

Careers

Nurturing a talent pipeline

Vet nurse **Rachel Smith**, who is a joint venture partner with Vets4Pets, has created a talent pipeline to develop her practices' staff and help with long-term recruitment.

I WAS Pets at Home Vet Group's first vet nurse joint vet partner. I'm a joint venture partner (JVP) at Vets4Pets Sunderland and myself and Claire Beckham, another vet nurse, are JVPs at Vets4Pets Sunderland South.

Our vision was to create a sustainable talent pipeline to support our practices. This means taking a long-term view of graduate recruitment and development. We do this because we want to make a difference – helping graduates as they start their careers. We like to think it's one of the reasons why we won the inaugural Vets4Pets 2018 Graduate Practice of the Year award.

We have always taken an active interest in nurturing future vet professionals and have built a reputation for providing a great learning environment. Over the past 10 years, we have recruited seven new graduates. Our newest graduates qualified in 2017 and 2018. And, as we recently heard that two of our work experience students have made successful applications to vet school, I think our talent pipeline is looking healthy for the next few years.

Nurturing would-be vets

Nurturing would-be vets begins while they are at school. Attending school careers days gives us the opportunity to speak to school students about pursuing a career in

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the veterinary profession. We provide great work experience opportunities and accept students from year 9. We make sure they are aware of the realities of what being a vet or a vet nurse means. It's important that they really want to work within the profession and not just cuddle puppies.

For A level students, we help them with their vet school application and encourage them to spend time with our team. We also provide extramural studies experience for vet students. Ultimately, we want to support students with their studies and help to build their confidence, as well as their vet and life skills.

New graduate support

When we opened our first practice in June 2008, we had very clear objectives about how we would support new graduates. We knew we couldn't throw them in at the deep end, sending them straight into a consultation room with a client and expecting them to get on with it. These young adults have had a highly specialised education, but they are still learning the art of applying and communicating their knowledge. We see this as part of their development and supporting them is an essential part of our role.

Mentoring a new graduate is not a single person's role. Everyone in the team has a role to play. We're a friendly, happy and relaxed group that works well together.

Induction process

Our graduates go through a structured, eight-week induction programme that I developed. It involves spending time with the client care team, vet nurses and the other vets. The plan is flexible and allows each graduate to develop



at their own speed. The induction process deliberately has a relaxed pace because we don't want to put too much pressure on our graduates. Our aim is to provide a relaxed and supportive environment right from the start.

In their early days with us, a graduate will consult alongside a registered vet nurse, helping them to get used to the practice's computer system, our processes and procedures. They then move on to take the lead in nurse consultations. We do this because more time is allocated to nurse appointments and therefore there's less pressure involved. This gives them the space and time to learn and, hopefully, it's when they really start to enjoy their work.

From there, they move on to doing booster vaccination check-ups and non-routine consultations.

Generally, to start with, they are given 30 minutes for a booster appointment and 45 minutes for a non-routine consultation. As they gain confidence and skills the appointment times reduce. We



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expect this process to take between six and nine months, but it can be extended if necessary.

The induction programme is all about the individual, how they learn and how we can help them to learn. We never assume progression will be routine as everybody is different. Some take naturally to consulting but may be slower in theatre. We're aware there's a danger that they may leave the profession if they feel they are drowning under their workload.

Our graduates are also invited to say how they feel the induction plan is working for them. They might want to change the length of the consultation time allocated to each patient, for example. We are willing and happy to adjust things to accommodate their needs and the needs of the practice.

Buddying

Our graduates buddy-up with a senior vet for one-to-one mentoring, tutorials and to gain operating experience. We also have a visiting referral team with certificates in surgery and diagnostic imaging, which gives graduates additional learning opportunities.

Learning is a two-way street

As we help our graduates to develop, we benefit from their help too. New graduates come to us with the most

up-to-date knowledge, fresh ideas and they are keen to learn. This brings a new dynamic to the team.

Learning to use the team around them is a huge benefit for our graduates – it isn't a sign of weakness. We have a strong, highly qualified nursing team who help and support all our vets.

As a manager and leader, I've created the induction programme, but implementing it and making it a success requires effort and commitment from everyone.

I hope our graduates learn lots, feel supported and come to view the team as family. We want them to stay and continue to develop professionally and contribute to the practice.

I have a sense of pride when our graduates come to me to discuss a difficult case or complete their first bitch spay without assistance. In years to come, these will seem like small hurdles, but at the time, they are giant steps forward. I am proud to have a role in helping them achieve their goals.

Graduate practice of the year

Last year, Rachel and Claire won the first Vets4Pets Graduate Practice of the Year award, which was a 'fantastic reward for the team'; however, they say the privilege is seeing graduates complete the programme and go on to forge a rewarding career.

One of their graduates, Thomas Natsiopoulou, said: 'My bosses are the most helpful people I have ever met. From the time I started, they have offered me lots of learning opportunities. My colleagues are very experienced, relaxed and help me to think positively when I make a mistake or am confused by one of my cases. My practice is the best environment for someone taking their first steps in the profession.'

Catriona Curtis, Vets4Pets veterinary talent manager, said: 'We were overwhelmed with the quality and number of nominations for this award. These were peer-to-peer nominations and more than 30 per cent of our graduates nominated their practice. There was tough competition, even for the shortlist. A number of people on the judging panel, myself included, were inspired and genuinely moved by the support our practice partners and their teams give to their graduates.'

'Rachel and Claire's story stood out from all the nominations. They are definitely role models, not just with Vets4Pets and Companion Care, but in the profession as a whole.'



The award was fantastic for the team, but the privilege will always be seeing graduates go on to forge rewarding careers