

Matching Associates and Practices

Our experience at Wutchiett Tumblin and Associates shows that matching associates and practices is an ongoing challenge. Therefore, through a research partnership with *Veterinary Economics*, we set out to develop a comprehensive guide to assist practice owners with hiring, training, evaluating and compensating both long-term and soon-to-be-owner associates. The result – The 2004 Well-Managed PracticeSM Study: An Associate Guide – details how some of the best-managed practices in the United States are finding, retaining, and developing the future leaders of the profession (available from Advanstar at www.vmpgstore.com or 1-800-598-6008).

Several of the 15-year participants reported this was the most challenging survey yet. Because this year's Study was less statistical in nature, the questions required careful consideration about processes and perhaps a little soul-searching about what owners truly want. We think you'll agree the participants came through with flying colors with their thoughtful responses.

Hiring right is an investment in the future and begins with a clear idea of what you are looking for. After all, the associate represents you and your practice philosophy, and may eventually be a candidate for co-ownership. Set aside time to think about your practice, your goals, and what you need to find in an associate. Taking a shortcut on this step may have a significant cost in the long run. Based on what you're seeking, make a list of the qualities that you'd like to see in a candidate to fulfill your specific needs. Separate your list into qualities that are "must have" versus "nice to have".

Surprisingly, only 40 percent of WellMPsSM have defined the skills and strengths they are seeking and have developed a position description before they begin searching for a new associate. Couple that with the fact that only 42 percent of the Study participants ask each applicant the same interview questions, no wonder the associate search is a bumpy ride. (Tools to assist you with your associate search are available at Management Tools on this website).

Where do you find an associate? The three most commonly cited resources were a classified ad in a veterinary journal, a recommendation from a colleague, or a job posting at a veterinary college. Seventeen percent of WellMPsSM have actively and successfully recruited a doctor from another practice.

Be mindful of the practice attributes that potential associates look for. Study participants tell us that top-quality medical care and competitive pay and benefits are most important to recent graduates in choosing their first practice. Associates tell us that they are attracted to a practice for its positive work environment, excellent reputation in the community, fair compensation and benefits, and the depth of case workup. Be sure to include the positive attributes about your practice when publicizing the position to attract high-caliber candidates.

Some WellIMPsSM are turning to professionals for assistance in the hiring process to help set the stage for long term retention. How do you select an advisor who can screen applicants for the talents and competencies that are important to your practice? A person with a successful record in personnel selection and development is a good place to start. A background in psychology and or human resources is a plus. Experience is the key. Then, do your own screening:

- Is the advisor a good listener?
- Does he or she demonstrate an understanding of your practice and its unique characteristics?
- Does the advisor clearly understand the talents and competencies you are seeking?
- Will the advisor work cooperatively with you yet challenge you to think differently about the selection and development process?

Your advisor's first role is to help you identify the competencies and talents you are seeking in an associate. Your advisor's second role is to screen potential candidates for these attributes. Some practices use their advisor to review applications to determine which applicants will start the interview process and others use their advisor to do the final screening--after the telephone and office interviews have narrowed the field of candidates.

What talents and competencies are most WellIMPsSM seeking? Everyone's list will be different but there are at least three talents that should be on your "must have" list if you are seeking an associate who has the potential of becoming a future owner of your practice:

- ✓ **A sense of purpose.** This talent is fundamental to the long-term success of the practice. Outstanding veterinarians have a clear sense of how they can contribute to the care and well-being of animals. They have a passion for their work and the ability to have a positive impact on the practice and the people they associate with.
- ✓ **People development.** Future owners must have the talent of people development if they are going to promote growth in the competencies needed in their doctors and staff.
- ✓ **Ability to delegate.** This talent helps create a climate of trust and collaboration in the hospital and motivates people in their work and in their willingness to accept new responsibilities.

An important concept to understand right from the start is that no applicant will have all of the talents and competencies you have identified as ideal. So first decide which talents you cannot compromise on; then decide which ones you'll be willing to help your associate develop over time. Your advisor should also be able to provide you with a plan and support for developing the competencies that need to be strengthened in the associate you select.

Once you've defined the qualities successful candidates will possess, establish a hiring protocol that outlines each step you'll take – from recruitment through hiring - to find an associate. Then create a position description that defines the responsibilities and expectations of the position.

Developing a cohesive, productive team member doesn't end after you successfully hire a new associate. Set the tone for a successful, long-term relationship with a balanced orientation program. Communicate your expectations clearly and aid in developing the associate's understanding of hospital protocols to hasten efficiency and productivity. Motivate by building on strengths and continue to look for opportunities to keep your associate enthused and moving forward, with enough options so he or she doesn't grow restless. (For associate orientation and education tools, go to Management Tools on this website).

This is one area where there is significant room for improvement in many practices. Seventy-eight percent of WellMPsSM don't have a written initial orientation and education program for new associates, and 89 percent don't have a continuing education plan for all associates. How can an associate be expected to successfully represent the owner and the practice philosophy without direction and guidance from the owner?

Another opportunity to aid an associate's learning and growth is to encourage him or her to choose a mentor within or outside the practice. What does the mentoring process entail? Mentoring is a professional development exercise. It brings together colleagues with different levels of experience within a practice, industry, or specialty to work together to improve job performance and prospects for advancement by asking and answering questions, seeking and offering advice, and sharing experiences.

Mentoring is primarily a one-on-one initiative. The typical relationship involves a mentor, who's an experienced member of the practice or industry, and a mentee, who's an associate with more to learn. The role of the mentor is to help the mentee set professional development goals and develop the skills needed to reach them. The role of the mentee is to drive the relationship, learn as much as possible, and act on the counsel the mentor provides.

According to psychologist Linda Phillips-Jones, Ph.D., a principal in the mentoring service firm The Mentoring Group (www.mentoringgroup.com) and a widely published author on the subject, effective mentoring requires a lot more than common sense and enthusiasm.

- ✓ **Core mentoring skills** (needed by both mentors and mentees): Listening actively, building trust, encouraging, and identifying goals and current reality.
- ✓ **Mentor-specific skills**: Instructing/developing capabilities, inspiring, providing corrective feedback, managing risks, and opening doors.
- ✓ **Mentee-specific skills**: Acquiring mentors, learning quickly, showing initiative, following through, and managing the relationship.

Why be a mentor? You'll learn from your mentee. He or she will have knowledge you don't have and help enhance your people-development skills. You'll also learn more about yourself. Mentoring is an opportunity to give back. You may have received guidance from someone in the past and now can reciprocate. Mentoring can energize you and help your practice gain a

recruitment edge, shorten learning curves, increase your associate's job satisfaction and loyalty, and improve productivity and quality. And, it's a powerful way to change the world, one life at a time.

Mentors can shorten the associate's learning curve in a variety of ways. A good mentor will nurture and support the associate and encourage them to think about where he or she is going. At times an associate needs mentors with skills different from his or her own, and at times he or she needs mentors with similar skill sets but more experience. The key is for the associate to identify where the gaps lie and what the goals are, and then choose people who have the knowledge and influence to help them become stronger in those areas.

The associate has the most to gain from a mentoring relationship, so he or she must initiate the relationship, negotiate the arrangements, set the goals, do the work, monitor his or her progress, and end the relationship when the time is right. Associates tell us some of the best advice they've received from a mentor is always be honest, compassionate, trust yourself – and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Owners and associates tell us that to build a successful, long-term relationship the owner must communicate well, hire right and nurture the relationship, value and respect the associate's contributions, recognize and reward effort, and be fair, honest and consistent. In return, the associate will bond clients to the practice, be productive and efficient, bring new ideas to the table, share their knowledge, and help keep the practice moving forward.

Clearly, the veterinarians we survey for The Well-Managed PracticeSM Study do a lot of things right. They put patients first and never lose sight of their mission to protect pets' health and well-being. They run their practices efficiently and have profit available to fairly compensate the veterinarians and owners and reinvest in technology and facilities. They feel enthusiasm for their work. They demonstrate respect for doctors and staff. Leadership is visible through owners' energetic passion for life, appetite for learning, optimism and focus. And, they view their practice as a work in progress.

We invite you to use these suggestions and the results, recommendations and management tools in The 2004 Well-Managed PracticeSM Study: An Associate Guide to enhance your ability to match associates with your practice and continue your work in progress.

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