

How I Attract and Retain Millennial Associates

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The future of the veterinary profession lies in the hands of the Millennial generation. Much has changed over the past few decades, and what worked to attract new associates in 1980 simply doesn't anymore. Bringing in a new associate involves a different approach to the meaning of work/life balance, and compensation methods, vacation time, benefits and professional fulfillment have all evolved. Millennials now are the largest pet-owning generation comprising over 35% of pet owners nationally according to a study by Idexx. Your practice may want to bring in a Millennial associate to better serve this generation of pet owners, you may want to mentor a recent grad or you might find that your area is highly attractive for millennial veterinarians. If your practice is looking for a younger veterinarian to hire, these factors are important to consider when formulating a compensation package, and the same values hold true when it comes to retaining Millennial associates.

Write a Great Job Listing

The first step to hiring a new associate is typically a job listing. The AVMA website is the most frequented for young veterinarians looking for a job. Other online job listing sites such as Indeed.com are also popular. When formulating your job listing, write an introduction to the area you are in and what makes it a great place to live. Then, briefly introduce your practice's history before diving into the culture you want to create. Make sure to mention the aspects of veterinary medicine that your practice does best (surgery, alternative/holistic medicine, palliative care, dairy cattle, equine orthopedics, dentistry, rescue/shelter work, etc.) and the opportunities that are available for an associate to practice and learn.

Go High Tech

Recent graduates want to work in a clean, modern facility with good quality equipment. We can't all afford to buy every piece of new equipment but negotiating what equipment a new hire would like to have is a good start. Your potential hires may desire to work with cautery, cold laser, dental x-ray or ultrasound. Engage potential candidates as well as current associates to understand where you should invest your capital for new equipment purchases. Providing the resources for your associates to practice great medicine contributes to fulfillment professionally as well as the practice's bottom line.

Millennials grew up with the internet, so investing in a cloud-based software with paperless records will greatly improve not only efficiency of the practice, but also your chances of hiring a millennial associate. Bringing your practice up to speed tech-wise takes time and money, but will pay off in the long run with efficiency and happy employees.

Be Flexible

Once you have staffed your practice with associates to cover the operating hours, providing flexibility can make a great impact on retaining associates. For weekend hours, consider if one associate prefers to work most Saturdays or Sundays, or if a rotating schedule works better. Be flexible with weekend hours in general, and if you are not profitable on weekends or are opening a new practice, consider closing on weekends (yes, it can be done!). If your associates make production only, allow them to choose what days they work and how often as long as your basic coverage is met. Some bigger practices allow their associates to request which days they want to work the month before. For smaller practices, this is not feasible, so flexible scheduling to accommodate associates with children is important.

Work/life balance

Work/Life is all the rage these days, and there's a reason for it: Burnout. Creating and promoting a culture of self-care and balance is important for attracting millennial associates, but you have to walk the walk to retain them. Provide opportunities for associates to chart their medical records at home so they can do it on their couch instead of in the office after hours (invest in cloud based software!). Encourage associates to take their lunch *outside* the office and use their annual leave. The work never ends (especially for us practice owners), so remember that associates need breaks too. Make sure that your associates are 100% free of hospital duties on their weekends and days off. They should not have to come in for hospitalized treatment care on their patient when they can transfer the patient to another associate who is working that weekend or day.

Provide Mentorship and Feedback

Mentorship is one of the most important benefits for young associates. Nearly every recent graduate wants to learn and grow, and the first few years are critical for setting the tone of practice. Providing strong mentorship in a structured way will help you not only attract millennials, but retain the ones you have. As they say in business, *people don't leave jobs, they leave bosses.*

Providing feedback and constructive criticism can be uncomfortable, but is necessary to provide any associate with a plan to improve performance. In the first few months, meet weekly to address any questions and concerns about medicine standards as well as guidance on handling communication with clients and staff. Create an open door policy for your associates and staff to come talk about goings on in the practice and voice any concerns or questions. Sit down with new hires to co-create a roadmap of what the next year is going to look like in terms of professional goals, and revisit that annually. Ask them to come up with their own reviews and what they can do to hold themselves accountable to staying on track career-wise. We like to be involved with our careers!

Compensation

Compensation methods have changed over the last few decades, but business principles have not: your millennial associate (or ANY associate) must generate enough revenue to cover their compensation. Once you have satisfied that, discussing compensation methods (salary vs. Pro-Sal vs. production only) with potential candidates will give you a better idea of what kind of associate they are. There are no right or wrong ways to approach compensation for millennials. Some doctors do better on salary, some do better on production. Involving the candidate and asking about their take on which they prefer can help you determine more about their style of medicine. Great associates can be found in both camps, and tailoring a compensation plan to an individual with a plan to check in every 60-90 days is the best way to figure out how your millennial candidate is motivated by compensation.

Insurance

Standard benefits packages include health insurance. Offering other benefits such as dental, vision, pet insurance, disability and life insurance can be helpful in attracting new associates, but only if they really want those benefits. Benefits companies such as PeopleKeep allow you to offer a set monthly benefit amount to your employees while allowing them to choose how they want to use that benefit. Because the needs of employees can vary widely, this is a great option to provide benefits that associates can custom tailor to their personal preference.

Time off

Millennials are a generation of explorers. We value experiences over things, and most of those experiences are attended away from work. Travel and self-care are major focal points for many millennials which means that time off can be a very important benefit to many younger veterinarians. We all know that the rest of the developed world gives 4-6 weeks paid annual leave, so the average 2 weeks in the USA makes it difficult to travel, spend time with friends and family and recharge. If you have an associate that values time off, negotiate an additional week or two of vacation time (paid or unpaid) to factor into the overall compensation package. I had a friend who left a job she loved because, despite offering to forego her 10% raise, her boss refused to give her an additional week off *unpaid* to see her family abroad. Don't lose a great associate because you don't want to give them the time off they need. You can adjust salary and/or benefits to offset the additional days of annual leave.

Continuing Education

Providing adequate opportunity for CE is extremely important to recent graduates. Covering travel expenses, hotels and conference registration is standard. Discuss with your associate what preference they have for CE (AAHA, AAEP, AVMA, Fetch, IVECCs, State VMA, Oquendo Center etc.) to negotiate time off and the total amount of expenses paid.

While we all have minimum CE hour requirements, remember that some associates want to develop their professional skills outside of traditional CE conferences. Online courses in acupuncture and herbal medicine, disaster preparedness, Fear Free certification, public health, business management etc. can all provide CE credit and may be more interesting and beneficial to new associates than traditional general practice focused conferences.

Meaningful work

Millennials know that we want our work to have meaning. So many corporate practices have a hard time retaining millennials because their associates find little meaning and purpose without great leadership and mentoring. Promoting a culture of purpose (stellar client services, gold standard medical care, work with local rescues/shelters, opportunity for community outreach, etc) can help drive opportunities for your associates to find a sense of purpose in their work. Consider these three veterinarians who answered the question "what do you do everyday?". The first says "I take care of sick animals." The second says, "I'm a veterinarian" and the third says, "I help people provide the best quality of life for their pets." The first has a job, the second has a career and the third has a *purpose*.

Professional fulfillment

Employees who find purpose in what they do typically stick around no matter what. Everyone's purpose and interests are different, so do some in-depth discussions with young associates and potential new hires to gauge what drives them: mastering new skills, teaching, giving back to the community, research, accomplishments in writing, practice ownership, travel, political animal welfare, etc. Individuals are motivated and driven in different ways, so this will take some creativity and effort to help a recent graduate identify what gives them purpose in life. Encouraging your associate to pursue that purpose as a part of their career leads to professional fulfillment.