

The Top Five Reasons Your Staff Will Stay

Follow this advice to transform your practice
from high turnover to high retention.

By Wendy S. Myers

For nearly 25 years, Kathy Daily, RVT, has worked for the same mixed animal clinic. She's turned down three higher paying jobs and raised two kids during her tenure as a technician at El Dorado Animal Clinic in El Dorado, Kan. After an internship at the clinic in 1973, she began working full time for Davy Harkins, DVM, in 1977 and has never considered leaving.

What's the secret to employee retention, especially during tougher economic times with fewer workers? More money isn't the magic wand to lure and keep valued employees. "Once employees' financial needs have been met, money's motivational influence diminishes, eclipsed by factors like recognition and advancement," writes Gregory P. Smith in his book, *Here Today, Here Tomorrow: Transforming Your Workforce From High-Turnover to High-Retention* (Dearborn Financial Publishing Inc., 2001). Here are five ways you can keep your best people:

1. Say thank-you often. Long hours and stressful days can lead to burnout if an employee doesn't feel appreciated. "After a long day of surgeries, the doctor says, 'We got through it because you were here.' That's what is most important of all," Daily says. "The last words you hear are 'Thank You.'"

When Tracy Dowdy, CVPM, a consultant with Transformation for Success in Bedford, Texas, works with hospital teams, she distributes an anonymous survey to assess staff members' attitudes. "The biggest mistake practice owners make is not patting their staff members on the back," she says. "If people feel appreciated for the work they do, they will be more loyal during hard times."



2. Share your passion. Just as a love of animals and science led veterinarians to their career choice, many staff members have the same calling. "Overall, I've stayed because I work for a very talented, compassionate doctor who truly cares about his patients and staff," Daily says.

Dr. Harkins and Daily are treating Lucky, a golden retriever with cancer, and know she's near the end of her fight. Now they're caring for the pet owner's emotions as well as the dog's medical needs. On Daily's day off, the owner called her at home to tell her how Lucky was feeling. A practice philosophy centered on the human-animal bond is one of the reasons that Daily has stayed with the hospital for 25 years. "Money is important, but happiness is more important," Daily says. "I have good benefits, a caring workplace, and a great staff to work with. Patient care is our No. 1 priority, and client care is No. 2."

3. Offer competitive benefits. Your veterinary hospital can attract and retain skilled workers with health insurance, paid vacation and holidays, retirement plans, veterinary services or pet health insurance, continuing-education allowances, and other benefits. "A

lot of practices don't even provide the basics of paid vacation and personal time off," Dowdy says.

At El Dorado Animal Clinic, Dr. Harkins pays 100 percent of employees' health insurance. The benefit helped Daily raise her two children without worrying about medical expenses. "Our health insurance is tremendous and I don't pay anything," she says. "That alone is worth so much." The hospital also offers a 401(k) plan and matches 3 percent of employees' contributions.

4. Be generous with training. Send staff members to local, state, and national veterinary conferences. Most offer technical, management, and client service seminars designed for veterinary healthcare teams. Also provide in-clinic seminars, subscriptions to journals, paid time off to attend lectures, and tuition reimbursement for staff members who want to pursue a degree. Many AVMA-accredited technician schools offer distance-learning programs (see "Going the Distance," *Veterinary Practice News*, June 2001, page 1).

"People won't feel like they're growing or being challenged unless they're being trained," Dowdy says. "If you're doing weekly training at staff meetings, you're communicating with your team."



5. Be family friendly. With the feminization of the veterinary profession, practice owners need to help employees balance work and family. Daily was twice offered a lucrative sales position with a veterinary company when her children were young. Both times, she turned down the job offer. "Working for Dr. Harkins, I had the flexibility of leaving work to pick up a sick child," she says. "That's the kind of benefit you can't put a monetary value on."

At Emerson Animal Hospital in Waco, Texas, Ray Emerson, DVM, allows employees to bring their children to work if they can't get a babysitter for the day. "I have a room with a TV and VCR, so they can watch children's shows and videos," he says. "Babysitters cost a lot of money and are sometimes hard to find, so offering staff members the option of bringing their children to the clinic works well. Most children are well-mannered if given a little guidance."

If you give team members respect, responsibility, and rewards, they will feel an important part of the hospital, Dr. Emerson says. Surprise staff members with unexpected rewards such as a day off, paid two-hour lunch, cell phone, using the company gas credit card to fill up their cars, and small gifts personalized to their interests. Daily loves to read and the practice manager at El Dorado Animal Clinic often rewards her with new books. "Simple gestures like putting a note in employees' paychecks can go a long way," Dowdy says. "A hand-written, sincere, and specific note shows staff members you appreciate them for all they do."

Want to Learn More About Employee Retention?

- *Here Today, Here Tomorrow: Transforming Your Workforce From High-Turnover to High-Retention* by Gregory P. Smith (Dearborn Financial Publishing Inc., 2001)
- *Hire and Keep the Best People: 21 Practical and Proven Techniques You Can Use Immediately!* by Brian Tracy (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2001)
- *Fun Works: Creating Places Where People Love to Work* by Leslie Yerkes (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2001)
- *Love Em' or Lose Em': Getting Good People to Stay* by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 1999)

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.