

Self-confidence & Identity

The VetSet2Go project found that self-confidence and identity is important for veterinary employability, and has described this as a veterinarian who *“has positive self-esteem and self-belief, anchored in a professional self-concept based on personal values, beliefs and goals”*.

In other words, we could say that self-confidence and identity is **self-assurance in relation to one’s ability** to function as a veterinarian in the context of the workplace.

What we have found in our research is that **both under-confidence and over-confidence** in a recent graduate are **problematic** for the rest of the team, and for employers to manage.

Under-confident recent graduates may require more ‘hand-holding’ by their employers and senior veterinarians, and may develop an over-reliance on support. Many employers found this level of support tiring. On the other hand, over-confident recent graduates are considered harder to teach and mentor as they appear to know it all, and do not want help and guidance. Some employers commented that some (initially) over-confident recent graduates will ‘tone it down’ and begin to listen more once they are advised to do so, and once they realise that they need help.

What they said

“But again, that’s confidence and knowing that it’s a mindset, knowing that you can do it. If you follow the rules doing it this way and that way, it’s not going to go wrong. The only thing that can go wrong is taking twice as long or three times as long as you normally do. So yeah, with technical skills I guess it took me about four or five months before I got quite confident in my spays and castrates. So initially I was taking about two hours for my spays and I brought it down to an hour by six months.” (Employee)

“And have the confidence to have a go and, again, working in rural practice first out really helped with that because most farmers, they just want you to try something, you know.” (Employee)

“It’s a bit difficult initially to just be confident in your ability to make that decision ... I was always asking for advice, especially in the early stages when I was unsure. So I think that helped as well. Because you’re getting reinforcement that you’re thinking along the right lines. But you also have that backup. So you’ve got the confidence to ask other people.” (Employee)

How is self-confidence & identity recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You believe in yourself and what you can achieve
- You can ‘back yourself’ to make decisions
- You can project confidence to reassure others, e.g. clients
- You are confident to ‘have a go’, without becoming overconfident or reckless
- You have a good concept of ‘who you are’, personally and professionally

Perceived by others:

- Positive self-esteem and self-belief
- Confident to ‘have a go’, but can recognize their limits
- Can gain and maintain clients’ confidence
- Mature, confident, professional identity based on self-awareness of abilities, beliefs, values
- Is able to make decisions autonomously but will also listen to advice and seek help
- BUT NOT: reckless, cocky, egotistical, overbearing, boastful, etc.

Why is self-confidence and identity important to employability?

Over-confidence inhibits **teamwork**, as it often presents as 'cocky' and tends to run roughshod over others, leading to personality clashes and being unlikely to help others in the team. Over-confidence also inhibits **willingness to learn**, as it leads recent graduates to think they know it all. Over-confidence may also reduce **self-reflection** and reflective practice, and instead promote a tunnel-vision approach to case management and patient care.

Under-confidence often **impairs the ability to make decisions**, which in turn inhibits **workflow**.

Both over-confident and under-confident animal handling is associated with **risks** and can compromise safety. Finding and possessing an appropriate level of self-confidence is essential. In other words, being confident without being over-confident, which is a challenging balance to attain!

"So they need to be, I guess, confident enough to jump in and do some things, so not get frozen with fear, but not over-confident." (Employer)

"I think if clients can tell that you're not confident, it's hard for them to trust you and then problems arise." (Employer)

"He is confident, but not reckless." (Employer)

"He's always been confident. Maybe too confident in some areas ... Maybe a case where he could take advice from me and he didn't ..." (Employer)

Possible strategies to enhance your self-confidence and identity

Back yourself:

Your self-confidence will never improve unless you 'give it a go'. Success builds confidence. Challenge yourself, preferably in a supported environment, and reflect upon your success. Believe that you can do it. When you do – celebrate this.

Remain willing to learn:

This will promote exposure to new challenges, thus building your confidence, but will also keep someone prone to over-confidence in check.

Reflective practice:

Do this not only to celebrate your increased knowledge / success, but also to prevent you from believing everything that you say! For the over-confident, reflect upon feedback that may point out your need to listen or to 'tone it down'.

Positive reinforcement:

Accept this from others graciously, and believe them. Do this with yourself as well.

Life experience:

Employers see retail and service industry experience (e.g. bartending work) as a good way to improve self-confidence in relation to interpersonal skills and teamwork. Employers commented that those who are widely travelled or have diverse interests came across as having a "certain strength and confidence about them".