

Your veterinary employability action plan

Id: jsuitor@student.unimelb.edu.au

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This is a summary snapshot of how you evaluated yourself against the veterinary employability framework on Monday, 3 April 2023.

This is your personal reflection on your employability strengths, and areas with potential for development. Don't forget that both are important - employability is as much about harnessing and building on your personal strengths, as it is about trying to conform to the expectations of others. Reflecting on your unique mix of capabilities will help you find 'job fit' with an employer or work context that values them.

Talk to someone

While self-reflection is important, we all have blind spots about how we might be perceived by others. It will be helpful to discuss this summary with a trusted mentor, as you might have nominated in your action plan.

If your mentor is not familiar with employability and the VetSet2Go framework, be sure to let them know of the collection of educator resources available on the [VetSet2Go website](#)

Want to learn more?

Access and download the full catalogue of resource cards, plus other tools, from [learner resources](#).

Monitor your progress

You completed this self-assessment on Monday, 3 April 2023. Come back and re-take this self-assessment in the future to monitor your progress!

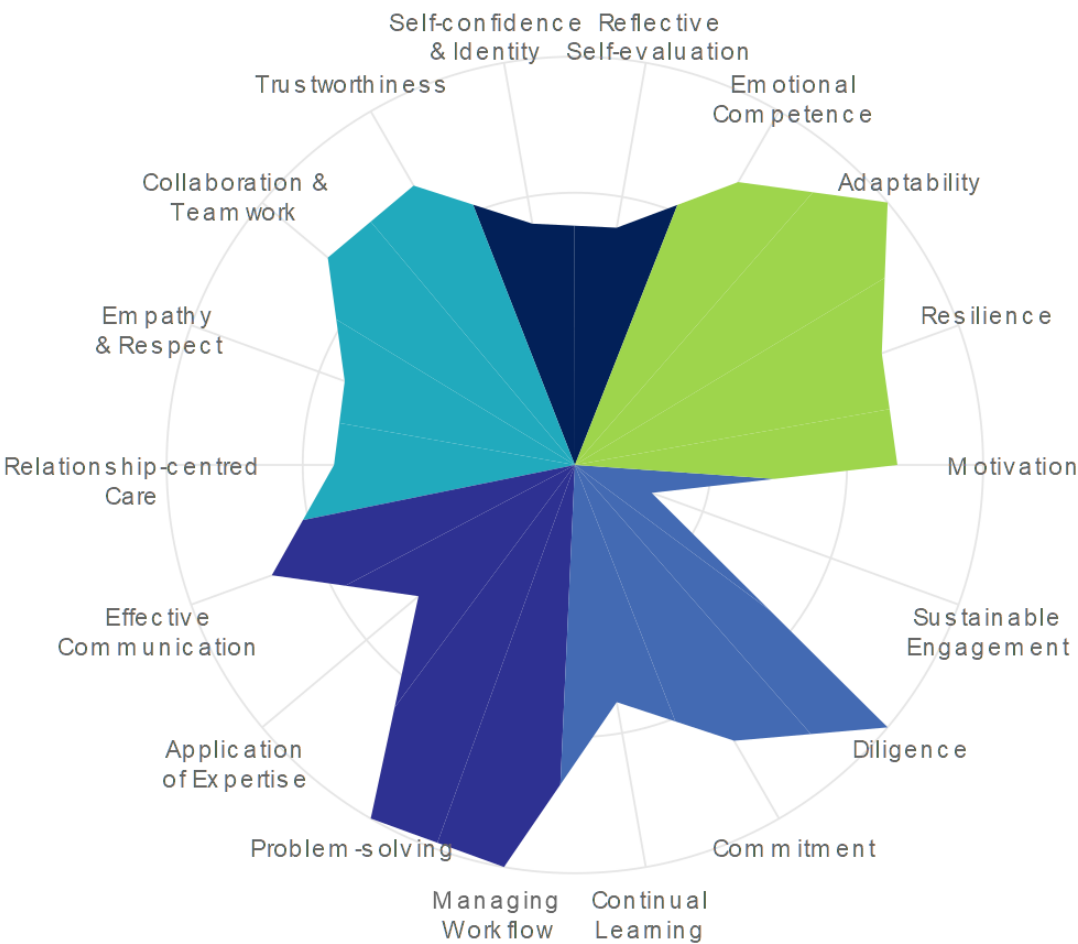
1. Domains

This is how you rated yourself in each of the domains:



2. Capabilities

This is how you rated yourself in each of the 18 capabilities:

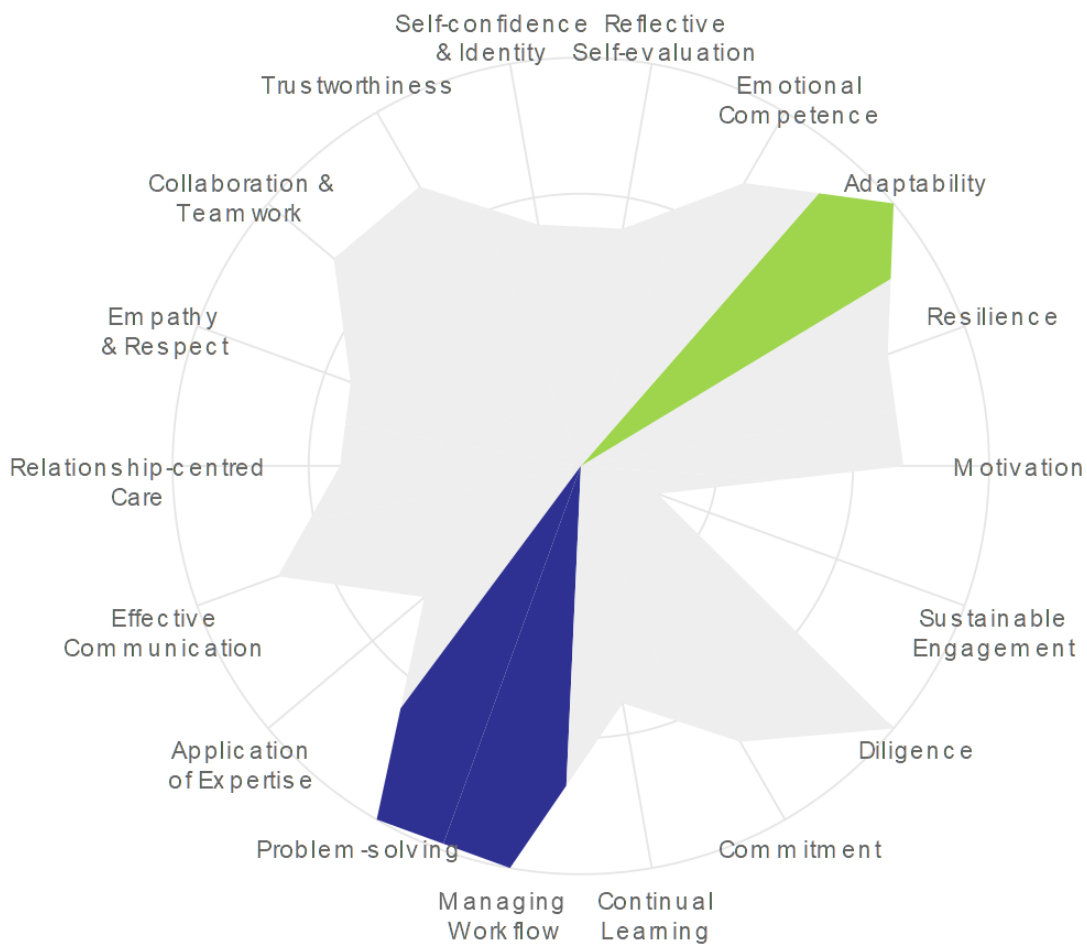


3. Activate strengths

These were the 9 capabilities that you rated yourself relatively highest in. These are in order; the topmost rated highest. You may wish to identify these as employability strengths.

- **Managing Workflow** refers to a vet who is self-organised in their work; manages priorities and uses time efficiently and productively; uses initiative; is independent
- **Problem-solving** refers to a vet who evaluates evidence in support of clinical reasoning and problem-solving; can make decisions despite incomplete information; uses good judgment and 'common sense'
- **Diligence** refers to a vet who is hard-working, persistent, reliable; gives attention to detail and quality assurance
- **Adaptability** refers to a vet who is flexible in dealing with change, uncertainty, and shifting priorities; is open-minded
- **Emotional Competence** refers to a vet who is able to navigate emotional situations and self-regulate emotional responses; remains calm
- **Resilience** refers to a vet who deals with pressure and adversity; draws on personal and contextual resources, and utilizes strategies to navigate challenges and sustain wellbeing
- **Motivation** refers to a vet who finds motivation and purpose in their work; is self-motivated and intrinsically driven
- **Trustworthiness** refers to a vet who builds trust through honesty, transparency, integrity
- **Collaboration & Teamwork** refers to a vet who fits into and supports an effective veterinary team; works with others collaboratively towards shared goals; is friendly and personable

You nominated these 2-3 capabilities to activate or harness as employability strengths:



Here are your reflection notes on those areas of strength to activate:

Capability	Why did you select this as a strength? Explain.	Can you provide evidence or specific examples of when you have exhibited this strength?	How could you activate this strength further, to build your employability?
Problem-solving	I tend to look at problems differently and can normally come to a diagnosis. I also tend to find solutions in ways most people normally can't.	Previous career in engineering and my engineering background	Keep learning how to solve problems in the veterinary domain, faster, and being more accurate.

Adaptability	I am able to handle just about anything in front of me. I tend to react and tackle the challenges directly ahead of me.	Just the day to day of who I am and what I do	Continue to say yes and make things work as I continue my career.
Managing Workflow	I tend to be able to strongly manage a team, usually creating better processes and increasing efficiency	Running large-scale teams and events such as Designathon	Continue working on my ability to manage team and organisations so that I can bring value in my career.

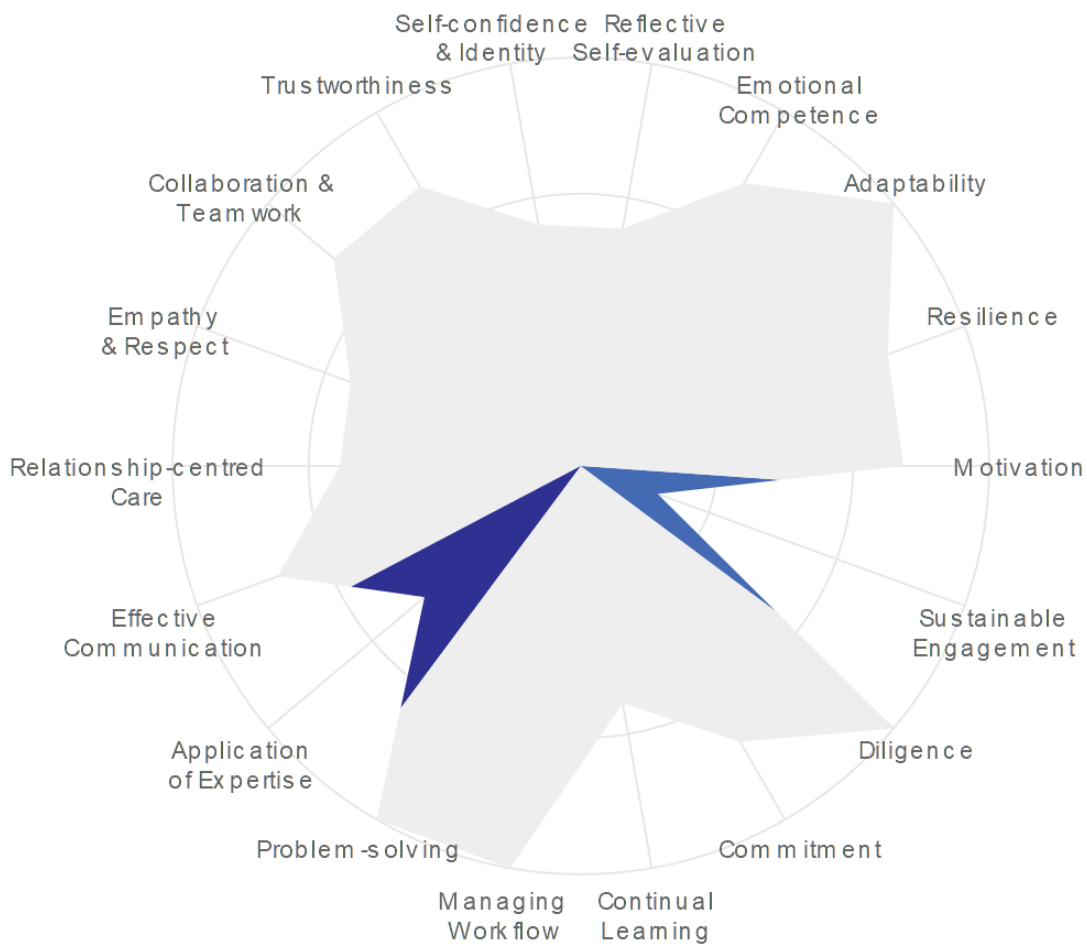
Attached are the resource cards for those chosen capabilities.

4. Develop Further

These were the 9 capabilities that you rated yourself relatively lowest in. These are in order; the topmost rated lowest. You may wish to identify these as areas for further development.

- **Sustainable Engagement** refers to a vet who sustains an energetic connection with their work; balances and refreshes their interest, passion and enthusiasm for work with other needs; is self-sustaining
- **Application of Expertise** refers to a vet who inspires confidence through compassionate animal handling, sound practical skills, and application of specialized knowledge
- **Continual Learning** refers to a vet who is keen to learn, open to feedback, and strives for improvement and best practice
- **Relationship-centred Care** refers to a vet who bases healthcare approaches in human relationships and decision-making in partnership; respects the human-animal bond
- **Reflective Self-evaluation** refers to a vet who is aware of their own strengths and limitations, reflective and learns from experience; is self-aware of emotional responses and behaviours
- **Self-confidence & Identity** refers to a vet who has positive self-esteem and self-belief, anchored in a professional self-concept based on personal values, beliefs, and goals
- **Empathy & Respect** refers to a vet who is attentive to others feelings, perspectives and concerns; is non-judgmental, respects diversity of opinion and worldview
- **Commitment** refers to a vet who is committed to the veterinary mission, including quality care and welfare, and to organisational goals; takes responsibility
- **Effective Communication** refers to a vet who is a clear and effective communicator (verbal, non-verbal, written); listens and seeks understanding; confidently; discusses difficult issues including financial aspects of care

You nominated these 2-3 capabilities to develop:



Here are your reflection notes on those areas to develop:

Capability	Why did you select this as an area for development? Explain.	Can you provide evidence or specific examples of when you have been challenged by this capability?	How could you work to improve in this area, to build your employability?
Sustainable Engagement	I tend to be a workaholic and usually have an unhealthy relationship with work.	My time at BESTECH when I was working 60+ hours per week.	Trying to balance life better and not be overcommitted

Application of Expertise	I just don't know enough at this point. What I do know I think I know well but I feel there is more to learn	I think that just being in vet school in general I lack the background that many other students have	Keep learning more and staying in school so I can build the needed skills
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Attached are the resource cards for those chosen capabilities.

5. Action Plan

You plan to focus your attention on:

I want to focus my attention on building my clinical skills so that I can provide the highest quality of care.

You plan to discuss this with, and seek objective feedback from:

I could discuss this with my peers or potentially an older DVM student.

You plan to seek the following opportunities:

I want to seek out more hands-on opportunities, especially in unfamiliar areas, to develop better connections and clinical skills, and to continue to be adaptable.

Problem-solving

A key aspect of providing excellent clinical care for patients is the ability to **effectively** solve problems.

Clinical problems are not always straightforward to solve, and animals may present with a number of different clinical signs. An employable vet will be able to collect and collate the information necessary to be able to solve these problems, and include consideration of the owner's circumstances when presenting options, **helping them make an informed decision**.

The information available to solve problems comes in the form of **history** given by the client and the **results** of physical examinations and diagnostic tests, alongside **observation** of the animal. Problems may need to be solved very quickly and decisively in an emergency situation, but during complex diagnoses problem-solving is often protracted and involves a number of different steps.

Not all problems that vets face are clinical in nature – vets also solve numerous problems during the day-to-day leadership of a clinical team or management of a veterinary practice. The good news is that **problem-solving skills are generic**, and it is likely that if you are an effective clinical problem solver you will also be able to manage non-clinical problems, such as managing staff or dealing with financial issues.

What they said

"It is important that I believe my vet knows what is best and will prompt me to make the right decision. I appreciate being given the option to choose, but I do appreciate hearing their personal decision, as if it were my vet's animal." (Client)

"In life or death situations, we need our vets to make quick, clinically effective decisions. We don't want our animals to suffer unnecessarily." (Client)

"Having [a] good problem-solving approach, so recognising when they don't know the answers to questions, and where to go, rather than having [answers] all on the top of their head ... so you have a new graduate who knows all of the answers, and you have someone who knows they don't know all the answers but has a really good way of working them out, I think they actually sit on an equal level in terms of value as a new graduate." (Employer)

"Good decision making and problem-solving skills instill a high degree of confidence that the practitioner is giving you the best advice in a particular situation." (Client)

How is effective problem-solving recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You can confidently apply your knowledge, skills and experience to solve complex medical problems
- You can logically and efficiently work through problems
- You can adapt to novel situations and 'think on your feet'
- You ask for, or establish, the correct information necessary to solve problems
- You are comfortable making decisions in the face of incomplete information
- You are calm and pragmatic in an emergency situation as you are able to quickly process information and make decisions

Perceived by others:

- Uses evidence in support of clinical reasoning
- Follows a logical process
- Can make timely decisions, without being paralysed by incomplete information
- Able to prioritise and triage
- Shows good judgment and 'common sense'
- Considers the "big picture" of client as well as patient factors when solving clinical problems
- Asks for help when required in order to progress through a complex situation

Why is effective problem-solving important to employability?

Employers reported that they found that if vets were able to solve problems effectively, this became an **enabler of other capabilities** such as resilience, by removing a key pressure. New graduates experience more **job satisfaction** if they are able to work through cases in a logical manner and come to a conclusion, involving the client and seeking help when required.

The VetSet2Go project found that clients require a vet to be able to work through whatever complex issues their animal has, and that in some situations where **immediate decisions** are required they wanted “straight talking” and decisive actions. However, on other occasions, where a number of options are the result of problem-solving, the process needs to be **slower and involve the client at all stages**, so that they can solve the problem together and get the right outcome for all. Employers benefit from this because the **client is more satisfied** and likely to return to the practice on another occasion. Good problem-solving skills engender a trusting relationship between client and vet.

“Well, you can see that there’s a thinking process going on ... that’s what we are looking for. You want them to say, “I’m thinking about this because, but ... and if this doesn’t work there are some other possibilities that I’m thinking of ...” (Employer)

“In very emotional emergency situations, where I do not have the opportunities to research and think about options, it is important that the vet is able to take more of a lead. Thinking outside the box is important as not all animals have read the text books!” (Client)

“Sometimes you can feel that you are being backed to a corner with only one solution to a problem which might involve more money than you can afford.” (Client)

“I think honesty should also come into problem-solving skills. I would much rather a vet referred me to a specialist in the field if they don’t know what exactly is going on or have little knowledge in a specific area rather than having endless tests.” (Client)

Possible strategies to enhance your effective problem-solving

Develop a process:

Demonstrate methodical (but not rigid) thinking:

- Identify body systems involved, time and severity
- Decide what questions to ask and use a variety of resources to get answers, e.g. references, employer, specialists
- Carry out tests as appropriate to generate further information
- Bring the information and options to the client for a two-way discussion in order to reach the best possible outcome
- Write concise factual notes in the medical record that reflect your thought processes.

Develop the ability to triage:

Categorise what is critical to act on now and make decisive actions, communicating with your team and client as you go.

Apply common sense and be practical:

Use a calm and methodical approach. Common things occur frequently and so always place these high on differential lists until further information proves otherwise. Don’t test for the sake of testing and communicate test choices to owners so that they are appraised of the financial options.

Think on your feet:

Often decisions will have to be changed as other issues arise – read the situation and recognize new problems in a dynamic fashion. Expect the unexpected and be ready for it.

Don’t forget the big picture:

Always think holistically about the situation you are dealing with – animals usually have owners who may find certain options challenging from a financial or logistical perspective. The context of the animal is also important, e.g. production animals and antibiotic use. Step back as you problem-solve, and involve the owner at all stages.

Know your limitations:

When you cannot solve a problem, or think of the right way to approach a problem, it is important that you seek help from colleagues. Clearly explain the problems and invite their perspective – two heads are usually better than one.

Practice makes perfect:

The more cases you deal with, the more you will begin to recognize certain “patterns” in presentation. Whilst it is important not to jump to conclusions, these patterns will help you identify common presentations as you gain more experience.

Adaptability

Adaptability is the capacity to respond to a changing environment or circumstances in a way that meets a desired outcome. It can also be defined in terms of capabilities that are flexible and therefore can be developed and modified in response to change. Adaptability allows a person to utilize their resources in different ways as each new context presents itself. It incorporates both the readiness and the resources necessary to respond to change - in other words being **willing and able to change**.

Adaptability is a central construct of both employability and career development theory. Adaptability has been defined as “the quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances.”¹ Adaptability is key to career development and success. Veterinary careers are not a linear continuum with a fixed path. The ongoing need to respond to new circumstances and novel situations requires a veterinarian to demonstrate plasticity and **innovation** in order to thrive.

In the shorter term, adaptability is a key part of **coping with uncertainty and ambiguity**, which is often the norm in the veterinary clinical environment. Individuals who are comfortable dealing flexibly with competing demands, abrupt changes, shifting priorities, and incomplete information are more likely to thrive in veterinary practice. Fortunately, recent graduates often told the VetSet2Go project that these same challenges form part of their motivation for becoming a vet — the intellectual stimulation and challenge of clinical problem-solving, and the daily variety of veterinary work. This shows that the challenging, unpredictable and variable nature of the veterinary environment can be a positive and motivating aspect of work, if approached flexibility and optimistically.

What they said

“I’m after someone who is not really dogmatic about their style of practice. You know, you’ve got to be somewhat flexible”
(Employer)

“Because I think we all change inevitably, particularly in those first twelve months after we graduate. Our personalities change; our aspirations change. And I think having a degree of flexibility will put you in a really good position to say, right, my initial aspirations of where my career was going to go aren’t working out, so I’m going to go this way instead.” (Employer)

“Resilience is the word; the favourite word of everyone ... and, into that, is probably adaptability. Just to go with the flow of the day and what’s happening and being able to change and being able to adapt to the situation. You know, it’s not the end of the world if it didn’t go right, it didn’t go how I wanted it ... still moving onwards and forwards.” (Graduate)

How is adaptability recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are flexible and resourceful, and can adapt quickly to change
- You are comfortable with change and ambiguity, and can adjust ‘on-the-go’
- You have a ‘can-do’ attitude, and are open to new roles and experiences
- You can deal with sudden shifts in schedules or priorities
- You relish variety in your work

Perceived by others:

- Comfortable with change, ‘not fazed’
- Willing to adapt to changing needs or new situations, even if it means changing how they work
- Rises to challenges with a solution-focused approach
- Flexible and open to new ideas; not dogmatic

Why is adaptability important to employability?

Employability in the veterinary work environment of the future is not about finding that perfect job and sticking with it until retirement. Graduates need to be prepared for moving across a **number of different work environments** during the life of their career. Adaptability allows a veterinarian to apply knowledge and skills gained today, in situations that will present tomorrow. It gives a new graduate the ability to take advantage of both current and future industry needs. A veterinarian that is **open-minded and flexible** when faced with uncertainty and changing work structures will **thrive** no matter what veterinary employment looks like in the future.

An adaptable employee is valued because their success benefits themselves, their employer and the wider profession. They learn from experience. So the time spent supervising and mentoring a new graduate becomes time well spent when they demonstrate adaptability because they are able to transfer these skills to accomplish future tasks as their work circumstances change.

Adjusting to new conditions, coping with the unexpected and staying positive are key elements that link adaptability to **resilience**. Adaptable people are more likely to maintain personal equilibrium in the face of challenges, contributing to **wellbeing**.

"Sometimes there was just constant attrition and no matter how much, how fast you did something there would still be more. So I think that was one of the hardest things, is not being able to plan your day. But I think I've learnt how to take the unknown. I'm much better at it now [but] I struggled with that."
(Recent graduate)

"I'm very much a go-with-the-flow sort of person, and so I probably just took it on board. And I suppose it's more being flexible to new processes and ideas and environments and all that sort of stuff, really."
(Recent graduate)

"Open mindedness, and also willingness to explore different paths and experiencing and learning new stuff that haven't been previously taught thoroughly before. It was just an openness, open mindedness and also positive outlook into the new stepping stone." (Recent graduate)

"The ability to learn and the ability to take on new tasks; I guess I want someone that's teachable, that's open to new ideas and open to being taught things and open to just developing themselves in many aspects. I don't want someone that sort of is not changeable ... not moldable when they come." (Employer)

Possible strategies to enhance your adaptability

Practice creative thinking:

As veterinarians we are trained to think logically; identify the correct diagnosis without running too many tests and come up with a suitable treatment plan, in a very short space of time. Adaptability however, is not always about being logical; it often requires a creative approach to problem solving. So it is important to nurture your creativity and to consider other possibilities and other approaches even if 'the old way' is viewed as 'the right way'.

Get feedback from others:

Self-confidence doesn't come easy when you are a new graduate so it is important to not only reflect on the merit of your own ideas and performance but also seek feedback from others. With time this will enhance your own self-evaluation skills

Build your emotional intelligence:

Competency in the emotional intelligence domains provides the foundation for successful work relationships and building the social capital that is required for adaptability.

Take stock of your resources:

It's easy to become familiar with the clinical skill set that is used every day in veterinary practice. But it is important to also draw upon those hidden resources that often get forgotten about, because you never know when they will become useful.

Try something new:

Take the time to step out of your comfort zone whenever the opportunity arises. Make trying something new the 'new normal'.

Laugh at yourself:

When you fail, reflect on what went wrong and consider a different approach for next time. Adaptability is strengthened when we learn from our mistakes, and this requires a degree of self compassion and a willingness to celebrate our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

Further Resources: Hartung, P.J. & Cadaret, M.C. (2017) Career Adaptability: Changing Self and Situation for Satisfaction and Success (Ch 2) in Maree K. (ed.) *Psychology of Career Adaptability, Employability and Resilience*. Cham: Springer International.

References: 1. Savickas, M.L. (1997) Career adaptability: An integrative construct for life-span, life-space theory. *Career Development Quarterly*, 45(3): 247-259.

Managing Workflow

The capability of managing workflow describes a veterinarian who can manage priorities to **use time efficiently** and productively, and is independent and **self-organised** in their work. It includes the skills of **time management**, organisational skills, and **multi-tasking**.

In the veterinary environment, the vet is part of an interprofessional team with interdependent workflows, meaning that poor workflow management can resonate to negatively impact the work of others.

Veterinary work is also unpredictable, so workflow management requires a mix of careful planning and quick, **flexible decision-making** to best prioritise urgent work without neglecting important 'loose ends' such as following up cases and client communication. Good workflow management relies on the ability to make decisions, and to remain calm, as well as self-confidence, adaptability, diligence and a collaborative team-based approach to your work.

Managing workflow is not just about working quickly, and must be balanced against work quality and effectiveness. Clients told the VetSet2Go project that while they appreciate a vet who is efficient and **punctual** with appointments, they also do not like to feel **rushed** during consults.

What they said

"So she likes to do one job, do it well, and then move onto the next job. And she does do it well; she does a brilliant job. The trouble is with mixed practice you've often got five million things coming at you at once and you've got to change tack all the time, and it's that changing tack that she can't handle." (Employer of recent graduate)

*"I think probably the biggest negative would be her lack of decision-making and her inability to step up, make a decision ... and then that flows onto a lot of other things, like time management and so on... and I think because of that lack of decision-making, lack of confidence when the **** hits the fan we just sort of — it all just goes badly ... in terms of time management and getting things done, so then that kind of flows onto then we get staff that are stressed, and clients that are stressed, and people are kept waiting, and then it just blows out from there." (Employer of recent graduate)*

"She's very, very efficient at time management. I think she's great. Yeah, she has some days where she'll have her slower days, but they're a rarity. Most of the time, if she's busy, she'll get everything done on time and she'll have her consult notes written professionally. She'll have followed up everything she'll need to, she'll have done all the daily tasks and she'll still be getting out roughly on time." (Employer of recent graduate)

How is workflow management recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You know how to manage your time to work efficiently and productively
- You can flexibly juggle priorities and multi-task
- You can work independently and set your own schedule
- You usually feel 'in control' of your workload, not overwhelmed
- You find it easy to keep to schedule

Perceived by others:

- Productive, 'gets on with it'
- Good time management; finishes everything on time
- Doesn't hold up others; 'easy to work with'
- Decisive (doesn't stall or procrastinate)

Why is workflow management important to employability?

A veterinarian who can manage workflow is an asset to the practice or their workplace. Managing workflow contributes positively to the team's productivity and 'team dynamic', and allows the caseload to be worked through in a **proactive and efficient manner**, thus reducing stress and frustration within the team, and improving the outcome for the animal and the owner.

Successfully managing a challenging workflow creates a sense of achievement, a state of "flow", and a sense of **collegiality** within a team. By being an effective manager of your workflow, you will positively impact upon those around you, and improve their working day – as well as yours. You and your team will be more **productive** and less stressed, and much happier as a result.

Conversely, poor workflow patterns can leave you feeling rushed and overwhelmed, 'out of control', and frustrated. Inability to manage your time may contribute to prolonged work hours, which is known to negatively impact mental health and work-life balance. Colleagues may become resentful when you are indecisive or procrastinating, while clients do not appreciate being made to wait or rushed.

"She used to really struggle with managing multiple cases at once. So, if she had a consult going and was running blood or something else and had surgery to do, she was not good at that at all at the start, but she got a lot better, and now she can prioritise and direct."
(Employer of recent graduate)

"Vets should try not to rush clients. I know they are busy but if they rush clients they are more likely to call or come back to ask more questions anyway or worse! (inadvertently harm the animal because they don't understand the instructions given)." (Client)

"A disorganised and indecisive vet will make situations much worse and very unsettling for all involved." (Client)

"Time management skills ... because more than often in general practice ... you don't know what comes through the door and you can have a seemingly quiet day and, boom, you have 10 consults back-to-back. So knowing how to manage your time is quite important as well, because otherwise you get too stressed out, especially if you have five back-to-back consults and you have demanding clients ... getting the gist of it as soon as you can and knowing to work on schedule, being on time is really important because your owners will appreciate you for doing that." (Recent graduate)

Possible strategies to enhance your workflow management

Reflect honestly:

Be honest with yourself, and ask for feedback. Reflect upon your usual work day and how you react (internally and behaviourally) to a busy day, and what bad habits adversely affect your workflow.

Stay calm:

The day always finishes. The majority of the time everything gets done, and most of the time your colleagues and clients will be satisfied with the work you have done. You should be too! Becoming stressed is not likely to help your productivity.

Be decisive:

Be confident in your ability to make decisions. You can always change or adjust the plan, but you need to start with a decision. Your first decision doesn't need to be perfect, you just need to work with the information you have right now.

Plan ahead:

Five minutes spent discussing and planning the workday with your team can pay dividends for productivity.

Be flexible:

Each day will bring new challenges as the day progresses. That's ok. Stay calm, re-prioritise, and keep moving through the day.

Multi-tasking:

Look at the bigger picture. Are there multiple tasks that can be more efficiently dealt with concurrently?

Prioritise mindfully:

Is the task urgent or important? If not, consider whether it needs doing. Prioritise and mindfully direct your work to maximum effect.

Delegate where possible:

Work with others to get the task done. You do not need to do everything related to this task or case yourself.

Work efficiently:

Look at ways to be more efficient. Your medical records should not equate to a novel. They need to be complete and concise.

Avoid time-wasters:

Identify and address your time-wasting habits - emails, texting, social media, internet, etc.

Set sensible limits:

Working long hours without breaks will not make you more productive - it is more likely to do the opposite. Take a break to refresh.

Further Resources:

- Viner B. (2010) *Success In Veterinary Practice: Maximizing Clinical Outcomes And Personal Well-Being*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- VetTimes, 21 August 2017. [Time Management](#).



Sustainable Engagement

Sustainable engagement describes the capacity to sustain an **energetic connection to your work**, through ensuring an approach to work that is **sustainable**. This requires finding balance between work and other priorities, such as nurturing relationships and enjoying outside interests.

This balancing act is often termed 'work-life balance' but is perhaps better referred to as '**life balance**', since work can and should be an enjoyable and rewarding part of life.

In examining the factors underlying success as a veterinarian, Lewis & Klausner (2003) identified balancing work, family, community, and professional obligations as a key success indicator. However, the same study also identified achieving this balance as a key challenge for veterinarians, because of their **unpredictable work** hours and workload, and willingness to make sacrifices for their role.

Excessive workload and long work hours are also well-known risks for **poor mental health and burnout**, highlighting the crucial need to balance commitment to work against other important life needs. Keeping the commitment to work sustainable through a healthy life balance is therefore a key element of employability from the perspective of both the employee and the employer.

What they said

"To have a focus outside vet is really important too. I've seen new grads come out, they're full of enthusiasm and they're full of energy and they run and run and run and then they crash ... They get to the stage where the novelty's worn off, all of a sudden, it's a long hard slog. It's long hours, it's long days, it's long nights. Lots of pressure, lots of emotional stress. And if you don't have an outlet for it, it'll very quickly consume you." (Employer)

"Somebody who has a good sense of humour, who values balance. So they are not going to be the sort of person who is just going to, all day, every day, all night, every night, have their head in the books ... The ones that can go, tools down, I'm out and going for a bike ride, or I'm going for a walk on the beach with my girlfriend, or I'm going to go take the dog for a walk. So those questions do come through in an interview as well: what do you do with your spare time? Not because I'm particularly interested, but because I need to know that they can find that balance." (Employer)

"Yeah, so I work full-time, five days a week. I go to the gym four days a week, and I play sport on the weekends and I live right next to the beach, so I go to the beach quite a lot, and yeah, I live with people who have nothing to do with the work that I do and we get home and have a chat and a beer ..." (Recent graduate)

How is sustainable engagement recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are aware of the balance in your life, and feel satisfied and in control of it (not overwhelmed)
- You can keep a sense of perspective about what's important
- You can mentally 'switch off' from work to recharge
- You have energy left for all parts of your life
- You can balance or reprioritize competing demands in your life, including work

Perceived by others:

- Sustainably engaged, motivated, energized – 'keeps the fire going'
- Healthy work-life balance
- Can draw boundaries and 'leave work at work'
- Has outside passions, interests, hobbies
- A 'multi-faceted' or 'broad' person; not defined only by their work

Why is sustainable engagement important to employability?

Since employability is concerned with success and satisfaction in work¹, it includes by default those capabilities that support work satisfaction, and ensure the long-term sustainability of employment. The VetSet2Go project identified a cluster of related **psychological resources** as important to employability, including resilience, emotional competence, motivation and sustainable engagement. In particular, the capacity to ensure **life balance** was identified as a key element of **resilience** in the veterinary context.

Fortunately, many employers and workplaces recognise the importance of life balance and sustainable engagement, making this an important employability skill from the perspective of both the employer and the employee. Employers told the VetSet2Go project that they actively seek employees with a **balanced approach to work**, strong social supports and **active interests** outside of their job. While employers value commitment, diligence and a good work ethic, they equally recognise that this needs to be sustainable over the longer term, and look for employees with habits and strategies that enable this such as **workflow management** and boundary-setting.

"And I think, too, when you're looking through the CV, it is looking at other stuff that they've done outside. So yes, you want to know what they've done [at university], but at the end of the day a lot of new graduate CVs look a lot like all of the others. So what else have you done with your life? ... And to me that shows someone who under duress recognises the balance – the importance of the work/life balance, and that they need to go and do other things. And so that gives me an indication of resilience." (Employer)

"Hobbies and sporting interests are also another thing that we put a lot of emphasis on. I think you can tell a lot about people by how they choose to spend their spare time. And we find too, that as much as the work skills are important, being able to have an outlet or an alternative—having your life outside being a vet—is really important to how well people settle into the community. And ultimately how long they stick around as vets. Because they can be brilliant vets and they can love their job and they can be good at it, but if that's all they do, they're 24/7 being a vet, ultimately they burn out. They get to a stage where their whole focus is work and they just don't have any sort of social or physical outlet. Whereas people who have interests in other areas ... I don't care if it's rock-climbing or archery or painting or yachting, someone who's got an interest that's completely outside the veterinary world is generally a lot more likely to fit into the community and just, I guess, have that work-life balance that's so important in a long-term career." (Employer)

Possible strategies to enhance your sustainable engagement

Leave work at work:

Make a rule of 'leaving work at work'. Make sure you have handed over all your responsibilities so you don't need to keep thinking about them after work. Mark the end of the work day with a ritual, such as exercise or listening to music.

Make plans:

Make plans for your time off to ensure you make the most of it, e.g. arrange to meet friends or family. Try to get out of the house at least once on your weekend.

Say no:

It can be hard to 'learn to say no', but this is an important precursor to setting boundaries around your personal time.

Clarify expectations:

Chat to your boss and your colleagues about your personal philosophy and approach to balancing work.

Get your priorities straight:

Make sure your own health, friendships and family occupy the right place in your list of priorities.

Have a hobby:

Dedicating time to an engaging hobby outside of work is a great way to refresh. Try restarting that neglected hobby you used to enjoy but got too busy for.

Do sport and exercise:

Sport brings the double benefit of healthy exercise as well as a scheduled break from thinking about work, while team-based sports add social relationships.

Take a holiday:

Regular holidays are an important part of looking after yourself.

Take a break:

Even short breaks timetabled into the work day can refresh your energy and focus — these can be coupled with quick breathing or mindfulness exercises to supercharge a short break.

Work smarter not harder:

Work should not be measured by the hours you put in, but by what you can achieve through being fully engaged.

Application of Expertise

While graduate employability typically highlights transferable personal and interpersonal attributes, **specialized technical knowledge and skills** are undoubtedly important influences on success in the workplace. However, employers often view technical or discipline-specific expertise as a **prerequisite** of employment, rather than being scrutinised during candidate selection. In the VetSet2Go project, veterinary employers said they expect graduates to have good technical knowledge and skills, since that is what universities focus on.

But more important is the graduate's **ability to apply this expertise in 'real-world' situations**, such as in diagnosing and managing complex clinical cases. Employers told the project that they expect **confidence** and **entry-level ('Day One') expertise** in routine but important areas of practice, including:

Knowledge

- basic applied anatomy & physiology
- pharmacology for treatment planning & routine anaesthesia
- preventative healthcare & vaccinations
- general husbandry advice
- production industry knowledge & agricultural economics
- basic computer software/IT
- basic day-to-day veterinary business economics

Skills & Application

- confident but gentle animal handling
- thorough clinical examination
- routine consults & history-taking
- interpretation of lab/pathology results
- triage & problem-solving
- routine procedures, e.g. injections, catheters, medicating
- routine surgery, e.g. de-sexing, wounds
- maintaining medical records
- preparing estimates & bills

What they said

"The other main way I assess vets (apart from their respect for me) is how they handle my animals, with kindness and confidence, and talking to the animals to calm them and develop a rapport." (Client)

*"[It's about] how much of the physiology and the pharmacology and the anatomy they can **relate to their new job in the workplace**. It's all very well and good to be able to rote learn anatomy and get a [high grade] in it, but to be able to **put it into practice** when you're back in the workplace is really, really important. So ... that's where I think a lot of them fall down, because they've learnt all that stuff and done really well, but they can't **make it useful**." (Employer)*

*"Know at least the basics of **handling the animal** you are coming to treat - **practical stockmanship** goes a long way in creating an initial confidence for the client and the animal - lack of it destroys trust all round." (Client)*

How is application of expertise recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are confident with animal handling
- You are confident with surgical basics, e.g. speys and castrations
- You are confident with procedural skills, e.g. IV catheters, taking blood
- You are confident with anaesthesia

Perceived by others:

- Inspires confidence through compassionate animal handling, sound practical skills and application of knowledge

In a VetSet2Go survey, clients were found to rate ‘**good knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery**’ as the most important quality they expect in their veterinarian. However, since clients may not be able to judge expertise directly, this can be taken to indicate the importance that the **client has confidence in the skills and expertise of their vet**, and feels their animal is ‘in safe hands’ and receiving the best care. Clients also told the project that they use **animal handling skills** or stockmanship as a proxy for judging the abilities of the veterinarian, making these skills particularly important for gaining the confidence of clients (and thus employers).

Why is application of expertise important to employability?

The VetSet2Go project found that employers typically value **confidence with routine, entry-level skills** above more specialized (but rarely required) knowledge. They also expect that theoretical ‘textbook’ knowledge can be applied to solve complex, real-world problems. Employees who can confidently employ their expertise to manage typical, day-to-day problems and procedures contribute positively to the efficiency and productivity of the veterinary practice, and give clients confidence that their pets are receiving high quality care.

However, both employers and clients told the VetSet2Go project that they do not expect veterinarians, particularly recent graduates, to be experts in everything. Rather, they value vets who honestly admit gaps in their knowledge or expertise, but promise to follow these up by doing further ‘homework’ in a process of **continual learning**.

*“[...] the criteria I’m looking at are more **people skills** probably, I’d say, and I’m assuming that they’ve got good base skills for the job because they’ve graduated.” (Employer)*

“I would have said her medical and surgical skills were probably what I expected, probably no more, no less, and that’s perfectly good enough for us.” (Employer)

*“[The] vet must be able to give the client **confidence in their ability**.” (Client)*

*“They don’t have to know every nitty-gritty thing, but to know where the uterus is in a dog and where its bladder is in relation to that, and intestines, liver, spleen, all the basics. I **don’t expect them to know every muscle** in a dog, not really important. I don’t expect them to know all the things that you don’t need to know. You don’t need to know every muscle in a dog.” (Employer)*

*“We want someone who has a really good basic knowledge of medicine and the **ability to work from first principles** and do [a] good basic work-up. But then obviously, if they [...] get into the complicated cases, [we’re] not expecting them to be able to do everything from day dot.” (Employer)*

Possible strategies to enhance your application of expertise

Gain work experience:

Work experience is viewed as a key element of employability in many fields, because ‘real-world’ experience allows learners to apply knowledge and skills developed in more theoretical situations.

Gain animal handling experience:

Animal handling skills are often used by clients and employers as a proxy for your overall skill level. Take every opportunity to gain confidence with effective and efficient, yet gentle and compassionate, animal handling skills.

Volunteer:

Seek volunteer opportunities to hone your skills while contributing to a good cause, e.g. charitable de-sexing services in poor communities; animal shelters; wildlife rescues; agricultural shows.

Watch old hands at work:

Experienced veterinarians may not rival a new graduate on the latest advances in veterinary science, but have a lifetime of experience in dealing with everyday problems – it pays to watch them work and ask them about their tips and tricks.

Learn the business side:

Expertise is not just about technical knowledge and skills, but also confidence with the financial and logistical side of operations. Being able to prepare and discuss an estimate of costs is as much a veterinary skill as being able to do the surgery.

Learn from everyone:

A good learner understands that you can learn from anyone, so be willing to take direction and seek advice/guidance from nurses and technicians, and draw upon the experience of clients as well as veterinarian colleagues.

Find a mentor or buddy:

Continual learning happens when systems are in place to support learning, e.g. a designated mentor/buddy can be a ‘go to’ person to seek guidance from, and develop a teaching/learning relationship with.