

Integrating a Workplace Wellbeing Initiative into Your Vet Practice and the Benefits it Brings

Being a vet is one of the best occupations in the world. However, numerous studies have shown that working in veterinary practice can be a stressful experience. Integrating a wellness initiative into a veterinary practice may help to lower individual stress and lead to a more collaborative team.

Setting up a wellbeing initiative in practice is hard work because it contains many facets and will fail unless it is embedded in the culture of the team.

As with any new business venture, the first question to ask is why it is needed?

- Is the culture and atmosphere positive at work?
- What are the values of the business?
- What is the vision and mission of the business?

If the answer to these questions is already known and the responses are positive, then this is, probably, a practice that is fun to work in; trust between employees and employers is high and individuals love what they do.

Stress will typically be lower in a practice like this; productivity will be higher and employee retention will be high.

If this is not the case, then work needs to be done to improve employee trust and motivation. Before any fancy well-being initiative is put in place, the team needs to be listened to by the owner and senior leadership.

- What are the issues in the business?
- Is there any bullying?
- Do the team trust the senior leadership?

As part of a new initiative, everybody needs to feel they have been listened to. 'Envisioning days' for the team to look at the vision, mission and values of the business are vital. Not only will this add clarity to the business and where it is going but will also make the team feel more appreciated. This is also the time to name the values the business stands for. By naming the values, it will often become clear who in the team does not live up to or aspire to those values. Those members of the team may find that they need to go elsewhere to be happy in their jobs. People who do not fit into the culture will often be disruptive and can easily create a toxic environment where everybody stops enjoying their work and dreads coming in. The team will become better at recognising behaviours that do not fit in with the business ethics and values and will feel more empowered to call them out once they have been written down. Values apply to leaders as much as employees!

Once the vision, mission and values are in place, it is a case of deciding what are the things that must be done to deliver on the vision and who will be responsible for them. Choosing the right person to take on this job is a vital part of the senior manager's duties in defining the role and bringing the best person in to do it, a role that the team member will enjoy and get excited by.

All of these things will reduce employee stress and help the employee enjoy or even love their job.

By this stage, the practice will, hopefully, have a positive practice culture with a clear vision and an obvious road map to get there. There will be a well-motivated team who love what they do and are in a good mental state because they are enjoying their job and they have civil or maybe friendly relationships with the other members of the team. There is nothing that will reduce an employee's wellbeing more than a toxic environment.

With these sturdy foundations built, what are the next steps to continue to develop an excellent attitude towards wellbeing in the practice?

Leaders must first of all walk the talk and mirror the good behaviour to the rest of the team. To be truly effective in the workplace, it is important that shifts are not too long, and relevant breaks are taken. This allows the team to calm themselves before going back into the clinical environment but also allows for the person to eat, drink and go to the toilet without feeling they are letting the boss or team down. These are normal requirements in almost every job and should not be scrimped on in the veterinary field. Team members will be less stressed, more rested and will perform to a higher standard with their duties. Professor Matt Walker of Stanford University has noted that a loss of sleep below 7–8 hours can massively affect our ability to perform our work tasks. Being well-rested will lead to a team that produces higher quality work.

What makes up a good practice wellbeing initiative?

- Meetings
- Rewards and recognitions
- Access to resources
- Fun Events
- Accreditation schemes
- CPD
- Charity days

Meetings and Team Training

Regular meetings in teams and 1:1s with line managers can be very effective at increasing camaraderie amongst teams and also dealing with disagreements between team members before they become a larger problem. These meetings can often help teams and individuals become productive but also allow individuals in the team the ability to determine the best way that their team should function. This active listening by team leaders and thanks when such events lead to better work practices can raise individual and team morale.

Wellbeing and training plans can be reviewed on a monthly or quarterly basis alongside performance reviews. If an employee can see that their work consistently meets or exceeds expectations, this will affect their wellbeing and feelings of worth. This ensures the team feels supported and motivated at work. Meetings can be fun too. Setting aside formal times for coffee breaks to allow team members to have some social time together is also very important.

Rewards and Recognitions

Allowing team members to have a day off for their birthday is worth considering. Birthdays are important times to reflect and celebrate. By giving these days off if they occur during the working week, employees can see that their employer cares about them as people, not just as someone who helps them fulfil their business goals but also who wants the best

for the employee too. It is also important to celebrate work anniversaries, feast days like Christmas or Diwali, and to consider employee of the month or quarter awards. This again demonstrates the worth of the employee in the employer's eyes. If all the employees can pick their teammate of the quarter, this gives more ownership to the team and again recognises the importance of their opinion. They can see what they think is important to the employer.

Access to Resources

There are so many resources that can contribute to employees' well-being. It is well recognised that exercise can be beneficial to everyone. Employers can pay for team members' gym or swimming monthly membership or encourage a steps competition for a month. A veterinary practice can be an unhealthy place. However, by encouraging exercise and providing fresh fruit in the staff room, employers can demonstrate the importance of exercise and diet in good physical and mental health.

There are lots of great apps and webinars to help with mindfulness and meditation like Headspace and Sanctus. The Webinar Vet has provided lots of useful resources on mindfulness and positive mindsets in conjunction with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeon's Mind Matters Initiative.

Vetlife also provides telephone services staffed by trained volunteers for those members of the profession to discuss a problem and hopefully minimise its impact. Numbers like this should be prominently displayed in the practice to allow easy access.

Fun Events

Organising physical evenings out has been difficult over the last two years of the pandemic but the work's night out should not be lost post-pandemic. However, neither should funding of large amounts of alcohol be countenanced either. The younger generation seems much less attracted to alcohol than the older generation. Fun events like paintballing or fun runs can engender greater teamwork skills. Social events allow team members to get to know each other better.

Accreditation Schemes

Schemes such as Investors in People, Investors in the Environment and Great Places to Work can help to measure the success of the business in how well it engages its team. In 2013 only 52% of people thought the Royal College was a great place to work. By following the advice of the scheme, this had risen to 91% two years later.

The RCVS chief executive at the time, Nick Stace, said the improvement demonstrated the great strides made by the college over the past three years and recognised the resolve of staff and council to improve its working practices, how members communicate with each other and overall well-being. He also said that it was testament to the importance of two-way communication – of giving staff the opportunity and freedom to come up with ideas and having a senior team willing to listen to and implement these where appropriate.

He felt that members of the RCVS council in particular had been very supportive of efforts to improve staff engagement and recognise a more motivated and happier workforce at the college and that that would be reflected in the quality of service offered to members of the profession. Passing accreditation schemes can also be a time for great pride within the organisation and helps to benchmark the business against its peers. In these times of the Great Resignation being seen as a great place to work as opposed to a good or mediocre business can massively help in staff retention and create stability in the business.

Clinical and wellbeing CPD

A poster at a pre-pandemic BSAVA Congress looked at the effect of good quality CPD on clinicians' wellbeing and showed that it had a very positive effect. Many vets are perfectionists and lifelong learners. They want to become more confident, able clinicians. With the advent of online CPD, there is a wealth of knowledge that can be acquired at a much lower cost than physical training alone. Training can be done at a time suitable for the learner, fitting in with a heavy workload and the demands of homelife, without the need for travel. Whilst not decrying physical CPD, digitalising veterinary CPD has democratised learning and made it available to vets and nurses on low salaries in developing countries who become better professionals which in turn leads to improved animal welfare and greater work satisfaction.

Charity Contributions

Giving each employee a couple of days to dedicate to charity shows the caring side of the business and allows the employee to spend some extra time doing something they are passionate about. These days have to be agreed upon and verified but are an important added benefit to working in a purpose-centred business. Events can also be organised to involve the team – working in a nature reserve or going to a care home or offering some help for free to a local animal charity. IVC Evidensia's recent Positive Pawprint is a very interesting document showing the initiatives that one of the UK's largest corporates is undertaking. A highlight is a budget that each clinical member of the team can use on stray animals or owned animals in precarious situations to support treatment. This treatment of animals who would otherwise not be treated can be a great morale boost for the practice. Some businesses decide on a charity for the year and raise money with raffles, sponsored events and cake sales. All of these activities can have beneficial effects on the organisers.

Integrating a wellbeing initiative into the practice can have massive benefits both for the productivity and profits of the business but also to help create a positive culture within the team as well. As a purpose-centred, service-orientated profession, the veterinary industry is used to giving of itself to the animals under its care. In a well organised business where this can be done sustainably, supporting the team at all times means that many good things can flow from this.



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