

Whitepaper

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**Veterinary
Integration
Solutions**

Lean Thinking in Veterinary Organizations to Improve Employee Experience

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FOREWORD

As burnout remains a significant challenge for veterinary professionals, various studies were conducted to investigate the issue. However, burnout rates keep increasing, which means that there is a need to go beyond assessing the degree, but also to provide a solution.

In the past decade, the veterinary industry has been going through massive consolidation. Dozens of corporations that are acquiring veterinary practices and there is vibrant private equity interest to fund these acquisitions.

While acquisitions are rapidly growing and the multiples are high, there are several challenges that these organizations face. When the businesses are being consolidated, they merge different cultures, workflows and business systems into a single managed structure which helps with cost optimization, but at the same time, change, if not managed properly, can result in unwanted staff turnover post-acquisition.

Throughout my career in veterinary medicine, from being a doctor, creating Smart Flow and consulting hundreds of practices worldwide on workflow optimization, I wondered if management could do something differently to help decrease burnout. This is how my MBA dissertation came to be.

This paper studies the application of lean thinking in human healthcare and its potential extension to the veterinary domain; considering the correlation between the two industries.



Dr. IVAN ZAK

CEO of Veterinary Integration Solutions

As a result, I'm proposing that lean methodology can improve employees' experience post-acquisition, decrease turnover and the risk of burnout, and generally help facilitate the consolidation of the veterinary industry.

The purpose of this paper is to provide information that will help shape the future of the veterinary industry. Further study of this topic will have a significant impact on the enterprise management and well-being of the veterinary domain.



INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings from Ivan Zak's MBA dissertation, "Lean Thinking in Veterinary Organizations to Improve Employee Experience". The study's specific objectives included determining factors affecting employee experiences, estimating the degree of burnout within the industry, working out the effects of consolidation on employee experiences, and discovering whether lean methodologies could reduce burnout among vet hospital and clinic employees.

Ivan Zak considered a correlation between human and veterinary medicine and used the Professional Fulfillment Index (PFI) to quantify the problem of burnout, as well as lean thinking principles proposed by [John Toussaint](#) for human healthcare to be applied in veterinary medicine.





RESEARCH PART: BURNOUT SURVEY

Dr. Zak leveraged Veterinary Integration Solutions (VIS) marketing expertise for the outreach campaign to collect answers for the Burnout Survey. It received 1,457 responses, by far surpassing the target of 1,000, and making the sample large enough to represent the entire veterinary population.

The participants were veterinary professionals from around the globe, mostly from English-speaking countries: USA, Canada, UK, Australia, and New Zealand. The survey consisted of three blocks (20 questions total), that participants answered anonymously on the VIS website. The questionnaire is detailed in Appendix 1.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data was collected using the Professional Fulfillment Index (PFI) developed by Mickey Trockel and his Stanford University team. PFI is a tool used to assess the degree of burnout among employees in human healthcare. It was chosen since it is a valid instrument used in healthcare and can gather data regarding burnout within the vet industry.

Quantitative techniques were used in data analysis. The scores of the PFI were computed by averaging the scores within each scale. The overall score for each scale ranged from 0-4. Zero indicated “not at all true,” while four represented “completely true” for the first section of the PFI sheet, which assessed the degree of job satisfaction.

In sections two and three of the PFI sheet, zero stood for “not at all,” while four represented “extremely.” A high score in the first section showed higher levels of job satisfaction, while a low number was indicative of low job satisfaction. A high score in the second section indicated higher levels of burnout, while a low score highlighted low levels of burnout. In the third section, a higher score showed a lack of empathy and connectedness to patients and colleagues. In contrast, a low score signified higher connectedness.



PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

Participant breakdown by age groups

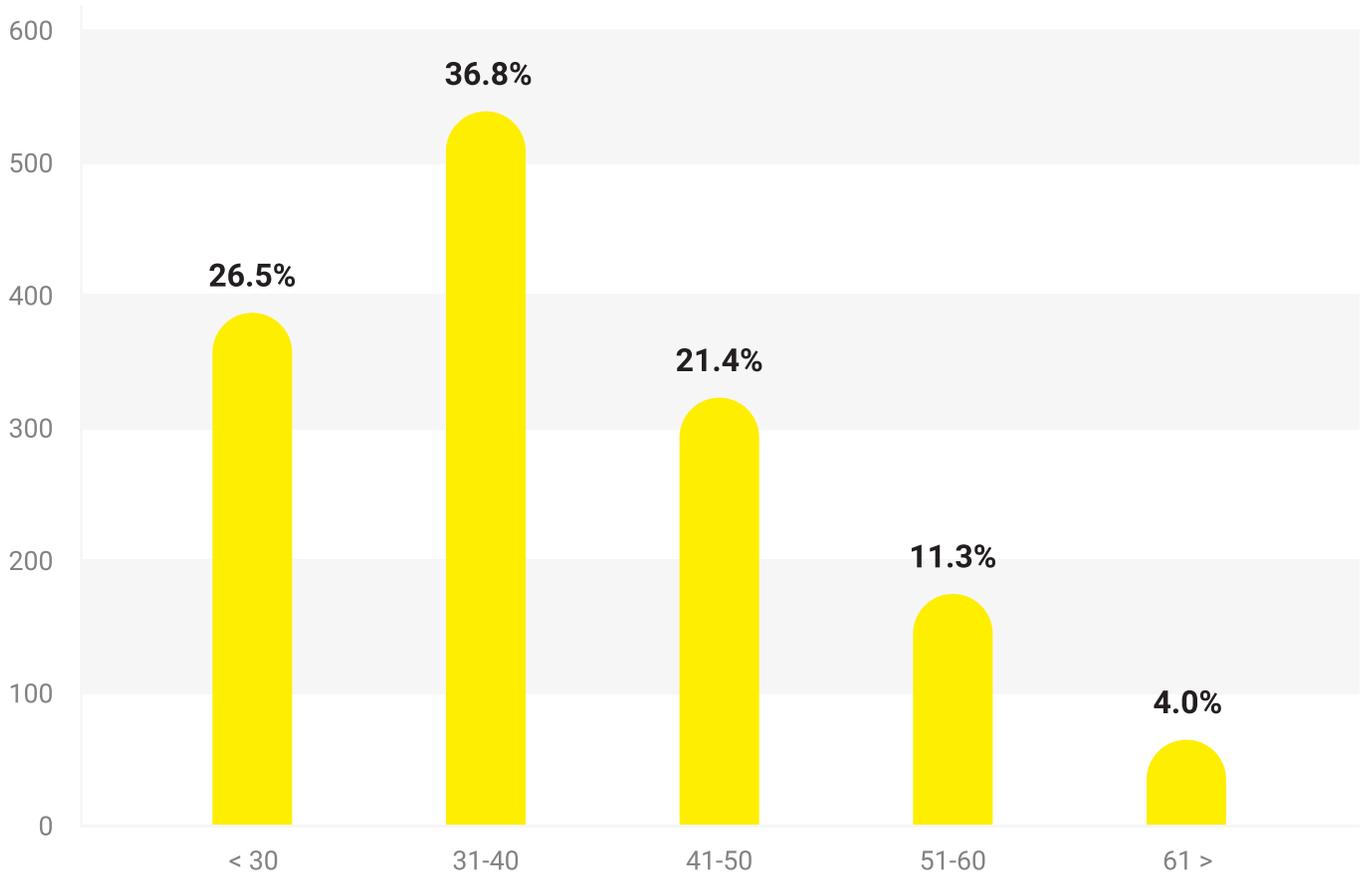


Figure 1. Age of participants

The majority of the participants were younger than 40. The survey collected data from several age groups validating that they were collected from a diverse range of participants. The greatest number of participants were ages 31-40 (37%). The smallest number of participants were older than 60 (3.9%).



Participant breakdown by types of vet hospital

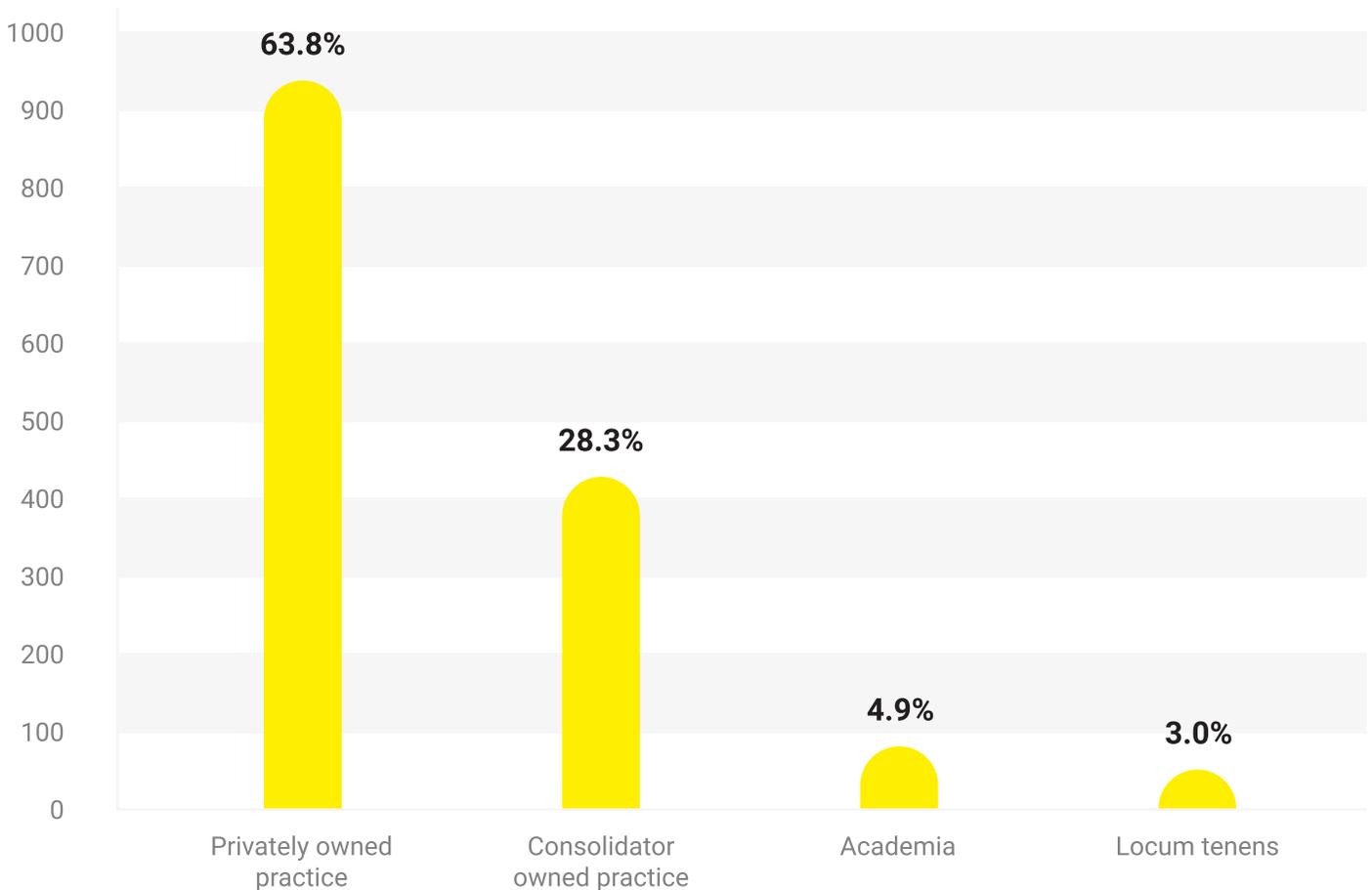


Figure 2. Type of vet hospital

The study identified the type of hospital setting that the participants were working in to compare the degree of burnout between vets working in different environments. The study targeted consolidated hospitals and private hospitals. There were participants from both types of settings. There were more participants from private hospital settings than those in consolidated hospital settings. Other hospital settings included in the research were academia and locum tenens.

This research aimed to quantify the problem of burnout within the veterinary industry by comparing different representatives of the profession. Any member of the profession, including receptionists, veterinary assistants, hospital managers, veterinarians, and veterinary technicians were part of the study.



Participant breakdown by role

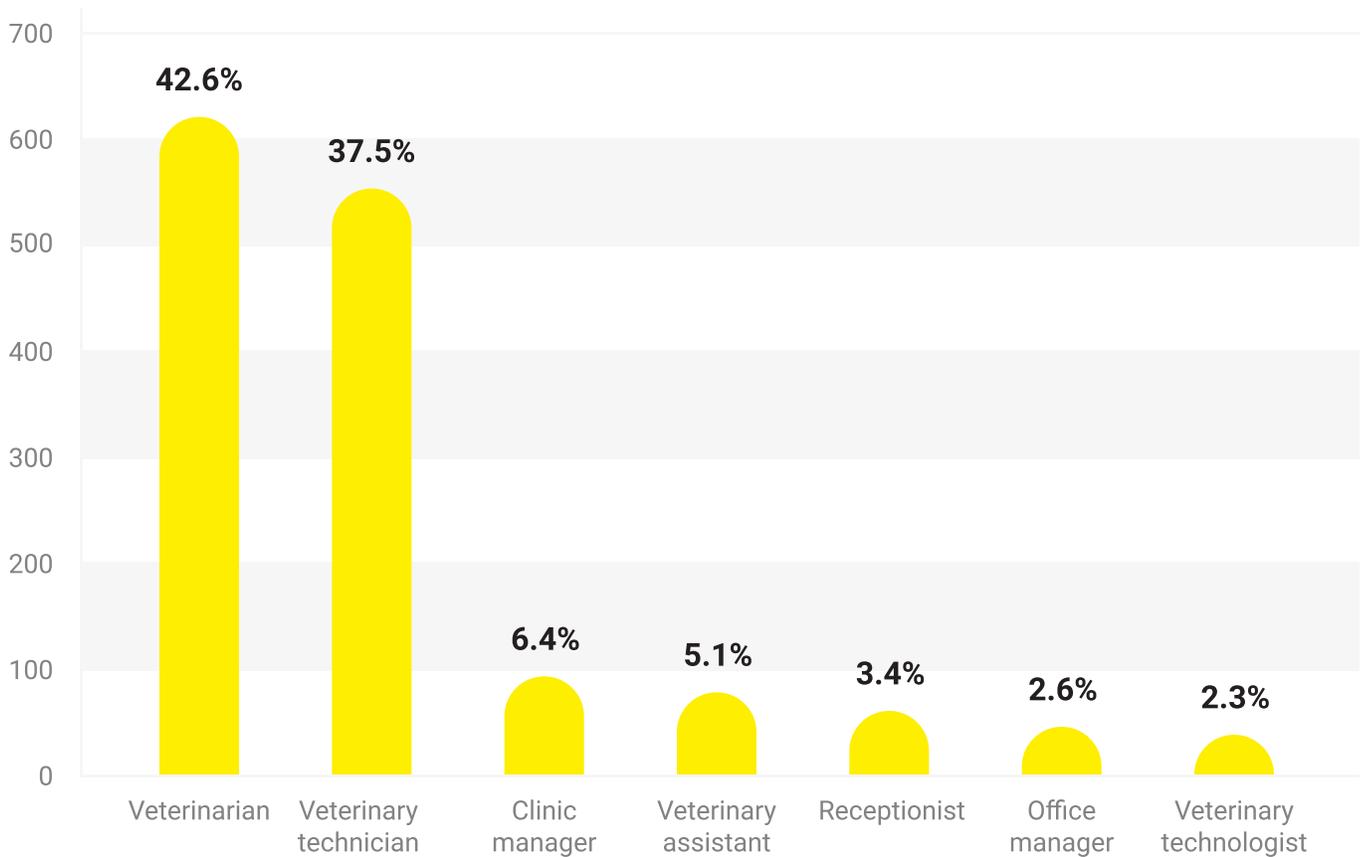


Figure 3. Role of respondents in the vet hospital

It was also critical to determine the role of the participants of the study. Forty-two percent of the participants were veterinarians and 38 percent were veterinary technicians. A small percentage were veterinary assistants and others were vet technologists. Very few participants were non-clinical (office managers, receptionists and clinic managers).

Nonetheless, the administrative employees were a crucial population since they also experience burnout while working in the hospital. Thus, their responses helped clarify the degree of burnout within the veterinary domain.



Participant breakdown by specialization

(only for veterinary doctors)

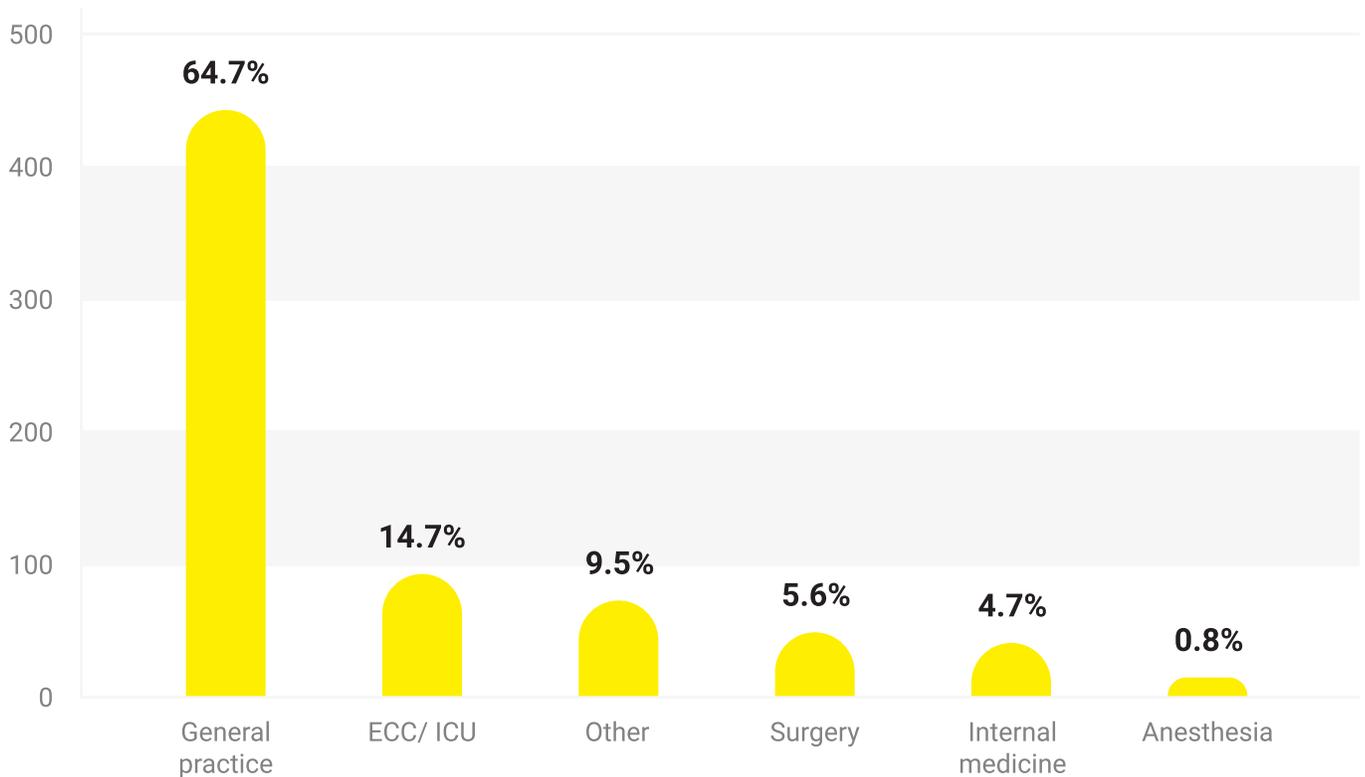


Figure 4. Specialization in the veterinary practice

It was important to interview participants from as many specialties as possible. Veterinary professionals often specialize in specific areas; interviewing several specialists provided a valid way to quantify the degree of burnout within the industry. The largest number of participants were general practice vets, while the majority of the participants did not specify their area of expertise. However, they were given the option of providing a response that best described their specialization within the hospital.

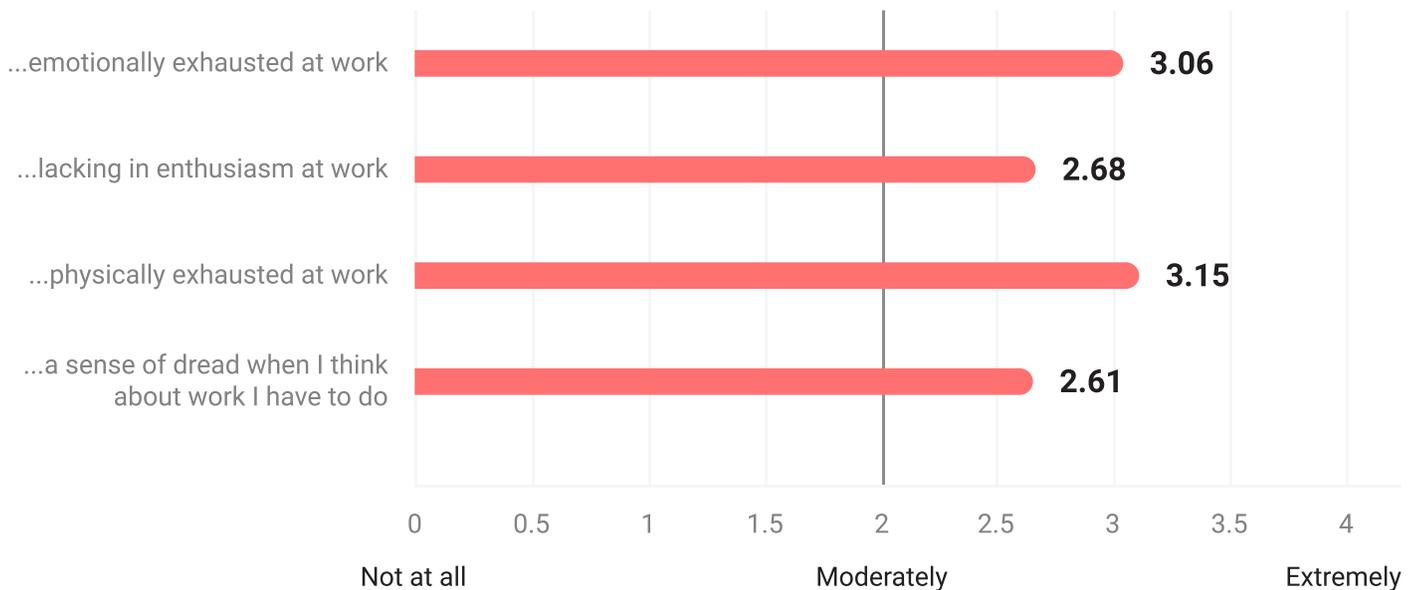


BURNOUT REMAINS A SEVERE PROBLEM IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION

The survey confirmed that burnout remains one of the most significant issues negatively affecting the veterinary profession. While most veterinary professionals find their work meaningful and their job satisfaction is generally high, the degree of burnout due to work demands is increasing. Respondents showed dangerously high levels of distress, signs of physical and emotional exhaustion, and felt a sense of dread when thinking about work they had to do.

**To what degree have you experienced the following?
During the past two weeks I have felt...**

Mean score for all the participants



A high degree of job satisfaction was one of the important findings of my study. It proves that a good veterinary staff member genuinely loves animals; therefore, they are dependable and motivated to ensure the continued success of the hospital. Hence, the real problem is the high degree of burnout among vet professionals.





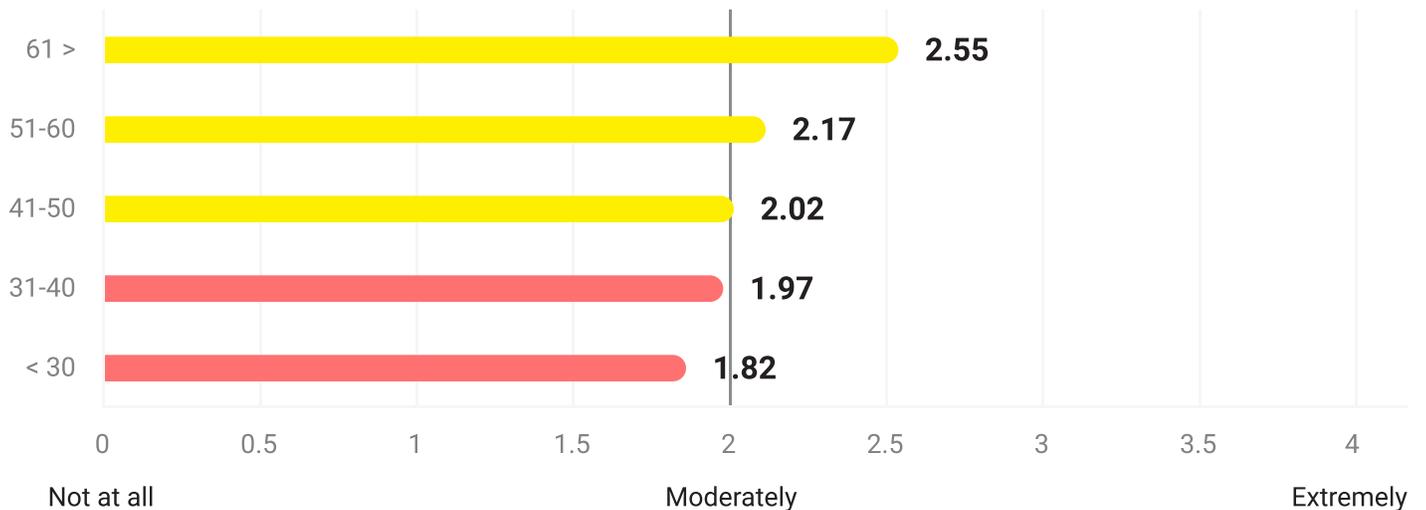
YOUNGER VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO BURNOUT

At the same time, Dr. Zak made some unexpected discoveries, and one of them was a direct correlation between the age of the respondent and the burnout rate. According to the survey results, the age group under 30 (which constituted 27 percent of respondents), showed the most significant burnout among veterinary professionals.

Aside from burnout, Dr. Zak also collected information regarding levels of physical energy and enthusiasm while at work. The results indicated the same relationship; professionals in the younger age group were less enthusiastic and more physically exhausted than their peers in other age groups.

I feel happy at work...

Mean score by age groups



This finding is even more alarming because in general, the veterinarian population is young. For example, 38 percent of U.S. vets are age 40 and under. The reason for higher burnout can be that the younger generation places more emphasis on work-life balance. It's harder for them to handle long hours or experience frustration from other factors, such as the lack of control when dealing with problems at work.



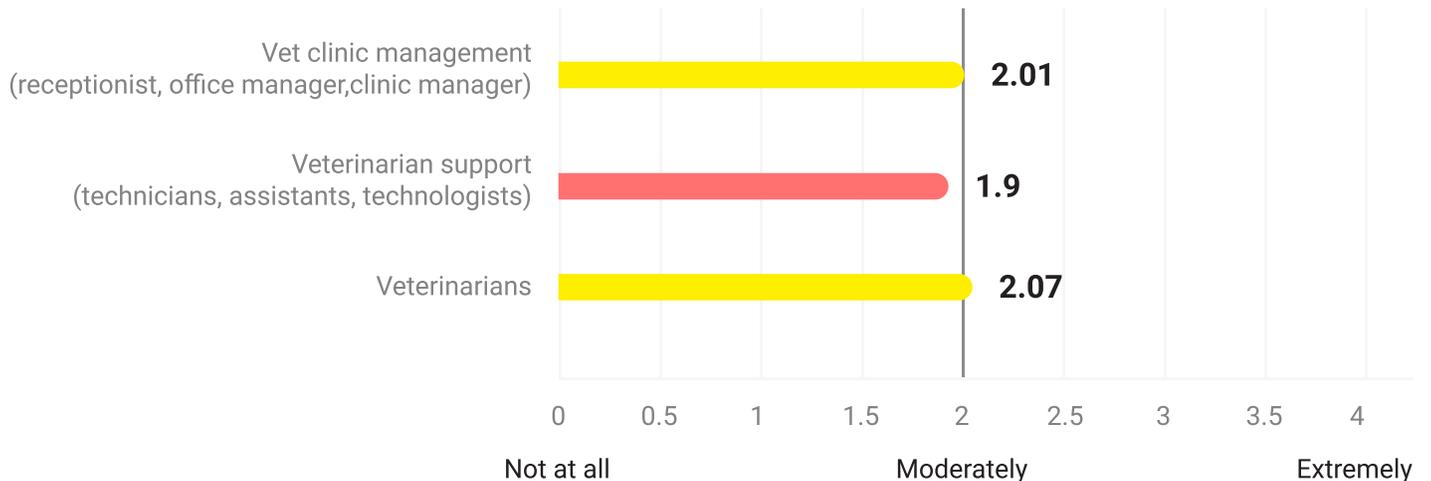


VETERINARY TECHNICIANS HAVE THE MOST DANGEROUS LEVEL OF BURNOUT

The survey collected a sample representing as many staff positions as possible: receptionists, veterinary assistants, hospital managers, veterinarians, and veterinary technicians. To compare the different roles, all participants responded to the same statement: “I feel happy at work ...” While analyzing results, Dr. Zak made an alarming discovery – there is a dangerously low level of job satisfaction among veterinary technicians – which is significantly worse than the satisfaction rate of the veterinarians.

I feel happy at work...

Mean score by vet role groups



A minor part of the survey consisted of veterinary assistants and non-clinical employees, which contributed to the study's success as they provided a broader cross-section. Although only a small percentage among administrative employees (office managers, receptionists, clinic managers, etc.) participated in the study, they also experienced burnout. Their roles in the whole clinical experience for clients and patients should not be underestimated.



Most previous studies focused on veterinary doctors only and did not find a high burnout rate among veterinary technicians. That is why it was important for us to survey technicians, receptionists and hospital managers. This is an under-researched and under-reported industry problem that needs to be immediately addressed. Often, techs are the undervalued force in the clinic setting and are stretched thin with the heavy caseload, excessive time spent on paperwork and reporting, long hours, and additional shifts. Their work is just very hard – physically and emotionally.



This finding might be a solid reason for practice managers to dedicate attention to the conditions vet technicians work in and how they can improve the current situation. A feasible way to do this is to offer a more flexible work schedule, better recognize their team's contribution, and introduce new non-monetary incentives and growth opportunities. Another way of combating burnout is adopting lean management within the organization to empower people, give them more freedom to make decisions, and focus on results rather than on micromanagement. Lean management also includes eliminating processes that are unnecessary and end up fatiguing the care provider. For instance, vet hospitals can get rid of manual paperwork and instead embrace the use of computer management systems.



APPLICATION OF LEAN THINKING TO REDUCE BURNOUT



Lean is about empowering employees

The lean management concept originated from the manufacturing industry, where the main focus is on the product and not the waste that comes with it. As many corporate entities adopt lean thinking and focus on specific pillars, most of them aim to increase revenue, improve the health of the organization and become more productive. However, the lean concept is not only about improving metrics, but also changing the organization's culture.

LEAN APPLICATION IN HUMAN HEALTHCARE

As defined by John Toussaint, one of the foremost figures in the adoption of organizational excellence principles in healthcare, lean in healthcare is the application of scientific methods to design systems and continuously improve work performance delivered by health practitioners, thus providing increased value for patients and other stakeholders within the health industry. Based on this definition, Toussaint provides six principles that can be used to guide the implementation of lean in healthcare.

- 1 Care providers should think of lean as an attitude of continuous improvement.
- 2 Lean is a value creation tool.
- 3 Lean is a method to foster unity of purpose.
- 4 Healthcare providers should take lean thinking as respect for the people who do the actual work.
- 5 Care providers ought to think of lean as a visual; this will lead to the placement of displays in staff areas to increase understanding of the application of lean methods.
- 6 Hospital staff should take lean as flexible regimentation.



The problem with most healthcare systems across the world is that they assume that lean methods are a quick fix to the issues facing the healthcare system. This assumption is the reason for the lack of success in the proper implementation of lean thinking in healthcare.



Toussaint explains that lean within healthcare should be understood as a total transformation of work culture. He puts forward that everyone within the healthcare system ought to be involved in the implementation of lean thinking. Everyone is needed to point out new ways to improve practice; therefore, no one should be on the sidelines in the quest to implement lean methods in healthcare. Another important thing to note, according to Toussaint, is that lean methods have no finish line and are a continuous process that requires constant changing of the definition of “good practice.”



LEAN THINKING CAN FACILITATE AGILE TRANSFORMATION FOR VETERINARY CONSOLIDATORS AND PROTECT EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

The veterinary industry is becoming increasingly consolidated and while this has its benefits, it can also create new challenges for the front line staff. Changes in policy, practice, and workflow can lead to frustration, create a feeling of uncertainty and end up wearing out employees. As a result, consolidated practices can suffer higher staff turnover rates following the merger of veterinary hospitals. Lean thinking can be a powerful tool in addressing the additional stress employees are likely to experience post-acquisition.

Lean methodologies have proven to be efficient in diverse industries around the world. Considering the similarities between human and animal healthcare, it is safe to assume that what would work for the human industry would also work for the veterinary industry.

“Veterinary corporate organizations can utilize the lean concept to keep the workforce happy, hence lowering the turnover.”



Lean thinking has three foundations: purpose, process and people.



LEAN LEADERSHIP

Changing any organization's culture begins with leadership. The change has to be instilled top-down and every individual in the organization — starting from the top — is required to strive for it, re-frame the work, and enact the values. Lean leadership calls for embodiment, mentorship, and inspiring lean thinking and lean values throughout the organization's structure.

DEFINITION OF PURPOSE

A lean veterinary hospital is achieved when the team is united by a shared and well-defined purpose. The lean process aims to improve the efficiency of service delivery through the reduction of waste while maximizing value. A flawed process reduces value. Lean leadership should aim to empower the staff to identify and correct faults to improve the process.

Lean veterinary organizations are holistic, and their success is attributed to everyone's attitudes, goals, processes, and behaviors.



DEFINITION OF VALUE

Bearing in mind that the goal of lean thinking is delivering maximum value to the customer, the staff in veterinary hospitals needs to understand what the value is and how it is measured. When the value is defined, the staff is in a position to work together to deliver it efficiently.

NO MICROMANAGEMENT

Lean organization encourages the bottom-up leadership model. Management in such organizations ensures that they create conditions for their employees to be successful and efficient on their own. Employees are exposed to an environment where they can observe, ask questions, and suggest input towards the organization's goals. To maintain lean management without employees being laid off or experiencing burnout, cross-train the staff so that they can fit elsewhere within the organization.



DECISION-MAKING FREEDOM

Lean leadership focuses on engaging employees, eliciting their suggestions, and valuing their expertise. Lean leaders should avoid setting goals for the employees, searching for immediate solutions and providing answers. Instead, they should search for causes, unite individual employee and organization goals, and ensure they ask the right questions.

DUPLICATES ELIMINATION

Another principle of lean management ensures that waste at any level is eliminated. After consolidation, the business structure, functions, and processes change, and some might become redundant while other areas may require more responsibility.

THE ADDED VALUE OF LEAN

Adding value to the customers is one of the lean management components. For this to be achieved, each job function should work towards achieving this goal. This means that as a stakeholder, the job functions must add value to the employees as well. Before reselling the veterinary corporate entity, ensure that added responsibilities allow newly-hired employees to succeed and grow with the company.



CONCLUSION

The veterinary profession will always remain stressful, but effective management can bring a certain relief. Although the lean methods have not yet been widely undertaken by veterinary organizations, it holds great potential to improve industry value. Veterinary consolidators have the capacity to apply lean at scale and take the lead in burnout prevention.

Veterinary consolidators, as complex corporate structures, can benefit the most from applying lean. Lean can lessen the risk of burnout and employee turnover post-acquisition. Lean environment facilitates value creation while providing an optimal experience for the staff.

As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are forcing veterinary businesses to rethink how they operate, now may be the time to embrace lean.





APPENDIX 1

PROFESSIONAL FULFILLMENT INDEX (PFI)

Section 1: How true do you feel the following statements are about you at work during the past two weeks?

	Not At All True Score = 0	Somewhat True Score = 1	Moderately True Score = 2	Very True Score = 3	Completely True Score = 4
A I feel happy at work	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
B I feel worthwhile at work	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
C My work is satisfying to me	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
D I feel in control when dealing with difficult problems at work	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
E My work is meaningful to me	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
F I'm contributing professionally (e.g., patient care, teaching, research, and leadership) in the ways I value most	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]



Section 2: To what degree have you experienced the following?

During the past two weeks I have felt...	Not At All Score = 0	Very little Score = 1	Moderately Score = 2	A lot Score = 3	Extremely Score = 4
A A sense of dread when I think about work I have to do	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
B Physically exhausted at work	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
C Lacking in enthusiasm at work	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
D Emotionally exhausted at work	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

Section 1: How true do you feel the following statements are about you at work during the past two weeks?

During the past two weeks, my job has contributed to me feeling...	Not At All Score = 0	Very little Score = 1	Moderately Score = 2	A lot Score = 3	Extremely Score = 4
A Less empathetic with my patients	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
B Less empathetic with my colleagues	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
C Less sensitive to others' feelings/emotions	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
D Less interested in talking with my patients	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
E Less connected with my patients	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
F Less connected with my colleagues	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]



AUTHOR

Dr. Ivan “Zak” Zakharenkov is a veterinarian with 12 years of experience in emergency medicine. After graduating, he worked in 35 veterinary hospitals across Canada, where he was inspired to create Smart Flow, a first-in-the-industry workflow optimization system. Smart Flow was subsequently acquired by the 500 company IDEXX, where he became general manager of the software division. After consulting 500+ practices worldwide on workflow optimization, he co-founded Veterinary Integration Solutions to create a more cohesive, unified consolidator operating platform that will ultimately benefit the veterinary profession.

Dr. IVAN ZAK

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