

**Strategic solutions to employee turnover in the
animal health industry**

by

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ABSTRACT

Employee turnover is very expensive for organizations. When it is an industry-wide challenge, then it demands a careful assessment for insights into the antecedents to the problem and an effective strategic response to it. There are many theories that consider motivations for employee turnover. However, there is no research to understand the high turnover in the veterinary profession. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the motivation of high employee turnover in the animal health industry. The research question that the research attempts to answer is this: What are the characteristics of employees and the workplace that motivate their decisions to exit the industry? The overall research objective was to explore employee characteristics and work environment that influenced their retention decisions. The study used survey data collected using the Qualtrics platform. The collection period was about four weeks. The diversity in the number of respondents did not allow the estimation of the original logistic regression methods to answer the question. As a result, the study employed a statistical approach.

The results indicate that the correlation between employees who say they find their work environment to be stressful and feeling unmotivated to go to work in the morning was 0.39 ($p < 0.001$). Those feeling burnout was more likely to be those who are feeling compassion fatigue ($r = 0.42$; $p < 0.001$) and those feeling burnout are likely to feel unmotivated to go to work ($r = 0.65$; $p < 0.001$). The results also indicated that perceptions of uncompetitive compensation and an unfriendly or unsupportive work environment were viewed as factors motivating the risk of quitting by just under 50% of respondents while about a third said these were not factors influencing their risk of quitting. The research

results begin to provide some indications in how the veterinary industry may modify the management of its staff to minimize employee turnover risks. They suggest recognizing the effect of workload on burnout and compassion fatigue and structuring work to give employees time to recuperate from the high emotional environment in which they work. The results show that this is true for all types of employees, including front office staff, who are often the ones dealing with clients and handling most of the emotional dimensions of the engagement.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The Animal Health industry including the veterinary profession continues to grow strength in the expanding economy. “Pet owner demand for veterinary services is strong, with household expenditures at veterinary clinics increasing by 8% from 2012-2016 to \$28 billion” (AVMA 2020). Veterinary clinics can be structured as small or large animal hospital, specialty hospital such as dental, dermatology or oncology, emergency hospital, mobile hospital, and university teaching hospitals. The majority of veterinarians practice small companion animal medicine. Small animal hospitals operate with veterinarians, veterinary technicians, receptionists, and other support staff. Animal hospitals provide pet owners preventive care, wellness, nutrition, treatment for sick and injured, surgery, end of life services, and much more care for pets. With the growing demand for veterinary services and record unemployment rates, the challenge to meet demand is filling open veterinarian and support staff positions. Each type of hospital faces its own unique challenges, work environment, workload, stress level and schedule. However, research has shown similar challenges in all veterinary professions the type of hospital will vary the effect.

1.2 Problem Defined

There is evidence that retention of professionals in the veterinary industry is very low compared to other professions (Whitcomb, 2008). This increases the cost for companies, who lose their investments in training if staff leave before the training value has been recouped. There are various theories attempting to understand and explain the cause of the high turnover. There are links between job satisfaction and employee turnover, exploring the theory that experiencing job dissatisfaction begins the withdraw process

(Mobley 1977). Additionally, the discrepancy theory looks at individual differences of career wants and what a career has to determine if turnover is indicated (Jiang and Klein 2002). Lastly influence of intrinsic motivation on turnover intention is substantial (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2010). Previous research has found high level of burnout and low level of engagement increasing turnover. As well as professionals with high levels of compassion fatigue and low compassion satisfaction. Other turnover theories include factors of compensation, job performance, organizational investment in employee skills and promotion, and career satisfaction.

The problem is that while a lot of work has been done in human healthcare about the causes of turnover of professionals including Mayo Clinic funding and facilitating over a decade of organizational research such research is missing in the veterinary health care sector. For example, the study conducted by Shanafelt (2016) noted that there is a strong business case to invest in strategies to promote engagement and reduce physician burnout. Similarly, the study by Hamidi argued that physicians reporting burnout and intent to leave are three times more likely to actually leave their organization. While these may be similar to what prevails in the veterinary industry, they differ in several ways. For example, veterinary sector is a multi-species industry while the human health sector deals only with a single mammal. However, the challenges presented by the diversity of diseases – cancer, diabetes, etc. are also dealt with in veterinary industry as in human health. Without developing a research-based appreciation of the problem of retention and turnover in the veterinary industry, any attempts by companies to address the problem may fall short of desired success.

1.3 Research question

The research question motivating this study, therefore, is this: What are the principal factors driving the turnover and retention challenges facing veterinary practices?

Answering this question begins the process of contributing to the literature on research problem. It also provides the foundation for developing research-based solutions for managers in the veterinary industry to address this problem.

1.4 Objectives

The overall objective for this research is to determine what causes turnover in veterinary professionals at the organizational level.

The specific research objectives are to:

1. Identify examples of previous research of turnover factors in veterinary health professionals, explore the intent and desire for career change.
2. Examine turnover motivations, self-reported burnout, intent to leave the organization.
3. Examine veterinary professionals who have turnover for a comparison study.
4. Recommend practices to minimize challenges of turnover based on survey results and other industry guidelines. Promote employee engagement and strategies that reduce turnover.

1.5 Thesis Outline

In this chapter, we presented the background and rationale for the research. An excursion of the literature is undertaken in Chapter 2, where the pertinent research published on turnover in general, and in the healthcare is reviewed and discussed. Chapter 3 presents the analytical models. Chapter 4 presents data collection, data collected and summary results of the data. The results of the study are presented and discussed in Chapter

5. The final chapter presents the summary, conclusion, and recommendation emanating from the study. Suggestions for future research are also presented.

The opportunity to reduce turnover is of genuine interest in the well-being of patients and organizations' employees. Reducing turnover may also help with associated factors of burnout and compassion fatigue, and will result in improved quality of care, safety, and efficiency. Currently, many veterinary practices operate under the framework that burnout and professional satisfaction are the sole responsibility of the employee. There is a lack of research on how to reduce turnover using tools available to veterinary practices. Helping veterinary practices leverage these tools and resources to mitigate turnover is what this research sought to achieve.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The depth of literature addressing the challenges of working in the veterinary health profession is significant, suggesting that factors of burnout, compassion fatigue affect turnover. Additionally, research has documented high levels of turnover within the industry and provides recommendations to improve engagement and retention. Previous research within the industry and other healthcare professions provides reasons why addressing the challenges is effective and significant for veterinary organizations. Limitations in the literature include surveys focusing on veterinarians and emergency veterinary nurses. There is limited research on surveying veterinary nurses and support staff within general practices and other specialties. Within the veterinary profession, no survey has been conducted on the effectiveness of recommendations and strategies to reduce burnout, or analysis of turnover rates over time. Comparable research identifies strategies to reduce burnout and promote engagement within the healthcare physician profession. The works cited provide a foundation and background for the development of recommendations to reduce turnover caused by factors such as burnout and compassion fatigue and engage professionals in the veterinary profession. Emphasis of this review is on factors that affect turnover of veterinary professionals.

2.1 Challenges in the Veterinary Profession

Demonstrating a high level of compassion, empathy, and drive to care for others is an important component of veterinary care. Veterinary caregivers report high levels of compassion satisfaction in their work, or satisfaction and joy found when caring for others (AVMA, 2020). In the veterinary profession, satisfaction level is hindered by clients that have high expectations that their emotional and medical needs will be met. To provide

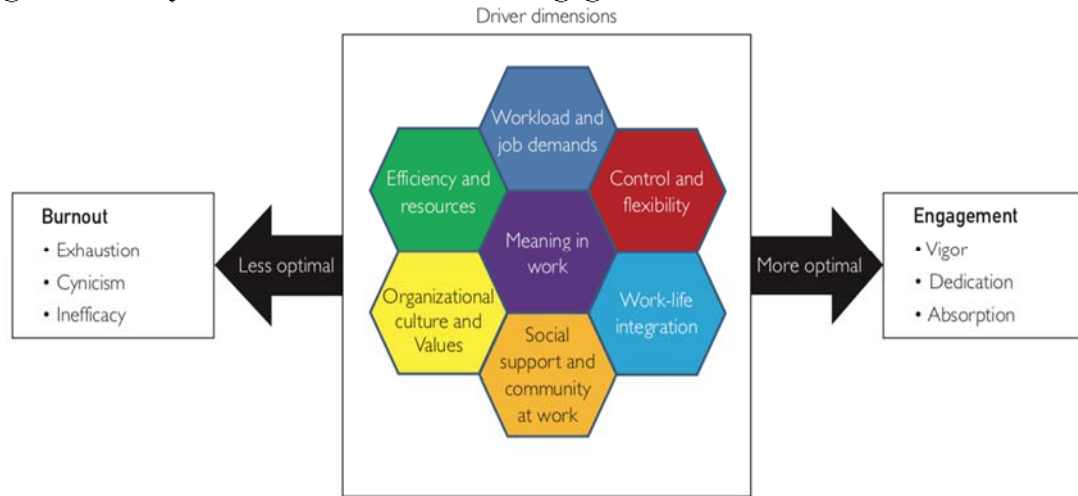
veterinary care requires great communication skills, intense and constant emotions that are risk factors for compassion fatigue and burnout.

Veterinary caregivers may be predisposed to the challenge of finding fulfillment and joy in their profession. Veterinarians are at greater risk for mental illness, depressive episodes, and suicidal thoughts compared to general population. Women are also found more at risk for depression, and there has been a large shift to women in the profession. Research has found that veterinarians suffer more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than other groups. Additionally, many veterinary team members self-identify with perfectionism. Perfectionism is defined as the relentless and irrational belief anything less than perfect outcome is failure (AAHA 2019) .

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) convention attendees identified stress and burnout including compassion fatigue being the most important wellness issues in the veterinary community. Seventy-six percent of the professionals did not feel they had the resources to address their wellness issues (Lovell and Lee 2013) . Burnout is a rising issue in the helping and caring professions including veterinary medicine. Burnout relates to the work environment or circumstances of work such as inefficiencies, hours of overtime worked and lack of support. Signs of burnout include exhaustion, negativity toward tasks, a poor work attitude, and difficulty concentrating (AAHA 2019) . There are three components to burnout and more research focuses on the emotional exhaustion component. Findings include that learning physicians with less experience have higher stress than the more experienced. Additionally, female physicians report higher stress (Lovell and Lee 2013). Factors that contribute to engagement and

burnout have been grouped into seven large dimensions (Figure 2.1) (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2016).

Figure 2.1: Key Drivers of Burnout and Engagement



Source: (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2016)

Compassion fatigue is identified as a main wellness issue by AVMA attendees. Compassion fatigue is a rising concern in helping professionals including nurses, social work, psychotherapy, veterinary medicine, law enforcement, and education. Across the caring professions, research has found that fifty percent of people are burned out (Dzubak 2020). Veterinary professionals report high levels of compassion satisfaction; however, they are at high risk for compassion fatigue from repetitive traumatic events in their profession. Events include animal abuse, illness, grieving or angry pet owners, constraints on care (financial, diagnostic or treatment), and euthanasia. Veterinarians face ethical dilemmas several times per week and the moral stress is a main contributor to suffering from compassion fatigue (AVMA, 2020) . Compassion fatigue is a multidimensional process with key components including an awareness of suffering, sympathetic concern and moved emotionally by suffering, wish to see relief of suffering, and motivation to help

relieve suffering. Compassion is beyond being empathic and in these professional roles, the effort to help and care for those suffering can be very stressful. Sometimes countless efforts of helping to save or remedy patients can be made and still lead to a negative outcome (Dzubak 2020). Compassion fatigue affects every team member, signs include lack of job satisfaction, avoidance of coworkers or clients, increased use of alcohol or drugs, missing work, excessive use of sick days, and dreams of trauma (AAHA 2019). Dzubak (2020) states “Compassion fatigue doesn't just affect individuals. It can spread and begin to affect an organization as a whole. The Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (2017) describes the following as organizational symptoms of compassion fatigue of high absenteeism, constant changes in co-worker relationships, inability for teams to work well together, desire among staff to break company rule, outbreaks of aggressive staff behavior, inability of staff to meet deadlines and complete tasks, lack of flexibility, negativism toward management, reluctance towards change, and inability to believe in improvement.”

Compassion fatigue is different than burnout with a more rapid onset. However, it can be considered as a factor contributing to burnout. Combined compassion fatigue, secondary stress and burnout are very complex concepts. All the concepts affect the professional's ability to function effectively professionally and personally. Combined compassion fatigue and burnout both reduce quality of care and safety of patients. In nursing professions, compassion fatigue has a greater impact with reports of nurses feeling undervalued and taken for granted with unrealistic expectations of their role (Dzubak 2020). The difference to addressing burnout and compassion fatigue within the workplace includes burnout being easier to discuss, becoming common to complain, and leads to a negative workplace atmosphere. Often compassion fatigue takes more trust and courage to

discuss and when shared professionals feel it is a character flaw or lack of commitment to the profession (AAHA 2019).

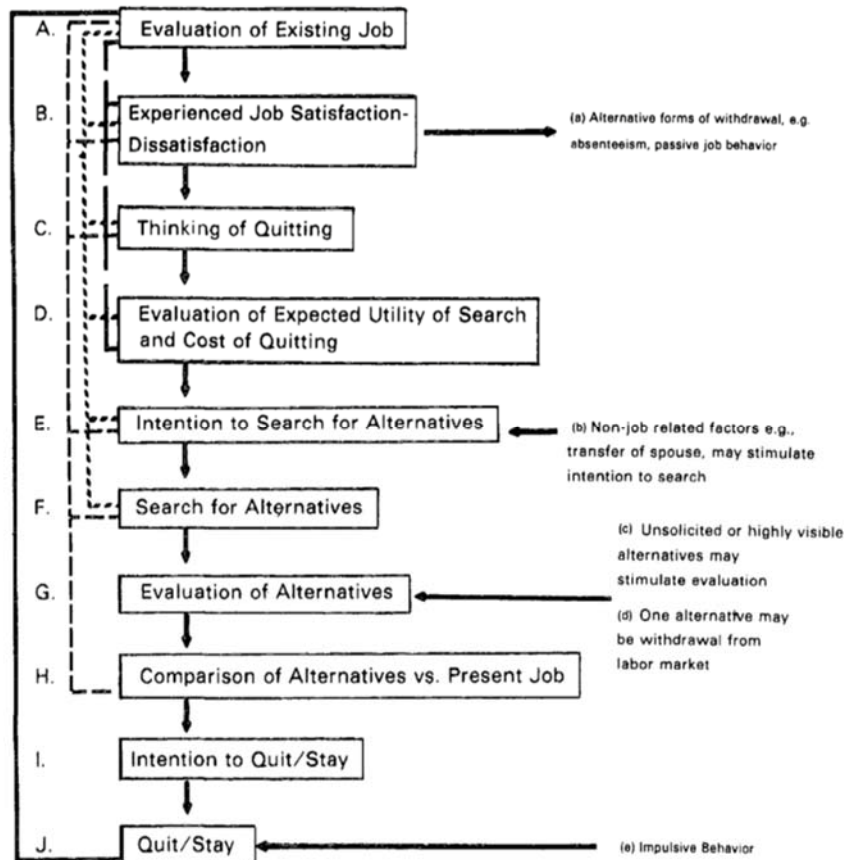
The veterinary profession is challenged with high rates of burnout and compassion fatigue leading to more employees to desire a career change and high organizational turnover. The average annual employee turnover at veterinary practices is double the national average. “Broken down, that figure includes turnover rates of 20 percent for associate veterinarians, 13 percent for managers, 35 percent for technicians and 44 percent for other staff, with turnover rates reaching the highest in urban and mid-sized practices” (Whitcomb, 2008). There are many factors when researching turnover rates, however one is the high price of employee turnover. Overall burnout has an economic impact on the veterinary industry with reduce job performance and increased turnover. Several things happen when a technician leaves the profession; practices suffer from staffing shortages, the experienced pool decreases, the lost investment in the employee leaving, increased costs of overtime to other remaining employees, cost of hiring new staff (advertising, interviews, onboarding, training), cost of training new staff, and the impact on morale when valued employee resigns (Hayes, LaLonde-Paul, & Perret , 2020). The wellness issue increases organizational turnover and decreases the ability to reach organization objectives, which shows the significance of research on burnout reduction and engagement of veterinary professionals.

2.2 Turnover Intention Theories

Several studies have examined theories to explain motivation behind high turnover. Employee turnover and job satisfaction in a previous study reports a consistent negative relationship (Mobley 1977). After experiencing job dissatisfaction, the next logical step may be intention to leave in the withdraw process. Instead of understanding the direct

relationship Mobley investigates the number of factors in the decision process between dissatisfaction and actual quitting. The process considers searching and evaluating alternatives as well as the cost of leaving present job including seniority or benefits.

Figure 2.2: Employee Turnover Decision Process



Source: Mobley 1977

Previous research on information system personnel turnover examined theories to better understand the causes of high turnover. The research included predictors of turnover including intent to leave and career satisfaction (Jiang and Klein 2002). Job satisfaction, rewards, and organizational commitment are found to be negatively related to turnover. Other variables include boundary spans, role conflict and role ambiguity. Intent to turnover include the factors of perception of pay and latitude equality. Lastly, career opportunities

and demographic variables can complete the turnover indicators to consider. The considerations make up the nine career anchors employees used to match career needs and what a career has. The discrepancy theory is known for considering individual differences in a career. Job satisfaction is related to rewards or outcomes and the more the reward matches the employee desires equals higher job satisfaction. Large differences in need and reward are equal to job dissatisfaction. This can include pay, hours worked, commute, and promotion opportunities. The previous study results showed employees only had three of the nine wants they desire (Jiang and Klein 2002).

Another turnover motivational theory is intrinsic motivation or self-determination theory. Employees who are intrinsically motivated work on tasks because they find them enjoyable, interesting and the result is its own reward. Intrinsic motivation requires fulfillment of three psychological needs including autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The first need is experiencing opportunities to show one's capacities or feeling effective in interactions in a social environment known as competence. The second need is feeling connected, cared for or a sense of belonging to others in one's community. The third need is a sense of autonomy or control of behaviors. Previous research showed intrinsic motivation was significantly related to turnover intention (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2010). The theories of turnover provide a foundation to answer what is motivating turnover in the veterinary profession.

2.3 Veterinary Job Demands

Previous research establishes gaps in occupational stress in the veterinary profession related to job demands. Previous research hoped to assess occupational stress and wellbeing related to job specific responsibilities of euthanizing patients. The findings wanted to focus on the role of veterinary nurses or assistances where limited research has

been conducted but was limited to general practice nurses. Specific job demands were identified to relate to known impacts including levels of job dissatisfaction, turnover, work-to-family conflict, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and psychological burnout. The research conducted a survey with Job-Demands-Resource model with several identified measures.

Deacon and Brough's (2017) main research findings were the proportion of respondents that reported a high degree of work-related burnout. (Deacon & Brough, 2017) Over half of respondents reported a high degree of work-related burnout. The results were higher in comparison to normative samples of human medical professionals. The impact on job demands suggests the need for practice managers to be able to detect signs of burnout and psychological stress in the nursing staff to allow for timely referral for assistance services. With the given high level of burnout observed, an important avenue of continued research is the development of targeted psychological health interventions to improve the occupational wellbeing of the veterinary professionals at risk. Further research could also include assessing types of coping strategies used by veterinary nurses with categories of personality type and resilience.

2.4 Burnout and Job-related Risk Research

Burnout is associated with many negative consequences for caregivers, patients, and hospital revenue. In the veterinary hospital setting, increased focus on the challenge of hiring and retaining veterinary staff has increased. Current research assesses the gap of surveying veterinary technicians who work in specialty referral hospitals. The importance of this research was to guide managers on issues at their level and make decisions for interventions directed at burnout reduction. As well as to determine the relationship between burnout and resilience in veterinary technicians. The Maslach Burnout Inventory

(MBI) was used to conduct research. Respondents were asked to rank their desire to change career and rank reasons in job satisfaction, compensation, and work environment (Hayes, LaLonde-Paul, & Perret , 2020).

Ninety-four percent of the survey respondents were female. Findings included an analysis of burnout compared to the desire to change career had strong associations. Issues include fear of communicating with supervisor, patient load inconsistent with ability to provide excellent care, and assistance was inconsistent or not available as workload increased. The results indicate veterinary technician burnout is a valid concern, burnout and depression are highly associated, and burnout can cause higher number of medical errors and desire to change career (Hayes, LaLonde-Paul, & Perret , 2020). The negative consequences to hospitals with burned out staff are decrease in quality of care and increase in hospital staffing costs. The results explain the relationship of burnout to decreased career satisfaction and reduced staff retention. An interesting note from the study is “the causes of burnout appear to be manifesting at a population level and are predominantly related to the hospital structuring of workflow and hospital team function” (Hayes, LaLonde-Paul, & Perret , 2020). The hospital environment is open to control and modification to increase resilience and reduce burnout, addressing root problems of burnout will have long term benefits.

2.5 Current Veterinary Recommendations

Recommendations have been made by many veterinary organizations and research. The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) makes recommendations and provides resources to veterinary practices for a healthy workplace culture initiative (AAHA 2019). The initiative is proactive and creates benefits of decreased employee turnover, increased employee satisfaction, productivity, and communication, improved individual

wellbeing, and practice reputation. Additionally, a healthier culture will improve patient care and client satisfaction. Mental health can be improved with self-compassion, self-care and support that can include psychotherapy and psychiatric care. Suggestions to combat burnout include establishing strong work and personal boundaries, incorporating best management practices, being properly staffed, instituting effective training programs and nurturing accountability.

To combat compassion fatigue, the AAHA suggests establishing healthy work and personal boundaries, debriefing with the team after a traumatic experience, discussing demands and effects of compassion fatigue, supporting self-care and healthy personal habits, regularly assessing our levels of stress, and following stress reduction strategies. Areas of stress that can be used as burnout protection strategies are interpersonal relationships, workload, and work scheduling. Individuals who receive training for resilience have a decrease in burnout. Resilience training was developed for the military to reduce the incidence of PTSD following active deployment (Hayes, LaLonde-Paul, & Perret , 2020). Suggestions to management include limiting exposure to excess workloads compared with the chance to risk patient care with no additional staff, and limit negative interpersonal relationships with supervisors to further target reducing burnout.

Overall, the experts insist that creating a healthy culture in veterinary practices has benefits including improved engagement, decreased turnover, and improved client and patient care. Human medicine has made progress addressing compassion fatigue with a three-prong approach to managing occupational stress. The first prong is organizational responsibility to care for staff. The second prong is a commitment among the staff to support each other. The third prong is personal responsibility for self-care (AAHA 2019).

The veterinary organization recommends that these practices will have enormous amounts of benefits to the business, organization, and industry. However limited research finding reduction of burnout and turnover has confirmed these recommendations.

2.6 Healthcare Recommendations

Many medical groups assume that burnout and professional satisfaction are only the responsibility of the individual physician. Some organizations use narrow solutions that miss the drivers of burnout and do not have physician buy. With the high rate of burnout, there is a need for a system or organizational level strategy. Research establishes the framework of shared responsibility and the need for solutions at organization level, however some barriers to the organization affect effectiveness (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2016). Barriers include the belief that supporting physician wellbeing will conflict with other organizational objectives. The second barrier is the belief all effective interventions for burnout reduction are cost prohibitive.

The reality of the healthcare challenges is that engaged physicians achieve organizational objectives and small investments make a great impact. The Mayo clinic provides nine organizational strategies to promote physician wellbeing and engage staff. The strategies are tangible with action plans and are supported heavily by evidence and experience (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2016). The Mayo clinic burnout rate of physicians over two years with strategies in place decreased by seven percent while the national burnout rate increased eleven percent. Overall findings conclude addressing the burnout problem is a shared responsibility of the organization and individuals and engaged physicians will meet objectives.

Figure 2.3: Mayo Clinic Organizational Strategies to Reduce Burnout

-  Acknowledge and assess the problem
-  Harness the power of leadership
-  Develop and implement targeted work unit interventions^a
-  Cultivate community at work
-  Use rewards and incentives wisely
-  Align values and strengthen culture
-  Promote flexibility and work-life integration
-  Provide resources to promote resilience and self-care
-  Facilitate and fund organizational science

Source: (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2016)

CHAPTER III: METHODS AND DATA

The motivation of voluntary turnover in the veterinary industry at the organizational level can be examined by several theories. Identifying the motivation of turnover is complex and includes examining motivation influences in categories of demographics, work environment and industry factors. Within each category is several factors that can be considered as turnover motivation. Voluntary turnover can be influenced by demographic factors including age, gender, tenure, location, and career aspirations. Another influence can be work environment factors including loyalty, work related stress, responsibilities, resources, and interpersonal relationships. Lastly, influence of the veterinary industry includes factors of employment opportunities, age distribution, ratio of entry/exit, and burnout level on turnover motivation.

3.1 Survey Research Methodology

An online survey, executed with Qualtrics®, provided the data used in the study. The survey instrument was designed to gain insight from current and past professionals in the veterinary industry on turnover motivation. Respondents to the survey were recruited through email invitations to veterinary professionals and social media – Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. All protocols involving human subject research were followed with approval coming from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University prior to distribution. The Arizona Veterinary Medical Association (AZVMA) distributes a monthly newsletter and included an article on the research and a survey link. Unfortunately, this newsletter did not go out early enough for responses to be included in the analysis. Therefore, the analysis depended solely on respondents coming through social media and email outreach. All respondents' anonymity is complete, without even the

researchers being able to identify them. The reporting has been structured to further ensure that any identifiers are not included.

The survey was ran from February 2, 2021 through February 28, 2021. The data were analyzed using Stata® 16 and presented using Microsoft Excel®. While the original intent was to employ regression analyses to answer the research question, the data precluded this from happening. Therefore, the analyses were limited to statistical analyses encompassing correlations and tabulations of frequencies of responses. The hope is that future expanded data would facilitate the employment of regression analysis to provide more detailed prescriptions for managing the turnover problem that is plaguing the veterinary profession.

The data were analyzed using Stata® 16 and Microsoft Excel for graphics. The analyses focused on frequency counts of respondents to specific responses and the distribution of respondent groups, such as gender or age category. The analyses also covered correlation among specific factors to ascertain their leveraged effects on specific factors influencing turnover. As indicated earlier, the inadequacy of diversity in the variables limited the use of regression analysis to facilitate stronger statements about turnover and its predicted associations with specific variables.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter provides the analysis of the online survey. The survey was utilized to gain a better understanding of turnover motivation in present employees of the animal health industry. Results will help reach the objective, examine turnover motivations, self-reported burnout, and intent to leave the organization. Additionally, results examine veterinary professionals who have turnover for a comparison study.

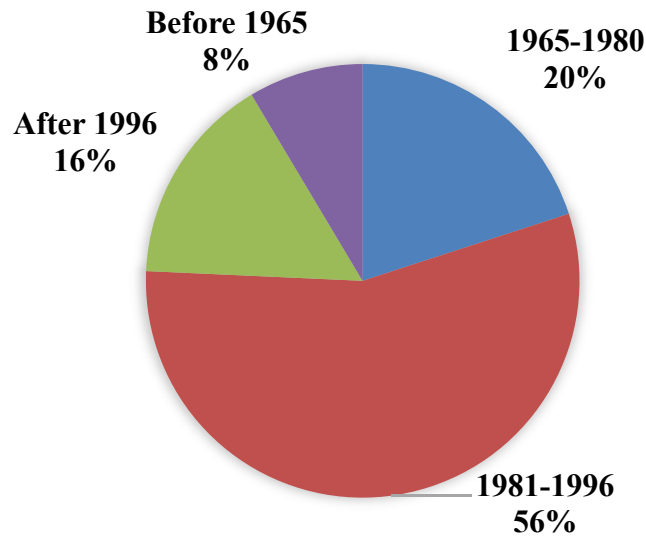
4.1 Respondent Characteristics

There were 93 respondents to the survey. Their responses provided the data for this research. Participant demographics were analyzed by in location, gender, age, education level, salary, martial and dependent status. The majority of the respondents (86%) indicated living in Arizona. This is unsurprising since the social network and email invitations to participate in the survey went to people essentially in the researcher's professional circles. The remaining 14% was distributed across seven states, with about 3% each indicating Florida and Texas and the remainder distributed equally (1.4%) in Idaho, Oregon, Ohio, Colorado, and Utah.

Figure 4.1 summarizes the distribution of respondents by age group. Those born before 1965 accounted for 8.4% of respondents while those born between 1965 and 1980 and between 1981 and 1996 accounting for 19.7% and 54.9% of respondents, respectively. Those born after 1996 accounted for 8.4% of respondents. This suggests that the majority of the respondents fell into Generation Z or millennials. This generation cohort have a global, social, visual, and technological orientation to the world and to work. This cohort views their job as a means to an end, and in this way differ from their millennial counterparts who need to love their work. For the Generation Z workers work is performed for financial reasons.

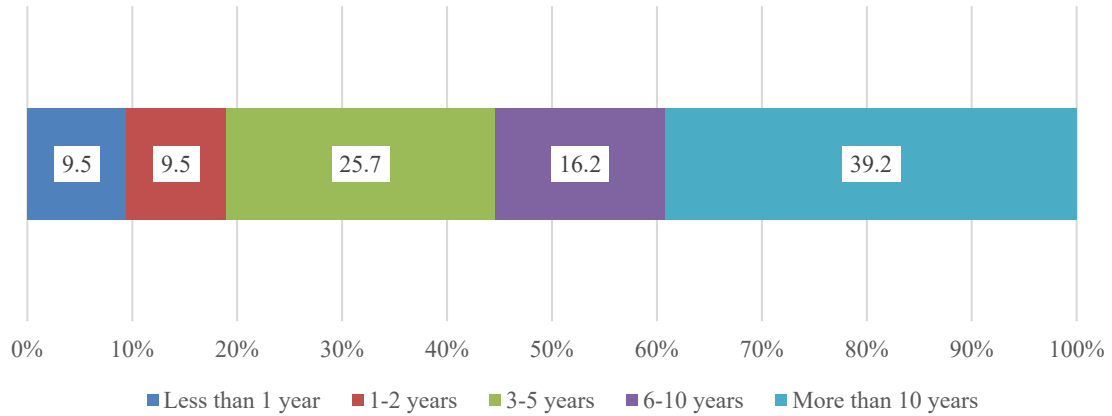
The respondents' gender distribution overwhelmingly identified themselves as female (84%) and the balance classified themselves as male. While the respondents to this survey are not claimed to be representative of the industry, the distribution of respondents by gender is comparable to previous research on veterinary technicians which showed that females accounted for 94% of respondents (Hayes, LaLonde-Paul, & Perret , 2020). This may be the evidence underscoring the talk of the gender shift occurring in the veterinary profession (AAHA 2019).

Figure 4. 1: Distribution of Respondents by Birth Year (N=93)



The tenure or duration of service in the industry is summarized in Figure 4. 2. It shows that people with more than 10 years of service in the animal health industry accounted for nearly 40% of the survey respondents. The next largest group was those with between three and five years of tenure. Those with less than a year or between a year and two years together accounted for about 19%, The group with between six- and 10-years tenure accounted for a little over 16%.

Figure 4. 2: Distribution of Respondents by Tenure or Duration of Service in the Animal Health Industry

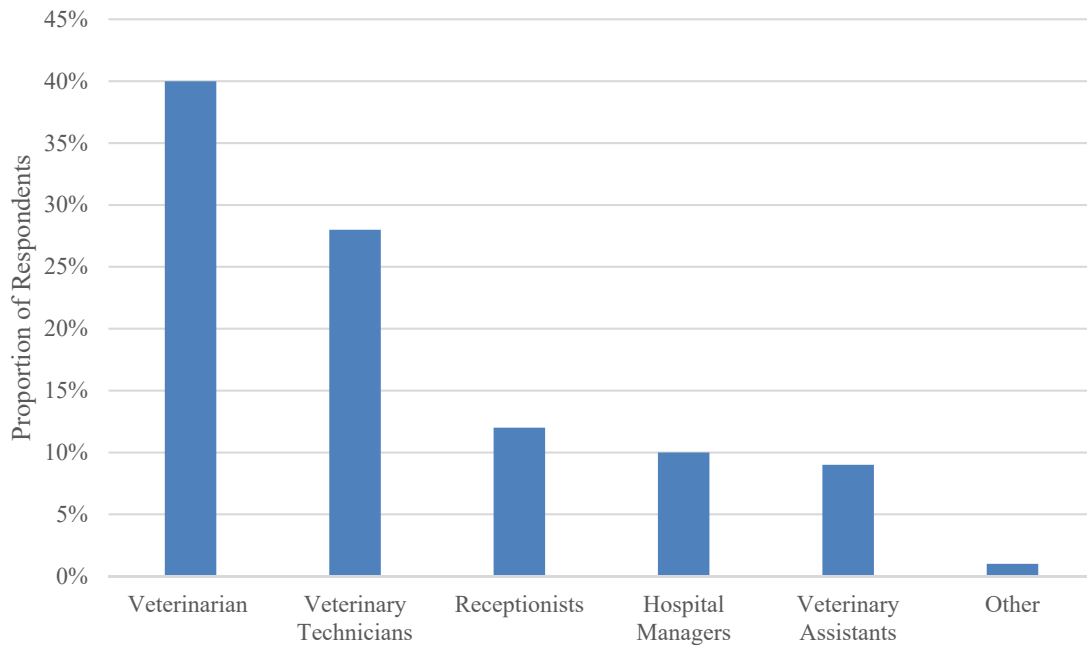


4.2 Current Industry Participants

Survey respondents self-identified into current or previous animal health industry workers. The results showed 94% of respondents currently working in the industry and only 6% indicating previous working in the industry. The small number of previous employees precluded effective analysis of turnover or exists from the industry. Therefore, the remainder of the analyses focus on current industry workers, focusing instead on their intent to quit and how this intent correlates with their demographic characteristics and their work environment.

About 96% of current industry employees responding to the survey indicated that they are veterinary hospital staff. They self-classified themselves into the distribution presented in Figure 4. 3. The figure shows that 40% of the veterinary hospital staff respondents indicated they are veterinarians, 28% are veterinary technicians, 10% are hospital managers, 9% are veterinary assistants, 12% are receptionists, and the remaining 1% covered other roles in the veterinary hospital. When asked to select the best description of their employer, the two largest results were 54% for small animal hospital, and 21% for emergency facility.

Figure 4. 3: Distribution of Respondents by their Role in Veterinary Hospitals



4.3 Participants Intention to Turnover

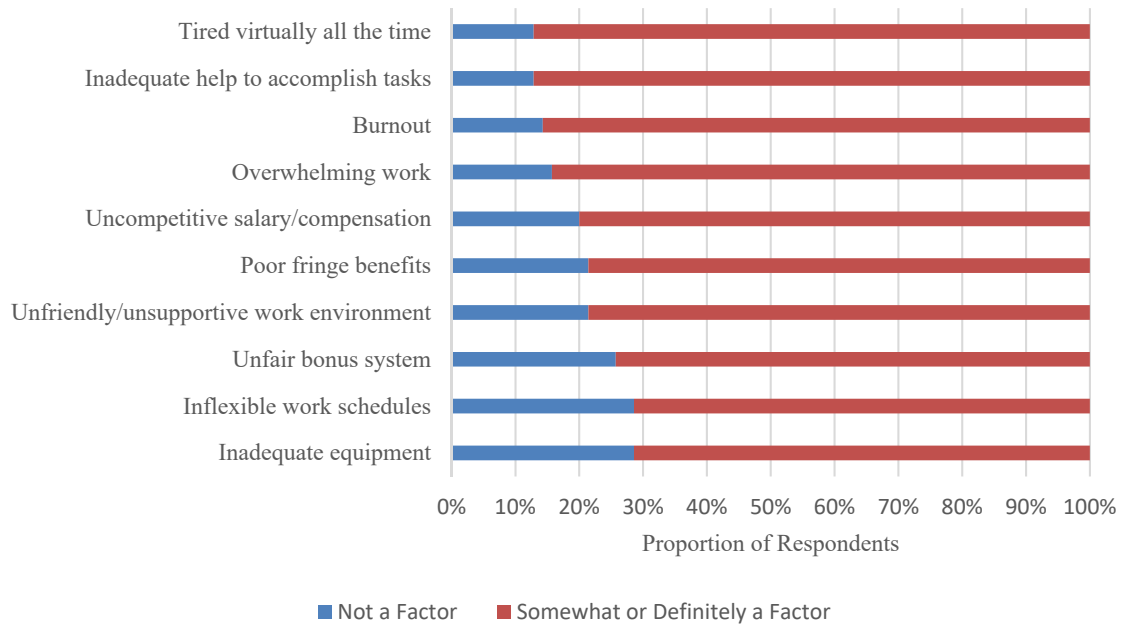
Since the study was essentially limited to current workers, turnover could only be studied through the intent lens. Intention is conceived of as the mental state representing a commitment to do something in the future if certain conditions present themselves. While intention does not imply the event, it provides insights into the possibility of the intent. What it also indicates is offer managers the opportunity to prevent the execution of the intent by forestalling the conditions that are motivating the intent.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which different factors could influence their decision to leave your current position in the animal health industry. The response scale for the factors was the following: (1) Not a factor; (2) Somewhat a factor; and (3) Definitely a factor. Figure 4. 4 shows the distribution of ten factors explored for their potential influence on respondents' decision to quit their current positions. It shows that with the exception of inadequate equipment or tools in the workplace to do one's job (71.4%), unfair bonus systems (74.3%), and inflexible work schedules (71.4%), more than

three-quarters of respondents indicated that the remaining factors were somewhat or definitely influencers in their any decision they make to leave their current positions. The top-three factors, selected by more than 85% of respondents, are Tired virtually all the time, Inadequate help to accomplish tasks, and burnout. About 80% of respondents indicated that the uncompetitive compensation and salary systems of their employers were somehow or definitely a factor that would influence their decision to quit. The only factor selected by more than 50% of respondents as influencing their decision to quit was Burnout, identified by nearly 58.6% of respondents.

The good news is that these factors can all be managed by employers if they want to minimize the risk of employees leaving them. For example, if employees indicated that feeling virtually tired all the time is a critical turnover factor, then employees might want to monitor their employees for fatigue and symptoms of fatigue and implement the appropriate interventions. For example, implementing processes that allowed employers to monitor employees' self-reporting of sleepiness, headaches, dizziness, aching muscles, moodiness, or physical symptoms like vomiting and diarrhea, anxiety and depression and weight loss could provide early signals of fatigue and allow them to ensure employees are taking their scheduled vacations, and/or rest periods are being offered at no cost to employees. There is evidence that US workers, unlike their European counterparts, are less likely to take their legal vacations, as limited as they are (Close 2017).

Figure 4. 4: Potential Role of Factors in Respondents' Decision to Leave Current Position (N=70)



The foregoing was triangulated with a question asking respondents how soon they intended to look for a new job. More than half (51.4%) of them indicated that they would be looking for a new job in at most 12 months. The remainder indicated they were satisfied enough to not want to go anywhere. More than 83.3% of those born before 1965 and about 55% of those born after 1996 belong to this last group, i.e., those satisfied enough to not want to go anywhere. Only about 42.9% and 43.6% of those born between 1965 and 1980 and 1981 and 1996 indicated being satisfied enough to not want to go anywhere. This means that they were also the age group most like to be in the market looking.

The relationship between the factors influencing the decision to quit their current position and the urgency of looking for a job was considered. The overall results in Figure 4. 5 shows that the more satisfied people are, the less likely they will be looking for jobs even when they consider the motivating factors are having no influence on their decision quit. However, poor work environment, exemplified by inadequate equipment,

uncompetitive salaries, unfair bonus systems, and poor fringe benefits motivated a larger proportion of employees to search for new jobs.

Figure 4. 5: Respondents Indicating that Factors Have No Role in their Decision to Leave Current Position and Their New Employment Search Situation (N = 70)

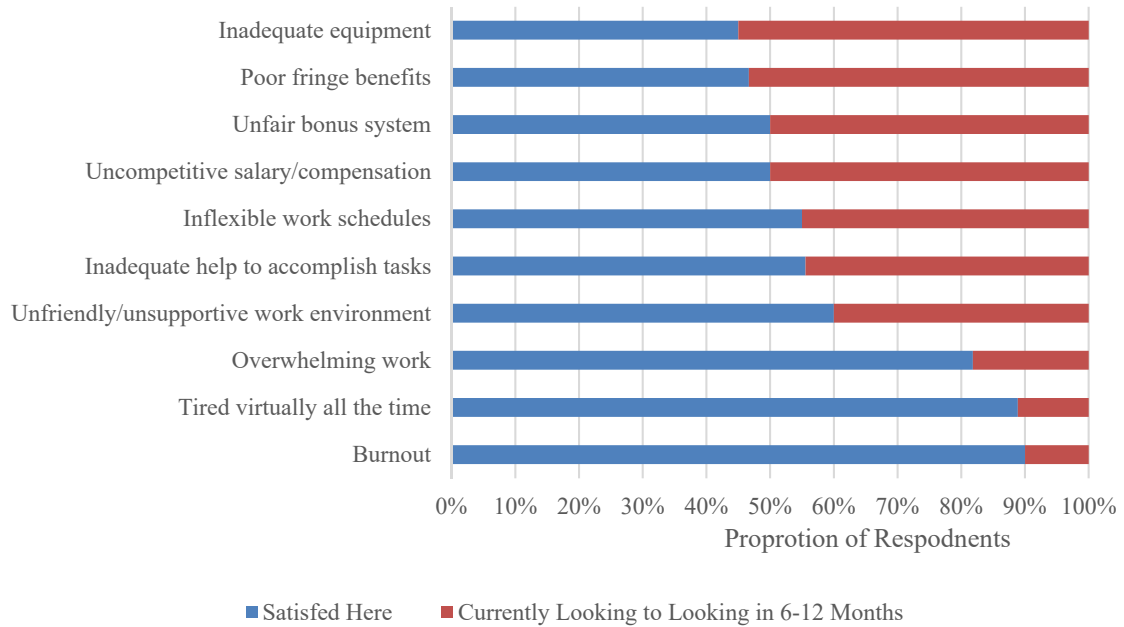
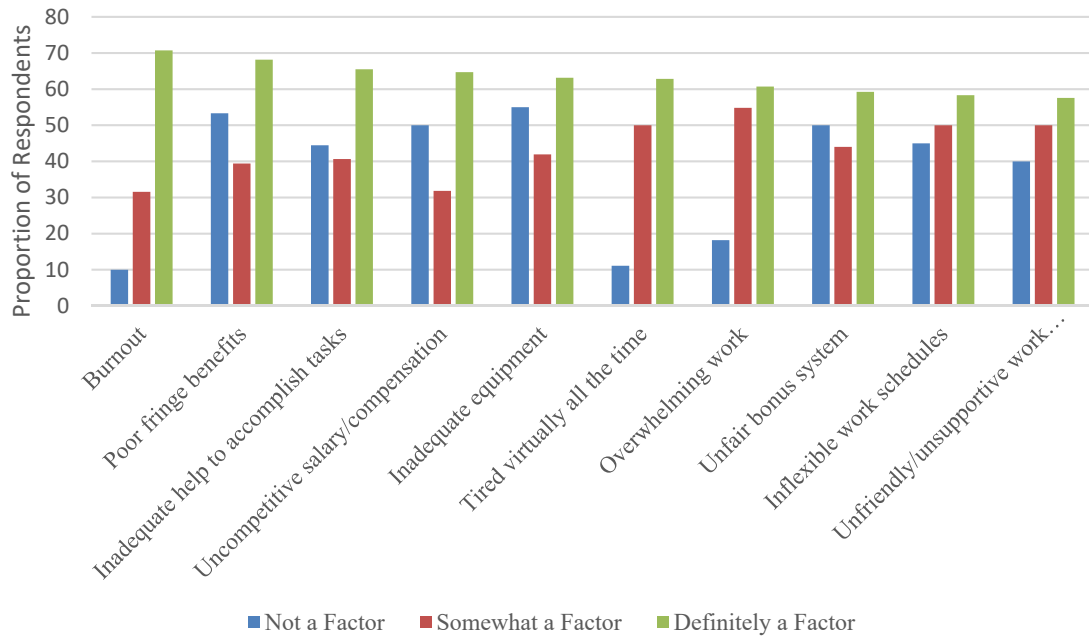


Figure 4. 6 compares the distribution of respondents currently looking or intending to look for a new position within six to 12 months and given the extent to which the factors influence their decision to leave their current positions. It shows that when a factor was at play, it influenced the search. However, even when a factor was considered not a factor, work environment factors, such as fringe benefits, inadequate equipment, uncompetitive salaries or compensation and unfair bonus systems put the search process at play. Personal conditions, such as burnout, overwhelming work, and fatigue did not motivate the search for new position.

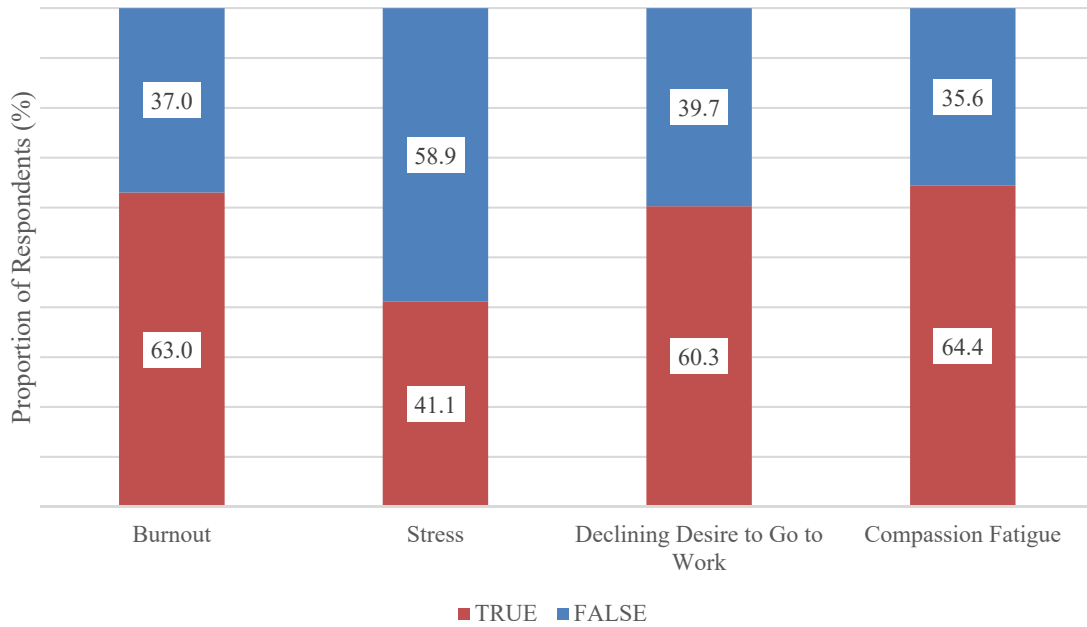
Figure 4. 6: Respondents Currently Looking or Intending to Look for New Jobs Within Six to 12 Months by Whether Factors Influence their Decision to Leave their Current Position



4.4 Stress, Burnout, Fatigue and Desire to Not Go to Work

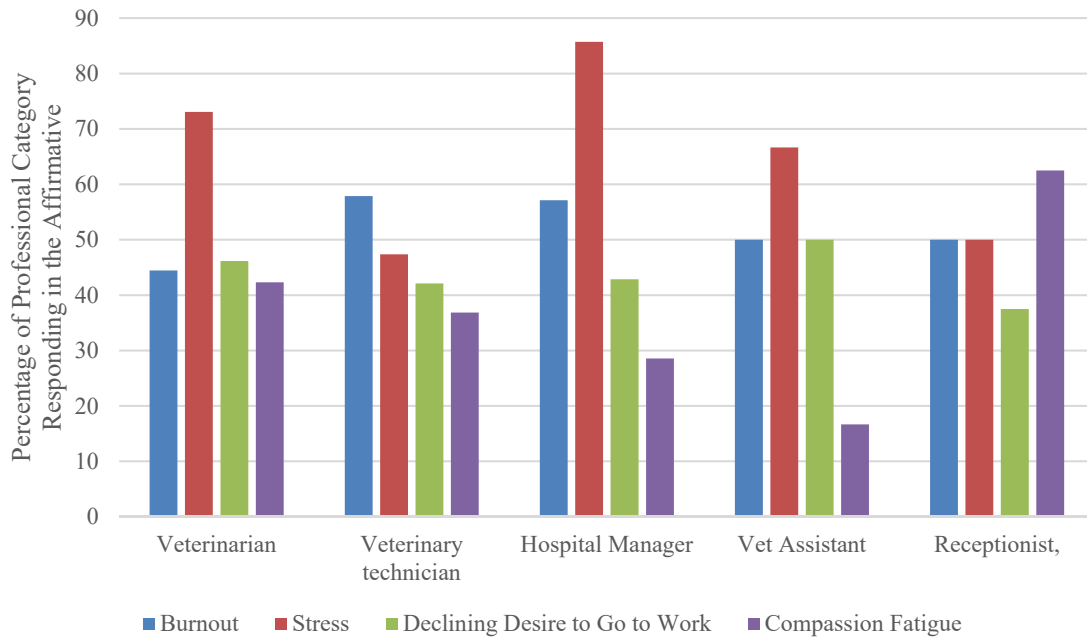
The current work situation on employees can have significant impact on their intentions to leave their current position too. Respondents were asked to indicate (binary) where specific work situations were true for them: I'm experiencing compassion fatigue; I'm feeling burned out; I'm experiencing high stress levels; and My desire to go to work has been declining. Figure 4. 7 reports the distribution of respondents by their answers to the four statements. With the exception of compassion fatigue, which only 35.6% of respondents self-indicated that they were experiencing, 58.9% said they were experiencing stress, while 39.7% and 37%, respectively, indicated feeling burnout and a declining desire to go to work.

Figure 4. 7: Distribution of Respondents by the Veracity of Them Experiencing Indicated Condition (N = 92)



The proportion of respondents by professional role answering in the affirmative to the experiences are presented in Figure 4. 8. Hospital managers are the brunt of these experiences. For example, nearly 58% of them feel burnout, 86% feel stressed, about 43% feel a declining desire to work while about 29% of them feel compassion fatigue. Their proportion of those saying they are experiencing burnout is similar to that of veterinary technicians and higher than the proportion of veterinary assistants, receptionists, and veterinarians. Receptionists own companion fatigue, with more than 60% of them saying they feel this.

Figure 4. 8: The Proportion of Each Professional Category Responding in the Affirmative that They Are Experiencing Defined Situation (N = 92)



As indicated earlier, this information provides management with the capacity to develop effective responses to address these adverse mental health conditions in the industry. For example, receptionists are the ones talking most to clients, and carrying some of the terrible news about their pets to them. This puts a lot of emotional drain on them, something that management can develop specific responses to since they stand out among all the professionals in the industry in this arena. Burnout, it would seem, is a universal experience in the profession. Since burnout also affects turnover, and also efficiency, there is self-interest on the part of management to get on top of these issues and address them quickly and efficiently.

Figure 4. 8 shows that there might be some strong correlations between some of the factors. Among veterinarians, the correlation coefficients between burnout on the one hand and declining desire to go to work and compassion fatigue were 0.69 and 0.61, both statistically significant at the 1% level. Among veterinary technicians, the correlation

coefficient between stress and companion fatigue was 0.59 ($p < 0.01$). As indicated by Figure 4.7, there was no statistically significant correlation coefficient among the variables for hospital managers. For veterinary assistants, the correlation coefficient between burnout and declining desire to go to work was perfect, i.e., 1.0 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that all veterinary assistants indicating burnout also indicated a declining desire to go to work. For receptionists, all those indicating burnout also indicated they were experiencing stress ($p < 0.01$), and the correlation coefficients between burnout and stress on the one hand and declining desire to go to work on the other were the same -0.77 ($p < 0.05$). Stress is positively correlated with declining desire to work and compassion fatigue ($p < 0.05$) and declining desire to work is positively correlated with compassion fatigue ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4.1: Pairwise Correlation for Mental Health Status of Respondents (N = 92)

	Burnout	Stress	Work Not Fun	Compassion Fatigue
Burnout	1.0000			
Stress	0.3892*	1.0000		
Work Not Fun	0.6450*	0.3936*	1.0000	
Compassion Fatigue	0.4525*	0.3887*	0.2731*	1.0000

4.5 Career Satisfaction

Experiencing career satisfaction also known as engagement or dissatisfaction such as burnout can be an indication of an employee committed to an organization or considering leaving. Respondents were asked to indicate (binary) where specific work situations were true for them as shown in Figure 4.7. Nearly 57% of respondents selected they were experiencing types of dissatisfaction. Among the DVMs 40% felt career dissatisfaction, and 28% veterinary technicians also reported it true. In comparison 44% of respondents reported they were feeling engaged. Some respondents were represented in both engaged

and dissatisfaction. Mobley’s turnover theory considers turnover and job satisfaction to have a negative relationship, it is important to understand where career satisfaction and dissatisfaction stems to reduce turnover (Mobley 1977). Career satisfaction decreases turnover as well as provides many other benefits including increased productivity, communication, and improved reputation. Management can experience the benefits by fostering satisfaction and preventing burnout.

Previous research has indicated strong correlation to satisfaction and demographics. In table 4.2 the correlation coefficient between age and gender was 0.32 ($p < 0.01$), a positive correlation with males being older than females in the industry. There was no statistically significant correlation coefficient among the variables for satisfaction. However, satisfaction can also be in the variables for education, income, and status. For education and gender, the correlation coefficient was -0.41 ($p < 0.001$), explaining females having lower level of education than male respondents. Additionally, income has a positive correlation 0.71($p < 0.001$), to education. Age and gender have a negative correlation to income ($p < 0.001$).

Table 4.2: Pairwise Correlation for Respondents Career Satisfaction (N=70)

	Satisfaction	Sex	Birth Year	Highest Educational Attainment	Base Salary
Satisfaction	1.0000				
Sex	-0.0444	1.0000			
Birth Year	0.0999	0.3224*	1.0000		
Highest Educational Attainment	0.1357	-	-0.3030	1.0000	
Base Salary	0.0256	-	-0.4719*	0.7190*	1.0000

CHAPTER VI : SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the study. Conclusions will review a few principal lessons from the research. Suggestions for future work will address research to be continued with change of limitations and questions of interest for further research. Lastly recommendations will be made for industry management to mitigate the turnover challenge.

5.1 Summary

Employee turnover is a problem creating high costs for organizations in the animal health industry. Veterinary hospital staff face unique challenges in their profession and with increasing demands for veterinary services there also has been increasing rates of employee turnover. The main objective of this study is to answer the question, what are the factors contributing to high turnover in animal health industry?

The study identified turnover motivation theories by previous research important for organizations to learn what contributes to career change. In the literature review research three turnover theories were found. Mobley describes the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover, and explains the process of employee turnover from considering, intention to quit and searching for a new job (Mobley 1977). Predictors of turnover related to career satisfaction in the previous research included pay, career opportunities, and hours worked. The discrepancy theory considers career desires and actual career offerings to consider how many match, and if less than desired there is intention for turnover (Jiang and Klein 2002). The third theory in previous research is intrinsic motivation theory. This theory considers if an employee is motivated to work from sense of belonging, enjoyment or self-determined (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2010). This theory has also been found related to

intention to turnover. In addition to turnover theories, the literature review also identified turnover factors unique to the veterinary industry. Work-related burnout has been defined as an industry turnover factor (Deacon & Brough, 2017). Previous research also found stress, compassion fatigue, and high workload relating to desire to change careers.

Survey feedback was collected from employees in the animal health industry on current work environment and intention to exit the industry. An online survey was sent in email invitations to veterinary professionals and shared on social media. It was found more than half (51.4%) of respondents would be looking for a job in at most 12 months. The remainder selected currently looking for work or are content with their job. The research results suggest factors that contribute to intention to leave the industry. The survey was limited to current workers, and the results can only be examined through the intent lens.

The survey also provided information to assess areas that influence employees to want to leave their current position. Certain responses provide adequate areas to focus on improving, while other responses indicate the influence fosters content. The top three focus areas found are tired virtually all the time, inadequate help, and burnout. Additionally, the survey found correlations of factors influencing wanting to leave, and tabulated what staff roles feel this influence most.

The results from this study can help animal health leaders and policy makers address the high turnover problem by providing focus areas for reducing turnover and engaging employees. Therefore, these findings can help the industry improve their turnover rate and create a better future for the profession.

5.2 Conclusions

This study provides support of identifying turnover motivations for veterinary hospital staff, the feedback from the survey was able to provide statistically significant

findings to understand what can cause intent to exit the industry. The motivators identified were related to work environment and career satisfaction. From here, new goals can be set in organizations to reduce the high turnover rate and increase preventives for retaining employees. For example, employers can provide more support and proper staffing levels to address that more than 85% of respondents selected inadequate help to accomplish tasks as a factor to quit. Another example goal would be for organizations to train supervisors on burnout and signs of the component emotional exhaustion, which can include poor work attitude, inefficiencies, working overtime and negativity towards work. This goal could be set with given response of 58.6% selecting burnout as a factor to quit.

In veterinary hospitals there are many levels of support staff with unique roles, previous research was limited to providing insight to veterinarians and veterinary technicians. In this study the research found that specific roles are affected differently by work conditions related to turnover. These findings can be beneficial to create role specific plans to address poor working conditions as well as addressing the entire hospital work environment. The conditions of stress, burnout, compassion fatigue and no desire to work were all found to have significant impact on intention to leave a career. In addition, examining each roles impact showed how the conditions had strong correlation relationships. These results can provide management areas to address, however some of these conditions relate to mental health and can have a shared approach by employer and employee.

The veterinary industry continues to grow in demand for veterinary services and as a result need for employees to provide those services increases too. There is a shortage of veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and experienced support staff to meet the needs of

hospitals currently seeking candidates. This research provides information to reduce and avoid the high cost of replacing and training new employees after losing veterinary staff due to turnover. The industry needs to innovate ways to engage employees, create proactive plans for retainment and invest in employee wellness and better work environments. In comparison, the human health industry has made changes and seen improvements in turnover rates.

5.3 Future Work

The objective for a comparison study of employees who had turnover in the industry did not have a large enough sample size for data analysis. For future research feedback from a larger sample size who have previously worked in the industry would add to the research. Additionally, organizing an extended study as employees exit the field and collecting data overtime could give more insight to why employees exit. This further research would eliminate studying the act of intent and predict more accurate turnover motivations.

Sample bias is present in this study, there is limited variability in the results geographical location with survey distribution being mostly in Arizona. The results could be influence by the results being from mostly Arizona veterinary staff, a more diverse geographical distribution of participants could improve accuracy of data collected. Additionally, a large proportion of responses came from two generations for age range, a larger sample size could help evenly distribute the age of respondents. Lastly the survey results did have mostly female respondents at 84% female, and it is not certain if this is an accurate representation of the industry or if any influence on data results.

A total of 93 respondents were included in the survey results. Which was not enough to employ regression analysis to answer the research question. The study was

limited to statistical analysis. Expanding the survey to include respondents from around the United States and include over 1,000 responses would greatly improve the survey data analysis and claims. With a larger response rate and regression analysis used more specific prescriptions could be made to manage the veterinary turnover problem.

Uncompetitive salary/compensation was one factor selected as a motivation to leave current position. Additional questions to explore more finely the specific characteristics and role compensation plays in this decision would be interesting. However, concerns about the length of the survey and its potential effect on responses caused the research to not pursue this line of inquiry in this initial study. A future study using these results as a foundation may explore this and similar questions more deeply. For example, how promotions and compensation influence decisions to leave current positions and the influence on the work environment on compensation could provide interesting insights into managing this challenge. After all, compensation is an interesting and complex part of the turnover problem (Rubel & Kee, 2015).

Limited previous research as well as questions asked in this study have been organized around mental health and wellness of employees. An important further study can increase awareness of mental health and learn more about how to maintain good mental health in the demanding industry of veterinary medicine. This study provided information on what conditions are being seen such as stress and burnout. Additional research could go on to learn what employers and employees are doing or not to maintain mental health and wellness. This future study would expand current engagement techniques used and areas for improvement.

This study determined career intention asking if content, currently looking for a new job or will be looking for a new job in at most 12 months. Assumptions in these questions have been made and further research could gather details and limit assumptions. By asking some of the following questions. Are you looking for work outside of the animal health industry? Are you planning to move or relocate? Are you looking for a promotion or change in role? Does your family or spouse impact your desire to change jobs? This research established intention and future research could gain by exploring more details of career change. The study also had many long-term employees (10+ years' experience) and employees that were in their first year, work at several locations. It could be beneficial to explore this further to understand these responses a little more.

5.4 Recommendations:

Based on the research results the following recommendations are made to take a proactive approach at the hospital level to mitigate employee turnover. The results show high percentages of employees currently experiencing the conditions of burnout, compassion fatigue and stress. These conditions are related to employee turnover and it would be recommended to address the work conditions proactively with a shared approach. Shared approach would involve employer and employee both agreeing to care for each other and implement ways to reduce stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. It would benefit employers and employees to receive training on what causes these conditions and to create awareness. Both responsible parties can use resources to learn how to prevent and best practice managing the conditions in the workplace from sources such as AAHA or AVMA. For example, if a proactive shared approach on burnout was implemented, the employer can be responsible for managing schedule and workload, where the employee can

be responsible for setting personal and professional boundaries and recuperating from work demands.

An additional recommendation from this study would be to address hospital wellness and position specific wellness, to create a better work environment and culture to support career satisfaction. The results showed how work conditions have different impacts on each hospital position. Considering this when providing support and addressing work conditions it can be more beneficial to address staff by position. For example, increasing career satisfaction for receptionists may need a different approach than career satisfaction for DVMs. This study shows we want to focus on plans for compassion fatigue with receptionists, stress reduction for DVMs and hospital manager, and reducing burnout for veterinary technicians.

A final recommendation would be to create action plans at the hospital level to address the ten factors explored for their potential influence on respondents' decision to quit their current positions. Nine of the ten factors were found to have influence on respondents' desire to quit. Hospital leaders can consider the extent these influences have on their hospital and work to improve them for employees. The impact would be to increase employee engagement and satisfaction and reduce turnover. Additional benefits can be cost savings from less turnover, improved culture, and increased patient quality of care.

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