



Vets4 Pets Head Office - Highly Commended

Q1. Work Conditions: supporting staff in dealing with the demands of their job

Vets4Pets have a purpose designed office in Swindon where our Support Office functions are based and provide expert advice to our Vet and Nurse partners; the support office is home to c150 colleagues providing a wide range of support services including finance, people, marketing, business insights and commercial.

In addition to these support colleagues, we have a strong field based team that spend their time in practices with our JVPs providing in practice support, advice and guidance.

Our work spaces are designed, taking in to account the space available to provide the best working environment we can. Having colleague areas with kitchen facilities, soft seating and an area where colleagues can go to get away from their work base contributes to wellbeing. We have established partnerships with a number of external agencies to provide the highest level of support for our colleagues. We have access to support through Retail Trust who provide a colleague assistance programme including access to counselling and other support. In the event of a major incident, we engage the services of CCP (Centre for Crisis Psychology) to support colleagues through traumatic experience and provide additional, more advanced counselling and other specific pathways including bereavement and physiotherapy through our occupational health provider where necessary.

The support we provide to our partners is strengthened by the clinical colleagues we have within support office, there has been significant investment in this within the last 12 months seeing these numbers grow from 3 RVNs to 7 and 3 vets to 8.

Client complaints can be extremely challenging and difficult for our practice colleagues to manage; we have a central client services team who manage the complaint process, supporting the veterinary colleagues and work with the Business development manager to reach the best conclusion.

We have significantly invested in our regional people team, providing essential support to JVPs and colleagues in practice. The regional people manager role was introduced in 2014 and now there are 8 field based people managers with expertise in people matters including promoting wellbeing and work life balance; regional people managers work very closely with all people team departments, enabling them to draw on the wide range of support and resources available to our practice colleagues.

We have also introduced Clinical Development Managers who provide specific clinical support and advice out in the field, understanding the specific challenges of being a vet. Through our on call system, practice colleagues can access support 24/7.

Understanding the needs of new graduates coming in to our business has led to us having a specific wellbeing plan in place, a bespoke development tool to engage them and also a buddy system- connecting them with a graduate from the previous year.

Q2. Balanced Workload: supporting work-life balance

Within our support office, we operate an agile working arrangement- this means that our office based colleagues can work their weekly hours early or late to suit their lives whilst still providing an excellent service to the veterinary practices. In addition to flexibility on hours worked, colleagues can choose to work from home on occasion; we have technology to enable them to still answer all calls on their usual landline number. At times when there is additional workload, arrangements are made for colleagues to take back additional time they have worked. Within our support office we have a number of colleagues who work under a flexible working arrangement including reduced hours and condensed working weeks.

In providing support for our practice based colleagues, we guide the Vet partners in managing colleague's working hours in a proactive way. Practices are open long hours so it is important to manage shift patterns fairly and take in to account personal circumstances. When offering a practice colleague a job with us, the rota is discussed and agreed in advance and wherever possible an agreement is reached where both parties are satisfied with the arrangements. Recent examples of some alternative shift arrangements include an average of 30 hours a week but over a 4 week period the vet has one week off, another practice which is 24/7 operates a one week on, two weeks off system for its night vets.

One of our vet partners was asked to speak to LVS to highlight hers and ours flexible working policies; she has also been asked to write an article for Vet record and is now being contacted by numerous vets outside the group for advice.

Appreciating the times when colleagues may wish to have time off, we have special types of leave for our support office colleagues; Wedding leave, new pet leave, first day of school leave, moving day leave and flying the nest leave!

Q3. Relationships at Work: fostering effective working relationships

Our new support office (Isambard House) was designed with fostering working relationships at the heart of it; there are small breakout areas where colleagues can have discussions, a large mezzanine area with kitchen facilities and ample seating for all colleagues to be able to get to know each other. There are regular events which allow colleagues to interact with one another including social events such as Halloween movie night, quiz nights, dog agility days and our regular So in The Know sessions bring all colleagues together to share information. When there is a project, people from across the support office are brought together to deliver this, enabling colleagues to better understand each other's work and strengthen relationships. With many colleagues being regionally aligned, the Annual Business Review process has helped to develop cross-department working and allows all colleagues to better understand each other's roles. Support office induction is key to fostering effective working relationships; colleagues join in a group so that they begin their journey with positive relationships; they also spend 4 days in a veterinary practice which enables them to understand how life is in practice, what the challenges are and how the support office function provides service to them. Having the insight to practice life enables our support office colleagues to provide the best service, understanding the context in which colleagues are working in. In addition, on an annual basis our colleagues are invited to attend for a Birthday breakfast with members of the executive board and other colleagues who have their anniversary at the same time; this is another touch point for colleagues to interact with people from other departments and build relationships.

This year, to celebrate 1 year in our new office and as part of our Corporate Social Responsibility plan we had over 80 colleagues taking part in work days for charities; this combined people from across departments to carry out gardening, decorating and general maintenance for various charities; we also have volunteers going to help at the food bank.

Our period end awards for support office star (voted for by support office) and support office colleague of the month (voted for by partners), also provides an opportunity for colleagues to get to know what other people do and achieve.

Q4. Personal & Career Development: enabling staff to work effectively

Personal and career development starts from joining our business, a 4, 8 and 12 week review is carried out to assess progress in their role, ensure they are settling in and that their expectations are being met.

Managers are expected to have a weekly one to one with their team.

Our 'being the best' appraisal system works on the basis of 6 month reviews- there is an end of year review where bonus and personal objectives are set and at 6 months the progress against these are assessed as well as development opportunities.

Annually we conduct a colleague engagement survey called Paws4Thought; this is an opportunity for colleagues to provide feedback on all aspects of the organisation; in 2017 we introduced a specific wellbeing question so we could understand how people would assess their own wellbeing.

Our learning academy responded to colleague feedback from the Paws4Thought survey and have;

- Launched Paws 2 learn sessions – So far we have delivered 9 sessions with a total of 102 learning hours!
- Delivered a Security awareness week training within the support office – 151 Hours of learning
- Wow programme - This calendar year it is 100 with a mixture of SO,PAH and specialist division colleagues
- Coaching training – 168 hours of learning
- Present with Impact training – 140 hours of learning
- Field team mediation training – 104 hours of learning
- Personal development training in Feb – Providing up to 72 hours of learning
- Excel training – up to 70 hours of learning.

Our internal learning academy offers a wide range of courses to support all aspects of development from clinical courses to leadership, mind matters and personal development including individualised coaching. Our learning and development team has grown to 5 FTE, demonstrating our commitment to colleague development. We have embraced the apprenticeship levy and consider whether an apprentice is appropriate for each of our support office roles when they are advertised.

Within the business there have been a number of internal promotions in the last 12 months at all levels, including up to the executive board. We operate a talent review process to identify talent and develop a succession plan. Individuals are encouraged to take ownership of their own development- we operate an internal development network called crossroads where colleagues can discuss their aspirations and better understand more senior roles.

Q5. Control at Work: enabling staff to have a say in their work

Within the support office, departments have regular team meetings where they discuss workload, up & coming projects and priorities; enabling them to contribute to the team plan and delivery. Teams hold a huddle on a weekly basis where anything can be brought up for discussion. Field based colleagues have the autonomy to manage their own diaries to meet the needs of the business as well as their own. Each regional team has a weekly call where business priorities and pending activity are discussed and the best approach is agreed.. There are a number of demands on colleagues within the business at varying times and having the flexibility to adapt their work approach during these times and in less busy times, promotes a healthy balance.

We have an internal Joint Venture Council; this is where elected Joint Venture Partners come together with senior leaders to discuss business developments and plans, they provide feedback, views and challenges encouraging 2 way communication and an active part in the decisions being made. To develop the JVC further, we have this year introduced a number of sub committees including a people subcommittee where the business changes/ developments can be discussed particularly taking in to account the impact on people.

Q6. Communication at Work

Communication is at the forefront of everything we do; there are a number of channels that we use to communicate with colleagues across the business. For our support office colleagues we start the week with a whole support office huddle; this is an opportunity to share information and updates from across the business including weekly sales information, latest offers and celebrating support office colleague Birthdays.

Café briefings are held by a member of the executive team on a period by period basis, this is where they share high level updates and developments that are coming up in the business; these are held at different times of the day to enable as many colleagues as possible to attend. Based on feedback from colleagues around communication, we hold an event called SO in the know each quarter; each time there is a business update from one of the executive board members, followed by carousel sessions where different departments share their latest updates; at the most recent SO in the know, we had a guest speaker, one of our vet partners who came to talk about a day in the life of a JVP- enabling colleagues to get a great insight into the demands and challenges they face; this appreciation for JVPs should lead to better service for our partners. Our intranet system (The Kennel) holds important information, policies & procedures as well as business updates and information. There is a quarterly colleague magazine that is sent to colleague's home addresses; within this there will be clinical updates from Huw Stacey; clinical Director, a piece/ case study from one of our practices and the latest updates from across the business. For our practice based colleagues, we share a weekly briefing with all of their key information in respect of the support office departments- this includes information on any changes to policies/ procedures and other department information.

Q7. Health & Psychological Wellbeing

The support provided to our colleagues in respect of health and wellbeing has developed significantly in the last 12 months. We commenced the year with a wellbeing week to launch our wellbeing programme; this is being continued forward and we plan in 2018 to do this at two points in the year.

The programme comprises of 5 main streams; financial, emotional, nutritional, physical and national awareness days. Each week we post information relating to the given subject onto the 'Kennel' our colleague intranet. The idea behind the programme is that we know our colleagues already live busy lives, so the ideas that we will provide are quick and simple to implement into your life but could have a big impact on your wellbeing.

Within wellbeing week we celebrated Blooming Monday where colleagues wore bright clothes to work in order to raise awareness of Mental Health concerns- we raised £1406 for Mental Health Research UK.

A number of activities were organised for colleagues to attend, these included;

- Mindfulness sessions
- Health MOTs which were conducted by Nuffield Health
- Our wellbeing committee delivered a workshop on the Hakka which encouraged physical activity.
- Fruit was delivered to our support office and taken in to many practices by the field based teams
- The field based teams each received a graze box in the post.
- We developed a bespoke resilience & stress self-coaching pack, to enable colleagues to reflect and analyse personal resilience whilst providing the opportunity to develop resilience.

Mental health and wellbeing can be complex subjects to understand and as part of our commitment to supporting all of our colleagues within our Vet Group, we have launched a mental health awareness programme through our Learning Academy, this was developed in association with RCVS Mind Matters Initiative by Trevor Bell.

This training aims to help individuals better understand their own mental health and be able to spot early signs and symptoms in others. We firmly believe that by understanding more about our own mental health allows us to be able to offer early help and support to others as well as being able to look after ourselves better.

Within our future plans, we have budgeted for a part time Occupational Health Nurse to be employed which offers a new level of wellbeing support for our colleagues.

One thing that we love as colleagues is the ability to bring our dogs in to work, having animals around had a calming and positive affect on people's wellbeing, hence therapy dogs in hospitals so we feel very lucky to be able to do this; it also encourages colleagues to get out and walk with their pet companions during lunchtimes- often with other colleagues which promotes taking a break and physical exercise.

What's on during Wellbeing Week at Support Office?

Monday 23rd January	Tuesday 24th January	Wednesday 25th January	Thursday 26th January	Friday 27th January
Introduction to Wellbeing	Physical Wellbeing	Financial Wellbeing	Emotional Wellbeing	Good Nutrition & Goal Setting
<p>Blooming Monday Colleagues are encouraged to wear bright clothes to work and donate a voluntary £2 to help raise funds for Mental Health Research UK.</p> <p>Retail Trust - Introduction for managers 10am & 11am - Lisle Room All line managers please try to attend one session to understand the services offered by Retail Trust and how your team can benefit.</p> <p>Retail Trust - Introduction for colleagues 12.30pm & 1.30pm - Lisle Room All colleagues please try to attend one session and see what a great service Retail Trust can offer.</p> <p>'Better' Leisure 10am - 2pm - Mezzanine 'Better' Leisure centres have facilities in and around Swindon - why not go and find out more about what's on offer in the local area?</p> <p>"Wellbeing is attained by little and little, and nevertheless is no little thing itself." <i>Citium Zeno</i></p> 	<p>Healthy Breakfast 8.30am - 9.30am - Mezzanine Join us on the mezzanine and get physical wellbeing day off to a nutritious start (porridge or Scrambled eggs)</p> <p>Wake & Shake - 10am</p> <p>Steps Challenge Get together with your colleagues and set up a steps challenge. Use a fit bit, pedometer or an app on your phone to measure how many steps you can do between today and Friday.</p> <p>Health Advice 12pm - 3pm - Mezzanine A representative from Swindon Council will join us on the mezzanine for healthy eating, stop smoking and general health advice.</p> <p>Have you looked in to the AXA healthcare options available to you? More details available from the People Team.</p> <p>"To keep the body in good health is a duty...otherwise we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear." <i>Buddha</i></p> 	<p>Pension Advice Legal & General will be on site to talk about Pensions and answer your queries. 9.30am & 11.45am - Mezzanine Group sessions, all colleagues welcome. 10.30am - 11.30am - Darwin Room Drop in session.</p> <p>Retail Cure Credit Union Retail Cure Credit Union is a membership co-operative saving and loans provider, serving anyone who works in retail or related industries. 10.30am & 1.30pm - Mezzanine Group sessions, all colleagues welcome. 11.30am - 1.15pm - Darwin Room Drop in session.</p> <p>Wellbeing Treatments Free of charge. 9.30am - 2.30pm - Burgess Room or at your desk 10 minute seated clothed massage or seated 10-15 minute reflexology treatments.</p> <p>"I don't like money, actually, but it quiets my nerves." <i>Joe Louis</i></p> 	<p>Making mindfulness work in your schedule 9.30am - 11.30am & 1.15pm - 3.15pm Mezzanine - Limited spaces! Following on from the mindfulness sessions in the summer, these sessions enable you to embrace mindfulness and make it a habit. Please book by emailing tanya.patchett@companioncare.co.uk</p> <p>Nuffield Health 10am - 2pm Could you do with a health MOT? Book in a slot with the experts from Nuffield.</p>  <p>Please book by emailing esme.wheatley@companioncare.co.uk</p> <p>"The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts." <i>Marcus Aurelius</i></p> 	<p>Healthy Bake Off Bring your bakes to the Mezzanine before 10.30am Judging will take place before lunchtime Bring in your best fruit & vegetable based bakes to be in with a chance to win a prize.</p>  <p>"You are what you eat." <i>Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin</i></p> 

Get involved with Wellbeing Week: 23rd - 27th January 2017

