

Advocating for Technician Utilization: Find Your Place at the Table

Kelly A. Zeytoonian, DVM, MBA, CERP

Statement of Objective: The presentation and proceedings will outline weaknesses in the standard veterinary medicine model of technician roles. We will highlight the benefits of technicians working to the high end of their skill set and give the audience tools to implement change within their practices. Author's address: PO Box 620071 Woodside, CA 94062; email: info@starwoodveterinaryconsulting.com (c) 2021 AAEVT

1. Introduction

The veterinary industry at large has experienced exponential growth (7.7%)¹ over the past few years and in response to the Covid Pandemic. The equine sector is no different. An August 2020 study² performed by Dr. Amy Grice revealed that a majority of owners surveyed were either not affected by Covid or experienced an increase in revenue following onset of the pandemic. Doctors entering the veterinary industry are lagging behind the increased demands - creating obvious challenges and maybe not so obvious opportunities for licensed and unlicensed veterinary technicians (the term "technician" will be used throughout this paper and is all-encompassing).

2. Discussion

The equine veterinary industry is historically lacking in technician utilization. A number of factors or perceptions likely contribute:

Historic model of veterinarians working solo and relying on horse owners to assist

Sadly, 16% of equine practitioners work without ANY assistance (Figure 1).³ Increasing concerns of safety and newer practitioners' desire to find efficiencies that improve work-life satisfaction are driving the demand for support team hires.

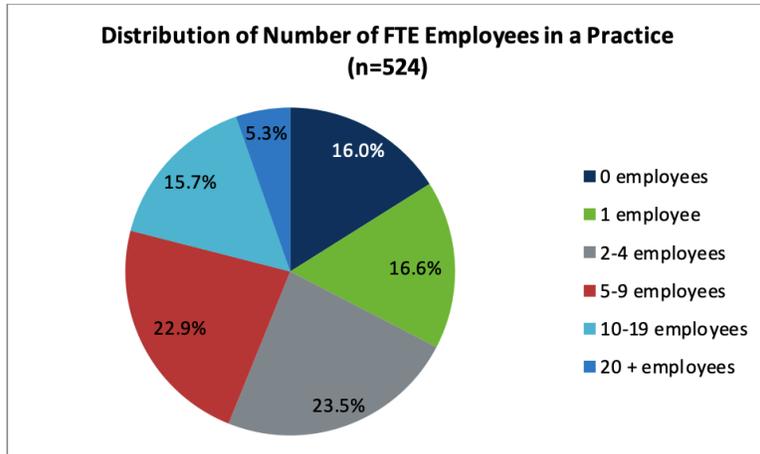


Figure 1: Number of Full-Time Equivalent Employees in a Practice³

Higher technician pay driving employees to the small animal sector

Numbers directly comparing small animal to large animal technician salaries are difficult to come by. Anecdotally, the author has observed average hourly rates of \$2-5 more in small animals compared to equine. A recent survey of AA EVT members⁴ (licensed, unlicensed, and practice manager roles combined) shows the highest hourly wage category is \$15-20. See the Figure below for details:

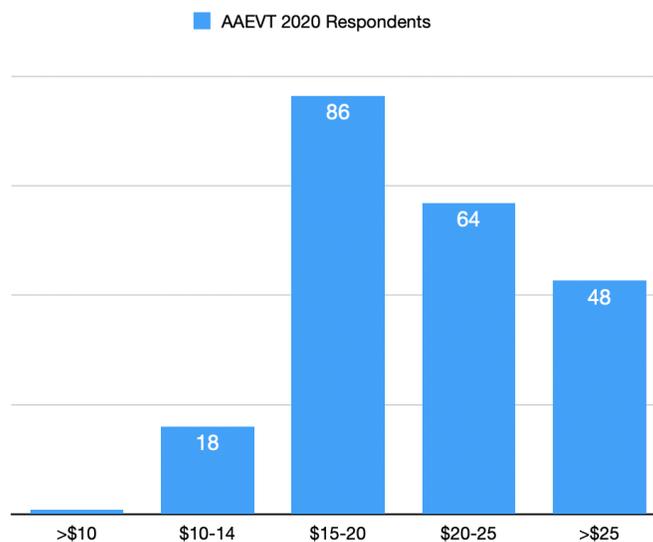


Figure 2: Hourly Wage Breakdown of 2020 AA EVT Survey Respondents⁴

Difficulties of generating enough revenue to support additional team members

When technicians are underutilized it is more difficult to generate revenue that supports additional support team members or higher wages. That said, the AVMA-AAEP Economic Survey³ measured veterinary salaries by practice size (see Figure 3). Practices with multiple employees showed a trend in increasing veterinarian salaries as additional team members were hired. A solo practitioner adding an assistant earned just \$120 less³ in salary for the year - a small price to pay for a myriad of benefits.

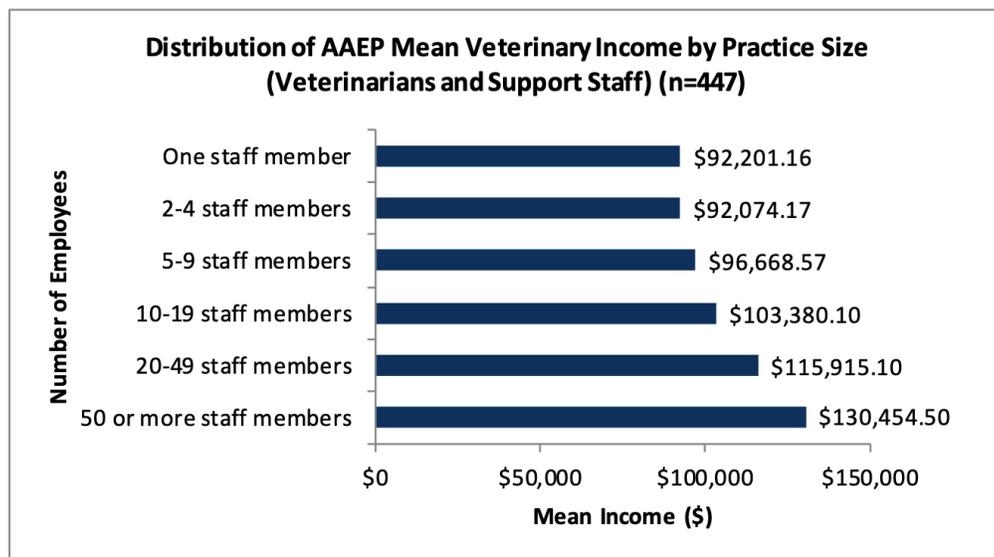


Figure 3: Veterinarian's Income Based on Number of Staff Members in a Practice³

We can also learn from our small animal counterparts who average twice as many support team members per veterinarian.⁵ For equine, ratios range from 1:0.5 (mobile) to 1:1.5 (combined ambulatory and hospital). These numbers compare to average small animal predominant clinic ratios of 1:3. While vet-to-staff ratios are not the only factor, the author believes they play a big part in the disparity between equine and small animal average annual doctor revenue - small animal vets producing \$200,000 more on average.³

While there are logistical hurdles to overcome - you can only fit so many assistants in a work truck - a comparison to small animal financials, and placing value on safety and career satisfaction quickly supports the hiring of additional assistance. The information provided above helps you, the technician or practice manager, understand (briefly) why veterinarians need additional help and shows that it is possible to create additional value for the practice with more assistance. The following section will help you start a conversation with your practice's owner and management to 1) hire additional help and 2) utilize technicians to the top of their skill set.

3. Solution

You are an integral part of the equine veterinary clinic and need to be recognized and utilized. Did you know that in many states*, a technician can do bandage changes, give IV and IM medications, perform laser/shockwave therapy, and operate radiograph equipment while under the indirect supervision of a veterinarian? Imagine having the opportunity to see certain appointments independently. Technician appointments have the mutual benefit of improving employee satisfaction for support team members who now have a more integral role in patient care and doctors who have additional time to complete medical records, see more advanced cases, or take an afternoon off.

The following section will detail how you can help your practice start better utilizing support team members and implement technician-driven appointments.

4. How-To

- Gain buy-in from doctors and practice owners. Remind them Figure 3 above shows an increase in salary for veterinarians as the team grows.

- Consult with your state’s veterinary medical board to determine tasks that licensed and unlicensed team members can perform with direct or indirect supervision.
- Assess your practice’s current use of technicians and assistants. How do you compare to participants of the 2016 AVMA-AAEP Equine Economic Survey? Are support team members performing all the tasks they can legally? Use Figure 4 below as a talking point with your team.

	Licensed Technician (n=222)		Non-licensed Technicians/Veterinary Assistants (n=394)	
	Obs.	Percent	Obs.	Percent
Administer anesthesia	168	75.7%	141	35.8%
Setting up diagnostic imaging equipment (radiography, ultrasonography, endoscopy)	191	86.0%	362	91.9%
Obtaining radiographic studies	163	73.4%	211	53.6%
Perform other diagnostic imaging studies (e.g. nuclear scintigraphy, MRI)	54	24.3%	45	11.4%
Administer vaccinations	141	63.5%	163	41.4%
Place IV catheters	184	82.9%	152	38.6%
Administer treatments or set up fluids through catheter	189	85.1%	258	65.5%
Administer IV injections (no catheter)	172	77.5%	171	43.4%
Administer IM injections (other than vaccinations)	190	86.5%	256	65.0%
Perform routine treatments - e.g., apply foot wrap, apply leg wrap, apply topical medications	186	83.8%	284	72.1%
Collect venous blood samples	198	89.2%	260	66.0%
Perform laboratory tests in house - e.g., set up bacterial cultures, use CBC/chemistry analysis machines, perform quantitative fecal exams, cytology	196	88.3%	280	71.1%
Perform aseptic preparation for procedures	201	90.5%	333	84.5%
Prepare injections for doctor use	191	86.0%	305	77.4%
Communicate with clients - e.g. Give care instructions, report laboratory results, make appointments	174	78.4%	260	66.0%
Write invoices for work performed by veterinarian	170	73.9%	264	67.0%
Assist in surgical procedures	162	76.6%	245	62.2%

Figure 4: Practice Utilization of Licensed and Unlicensed Technicians³

- Agree upon communication flow should a concern arise during a technician visit. A doctor should be available remotely to field any questions. Video chat is a great way to receive real-time feedback if something unexpected occurs.
- Schedule dedicated time for solo appointments or “double-up” on patient visits at the same location.
- Educate clients on the benefits of technician appointment slots (more accessibility, financial savings, etc.).
- Enhance client comfort with non-doctor visits. Writing a blog post or presenting at a client education seminar are both ways for technicians to gain confidence from clients.
- Commit to improving technical skills during doctor appointments so you can continue offering a wider range of services.
- Negotiate a pay increase that reflects the added doctor efficiency or solo revenue you produce. As a basic rule of thumb, you need to produce 1.5 times the pay increase amount in revenue for the practice to break even. This suggestion accounts for the cost of goods sold, payroll tax, worker’s compensation, etc.
- Share the October 2020 Equine Veterinary Journal Article⁶ (co-authored with Dr. Cara Wright and scheduled for publication) with your owner or practice manager. Here is an excerpt:

How do you know if you can afford a technician? Some simple numbers can get you started: The nationwide average salary according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics for a registered technician in 2020 was \$17.43/hour, with a range from \$12/hour to \$25/hour². A 2019 report from the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association reports a range of \$16.85- \$21.93 for credentialed technicians³. This report is also broken down by state and time in the industry for easier comparison of wages. Since registered technicians are licensed individuals, continuing education and licensing fees are something to consider. Additional benefits are clinic and location-dependent, but the practice can expect to invest an additional \$6,000-11,000 in employee benefits, payroll taxes, and worker’s compensation. See figure 1 for general assumptions:

Figure 1:

Considerations for Hiring

- National Median Salary²- \$36,260
- Health Insurance- \$3000-6000
- Dental/Vision- \$600
- CE- \$500-1000
- Worker's Comp(state and policy variability)- \$500-2000
- PTO, Sick Days - \$500
- Uniform - \$300

Additional Resources

- <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/practice-management/utilizing-veterinary-technicians-improve-practice-success>
- <https://www.aaevt.org/online-certificate-program/>

5. Conclusion

Industry leaders are predicting a deficit in veterinarians and veterinary support team members for the next decade. Now is the time to start re-thinking the current equine veterinary practice model and allow technicians to start working to the top of their skill set in order to recruit and retain these valuable team members. Clinics who embrace this changing model will find themselves working more safely and efficiently; resulting in client satisfaction, employee fulfillment, and business success.

*Remember each State's Veterinary Medical Board has a different policy for appropriate direct and indirect supervision of tasks. Consult with your Veterinary Medical Board for state-specific guidelines.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the technicians, assistants, and entire support staff of Starwood Equine!

Declaration of Ethics

The Author has adhered to the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the AVMA

Conflict of Interest

The Author offers and provides business consulting services to veterinarians and veterinary practices through Starwood Veterinary Consulting, Inc., of which she is a shareholder.

1. IBIS World. 2021 Veterinary Services Industry in the US - Market Research Report. Available from: <https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/market-research-reports/veterinary-services-industry/> Accessed October 11, 2021.
2. Grice, Amy L. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Equine Practice. September 15, 2020.
3. American Association of Equine Practitioners. 2019 AVMA AAEP Equine Economic Survey. Available from: https://aaep.org/sites/default/files/Documents/2019%20FINAL_AMVA_AAEP_Equine_Report.pdf. Accessed October 12, 2021.
4. American Association of Equine Veterinary Technicians. 2020 Membership Survey Responses. Raw Data provided by Deb Reeder.
5. American Veterinary Medical Association. 2018 The Market for Veterinary Services. Available from: <https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/resources/2018-econ-rpt3-veterinary-services.pdf> Accessed October 12, 2021.
6. Wright, Cara, and Zeytoonian, Kelly. October 2021 Equine Veterinary Education (scheduled for publication at the time of proceedings submission).