

**ATTRACTING STRONG APPLICANTS IN A HOT VET TECH JOB MARKET (AND KEEPING THEM LONG TERM)**

Supervisors are constantly sharing with Bel-Rea that they are having a hard time finding enough veterinary technicians for their Colorado practices, teaching hospitals, research centers, and specialized positions. Amy Martin, Bel-Rea’s Job Placement Director, and I both receive a steady flow of questions about how to **hire** enough technicians, **retain** proficient employees, and **keep** technicians in the field long-term. Recently, we have also been asked how veterinary employers and the veterinary technician programs can work together to **attract** higher numbers of quality employees to the veterinary medicine field.

**What current challenges are we seeing for veterinary employers in Colorado?**

- 1) The recession economy has definitely shifted back to a **seekers job market**, and there are many more jobs posted than veterinary technician professionals looking.
- 2) General unemployment numbers are down, which is good for working adults in our society, but this creates enrollment challenges for vocational colleges. The result? A lower number of individuals pursuing an education and, therefore, a **lower number of veterinary technician graduates** entering the profession for you to employ.
- 3) The US Department of Labor is reporting a **19% anticipated job growth rate** for veterinary technicians, “much faster than average” for the 2014-2024 time period ([www.bls.gov/ooh](http://www.bls.gov/ooh)).
- 4) Many new grads **choose to leave Colorado** - some to be near family, some for unusual job opportunities, but more and more due to higher pay offers or lower cost of living in other states.
- 5) The **current rental housing crisis** in Denver. Between February 2010 and February 2016, average apartment rental prices in the Denver Metro Area increased approximately 57%. The average 1-bedroom apartment rental jumped from \$728/month to \$1256/month, and the average 2-bedroom from \$962/month to \$1689/month ([www.rentjungle.com](http://www.rentjungle.com)).

Please understand the housing barrier that new graduates and experienced technicians are facing in Colorado. After taking out 20% for basic tax withholding (Federal, Colorado State, Social Security, Medicare), here’s an approximate **income vs. 1-bedroom rent comparison** for a single employee with 1 Federal Allowance on their W-4 and no dependents:

| HOURLY WAGE | ANNUAL FULL-TIME SALARY (52 WEEKS x 40 HOURS) | GROSS MONTHLY INCOME (ANNUAL/12 MONTHS) | % OF GROSS INCOME SPENT ON \$1256 RENT | MONTHLY NET/ TAKE-HOME PAY | ***AMOUNT OF REMAINING MONTHLY TAKE-HOME PAY AFTER \$1256 RENT |
|-------------|---|---|--|----------------------------|--|
| \$10        | \$20,800                                      | \$1,733                                 | 72%                                    | \$1,386                    | \$130  |
| \$12        | \$24,960                                      | \$2,080                                 | 60%                                    | \$1,638                    | \$382  |
| \$15        | \$31,200                                      | \$2,600                                 | 48%                                    | \$2,016                    | \$760  |
| \$17        | \$35,360                                      | \$2,947                                 | 42%                                    | \$2,268                    | \$1012   |
| \$22        | \$45,760                                      | \$3,813                                 | 33% *                                  | \$2,883                    | \$1627   |
| \$29        | \$60,320                                      | \$5,026                                 | 25% **                                 | \$3,644                    | \$2388   |

\* It takes \$22 per hour before a Denver Metro Area employee will reach the 30%-35% range of gross monthly salary spent on housing that most financial planners recommend.

\*\* It takes a whopping \$29 per hour to reach the 25% rent to gross income mark required by many local landlords.

\*\*\* What do they still need to cover with the remaining take home pay? Health insurance costs/deductibles, medical expenses, additional housing space for children, childcare, utilities, transportation, food, recreation, retirement planning, student loans, and any additional financial responsibilities.

These are scary figures for local employees in helping fields such as veterinary medicine, education, and not-for-profits.

Some graduates do have dual incomes, which can help take the percentage of income spent on rent into a more reasonable rate. Roommates can also help with housing expenses, but usually also bump up the monthly rental costs due to the need for additional bedrooms. The career changer and single parent graduates we speak with seem to face the greatest barriers with housing costs in the Denver Metro Area, as they typically are either at a stage of life where they do not want roommates or they cannot have roommates due to their children's housing needs.

### **So what can Colorado employers do to attract and retain credentialed veterinary technicians?**

**1) Structure your employee duties wisely.** If your veterinarians, technicians, assistants, managers, and other team members are not performing appropriate duties for their training and experience level, you are throwing money to the wind. Consider working with a consultant for assistance with elevating and streamlining your business practices. Create a structure where personal initiative and perpetual enhancement of services are supported and highly encouraged. Realize that if your skilled employees are not getting to consistently do what excites, engages, and challenges them, they will seek sites that will provide them with a higher level of job satisfaction.

**2) Encourage professional improvement and challenge technicians of all ability levels to advance their skill sets.** Nurture a growth-focused environment. Cover VTNE and state registration fees and encourage more CE than is required. Consider bringing in speakers, taking the whole tech staff to local conferences or classes, supporting specialization, and covering both the cost of CE and the time off. Set an individual accountability and professional development plan with each employee that focuses on how you will help them progress in their skills and career – review and revise it annually.

**3) Reassess your benefits package,** especially health insurance coverage, profit sharing, and retirement plans. Work with a tax professional to learn about potential tax write-offs. Calculate the specific amount each piece of your benefits package is worth, along with the grand total, and provide this information in writing to applicants and current employees. Consider adding a Personal Financial Planner to your benefits package – someone who can teach your employees how to live wisely and well on their current and future income levels.

**4) Reassess your starting salary range and the salary for your long-term employees.** Strongly consider paying above "the norm," which has not increased enough over the last 10 years to keep up with cost of living in Colorado. No one enters the veterinary field to get rich, but helping professionals still need to make a living and would like to retire someday. With a shortage of veterinary technicians, listing a higher salary range in a job ad goes a long way, especially for attracting and retaining career changers, professionals with children, and graduates with other financial commitments.

**3) Help with relocation expenses to attract a wider range of applicants.** Moving from Denver to a nearby area will likely cost a graduate several thousand dollars due to apartment deposits and moving expenses – you can proactively remove this financial barrier. Concerned about the cost? Set a 1-year minimum commitment with a prorated repayment amount if they choose to resign during that time.

**6) Structure a comprehensive orientation and training process for new hires.** Too many new veterinary employees are thrown in to their duties immediately when a staff is shorthanded, resulting in a stressful transition and potential conflicts with team members. Whether they are fresh out of school or highly skilled, shadowing an experienced team member, reviewing all advanced techniques and protocols, covering all policies, training on records systems, locating supplies, and discussing veterinarian and technician pet peeves will create a much smoother transition for new employees. Having a solid orientation also allows your supervisors to clearly assess the training needs of each new staff member.

**7) Create a highly positive work environment.** Veterinary Medicine is definitely a small world job market. Word-of-mouth and employee satisfaction can either drive applicants your way or drive them away. Being an excellent "boss" and having skilled managers significantly impacts employee retention. Compliment team members, ask what

improvements they would appreciate, and truly listen to what they have to say. Work to consistently improve protocols, address safety and compassion fatigue issues, and create a setting where bullying and unprofessional interactions are not acceptable. If your veterinary technicians LOVE working for you, they will let others know.

**8) Actively acknowledge their contributions.** Smart employers offer their employees opportunities for additional income for taking on additional responsibilities, upping client retention numbers, bringing in new clients, and otherwise improving the business. Bonuses due to additional profit, thank-you notes and small gifts, and unexpected merit-based rewards will go a long way with keeping experienced technicians in your business, especially your star employees. If your team doesn't naturally look for ways to improve your business, set a challenge, try out the best ideas raised by the team, and create incentives for success.

The current concerns and listed suggestions can be applied to all levels of veterinary staff, from your youngest team member up through your most seasoned veterinarian. Your personal actions will not only make a great impact on your own team's experience, but will also encourage other veterinary employers to actively address the employment issues inherent in a helping field. The roadblocks are not insurmountable and employers have the power to create a business culture conducive to long, productive veterinary careers!

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