

Application of Expertise

While graduate employability typically highlights transferable personal and interpersonal attributes, **specialized technical knowledge and skills** are undoubtedly important influences on success in the workplace. However, employers often view technical or discipline-specific expertise as a **prerequisite** of employment, rather than being scrutinised during candidate selection. In the VetSet2Go project, veterinary employers said they expect graduates to have good technical knowledge and skills, since that is what universities focus on.

But more important is the graduate's **ability to apply this expertise in 'real-world' situations**, such as in diagnosing and managing complex clinical cases. Employers told the project that they expect **confidence and entry-level ('Day One') expertise** in routine but important areas of practice, including:

Knowledge

- basic applied anatomy & physiology
- pharmacology for treatment planning & routine anaesthesia
- preventative healthcare & vaccinations
- general husbandry advice
- production industry knowledge & agricultural economics
- basic computer software/IT
- basic day-to-day veterinary business economics

Skills & Application

- confident but gentle animal handling
- thorough clinical examination
- routine consults & history-taking
- interpretation of lab/pathology results
- triage & problem-solving
- routine procedures, e.g. injections, catheters, medicating
- routine surgery, e.g. de-sexing, wounds
- maintaining medical records
- preparing estimates & bills

What they said

"The other main way I assess vets (apart from their respect for me) is how they handle my animals, with kindness and confidence, and talking to the animals to calm them and develop a rapport." (Client)

*"[It's about] how much of the physiology and the pharmacology and the anatomy they can **relate to their new job in the workplace**. It's all very well and good to be able to rote learn anatomy and get a [high grade] in it, but to be able to **put it into practice** when you're back in the workplace is really, really important. So ... that's where I think a lot of them fall down, because they've learnt all that stuff and done really well, but they can't **make it useful**." (Employer)*

*"Know at least the basics of handling the animal you are coming to treat - **practical stockmanship** goes a long way in creating an initial confidence for the client and the animal - lack of it destroys trust all round." (Client)*

How is application of expertise recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are confident with animal handling
- You are confident with surgical basics, e.g. speys and castrations
- You are confident with procedural skills, e.g. IV catheters, taking blood
- You are confident with anaesthesia

Perceived by others:

- Inspires confidence through compassionate animal handling, sound practical skills and application of knowledge

In a VetSet2Go survey, clients were found to rate 'good knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery' as the most important quality they expect in their veterinarian. However, since clients may not be able to judge expertise directly, this can be taken to indicate the importance that the **client has confidence in the skills and expertise of their vet**, and feels their animal is 'in safe hands' and receiving the best care. Clients also told the project that they use **animal handling skills** or stockmanship as a proxy for judging the abilities of the veterinarian, making these skills particularly important for gaining the confidence of clients (and thus employers).

Why is application of expertise important to employability?

The VetSet2Go project found that employers typically value **confidence with routine, entry-level skills** above more specialized (but rarely required) knowledge. They also expect that theoretical 'textbook' knowledge can be applied to solve complex, real-world problems. Employees who can confidently employ their expertise to manage typical, day-to-day problems and procedures contribute positively to the efficiency and productivity of the veterinary practice, and give clients confidence that their pets are receiving high quality care.

However, both employers and clients told the VetSet2Go project that they do not expect veterinarians, particularly recent graduates, to be experts in everything. Rather, they value vets who honestly admit gaps in their knowledge or expertise, but promise to follow these up by doing further 'homework' in a process of **continual learning**.

*"[...] the criteria I'm looking at are more **people skills** probably, I'd say, and I'm assuming that they've got good base skills for the job because they've graduated." (Employer)*

"I would have said her medical and surgical skills were probably what I expected, probably no more, no less, and that's perfectly good enough for us." (Employer)

*"[The] vet must be able to give the client **confidence in their ability**." (Client)*

"They don't have to know every nitty-gritty thing, but to know where the uterus is in a dog and where its bladder is in relation to that, and intestines, liver, spleen, all the basics. I don't expect them to know every muscle in a dog, not really important. I don't expect them to know all the things that you don't need to know. You don't need to know every muscle in a dog." (Employer)

*"We want someone who has a really good basic knowledge of medicine and the **ability to work from first principles** and do [a] good basic work-up. But then obviously, if they [...] get into the complicated cases, [we're] not expecting them to be able to do everything from day dot." (Employer)*

Possible strategies to enhance your application of expertise

Gain work experience:

Work experience is viewed as a key element of employability in many fields, because 'real-world' experience allows learners to apply knowledge and skills developed in more theoretical situations.

Gain animal handling experience:

Animal handling skills are often used by clients and employers as a proxy for your overall skill level. Take every opportunity to gain confidence with effective and efficient, yet gentle and compassionate, animal handling skills.

Volunteer:

Seek volunteer opportunities to hone your skills while contributing to a good cause, e.g. charitable de-sexing services in poor communities; animal shelters; wildlife rescues; agricultural shows.

Watch old hands at work:

Experienced veterinarians may not rival a new graduate on the latest advances in veterinary science, but have a lifetime of experience in dealing with everyday problems – it pays to watch them work and ask them about their tips and tricks.

Learn the business side:

Expertise is not just about technical knowledge and skills, but also confidence with the financial and logistical side of operations. Being able to prepare and discuss an estimate of costs is as much a veterinary skill as being able to do the surgery.

Learn from everyone:

A good learner understands that you can learn from anyone, so be willing to take direction and seek advice/guidance from nurses and technicians, and draw upon the experience of clients as well as veterinarian colleagues.

Find a mentor or buddy:

Continual learning happens when systems are in place to support learning, e.g. a designated mentor/buddy can be a 'go to' person to seek guidance from, and develop a teaching/learning relationship with.