

# Juggling career and family life

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I have been asked to share my experience juggling work as a dairy veterinary clinician with raising a family. How has it worked for me and how have I coped? What have my employers allowed? Have I felt conflict and do I have any thoughts or suggestions on how to manage better?

Juggling work and family has been a rewarding experience for me. I had my fifth child in December and am currently on maternity leave but have returned to work after having my four other children. I have been very fortunate to be allowed to work the hours and days that best fit for me. I have worked part days, full days, two days a week, three days a week and even five days when we were short staffed one spring. When I had only preschool children I was able to work full days as childcare facilities provided full days care but once my eldest child, Bevan started Kindy and then school, this was not so easy. I changed to working the same number of hours per week but spread over three days instead (9am to 2.30pm). This was a great compromise between work and home. There is limited access to before and after school programs living rurally and I believe it is important to be home after school for sports, homework and to keep up with what's going on in school.

I have always done my fair share of on call. The practice has rotas scheduled six months in advance so it is very easy to work out what on call a full time vet does annually. I was working point four of a full time vet which equated to three weekends and 15 week nights annually. As James and I own a dairy farm it is impossible for me to be on call during spring as James is never home to watch the kids, so I scheduled all my on call from November to June. At one point I was job sharing with another vet, I worked Monday and Tuesday and he worked Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. This worked extremely well as he did no on call from Nov to June and scheduled all his during spring. This meant the rest of the team were not put under any extra pressure during the busy time.

Employers always worry about client/vet relationships when a vet is working part-time. I was concerned initially too but the clients adapted rapidly and very positively. They all understand the importance of family and are all happy to still have me working, even if it is on a reduced basis. They quickly learned to book routine work in advance to ensure I am available and are happy to see anyone else when it is urgent. Another positive about job sharing is the clients know I was available on Monday and Tuesday and then the other vet on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday so they still get consistency with care. And with mobile phones, I am always at the other end; clients know if I don't answer immediately I return their call when I can.

It has not been all plain sailing and I have learned a few things along the way. It was hard initially to not be available for clients 24/7 and to have other vets "on your patch" but no one is irreplaceable and people adapt quickly! In the beginning I kept my full list of clients but discovered over time that it was too much and I was better to provide a great service to a few and not a stressed out service to them all. The clients allocated to other vets are just fine! I was always torn when I had a sick child, I knew I should be home with them but didn't want to let work or clients down. I wouldn't be the first parent to give their child panadol and race off to work. I am fortunate my children don't get sick very often but now they are priority and my employers are very supportive about that.

Working nine to two thirty is working the productive hours of the day. I turn up, load up my ute and am out all day till knock off time. There are often times when I wouldn't see any of the other vets all week. It's great to be out working but I never get the down time, such as milking time in the afternoon, to catch up on paper work or collegial

discussion. Initially I would take work home and write reports in the evenings, but would get very disheartened, this time was not being recognised or appreciated by my employer and I had outside interests as well as a business of my own to run. I started blocking out the odd time at work to catch up on paper work and stop taking it home, this is still an issue today as during the busy times they get booked over! I'm not sure of a solution to this problem, any suggestions?

Vet meetings, product presentations and training seminars are always scheduled outside of my working hours. It means I miss out on collegial interaction and does create a degree of separation from the full time staff. We temporarily moved the vet meetings but I was always out on calls so that didn't work. Other than drag all my children along to these events, which is completely impractical with preschoolers, I was unable to attend. This is an area of frustration for me as I think it's important to attend these events and feel part of the team. It also ensures some consistency in service.

## Suggestions for employers

- A little bit of a good thing is better than none at all. There are many great experienced vets that would love to work but not full time. They have valuable skills to offer clients and staff and employing them on limited hours is better than not at all?
- Job sharing is a great option – two part-time employees filling one full time position. It keeps balance with staff and on call as well as providing clients with consistency of care.
- Afterhours expectations should be fair and relative to clinical hours worked. Expecting a part-time vet to work on call as full time member has potential for friction. Salary/wages should compensate accordingly.
- Reach compromise together on hours to be worked. Dictating hours that suit you best as an employer may be completely impractical for employee creating stress on work/life balance before work even commences. A valuable employee is worth compromising with to reach happy medium.
- Don't expect five days work in three days. It's natural for part-time staff to try to squeeze everything in and not let anyone down. This level of work cannot be sustained without problems arising. Be realistic about what work can be expected versus what can be achieved in the allotted time.
- Advanced warning for schedule changes. If you want to change days, hours etc that employee is working then discuss this with them to ensure it still works well for both parties. Allow plenty of advanced warning of any changes as rearranging child care is often not easy.
- Think of timing of meetings. Try scheduling vet meetings, rep meetings, continuing education etc, at practical times to allow part-time staff to attend and be part of the whole team.

## Suggestions for employee

- Why are you returning to work? Is it because you enjoy your profession or just for the money? It's important to want to be at work, have good motivation and a great attitude. No matter how hard you try, work does put some pressure on home life, and you need to be prepared to deal with the additional demands in order to succeed at striking a good balance.
- Afterhours is an essential part of dairy practice. Be prepared to do your fair share, otherwise it can create friction amongst colleagues. Being part of the team is important.
- When at work, make work your number one priority.
- Try to negotiate work hours that are comfortable for you. Working too many hours or hours that put pressure on outside of work creates stress and uncomfortable work environment. Going to work should not be a burden or stressful event.
- Don't try to do five days work in three – it catches up on you. Be prepared to reduce work demand rather than taking extra work home.
- Communication is extremely important. If the hours are not favourable or the work load is overwhelming, communicate it to your employer. See if you can reach a compromise to ensure work life is enjoyable.

With a growing number of veterinarians wishing to reduce work hours and work part-time, the industry as a whole needs to recognise their contribution is still hugely valuable and retaining their skills is important. Employing part-time vets is not difficult and can provide a valuable asset to your business.

