

Section IV: Employee Engagement

Employee Retention and Motivation

Given that your employees are your greatest asset, keeping the good ones should be your number one goal. It is important to the overall success of your clinic to be able to retain your best employees. There will always be other opportunities for your strong performers regardless of the economic environment. Your best employees can be tempted to leave for a new opportunity at any time which means that you must give them good reasons to stay, especially as we emerge from our down economy and job opportunities increase. Clinic directors that retain their star performers will have an easier job and a great advantage.

There are certain key factors that encourage good employees to stay. If you practice these on a regular basis, it will also help with recruiting good workers.



It may surprise you to find out what your employees really like about their job. When candidates apply for a position, they consider the pay rate or salary and it is an important factor in the decision-making process of whether or not the position is the right one for them. However, money is not usually the reason employees cite as the reason they stay at their companies. Employees who are committed to your mission and have a passion for working with animals will find a good outlet with your spay/neuter clinic and that's part of the equation.

Your employees may be driven by the clinic mission, but they also have to be realistic in securing a pay rate or salary that meets their needs. In order to retain the best employees, you must develop a fair and relevant compensation package. Regardless of your reward and recognition efforts, an employee who feels that he or she is underpaid will not be happy on the job. They may accept the position, but will probably be quick to leave when the economy improves and another higher-paying position becomes available. To address this issue, there are some things you can do when setting compensation levels for your positions that will have a positive effect on retention.

Establish Competitive Pay Rates Whenever Possible

Pay your employees competitively. Common sense tells you that more applicants are going to be interested in those positions that pay above the market average. This strategy allows you to cast a wide net when recruiting from an applicant pool and ensures that new hires are satisfied with their compensation. It then becomes important to address other areas of the work environment in order to keep employees happy and content on the job.

It is also important to monitor the environment and review salary levels at frequent intervals. At least once per year, review your compensation plan to ensure that your pay rates and salaries are maintaining a competitive edge. As the external environment changes, you should adjust your pay rates to remain above average. This is especially important in a situation like the one we are currently facing where a very depressed market is starting to rebound. If your rates are out of line, it could have a very strong impact on

your retention rates. It's better to know where you stand on your compensation before employees begin to leave for pay-related reasons.

Benchmarking key positions can indicate you're either in line with your pay rates or need to make adjustments. One way to determine if your positions are paid according to current market rates is to conduct regular benchmarking analyses. Benchmarking is simply a means for you to compare your clinic to other businesses in your area or other nonprofits so that you know how you compare on a variety of issues. One common issue is pay rates. Many of the positions within the clinic are common throughout other businesses or other clinics. See the chart below for an example of benchmarking a Vet Tech position to national averages in 2008/2009. There are many factors which should be considered when benchmarking pay rates for your own local clinic positions. Some of those factors include education required for the position, competition for workers, size of clinic operations, type of business and geographic location. These factors greatly influence the pay rate and what would be a viable benchmarking point for your location and position. A national comparison may be more relevant to a higher level position such as a Veterinarian. Other sources for pay rate information include: [Boardsource](#), [Guidestar](#), [Salary.com](#), [Monster.com](#), [Careerbuilder.com](#), and [AVMA.org](#).

JOB TITLE	SOURCE	PAY RATE/ HOURLY	EQUATES TO ANNUALLY:	GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION
Vet Tech	Allalliedhealthschools.com	\$11.00 - \$16.00	\$22,880 - \$33,280	National
Vet Tech	Payscale.com	\$10.61 - \$15.47	\$22,068 - \$32,177	National
Vet Tech	O*NET	\$13.89 median	\$28,900	National
Vet Tech	NAVTA	\$14.66	\$30,500	National
Vet Tech	Occupational Outlook Handbook	\$10.44 - \$18.68	\$21,715 - \$38,854	National

Make sure your employees know the real value of their total compensation package. Many employees, especially those paid an hourly rate, look only at the hourly rate to judge the value of their compensation and don't consider the true value of their benefits package.

Build in bonus awards or recognition awards into your annual budget. A nonprofit typically relies very heavily on the annual budget and variances to the monthly spending can be difficult to obtain. However, one way to recognize excellence in your good employees is to be able to offer them immediate rewards for instances of great performance. And, it doesn't have to be overly costly to the clinic: movie tickets, dinner coupons, etc. are all cost-efficient ways to say thanks.

Ensure a Good Working Environment

People are motivated to do a lot of things. The challenge at work is to create an environment in which people are motivated to do those things in such a way as to ensure the ongoing success of your clinic.

In developing a good work environment, the first thing you want to make sure you do is remove obstacles and roadblocks. Sounds easy but if you look objectively at your clinic and your operations, there are probably a few things you already have in place that demotivate your employees. Unhappy employees who have disengaged from work complain about not having the proper tools to do their job - they don't

know what is expected of them and they feel their bosses don't listen to them. They may still show up for work every day, but disengaged workers have already "quit." They just haven't told you yet.

If you create an environment that is viewed as fair and consistent, you give people little to push against. You open up a space in which people are focused on contribution and productive activities rather than gossip, unrest, and unhappiness. Which workplace would you choose?

Most employees report that they can never have enough communication. The following ideas can help you provide an engaging work environment that connects and engages your employees. Use the ones that would fit into your style and your clinic culture or develop your own. Here are a few suggestions:

- ▶ Communicate the clinic's [mission, vision and values](#) in a way that enables your employees to align themselves with the clinic direction. Encourage communication about the importance of these, and provide clear expectations about the behaviors expected from everyone to accomplish these.
- ▶ Provide [regular performance feedback](#) for all employees and develop an improvement plan or career development plan when appropriate.
- ▶ Provide training to employees and allow them to develop their skills through formal training, mentoring relationships, cross-training or other creative developmental opportunities.
- ▶ Create a way to recognize and value employees.
- ▶ Be responsive to employee complaints and problems.
- ▶ Schedule and hold learning events such as book clubs, new tools or medical device trainings, and planning meetings.
- ▶ Provide funding for conferences and educational development opportunities for employees to continue learning.
- ▶ As part of your development, ask your employees how you're doing.
- ▶ With the involvement of many employees, identify clinic values and write value statements and a professional code of conduct.
- ▶ Address individual dysfunctional behaviors on a "need-to" basis with counseling, progressive discipline, and performance improvement plans.
- ▶ Clearly communicate workplace expectations and guidelines for professional behavior.
- ▶ Solicit employee feedback on potential policies, areas in which policies are needed, and so on.



The point is to increase communication and get your employees committed and engaged to the clinic.

Be a Good Manager to Your Employees

People leave their bosses more often than they leave companies or jobs. A manager who is good at employee retention knows that the quality of supervision is the key factor in retaining their employees. Good managers start by communicating clear expectations to their employees. They are able to share their vision of good performance and what is required from all employees in order for the clinic to succeed. Good managers also give their employees frequent feedback and recognition. They make their employees feel that what they are doing is important and valued. Good managers help their employees feel empowered, enabled, and confident in their ability to get the job done.

The biggest complaints that employees have about bad managers are that they fail to:

- ▶ provide clear expectations
- ▶ give accurate information about career development and earning potential
- ▶ give regular [feedback](#) about how they are performing on the job
- ▶ run scheduled meetings effectively
- ▶ structure the work so that the employee feels they can succeed

One of the most important things you can do as a manager is to truly value the people who work for you and recognize them for their contributions.

Turn Around a Dissatisfied Employee

The first thing you need to do is determine why the employee is dissatisfied or unhappy in their job. Is it that they dislike the day-to-day work? Or, are there other problems that are affecting their perception about their job? If the employee truly likes the work, it may be worth your effort to try to turn them around. Employees don't usually really want to quit their job – change is disruptive at best and sometimes downright traumatic! And, good jobs are hard to find, especially in the current economic environment.

The employee may be feeling that there is no hope of promotion or of ever doing anything new and challenging. Talk to your employee about opportunities for lateral moves, cross-training and for more interesting, skill-stretching assignments. It's a good thing to have employees who show initiative and want to continue to learn and grow.

Your Employee May Feel Unappreciated

Your employees work hard every day and probably don't get a lot of recognition for their efforts and their contribution. One thing employees can never get too much of is appreciation and recognition. Everyone wants to feel valued for what they do. But, it must be sincere – employees can see right through an insincere effort. Giving your employees honest feedback, appreciation and recognition is easy and cost-effective! As the director, your feedback means a lot to your employees.



If you don't feel comfortable doing this, try creating an employee recognition team that can develop a process for recognizing the hard work and efforts of all your employees. After all, if one employee is feeling unappreciated, you can bet others are, too.

Your Employee May Have Lost Touch with the Mission

Hold informational meetings with your staff and give them an opportunity to ask questions and raise issues that they have. This can be a good opportunity to let employees hear about the clinic goals, vision, mission and business objectives. Staff will get an opportunity to ask you questions and raise issues important to them. Two-way, straightforward communication helps to curb negativity and increase morale.

Spend time with each employee by conducting an hour walk along with a different employee each week. Walking an hour in a staff member's shoes can help to unveil a new understanding of what goes on and what daily issues the employees face. It also helps to reduce communication barriers and facilitates the connection between you and individual employees.



Learn from Your Mistakes

One of the most valuable pieces of information you can have as a clinic director is to know why employees leave. The only way to get this information is to ask. Try to conduct exit interviews with any and all staff that are leaving your clinic. Gathering this information can help you understand why your employees are dissatisfied, which is the only way to improve the work environment for the remaining staff.

Great Ideas from Others!

Anytime you can make work fun for your staff, you'll be making progress in your employee retention. People who do what they love and love what they do never work a day in their lives! There are a number of great ideas out there from other clinics who are building fun into the work environment. Some of the ideas include:

Jeopardy game (from Deanna in Illinois): create a Jeopardy game with training content to conduct refresher training with your staff. (see Retention Tools in [Appendix](#))

Spirit Week/Volunteer Week (from Aimee in Ohio): staff dress up for the week with themes and games/activities scheduled throughout the week. Both employees and volunteers look forward to a fun, theme-based week!

Appreciate your staff: You can reinforce your employees' recognition in the following ways:

- ▶ Write out the recognition - what the employee did, why it was important, and how the actions served your clinic. Place a copy in the employee's file.
- ▶ Accompany the recognition with a small gift. Engraved plaques, movie tickets, logo merchandise, even certificates of appreciation reinforce the employee recognition.

- ▶ Everyone likes cash or the equivalent in gift cards, gift certificates, and checks. If you use a consumable form of employee recognition, accompany the cash with a note or letter. When the money has been spent, you want the employee to remember the recognition.
- ▶ Present the recognition publicly - at a Board of Directors meeting, for example. Even if the employee is uncomfortable with publicity, it is important for the other employees to know that employees are receiving recognition.

Educate your staff: Employees don't always know how great it is to work for you! You can educate your employees about the total amount of their compensation package by creating a list of all of their benefits and what they are worth. Some employees just look at their hourly pay rate or annual salary as their compensation when, in actuality, the benefits you provide them could increase their total compensation by 15 – 40% or more!

Rewards and Recognition Programs



Most employees crave recognition and appreciation in their work. In fact, if compensation is fair, employees will list pay further down the list of factors that keep them satisfied at work. Things like recognition, appreciation and a sense of accomplishment are rated higher and have a greater impact on employee satisfaction, turnover and engagement.

Various studies have been conducted over the years to ask employees what they really want on the job and to compare it with a list from managers who are asked to rank order what their

employees' value at work. As you might guess, there is some

discrepancy about what employees say they want and what their managers think they want.

What employees say they want, starting with what's most important:

1. Full appreciation for work done
2. Feeling "in" on things
3. Sympathetic help on personal problems
4. Job security
5. Good wages
6. Interesting work
7. Promotion/growth opportunities
8. Personal loyalty to workers
9. Good working conditions
10. Tactful discipline

What managers THINK employees want, starting with what's most important:

1. Good wages
2. Job security
3. Promotion/growth opportunities
4. Good working conditions
5. Interesting work
6. Personal loyalty to workers
7. Tactful discipline
8. Full appreciation for work done
9. Sympathetic help with personal problems
10. Feeling "in" on things

Employees report that appreciation for the work they do is the most important thing that keeps them going on the job; however, managers list appreciation at the bottom of the list. No wonder employees say they crave recognition and appreciation! Some of the benefits of regular rewards and recognition are:

- ▶ Employees feel appreciated for the work they do
- ▶ It creates a positive work environment and culture
- ▶ Employees feel more of a connection to what they are doing
- ▶ It encourages discussions about performance all through the year
- ▶ Helps all employees seek to become magnificent instead of being mediocre

Positive Reinforcement Works!

Although this may seem like common sense, too often leaders can become so busy with the busy-ness of management that they fail to spend time reinforcing good behavior in their staff. And, no one is immune to being appreciated. Think about your own recognition and appreciation needs: when was the last time someone acknowledged your contribution? How do you feel when someone tells you that you've done a great job with something?

You may want to acknowledge your employees to say “thank you,” “job well done,” “you are valued as an employee,” “your contributions are appreciated,” and “keep up the good work!” Whatever you want to accomplish, the important point is to start now to recognize good performance and good action. Tell your employees before they decide to leave how valuable they are to your clinic's success.

Before you begin, there are some questions you'll want to consider:

- ▶ How do we currently recognize or thank employees?
- ▶ What is our culture like?
- ▶ What do our employees value?
- ▶ What are our goals and how might we influence and acknowledge goal achievement?
- ▶ Who is the right person (people?) to reward and recognize staff

The guidelines for effectively rewarding and recognizing employees are simple:

Think about the Employee – each employee is different and it's important to reward your employees in ways that they truly find rewarding. Rewards can be personal or official clinic business, they can be formal or informal, they can be done in private or in public, and finally, they can be in the form of gifts or activities. You can ask employees on their first day what they like or pass out a short survey asking your staff for input into what types of things they prefer.

Balance the Reward with the Accomplishment – your reward should be consistent with the performance or achievement you're recognizing. If an employee has done a great job on a project that lasted six months, their reward should be more significant than an employee who stepped up and helped a co-worker for a few hours. Make the reward match the level of time and effort that the employee contributed.

Tie the Reward closely in time to the Behavior – following basic motivational theories, to be effective your rewards should be given as soon as possible to the time of the behavior or performance. It is most

meaningful when it is timely. It is also important to be specific in your recognition. Telling an employee that “they are a great employee” may feel nice, but it does little to let that employee and others know what exactly you valued in their performance.

Mix up your Rewards – Similar to item two, it is important to vary your rewards. While a written thank-you note is a nice reward, if every employee always gets a written thank-you note, it will soon lose its special touch. You should mix up your rewards by offering informal acknowledgements, more formal rewards, and very special rewards/recognition.

Encouraging good performance from all of your employees takes a comprehensive effort. You’ll need to reinforce good behavior/performance from multiple levels. Good performance should be recognized, rewarded, used as a basis for promotion, and documented in performance reviews.

There are many different types of rewards that you can use and many clinics are already doing a good job in this area. Recognition and appreciation may be monetary and non-monetary. Other forms of awards are thank-you notes, pins, plaques, lunch, balloons, flowers, candy, clinic merchandise, gift cards, cash, employee photo in clinic newsletter, special events, traveling awards that go from department to department periodically, etc. The choices are endless and not necessarily expensive. Some companies reward employees on several levels concurrently:



- ▶ **Length of Service:** this type of program recognizes service with the employer. Often these rewards are given in incremental years, for example, for each five years of employment. The reward can include recognition in the clinic newsletter or at a board of directors meeting. Sometimes the recognition includes a pin, certificate, or being able to choose a gift from a service award catalogue.
- ▶ **On-the-Spot Awards:** another way to recognize employees is to reward employees who you catch going over and above what’s required on the job. This can be a one-time achievement, rather than sustained performance over a period of time. A common award for this type of program is an on-the-spot gift card, movie tickets or small cash award.
- ▶ **Special Performance:** you may want to identify a particular type of outstanding or noteworthy performance. Usually the performance to be recognized varies with the needs of the clinic. What are you trying to reinforce in your culture, your mission, or your values?
- ▶ **Department Recognition:** many employees consider this a very important award and this can be good if you are trying to reward teamwork within a department. Thanking employees for outstanding efforts as part of a staff meeting is both an inexpensive and effective way to recognize your staff.

NOTE: According to the IRS, gifts and cash are taxable as income unless the amount is “de minimus” or very small.

Some Examples of Rewards

- ▶ Time - give an outstanding team or employee the afternoon off. Let them decide when to use their gift of time.
- ▶ Gifts for the department or individual - a dart board, a basketball hoop, tickets to the movies, etc.
- ▶ Trophies and plaques - customized plaques, a coffee cup with a personal thank-you note inscribed, or a refrigerator magnet with the perfect message.
- ▶ Opportunity - giving the employee a chance to be part of a special committee or to give a presentation to the Board of Directors, special training, etc.
- ▶ Camaraderie – think about an outing or event on clinic time. Leaving work early to watch a baseball game or having a spontaneous pizza party some afternoon; chili cook-off, bake-off, barbeque, group picnic, etc.

Low-Cost/No-Cost Recognition Examples

- ▶ “Celebrating Our Successes” board
- ▶ Post-it note comments
- ▶ Monthly drawing/monthly winner
- ▶ Give an appreciation certificate
- ▶ Gift card to the coffee shop of the employee’s preference
- ▶ “Leather Chair Award” – An executive leather chair awarded once a month or once a week to someone who has made an outstanding contribution or done an outstanding job; the leather chair is then passed to another awardee the next month or week.
- ▶ “King/Queen for a Day” with a crown or a funny hat and a plaque
- ▶ Thank-you note to an employee’s family acknowledging the employee’s long overtime hours or required traveling and expressing appreciation to the family
- ▶ Candy bars with a message attached: “Thanks-A-Millions Bar”
- ▶ Coupons for small awards; e.g., 10-point awards
- ▶ Coffee with the director or Board of Directors
- ▶ Bumper stickers
- ▶ Fortune cookies, candy bars, Lifesavers, etc.
- ▶ Stickers - “Star Performer”
- ▶ Marble awards (collect until you have a certain number and turn them in for a prize)
- ▶ Treasure box
- ▶ Flowers
- ▶ Recognize nominees once a month - have a drawing of their names

Additional Reading: Nelson, Bob. (1994). 1001 Ways to Reward Employees. New York: Workman Publishing.

Creating Excitement

Now comes the fun part of being a clinic director – creating a positive, exciting, engaging work environment.

Work doesn't have to be boring, exhausting or just not interesting. Remember the excitement of being a kid, when life was full of possibilities and little pleasures were a really big deal? And there was always something to look forward to and get excited about? A clinic director can use such feelings as the basis of an effective approach for creating teamwork and momentum in the workplace. It's even easier with a small clinic because it doesn't take as much effort to make a more exciting workplace that can generate benefits for all. And who wouldn't rather have employees who are interested in what they're doing - confident, well-informed ambassadors who make the clinic a great place to come? Camaraderie and energy among employees extends outward to everyone connected with your clinic.



If you want to create more excitement in your workplace and get your clinic staff energized, it's really not that hard to do. Here are a few simple steps to generate, maintain and build enthusiasm.

Remember: If you do what you love, and love what you do,
you never have to work a day in your life!

Develop your thinking skills and look for new ideas

Employees get tired doing the same thing day after day – there is always a need for new ideas. Fresh ideas help to create a more dynamic culture. As the world outside keeps changing, a clinic needs to learn new ways of thinking and doing. There are always new, better, different ways of doing things. Encourage your employees to learn either on their own or through company-sponsored training. Engage your staff in constantly learning so they are being challenged on a regular basis.

Encourage a new way of thinking

Encourage your staff to think about your business. Is there a new or better process? Is there a way to reach more clients? When employees are challenged to think about the new and unknown possibilities, they are thinking on the edge – and that's exciting. You may end up developing a new service or process that your clients will benefit from and appreciate.

Revamp your clinic's culture

Every clinic has a culture, much like every person has a personality. Is it the type of culture that fits with you and your staff or do you need an overhaul? Your culture says a lot about you: it shows what you stand for and creates expectations for levels of attention, quality and service. It has meaning for everyone connected with it, including your clients and vendors.

Does your culture encourage knowledge growth, personal development, time for family life, and openness with your co-workers? Are these things you and your employees value? Engage your staff in helping to identify what your culture should look like and work on ways to get it there.

Do your employees feel proud to work for the clinic? Do you capitalize on your uniqueness? Do you provide logo items for your employees and their families? Not only is this a way to integrate your culture with your employees, but you're marketing to the community at the same time.

Have some fun

See [Team Building](#), because doing something different is often exciting in and of itself. Give your employees a chance to relax, have some fun in an activity and also build positive relationships with their co-workers. The sky is the limit when it comes to finding activities for you and your staff.

You can solicit input from your staff and perhaps vote on the activity or set up a regular quarterly activity or luncheon. Find a way to do something a little different which helps to break up the routine.

Appreciate your employees

You have probably already come to the conclusion that you cannot succeed without great staff. Without your great employees, the work wouldn't get done. You can have the best equipment, the nicest building and lots of clients, but without great employees, not much would be accomplished!

Review [Rewards and Recognition Programs](#) for ideas on how to recognize and appreciate your employees.

