

The COVID Silver Lining

by Katherine Keane



We can all agree that the COVID pandemic has exacerbated the shortage within the veterinary industry and made it more difficult for us to treat our patients. The veterinary industry was already short-staffed prior to COVID due to lack of veterinarians, lack of certified veterinary nurses and programs, poor salaries, compassion fatigue, and veterinary burnout on all staffing arenas. In addition to the staffing shortages across sectors such as retail, restaurants, and education, the high stress, lack of training and support in client care, and close-up care required of veterinary medicine increased the staffing shortages in our industry. To add to this, anxiety-ridden pet owners (emotionally charged from COVID) stared at their pets at home, purchased and obtained more pets, had more disposable income, and increased patients visits while the veterinary industry struggled to see the increased demand. Despite the challenges and tragedy of COVID, it has positively impacted my career and increased the capacity of my employer's hospitals to meet the needs of the patients and clients.

As the country was shutting down and schools went remote, I exchanged text messages with my prior boss. We were reminiscing about how I was an extra set of hands in her hospital when I worked there and she wished I lived closer while in school. We almost wished there was a way I could travel home, do remote veterinary school in New Hampshire and work over the summer, but that wasn't possible. It was that day we decided to try something new. After collaboration with my boss, her IT-minded husband and myself, I obtained an IP office phone and remote access on my computer and started working full time throughout the summer, at a hospital located in New Hampshire, while I remained in Philadelphia. They were struggling like all veterinary hospitals with being even more short-staffed and overworked due to COVID. I was able to take many of their daily calls and clerical tasks to lighten their load in the hospital, so they could have more time for in-hospital patients and leave on time at the end of the day. Halfway through the summer, we realized COVID was not ending anytime soon and that my remote position was very beneficial. My boss asked if I had any vet school friends who needed to make extra money and wanted to work from home in Philadelphia for her other hospitals in New Hampshire. I asked my friends and sent a message to my entire class and received much interest. We hired two remote assistants (veterinary students), and my boss requested that I train, manage, and coach them through the remote work. Once the summer was over, my two classmates needed to focus on school, so I recruited four replacements to take over their tasks and managed them while we continued virtual veterinary school. The five of us helped the hospitals make laboratory results call-backs, client follow-up calls, and daily tasks that could be done remotely, allowing the technicians/nurses to spend more time with their in-hospital patients. My boss still uses remote technicians at all three hospitals and will continue this practice even when the pandemic is over. This new remote process is the "COVID silver lining," and it will improve staffing shortages and transform how the veterinary industry works as a whole. We used innovation and creativity to solve our staffing shortage. We also provided work to people who wanted or needed to work from home, so staffing became win-win.

I believe the staffing shortage in the veterinary industry is multifaceted. Working in veterinary medicine requires a particular skillset, mindset, and ability to adapt. It also requires specific knowledge and training, taking lots of time, money, and resources. Once these individuals are trained, we all want a healthy work-life balance, but being in this profession, we also want to help as many animals as possible, making the ideal work-life balance harder to achieve. Then as an industry, the lack of or outdated use of technology makes us work harder and have longer hours. The COVID pandemic exacerbated many of these issues. We discovered we needed to work as efficiently as possible in and out of the hospital as we adapted to a curbside model. Being innovative, flexible, and creative improved this situation dramatically.

This experience has positively impacted my career and how I will deal with staffing shortages in the veterinary industry in the future. These staffing shortages do come from there not being enough qualified bodies to help, but we can rectify this issue by reallocating our resources and using innovation. The veterinary industry has often been a touch behind other industries in technology and resources, so we



need to identify helpful tools and use them. Now that COVID has forced us to look for those tools, I have seen many practices using this remote employee idea. This practice allows everyone involved to get their jobs done in a more efficient way. It also allows in-hospital staff to focus on in-patient and client care, while remote workers can return phone calls and client concerns in a timely manner. This allows for a better work-life balance for both in-hospital and remote staff which is very important for us to consider in the veterinary industry. The COVID silver lining has allowed me to fully understand the concept of “work smarter, not harder,” and I will continue to find resources and technology that can aid in productivity, efficiency, decrease overwhelm, and provide greater satisfaction in my veterinary career.

