



Blacks Vets - Winner - Large Practice

Work Conditions: supporting staff in dealing with the demands of their job

Firstly, we listened. We surveyed each function across the Practice, listening to their views, taking action to understand not just their work demands but how everyone feels. We included the team in the entire practice transformation plan, keeping all 'the good' from our history and meeting head on every area that needed to be improved. As a result of feedback we have:

A) Eased the workload by taking on more people (see Q2)

B) Help make the job less stressful and more fulfilling by providing better tools:

We invested over £100k in IT infrastructure, software and support to remove technology frustrations, and an additional £60k in additional equipment in digital xrays, new anaesthetic machines and capnographs to give a better team experience and service. Our team are better supported and we continue to grow in one of the most fiercely competed areas of the UK, our standards remain higher than ever

C) Help create a good, safe and pleasant working environment so that each team member feels safe, valued and cared for:

We reduced appointments from 10 to 15 minutes helping the vets feel less rushed and more fulfilled, have shorter afternoon surgeries on weekly CPD days (Thinking Thursdays) and reduced consults for vets who may travel between branches so that no one feels pressured. A nurse is on site at all times so that OOH vets are never alone, a sole worker alarm if there is one person in the building at any time so that everyone feels safe and knows we care. We invested in facilities directly aimed at Wellbeing – see Q7. We made a Time For You room in our main hospital to support the team in difficult times with clients. Vets are supported OOH, see Q2. Investment in air conditioning throughout helped our team in summer months. We support everyone with 2 full time Maintenance people to jump on any issues within Beautiful Buildings (Facilities Management, but nicer in our world...)

D) We support our team members in difficult times – always.

We offer training, briefing and full support through our Handling Difficult Situations module. This has helped our vet and nursing team to deal with the low number, but inevitable, complaints. They know to take these events seriously, but not personally, and feel fully supported. We also fund VDS cover and work with them if we need to. Vets have a Wellbeing Buddy to help support them with the non clinical challenges life throws at them!. They have mentoring support day to day as well as a quarterly mentoring session to help progress their career. We are a Platinum level Compassion Understood practice across all branches, this has helped the team to cope with the inevitable but demanding privilege of giving a respectful and empathetic end to the life of a pet. We offer support through investing in Citation as and when needed.

Stress management and resilience is planned via Bayer with Caroline Crow from VDS as part of our 'V Well' activities in 2018.

Balanced Workload: supporting work-life balance

A) We listened to views on workload and answered needs– see Q1

B) We eased the workload by taking on more people:

We invested in 2 additional receptionists, 3 additional nurses, 3 additional vets and an additional maintenance person (cost approx. £250k – ROI – priceless – happy staff who have a good manageable workload).

Our nurse to vet ratio sits at least 2:1 at any time, our Reception to vet ration at 5:1 and our Practice Support to Vet at least 1.3:1. We remain healthily profitable too! We have reviewed resource models in depth over the past 2 years to ensure that we look after our people and our clients so that our team enjoy work and our clients are fully supported with great service. We were recently awarded Outstanding in the RCVS Client Service Award across all sites.

C) We approach rotas in a fair and balanced way

For example, if a vet works a weekend, they have the following Friday and Monday off. Our vets work a 4.5 day week which has allowed better balance in their lives to pursue other interests and reduce fatigue. Our rotas are family friendly, accommodating part time mums and school drop offs where we can. We actively manage the team to make sure they get breaks regardless of role. Yes there are times when it is 'all hands on deck', we support each other, we have each other's backs, but the norm is a sensible day with breaks, even if we have to tap a shoulder to remind them if they are engrossed! We encourage everyone to balance annual leave through the year to take breaks and do not allow holiday carry over so they must have a rest! We make sure there is opportunity within the rota to observe procedures and spend time with Cert Holders so that everyone learns.

D) We support, always.

For example, vets have a nominated direct access to a Senior Vet or Partner for OOH working so they are NEVER without support, they can be there within 15 minutes to help, and they do!. We have made a comfy bedroom with a bathroom for our OOH vets to use when they want to as well. We listen to feedback in weekly, monthly and quarterly meetings to constantly review workload and make adjustments or take action where needed.

Also see Q4 and Q6 for examples of good communications to listen to feedback on workload.

Relationships at Work: fostering effective working relationships

Each team meets regularly – For example, the Finance Team meet once a week to share ideas and overcome obstacles, Thinking Thursdays are when the vet team get together to learn something new, Training Tuesdays is the nurses time to get together and learn, with Wisdom Wednesdays being launched in 2018 for the whole of Practice Support.

We have a Vet Team meeting once per month to keep standards high and invite ideas for improvement or feedback, we have a monthly Nurse Meeting along a similar theme, we also have Healthy Practice Business Development Meeting for management and team leaders to share progress and work together to constantly improve and share their experiences – they love this! There are quarterly mentoring reviews for vets and annual reviews for all other team members, each vet also has a Wellbeing Buddy so they feel fully supported.

We have great fun on our Whatsapp Groups which is used for all sorts to keep in touch daily and also arrange socials in teams and branches.

We encourage all functions to stagger lunches so that everyone mixes with other departments at lunch time, even if it is only for a ten minute crossover – this practice is built on people not task. We have a designated Lunch, Learn & Wellbeing area at our Hospital and kitchen areas in branches.

We redesigned our Staff Handbook this year so that everyone knows our policies on issues that can affect them, clearly and fairly.

We have our Best of The Best Awards Oscar style at our Annual Garden Party – all voted for by their colleagues, a winner in each function and a winner overall. We also have Long Service Awards for 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 and yes, 30 years! Which we are very proud of. We have changed a lot though have retained great experience by being completely inclusive when change was needed.

Our Annual Garden Party and New Year Party are where the whole practice gets together and The Partners and MD say a big THANK YOU to everyone, as well as tokens of appreciation throughout the year. The Garden Party also invites partners and children along – they are all our extended family and we like to appreciate them too!

Though we remain professional at work, many of us have good, solid, lifetime friendships thanks to Blacks, so as much as we work hard, it is of equal importance to us to let our hair down too!

Personal & Career Development: enabling staff to work effectively

See Q3 to help with this one. We fund and support Training Tuesdays for Nurses and Thinking Thursdays for Vets – internal and external CPD speakers over a lunch period (lunch provided) to accelerate our learning every week. Wisdom Wednesdays for Practice Support and Leadership Team Development launches in 2018.

Vets, Nurses, Reception and Practice Support have annual appraisals and development plans. Vets have quarterly mentoring sessions, including agreeing learning objectives for the quarter, an opportunity to feedback, a review of their 'wishlist' of procedures they want to be competent in to make sure we provide opportunities, updating of their PDP and a review of motivation triggers. We make sure each vet has time at our hospital which is very different to branch working, we facilitate follow through of cases then review with mentors. Forward planning enables selection of more complex procedures to support individual's personal development (the nursing team can see their wish list and let them know when a wish is coming!), and, we can support development by assisting with more complex surgery.

Vets and Nurses have defined CPD allowances ranging from £300 to £1500 depending on level. We also fund Certs for vets. There is a CPD request process anyone can follow to apply for CPD if it makes good business sense to do it. For ALL CPD the applicant must tell us how they will SHARE their knowledge with their colleagues so that we can all learn.

We fund membership of RCVS, BSAVA, VDS for vets.

We look after our mentors by ensuring they have no more than 3 mentees. The MD also supports mentoring sessions to encourage the link between clinical and commercial excellence. Induction is 2 weeks long, off rota, covering every aspect of practice to fully prepare each vet for working in their Blacks Family, understanding and being able to access the support they have available. This means that at whatever level a person is that, they are fully supported with learning and progressing at a pace that is right for them.

We conduct pay reviews each year for vets, we have undergone a full and inclusive bench marking review for pay for nurses, receptionists and practice support to make sure they are paid well for a good day's work.

We have many, many team members who have been part of Blacks for a very long time. All have access to learning so that they can feel professionally fulfilled in a way and at a pace that makes sense to them. Despite the huge cost of external CPD (£30k this year alone), we continue to grow each year in a fiercely competed area. So maybe the word 'despite' could be replaced with 'Because of'!

We have also been rewarded by twice being voted Best UK Vet by the pet owning public via VetHelp Direct, previous Practice of The Year Award winners, we are an RCVS Accredited Practice and were very proud to achieve 'Outstanding' in the RCVS Client Service Award – our term really deserved that.

Control at Work: enabling staff to have a say in their work

Our team members are fully involved in how they work. We ask their views in detailed surveys, we invite them to workshops to design their job descriptions so that they have their say and feel included. We also invite them to contribute to KPIs and advise how they want to work – our job is a management team is to provide a great environment to work in, to be happy and fulfilled, to provide support where they need it and remove the barriers, not tell them what to do! The idea is that they design the KPIs they hold themselves with pride to, and if they drop behind outstanding in any area they are encouraged to push back at the management team to help make it happen for them – that's our job!

They feed in to their workflow and are actively invited to input into improving protocols and offer ideas for improvement – and they do! So much so we have just taken over one of the main walls in the Hospital with an ideas tree to try and funnel everything.

Each team meets at least monthly to get together and exchange progress and ideas, vet and nurse teams meet weekly for CPD too.

Our Management Team Healthy Practice Business Development Meetings brings progress and challenges to solve at each session by each department, so that each one can be tackled across functions, problems defined, analysed and solved there and then. We then feedback to Partners on our achieved and planned progress so they can input if they feel the need to, but they have been delighted with progress! This has accelerated our progression exponentially over the past 2 years.

Monthly vet meetings are always jam packed of feedback and ideas to improve, everyone feels safe in offering a view or an idea, we encourage it.

We give branches autonomy when they feel ready and offer branch management opportunities

Communication at Work

Every day we are communicating, email, whatsapp, noticeboards, PMS, whatever works for everyone.

We go through our overall strategy right at induction and even have it printed on mousemats to stay focused on what we are here for, why we get up everyday : “To make Blacks Vets pets the Healthiest in the UK”. We have 4 strategic objectives to support this which run through everything we do and are held to account for every decision we make: ‘ Best Care (Clinical), Best Client Experience, Best Team and Best Practice. We want to make Blacks Vets THE Place To Work in the UK veterinary world. Why? Because if we do we have the best people, if we have that then we can have great conversations with clients – if we do that we drive better care standards to paws and claws in need – isn’t that what we are all here for?? This runs through most of our comms on any changes or steps forward in the practice – it is our WHY for being here. Fortunately, it also results in great financial success too!

So, every day, every week, every month, at every opportunity we communicate well. During our last survey 80% of respondents said that they agreed we communicated to an ‘excellent’ standard – when we looked at the comments on the other 20% - there was a request for more face to face though they understood we can’t all be in 5 places at once, and I think we do really well considering the sparse management team get together every week over 5 sites, but of course we can always improve.

We also do branch briefings where the management team take it in turns to be out and about in branches to check that everyone understands the comms that affect their role and can ask questions if they were not in on the weekly meeting.

We also share documents via Citation’s Atlas platform to give everyone time to read through larger documents like Health & Safety and the Employee Handbook. They can sign on to say they have read it and offer suggestions for improvement too. We also operate Dropobox so that all functions have access to up to date RCVS Practice Standards which we update regularly, each relevant person receiving a notification of updates so that they can brief their teams. Our induction programmes ensure time with every practice support function so they know who to communicate with when they need help.

Oh, and everyone gets a personalised electronic birthday card on their big day! And cake. LOTS of cake.

Health & Psychological Wellbeing

The mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of our team is our number one priority, we put money, time and resource where our mouth is on this one. We are a First Opinion and Referral Centre, an Accredited Veterinary Hospital at Dudley with 4 branches (3 General Practice 1 Core Standard), 101 unique and valued team members including 4 Cert Holders. Wellbeing isn't just about policies, it's about being inclusive providing a safe environment for honesty, listening, understanding and taking action to meet the wellbeing needs (or 'V Well' as we call it) to make a great place to work.

We invested £10k in our Lunch, Learn & Wellbeing room and also in a VIP CPD Room so that all team members have somewhere nice to be to relax, and / or learn, and shut the door on work. When that Mindful Moment is needed, we have a place to be to do just that and a little basket of tool to help relax. Healthy eating promoted and supported via lunches at all meetings. We have staff rooms at all branches.

We regularly review the tools and technology needed to do a good job, bringing about a sense of work satisfaction and fulfilment to the team. We regularly review the skills needed and supported in emotionally charged situations such as delivering Handling Difficult Situations training and our Compassion Understood training. Training for all vets on programmes such as Colourful Consultation Training also assists in giving vets the communication skills they need to lower stress levels when it comes to issues such as discussing client finances.

As previously explained, we have a review annually with staff on their development, quarterly with vets, who also have a Wellbeing Buddy. We also have 2 annual social events, our Garden Party and our New Year Party, all funded by the practice, as well as the many socials and charity events we do – today's is for Save The Children.

If someone is off ill for a while, we fully support them with a phased return to work and offer adjustments that makes their life easier.