

Continual Learning

Continual learning in the employability sense describes not only the process of **lifelong learning** and inquiry, but also the attitude and mindset of being **keen to learn**.

Continual learning is essential for veterinarians to advance their capabilities, in order to **become better practitioners**.

Professional growth and development is also necessary to keep up-to-date, especially given increasingly rapid advances in veterinary knowledge and techniques.

In the context of the veterinary profession, continual learning can be both formal (e.g. structured Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the form of conferences, courses, or advanced training) and informal (e.g. learning from more experienced colleagues in your practice, or reading around an interesting clinical case).

While continual learning may be directed or facilitated by an employer, much continual learning is self-driven and self-directed. As well as learning through pursuing workplace and external CPD opportunities, veterinarians **strive for improvement** and aim for best practice through seeking help and guidance when needed, and through **acting upon feedback** about their clinical and professional capabilities.

What they said

*"I guess I get a bit wary about people who are **over-confident** with their skills. I'm much more accommodating towards people who say, 'I'd **love to learn**. I don't know how to spay a dog, because I've only done one and that was at uni, but please teach me. I'd love to learn how to do it.' ..."* (Employer)

"So I suppose the ones who are open to education and feedback, they'll be interested in what you're saying, and as you work through sort of a disease with them, they'll ask questions that are insightful, that are part of the process, whereas students who aren't going to be as open to teaching seem disengaged when you explain things to them, or often fob off saying, 'Yes, yes, yes, I know that,' those sorts of things. So those would be the markers for me that I'd be concerned about, if they fade off or they say, yes, I know, rather than appear interested or ask follow-up questions. Asking follow up questions, I suppose, shows that you're actually trying to learn from what I'm saying, whereas just nodding and saying yes, doesn't necessarily show that it's going in at all." (Employer)

*"Yeah it's the **preparedness to learn**, the preparedness to go that extra mile to work the case up, to try and find options on a difficult case, to try and muck in and try and want to be there when a leg's being repaired ... to wait back after work if something's rushed in for a caesarean. Those sort of graduates turn out to be good vets, because you can see the **willingness to gather skills together**." (Employer)*

How is continual learning recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are committed to continually improving your knowledge and skills
- You can identify your own gaps and take the initiative
- You like to push yourself 'outside your comfort zone' to grow
- You are open-minded and responsive to feedback
- You view challenges as learning opportunities

Perceived by others:

- Keen to learn
- Interested, asks questions
- Seeks and listens to feedback
- Strives for improvement through reflection on practice
- Sets development goals
- Develops special interests

Why is continual learning important to employability?

In the VetSet2Go project, employers and colleagues often spoke of valuing '**love of learning**' – keenness to learn, and thirst for knowledge and **self-improvement**. Employers recognise continual learners as those who appear interested in what's going on, who are happy to try something new, who ask questions, and aren't afraid to ask for help or guidance. The tone and nature of their response to feedback can indicate whether someone has a learning attitude, versus an 'I already know everything I need to know' attitude. Similarly, clients told the VetSet2Go project that they value a vet who is **honest about gaps in their knowledge**, but is happy to go away and pursue further learning on their behalf.

Employers, employees, clients and their animals all benefit from a commitment to continual learning. Aside from ensuring that high standards of veterinary care are maintained, continual learning contributes to job satisfaction and a sense of well-being, and promotes **collaboration and teamwork**. Employers place a high value on veterinarians who are willing and able to attend to continual learning in the workplace and through CPD activities. This is because continual learning is associated with many employability capabilities, including **application of expertise, motivation, commitment, diligence, sustainable engagement, adaptability, reflective self-evaluation, and self-confidence and identity**.

The VetSet2Go project found that new graduates were especially well-placed for continual learning: they were seen to be open-minded to being taught, and were not too rigid or set in their ways. Employers of new graduates accepted that it was their responsibility to scaffold clinical skills development in the workplace. Because they were inexperienced, new graduates were felt to be more likely to **ask questions and seek clarification or guidance**, all of which brought about continual learning.

The project also found that employers were concerned if there was a lack of commitment to continual learning, and actively filtered out applicants who failed to demonstrate this quality. For example, applicants who were **overconfident** were perceived to be not interested in learning, as were those who were unwilling to ask for guidance. Some employers felt that having a lot of experience could close veterinarians off to further learning, especially if the exposure was at the specialist level.

*"It's great when, if the vet isn't sure about the diagnosis or the best way to treat the issue, they are happy to go away and **research**, ask senior vets or recommend specialists to help identify the problem and help plan the best course of treatment and/or prevention." (Client)*

*"I don't mind if a vet **acknowledges** that they don't have much expertise in an area. By all means, consult a book or call a mentor before referring me to an expensive specialist." (Client)*

"I respect a person who is unable to find an answer immediately and says so — then follows up using research or other colleagues. No shame in learning." (Client)

"It is also nice for a vet to say it sounds like 'X' but I need to research to be 100% sure. For the vet to acknowledge they don't know everything and need to research shows they are willing to learn more and are honest about their knowledge. I would feel more comfortable knowing my vet said this and came back to me." (Client)

Possible strategies to enhance your continual learning

Take Responsibility:

Don't wait to be 'taught' — take responsibility for your learning and be willing to follow through and focus on it.

Identify Targets:

Identify and reflect upon your own learning gaps and take the initiative, e.g. look things up, ask to be taught something.

Set Learning Goals:

Develop short-term and long-term learning goals based on your interests and perceived weaknesses and then plan how to meet those goals.

Emergency Learning:

If you are a new graduate, offer to come in to observe/assist emergency cases as these are valuable learning opportunities.

Be a Self-Learner:

Avoid 'learner dependency' — you are not starting from scratch, and employers don't like it when you are totally dependent on guidance from others/locked into 'student mode.'

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 clients' experience, as well as that of other veterinarians.

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.

Industry Experience:

In production animal-based practices, gaining industry experience, say by working on a farm for a few months, will help you gain a better understanding of the industry.

Ask For Help:

Employees need to know that their requests for help/guidance will be responded to positively; that there is someone available if they need it.

Further Resources:

- Briggs S. (2014) InformED. *25 Practices That Foster Lifelong Learning*. www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/lifelong-learning/