

## The New Assistant (An alien in the practice)

It is over, for now...??? We found that our practice is doing better and we are turning clients down. We are fully booked several days a week and on Friday afternoon is impossible to get a slot.

We decided that we needed to hire a new assistant, so we placed an advert in the Veterinary Times. We knew that the new vet would be doing loads of consults, so we thought that a new graduate or somebody with not so much experience would fit well.

We got quite a good response and short listed 5 candidates to meet. We have a pro-active partner that conducted the interviews and passed the results to the other partners.

We got the final two candidates to come over to spend a day with us, to see if they could fit in the team. Finally, we chose what we thought it was the right person. She did not have much experience, but looked really keen and she had done a load of working experience.

Six months later, she resigns and we have to start the process again. She had all what we looked for and despite that, she left, what did we do wrong?

On this article I will try to give some guidelines on how to integrate the new staff to the team. We have to remember that you can only have a first impression once, so we better help our team to give a good one. It also very expensive to constantly having to train staff, it is much cheaper and more productive to retain people.

The whole integration process cannot last less than 2 days and it could run as long as up to 5, depending on the size of the practice. In many occasions I found myself consulting within 20 minutes of arriving to a practice, or told to hang around the prep room for a while with nobody telling me what to do.

First of all, when we hire a new assistant, after giving her or him a tour of the facilities; we should consider assigning them a mentor. A mentor would be a member of the team (another vet, a nurse,...). The mission of the mentor will be to answer all those questions that are important to us, but do not appears on the books (i.e., where is the toilet). The mentor also will be in charge of introducing the new assistant to every member of staff and guide through the normal procedures and duties (i.e. explain how the blood machine works or where do I leave the mail to be posted). The mentor has to train on how

to do something and to ensure that it is done properly, he or she would need to ask the new assistant to tell back on how to do it.

The mentor can also help the new assistant to find the way around the local community, explaining about things like restaurants, leisure centres, pubs... it will help to integrate the new person, which will improve the retention.

It would be good, where possible, to allow the new member of staff to “see practice” for a couple of days, shadowing if necessary one of the partners. On this way, the clients will familiarise with the new face and see that she or he has all the trust from the partners. There is nothing more frustrating for somebody than listening 20 times a day; “You are new here, I will see Mr. X, because he knows my pet”.

It is common in many practices to have already protocols with the rules for the new assistant. These protocols include dress code, when to have a break...; but they lack what it is important for the new vet, things like when do I get paid, where to I eat my lunch, who do I go if I have any problems... It is a huge temptation to give the rules, because it is what I care about as employer and forget about the rights.

Ideally we should have a meeting with all the members of staff to introduce the new assistant. It is also necessary to inform the clients that there will be a new face in the consult. The newsletter will be used for this, but also a sign in the waiting room is important, so we reduce the surprise element for them. We have to include a little personal profile as well as a picture, if possible, with the rest of the team better, as it will give the image to the clients that is “one of the bunch”.

During the integration time, we should provide the new members of staff with our protocols. These protocols could be divided into procedural and administrative ones.

Among the things to be included in the procedural protocol things like vaccination schedules, parasite control products, euthanasia related subjects, consent documents (not only how to print them, but which ones are needed), diagnostic lab topics, referral hospitals in the area, diseases of high prevalence in the area, anaesthetic protocols...

The administrative issues to inform the new assistant of range from payment terms (including out of hours), what to do with bad debtors, working hours and rota, health and safety, treatment of own pets...

The complete training of the new assistant should cover all the areas in which he or she is expected to perform, from computer system and phone system to safety training. Depending of the size of the company, it might also be a good idea to introduce the new

member of staff to all the departments.

These rules apply for small or large animal practices. On the latter ones, we should consider also the fact that we need to show the new vet how to get to the places, either with a sat-nav system and/or a map of the farms or stables. In these cases, it is also very important to make the policy referring to the company car as clear as possible, specially personal usage and tax issues.

Finally, one key thing to bear in mind, at the end of this introduction process, the new employee should be aware of how and when her or his review will be done, giving them as well an opportunity to rise any questions.