

VACATION—REDUCING THE HASSLE WHILE PROMOTING TIME OFF JUNE 2022

Three people want to take a vacation in June, a doctor has requested Christmas week for the fourth year in a row, another person refuses to take time off, and someone else wants to use next year's vacation days for this year to attend a destination wedding. Why is scheduling time off such a hassle? When did an employee benefit become a manager's nightmare?

First, let's address the importance of taking time off from work. Workplace stress, health issues, and burnout are taking a toll on the veterinary profession. Mental health and well-being have morphed beyond simple buzzwords and become strategic initiatives. Research shows direct links between vacations and feelings of well-being. We all agree that time away from work is a good thing and paid time off (e.g., paid vacation days, personal days, sick days) is a necessary employee benefit – or do we?

Some veterinary practices do not offer paid time off (PTO) or offer so few days that it can hardly be considered a valuable component of the comp and benefits package. Of the 175 hospitals responding to the VHMA 2021 Compensation and Benefits Survey, 88% provide PTO. So, what's up with the other 12%? For starters, most employers are not legally obligated to provide paid vacation time (be aware that different states have different PTO requirements, so check your state Department of Labor website at <https://www.dol.gov/general/location>). Some practice owners may think they can't afford to pay employees if they aren't working. Perhaps another reason not to offer it is that it can be a hassle to calculate, track, keep it legal, and schedule everyone fairly and equitably. Reducing the hassles can make encouraging and paying for vacation days easier.

This brings us to the second essential point - reducing the hassles. Consider the following steps to reduce vacation scheduling drama:

Know the law in your area. Different states have different regulations surrounding paid leave and the requirements often change. Before establishing any policy, check your state's laws and talk to an employment attorney just to be safe.

Craft Your Policies. Decide if you are doing combined PTO or separate vacation/sick/personal days based on state requirements. Then, incorporate the following:

- How many days are offered, or how is the time accrued (e.g., monthly, yearly, per pay, or hourly)?
- Is the time tracked by calendar year or individual anniversary dates?
- Do part-time employees receive any paid days? (We strongly believe they should!)
- Is there a waiting period before the team member is eligible to earn or use the days?
- How many years of service are needed for an increase to additional days? What is the maximum that can be earned?
- Can days be carried over to the following year? How many?
- How are requests for days off handled (e.g., how far in advance, forms to fill out, seniority, first-come-first approved, rotations, lottery system)?
- Can paid time off be taken in hourly increments or only full days (e.g., flex time such as arriving late or leaving early)?
- Is there an option to pay out unused days at the end of the year or when employment is terminated? Again, this is a state-specific regulation.
- Is there a use-it-or-lose-it policy or a cap on time earned?
- Is there a mandated minimum time that must be used (after all, time away from work is necessary for mental, emotional, and physical well-being)?
- Does the practice shut down at any time, have forced vacation time, or have black-out times?
- Is there a need to limit how many people are off at the same time, or how many people from a department (CSR, Nurse/Techs, Vets) are off simultaneously?
- Does the practice permit time off without pay?

Educate the Management Team. Yep, you read that correctly. Your management team must understand what is in the employee handbook and what the law is regarding time off. In addition to your policy, other time off (such as FMLA, ADA, and jury leave) must be part of this conversation. Don't let an ill-informed manager make a comment or rule on a request that goes against your policy or the law – just another way to reduce the hassles.

Inform the Team. This is one of those topics that should be part of an annual update/review at a team meeting. It should go without saying that the practice manager goes over the policy, in detail, with every new hire. Additionally, regular discussion keeps everyone on the same page and reduces the chances that someone is surprised when they do not get approval or lose their days.

Approve Requests in a Fair and Equitable Manner. This may be the ultimate hassle. You have a clear policy, the team has their copy, and everyone knows the rules of the game...but there are still problems to address. A quick scan through the VHMA and VetMedTeam discussion boards shows that you are not alone in dealing with scheduling hassles – and there are some good solutions to consider. Remember that your practice is unique and what works for one practice may not work for another. Let's tackle a few of those hassles.

- Requesting prime days year after year, like always asking for the same holiday week. The solution may be as easy as setting up a rotation. Each year, a different doctor gets to choose first. Then, doctors may submit for a holiday as a second choice if no one claims it. For the team, a rotation or a lottery system may work. Consider a policy statement that prime dates can't be requested year after year, but can be taken if no one claims the dates.
- Too many requests for the same dates. Again, consider rotations, limiting requests if the time was taken last year, or lottery. Your policy may need to state that the practice cannot have two veterinarians (or other team members) off simultaneously (consider vacation and CE for this one). This may also be an issue if you have a use-it-or-lose-it policy and December has you short-staffed due to everyone taking their days.
- Booking the vacation before getting approval...only to find out the dates are already claimed. For some practices, using a program such as Namely or BambooHR allows team members to manage their vacation time and see available dates. Not interested in another program? Simply hanging a calendar on the lunchroom wall can make the team aware of unavailable dates.

Culture Trumps Strategy. The "way things are done around here" does not always agree with your policy and can land you in a heap of trouble. For example, if the practice owner takes off when another doctor is off – the culture says that you don't have to follow the policy based on your position in the hierarchy. Perhaps a well-loved team member is leaving, and management decides to pay out the remaining days – even though policy says it won't be done (and then add another hassle when management declines to payout for the not-so-loved team member who is leaving).

A final comment about culture – are team members vilified for taking time off? Is being a workaholic valued over everything else to the point that people feel they won't receive the best pay raise or will be treated differently if they use their earned time off? Is there negative peer pressure when someone takes time off – do they make the days leading up to or upon returning to work difficult as a means of payback? Those attitudes, actions, and comments are part of your culture and may be killing team member engagement and job satisfaction.

Be the Employer of Choice. Offering a "healthy" PTO benefit can make you an employer of choice – in other words, it may be the factor that tips the scales in your favor as a candidate evaluates job offers. In addition, having a "healthy" culture around time off will help your retention strategy and promote team well-being. Scheduling vacation requests will always require teamwork and creativity to ensure proper staffing levels while promoting team well-being.