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TALENT TERRITORY

Then and Now

From salaries and benefits to work-life balance, the veterinary profession has come a long way in 30 years.

BY STACY PURSELL, CPC, CERS

Earlier this year, I presented "How Veterinary Recruiting Has Changed: 28 Years in the Field" at the VetPartners Annual Conference. My presentation highlighted the many ways the profession has evolved since I became a veterinary recruiter. One story I shared: During the late 1990s, I worked with a veterinarian who was working full time for a private practice and was earning $25,000 with no benefits. I was able to place her in a position with a corporate practice that doubled her salary.

Later that day, I had a conversation with two early career veterinarians who were attending the conference. They couldn't believe that in 1997, veterinarians were earning as little as $25,000 per year, often with no health insurance, no 401(k), no paid time off, and no employer-paid continuing education. They were further stunned to hear that many veterinarians worked five to six days a week, routinely put in long hours, had little to no work-life balance, and had almost no leverage in the job market.

To them, it sounded like another era entirely. And in many ways, it was.

That moment reminded me how important it is to pause, reflect, and recognize how far the veterinary profession has come over the past three decades.

Then: An Employer-Driven Market

In the 1990s, salary levels for veterinarians were modest. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, veterinarians earned an average salary of $50,333 in 1997, and the mean starting salary for new-graduate veterinarians was $31,485. However, averages often mask reality, and many practitioners earned far less. It was common for me to work with veterinarians earning $25,000 to $35,000 per year.

Also, many practices did not offer benefits, such as:

- Health insurance
- Retirement plan
- Paid time off
- Paid continuing education

If you wanted CE, you paid for it yourself. If you wanted time off, you often had to choose between rest and income.

In those days, the veterinary job market was employer driven. Practices held the power. There were more veterinarians than available positions in some regions, and employers knew it. Offers were sometimes presented as non-negotiable. Asking for fewer hours, additional benefits, or schedule flexibility could label a candidate as "ungrateful."

Work-life balance, as we talk about it today, simply wasn't part of the conversation. Long hours were expected. Weekend work was standard. Burnout wasn't discussed; it was silently endured.

And yet, veterinarians showed up every day because they loved the profession. They were passionate, dedicated, and deeply committed to animal care, often at great personal sacrifice.

Now: A Candidate-Driven Market

Now let's fast forward to 2026, and the contrast is nothing short of remarkable.

According to the AVMA, the mean starting full-time salary for new veterinary graduates entering companion animal practice, as reported in 2025 for 2024, is $140,000.

Let that sink in for a moment.

Compare today's $140,000 to 1997's $31,485. Even when adjusted for inflation, $31,485 would be equivalent to approximately $63,800 today — a full $76,000 less than the mean starting salary of new companion animal veterinarians.

That is not a modest increase.

Even more striking, the average real income for all veterinarians, as reported in 2025 for 2024, is $154,000.

In less than three decades, the profession has moved from modest wages and minimal benefits to competitive compensation packages that often include:

- Health, dental, and vision insurance
- 401(k) plans with employer contributions
- Paid time off and paid parental leave
- Employer-paid continuing education and licensing
- Sign-on bonuses and student loan assistance
- Flexible schedules and reduced workweeks

This evolution did not happen overnight, and it did not happen by accident. It is the result of changing demographics, workforce shortages, increased demand for veterinary services, corporate investment, and veterinarians advocating for themselves and the value they bring.

Today's veterinary job market is candidate driven. Veterinarians now have options — and often multiple options. They can compare offers, negotiate compensation, prioritize culture, and seek positions that align with their values and lifestyle goals.

Flexibility is no longer a perk; it is often an expectation. Four-day workweeks, part-time roles, hybrid schedules, and structured time off are now the norm rather than the exception. Mental health, well-being, and sustainability are openly discussed.

These shifts represent real progress.

Perspective Matters

Despite the advances we've seen over the past 30 years, I often hear veterinarians express frustration about workload, work-life balance, or the pressures of the profession.

Some of those concerns are valid. Veterinary medicine is emotionally demanding. The responsibility is real. The expectations are high. And no profession is without its challenges.

But perspective matters.

When I think back to 1997 — when earning $25,000 with no benefits was a real possibility, when six-day workweeks were routine, and when asking for flexibility or work-life balance could cost you a job — I can't help but feel a sense of gratitude for how far this profession has come.

Gratitude Without Complacency

Recognizing progress does not mean ignoring ongoing issues or settling for less than what's deserved. Growth should continue. Improvements should continue. The profession should keep evolving.

Recognizing progress means acknowledging the gains that have been made. It means understanding that today's opportunities were built on decades of change, advocacy, and resilience. And it means appreciating that, compared to where we were, veterinarians today are in a far stronger position financially, professionally, and personally.

So, when things feel difficult — and they will — remember to think about how far we've come. The profession has grown, strengthened, and evolved in ways that once seemed unimaginable. And that is something we can be truly grateful for. TVB

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BE AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

Does the way you hire and run your veterinary practice reflect today's candidate-driven market? If not, think about how you can adapt to be an employer of choice. Offer competitive salaries and benefits packages, provide flexible schedules, and listen to what your existing employees want and need.