incentives (e.g., stock options, sign-on bonuses) to attract employees to this organization.

Our employee handbook is relevant, updated, and used consistently with employees.

Managers provide frequent, informal performance feedback to employees.

We use a planned onboarding program that extends beyond initial orientation and includes training to…

We attract and retain employees by paying above-market compensation.

Performance feedback is mainly focused on promoting employee growth and development.

We hold regular meetings with employees.

We use individual bonuses or incentive pay to motivate employees.

We use a planned orientation program for new employees in their first few days of employment.

We attract and retain employees because we have a satisfying and engaging work environment.

Managers provide frequent, informal performance feedback to employees.

We regularly use formal performance appraisals to provide feedback to employees.

Our employee handbook is relevant, updated, and used consistently with employees.

We use incentives (e.g., stock options, sign-on bonuses) to attract employees to this organization.

We use written standard operating procedures (SOP’s) or similar tools to clearly define how certain tasks…
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.

**Figure 2.** Perceived Employee Performance in Veterinary Practices

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.

**Figure 3.** Perceived Business Performance in Veterinary Practices

### 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 two 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.

For veterinarians we found two weak but significant correlations between HRM and total turnover: providing the opportunity to suggest improvements ($r_s = -.214$, $p < .05$), and providing an engaging work environment ($r_s = -.254$, $p < .01$).

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 ($r_s = -.318$, $p < .01$), leaving a position open for the right candidate ($r_s = -.209$, $p < .05$), providing orientation to new veterinarians ($r_s = -.200$, $p < .05$), asking veterinarians to participate in decisions ($r_s = -.254$, $p < .01$), encouraging employees to suggest improvements ($r_s = -.343$, $p < .01$), and providing an engaging work environment ($r_s = -.310$, $p < .01$).

**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 two important indicators of engaging employees, interestingly, both of these items are associated with reduced voluntary veterinary turnover. Taking 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
