Recruiting During a Dry Spell & Recruiting Contracts

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It has been said many times that employees are our most valuable assets. Without a well-trained, highly motivated staff, it will be difficult for any Practice to achieve its strategic vision and performance goals. Since every Practice will need to hire someone at some point, the decision to hire a new employee should not be taken lightly or without careful Talent Acquisition planning. The key to any Talent Acquisition effort is to devise and implement a strategy that will yield the greatest opportunity to attract talent and retain them.

Defining the Job

Every recruitment effort should incorporate strategies to address sourcing, screening, interviewing and selection. Before deciding where, when and how to advertise for a job opening, it is critical to confirm the need for the job still exists. Every Practice needs to accomplish certain basic functions, including reception, patient examination, inventory management, client billing, etc. When a Practice is just starting out, many of these responsibilities are combined into one or more positions. Team members often are responsible for doing anything and everything needed to help run the Practice and job descriptions should reflect this broad array of duties. As a Practice grows and evolves, management needs to analyze and improve the Practice's organizational structure. Job descriptions will help reveal whether all Practice responsibilities are adequately covered and where responsibilities should be reallocated to achieve a better balance.

As a result, a job description should be reviewed annually to ensure it includes and clarifies information regarding the general and strategic nature of the work to be performed, specific responsibilities and duties and the employee characteristics or competencies needed by the person who will be required to fulfill the job requirements. Knowing these needed attributes will help ensure a Practice has the best possible chance of finding the right individual. In addition, an accurate job description will ensure interested candidates are provided a clear and concise picture of what the job entails and enables the potential employee to assess the relative importance of everything he/she is accountable for, providing a sense of where the job fits in to the Practice as a whole and how the position supports the Practice's overall goals. If a job description does not exist for the position you are looking to fill, this is the ideal time to create it.

Determining Where to Look

Once your job description is completed, you are ready to craft a job posting that dazzles an ideal candidate by highlighting your Practice's strengths and the position's attractiveness. Describe your Practice's culture, reputation, growth, benefits package, advancement opportunities and even location. Write your job posting as a performance profile, informing candidates of expectations and what kind of attitude your want in a new hire as well. Think of your job descriptions and job postings as advertising copy that you have created as an opportunity to highlight what is great about your Practice, to raise your Practice's profile in the industry and to pull in your next high achiever.

Once you have clearly identified what position you are looking to fill, the next step is determining the best places to look. There are various resources that can help you "cast a wider net" about your job opening. The decision of where and how to recruit should be based on an assessment of how difficult you think it will be to find a sufficient number of qualified candidates and how much time, effort and money you are willing to commit to the recruiting process. While some sources are free or relatively inexpensive, others are very costly and may require signing an agreement with outside consultants to pay a percentage of the first year annual salary of the individual you ultimately hire. Be creative in your sourcing because you never know where your next ideal candidate will be present.

Conducting the Interview

The interview provides the hiring manager a perfect opportunity to identify the applicant(s) best qualified and best suited for the Practice. If conducted properly, it offers a valuable opportunity to assess how an applicant will perform the essential functions of the job and whether s/he will fit into the culture of the Practice. However, if handled incorrectly or unprofessionally, you risk alienating a candidate to whom you may want to issue a job offer.

In preparing for the interview, an applicant checklist should be developed to ensure all necessary information and documents have been obtained and distributed to persons involved in the interview and selection process (e.g. application, resume, etc…). Prior to the interview, train the employees involved in the process and create a list of common questions to be asked of all applicants for the same job. While the need to ask additional specific questions to each applicant will certainly arise during the interview, having a core group of questions will ensure every interviewer receives a common subset of information about each applicant. If team interviews will be used be sure all team members know what skills, knowledge and competencies they will be looking for. To ensure the interview process runs smoothly and without misstep, it is advisable to assign responsibility to one person to act as "gatekeeper" of the recruitment process. This person will make sure each interviewer has been provided with all of the information and tools needed to conduct a thorough and legal interview. This individual will also coordinate all interview arrangements and schedules.

As you begin the actual interview, be sure to introduce yourself and your position, briefly discuss the organization structure. It is always a good idea to ask broad, open-ended questions that require an applicant to process what is being asked and develop an appropriate response. Questions should be job-related, be asked in a direct, clear manner, and pertain to the applicant's education/training, work history, attitudes towards work, people and working conditions. To obtain information about work history, questions might center on specific duties and responsibilities of current/past jobs and what has s/he done to prepare for assuming greater responsibilities. Additional behavioral interviewing questions eliciting responses regarding goals, motivation, and responses to specific situations are valuable in determining if your Practice's culture and organization structure offer opportunities that match those of the applicant. To learn more about attitude and motivation, you might ask about what aspects of prior jobs the applicant felt were particularly rewarding and what serves to motivate him/her. Regarding working relationships, ask an applicant to describe the working environment and tell you about his/her prior supervisors.

There are many ways of ascertaining information from an applicant. However, asking the wrong questions, or asking the right questions in the wrong manner, can result in serious legal problems for a Practice. Numerous laws and regulations have been passed that provide extensive protection against discrimination in employment. These laws have been created to ensure an applicant is not discriminated against on the basis of age, gender, marital status, religion, or sexual orientation or any other protected class. Thus, it behooves each Practice to ensure all of its employees involved in the interview process know what can and cannot be asked during an interview. The key to understanding unlawful inquiries is to ask only questions that will provide information about the person's ability to do the job, with or without a reasonable accommodation.

Effective interviewers listen more than they talk. Remember, your goal in the interview is to learn as much as you can about the applicant. Be sure to control the pace and flow of the conversation. Once the interview is completed, be sure to thank the applicant for coming to the interview, explain that you are still in the interviewing phase, and inform the applicant that you hope to be making a decision within the next few days/weeks.

Making the Offer

You've sifted through dozens of resumes, read through countless cover letters, conducted several interviews for numerous applicants, and analyzed every candidate six ways from Sunday. Now that you have completed the interview process and determined whom you want to select, it is time to decide how to extend the job offer. Here, too, there are guidelines you should follow to ensure the entire recruitment process does not fail because you did not act swiftly or decisively enough in the eyes of your chosen candidate. To avoid losing the "right person", make the offer as soon as possible after the final job interview.

Admittedly, you don't want to rush the interview process and risk hiring the wrong person. However, the individual you ultimately select may also be actively interviewing with other hospitals and might receive another offer while you deliberate. By making the offer as soon as possible, you increase your chances of hiring the person you want for your Practice. Considering you may only have one opportunity to offer the job to that individual, be sure to reemphasize all the benefits of working for your Practice. This is the ideal time to review salary and benefits, paid time off, paid (or unpaid) CE, personal pet care benefits, and any other terms and conditions of employment.

If your Practice includes pre-employment drug screening and background screening as a routine part of the employment process, this testing will need to be done AFTER a contingent job offer of employment has been made. Depending on the level of the job being offered, you may wish to have a formal employment agreement developed by an employment attorney who is knowledgeable about the veterinary industry.

Other methods of delivering the job offer include issuing the offer in person, informing the applicant over the phone, sending an email offer, or forwarding a written offer signed by the Practice manager or hospital owner. The final step in the interview process entails notifying rejected applicants that they were not selected. This notification is normally accomplished by email or written letter. While there is no requirement for this notification, taking this action sends the message that your Practice respects all applicants and is committed to treating everyone with dignity and respect. Furthermore, you may wish to reconsider a previously rejected applicant at some future date.

Compensation and Benefits

It would be so simple if practice owners could open a fortune cookie for each one of their employees and find the method by which to fairly compensate them. While there are commonly accepted methods of compensation, their implementation in veterinary practices varies because different entrepreneurs have different business goals. Also, "fairness" is a relative term that introduces variability into an equation that might otherwise be consistent from practice to practice. We will discuss the factors that practice owners should consider when determining compensation for veterinarians and paraprofessional staff.

On-Boarding the New Hire

On-Boarding is the process by which a Practice acclimatizes its new employees. It is one of the keys for improving productivity, building loyalty and engagement, fostering a stronger team, and helping employees become successful early in their careers with the new Practice. Employee on-boarding includes the processes that allow new employees to learn about the Practice, its structure and its vision, mission and values, as well as to complete new-employee paperwork relative to benefits and legal documents such as non-competes, at-will statements and employee handbooks. For some Practices, the employee on-boarding process consists of one or two days of activities; for others, this process may involve a series of activities spanning one or many months.

Veterinary Practices have learned that employee on-boarding is not merely a process for getting new employees to sign off on their new-hire paperwork, but a process that is essential to transitioning a new employee into your Practice.

Engagement, Loyalty, Commitment

Studies have proven that employee engagement is partially determined by the new employee's treatment and orientation during the first 30–90 days of employment. A solid employee on-boarding strategy will help build on that loyalty and help with retention and engagement issues throughout an employee's tenure.

Mission, Vision and Values

If employees are to contribute to the Practice, then they must have a solid understanding of the Practice's mission, vision and values and how these align with the employees' positions and departments.

Expectations and Performance Standards

"What is expected of me?" is one of the most important questions contributing to employee satisfaction. Reviewing work standards and expectations, along with how performance will be managed, measured and reviewed, is critical for the new team member to better understand how he/she will fit into the Practice.

Acceptable Work Behaviors and Etiquette

What is the work culture and what standards of etiquette govern employees' everyday behavior? Is it OK to smoke on facility grounds? Can receptionists eat at their desks? Is there a dress code? Is it ok to joke around with clients? Discussing these, and many other written and unwritten rules, is a great way to avoid any misunderstandings and help new employees become productive team members.

Review and Sign Documents

New employees also must sign documents which may include W-4's (tax withholding), benefits enrollment, legal (e.g., Handbook Acknowledgement of Receipt), and others.

Before the Start Date

Practices that tend to recruit long in advance of the employee's start date may find that they want to begin the on-boarding process after the offer is accepted but before the actual start date. In these situations, Practices may want to develop strategies to link new employees to the Practice. Examples include:

- Inviting the employee (and family) to the facility for a tour (may also include a house-hunting trip and community tour, if relocation is involved).
- Mailing information to the employee regarding the Practice, including brochure, benefits information, etc.
- Sending a "welcome" to the new employee. Welcome packages may include, uniforms, name tag, stuffed animal, coffee mug with the Practice name and logo, etc.
- Matching the new employee with a mentor who connects with the new employee prior to the first day to answer basic questions (What is the dress code? What can I expect on my first day? What time should I arrive? etc.).

Roles and Responsibilities

While every Practice is unique in how the employee on-boarding responsibilities are shared, here are some general guidelines for splitting up on-boarding duties:

- **Practice Manager or HR personnel:** Employee paperwork (forms, benefits, etc.); work hours; history and background of the Practice; review of the organizational chart; tour of the facility; discussions about the culture, goals and objectives;
- **Supervisor or Practice Owner:** Duties and responsibilities; work behaviors, standards and expectations; introductions to fellow team members and other members of the Practice; review of other roles and relationships within the department; review of policies and standard operating procedures;
- **Co-workers:** How the group works as a team; how to get things done; how to treat/respond to clients; how to treat patients;
- **Practice Owner:** Mission, vision and values; strategic goals and objectives of the Practice; high-level review of roles and responsibilities; description of Practice culture.
- **Mentor/buddy.** Introductions to fellow team members and others within the Practice; review of informal rules and policies; answers to day-to-day questions.

Tailoring Employee On-boarding to Different Audiences

All employees, no matter their level or status, will need some sort of employee on-boarding process since this is the way in which a Practice conveys rules and guidelines for all employees. However, the process may be modified to meet the differing needs of various groups of employees. For example, all supervisory and professional employees will need a review of not only the employee handbook and Hospital policies and programs, but also information on how to administer or lead these various programs and policies.

Independent contractors may have differing policies controlling their reporting of work hours, access to the premises and other unique issues the Practice should address in an on-boarding process. Similarly, interns, temporary workers or seasonal employees (often seen in equine Practices) may have different benefits, rules of conduct, policies and programs that should be explained to them. Persons with disabilities may also need information about accommodation options and how to arrange them with their supervisor, Practice Manager or Practice Owner.

Employee On-boarding Delivery Approaches

Various components of an employee on-boarding program can be delivered using different approaches and methodologies combined to suit the Practice and available resources.

Mentoring and Buddy Systems

Many Practices offer a formal or informal mentoring or buddy system to support the new employee during the employee on-boarding period. Mentors/buddies should be selected by management and be an ‘A’ player. Generally, the role of the mentor or buddy is to offer the new employee a connection to someone who is not in a position of direct authority over the new hire or in an official capacity as a guide. The mentor can assist the new employee with explaining policies such as internet usage and pet discount policies, or showing the employee around the hospital facility, including where personal items are kept, or help the employee understand the nuances of working in a Practice (such as, what are the “hot buttons” for the boss and key employees) and instilling the collaborative approach of the team culture. Mentors/buddies may be teamed with the new employee for a day, a week, or a month or longer, depending on the length of the formal on-boarding program.

Measuring Value

Especially in smaller Practices, it is important to check back with recent new hires and ask open-ended questions to determine their level of satisfaction, not only with the employee on-boarding process but with the Practice as a whole.

Many Practices believe that employee on-boarding is a one-day event in which the new employee signs all appropriate paperwork, reviews all pertinent information, receives the facility tour and is set to begin. Increasingly, however, Practices realize the value of a thorough process as a strategy to ensure success, improve productivity and engagement, and, ultimately, enhance retention. To that end, Practices are looking for ways to strengthen employee on-boarding by making it a process and not an event.