



White Cross Vets - Winner

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

There is no denying that the veterinary practice can be a challenging environment in which to work. But with careful planning, White Cross Vets ensure team members not only cope, but thrive in this demanding industry.

This planning focus on two areas; foundations, and our added initiatives.

So, what are these foundations? It starts with clearly defined job descriptions, which team members review and discuss with managers regularly to ensure they are working within the demands of their own role. Assessments of workload mean tasks can be attributed accordingly, and new team members can then be recruited where appropriate. We listen to the team, and we ensure they are supported.

The foundations also encompass the buildings themselves. Air-conditioning, brand new equipment, break rooms, spacious waiting areas, plenty of sunlight, water fountains. Our new Head Office features table football, televisions, coffee machines, breakfast making facilities - our buildings are planned to ensure team member, client, and pet comfort.

Policies and procedures are the next building block. During induction, online training through the White Cross Academy guides team members through the team handbook, guaranteeing they are aware of our carefully designed policies, implemented to support wellbeing. For example, team members must take any extra hours worked back in lieu during that month, keeping to their weekly hours. Vets must adhere to four-day weeks. Paid days for funeral attendance and emergencies help to relieve the stresses of life events. Our policies ensure that the team know what they need to do, and how to do it.

Health and safety is that final foundation. A health and safety management system, alongside training during induction, ensures team members are aware of our policies on aspects such as lone working - small but crucial tasks such as advising colleagues of key details before they go, taking the work mobile, running through a checklist - all aspects that might often get missed in a busy practice. We ensure our working practices, and therefore our team members, are safe, helping to relieve any potential stressors.

With the basic systems in place, White Cross then go above and beyond to ensure team members are equipped to meet the work demands. Team members receive access to online pet bereavement training to ensure they are comfortable in supporting clients. We've run three company-wide training sessions on dealing with stress to help teams understand stress in others and themselves. Our Keynote speaker for the past two years at Congress has focussed upon dealing with pressure and balancing work with everyday life.

Where these measures are designed to alleviate issues, when extra support is needed, all team members have access to face-to-face or telephone counselling through our Employee Assistance Programme.

In essence, no matter how many extra initiatives you might throw in on top, it is the day-to-day foundations that set the tone for work life. As our team members have voted us into the Sunday Times Top 100 Companies to Work 5 years running, we think we've got that tone just right.

Q2. Balanced Workload: supporting work-life balance

Exhaustion. On-call. Late shifts. These negative words are synonymous with the veterinary industry.

But they're unrecognisable at White Cross Vets.

Work-life balance is recognised as being crucial for wellbeing, both physical and mental. And that's why we go above and beyond.

Breaking up the routine of the everyday role is crucial in finding a balance for team members. We provide 5 weeks annual leave plus 7 bank holidays per annum - these holidays cannot be paid or carried over into the next holiday year, ensuring they are taken. This is in addition to our brand-new peternity leave initiative - four days of leave to settle their new pets into their homes. We believe projects and hobbies outside of work are crucial for mental wellbeing, hence we encourage the teams to get involved with the community. Five paid charity days (volunteering for a charity of their choice) are given each year, and many have taken this opportunity to work in animal sanctuaries overseas. School visits and the free treatment for school pets is seen across practices, and in addition we are currently arranging support for the "Street Vet" initiative – an initiative brought to our attention by a team member which supports homeless people's pets. Teams are actively encouraged to pursue charities outside of the veterinary industry; we donated £5500 to the Royal Manchester Children's Hospital following the terrorist attack in the city in 2017 - team members voted unanimously to donate the proceeds of our monthly team member reward scheme to help support the victims of the bombing.

The result of all of this? With plenty of activities outside of the practice, the team come to work refreshed and prepared for the day ahead.

But a balanced workload encompasses life in practice too. We recognise this, ensuring team members work no out-of-hours, vets work four days per week and all team members take regular rest breaks (with two 10-minute breaks plus lunch).

As per legislation, team members can request flexible working, but at White Cross we listen; every single request for flexible working (with examples including job-sharing, part time hours, early shifts only) has been deemed reasonable and agreed in 2017, allowing team members to blend work and life effectively to suit individual needs. Rotas are discussed and arranged during team meetings to accommodate requests, with team members alternating between early (8.30-4.30) and later shifts (11-7). Consecutive weekends of work are only taken in exceptional circumstances and time is always taken back the following week regardless – small touches such as taking time back on a Friday to extend the following weekend are always appreciated.

In short, we do everything we can ensure the balance is there. White Cross Vets are the only practice to ever receive a three-star Best Companies rating being declared 'An Extraordinary Company to Work For' – as voted for by our team, and up against companies across all industries. This proves that work-life balance and the veterinary industry aren't as incompatible as many would suggest.

Q3. Relationships at Work: fostering effective working relationships

One word crops up again and again in White Cross Vets.

Family.

A family run group, with a family ethos, we welcome new team members to the family in numerous ways. And this top down approach helps to foster healthy working relationships in practice.

The tone is set when you walk into practice on your first day; pictures of team member's families and their pets line the walls. Team members are team members, never staff; we are all working together as a team to achieve quality care. A phone call from the MD on day one provides that personal welcome, as does the White Cross Service pin, presented to and worn by every team member with pride.

After day one, team members are introduced to various initiatives that run concurrently to encourage healthy relationships. With cake Mondays once per month, Pilates sessions in the Central Team Support Office every Friday, table football tournaments, Sunday breakfasts in practice on a weekend, team members are never short of opportunities to get involved. Regular team meetings, paid team nights out instead of bonuses, and lunch and learn sessions all help to bring groups together. We even contribute £50 toward team members purchase of fitbits, and have recently launched our fitbit leaderboard, where teams of 3 compete across the group to see who can achieve the most steps each week. This has led to team dog walks, gym sessions, lunchtime strolls – all brilliant for wellbeing and team relations.

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways of ensuring strong working relationships is saying thank you. We equip team members to do this in the form of our own internal currency; the 'Alfie' scheme, named after our MD's Whippet. Each team member receives five Alfies each month which they present to colleagues as a means of recognition in addition to saying thank you. Alfies earned can be donated to charity or exchanged for shopping vouchers, each one being worth £1.

These everyday initiatives help to support these positive relationships, but it is our company-wide events that truly go that extra step. Our annual Congress brings the whole company together for 3 fantastic days, with a theme this year of "Learn, Make Friends, Have Fun". It includes a prestigious Awards Dinner, our Congress team-building session – this year entitled "Medieval Mayhem" – our very own White Cross Band made up of several talented team members, and a number of hours of CPD from internal and external speakers.

And it doesn't stop there. ALL team members have enjoyed a three day CPD trip to Monaco and Nice. Every two years two CCCs, Nurses and Vets are drawn from a raffle to enjoy a fully funded visit to the NAVC Florida – complete with a visit to Disneyworld! And a group-wide annual Christmas party in Birmingham brings everyone together once again.

These initiatives help to build a fun and positive culture, they say thank you to our team, and they ensure team members make great friends for life.

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

Our 2017 survey into “What motivates you?” indicated that the constant learning, development, and ensuing recognition White Cross Vets provide was valued by our teams above anything else. We break our team member development into two areas of focus; internal and external. Internally, training and development is a constant part of White Cross life. Bi-annual appraisals, regular goal setting, and one-to-one meetings provide guidance for both ourselves and the team member as to how things are going, and what the future holds. As a result, we can support the team members in getting where they want to be, be it to move into a management role, or develop into a better practitioner. Consider our marketing and operations assistant, who expressed a desire to progress into operations. Following target-setting, shadowing, training and support, she now works as the operations manager for our north-west practices.

Our online White Cross Academy - a source of e-learning on topics ranging from mindfulness to consult skills – provides further internal support, as do our regular lunch and learns. Take for example our current series of lunchtime sessions based around communication styles, with both fellow team members and clients.

Perhaps the pinnacle of our internal training is our White Cross Congress (see here <https://youtu.be/8ahvhRL3rZs>). Here, internal and external speakers provide three days of quality CPD, with sessions this year ranging from rabbit anaesthesia to practice culture. It's also our opportunity to recognise top performance and achievement; our White Cross Awards dinner takes place on the Saturday night, with awards such as Nurse of the Year being voted for by team members. This recognition, along with our aforementioned “Alfie” scheme, is all part of our cycle of development. And that's just the internal side. Externally, we offer all vets a £1000 CPD fund, along with support through clinical certificates for many. We have increased our nurse CPD allowance to £500 (with many being funded through certificates also) - and that's not to say this fund is purely spent on clinical areas; some team members have pursued personal interests following their appraisals, with one nurse undergoing a diploma in health and safety. Moreover, all client care co-ordinators have the opportunity to complete NVQs in customer service.

One of our most recent initiatives involves our leadership team. All managers are fully funded through ILM qualifications, but they have now been given the opportunity to enrol as apprentices as they work towards a diploma in leadership and management. This involves monthly coaching with an external provider, as well as quarterly training sessions as a group. Example topics include coaching and mentoring, meaning the team benefit from the skill back in the practice in a trickle-down effect.

It's a constant cycle of feedback, goal-setting, training and recognition at White Cross Vets. A culture of growth (one of our four principles), problem solving, fulfilled potentials, and engaged individuals follows. And as our surveys indicate, it's a culture the team relish.

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

Our teams keep our practices going. And it is therefore logical for them to have a meaningful input into how things are done, and how we might improve.

How do we ensure this happen? It starts with day-to-day behaviours and platforms for feedback. Regular one-to-ones allow for discussion of personal roles and duties, and weekly team meetings allow teams to establish the most efficient working practices. Happiness surveys provide constant feedback on how things can be improved. It means everybody has a say, has autonomy, and is heard.

Managers are given real responsibility in budgeting for their clinic, making final decisions on recruitment, deciding how things are done. They are also trained on the importance of empowerment through our ILM sessions, teaching them the value of giving team members responsibility. We offer a social media platform through Facebook discussion groups for each job role, through which team members can discuss ideas as to how things are done.

Beyond day-to-day roles, we're also aware that there is nobody better placed when deciphering how the company can be improved on a wider scale. That's why we hold "Ask Tim" sessions twice each year, where the managing director visits each practice in turn and meets with the team. They have the opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions to improve practice life.

Similarly, our bi-annual Voice meeting plays a crucial role in encouraging suggestions for improvement. A different practice hosts the meeting each time, with a representative from each practice (not from the leadership team) attending. They share issues from their practices and together we look for solutions. For example, one meeting a practice highlighted that the term 'receptionist' did not show full appreciation for the front of house role, it had negative connotations. The representatives therefore proposed a new name, which the practices voted upon, and all receptionists were renamed CCCs (Client Care Coordinators).

We have introduced a "great ideas" e-mail address, to which team members e-mail in any ideas they think can improve practice life. One such idea which has been implemented is peternity leave, 4 days leave to raise new pets. During our 80 prizes in 80 days initiative (see Q7), one of the prizes was "MD for the day". One of our CCCs won the prize, and was invited to run the company for the day, opening a new practice, going for lunch with a drugs company rep, and seeing how everything comes together to make White Cross tick. Efforts such as this just highlight our culture of listening and working with our team to improve – they make a difference.

Ongoing discussion, involvement and greater autonomy are key at White Cross. It's why we scored so highly on the Best Companies section relating to control at work. Our team members know they are listened to, they have autonomy each day, and they're a source of knowledge and ideas we would be foolish to ignore.

Q6. Communication at Work

Being multi-site brings its challenges in terms of keeping team members up to speed with company-life, but we combat this to ensure strong internal interaction and communication across the group, so that the White Cross family stays connected.

Communication starts from day one at White Cross with communication of our business aims; we communicate our organisational goals through our Principles One training session, a session all new team members take part in to ensure they understand what we are all about, what we aim for, and how we function. Posters of the principles can then be seen across practices, again reinforcing our organisational aims.

Each team member is then signed up to our weekly electronic team newsletter 'Briefly Connected' (currently on its 175th edition) and our six-monthly award-winning 'Connected' magazine, ensuring our team members keep in touch with what is happening in the organisation - be it birthdays, exciting initiatives within practices, or other celebrations such as new team members. Regular communication runs out through practice e-mails, Facebook discussion groups, practice WhatsApp groups, and through our team intranet.

Whilst keeping up to speed on things is key, personal meet-ups ensure the White Cross family remain a tightly knit unit. Our bi-annual voice meeting, annual Congress, and whole-group Christmas party provide those personal meet-ups twice per year.

On top of all this, recent initiatives include our Total Reward Statements, an annual communication outlining the full package offered to team members, encompassing each benefit they are entitled to. This provides clarity, and ensures nobody misses out on any of our wonderful perks. Our recent 80 Prizes in 80 Days draw, celebrating 80 years of White Cross, involved a Facebook live prize draw at 1pm each day for 80 consecutive days. This video messaging opened up a whole new forum of interaction between our teams around the country.

A final aspect to consider is communicating change. Minor changes (such as a new boiler being fitted) may be communicated through the weekly newsletter or team intranet. For major change to everyday working life – such as our switch to Sunday opening at our Redcar practice - face-to-face explanations would take place, followed by consultation with the teams as a group and individually to gain team members thoughts and proposals of how the change would impact them. Further proposals and explanations would then take place based on these thoughts and proposals, before the change went ahead with employee agreement. The result is a thorough process that takes team member needs into account.

We're a family company, but as we grow, we need to ensure we don't grow apart. Our communication strategy and slick marketing department, ensure this doesn't happen.

Q7. Health & Psychological Wellbeing

In the UK, the average number of sick days per year per employee is 4. White Cross average 1.5 per employee. And that's because wellbeing is at the heart of everything we do.

Everyday systems are crucial in their impact on wellbeing. Our generous sick pay scheme ensures nobody rushes back to work for financial reasons, phased returns to work are encouraged, as are adjustments for team members with specific requirements (e.g. stools to consult with for musculoskeletal conditions). Our health and safety systems are top of the agenda with bi-annual practice visits from our advisory service, and simple action checklists for practice reps to follow. A 24/7 support line is also provided.

Additional initiatives help to relieve stress and improve wellbeing. Schemes such as an 8% non-contributory pension scheme and a £500 new arrival bonus for all new parents help to relieve financial stresses. Our Simply Health Scheme removes barriers to good health by subsidising dental, optical, physio and many other treatments – it also means the team are a phone call away from a professional counselling advice line or face-to-face counselling sessions. We contribute £50 toward Fitbit monitors, £100 towards gym memberships, and we run a cycle to work scheme, these financial supports removing barriers to physical wellbeing. Our recent Fitbit challenge sees teams of 3 compete each week to become the top steppers (with the most improved team winning a prize each week), and has proven a big hit with practices in increasing activity. On top of all this, team members receive access to Perkbox to further support physical and financial wellbeing. Birthday cakes and a day off on birthdays are the icing on the cake.

Psychological awareness is also crucial. We have run mental health awareness training for the leadership team, stress and sleep hygiene training for all team members, as well as mindfulness webinars for everyone.

But White Cross again go above and beyond.

Over the past three years ALL team members have enjoyed a three-day CPD trip to Monaco and Nice. To start our 80th Anniversary celebration we held the 'Dream Location' draw; a fully paid two-week holiday for one team member to any destination written on their dream ticket. We then ran our 80 prizes in 80 days draw, to celebrate 80 years. This involved 80 live prize draws in which each team member had the chance to win prizes including a weekend for two in New York, European holidays, festival tickets, and an extra weeks' holiday. Every day at 1pm we broadcast the live draw from somewhere in the country, and a lucky winner was picked and announced (see here <https://youtu.be/IVwwJpn5AFk>). Every single team member then received a bottle of personalised champagne as a thank you for their efforts.

The purpose of all this? The happy vibe these initiatives create, and the degree to which it shows genuine care for our people is obvious. That's what White Cross is all about, and that's what helps the practice become such a great place to work.