What are employers looking for in new veterinary graduates?

A content analysis of UK veterinary job adverts.

ABSTRACT

As veterinary educators, we have a responsibility to ensure that our graduates are prepared for working life. Veterinary practices, like any other businesses, rely on good employees, and the implications of a poor match between newly-employed vet and employing practice could be extremely costly in terms of personal wellbeing and enjoyment of work as well as the time, financial, and goodwill costs of high staff turnover for the practice. Contemporary veterinary curricula encompass a range of teaching to complement the clinical content; including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and business skills, in order to support good practice and increase the employability of new graduates. Previous studies have examined the qualities required of early-career veterinarians as viewed by educators, recent graduates, pet owners, and practitioners; however, no-one has previously constructed a picture of the employment market for new veterinary graduates by exploring the nature of its recruitment advertising. Three months of UK veterinary job adverts were examined. Content analysis yielded ten distinct characteristics desired by employers of early-career veterinarians. The most common by far was “enthusiasm”, followed by having an interest in a particular area of practice, being an all-rounder, good communication skills, teamwork, client care, independence, being caring, being ambitious, and having high clinical standards. While several of these qualities were expected and indeed are specifically taught in veterinary school, the dominance of “enthusiasm” as a specifically desired trait raises interesting questions about the characteristics of veterinary students that we are supporting, encouraging, or maybe even suppressing, during veterinary training.
As veterinary educators, we have a responsibility to ensure that we are producing graduates who are prepared for working life. Organisations representing UK employers more widely report that graduates entering the labour market generally are deficient in key personal skills; especially teamworking, decision-making and communication (Bennett, 2002). Contemporary veterinary curricula encompass a range of teaching to complement the clinical knowledge and skills taught; including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and business skills, in order to support good practice and increase the employability of new graduates. Previous studies have examined the qualities required of a good early-career veterinarian as viewed by veterinary educators (Lane and Bogue, 2010; Laidlaw et al, 2009; Walsh et al, 2001); veterinary students and recent graduates (Rhind et al, 2011; Schull et al, 2012); pet owners (Mellanby et al, 2011); and practitioners (Walsh et al, 2001; Routly et al, 2002; Heath and Mills, 1999); and these will be discussed more fully later. However, no-one has previously constructed a picture of the current UK employment market for new veterinary graduates by exploring the nature of its recruitment advertising. With the employability agenda making greater inroads into the realm of veterinary education, this type of research can therefore inform the design of, and emphases within, veterinary curricula.

EMPLOYING EARLY-CAREER VETERINARIANS

Despite changes in the nature of work, the adoption of new technology, and advances in communications, the effectiveness of any organisation remains dependent its employees (Allen and Van Scotter, 2004); and this is especially true of the healthcare professions. In veterinary medicine as in other fields, increasing numbers of new entrants will naturally entail an increasing diversity of job roles and a redefinition of areas of work. When job requirements change, new skills become more in demand in the labour market as employers look for employees who fit the new jobs. Job adverts are therefore more than mere announcements of labour needs: they are indicators of
workplace culture (Massey, 2010). Examining the content of job adverts therefore allows analysis of the nature of skills which are required by employing organisations in a given field (Harper, 2012).

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

Figure 1: Increasing trend in RCVS registrations since 2010

UK—United Kingdom; EU—European Union; Aus—Australia; NZ—New Zealand; USA—United States of America; SA—South Africa; Can—Canada; RoW—Rest of World

On graduation, most UK newly-qualified veterinarians will work in primary practice for at least a year (Institute for Employment Studies, 2014); and decisions on hiring early-career vets are therefore mostly made by practice owners, partners and managers. Veterinary practices, like any other businesses, rely on good employees (Blackman, 2006); and the implications of a poor match between employee and employer could be extremely costly in terms of wasted time and loss of employee morale, as well as financially (Blackman, 2006). High staff turnover rates are known to be costly and disruptive to employing organisations (Mathews and Redman, 2001), and it is therefore very important to communicate an appropriate message when attracting potential employees (De Cooman and Pepermans, 2012). Job seekers and applicants will select jobs to apply for that they perceive as being a good fit between their personal values and those of the organisation. A good person-organisation fit therefore increases the chance of a successful hire and results in a well-performing, committed, satisfied employee who adjusts well to their new position and is more likely to stay (De Cooman and Pepermans, 2012). It is easy to see the benefits of this for both the new veterinary graduate, the practice, and the profession more widely.
Several common themes occur when examining the literature on the characteristics desirable in a good veterinarian. The importance of good communication skills is universal among all previous studies in this field. In their study of veterinary educators, Lane and Bogue (2010) and Laidlaw et al (2009) also add ethics and moral responsibility, critical thinking, self-development and lifelong learning, and interpersonal skills to good communication. Walsh et al (2001) also surveyed veterinary educators, and identified the humane and responsible treatment of animals and a responsibility to the wider community, as well as separating communication skills into those with colleagues and with clients. Rhind et al's (2011) study of veterinary students and recent graduates and Schull et al's (2012) of final year students again listed communication skills as primary, followed by the importance of knowing one’s limits, honesty, and having the ability to listen. The animal owners’ view investigated by Mellanby et al (2011) assumed a good general knowledge of veterinary medicine, and identifies the required personal characteristics as being good with animals, compassionate, honest, and confident; and, again, knowing one’s limits. Similarly, veterinary practitioners identified communication skills with both clients and colleagues as paramount; along with the ability to problem-solve, empathy, and confidence, in Routly et al’s (2002) and Heath and Mills’ (1999) papers.

The purpose of a job advert includes communicating information about the expectations of the employee, encouraging a personal connection to the organisation at an early stage and helping persuade job seekers to make an application (Allen and Van Scotter, 2004). In a strongly values-driven profession such as veterinary medicine, it is easy to recognise the importance of such connections and for a new graduate to identify a match between their self-evaluation of their personal strengths, and those sought by a recruiting veterinary practice.
Job adverts may present a somewhat limited view – for example, it would not be known how well the skills that successful candidates possess correlate with the actual skills deployed in a job (Harper, 2012). Some aspects may be under-reported due to the brief nature of job advertisements (Heimer, 2002), and other characteristics of a desirable applicant may be so generally accepted that they do not merit mentioning in a job advert with limited space (Beck Jorgensen and Rutgers, 2014). Job adverts available for analysis only consist of publicly advertised positions, so will not include, for example, a practice employing a new graduate that had spent time with them as a student, or new hires made via word-of-mouth. The quality of writing in adverts will also vary - the content of an advert could reflect an employer’s ability to communicate through written language rather than a description of the actual vacancy and the person sought to fill it.

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

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

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

SAMPLING

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Job type</th>
<th>Number of adverts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Non-profit CEOs</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blickley</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Conservationists</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choi</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Librarians</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cramer</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Chaplains</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Cooman</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>1,786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esin</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Obstetricians and Gynaecologists</td>
<td>1,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemphill</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>General Practitioners</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Previous studies of job adverts

<table>
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<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Massey</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathews</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Salespeople</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

DATA ANALYSIS

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

The text of each advert was loaded into NVivo 10 (QSR International, Cheshire, UK) and coded by the author. Codes were obtained directly from the text using the adjectives and phrases used to describe the person sought (usually in the form of “We are looking for…” or “Are you…?”); therefore using the natural language of the contemporary veterinary employment market (Massey, 2010).

Coded items were then grouped into characteristics. This presented a potential difficulty as terms such as *dynamic*, *enthusiastic*, and *energetic* have considerable overlap in meaning but subtle differences (Mathews and Redman, 2001); so node consolidation was carried out using primary synonyms as listed by the Oxford Dictionaries Thesaurus (2017).
Ethics

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

Results

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

Figure 2: Job adverts analysed by practice type

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

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

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

Discussion

In line with previous work on the desired qualities of a good new graduate vet, communication skills were ranked highly, along with having a broad range of skills (“all-rounder”), good teamwork, and good client care. However, by far the most common characteristic sought was enthusiasm for the job.
Enthusiasm is a characteristic also identified as being highly valued in veterinary clinical teachers (Bolt et al, 2010). Bolt and colleagues summarise enthusiasm as “energetic, positive attitude, enjoys his/her job”; and it is worth exploring these factors in more detail in an employment context. The concept of enthusiasm for or at work is strongly associated with employee engagement; along with involvement, commitment, passion, energy, focused effort and satisfaction with work (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010); and it is easy to see how these positive and active qualities would be attractive to a potential employer. There are also inverse correlations with the language used to describe burnout in the veterinary and other professions (e.g. exhaustion, cynicism, disillusionment, fatigue, frustration, etc) – enthusiasm and associated terms can be characterised as the exact opposite (Durán et al, 2004; Monnot and Beehr, 2014). Further exploration of this could therefore yield potentially useful protective strategies if we can harness and encourage enthusiasm in our students and future colleagues.

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

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

The lack of mention of any personal characteristics in 13% (53 of 395) of the adverts was surprising. Some theorists have suggested that there is an inherent risk in including personal characteristics – that it may be misleading or even dangerous (Mathews and Redman, 2001) – presumably as prescribing a particular type of person could be limiting or exclusionary and therefore unhelpful. However, given the broad nature of the qualities identified here, this is unlikely. Mathews and Redman also highlight imbalances between long lists of requirements for prospective candidates but only vague coverage of what the organisation offers; which provides a rather poor or unequal start to the psychological contract between the applicant and the organisation (Mathews and Redman, 2001). Interestingly, the opposite appears to be true of veterinary recruitment adverts, which often contain long lists of (for example) all the equipment that the practice has, but very little detail on the type of person sought. Again, this is a useful avenue for future research.
A potential confounding factor when drawing conclusions from this study is whether the values identified here are actually those considered by employers to be the most important for a new graduate, or those which there is an identified or perceived lack of. This has been examined in more depth by previous research, such as Bennett (2002), who investigated the reasons why personal skill requirements are included in job adverts. He identified four factors, in order of importance: (1) to attract the most suitable candidates, (2) so that candidates expect minimum standards, (3) that the company has always demanded these skills, and (4) that universities were not producing graduates with these skills so employers could not assume that graduates possess them. Some taken-for-granted skills required of a new veterinary graduate are not at all mentioned in job adverts, such as being able to use practice IT, or holding a driving licence; and this could be the reason for the difference in emphasis on communication skills between this study and previous work.

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

CONCLUSION

This study has identified ten qualities of new veterinary graduates that are valued by their potential employers. A clear understanding of veterinary employers’ needs is beneficial on many levels. Firstly, senior veterinary students and early-career veterinarians who are actively seeking employment will need to know what employers are seeking to maximise their chances of success
and for planning their careers in practice. Practice owners and managers can use these findings for allocating staff resources, planning recruitment strategies, and designing effective recruitment adverts. This and future related research will be of interest to practitioners, researchers, historians and others interested in the changing nature of UK veterinary practice. More widely, veterinary organisations and policy-makers need to understand the needs and employment patterns of the veterinary profession in order to plan future provision in terms of educational funding and emphases for regulatory purposes; and to inform decisions on standards for training and long-term workforce effectiveness.

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

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

The most desired quality, however, was enthusiasm. There is an important lesson to be learned here by veterinary educators and the profession more widely: to nurture our students through their
veterinary training, to role model positive working practices, and to ensure that they enter the veterinary employment market motivated and full of enthusiasm for the next stage in their veterinary career.

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