



## 23 INTRODUCTION

24 As veterinary educators, we have a responsibility to ensure that we are producing graduates who are  
25 prepared for working life. Organisations representing UK employers more widely report that  
26 graduates entering the labour market generally are deficient in key personal skills; especially  
27 teamworking, decision-making and communication (Bennett, 2002). Contemporary veterinary  
28 curricula encompass a range of teaching to complement the clinical knowledge and skills taught;  
29 including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and business skills, in order to support good  
30 practice and increase the employability of new graduates. Previous studies have examined the  
31 qualities required of a good early-career veterinarian as viewed by veterinary educators (Lane and  
32 Bogue, 2010; Laidlaw et al, 2009; Walsh et al, 2001); veterinary students and recent graduates  
33 (Rhind et al, 2011; Schull et al, 2012); pet owners (Mellanby et al, 2011); and practitioners (Walsh et  
34 al, 2001; Routly et al, 2002; Heath and Mills, 1999); and these will be discussed more fully later.  
35 However, no-one has previously constructed a picture of the current UK employment market for  
36 new veterinary graduates by exploring the nature of its recruitment advertising. With the  
37 employability agenda making greater inroads into the realm of veterinary education, this type of  
38 research can therefore inform the design of, and emphases within, veterinary curricula.

## 39 EMPLOYING EARLY-CAREER VETERINARIANS

40 Despite changes in the nature of work, the adoption of new technology, and advances in  
41 communications, the effectiveness of any organisation remains dependent its employees (Allen and  
42 Van Scotter, 2004); and this is especially true of the healthcare professions. In veterinary medicine  
43 as in other fields, increasing numbers of new entrants will naturally entail an increasing diversity of  
44 job roles and a redefinition of areas of work. When job requirements change, new skills become  
45 more in demand in the labour market as employers look for employees who fit the new jobs. Job  
46 adverts are therefore more than mere announcements of labour needs: they are indicators of

47 workplace culture (Massey, 2010). Examining the content of job adverts therefore allows analysis of  
48 the nature of skills which are required by employing organisations in a given field (Harper, 2012).

49 In the UK, increasing numbers of domestic veterinary graduates plus high numbers of overseas  
50 registrants are creating increased competition for 'entry-level' veterinary jobs suitable for a newly-  
51 qualified or early-career vet (Figure 1).

52 *Figure 1: Increasing trend in RCVS registrations since 2010*

53 *UK-United Kingdom; EU-European Union; Aus-Australia; NZ-New Zealand;*

54 *USA-United States of America; SA-South Africa; Can-Canada; RoW-Rest of World*

55 On graduation, most UK newly-qualified veterinarians will work in primary practice for at least a year  
56 (Institute for Employment Studies, 2014); and decisions on hiring early-career vets are therefore  
57 mostly made by practice owners, partners and managers. Veterinary practices, like any other  
58 businesses, rely on good employees (Blackman, 2006); and the implications of a poor match  
59 between employee and employer could be extremely costly in terms of wasted time and loss of  
60 employee morale, as well as financially (Blackman, 2006). High staff turnover rates are known to be  
61 costly and disruptive to employing organisations (Mathews and Redman, 2001), and it is therefore  
62 very important to communicate an appropriate message when attracting potential employees (De  
63 Cooman and Pepermans, 2012). Job seekers and applicants will select jobs to apply for that they  
64 perceive as being a good fit between their personal values and those of the organisation. A good  
65 person-organisation fit therefore increases the chance of a successful hire and results in a well-  
66 performing, committed, satisfied employee who adjusts well to their new position and is more likely  
67 to stay (De Cooman and Pepermans, 2012). It is easy to see the benefits of this for both the new  
68 veterinary graduate, the practice, and the profession more widely.

69

## 70 THE QUALITIES OF A 'GOOD VET'

71 Several common themes occur when examining the literature on the characteristics desirable in a  
72 good veterinarian. The importance of good communication skills is universal among all previous  
73 studies in this field. In their study of veterinary educators, Lane and Bogue (2010) and Laidlaw et al  
74 (2009) also add ethics and moral responsibility, critical thinking, self-development and lifelong  
75 learning, and interpersonal skills to good communication. Walsh et al (2001) also surveyed  
76 veterinary educators, and identified the humane and responsible treatment of animals and a  
77 responsibility to the wider community, as well as separating communication skills into those with  
78 colleagues and with clients. Rhind et al's (2011) study of veterinary students and recent graduates  
79 and Schull et al's (2012) of final year students again listed communication skills as primary, followed  
80 by the importance of knowing one's limits, honesty, and having the ability to listen. The animal  
81 owners' view investigated by Mellanby et al (2011) assumed a good general knowledge of veterinary  
82 medicine, and identifies the required personal characteristics as being good with animals,  
83 compassionate, honest, and confident; and, again, knowing one's limits. Similarly, veterinary  
84 practitioners identified communication skills with both clients and colleagues as paramount; along  
85 with the ability to problem-solve, empathy, and confidence, in Routly et al's (2002) and Heath and  
86 Mills' (1999) papers.

## 87 JOB ADVERTISEMENTS AS A DATA SOURCE

88 The purpose of a job advert includes communicating information about the expectations of the  
89 employee, encouraging a personal connection to the organisation at an early stage and helping  
90 persuade job seekers to make an application (Allen and Van Scotter, 2004). In a strongly values-  
91 driven profession such as veterinary medicine, it is easy to recognise the importance of such  
92 connections and for a new graduate to identify a match between their self-evaluation of their  
93 personal strengths, and those sought by a recruiting veterinary practice.

94 Job adverts may present a somewhat limited view – for example, it would not be known how well  
95 the skills that successful candidates possess correlate with the actual skills deployed in a job (Harper,  
96 2012). Some aspects may be under-reported due to the brief nature of job advertisements (Heimer,  
97 2002), and other characteristics of a desirable applicant may be so generally accepted that they do  
98 not merit mentioning in a job advert with limited space (Beck Jorgensen and Rutgers, 2014). Job  
99 adverts available for analysis only consist of publicly advertised positions, so will not include, for  
100 example, a practice employing a new graduate that had spent time with them as a student, or new  
101 hires made via word-of-mouth. The quality of writing in adverts will also vary - the content of an  
102 advert could reflect an employer’s ability to communicate through written language rather than a  
103 description of the actual vacancy and the person sought to fill it.

104 There are, however, many substantial advantages to using job adverts as a data source. They are  
105 easily accessible, organic and naturalistic; and of significant practical use to both veterinary  
106 graduates and those involved in veterinary education and policy-making. The long history of  
107 advertising “positions vacant” in the veterinary press enables longitudinal comparison and  
108 documentation of historical trends as indicators of social change in the profession; as well as  
109 producing data showing long-term changes to job roles (Harper, 2012; Beck Jorgensen and Rutgers,  
110 2014). Due to advertising space and therefore cost limitations, job adverts usually have to be fairly  
111 concise, meaning that employers must be selective when constructing their adverts (Beck Jorgensen  
112 and Rutgers, 2014) and publish only the most pertinent content.

113 Identifying the characteristics that veterinary employers are seeking can inform both teaching and  
114 research which focus on tangible outcomes benefitting student, school, employer, employee, and,  
115 ultimately, patient. The analysis of job advertisements is a method which provides data relevant to  
116 these issues by providing a snapshot of the current employment market (Harper, 2012). Overall,  
117 therefore, examining job adverts is an efficient way to investigate the priorities of veterinary  
118 employers and therefore informing what we as veterinary educators should be aiming to produce.

119 METHODS

120 There is little consolidated guidance on research design in studying job adverts – either in terms of  
121 the practical elements of research (i.e. data collection and analysis) or the theoretical aspects (i.e.  
122 ontological frameworks) (Harper, 2012). Analogous work in human medicine has focused on  
123 recruitment problems in specific fields or regions – for example, in areas where the  
124 practitioner:population ratio is low and therefore more innovative recruitment strategies are  
125 needed in order to attract good applicants (Hemphill and Kulik, 2013).

126 SAMPLING

127 The *Veterinary Record* is the most popular source of veterinary recruitment adverts in the UK.  
128 Published weekly, it has a print circulation of 11,789, and its website has 36,600 unique online users  
129 per month. It reports that 96% of the profession uses it when job-hunting (BMJ, 2017). Adverts can  
130 be placed either in print only or both print and online, therefore no data were omitted by sampling  
131 only the print version.

132 Previous studies of job adverts have examined from 60 to over 1,700 adverts (Table 1). The median  
133 figure is 236, suggesting this could be an acceptable minimum sample size.

| Lead author | Year | Job type                         | Number of adverts |
|-------------|------|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Ahmed       | 2005 | Non-profit CEOs                  | 242               |
| Bennett     | 2002 | Managers                         | 1,000             |
| Blickley    | 2012 | Conservationists                 | 60                |
| Choi        | 2009 | Librarians                       | 363               |
| Cramer      | 2012 | Chaplains                        | 71                |
| De Cooman   | 2012 | General                          | 1,786             |
| Esin        | 2014 | Obstetricians and Gynaecologists | 1,235             |
| Hemphill    | 2013 | General Practitioners            | 399               |

|         |      |             |     |
|---------|------|-------------|-----|
| Massey  | 2010 | Journalists | 326 |
| Mathews | 2001 | Salespeople | 300 |

134 *Table 1: Previous studies of job adverts*

135 The length of the sampling period in these studies was variable – from eight weeks to longitudinal  
 136 studies over ten years. For this project the requirement was to capture a snapshot of the current  
 137 veterinary market; although the advantage of using a data source with long-term systemic archiving  
 138 is that retrospective analysis of historical job adverts will be possible in future work.

139 The first three months of the *Veterinary Record* volume 176 (issues 1-13), containing 1,095  
 140 recruitment adverts, were examined. Of these adverts, 597 were duplicates, 16 were for jobs  
 141 overseas, 51 were for non-practice positions, and 36 were for Specialist or senior management  
 142 positions. As the aim of the study was to examine what UK practice employers were seeking in new  
 143 veterinary graduates, these were all excluded, leaving a total of 395 unique adverts for analysis.

144 DATA ANALYSIS

145 Content analysis was used to identify the desired attributes of a new employee as described in job  
 146 adverts and therefore the set of characteristics that UK veterinary employers are currently seeking.

147 The text of each advert was loaded into NVivo 10 (QSR International, Cheshire, UK) and coded by the  
 148 author. Codes were obtained directly from the text using the adjectives and phrases used to  
 149 describe the person sought (usually in the form of “*We are looking for...*” or “*Are you...?*”); therefore  
 150 using the natural language of the contemporary veterinary employment market (Massey, 2010).  
 151 Coded items were then grouped into characteristics. This presented a potential difficulty as terms  
 152 such as *dynamic*, *enthusiastic*, and *energetic* have considerable overlap in meaning but subtle  
 153 differences (Mathews and Redman, 2001); so node consolidation was carried out using primary  
 154 synonyms as listed by the Oxford Dictionaries Thesaurus (2017).

155

156 ETHICS

157 Ethical approval was not required as the data gathered were already in public domain. The names of  
158 advertisers and contact details were removed prior to analysis and no identifying data are included  
159 here.

160 RESULTS

161 395 unique adverts were analysed. Practice types corresponded with national figures for the UK  
162 (e.g. Nielsen et al, 2014); although 9% (34 of 395) adverts did not specify the type of practice or  
163 species treated (Figure 2).

164 *Figure 2: Job adverts analysed by practice type*

165 Ten distinct characteristics were identified that were mentioned by more than 5% of the adverts:  
166 enthusiasm for the job, an interest in a particular aspect of veterinary medicine, being an all-  
167 rounder, having good communication skills, being a team player, the ability to generate and  
168 maintain good client relationships, the ability to work autonomously, being caring, being ambitious,  
169 and having high clinical standards. Surprisingly, 13% (53 of 395) of adverts made no mention at all  
170 of any qualities of the person sought, and a further 29% (115 of 395) only mentioned one.

171 Frequency scores for each of the ten characteristics are shown in Figure 3.

172 *Figure 3: Frequency of the characteristics sought of a new veterinary employee in job adverts*

173 DISCUSSION

174 In line with previous work on the desired qualities of a good new graduate vet, communication skills  
175 were ranked highly, along with having a broad range of skills (“all-rounder”), good teamwork, and  
176 good client care. However, by far the most common characteristic sought was enthusiasm for the  
177 job.



178 Enthusiasm is a characteristic also identified as being highly valued in veterinary clinical teachers  
179 (Bolt et al, 2010). Bolt and colleagues summarise enthusiasm as “energetic, positive attitude, enjoys  
180 his/her job”; and it is worth exploring these factors in more detail in an employment context. The  
181 concept of enthusiasm for or at work is strongly associated with employee engagement; along with  
182 involvement, commitment, passion, energy, focused effort and satisfaction with work (Schaufeli and  
183 Bakker, 2010); and it is easy to see how these positive and active qualities would be attractive to a  
184 potential employer. There are also inverse correlations with the language used to describe burnout  
185 in the veterinary and other professions (e.g. exhaustion, cynicism, disillusionment, fatigue,  
186 frustration, etc) – enthusiasm and associated terms can be characterised as the exact opposite  
187 (Durán et al, 2004; Monnot and Beehr, 2014). Further exploration of this could therefore yield  
188 potentially useful protective strategies if we can harness and encourage enthusiasm in our students  
189 and future colleagues.

190 Patrick and colleagues (2000) examined the positive effects of teacher enthusiasm on students’  
191 motivation to learn. They found that enthusiasm in a teacher – presenting material in a dynamic,  
192 energetic way - acts as a catalyst for ‘intrinsic motivational energy’; acting as a ‘spark to reignite the  
193 flame of curiosity and interest for students’ (Patrick et al, 2000). Translating this into the early  
194 stages of employment, having dynamic, positive, motivated members of staff is an obvious  
195 advantage for a practice team. There is also a more emotional aspect – demonstrating enthusiasm is  
196 the enactment of eagerness to join a profession that new graduates have worked hard to become a  
197 part of; and this positivity towards veterinary work, an occupational group that the employer is  
198 already a member of, is valued and rewarded by the established veterinary community (Perrin,  
199 2016).

200 It is interesting to note that having a particular interest in one aspect of veterinary medicine was so  
201 highly valued by employers, and this is something that can be directly utilised by new graduates and  
202 early-career veterinarians applying for jobs – cultivating an interest and being prepared to sell it in

203 job applications should be a positive step. It is also interesting how this relates to the required  
204 omnicompetence of graduating vets: having good all-round skills was also highly valued by  
205 employers, and it is therefore reasonable to suggest that having a solid grounding in day-to-day  
206 practice along with adding something extra that will benefit the practice will be viewed positively in  
207 a job applicant; i.e. having an increased skill level in a particular area. Interestingly, there was a wide  
208 variety of such interests listed – half did not specify an interest in a particular discipline, simply that  
209 *any* additional interest would be an advantage. The remaining half valued widely varying interests  
210 from bovine reproduction to equine sports medicine to small animal orthopaedics. New graduates  
211 should take note: the evidence suggests that there is value in developing a ‘marketable’ skill set in a  
212 particular field and highlighting it in job applications. The benefits of this for the practice will  
213 subsequently be the potential to offer additional services or expertise to clients; and for the  
214 employee, increased job satisfaction in being supported to develop an area they are interested in  
215 and feeling like the practice values their contribution (Gilling et al, 2009).

216 The lack of mention of any personal characteristics in 13% (53 of 395) of the adverts was surprising.  
217 Some theorists have suggested that there is an inherent risk in including personal characteristics –  
218 that it may be misleading or even dangerous (Mathews and Redman, 2001) – presumably as  
219 prescribing a particular type of person could be limiting or exclusionary and therefore unhelpful.  
220 However, given the broad nature of the qualities identified here, this is unlikely. Mathews and  
221 Redman also highlight imbalances between long lists of requirements for prospective candidates but  
222 only vague coverage of what the organisation offers; which provides a rather poor or unequal start  
223 to the psychological contract between the applicant and the organisation (Mathews and Redman,  
224 2001). Interestingly, the opposite appears to be true of veterinary recruitment adverts, which often  
225 contain long lists of (for example) all the equipment that the practice has, but very little detail on the  
226 type of person sought. Again, this is a useful avenue for future research.

227 A potential confounding factor when drawing conclusions from this study is whether the values  
228 identified here are actually those considered by employers to be the most important for a new  
229 graduate, or those which there is an identified or perceived lack of. This has been examined in more  
230 depth by previous research, such as Bennett (2002), who investigated the reasons why personal skill  
231 requirements are included in job adverts. He identified four factors, in order of importance: (1) to  
232 attract the most suitable candidates, (2) so that candidates expect minimum standards, (3) that the  
233 company has always demanded these skills, and (4) that universities were not producing graduates  
234 with these skills so employers could not assume that graduates possess them. Some taken-for-  
235 granted skills required of a new veterinary graduate are not at all mentioned in job adverts, such as  
236 being able to use practice IT, or holding a driving licence; and this could be the reason for the  
237 difference in emphasis on communication skills between this study and previous work.

238 There is no doubt that the nature of veterinary employment is changing, with increasing numbers of  
239 corporate-owned practices and a move away from the traditional owner-practitioner model. With  
240 historical data available from job adverts, it would be possible in future work to trace whether this  
241 shift has had, or is having, an impact on what is expected of newly-qualified vets. Rafaeli and Oliver  
242 (1998) found that adverts for professionals contain detailed descriptions of the organisational  
243 culture and values, whereas ads for salespeople are more likely to contain descriptions of extrinsic  
244 motivators such as benefits and hours of work; consistent with the theory that occupations develop  
245 shared rhetorical forms. Future work will investigate whether a similar model is recognisable in the  
246 corporatisation of veterinary practice.

## 247 CONCLUSION

248 This study has identified ten qualities of new veterinary graduates that are valued by their potential  
249 employers. A clear understanding of veterinary employers' needs is beneficial on many levels.  
250 Firstly, senior veterinary students and early-career veterinarians who are actively seeking  
251 employment will need to know what employers are seeking to maximise their chances of success

252 and for planning their careers in practice. Practice owners and managers can use these findings for  
253 allocating staff resources, planning recruitment strategies, and designing effective recruitment  
254 adverts. This and future related research will be of interest to practitioners, researchers, historians  
255 and others interested in the changing nature of UK veterinary practice. More widely, veterinary  
256 organisations and policy-makers need to understand the needs and employment patterns of the  
257 veterinary profession in order to plan future provision in terms of educational funding and emphases  
258 for regulatory purposes; and to inform decisions on standards for training and long-term workforce  
259 effectiveness.

260 Veterinary educators and other veterinary school staff need to ensure that their graduates are  
261 prepared for working life. Employment research such as this can inform the design, structure and  
262 emphases of veterinary curricula; as well as providing an evidence-base for career advice offered as  
263 part of professional development modules, and for veterinary faculty acting as pastoral tutors to  
264 students under their care.

265 Increasing numbers of veterinary students will require a greater diversity of job roles within the  
266 veterinary profession. All of the existing normative models of the 'good vet' as identified in the  
267 literature prioritised good communication skills as being the primary quality; along with established  
268 qualities such as the ability to work in a team, the ability to form and maintain good client  
269 relationships, being caring and/or compassionate, and the ability to work independently. While  
270 these factors did feature here, examining job adverts to determine the qualities required of a new  
271 veterinary employee yielded other factors that had not previously been emphasised. The emphasis  
272 on having an interest in a particular aspect of veterinary medicine was surprising, and supports the  
273 development of veterinary school curricula which permit students to study electives or a particular  
274 topic in greater depth as being useful for their future move into the veterinary workforce.

275 The most desired quality, however, was enthusiasm. There is an important lesson to be learned  
276 here by veterinary educators and the profession more widely: to nurture our students through their

277 veterinary training, to role model positive working practices, and to ensure that they enter the  
278 veterinary employment market motivated and full of enthusiasm for the next stage in their  
279 veterinary career.

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