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Setting Yourself Up for Relief Work

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Relief services are a thriving segment of the veterinary profession. Hiring a relief veterinarian allows associates and practice owners to be away from the practice knowing their patients are cared for and clients have access to needed services. Working relief comes with benefits and challenges that are different from standard clinical practice, and opportunities exist for both

veterinarians and veterinary nurses. We explore several of the many facets of veterinary relief work.

What Are the Options?

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Veterinary relief work offers many benefits (eg, flexible scheduling, the opportunity to work with a range of team dynamics, independence, a variety of professional experiences). There are many compelling reasons to make the leap from associate veterinarian to independent contractor, but several factors must be considered before making the change.

Challenges

A relief veterinarian needs confidence and autonomy and should have at least 3 to 5 years of full-time practice experience. He or she also needs cognitive flexibility and a high degree of emotional intelligence to meet the inherent challenges (eg, variability of staff training, including different personalities and experience levels; different equipment; limited drug selections) within each practice. However, working with a variety of teams and learning how to think outside the box can be rewarding. (See **Relief Work: One Veterinarian's Personal Path.**)

Networking is Key

Relief work can have a variable level of demand and be seasonally dependent. Staying connected with other veterinary professionals is key to staying relevant and mitigating seasonal lulls. Networking with practice owners and associates at local veterinary medical association meetings and conferences, and monitoring employment ads to identify practices that may need relief services can be helpful.

Drug and laboratory company representatives, traveling surgeons, and traveling ultrasonographers are great referral resources. Set up a lunch meeting and discuss how both parties can benefit from a business relationship. Using marketing strategies (eg, a booth at a local conference) is good, but word of mouth is inexpensive and simple, with a potential big payoff.

Tax Considerations

The tax burden of an independent contractor is higher than that of a W2-employee. Keep diligent expense records and track mileage—commutes can be lengthy, especially if driving back and

forth from rural communities—to reduce tax burdens. Hire a tax professional to ensure the business structure and taxes are calculated accurately.

Legal Advice

Consult a legal professional to decide what type of business entity is best based on cost, complexity, and state regulations. A legally binding contract is vital to protect the business and must specify the hourly rate and how it is billed (eg, by the quarter-hour), additional fees for travel time, and the cancellation policy. These specifications clarify the professional relationship between client and contractor, protecting against loss of income. (See **Legal Considerations for Relief Work.**)

Alone or in a Group?

Relief work can be done on your own or through a group (ie, a company that specializes in providing relief personnel), and there are advantages to both situations. (See **Relief Work: Positives & Negatives.**) Working relief in a group can provide many of the same benefits as an associate in a practice while retaining the freedom of scheduling and job selection inherent to an independent contractor status. A relief group can become a go-to resource that meets practice needs with the assurance of better availability of coverage and consistency of veterinarians who practice high-quality medicine and have affable personalities. Even if the primary relief veterinarian is unavailable to cover a shift, the practice can be assured that another member of the group will perform similarly and benefit the practice in much the same way. Working relief on your own means you are your own boss and allows you to have control over your own schedule.

(See **Veterinary Technicians Can Do It, Too.**)

Relief Work: Positives & Negatives

Positives for Independent Contractors:

- ▶ Being your own boss
- ▶ Controlling the vision and direction of your business
- ▶ Controlling your own schedule
- ▶ Receiving a fully earned hourly wage
- ▶ Setting your hourly rate

Positives for Relief Groups:

- ▶ Colleagues to consult on cases
- ▶ Employment benefits (eg, worker's compensation insurance, payment of veterinary association dues)
- ▶ Human resources support to handle contract negotiations, scheduling, and invoicing
- ▶ Regular paychecks
- ▶ Retaining preferred practices as clients

Negatives for Independent Contractors:

- ▶ Not being paid on a regular basis
- ▶ Not having human resources support for sending out contracts, scheduling, and invoicing
- ▶ Paying self-employment taxes
- ▶ Paying taxes quarterly

Negatives for Relief Groups:

- ▶ Not being your own boss
 - ▶ Part of your hourly wage is paid to the relief company
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Conclusion

Relief work, particularly in the context of working with a small group of trusted, like-minded relief veterinarians, can be rewarding and a positive change from working as an associate veterinarian. If the prospect of relief work is enticing, move forward while keeping in mind the considerations mentioned above. Good luck!

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AUTHORS

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Tosha Starke, DVM, is a 2004 Virginia Tech graduate. She started her relief service, All Four Paws Veterinary Relief, LLC, in 2013. She has 14 years of general practice experience.

FUN FACT: Tosha started doing relief work so she could have more control of her work schedule. With her company, she has helped fellow veterinarians to be able to do the same without having to do it alone.

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Kathy Wainwright, DVM, is the owner of Capital Area Veterinary Services, a solo-practitioner, small animal relief veterinary service in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. She earned her DVM at the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine. She then completed a one-year small animal rotating internship at Oradell Animal Hospital before returning to her childhood home in northern Virginia where she resides with her husband and a sassy feline.

FUN FACT: Kathy enjoys traveling to and exploring new countries, and is an avid Orangetheory addict.

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FUN FACT: To keep up with a hectic travel schedule of teaching at veterinary schools and consulting with veterinary practices, Lance pilots his 1969 Cessna Skylane around the country. Look for him overhead!

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Michelle D. Krasicki-Aune, MBA, BS, CVT, is the founder, owner, and lead Relief Certified Veterinary Technician (CVT) for Vet Teams, LLC, the first company of its kind in the Midwest. She loves drawing on her more than 20 years of experience as a CVT to meet the challenges that relief work brings in her daily experiences and all things Boxer! She also dedicates her time to the National Association of Veterinary Technicians as the organization's treasurer, works behind the scenes to help further veterinary technology education, and helps teach and train the veterinary community in Fear Free practices.

FUN FACT: Michelle attends the Minnesota State Fair at least twice a year, taste testing and reviewing all the new food and drink, often live if given the opportunity.

For global readers, a calculator to convert laboratory values, dosages, and other measurements to SI units [can be found here](#).

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