



Sustainable Engagement

Sustainable engagement describes the capacity to sustain an **energetic connection to your work**, through ensuring an approach to work that is **sustainable**. This requires finding balance between work and other priorities, such as nurturing relationships and enjoying outside interests.

This balancing act is often termed 'work-life balance' but is perhaps better referred to as '**life balance**', since work can and should be an enjoyable and rewarding part of life.

In examining the factors underlying success as a veterinarian, Lewis & Klausner (2003) identified balancing work, family, community, and professional obligations as a key success indicator. However, the same study also identified achieving this balance as a key challenge for veterinarians, because of their **unpredictable work** hours and workload, and willingness to make sacrifices for their role.

Excessive workload and long work hours are also well-known risks for **poor mental health and burnout**, highlighting the crucial need to balance commitment to work against other important life needs. Keeping the commitment to work sustainable through a healthy life balance is therefore a key element of employability from the perspective of both the employee and the employer.

What they said

"To have a focus outside vet is really important too. I've seen new grads come out, they're full of enthusiasm and they're full of energy and they run and run and run and then they crash ... They get to the stage where the novelty's worn off, all of a sudden, it's a long hard slog. It's long hours, it's long days, it's long nights. Lots of pressure, lots of emotional stress. And if you don't have an outlet for it, it'll very quickly consume you." (Employer)

"Somebody who has a good sense of humour, who values balance. So they are not going to be the sort of person who is just going to, all day, every day, all night, every night, have their head in the books ... The ones that can go, tools down, I'm out and going for a bike ride, or I'm going for a walk on the beach with my girlfriend, or I'm going to go take the dog for a walk. So those questions do come through in an interview as well: what do you do with your spare time? Not because I'm particularly interested, but because I need to know that they can find that balance." (Employer)

"Yeah, so I work full-time, five days a week. I go to the gym four days a week, and I play sport on the weekends and I live right next to the beach, so I go to the beach quite a lot, and yeah, I live with people who have nothing to do with the work that I do and we get home and have a chat and a beer ..." (Recent graduate)

How is sustainable engagement recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are aware of the balance in your life, and feel satisfied and in control of it (not overwhelmed)
- You can keep a sense of perspective about what's important
- You can mentally 'switch off' from work to recharge
- You have energy left for all parts of your life
- You can balance or reprioritize competing demands in your life, including work

Perceived by others:

- Sustainably engaged, motivated, energized – 'keeps the fire going'
- Healthy work-life balance
- Can draw boundaries and 'leave work at work'
- Has outside passions, interests, hobbies
- A 'multi-faceted' or 'broad' person; not defined only by their work

Why is sustainable engagement important to employability?

Since employability is concerned with success and satisfaction in work¹, it includes by default those capabilities that support work satisfaction, and ensure the long-term sustainability of employment. The VetSet2Go project identified a cluster of related **psychological resources** as important to employability, including resilience, emotional competence, motivation and sustainable engagement. In particular, the capacity to ensure **life balance** was identified as a key element of **resilience** in the veterinary context.

Fortunately, many employers and workplaces recognise the importance of life balance and sustainable engagement, making this an important employability skill from the perspective of both the employer and the employee. Employers told the VetSet2Go project that they actively seek employees with a **balanced approach to work**, strong social supports and **active interests** outside of their job. While employers value commitment, diligence and a good work ethic, they equally recognise that this needs to be sustainable over the longer term, and look for employees with habits and strategies that enable this such as **workflow management** and boundary-setting.

“And I think, too, when you’re looking through the CV, it is looking at other stuff that they’ve done outside. So yes, you want to know what they’ve done [at university], but at the end of the day a lot of new graduate CVs look a lot like all of the others. So what else have you done with your life? ... And to me that shows someone who under duress recognises the balance – the importance of the work/life balance, and that they need to go and do other things. And so that gives me an indication of resilience.” (Employer)

“Hobbies and sporting interests are also another thing that we put a lot of emphasis on. I think you can tell a lot about people by how they choose to spend their spare time. And we find too, that as much as the work skills are important, being able to have an outlet or an alternative—having your life outside being a vet—is really important to how well people settle into the community. And ultimately how long they stick around as vets. Because they can be brilliant vets and they can love their job and they can be good at it, but if that’s all they do, they’re 24/7 being a vet, ultimately they burn out. They get to a stage where their whole focus is work and they just don’t have any sort of social or physical outlet. Whereas people who have interests in other areas ... I don’t care if it’s rock-climbing or archery or painting or yachting, someone who’s got an interest that’s completely outside the veterinary world is generally a lot more likely to fit into the community and just, I guess, have that work-life balance that’s so important in a long-term career.” (Employer)

Possible strategies to enhance your sustainable engagement

Leave work at work:

Make a rule of ‘leaving work at work’. Make sure you have handed over all your responsibilities so you don’t need to keep thinking about them after work. Mark the end of the work day with a ritual, such as exercise or listening to music.

Make plans:

Make plans for your time off to ensure you make the most of it, e.g. arrange to meet friends or family. Try to get out of the house at least once on your weekend.

Say no:

It can be hard to ‘learn to say no’, but this is an important precursor to setting boundaries around your personal time.

Clarify expectations:

Chat to your boss and your colleagues about your personal philosophy and approach to balancing work.

Get your priorities straight:

Make sure your own health, friendships and family occupy the right place in your list of priorities.

Have a hobby:

Dedicating time to an engaging hobby outside of work is a great way to refresh. Try restarting that neglected hobby you used to enjoy but got too busy for.

Do sport and exercise:

Sport brings the double benefit of healthy exercise as well as a scheduled break from thinking about work, while team-based sports add social relationships.

Take a holiday:

Regular holidays are an important part of looking after yourself.

Take a break:

Even short breaks timetabled into the work day can refresh your energy and focus — these can be coupled with quick breathing or mindfulness exercises to supercharge a short break.

Work smarter not harder:

Work should not be measured by the hours you put in, but by what you can achieve through being fully engaged.