



Characterizing the Current US Employment Market for Veterinarians – June 2019

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Background

Over recent years, a decided trend has emerged among Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) member institutions toward expanded capacity to train veterinarians, with an accompanying increase in size of veterinary medical student cohorts being admitted each year. During the same period, new colleges/schools of veterinary medicine have been launched in Tennessee and Arizona, with another appearing likely in Arizona this year. As a direct consequence, both the total number of students entering into and graduating from veterinary medical programs in the US and Canada is experiencing a noteworthy upward trajectory.

In the context of this significant growth curve, two critical questions are being asked with increasing frequency:

- 1) Is the system-wide applicant pool of sufficient size and quality to sustain the increasing rate of admission to colleges/schools of veterinary medicine?
- 2) Is the employment market sufficiently robust to provide sustained, high quality career opportunities for the increased number of veterinarians graduating annually?

To help address the second question, a study was designed to analyze and characterize the current employment market for veterinarians in the United States. The overall goal was to provide a one-point-in-time descriptive analysis of the number of open positions relative to the number of available candidates.

Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative evaluations were conducted of the current employment market for veterinarians in the US. Quantitative evaluation of the number of jobs available involved review of major job-posting websites for veterinary medicine, including: indeed.com, the AVMA career center, AAEP, AABP, several state VMA websites, and usajobs.gov. Because most AAVMC member institutions in the US conduct their annual graduation in May, websites were accessed in June to capture the post-graduation state of the market.

To estimate the number of potential jobseekers in the veterinarian employment market, AAVMC data on 2019 fourth-year student enrollments were combined with historical patterns of employment at graduation obtained from annual AVMA senior surveys. In addition, AVMA

data on total numbers of US veterinarians were considered along with prevailing estimates of the unemployment rate among veterinarians.

Qualitative assessment involved a combination of interviews and conversations with a broad-based group of leaders directly engaged in the employment market for veterinarians in a variety of capacities. Confidentiality agreements preclude an actual listing of names or other specific identifiers, but positions, titles, roles, and responsibilities included:

- President and CEO
- Chief Executive Officer
- President and Chairman of the Board
- President
- Chief Veterinary Officer
- Chief Medical Officer
- Executive Director
- VP of Talent Acquisition
- Director, Talent Acquisition
- Director of Talent
- Senior Talent Acquisition Specialist
- Practice Owner
- Career Counselor
- Consultant
- Recruiting and Outreach Coordinator
- Director, Program Support Services

Major organizational affiliations included (alphabetically):

- American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP)
- American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP)
- Banfield Pet Hospital
- BluePearl Veterinary Partners
- Compassion-First Pet Hospitals
- Michigan State University
- Mission Veterinary Partners
- Mixed Animal Veterinary Associates North America (MAVANA)
- National Veterinary Associates
- Pathway Veterinary Alliance
- Pet Partners, LLC
- THRIVE
- USDA – APHIS
- USDA – FSIS
- University of Florida
- Veterinary Growth Partners
- Veterinary Practice Partners

- Veterinary Study Groups
- Wellhaven Pet Health

In addition, several private practice owners and private consultants were included.

Results

Job Postings. The job-posting websites reviewed for veterinary medicine were found to be quite dynamic, with considerable change in specific numbers of postings happening on a daily basis. For this reason, only approximate numbers are reported here.

By far, the greatest number of jobs posted for veterinarians was found on the indeed.com website, which was accessed on several different days during the last week in June 2019. Notably

- On each access date, more than 4200 veterinarian postings were included on this site, of which over 3400 were for full-time positions.
- Approximately 3800 positions in total on each date were characterized as entry-level, of which nearly 3100 were listed as full-time.
- Over 800 postings were added during the last two weeks of June. More than 500 of these were full time, including over 450 at entry level.
- Many postings included more than one position, and most of the positions had been posted for 3 weeks or less.

The second greatest number of job postings for veterinarians in late June 2019 was found on the AVMA career center website, where approximately 2500 postings were included. Of these:

- Postings that included more than one position were not uncommon.
- Over 2300 had been posted for 4 weeks or less.
- Hiring bonus was mentioned in approximately 650 postings, with about 150 of these containing the word “bonus” in the title. The size of these bonuses varied, but some were as high as \$40,000.
- Although most positions were for companion animal practice, jobs working with equine (~150), food animal (~80), industry (~10), and state/local government (~5) were also included.

In April and May, the total number of AVMA postings was a bit higher (around 3000), but the general characteristics and patterns listed above were entirely consistent with June findings.

As it turns out, the AAEP uses the same website vendor as AVMA. During the last week in June 2019, the AAEP website listed over 200 job postings for veterinarians. Although the listings were not reviewed item-by-item, considerable overlap was found with equine postings on the AVMA site. It was not uncommon, however, to find postings on the AAEP website that were not included on the AVMA website.

During the last week in June 2019, the AABP website listed about 50 job postings for veterinarians. Again, a complete investigation of all listings was not conducted, but in contrast to the AAEP case, none of the reviewed AABP postings was found on the AVMA website.

Review of all state VMA websites for job postings was beyond the scope of this project. However cursory visits to the employment section of the largest state VMAs revealed that most, but not all (CA, IL, OH as notable exceptions), follow a model similar to the AAEP in using the same vendor as the AVMA. Also similar to AAEP, most positions posted on the state-specific sites also showed up on the AVMA site – but not all (roughly estimated at >90%).

In general, the number of veterinarian-specific positions posted on the usajobs.gov website was found to be quite low (20 or fewer). However, many positions were posted for 10 days or less. Also, senior-level positions in USDA FSIS and APHIS, many of which are filled by veterinarians, were not posted as veterinarian-specific. As a result, it is a bit difficult to estimate the number of open employment opportunities for veterinarians posted on this site without an extensive review of individual postings, position-by-position.

Job Seekers. As for the number of job seekers in this market during June 2019, the total number of 4th year students in 2018-19 at AAVMC member institutions that could be expected to be entering the employment market by the middle of 2019 was approximately 4000. This includes both US member institutions (about 3200) and US citizens enrolled at Canadian and international member institutions (about 800). Of these, it is conservatively estimated that at least 60% would have accepted an employment offer by time of graduation based on historical patterns in AVMA senior survey data. As a result, probably about 1600 new graduates (or less) were seeking employment during the time of this evaluation.

From a profession-wide perspective, AVMA estimates that there are 102,000 veterinarians of age 65 or younger in the US (includes new and recent graduates). Prevailing estimates of the recent unemployment rate among veterinarians are 2% or less (some as low as 0.5%). From this approach, the total number of available jobseekers would be about 2000.

Interviews. The broad range of interviews and conversations provides a uniquely robust overall view of the current employment market for veterinarians beyond just the quantitative analysis. Comments and perspectives were remarkably consistent in framing the apparent workforce shortage that exists, with some expressing deep concern about the inability to hire associates. Although the intensity of concern varied a bit between individuals, the national perspective that emerged almost uniformly indicated a tight employment market with a relative scarcity of candidates for the number of positions available, thereby validating the results of the purely quantitative analysis. Some of the specific comments included:

- The current workforce shortage is perceived to be a direct result of an unprecedented increase in demand for veterinary services.
 - Improved management of our practices, including effective marketing, client education, and making a more progressive portfolio of services available has enhanced the success of our practices and helped generate this situation.

- Based on these factors alone, we should expect the shortage situation to continue getting worse with the ongoing wave of consolidation.
- Most candidates now have 5-6 employment offers. This is a very competitive market, and it's getting tighter.
- Retention is an increasing concern when veterinarians have so many employment options. Consequently, some employers are exploring non-traditional approaches to retaining associates, including factors to improve workplace satisfaction, and strong emphasis on wellness and professional development.
- In addition to a shortage of general practitioners, especially in emergency and after-hours practices, more specialists are needed, particularly in radiology, ophthalmology, dermatology, dentistry, and oncology. It can take 1-3 years to fill a specialist position.
- The shortage of veterinarians is leading to more and more discussions about how to better utilize veterinary technicians/nurses to more effectively leverage existing practitioners and maintain access to quality care.
- In this tight market, where new graduates are in short supply, experienced practitioners are even more difficult to recruit.
- Employment opportunities at USDA, by far the single government institution that hires the greatest number of veterinarians, is not well represented by the postings found on initial reviews of the usajobs.gov website. Conversations with representatives of FSIS and APHIS-VS, the two agencies with the most veterinarian employees, indicate the following:
 - These agencies are experiencing similar difficulty in hiring veterinarians as the rest of the market.
 - At FSIS, the current vacancy rate in veterinarian positions is about 12-13%, and at APHIS-VS about 9% of veterinarian positions are currently open. This represents about 140 open positions at FSIS and nearly 50 open positions at APHIS-VS.
 - Both agencies indicated that the current situation is similar to last year's market.
- Family obligations and/or plans associated with an increasing proportion of women in the workforce are exacerbating the shortage. Because of very real family commitments, the average length of workweek has expectedly and necessarily decreased, increasing the number of veterinarians needed to provide any given amount of service.
- Even though it seemed to be a good deal based on virtually all other metrics, one practice owner actually turned down an opportunity to buy an emergency/after-hours practice because of a concern about not being able to hire enough veterinarians.
- Recognizing that people come to veterinary medicine because of their passion, recruiters are increasingly keeping a keen focus on the value proposition for candidates rather than just salary, bonus, and benefits. This relates to both the work/team environment, and to the opportunities for making a difference.
- From a recruiting standpoint, the shortage of candidates to fill veterinarian positions has led to an increased
 - Time-to-fill
 - Cost-to-fill, because

- The length of time jobs are posted has grown
 - The number of different sites used for posting has increased
 - Recruiting trips have become much more common
- Relative size of the recruiting team.
- Posting positions on the internet is becoming increasingly expensive and is not generally considered as a high-yield exercise.
 - The cost of posting and the number of positions being posted frequently leads to more than one position per posting. However, this is not always the case because some recruiters feel that the more specific they can be in the advertisement, the more likely they will attract candidates who are a good match.
 - Listing positions on websites is viewed as necessary to maintain visibility in this market, but several specific examples indicate that often only a fraction of open positions are actually posted on any given website.
 - Often, posted jobs only receive 1-2 applications, if that. As a result, there is an increasing focus on relationship-based recruiting.
- Because of the shortage of candidates, the ability for employers to be selective is limited. This frequently results in a less-than-ideal person-position fit. The absence of a strong match, then, between the competencies required and those possessed serves to highlight any potential employer dissatisfaction with the preparation/skills of new hires.
- In this seller's market, prospective employees are frequently perceived to have unrealistic expectations entering into the negotiation process. However, some hiring directors feel that successfully filling open positions in this market frequently leads to new hires being overpaid.
- The relative shortage of candidates also highlights the importance of any negative perceptions that might exist, whether related to type of practice or a specific potential employer. In particular, it was suggested that professors might have an especially critical impact on perceptions held by new graduates in this context.
- The workforce shortage is especially problematic for recruiting to secondary markets, because candidates today are increasingly part of a dual-income household. In that regard, secondary markets are often less likely to offer attractive employment options for the second wage-earner.
- In the perception of several interviewees, the workforce shortage is leading to an increasing frequency of burn-out for practitioners working too many hours. As a result, it seems like an increasing number of veterinarians are looking for employment outside clinical practice.
- In equine and food animal practice,
 - In general, lots of jobs are available, but they are hard to fill because of the low numbers of candidates interested in equine and/or food animal jobs.
 - Those needing to hire in equine practice are looking for ways to "sweeten the pot" to enhance the success of recruiting, even including new ways to structure internship programs.

- The relative lack of availability of associates, and thereby potential buyers for practices, has led to a delay of retirement for many equine practice owners due to absence of a viable exit strategy.
- Because many large animal practices are actually mixed practices, they are impacted directly by the competition for companion animal veterinarians.
- The seller's market has seemingly decreased the perceived importance to employed veterinarians of practicing "retail medicine" effectively. In this market, associates tend to have a plethora of employment options, so they may actually experience a disconnect between the very real need to be a successful retail agent and the ability to maintain their current employment.
- One recruiter suggested that opening more veterinary medical schools would be a good way to help alleviate the shortage.
- Despite the difficulty in filling positions, nearly everyone was truly excited about the future of veterinary medicine.

Discussion

Analysis of the data provided on numbers of postings and availability of candidates clearly demonstrates the shortage of veterinarians in the employment market today. If only new graduates were considered, the number of full-time, entry-level positions posted on indeed.com (3100) was approximately twice the number of new graduates estimated to be looking for employment at the time (~1600) for a ratio of greater than 1.9 open positions per job seeker. Alternatively, if the overall unemployment rate across the entire veterinary medical profession is considered, the estimated 2000 job-seeking veterinarians is far less than the number of full-time positions posted on indeed.com (~3400) for a ratio of about 1.7 open positions per job seeker. Of course, these numbers don't consider that a significant proportion of the job seekers would likely be looking for part time positions. The fact that 800+ postings were added during the last two weeks of June, with about 450 of these for entry level, speaks to the ongoing strength of this market in the weeks immediately following graduation.

The AVMA website statistics confirm the strength of the demand for veterinarians that was evident on the indeed.com website. The fact that strong numbers were present in April and sustained through June again speaks to ongoing, robust employment opportunities for veterinarians in the US right through the graduation season. The remarkable prevalence of signing bonuses is another indicator of the relative imbalance between open positions and available candidates. And finally, the AVMA numbers start to demonstrate that, even though companion animal practice is the most common job posted, equine and food animal practice also present solid employment opportunities, as do industry and government. In total, about 10% of the postings were outside of companion animal practice on this website.

The number of jobs listed on the AAEP and AABP websites, considered along with the USDA interview results, confirms that the strong employment market extends beyond companion animals, and indicates that the numbers of positions posted on the AVMA website is more than likely below the actual number of jobs available. This finding is also supported by

reviewing the respective state VMA postings and is consistent with the AVMA numbers being lower than those found on indeed.com.

From a quantitative perspective, two significant employment sectors exist in veterinary medicine that were not explicitly included in this study: the pharmaceutical, nutrition, and other animal-related industries, and academia. Neither of these sectors has a readily accessible, centralized employment agency, but both employ a substantial number of veterinarians. In their 2018 annual report, the AVMA states that 4.7% of its members are employed in academia and another 2.4% are in the industry/commercial sector. If these percentages are projected across the estimated 102,000 veterinarians of age 65 or younger in the US, a total of over 7000 veterinarians are likely engaged in these career pathways at the present time, and conservative career longevity and turnover rates would predict that over 200 associated vacancies exist.

Taken together, the interview comments confirm the broad-based nature of the veterinarian workforce shortage. In addition to the obvious and immediate difficulty of meeting service needs in individual practices, the interviews start to give a glimpse of both the breadth and depth of the current impacts and what might be yet to come. Several of these aspects warrant repeated mention for emphasis here, including:

- A decided trend toward improved practice management, marketing, client education, and service offerings stands to extend the current shortage situation into the future, with all else being equal.
- Key shortages exist in both general and specialty practice, and include sectors beyond companion animal practice.
- Because of the shortage of veterinarians, there is an urgent need to enhance utilization of veterinary technicians/nurses to maintain or improve access to care.
- In the absence of an ability to be selective in the hiring process, employers perhaps appear to be less satisfied with their new hires.
- The shortage of veterinarians is likely impacting the sale of practices, including in the equine sector where many current practice owners' retirement options and exit strategies are being significantly limited.
- The workforce shortage may possibly be contributing to professional burnout and decreased wellness in veterinary medicine.
- In spite of the tight market and all its repercussions, people are excited about the future of veterinary medicine.

Results of this study clearly indicate that the current employment market for veterinarians would easily provide solid employment opportunities for a substantial number of additional graduates, perhaps as many as 2000. However, a more comprehensive study of the actual structural components of the increasing demand would be necessary to confirm that this increased level of employment would be sustainable over time. Regardless, there is nothing to suggest that the trend will not continue.

Summary

In June 2019, the number of employment opportunities for veterinarians posted on a single website (indeed.com) exceeded the number of job-seeking candidates by as many as 1000-1500 positions. As would be expected, most of these positions were in general companion animal practice, but the workforce shortage also extends to other sectors of the profession, including practice in other species, specialty practice, and government employment. With just the number of food animal and equine-specific job postings, plus the available USDA jobs that were documented through interviews and the pharma/academic vacancies that were estimated, it's safe to say that another 500+ openings exist. These estimates do not even include the plethora of other websites, mostly from VMAs or veterinary-specific search firms, that also list jobs for veterinarians.

Beyond the day-to-day challenge of running successful veterinary practices or other animal health organizations with a shortage of veterinarians, the impacts of the current situation are broad and deep in the veterinary medical profession. Factors such as decreased employer satisfaction, restricted retirement/exit strategies, improved veterinary technician/nurse utilization, and decreased professional wellness are also emerging. Although a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of the structural components that underlie the increasing demand will be necessary to project the future trajectory with confidence, there are presently no indicators to suggest that the current trend won't continue. Based on the unprecedented strength of consumer demand for animal health services and products, there is great excitement about the future.

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