

IMPORTANCE OF SOFT-SKILLS FOR MANAGING VETERINARY PRACTICES

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Abstract

In the past years the relatively new field of veterinary management faced incredible challenges. In order to maintain the fluent workflow and guide the veterinary practitioners through economic and health crises the profession itself demanded a new skill-set to be implemented focused on the so-called soft skills. The present study focused on a survey among owners, managers and employees at veterinary clinics and hospitals in order to establish the level at which they have implemented some non-technical skills in their work. We investigated the amount of time during the workhours which the respondents used for non-clinical tasks as communication with animal owners, suppliers, governmental officers, colleagues, financial management and time management. The conclusions drawn could be used for improvement of the curriculum for veterinary professionals, addressing their needs for acquiring and updating their non-clinical skills and competences in managing their businesses.

Key words: management, veterinary practice, soft-skills, communication

INTRODUCTION

Veterinary medicine falls among the healthcare professions and as such it has to constantly maintain a high level of animal health and welfare, public health and food safety. To achieve these crucial goals and maintain their performance in service of the public, veterinary graduates have to be well prepared for their professional path. There is a framework and relevant legislation implemented at international, European and national level to ensure all veterinarians would be able to perform as expected on the first day upon their graduation [25, 11, 34]. However, besides all the clinical skills and competences that are mandatory for the profession, there is a need of a new set of skills related to the new emerging challenges for the veterinarians [12] in order to bridge the gap between the capabilities of graduates, and the requirements and demands of the work environment [2] – business and entrepreneurship skills [27], management competences (time, finance, human resources managing) [20], social and digital skills [8]. With the present study we aimed to investigate the level of understanding among veterinary practitioners in Bulgaria on the

effect that non-clinical skills have on the success of their practices and to analyse the main areas of business management where the veterinarians have to apply their non-technical skills and allocate time to adequately manage their practices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design of Survey

The survey was conducted through an anonymous written questionnaire that was distributed indirectly to veterinary practitioners in Bulgaria through fifth-year veterinary students at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Trakia University – Stara Zagora, who willingly consented to distribute the questionnaires at random in the period February 2022 – February 2023. Thus the personal contact between the authors and the respondents was avoided and no conflicts of interest raised. The survey did not need ethics committee approval.

The questionnaire was divided into several sections, each focused on a particular theme – respondents` demographics (gender, location of practice, years of practice, type of practice, employment status at the practice), respondents` perceptions on time management

related to practice operation (communication with clients, communication with authorities, staff management, financial issues and suppliers) and their overall perceptions how the business success was affected by the veterinarians' clinical and non-clinical skills. At the end of the survey there were 179 completed questionnaires in total.

Statistical Analysis

For the analysis of the received questionnaires upon their completion by the respondents, the answers were turned from textual statements into numerical values and afterwards they were statistically processed (IBM SPSS-Inc., 2019, SPSS Reference Guide 26 SPSS, Chicago, USA). Descriptive statistics (frequency distribution tables) and chi-square analyses were used to study the investigated parameters. A two-tailed $p < 0.05$ was considered significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The participants in the survey showed very diverse background (Table 1). From all 179 of them, 52.5% were male and 44.7% were females, both genders almost equally representing the practitioners in Bulgaria in line with the feminization of the profession [33, 10, 6]. In similar research among veterinary practitioners [5], it was found that female veterinarians represented 55.6% of all veterinary practitioners in France. [4], however, reported less women employed at veterinary clinics – 36.4%, which probably was related to the cultural characteristics in their country Turkey.

The majority of the veterinarians in the study had established their practice in urban settings – 95% in total (practice at the capital city, cities-regional or municipal administrative centres) and the rest were situated in less urbanized settlements (small towns and villages).

Regarding their position at the practice, slightly more than one-third or 36.4% were owners of co-owners of the business, thus being the managers entitled to leadership and practice management. About half of the respondents or 55.3% were full time employees that executed the every-day

activities at the clinic, responsible for its operation and treatment of patients. The rest of the staff, like part-time employees, internship trainees, etc. had little impact on the practice performance as they were partially working when needed for a defined short period of time. In a survey among Hungarian practitioners [26] three-quarter of them appeared to be practice owners and 22% were employed veterinarians.

The amount of working experience was another factor to consider with regard to the forming clear understanding on the competences needed for practice management. The first two categories – respondents with less than one year of experience (2.8%) and between 1 and 3 years of practice (16.2%) were veterinarians who at this time tried to gain practical competences and hands-on experience dealing with clients, patients and other stakeholders while at the same time building their professional reputation. The rest of the respondents were distributed per their practical experience as follows: 4-5 years – 15.1%; 6-10 years – 20.7%; 11-15 years – 15.6%; 16-20 years – 8.9%; more than 20 years – 10.1%. When compared to other surveys, [4] reported that on average the professional experience of veterinary practitioners was 17.1 years, with the least experienced working for 3 years and the most experienced veterinarians working for 35 years. Similarly, [26] stated that small animal veterinarians being practice owners had worked about 16 years long.

The largest share of the respondents of 46.4% worked with companion animals, while almost equal part of the other participants in the study worked with farm animals – 20.7% or had mixed practice with pets and livestock – 19.6%. Less than one percent – 0.6% were the practitioners that treated exotic animals. This type of practice appeared as a relatively new trend during the last years as stated by the Federation of Veterinarians in Europe [10] and is still emerging.

Interesting profile of the type of veterinary practice in Bulgaria was defined when the respondents shared the number and professional background of the employees there. Close to one-fifth or 20.7% of the

veterinarians operated as a one-man-business, being owner, manager and a single employee, thus responsible for all operational and strategic activities at the practice.

Table 1. Table 1. Respondents` demographic characteristics*

Respondents` Demographics	Count	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
1)Female	80	44.7
2)Male	94	52.5
<i>Residence</i>		
1) Capital city	13	7.3
2)City-Regional administrative centre	135	75.4
3)City-Municipal administrative centre	22	12.3
4) Town	2	1.1
5) Village	7	3.9
<i>Occupational post at the clinic</i>		
1) Owner	47	26.3
2) Co-owner	18	10.1
3) Full-time employee	99	55.3
4) Part-time employee	8	4.5
5) Veterinarian on internship	6	3.4
6) Other	47	26.3
<i>Working experience</i>		
1)less than 1 year	5	2.8
2) 1-3 years	29	16.2
3)4-5 years	27	15.1
4) 6-10 years	37	20.7
5) 11-15 years	28	15.6
6) 16-20 years	16	8.9
7) over 20 years	18	10.1
<i>Type of practice</i>		
1) Companion animals	83	46.4
2) Farm animals	37	20.7
3) Mixed practice	35	19.6
4) Exotic animals	1	0.6
<i>Size of the practice (type and number of employees)</i>		
1) 1 veterinarian, no other employees	37	20.7
2) 2-10 veterinarians	66	36.9
3) more than 10 veterinarians	9	5.0
4) veterinarians and other non-veterinary employees**	64	35.8

*Due to rounding of values and non-responders some indicators may not sum up to 100%

** Non-veterinary employees at the respondents` clinics – receptionists, hygienists, groomers, technicians, shop assistants, laboratory specialists, stray animal hunters, animal keepers

Source: Authors` data from the questionnaire survey.

Based on the estimations of [24] that one veterinarian could service approximately several thousands of clients depending on the country and varying from 4,000 in the USA to 6,000 in Austria to 10,000 in Germany, it become quite clear that a sole veterinarian enterprise would face difficulties with the

completion of all clinical and non-clinical tasks of the business.

Higher share of 36.9% had the practices where 2-10 veterinarians were employed. This type of operation with several veterinarians allowed for structural and functional improvements, division of labour and responsibilities, offering various or new services to the clients with more profits for the practice. [26] estimated that on average there were 2.15 vets working at a small veterinary clinic in big cities. On a higher level, clinics with more than 10 veterinarians employed, accounted for 5% in our survey, usually appeared to be highly specialized large clinics with a wide and advanced profile of services offered which had occupied a particular market share not only among local animal owners but also clients from other areas due to their extremely solid reputation. Even higher was the share of clinics with more than 10 vets – 24% as reported by [9] for Germany which in fact corresponded to the global trend of increasing the veterinary market [1, 16].

More than one third or 35.8% of the respondents stated that their practices had both veterinary and non-veterinary personnel. Among the non-veterinary staff there were technicians, receptionists, hygienists, groomers, shop assistants, laboratory specialists, etc. – all of them performing specific tasks depending on the range of services offered to the clients and incorporating other business components to the veterinary clinic (pet hotels, shelters, pet shops, grooming saloons, etc.). On average there were 0.76 assistants and 0.5 other staff in small veterinary practices which operated with 2 veterinarians [26]. In another survey among German practitioners it appeared that 43% of practice owners employed 1-3 technicians [9] which seemed to be related to rural settings and the work with large animals there.

The contemporary veterinary practice has to perform in a way that has to ensure the expectations of clients, society and profession itself as a whole are met [12, 13]. In order to be able not only to meet these highly demanding expectations, the veterinarians nowadays had to properly execute time

management at their clinics. The results from the survey showed that 82.2% of the respondents in total (Fig. 1) did not apply any kind of time management related to the main activities of their work pointing out that 0% of their time had been spent on communication with animal owners, communication with state authorities, working with suppliers, solving financial issues and managing the practice staff. The lacking or poor non-technical skills among veterinarians were commented with relation to the difficulties

encountered later with clients, both in communication and financial matters [3]. It was argued that even during the university education future veterinarians should be enabled to communicate as per the relevant situation, appropriately and adapting their role regarding the circumstances [17]. However, as [21] reported 11% of the veterinary surgeons did not spent time at all on activities related to quality improvement and governance at the clinic.

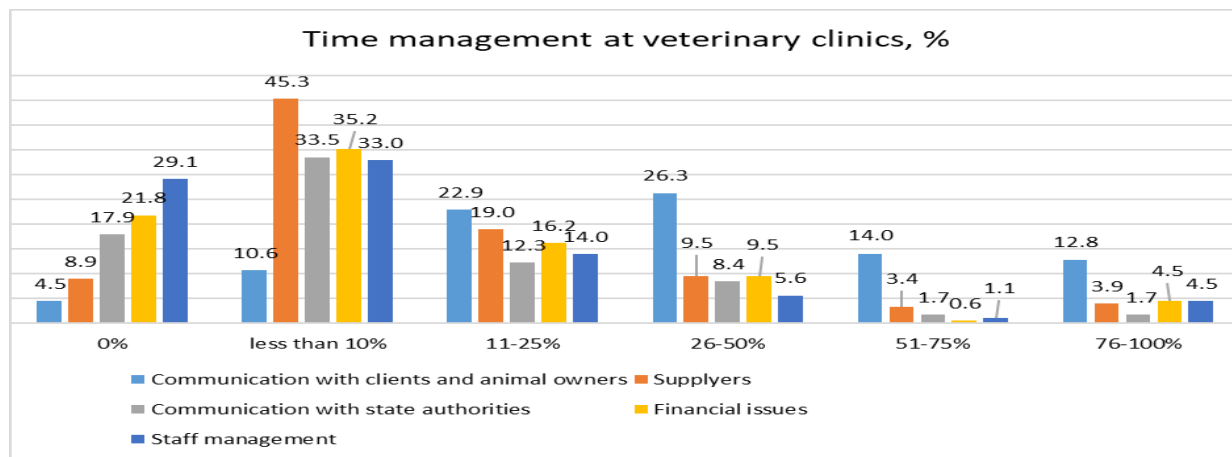


Fig. 1. Time management at veterinary practices as per the respondents` main areas of focus, related to non-technical activities

Source: Authors` data from the questionnaire survey.

on managing the practice, almost half of the respondents – 45.3% paid most of their attention to suppliers, while a third of them dealt with financial issues (35.2%), staff management (33%) and communication with the public sector (33.5%). In fact the time spent to work with the suppliers was significantly dependent on the residence as veterinarians from clinics in large cities devoted more time to supply management ($\chi^2 = 35.997$; $df=20$; $p=0.015$) and at the same time to maintain regular communication with the authorities located in the capital and the administrative cities ($\chi^2 = 35.111$; $df=20$; $p=0.020$). Communication with clients was among the important tasks for only 10.6% of our respondents. Even in case that communication was included in every day routine, it still was not considered effective if veterinarians, especially newly graduated with a couple of years of experience, did not possess the ability to talk to clients at the

appropriate level [29]. The same authors argued that miscommunication could also lead to low-level staff management, lack of support and stress, resulting in young employees leaving the job. Furthermore, offering support to the veterinary staff and helping them develop interpersonal skills was believed to be beneficial to manage challenging clients and reduce stress and burnout [30].

Further analysis of data from Fig. 1 showed that with the increase of time allocated to non-clinical activities for managing the practice, the veterinarians used most of this managerial time to focus and develop proper communication with clients and animal owners compared to the other office tasks. This type of interpersonal skills was highly important for the performance of the clinic as low-level management skills were associated with sub-optimal economic conditions [22]. Moreover, communication was regarded as a

crucial tool to achieve and modulate clients` satisfaction, especially when dealing with difficult clients [32, 28] which could be additionally enhanced as well by improving the veterinarian`s emotional intelligence and human personal performance as a whole [31]. Our study showed that communication with clients was significantly dependent on the gender of the veterinarians with women being more open-minded and striving to establish good interrelations with the animal owners ($\chi^2 = 11.198$; $df=5$; $p=0.048$) and the type of the practice –small animal practitioners were more aware of the need to maintain proper communication with their clients ($\chi^2 = 25.054$; $df=15$; $p=0.049$). Similar dependence was found for veterinary practitioners and their time to manage the practice staff as business owners ($\chi^2 = 37.420$; $df=15$; $p=0.001$).

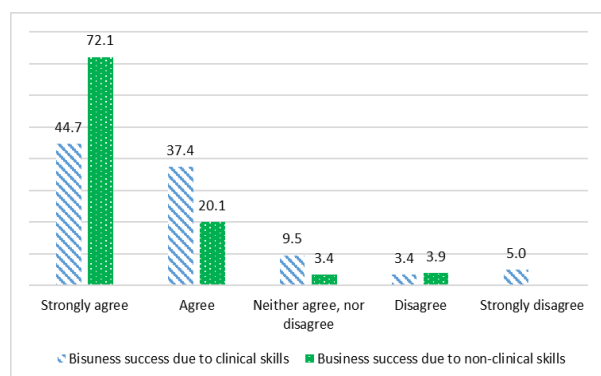


Fig. 2. Respondents` perceptions (%) on the effect of clinical and non-clinical skills for their business
 Source: Authors` data from the questionnaire survey

The overall perceptions of the respondents in our survey regarding the level of success of their private business (Fig. 2) showed that besides the extremely important clinical skills in various field of specialization for 78.1% of them (44.7% who strongly agreed and 37.4% who agreed), the majority of the veterinary practitioners were without doubt sure that the business success and profitability was due to their non-clinical and managerial competences – 92.2% in total (72.1% strongly agreed and another 20.1% agreed). There were statistically significant differences among the employment status of the respondents, being business owners, and their understanding on the need to implement and use proper skills for staff management ($\chi^2 = 64.129$; $df=20$ $p=0.000$) and financial management (χ^2

$=44.523$; $df=20$; $p=0.001$) for the success of their practice. The profession itself expected from the veterinarians to be not only business owners but also leaders through personal growth and evolving skills like strategic thinking; team building; communications, influencing, and advocacy among the public and the private sectors [23]. Similar non-technical competences were identified as essential by [19] for other health professional and their successful performance.

The need for business skills among the set of competences of veterinary employees was discussed even in the light of provision of such non-technical skills during the undergraduate education [15, 14], including social competences [7] in order to have better prepared veterinary practitioners for real working environment. Well recognized practices like communication, team-work and team-morale, patient safety, and distributed leadership should be included in a Quality Improvement approach for veterinary clinics and thus to provide opportunities for improvements on a regular basis [21]. Similar approaches and competence models were proposed even on a larger scale, aiming at creation of Pan-European soft skills curriculum intended to develop competences among veterinary graduates in three main areas of expertise – communication, entrepreneurship and digitalization [18].

CONCLUSIONS

The survey on the current state of veterinary practice management in Bulgaria revealed some issues that need to be urgently addressed among the profession, academia, business and decision-makers, namely the lack of appropriate competences to solve non-clinical problems at veterinary hospitals and clinics. Most of the veterinarians did not deal at all or allocate very short time for managerial tasks related to communication, financial management, human resources management. However, the majority of the respondents considered the importance of the soft skills for the successful performance of their practice. The survey showed that the profession itself needs to evolve and create a model approach,

even incorporate it in the higher veterinary education cycle, to gain knowledge and competences in business management and meet the expectations of the stakeholders and the society.

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