

Reflective Self-evaluation

Reflection is a key skill in professional life, and has been described as “the essence of professionalism”. It is expected of professionals such as veterinarians that they:

- Monitor the quality of what they do
- Continually strive for improvement and evidence-based best practice
- Learn from their past experiences & mistakes
- Are aware of their own strengths, weaknesses, and limitations.

But reflection is not only key to professionalism, it also a **‘master key’** with many central roles in employability.

The VetSet2Go project concluded that **self-awareness, reflection, and identity formation** forms the core of employability development, since it drives the central learning process as well as developing specific capabilities that are valued in their own right (e.g. capacity for reflection, ability to articulate achievements). Self-awareness builds and activates employability ‘assets’ through knowledge of employability strengths as well as areas for development, drives personal learning and agency, and enables exploration of identity ‘job fit’.

The VetSet2Go project found that while **awareness of limitations** is important to employability as well as being an essential element of professionalism, **awareness of your strengths** is just as important for employability.

What they said :

“... all of his basic problem-solving skills were there, and he knew his limitations. And that to me is really appealing, someone who knows their limitations and is happy to admit them and say, now I need help. So his approach was, ‘This is how I would approach it, and this is my rationale, this is how I’d go about it, this is the point at which I would ask for assistance’. That to me is a perfect new graduate.” (employer)

“You know, things like emotional resilience ... For me, that’s kind of tied up in the whole awareness of self, and awareness of what your abilities are and what your limits are, and what your wants and needs and desires and those kind of things are.” (employer)

“Being able to sit down with [my employer] and be like, ‘A complaint: I did this and this. Is there anything you think I could have changed?’ So the communication, being willing to ask for criticism and being able to put that criticism into something that you can implement practically on a daily basis; I think that’s a really good thing.” (recent graduate employee)

How is reflective self-evaluation recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are comfortable reflecting on your own thoughts, actions, habits
- You can ‘take a step back’ from experiences to understand and learn from them
- You are aware of your strengths and limitations, and can play to your strengths and develop your weaknesses
- You know your limits, and feel comfortable asking for help or advice
- You are able to learn from failures and mistakes to improve your practice

Perceived by others:

- Shows insight – their self-assessments matches the perceptions of others
- Aware of their own strengths and limitations
- Reflective and learns from experience
- Self-aware of their behaviours and impact on others
- Willing to give things a go, but aware of their limits and happy to ask for help

Why is reflective self-evaluation important to employability?

Reflective self-awareness is defined as an essential competency in many other professions including veterinary medicine, and is specified in the guidelines of veterinary accrediting bodies such as the RCVS. The capacity for reflection and self-audit underpins many important professional attributes such as effective **problem-solving** and decision-making, **communication**, conflict management, **effective relationships** with clients & colleagues, dealing with challenge, and **life-long learning**. So not only is reflective self-awareness valued as an employability attribute – it also drives the key process for developing and activating many other employability capabilities.

In the VetSet2Go project, employers, colleagues and clients told us that they value a veterinary graduate who:

- is aware of their strengths and weaknesses and can articulate them (e.g., during a job interview)
- is willing to 'give things a go', but is aware of their limitations and comfortable asking for help when required
- shows evidence they have gone out of their way to develop skills or knowledge they may lack
- is able to learn from mistakes and experiences
- shows a high level of professional, personal and emotional self-awareness.

"[...] we try to do as much of that [reflection] as possible, and she [the graduate] needs to remember how many things she is good at, and that's what I try to make the reviews about. ... these are things you're doing well, but these are the areas that you could [improve], and overall you're doing fantastic."

(Employer of recent graduate)

"And I suppose it's about the [application/CV] writing style, too ... [saying] – 'this is what I've got to offer you'. ... and it doesn't often come naturally to us, selling what's unique about us, ... [saying] these are all the other things that I have done that make me different and stand out, and could bring something to your team."

"The most important things to me: that my vet is knowledgeable but also willing to admit areas where he/she is lacking knowledge and willing to continue to learn." (Client)

"We look for people who ... can judge themselves as well, so they don't assume they've done everything right, or that everyone else has done everything right. So we want them to keep going back and looking at the patients again and again, and thinking: are we missing something? [We want] very reflective practitioners, but not so much that they become paralysed by it."

(Employer of recent graduate)

Possible strategies to enhance your reflective self-evaluation

Learn to reflect:

Reflection is something we all do instinctively, often without realizing it. Nevertheless, effective reflection is also a learned skill which can be practiced and refined. Much has been written about reflection so take the time to learn what reflection is (and what it isn't), and how to do it properly.

Just ask the question:

Sometimes reflection can be as simple as looking back and just ask yourself the question, 'What could I have done differently? What can I change next time?'

Follow the '3 WHATS':

Another useful process to follow is to ask:

What? What did you experience? In what context? Who what where when?

So what? Why is this important? Who cares? How does this make you feel? What thoughts went through your head? What beliefs or assumptions did it challenge?

What now? What does this mean? What did you learn? Do you know why this happened? Are there lessons here? How will this apply to you?

Talk to someone:

Reflection needn't be done only in your head - it can often help to 'think out loud' and talk through a problem with a colleague or mentor.

...or talk to yourself:

If no-one's around, you can still 'think out loud' – by talking to yourself! Sometimes an imaginary conversation can be just as helpful as a real one.

Be open about mistakes:

Many new graduates overestimate the negative impact of admitting mistakes, whereas clients and employers often say the opposite – honestly admitting mistakes creates valuable learning opportunities.

Keep a notebook or journal:

Writing down your reflections will increase their impact. Keep a notebook or pin-board handy to write '**notes to self**'.

Give yourself time:

Reflection is difficult when we are rushed – be sure to reserve the quiet time you need to reflect properly.

Further Resources:

- Adams C, Nestel D, Wolf P (2006) Reflection: a critical proficiency essential to the effective development of a high competence in communication. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education* 33(1): 58-64
- Davies 2018. Taking a different approach to learning using self reflection. *Veterinary Record* 182, i-ii
- RCVS 2018. Learning from reflection. <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/lifelong-learning/continuing-professional-development-cpd/cpd-champions-blog/learning-from-reflection/>
- OpenLearn (free course) Learning to teach: becoming a reflective practitioner. <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/learning-teach-becoming-reflective-practitioner/>