THE INDEPENDENT REVIVAL

Economic shifts and personal priorities have some veterinarians choosing ownership over employment.

BY ANGELA BEAL, DVM

Independent veterinary practice ownership is a viable option for veterinarians seeking autonomy, meaningful workplace culture, and the opportunity to shape their own future. For some, the spark begins early, with a childhood dream of leading a practice. For others, the drive grows from workplace frustrations or a desire to deliver better care. The following two stories highlight the challenges and rewards of building a practice independently — and what could become a growing movement of solo owners reclaiming the future of veterinary medicine.

A Dream 10 Years in the Making

Dr. Ezra Ameis' introduction to veterinary medicine came when, as a young boy, he accompanied the family dog to a routine vet visit. As he watched the veterinarian examine his dog, a passion was sparked, and Dr. Ameis knew he wanted to lead his own practice someday. In January 2025, his childhood dream was fulfilled when he opened Paw Priority, a 3,200-square-foot urgent care facility in Los Angeles.

The launch culminated 10 years of saving, planning, and researching.

After completing veterinary school and two internships, Dr. Ameis joined an independently owned emergency practice. Two years later, the owner sold to a corporate group. When the new group took the reins, Dr. Ameis was optimistic. "I got adopted into this mid-level corporate atmosphere that was mostly good pre-COVID," he said. "They seemed to really care."

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However, the practice's culture shifted during the pandemic. "I saw the teeth come out a little bit," recalled Dr. Ameis. "At one point, I wanted to take a week off, and they said, 'Sure, but you have to find a replacement.' But that shouldn't have been my problem, right?"

Dr. Ameis soon moved to Los Angeles and spent the next five years working relief shifts. "I did relief at about 95 hospitals in the LA area," he said. "The hospitals were all over the spectrum: corporate, ER, independent, small practice, urgent care. It was the perfect crash course in what I wanted [my own practice] to be."

After finding a suitable location in West Hollywood — a large, open building that had sat empty for 70 years — Dr. Ameis took the leap. "I met with a mortgage broker and started looking for different ways that we could buy the property and build it out and start using it," he said. "For white-coat professionals, the SBA offers loans that are 10% down. I had been saving for 10 years. I didn't go on vacations or do anything else so I would have an amount of money that I could put down. Then I had to beg, borrow, and steal from my own finances, my wife — everybody I knew — to get that last dollar for our down payment."

After two years of construction, Paw Priority opened its doors. In addition to urgent care, the practice offers general care and acupuncture.

One year and more than 50 five-star Google reviews later, Dr. Ameis is considering adding a second veterinarian. However, he believes in preserving the concierge-style service for which Paw Priority is known. "I don't want to bring on the wrong person, and I want to make sure they fit the culture we have built," he said. "I used to think I'd want a doctor who is just a machine running through cases. I want the opposite. I want somebody who spends time with people and makes clients feel like we care about them. I'm less concerned about showing a giant profit margin and more concerned about building a place that has some kind of meaning to the area, and then we can build from that."

For Dr. Ameis, opening a practice helped reignite his passion for veterinary medicine. "I used to feel like this cog that was just here to see as many patients as possible, go home, and then repeat it the next day. There's something about starting a business that feels new and fresh every day. It makes it feel exciting and empowering, and it changes your perspective."

Carving a Path Together

As a former lieutenant in the U.S. Army National Guard, Dr. Kaila Cruz had ambition and a drive to succeed.

After graduating from Midwestern University in 2022, she accepted a position at a veterinary practice in Phoenix. "During the interview, the owner told me he had sold to corporate, but had not told his staff," Dr. Cruz shared. "That was awkward."

When the transition occurred six months later, Dr. Cruz's attempts to help the team were not well-received. "I came in as a very motivated new vet," she said. "I was trying to help the

Dr. Kaila Cruz was awarded the Arizona VMA's Emerging Leader Award 13 months after opening her practice.

Becoming an independent practice owner has helped Dr. Ezra Ameis rediscover his passion for veterinary medicine.

SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT PRACTICE OWNERS

The following organizations can provide support and guidance for independent practice owners:

- Independent Veterinary Practitioners Association (IVPA): iveterinarians.org
- Independent Animal Hospital Association (IAHA): iahavet.com
- Veterinary Management Groups (VMG): myvmg.com
- Veterinary Specialty Practice Alliance (VSPA): specialtyvets.com
- The Veterinary Cooperative (TVC): theveterinarycooperative.coop
- VetPartners: vetpartners.org
- Veterinary Ownership Advocates: veterinaryownershipadvocates.com

new leaders find their roles and their place, but they didn't really like that coming from the baby vet."

With military backgrounds, Dr. Cruz and her husband, Aaron Hoyt, struggled to understand the lack of standard processes and leadership development at Dr. Cruz's new workplace. "I started creating SOPs," she said. "I was like, 'I made this SOP on how we check surgery patients in. Look, this is so organized!' And my management wasn't excited about that."

As the situation worsened, Dr. Cruz began talking to her co-worker and mentor, Dr. Jetta Schirmer, about opening her own practice. "Dr. Schirmer and I joked around about getting a clinic and just doing it all on our own, practicing medicine the way that we want, but also providing much more of a service than just a get-in-and-get-out," said Dr. Cruz.

That's when Hoyt, who was working as a marketing director for the Army, stepped in. He saw firsthand the passion Dr. Cruz and her colleagues had, as well as her desire to deliver better service to pet owners. "I said, 'Hey, Kaila, I do all of these things for the Army — accounts receivable, payable, vendors, contracts,'" he recalled. "'We could do this.'"

Hoyt began researching the local market and identifying prospective locations. He landed on an existing practice for sale in Phoenix called The Complete Pet Animal Hospital. And although the practice wasn't as up to date as the new build where Dr. Cruz was currently working, they were sold on the price and potential.

"We applied for a small business loan and cleared out every single nickel and dime we had to use as a down payment," said Dr. Cruz. "In addition, we borrowed about $50,000 from friends and family, and just took a leap."

After acquiring the practice in April 2024, Dr. Cruz and Hoyt had to make some difficult decisions. They noticed several problems, so they closed the practice to conduct a thorough cleaning and inventory count and to dispose of expired products.

"We were shut down for 11 days," Dr. Cruz said. "We opened the doors back up, and we had a whole new clinic to the point where people said, 'Wow, you replaced the floors?' No, we just got on our hands and knees and scrubbed the grout. We put some paint on the walls. But it was so much more than that. It was unbelievably difficult taking over."

They also had to let most of the staff go, including the previous owner.

"[The previous owner] didn't tell any of her staff or clients that she was selling," recounted Dr. Cruz. "And then boom, day one, here we are, the bad guys. That was really hard."

Nine months after they purchased The Complete Pet Animal Hospital, Dr. Cruz and Hoyt tripled the practice's gross revenue. Now, two years later, they have a staff of 22, including Dr. Cruz, Dr. Schirmer, another full-time veterinarian, and a part-time internal medicine specialist.

They are also gaining recognition in the community. In 2025, Dr. Cruz and

Q&A: HOW DO NEW GRADS FEEL?

Dr. Dani Rabwin, the owner of Ready, Vet, Go, a mentorship program for early career veterinarians, shared some insights based on her experiences with new graduates.

Q: How do new graduates and early career vets feel about practice ownership?
A: I regularly meet with vet students who are eager to learn about ownership. There are also a lot of young practice owners who are sharing on social media how rewarding it can be, and that's really inspiring early career vets to consider ownership. We've had so much interest in new grads learning about practice ownership that the RVG Community is hosting a roundtable this year called "New Grad, New Practice Owner," where students and new grads can chat with vets who opened practices early in their careers.

Q: Does the prioritization of work-life balance affect early career veterinarians' decisions about practice ownership?
A: An early career vet came to me with the idea of starting a new practice and asked if I would be part of it. I said, "That's an interesting idea, but I'm not in a position to run a practice. You need to be the one to be on the ground for 80 hours a week if you're going to start a new practice." And she said, "I value my vacations too much. I'm not doing that. I'm just going to stay where I am." I think that mindset is pretty common in early career doctors.

Q: Are there opportunities for different practice models that allow new owners to balance practice ownership with their personal lives?
A: New grads value what independent practice can offer, but they also value their time. I think they're thinking about it a bit differently, like shared models where multiple people go in together — maybe young moms doing it together, or a smaller group — rather than the old-school, single-doctor model of independent practice ownership.

The Complete Pet Animal Hospital won multiple awards, including the Phoenix Business Journal's Top Business Woman of the Year, the West Valley Chamber of Commerce's Community Impact Award, and the Arizona Veterinary Medical Association's Emerging Leader Award.

After reinvesting the majority of their profits back into the practice, Dr. Cruz and Hoyt are focused on maximizing the clinic's potential. "We're at a point now where everything is done," said Hoyt. "We have everything we need, and we're fully staffed. We can do about $400,000 in gross revenue per month without extending our hours or adding more staff. We needed to reach that number as quickly as possible. I projected three to five years, but we did it in under two years."

The pair sees a future in which they help other veterinarians achieve their practice-ownership dreams. Their vision includes providing funding and support for other independent-minded veterinarians so they can open practices.

TRUTH IN NUMBERS

"Over the past 12 to 18 months, we've observed a clear resurgence in independent veterinary practice ownership through our firm's transactional data," said Anthony Mahan, managing attorney for the Kentucky-based Mahan Law. "In 2025 alone, Mahan Law closed over 75 practice transactions representing more than $300 million in transferred practice value. What used to be roughly 25% private vet-to-vet sales and 75% corporate acquisitions has flipped, with vet-to-vet independent deals now comprising about 75% of all transactions. We're also seeing approximately double the number of veterinary startup transactions compared to the prior period, further underscoring veterinarians' renewed interest in building and owning their own practices."

Overcoming Barriers to Independent Practice Ownership

Is now the right time to consider independent practice ownership? Maybe — and perhaps more so than in the past decade. Corporate acquisitions have cooled significantly. Additionally, veterinary economists and financial experts have described the current economic conditions as ripe for a resurgence of independent veterinary practice ownership.

Dr. Peter Weinstein, the founder of Veterinary Ownership Advocates and a Today's Veterinary Business columnist, is focused on educating and equipping the next generation of veterinarians as they shape their careers and the profession that will sustain them. He is optimistic about the future of independent practice ownership. "I think that there are a large number of young doctors who have had their first, second, or third job experience and have decided that they would like a different experience, one that they control, and so are interested in creating a business in their image and with their beliefs and standards," said Dr. Weinstein.

Independent practice ownership is a realistic goal for veterinarians who have the motivation and drive to succeed. However, many aspiring practice owners may hesitate due to perceived or realistic barriers. Overcoming those obstacles is the first step toward creating a future dictated by their own goals and ideals.

Owning and running a business is no small feat, yet thousands of veterinarians do so successfully. "I think the only things that will prevent this continued renaissance of independent hospitals are the warranted and unwarranted fears of being an entrepreneur," said Dr. Weinstein.

The same benefits that can inspire veterinarians to want to be practice owners — the ability to make their own policies, hire a team they want to work with, and establish a positive culture — can feel like daunting tasks when they have to do the work themselves.

Assemble a team of trusted advisers — including a veterinary-specific bank, attorney, accountant, and consultant — to help you make good business decisions that will set you up for success.

"Don't be intimidated by what seem like overwhelming issues, such as human resource management and compliance with government mandates," said Dr. Arnold Goldman, the president of the Independent Veterinary Practitioners Association and a 30-year practice owner. "You take it in bite-size pieces. Once you take over, maybe you let six months go by, and you start making changes that fit your way of doing things."

Other challenges depend on whether a veterinarian builds a practice or purchases one. Start-ups will have a ramp-up period while the new owner builds a clientele. "It's scary because you're unsure if people are ever going to come through the door," said Paw Priority's Dr. Ameis. "There were days here in the first few weeks when I'm sure I saw a tumbleweed roll by. It's the strangest feeling to be so used to running from appointment to appointment, and then you look at the schedule, and there's nobody there. It's terrifying."

Dr. Weinstein said the keys to a successful startup include having a solid business plan and leaning on other professionals. "If you have a good business plan that's been well thought out, and if you surround yourself with a team of experts — bankers, architects, contractors, lawyers, marketing people, consultants — you can be quite successful."

For veterinarians buying an existing practice, the challenge lies in maintaining or, hopefully, improving the established business. "If you bought a practice that had good cash flow, your job then is to retain the clients and staff, and build on the reputation that currently exists," said Dr. Weinstein.

However, new owners may face pushback from clients and staff accustomed to established routines and procedures. "We had some that were really mean online and completely dragged us through the mud," recalled Dr. Cruz. "But we kept on keeping on. And now everybody is happy that we're here, and the true haters have made their way to other veterinarians."

According to Dr. Weinstein, "The barrier really is in the mind of the buyer to become a leader, to become an entrepreneur, and to focus on working on their business as much as they work in their business so that they continue to steer the practice toward their vision."

Advice for Aspiring Independent Practice Owners

Although independent practice ownership means you can be your own boss, running a successful business takes a village. The following tips can help aspiring practice owners overcome their hesitations and take the leap.

1 Don't Be Afraid of Student Loan Debt

Many early career veterinarians assume they won't be able to secure financing because of their large debt load. "A lot of graduates are debt-averse. They come out with hundreds of thousands [of debt], and the idea of buying into a practice and taking on more debt may seem impossible or unwise," said Dr. Goldman. "But in reality, the fastest way to retire that debt is to work for yourself and be able to manage debt overall."

2 Build a Personal Support Team

"Surround yourself with a 'yes' team — those people who will be there supporting you, believing in you," advised Dr. Weinstein. "Because you will trip and fall, and they will help you up so you can continue to run."

3 Build a Professional Support Team

Starting or purchasing a practice should not be a solo endeavor. Assemble a team of trusted advisers — including a veterinary-specific bank, attorney, accountant, and consultant — to help you make good business decisions that will set you up for success. Seek out professionals who are familiar with veterinary businesses rather than general advisers. "We've seen banks that don't understand the profession over-loan money, not recognizing the challenges," said Dr. Weinstein. "We've seen accountants create a chart of accounts that really doesn't help manage the hospital. And we've seen people use marketing firms that don't understand the audience veterinarians market to or the brand and image that needs to be created."

4 Learn From Those Who Went Before You

Finding a veterinary business mentor is essential. Many practice owners are more than happy to share the wisdom they've learned along the way to help others succeed. "I want people to reach out to me if they have questions," Dr. Ameis said. "It's not that I'm good at this — I've made every mistake possible on the way here. But if people want to ask me questions, I'd be happy to answer them. I really feel strongly that the future of this profession needs to be independent."

Independent practice ownership is within reach for veterinarians who want to chart their own course by setting their own standards, building their own team, and creating a practice that provides financial freedom. And, it just might be the spark that reignites passion. "I feel optimistic every day," said Dr. Ameis. "I feel like the future is in the palm of my hand, and that's awesome." TVB

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STORY ARCHIVE

Read more on independent practice ownership from Embracing Entrepreneurship columnist Dr. Peter Weinstein at go.navc.com/embracing-entrepreneurship.