

Managing Multiple Locations – Collaborative Article

There are a growing number of hospital managers with multiple locations in veterinary practices across North America. Managing multiple practices might lend to the visualization of daily cross-town commutes. However, these locations may be sprinkled across town; across the state or across the country. There are relevant issues to multi-location managers and it is our hope that this article will address them. Continuous effective communication is vital and with good planning, the well-trained, organized manager can oversee administrative and operational areas for more than one practice.

As hospital administrators for multiple locations in varying locales, we have learned to embrace the diversity of staff, facilities and clientele for each practice. We have learned more than we imagined by having to find the answer to so many questions. Our practices range from one DVM/six employees to three DVMs/forty employees and everything in between. It has been a wonderful challenge to address such diverse issues.

From a practice owner's perspective, finding or developing a trustworthy, problem-solving manager that is goal-oriented for one practice can be challenging. It may not be feasible for owners with multiple locations to have dependable management personnel at each location. The multi-location manager's role may vacillate between that of well-woven personnel fixture to an overseer or administrator. But when achieved, it can be professionally rewarding for both the owner and the manager.

Our best advice is to see each hospital as its own entity. Each practice brings its own client demographics; legal parameters for business and unique practice culture to the table. Each practice should have a customized business plan or individual management structure for optimum results. Like raising more than one child and appreciating their differences, each hospital has its own personality. One practice may be the epitome of a state of the art facility with a "the sky's the limit" clientele to match. Yet another practice may be a warm fuzzy group with a business plan that focuses on community animal health. Whether a general practice or a specialty practice, the multi-location manager must recognize and adjust to each practice's needs and concerns.

Just as there are differences in clientele, the employee group at each location varies. To compliment the differences in clientele, the health care teams at each location need individual consideration. Employers have the legal duty to provide an equitable work place and biased-free management. For example, without compromising minimum wage laws, the labor market may indicate different pay scales in different regions. Employment competition in some areas may include a national fast food chain who can offer a starting pay of \$3.00 over minimum wage. When the market rate is elevated, adjustments need to be made to hire and retain entry level staff.

Contemplating and fulfilling the need for sound human resource management within any practice is important and can be time consuming. Multiple practices with common ownership can utilize the same or similar program resources for payroll, book keeping, and benefits. The time and effort to maintain vendors and a single system may be less than having to bounce from one system to the next. The familiarity and continuity of outsourced responsibilities can be streamlined and more cost effective for the owner.

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Human resources; employee training, and client service programs can be greatly streamlined by having a central manager for multiple sites. Each practice might have department, section or team leaders who assist in the day-to-day operations and report to the central manager. In-house documents and protocols can be similar from practice to practice or tailored for each practice.

It is helpful to stay in tune with the grapevine at each practice. For example, problems can arise if the staff is loyal to an associate and not the employer. The manager's duty to be informed is heightened when on premises for a limited amount of time. Responsibility for maintaining a professional workplace and getting the information for assessment and planning may require more frequent site visits. It is important to build a relationship with each staff member so they see management cares for them as individuals. Learn their names and faces, and try to take a moment when visiting to speak to each person.

Keeping track of employee files for multiple practices is not much different than keeping track of one set for a single location. Employee files, pay changes and termination notices should be kept securely in the management office at each location. When managers are faced with recruiting and hiring new employees, they can interview via telephone; during site visits or train supervisors to perform the interviews. A supervisor's responsibility to the hiring process may include a discussion of applicants and potential pay. In some hospitals, a supervisor may also be responsible for providing the manager with the final documents for people that are hired. Once hired, payroll hours can be sent to the central office and payroll produced by an adequately trained person or reviewed for processing by a payroll service. Payroll reports are kept on file and some may be sent on to individual hospitals if warranted.

Like support staff, the veterinarians are individuals and when hiring, special attention needs to be paid to finding a good match. The warm fuzzy doctor will be eaten alive in a fast paced emergency atmosphere and the high energy doctor may be frustrated with a hospital that is staffed by people that spend more time attending to the intangible needs of the client than moving on to the next task. In some hospitals it is beneficial to create the doctor schedules while other hospitals may do their own in accordance within established protocols. Keep a copy of each location's doctor and staff schedules for your own reference.

Technology has become a lifeline to multi-location managers. Today it is very important to expect managers to be able to efficiently navigate computer documents and the internet comfortably. There is a variety of software available to address every aspect of practice management and these can be efficiently accessed from remote locations. We are most familiar with practice management software that stores our client's records and transactions. In addition, there is time clock software that allows a view of real time employee time, hours worked and benefits earned through a secure internet connection. This is a great tool for managers on the go. While technology is a great tool in management, success will come to those who are able to find the balance between technologies, tasks, the people they work with and the clients they serve. This is paramount for a manager in one practice or multiple practices.

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Streamlining day to day business reports will serve the multi-practice manager well. Daily reports reflecting client invoicing statistics, cash receipts, accounts receivable, inventory received, and petty cash expenses can be communicated at the close of business by each practice. Those reports are transferred to the central manager in a pre-determined route, i.e. fax, email or other electronic transfer. Fax and email make keeping in touch easy. Supervisors fax information and checklists each day. One checklist may include large spaces for making notes and another is a task list of daily or weekly duties. It is helpful to create a path for supervisors to report maintenance & repair issues, personnel issues, attendance problems, notable cases, client concerns, DVM caseload updates that can be reported on an as-needed, daily or weekly basis.

Finances are one of the easiest areas to maintain off site. Forms are developed for reporting daily deposit amounts. This is faxed each day with the veterinary software report and will show if the money collected matched the computer entries or if there were any discrepancies in the deposit. Each location should have a couple of checks secured should unplanned expenses arise. When a check is used by an authorized person, they report the check details on the daily report. Files for daily deposit reports are kept for reference and are helpful when reconciling the checking account statement.

If accounting functions, such as account payables, are completed off-site, they are returned with the check stub attached or a notation if paid online. Keeping vendor files on-site and available is helpful when immediate answers are needed for questions/issues that occur.

It is possible to place orders for inventory, office supplies, stamps, uniforms, cleaning supplies, lunch or flowers with a few clicks of the mouse. A manager can work from a desk in one office and place an order for cleaning supplies for multiple locations in about as much time as it takes to order for one location. Of course, the financial transactions for those supplies must be strictly tracked and documented to each practice.

One of the most obvious benefits to multiple location management is the ability for hospitals under the same ownership to share ordering and take advantage of vendor discounts. Without becoming a warehouse, the inventory orders involve more inventory than either practice would use regularly but when shared, each location saves. This is especially helpful for the smaller locations.

Requests for medical and office supplies and janitorial items are faxed to the central office and sorted by vendor. The orders are reviewed, placed, and the order forms are faxed back to the individual hospitals with notations made on how many and where the products were ordered. If there are backorders, the hospital is aware due to the return of the order form. Vendor representatives are still encouraged to visit each location and service any educational or return needs, but no order is placed without administrator approval. Vendors should call to verify any order being placed from individual locations.

Within the plan for practices under common ownership, maintenance of policies, vendors, staff procurement and many other aspects of management can be streamlined.

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Imagine the annual review for the practice's telephone advertising contract. Now imagine being able to review one, two or three additional contracts in that one appointment. What type of time savings can you envision? Is it a few minutes or hours? It is likely your proficiency in reviewing and scrutinizing the advertisements improves with practice.

Files are maintained for accounting, legal and tax issues. Monthly reports are kept from each practice's veterinary software, along with a profit & loss report and balance sheet. The period total or deposit report, a category or account report, the accounts receivable report, the inventory report and something that shows individual doctor's production from the veterinary software reports are valuable. This gives a good start for reviewing the history of each individual practice. And, each practice should securely retain their original copies for good record-keeping and quick reference.

Monthly review is as helpful in multiple practices as it is in one practice. Chart gross income, number of new clients, average transaction by doctor, number of transactions, net profit and the trends of all of these throughout the year. Compare the hospitals. Expect different things from them, but you want to see if one is gaining ground. Are all holding to industry benchmarks? How often do you hear that it is a slow season? With several locations, there is a small research pool to study real changes.

Managers should schedule regular site visits. It may seem that a surprise visit would be advantageous, but this just serves to make everyone nervous and can create an adversarial relationship. If you visit so often that you are seen as a fixture this may not be a problem. No matter what your paperwork may say or what people tell you, there is no substitute for seeing, hearing and smelling for yourself. Walk through the practice and take a few minutes to speak with each employee and doctor. It smoothes the barrier created by off site management. A consistent schedule for site visits works best. Employees count on leadership to be present. Managers need to put their name on the schedule and show up ready to work. Managers working the front line, helping with clients, taking phone calls or holding a pet align with the staff. Leading managers are willing to participate in the daily activities. Be ready to learn from the employees about the practice. You learn as much from them as from any formal continuing education. This will have a positive effect on many aspects of the business as well as a manager's professional growth.

It is possible to manage multiple practices for different owners. With careful planning, and employment contracts in place, a conscientious professional can successfully manage practices with different owners. Clear job descriptions and work schedules are imperative whether a manager is working for one owner or more. Be mindful of the risk that the business owner faces. What level of commitment are you bringing to the work environment for each business?

In summary, the manager of more than one location must be extremely organized and willing to extend whatever effort is needed to care for a multitude of issues. Successful people are willing to do what others are not. This applies to more than multiple location managers.