

# Juggling career and family: When people want to work less than 60 hours per week

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## Introduction

This paper is designed to briefly look at some of the benefits and challenges of part-time work within the veterinary profession. I work in a large animal practice as a dairy herd health veterinarian and Intelact consultant. I have two little girls, and reduced my working hours to part-time when I returned to work after my first child was born.

The composition of the New Zealand veterinary profession is changing, with ever increasing numbers of female veterinarians and more of those females working less than a traditional 40 hour week (Veterinary Council of New Zealand 2012). Stevenson (2012) predicted how the profession will look in 2029 and he put forward the concern that while the actual veterinarian counts remain relatively static from 2015 to 2029 there's a negative trend in full time equivalent counts.

As the composition of the profession within New Zealand changes, so too do the working hours of many veterinarians. The idea of part-time work (less than five full days at work), seemed like a good compromise for me, as it does for many other veterinarians who want to enjoy other parts of their life, but most commonly for women bringing up their families. However, part-time is by no means an easy option and I am hoping this paper helps you prepare yourself for part-time work.

## What are the benefits of working part-time?

For the employee the benefits of working part-time may be obvious such as having a better work-life balance (therefore happier) and the best of both worlds (home and work), however the flip side, especially as a working mother who enjoys their work (perhaps a veterinarian trait of being a high achiever) there is the feeling of constant compromise, and never doing anything properly anymore. I had been pre-warned of this feeling, before I started back at work after the birth of my first child, but never really believed how much it would play on my mind until I was living it.

Clients appreciate that we are still working, and if they have enjoyed a good relationship with you in the past, this can continue when you are working part-time, in fact depending on the nature of the relationships, they may not even be aware that you are now only part-time. If you have had a close relationship with your clients, then you may gain more respect from them for coming back to work after taking maternity leave for example (improved relationship with your farmers' wives for example).

It is crucial for clients and employers alike that experienced veterinarians continue to practice; therefore retaining experienced staff is extremely valuable. In my discussions with various part-timers for this paper, I found a common comment was that, mothers would not have returned to vet work if they hadn't been able to work part-time. We are working in a profession that is progressive with strict CPD requirements and taking time out for a few years to have children, with minimal contact with colleagues, makes returning to work extremely difficult.

Working part-time increases the efficiency of the vets (trying to get the same amount of work done in less time, or reducing 'down time'), and consequently improves time management skills of those working part-time.

If working part-time is occurring because you have children, some may argue that the children benefit from exposure to other environments (grandparents, a nanny, childcare or an in-home educator).

By having a group of employees working part-time it forces a team approach to clients and cases. The success of working part-time hinges on the quality of communication between staff and clients (addressed in the next section).

## What are the challenges of working part-time?

For the employees of course we are taking a significant pay cut by reducing our hours, which means we may need to change our lifestyle in order to manage with a reduced salary.

Fortunately we have agreed that we are more organised when we work part-time, which is fortunate as coordinating annual leave to coincide with children's holidays or children's carer's leave over multiple part-timers may be an absolute nightmare for management.

Communication to counter staff, other vets and clients about when we work, what we cover, how we pass information on when we are absent (non-work days), and our availability to be contacted when we aren't working all need careful consideration. Discipline around what hours we work is important for everyone (sets boundaries), but being flexible is important too, to allow the part-time option to work, i.e. if someone is sick can you fill in on that day?

The role of the administration personnel, vet nurses/technicians in communication between part-timers is vital. These other staff may be the common link between multiple vets and clients, and their knowledge of the situation on farm (who has been told what for example) will help ensure that the changeover of vets (from day to day) is seamless.

Sensitivity around dealing with other staff within the business is important, as they may not have the choice to be part-time for financial reasons for example; therefore we need to respect their workload.

With part-timers within the business there is a higher management component per full time equivalent (FTE), as each part-timer will still need the same (or perhaps more) management. Other factors such as vehicles, laptops and phones are also set up costs that will be potentially higher per FTE once there are more part-timers within the business.

With fixed days of work per week, practice good activities, attendance at vet meetings and CPD seminars are difficult to fit in. If they occur on a routine day of work, it means there is less time in that week to get the required part-timer work load done, and if they occur on a non-work day, then attendance is in the employee's own time.

Dealing with afterhours is potentially a big issue once a business has many part-timers, if all the part-timers want to step out of the afterhours roster. A few points need to be discussed individually; does the part-timer contribute to the afterhours roster? If so, do they contribute as a FTE or relative to their part-time workload for example 0.6FTE X number of duties a FTE does? What happens to afterhours calls that fall on a morning or evening of a day they don't work but are on call? E.g. Regular work day a Tuesday, on duty Tuesday night 5pm - Wednesday 7am, but don't work on a Wednesday. If a call comes in on Wednesday morning at 6:45am whose responsibility is it, and how is this managed?

It is important for every employee, whether part-time or full-time to take the appropriate amount of annual leave in the appropriate time-frame; this is beneficial both for the vet and to the business. The specific role of the large animal vet (clinical vet who has a set group of client, clinical vet with shared clients, advisory vet with a set group of clients etc.), will determine how the work is managed when the part-time vet is not working (not their regular days). If the vet has a set group of clients, the difficulty is that the work does not happen unless that specific vet is working, so a backlog of work occurs, which means taking annual leave is extremely difficult. In this situation the business needs to help the individual set up a plan to be able to manage their annual leave. Ensuring that all parties

are aware of this potential problem and that options for managing annual leave are discussed before starting part-time work will help to prevent a problem developing.

An honest discussion well before (months preferably) the employee commences their new part-time position between the employee and management is required to talk over potential issues before they arise. Some of the things the employee needs to think about and ensure they raise with the employer at this meeting are:

- Communication between staff of cases and farms etc. - two vets sharing farms, is overlapping a day (i.e. both vets being present on the same day) going to make communication easier? What is expected of me with respect to communicating with my colleagues; is there a system that is working well in another clinic that I can learn?
- Am I able to be contacted when I am not working, and am I expected to be?
- Who is responsible for organisation of my working day and how do I find out about this on a day to day basis? (e.g. calls being booked for me while I am not at work)
- What type of vet job am I working in? Is work required out of hours? How flexible is my job?
- Holidays/annual leave accruing it and using it.
- CPD
- Afterhours
- Am I expected to attend or contribute to vet meetings if they are not on my work days?
- When and how do I write reports for clients or contact clients out of hours? E.g. Do I have access to lab results outside of work times?
- Specific to working parents who are part-timers:
  - Managing the continual guilt – if I'm not at work and if I'm not at home.
  - How do I manage work with sick children?
  - Breast feeding
  - Childcare
  - Flexibility around times of first and last call with respect to child drop off and collection.

Likewise there are a number of things that the employer needs to discuss with their vet at this meeting, some of these things are specific to this meeting with the vet, and some are more about the business as a whole;

- Staff morale - is part-time welcomed and embraced by all staff?
- Educating clients (how would you like to inform them of your return to work and your new schedule?) and staff about the part-timers and educating part time vets (how to keep up to speed with things when only part-time?)
- CPD
- Expectations for attendance of vets at things such as in-house vet meetings, drug company evening seminars etc.
- Annual leave/pay package
- Part-timers want to be at work for whatever reason so they are people that like the workplace, however if they are mothers/fathers then there is probably another place they feel they want to be, so you need to make them feel welcome and appreciated
- How to capture “practice good” contributions from those working part-time, as it is likely they will have less down time. I consider “practice good” to be time spent that is benefiting the wider business but not directly earning income for the business. An example of “practice good” maybe time a vet spends developing tools for use in the wider practice such as standard operating procedures.

## **What are some of the solutions to the challenges outlined?**

Job sharing is a successful way to manage two (or more) people who each want to work less than a FTE. This is done in many fields, but hasn't been used much in large animal vet practice. For a clinician this could work exceptionally well, with two vets being responsible for a group of clients, and those clients accept that one or other

of the vets will attend to their needs. Communication between these two people is paramount, and good protocols around the way specific things are managed. A mutual respect for each other is critical, and at least a day a week of overlap to ensure adequate communication is fundamental to this solution. Face-to-face communication is most accurate, since ideas are expressed both verbally and non-verbally, and decisions can be made.

When someone is transitioning to part-time, it is often after a period of leave, therefore it would be worthwhile for an experienced part-timer within the business to mentor and/or do an induction with the vet. A list of guidelines around how part-time works within your business would be useful.

Communication is absolutely crucial for the success of a part-timer. Clarity of their new role needs to be communicated to their colleagues and support staff and clients (if they choose), to allow a smooth transition. This way everyone can be positive about you being at work part-time and the client will feel better for it. Communication about cases needs to be transparent and files need to be up to date and in detail.

With individual cases/clients/farm issues there needs to be a lead carer/vet assigned, and that vet is responsible for primary communication on the case.

Within the business, awareness of the part-timers' schedules need to be taken into account when setting dates for regular meetings for example, so that all staff (including part-timers) have equal opportunity to attend.

## Conclusion

When I was working full-time, working part-time seemed like an idyllic compromise. The truth is, for me, many things have changed in my life since I worked full-time, and juggling all those balls is a constant challenge, which may take a life-time to perfect!

Part-timers are valuable members of their veterinary practice, and all parties involved need to be aware of the benefits and challenges of having part-timers in their team. Other professions successfully integrate part-timers, and I believe that in large animal practice we can too.

## References

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