



Utilizing an Underused Resource: Veterinary Technicians

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Abstract

Veterinary technicians in the modern veterinary practice play a vital role in clinic operations. To get the most use out of this typically underused resource requires an understanding of the nuances of technician education and regulation.

By appreciating the qualifications of credentialed veterinary technicians, you will empower your practice to hire the best staff and increase your revenue.

Introduction

Veterinary technicians play an important role in the day-to-day operations of modern veterinary clinics. In their capacity as support staff, they assist veterinarians in treating, preventing and/or managing disease or injury in animals. However, there is some confusion among veterinary practices as to what defines a veterinary technician. Rather than fulfilling a prescribed set of values and competencies necessary to gain entry into a profession like veterinary medicine, the term “veterinary technician” has many applications.

To add to the potential confusion, there are two other Para-veterinary roles besides technicians: veterinary technologists and veterinary assistants. It should be noted that the levels of education, remuneration and responsibility vary among the positions significantly. Although it is concerning that, within the veterinarian community, many are still unclear as to the distinguishing features and hence best utilization of the different support roles, the scope of this article focuses on veterinary technicians.

Overview of position

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines a veterinary technician as having, “... a two year associate’s degree in a veterinary technology program.” It goes on to further briefly outline the work technicians perform such as laboratory testing, radiology and client communication. Unfortunately this description of a veterinary technician is very restrictive, and differs greatly from the public (and veterinary) perception of a technician.

There are tens of thousands of veterinary technicians within America who are paid a median wage of \$36,278, according to the 2011 survey by the National Association of Veterinary Technicians of America (NAVTA). Since 1991, the primary concern members of NAVTA have reported is low salary. Job security is also fast becoming a key issue.

Considerations when employing technicians

Depending upon the state a technician is registered in, a technician could have:

- no qualifications
- an associate's degree
- a bachelor degree
- post-graduate qualifications

Although the American Association of Veterinary State Boards administers credentials to those who pass their entry-level competency evaluation, the Veterinary Technician National Exam (VTNE), a technician can pass the VTNE with only “on-the-job training” if they are from Alaska, Delaware, Wisconsin or Washington.

This means a technician with no formal education in anatomy, physiology, anaesthesia or pharmacology can take the VTNE. Simply passing the VTNE, though, is not enough to become a licensed or certified veterinary technician on its own. Candidates will get their VTNE score sent to the state they want to be registered in, which may then require further testing, such as the Florida Practical Examination.

It is no wonder NAVTA and other veterinary bodies are calling for this to be changed. The confusion surrounding what constitutes a certified technician, combined with the differences in state requirements, makes hiring the vet tech you want difficult. A national standard in veterinary technician licencing would allow practice owners to know what they were hiring and give technicians the peace of mind that their position is secure.

In order for practices to better utilize technicians, it is essential to understand what roles technicians perform within veterinary hospitals and what roles they do not. Although there may be confusion over the exact definition, strictly speaking, a veterinary technician is not an assistant – and not a technologist. In other words, these other paraclinical roles are not all the same and cannot be regarded as the same. Traditionally, a veterinary assistant is trained on-the-job with very little, if any at all, formal qualifications. As a result, veterinary assistants are employed to do more basic tasks and are consequently paid less. A veterinary technologist usually has a four year bachelor degree along with a deep understanding of veterinary laboratory science among other topics. Individuals with these qualifications usually find employment within research facilities or laboratories, but it is important to know the distinction from a technician.

A list of competencies and essential skills for veterinary technicians and assistants is available on the NAVTA website and, although the two roles cross over to some extent, the dissimilarities are distinct enough to warrant different utilization.

Benefits of using certified technicians

Because certified technicians usually have formal education of two years or more, it is possible for veterinarians to delegate duties in order to generate more profits by seeing more clients. Ultimately, of course, it is the veterinarian who brings people through the door and

initiates revenue making activities; however, there are aspects of this process that could be completed by qualified technicians. Low profit procedures or time consuming tasks should be delegated to veterinary technicians to complete. For example, scale and polish can, in most states, be conducted by a qualified technician. Laboratory work such as blood panels and urinalysis is routinely processed by technicians. Hiring veterinary assistants to clean kennels and autoclave equipment, and to care for patients is another example of delegating tasks to the most efficient and relevant staff member.

Perhaps most importantly to many practices, well-educated and competent veterinary technicians improve your bottom line. In 2008, the AVMA Biennial Economic Survey revealed that, on average, for every credentialed veterinary technician a practice employed, the practice generated \$161,493 more in gross revenue. This same phenomenon was not seen with non-credentialed technicians; rather there was no significant revenue improvement when hiring non-credentialed technicians. The conclusions of the study attributed the increase in revenue to perhaps freeing up veterinarian time by allowing qualified technicians to complete tasks traditionally requiring a veterinarian to oversee.

Ultimately, hiring educated technicians makes financial sense. However, there are other less tangible benefits, as well, such as decreased risk of malpractice suits, improved practice efficiency, improved customer satisfaction and improved staff morale. A qualified technician makes a valuable addition to your team, but it is important to understand the nuances within technician education and certification in today's society. Although it might be cheaper initially to hire a veterinary technician with less education, the 2008 AVMA study showed that hiring unqualified technicians results in lost revenue far exceeding the cost of a certified tech.

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