

**ONSITE AND/OR ONLINE:
MANAGING A VETERINARY PRACTICE FROM A DISTANCE**
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A stretch of the mind has led practice management to a different venue. Imagine taking a vacation and toting along your cell phone and laptop in the event that anyone back at the office needed you. Your family or travel companions might think you were a little overcommitted to your job, but you were prepared. You visualized addressing work issues while away from your office environment. Have you ever stopped to think about managing your practice from a location outside of the practice the majority of the time?

Too often, we lock ourselves into convention. Conventional management personnel traditionally work under the same roof as the business owner, peers and subordinates. In 2000, convention met innovation and a new concept was born into veterinary management. The idea of a practice manager working in a full-time capacity from an offsite location (telemaking) was unveiled and its prototype engaged. Inspired by the successes of internet-based businesses and larger corporations with virtual offices, this variety of management was started to fit the needs of the business as well as assist the manager in a successful work-life balance.

Since its inception, this offsite telemaking model has raised curiosity. How could someone manage a veterinary practice remotely and cater to the day-to-day issues that arise? This question has been posed by newcomers to the industry as well as long-experienced veterans. There is not a stock answer to that question. Representatives from those groups each have their own world view and experiences that either allow, or disallow, the possibility of stepping outside the box of generally accepted management structures.

The evolution of veterinary management is both interesting and inspiring. Many veterinarians have experienced working after-hours on administrative duties. Some have relied upon a family member to help with management duties or employed part-time managers. Perhaps they have grown their practice enough to hire a full-time onsite manager. The development and expansion of the way we can manage practices is at our fingertips. Reaching our staff and our clients has become easier over the last 5 – 7 years. We are able to utilize the latest technologies in gathering, analyzing and storing data and we can host meetings and educate our staff via online capabilities.

Many managers are responsible for one practice while others are responsible for multiple locations. Some managers have arranged to work away from the office one or two days a week. This type of an arrangement has been beneficial to both the owner and the manager. For the last seven years, two practices in Grand Rapids, Michigan have successfully operated under the guidance and leadership of a manager who has worked solely for those practices from out of state. In other words, every 4 – 6 weeks Travelocity® has been a vital part in planning the monthly onsite visit.

There are a number of reasons why telemaking might be a viable option for a practice and manager. Likewise, there are plenty of practices where telemaking would not be a good fit. It is a decision not to be taken lightly and proper planning is a necessity. Several key features of the telemaking candidate might include: ability to work independently, remain focused amid many distractions, manage time well, and communicate effectively.

Managing from a remote location requires additional consideration about the way we communicate with each other. Since its inception, many task-oriented and logistic questions about this model have been posed by veterinarians and management peers. It is interesting that very few questions pertaining to the actual art of communication have arisen. When a manager is working remotely, poor communication skills will lead to failure. Timely feedback is imperative.

When this telemanaging model began, communication in both practices improved significantly. Why? The owner, staff and manager were committed to the continued growth of the practice. The employees and the manager simultaneously responded to the need and created efficient means of keeping in touch and staying on the same page. Phone calls, faxing, emailing and voice messaging were the earliest means of communication in this model. With advances in telecommunications, conference calling, IM, Webinars, etc. have been useful additions.

The day-to-day operations of the practices did not change after the manager began working offsite. Minor changes for a few daily administrative tasks were made. For example, the staff was trained how to handle client issues more efficiently. They understood when they were to ask for assistance from the manager. When assistance has been needed from the manager/administrator, client concerns have been addressed promptly over the phone. To date, not one client has expressed discontentment with not being able to discuss an issue in person.

Staff issues and concerns are addressed in a similar fashion. The staff member can choose to call the manager or seek his/her department leader. If the employee discusses the issue with the department leader, the leader will in turn discuss with the manager. The leaders' job is to know their department personnel, work environment and operations from top to bottom. They are authorized to submit recommendations for change within their departments. However, they do not have the authority to implement change without the approval of the manager/administrator. This process is very helpful in keeping all hospital operations running smoothly.

Onsite visits are constructive for both the staff and the manager. The staff needs interaction and support from their manager. They need to feel that management is present and available to them. The visits are necessary for the owner, too. The owner can have a renewed sense of obligation from his/her remote manager by seeing him/her engaged in the practice environment. The manager needs the interaction of the staff and owner to stay realistic about what is happening in the hospital. In addition, it helps maintain relationships within the work family.

Performance appraisals, vendor meetings, planning meetings, and staff meetings are just a few things that may be scheduled during an onsite visit. Onsite visits are a great time to get in as many face-to-face interviews as possible for job openings within the practice. Most onsite visits are announced to the staff. It is rare that an onsite visit will be unannounced but it has happened and has been helpful. Impromptu visits can assist with seeing how things are at any particular moment. These are often the best teaching and retraining opportunities.

Is this structure a part of the evolution of veterinary management? Some will argue that it is not - that it is a unique, single arrangement. Certainly there are days when it would be more convenient to be in the practice for the manager and for the staff. At the end of the day, it is all about balance. Other veterinary owners who have been actively seeking balance for their practices and their employees may find they will enjoy the benefits of balance brought about by this unique management model and concept.