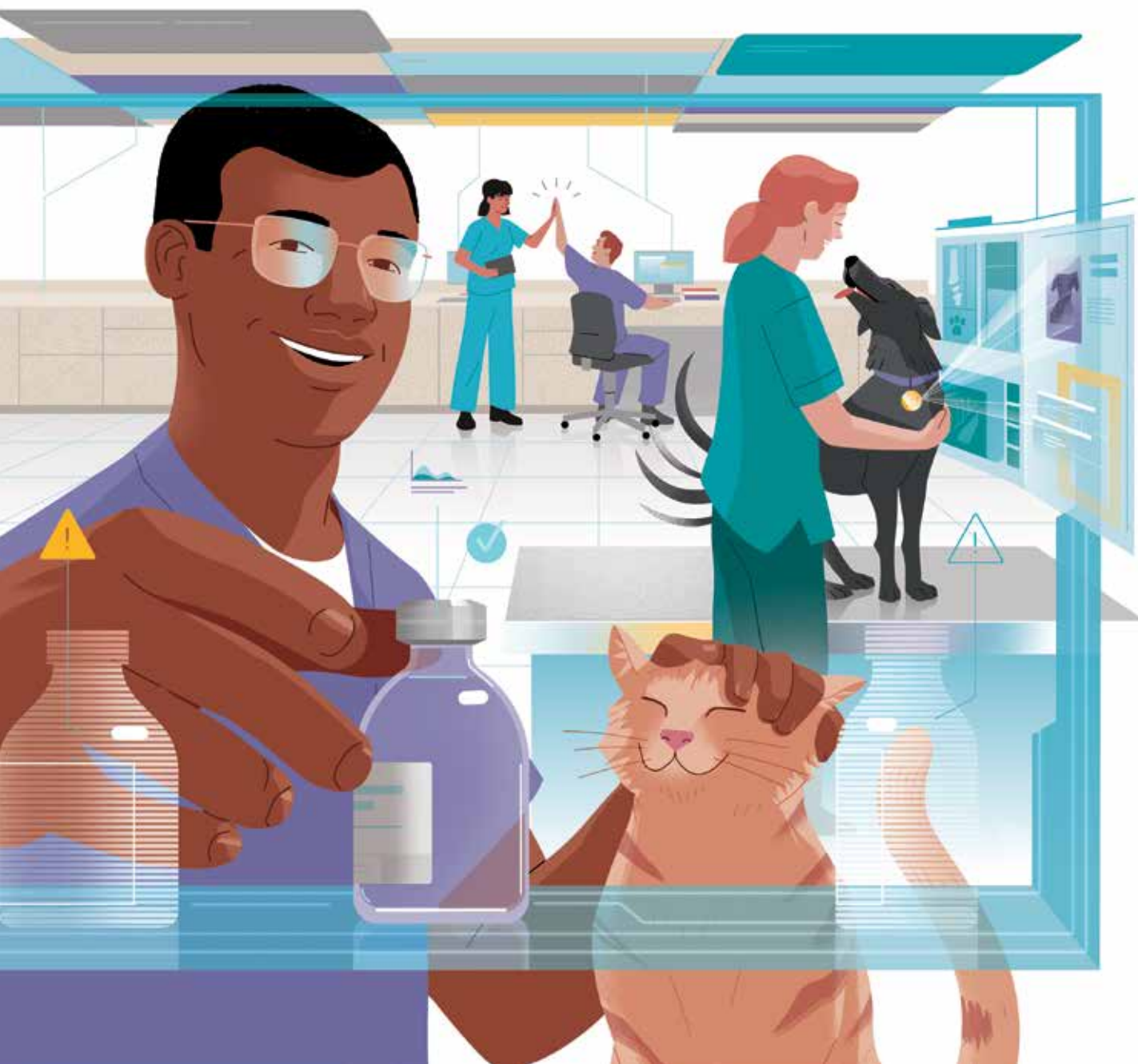


PRODUCTIVITY AND PEOPLE **STRIKING THE RIGHT AI BALANCE**

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VETERINARY MEDICINE AND STRESS SEEM TO GO TOGETHER LIKE PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY.

Long hours, complex medical challenges and demanding client interactions contribute to burnout, compassion fatigue and moral distress. Worse, sometimes we've even been accused of glamorizing "the grind." Fortunately, the past few years have seen an increased awareness of the need to add ways to evaluate psychological health and safety to our existing practice metrics.

Enter AI. These revolutionary software tools all promise to save us time, enchant our clients, improve our profitability and pack our lunch. (Maybe not the last one. Yet.) The truth is that AI tools can and will contribute to our productivity, but could those benefits be at the expense of team well-being? This article explores the current applications of AI in veterinary medicine with emphasis on the potential benefits to veterinary team well-being under the banner of a very simple axiom: If enhancing well-being is our goal, we must be deliberate in choosing, implementing and measuring the success of AI tools.

Understanding the Pressure Points in Veterinary Practice

Addressing well-being effectively requires understanding the specific pressures veterinary professionals face. Studies consistently pinpoint factors like demanding workloads and pervasive staff shortages as contributors to burnout. Indeed, recent Merck Animal Health research found veterinarians experience exhaustion at nearly twice the rate of the general population (61% versus 32%), with veterinary staff reporting even higher rates (72%).¹ Compounding this is the significant administrative burden, particularly time-consuming documentation that often bleeds into personal hours. These stressors, especially when combined with the emotional demands of caring for animals, manifest in high rates of burnout and psychological distress, contributing to alarming turnover rates (around 20% for DVMs and nearly 50% for technicians, according to AVMA data²) and leading many to consider leaving the profession. The financial repercussions are also stark, with burnout estimated to cost the U.S. veterinary industry \$1 to \$2 billion annually in lost revenue due to turnover and reduced productivity.³

A Practical Toolkit for a Demanding Profession

AI offers a suite of tools designed to augment, not replace, the skills and empathy of veterinary professionals by automating or assisting with specific tasks. These applications span various aspects of practice.

Workflow automation

Goal: The primary aim of AI in workflow automation is to tackle routine, repetitive and time-consuming administrative tasks.

Well-being benefits: By automating these tasks, AI directly addresses major burnout contributors like excessive workload and administrative burden. This leads to significant time savings, allowing professionals to finish work on time, take needed breaks and reduce after-hours documentation, thereby improving work-life balance. Reducing these pressures can lower daily stress, free up cognitive energy for patient care and client interaction and increase overall job satisfaction.

AI category examples: AI scribes, automated client communications, intelligent scheduling and inventory management

Diagnostic and clinical support

Goal: AI in this area aims to assist veterinary professionals with clinical tasks by analyzing complex data and providing insights to support decision-making.

Well-being benefits: These tools can enhance diagnostic confidence, particularly for less experienced veterinarians or in complex cases, potentially reducing the stress associated with uncertainty. By aiding analysis and information retrieval (e.g., suggesting differentials), AI can lessen the cognitive load required to recall vast amounts of medical knowledge or interpret subtle findings, allowing focus on the patient. Faster diagnostic support can

Well-Being and Efficiency: Intertwined Outcomes

The high rates of burnout and attrition in veterinary medicine carry significant economic and personal costs. AI offers tools that can address efficiency bottlenecks, but their true value lies in their potential to improve well-being, which in turn improves efficiency and retention.

Exhaustion

61%-72%

Percentage of veterinary professionals that reported high exhaustion in a recent study¹

Documentation Time

70 MINS

The estimated time an AI scribe can save a clinician per day⁴

The Cost of Burnout

**~\$1-\$2
BILLION**

The estimated annual lost revenue in U.S. veterinary medicine due to turnover and lost working hours associated with burnout⁵

Technology Adoption

39%

The percentage of veterinary professionals in a recent study who use AI tools⁶

lead to quicker treatment decisions, potentially reducing anxiety for both the clinician and the client.

AI category examples: Diagnostic imaging analysis, laboratory sample analysis and clinical decision support

Practice management and communication

Goal: AI tools in this category focus on improving the efficiency and flow of the practice, integrating various functions and enhancing how the practice interacts internally and externally.

Well-being benefits: Smoother operations resulting from integrated systems and optimized workflows can reduce daily friction and stress for the entire team. Better resource allocation and data-driven insights can help manage workloads more effectively, potentially easing strain. Enhanced communication channels, like AI-powered triage, can manage client flow more efficiently, reducing pressure on staff and potentially improving client satisfaction by providing timely guidance.

AI category examples: AI-integrated practice information management systems, AI-powered telehealth/triage and business insights

Measuring Well-Being Impact

The implementation of these AI tools can lead to significant efficiencies, particularly on administrative tasks. AI scribes, for example, can claim to save several minutes per patient record, potentially freeing up hours per week for veterinary team members. This reclaimed time can allow professionals to see more patients, take breaks, engage more fully with clients or finish their workday on time. This is the point at which it is critical to emphasize how important it is to decide which metrics will be a measure of success for you and your practice. Seeing more patients per veterinarian may be a productivity metric that is incompatible with well-being metrics like levels of exhaustion or burnout. The impact of these efficiencies on staff well-being must be actively measured and considered during implementation. Most veterinary workplaces and organizations generally have two metrics that are consistently tracked related to employee well-being:

- ▣ Number of sick days and stress-related absences
- ▣ Employee churn rate/turnover

These values, while important, are lagging indicators of the state of well-being of a veterinary workplace and its team members. In order to be proactive, factors known to impact workplace well-being on an individual, team and organizational level should be assessed. Metrics related to well-being include:

- ▣ Staff satisfaction with their roles and the practice environment
- ▣ Psychosocial hazards: inadequate reward/recognition, poor change management (AI implementation fits here), job

overload, leadership support, role clarity and job autonomy, among others

- ▣ Positive emotion, engagement, relationships, sense of meaning and accomplishment in work
- ▣ Levels of exhaustion and burnout

Without tracking these metrics using a validated tool — such as the PERMAH Tool for Veterinary Workplaces, FlourishDx, or Guarding Minds at Work (Canada) — combined with effective one-on-one communication with team members, practices may implement AI tools that improve efficiency in one area but inadvertently add stress in another. This negates potential well-being benefits. The successful integration of AI for well-being relies on a thoughtful approach where the impact on the veterinary team is a central consideration, not an afterthought.

Forging the Link

When well-being metrics are prioritized, AI can contribute to a healthier work environment by:

- ▣ **Reducing daily stress and cognitive load:** Less administrative hassle and streamlined schedules can lower day-to-day stress. Automating tasks frees up mental bandwidth for complex medical reasoning and client interaction.
- ▣ **Improving work–life balance:** Reclaiming personal time by finishing tasks during the workday is crucial for rest and recovery.
- ▣ **Increasing job satisfaction and professional efficacy:** Focusing on core veterinary tasks, especially those that involve engaging with patients and clients, can enhance job satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment.
- ▣ **Potentially mitigating emotional stressors:** While not a direct solution for grief or moral distress, reducing overall workload may leave professionals with greater emotional reserves.

Toward a Sustainable and Fulfilling Profession

AI offers significant potential to alleviate the efficiency-related stressors that contribute to the veterinary well-being crisis. From automating documentation to streamlining communication and aiding in diagnostics, these tools can free up veterinary professionals to focus on patient care and build client relationships. However, realizing the benefits of AI for well-being hinges on a conscious effort to implement these technologies with well-being metrics in mind and to continuously measure their impact on the veterinary team. By strategically embracing AI as part of a holistic approach that prioritizes team support and practice health, the veterinary profession can move toward a more sustainable and fulfilling future.

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