Finding the right first job

Most vets would agree that the most important first step on graduation is to find a good employer. Here are some ideas on what to look out for.

A good employer will be supportive and fair, will encourage you to learn and become progressively independent, will encourage a high standard of professional work, ethics and interpersonal interactions, and will be someone with whom you can develop a comfortable working relationship. If there is more than one other veterinary surgeon in the practice, there will be the added advantage of others to learn from and share after hours with.

How can you find such an employer? Contacts are the best way. Contacts may be made through work, at practices or visits, through attendance at veterinary meetings and conferences, or indirectly through others. Some may be found through advertisements or agencies, but whatever the source and however personable they may seem, it is important to check up on their qualities as an employer. It is not necessary to accept the first job you are offered. Be selective. Find the best job and the best employer for you.

Talk with other employees in the practice or the person whose place you would be taking. A good employer will suggest that you talk with others in the practice, and offer contact details of previous employees. If you feel uncomfortable making inquiries about a potential employer, remember that they will be inquiring about you too and the outcome is likely to influence your career. A keen and idealistic graduate can have their enthusiasm quashed by a miserable employer. A timid graduate can find that an excellent employer provides a boost that launches them on a satisfying and rewarding career.

Preparation

While you are making your own assessment of the employer and the position, you will also be assessed. Your initial selection will be based on your CV or on direct or indirect personal contact. This may lead to an invitation to attend a formal interview or to visit the practice. Find out as much as you can in advance about the practice and its staff. Be ready to be judged on your ability to relate to the clients, other veterinarians, the nurses and other staff. Remember that if you get the job these people will be central to helping you settle in and begin work. It is essential that you relate well to them.

If you are a little shy or lacking in confidence about interacting with others, don’t assume that you will be found wanting in your ability to relate to clients and colleagues. Instead, think in advance of likely situations and questions and prepare possible responses, which will help you to respond in a positive and confident way. Also, visualise yourself in the position of the other person — potential employer or client — and think of the type of response they would find appropriate, while not misrepresenting yourself, of course.

Remember that interviewers may also be a little nervous and inexperienced. They may be tentative in an interview situation and struggle to find appropriate questions.
to keep the interview flowing. So flesh out your responses, while at the same time avoiding verbosity. If you have access to a video camera and a willing helper, try some practice interviews in advance. It is also useful to practice interactions with clients, especially those involving tricky situations such as fee disputes, grief and aggressive behaviour.

**Interpersonal skills**

Most employers place less emphasis on the technical skills of diagnosis and treatment, including surgery, than on personal and interpersonal attributes. They assume that all graduates have a base level of technical skill. Although this may vary between graduates, all will need some help and support to become proficient. A willingness to learn, to ask questions and to accept constructive criticism is important, as is an agreeable level of self-confidence. Too much confidence can give an impression of arrogance; too little suggests indecision.

New graduates often seek to start work in a mixed or large animal practice with a view to consolidating their skills with various species, and look forward to the experience with much enthusiasm. However, many leave these practices within the first few years, often as a result of long hours of work and after-hours duty, coupled with possibly reduced remuneration, especially compared with that of other young professionals in their area, or with city colleagues. In addition, both men and women may be deterred by the professional and social isolation of work in rural areas. Some, however, make a smooth transition to work after they graduate and continue to have satisfying and rewarding careers in rural large animal or mixed practice. Several factors are likely to help in this transition. The first is a supportive, encouraging employer. Another is reasonable working hours and conditions, with support available from a more experienced colleague when required, including out of hours.

The ability to develop and maintain personal contacts for friendship and support is also vital. The importance of staying in contact with friends from veterinary school cannot be overestimated. The mental equilibrium of many new graduates is maintained by being able to discuss frustrations and real or potential disasters with others in comparable situations. By joining your territorial BVA division you can make contact with local practitioners outside your own practice; many divisions operate mentoring or ‘buddy’ schemes for recent graduates. Furthermore, the BVA’s Young Vet Network (YVN) can offer practical help and a range of support services.

This article is based on advice given in the ‘BVA new graduate guide’, a handbook provided to final-year students and graduates up to eight years’ qualified on joining the BVA.

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**Ten-minute chat**

David Hallas qualified from Liverpool vet school in 1990 and is general manager at Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health.

**What made you decide to join industry?**

I wasn’t good enough to make it as a professional cricketer or golfer. Between school and university I worked at ICI (now Astra Zeneca) when Sir John Harvey-Jones was chairman. I found the mix of science, purpose and commerce really stimulating, and decided then that I wanted to join industry after vet school; I just didn’t know how or when.

**How did you get to where you are today?**

After two years in general practice, I joined SmithKline Beecham in a sales role, and then spent a period as a technical adviser. After Pfizer purchased that business I helped set up a new business unit in the UK, then spent a while on European marketing. Five years in the USA was spent initially as a global marketing manager, then as manager of the pig and poultry business. I returned to the UK in 2005 in a part R&D/part commercial role, after which the role of general manager at Schering-Plough was offered to me. After the integration of Intervet I got my current role.

**How do you spend a typical day?**

I usually say I spend most of my time with my feet on my desk. Really, it’s more likely I’ll be working with my team, meeting customers and suppliers, trying to grow our business and help our customers’ businesses grow.

**What do you like about your job?**

I like the industry in which we work; it’s one that adds value to the country and community and can help people’s, pets’ and animals’ lives. It’s wonderful to work with smart, motivated people. The industry is quite small and still retains characters and charm, yet has a global reach and impact. It’s also allowed me to travel and pursue lots of interests.

**What do you not like?**

Pointless administration and unnecessary frustrations.

**Why is your job important?**

It’s necessary to bring science to life, to vets and to owners, to provide them with ways to make their lives easier, to help them provide gold standard care and help to the animals that rely on them. Also, to develop the revenue to support future R&D.

**What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?**

Do it, be flexible and open-minded, seize the opportunity, and find ways to be part of every aspect of the business.

**What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?**

Single-minded determination will help you get what you want; or, if you can cope with serious demands, then it could be Kipling’s poem ‘If.’

**What was your proudest moment?**

Seeing your children succeed makes you proud, also seeing success, especially after adversity.

**What was your most embarrassing moment?**

Three embarrassing moments spring to mind. First, as a new graduate, proudly lambing a ewe to produce a singleton lamb. Second, accidentally skinny dipping in front of a teenage heart-throb. Third, seeing Gordon Brown stand next to Barack Obama.

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Time out... David Hallas (far left) pursues one of his outside interests
Ten-minute chat

David Hallas

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