

IN PRACTICE

Technician Shortage? What Do the Numbers Say?

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Colorado has a high concentration of veterinary technicians.¹ Why then are there conversations around the shortage of credentialed veterinary technicians? Our inquiring minds want to know!

We were invited to create an article about the shortage of veterinary technicians in Colorado. This led us down a path where we first identified numbers and educational levels of technicians, both in Colorado and nationally. We then dove into the “shortage” discussion to identify what might be happening. Finally, we pondered if there were steps that could be taken to lessen this feeling of constantly being short-staffed.

This was our mental journey that we now invite you to follow.

Veterinary technicians by the numbers



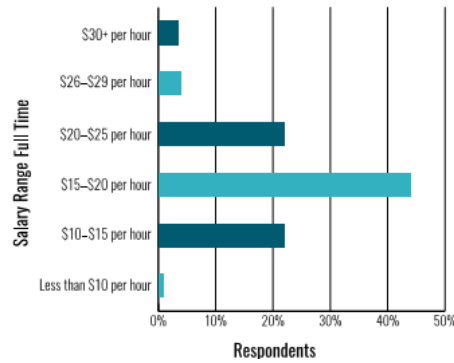
Our exploration of the numbers begins with looking at the education of veterinary technicians and the general wages for those degrees.

Students attending AVMA-accredited veterinary technology programs have an option to receive either a two-year (Associates in Applied Sciences-AAS-veterinary technician) or a four-year (Bachelor of Science-BS-veterinary technologist) degree.

After completing either one, the graduate may then take the Veterinary Technician National Exam (VTNE), and upon passing, be eligible for credentialing in a state. Since both degrees take the same national exam, it seems that the level of veterinary care delivery would be similar. However, there may be greater opportunities for veterinary technologist (BS degree) to work in colleges, universities, and industry.

In the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America’s (NAVTA) 2016 Demographic Study,² it showed 55% of the respondents had an associate degree while 30% had a bachelor’s degree. Approximately 43% of the

respondents were making between \$15 and \$20/hour (see graph). Unfortunately, this survey did not differentiate between levels of education.



2016 NAVTA Survey results²

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports veterinary technologists and technician wages as of May 2018.¹

Employment	Mean hourly wage	Mean annual wage
106,680	\$17.10	\$35,560

Colorado FREAKY FACTS!

Digging deeper into Colorado BLS information, we learn even more. Colorado has over 4,000 individuals listing themselves as veterinary technicians (not all are credentialed). This is one of the highest percentages of veterinary technicians in the U.S. (tied with Vermont).³

State	Employment	Employment/ 1000 jobs	Hourly mean wage	Annual mean wage
Colorado	4,000	1.52	\$17.49	\$36,390

Fort Collins has one of the highest concentrations of veterinary technicians for a metropolitan area. Coincidentally, the other higher metropolitan concentrations were in cities with veterinary universities.

Metropolitan area	Employment	Employment/ 1000 jobs	Hourly mean wage	Annual mean wage
Fort Collins, CO	540	3.37	\$17.39	\$36,170

Some of the top paid veterinary technicians within the state are in the Northwest part of the Colorado.

Non-metropolitan area	Employment	Employment/ 1000 jobs	Hourly mean wage	Annual mean wage
NW CO	200	1.69	\$18.97	\$39,460

The Colorado Association of Certified Veterinary Technicians (CACVT) maintains the credentials and directory of veterinary technicians in the state. CACVT is one of the

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nation's largest veterinary technician associations with approximately 2,400 credentialed veterinary technicians.⁴

So why the shortage?

This is the million-dollar question! Overall, there isn't one issue that stands out as the originator but rather multiple factors. We address a few, although we're sure there are more!

Graduates

Since we've been discussing technician programs and wages, let's look at these first. Graduates don't necessarily stay in the state where they attend school, thus we will address the national numbers. These numbers are approximations from AVMA Professional Resources for Veterinary Educators surveys. They are meant for comparison only and not exact figures.⁵

Year	AAS programs	BS programs	Total	AAS grads	BS grads	Total grads
2011-2012	184	17	201	5,127	238	5,365
2012-2013	195	17	212	5,749	729	6,478
2017-2018	170	21	191	4,804	540	5,344

Today it appears we are graduating fewer technicians with AAS degrees, the ones more likely to work in clinic settings.

Salaries

In "Career Choices for Veterinary Technicians" (2013),⁶ Rebecca commented, "Veterinary technicians earn salaries that compare favorably to those in other fields requiring a similar education." Does this statement still hold true today?

According to a May 2018 article from Smartasset, in general, the annual salary for someone with an associate degree in the U.S. is \$41,496 (roughly \$20.00/hour), where those with a bachelor's degree made an average of \$59,124 (roughly \$30.00/hour).⁷

This is similar to the BLS May 2018 report of the median annual wage for all workers with an associate degree of \$38,640.8 This is the wage at which half of the workers in the occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. Yet for veterinary technicians, it was reported as \$34,420.⁸

It appears the veterinary industry is not maintaining with national averages and Rebecca's statement no longer holds true.

Growth

Pet ownership in general is on the rise in the U.S. And it's not just dogs and cats but also includes exotics.⁹ This trend

doesn't look to slow with a global companion animal market projected to rise 6.3% from 2018–2023.¹⁰

In addition, there is an increase in the U.S. commercial production of beef and boiler meats due to an increasing population and rising income levels.¹¹

While we haven't been able to verify the actual numbers, from conversations held with industry representatives, there is a growing number of physical veterinary hospitals emerging in Colorado. We can speculate that this is occurring in other areas of the U.S. as well.

Clinic management

Even without increasing the number of hospitals, there is a trend to increase services provided and/or hours of operation to accommodate the growing demand for veterinary care. With this comes the obvious requirement to increase staff.

This isn't just veterinarians. Research has shown clear links between increased use of credentialed technicians and higher practice revenue. The most efficient ratio appears to be one veterinarian to six non-DVMs.¹² This is an increase from previously held ideas of 1:2 or 1:3 ratios, thus increasing the demand for more technicians in the clinic setting.

Exodus of technicians

Finally, there is no doubt that technicians leave clinics and sometimes the profession all together. According to the 2016 NAVTA survey, when people left veterinary hospitals, 45% went to work in human healthcare field, veterinary technology education or veterinary pharmaceutical sales.²

While many view salaries as the factor, in reality it's a combination including culture, lack of proper management, and underutilization. In addition, it's a physically and emotionally challenging job. Sometimes people have had enough.

Solutions?

Now that many areas have been identified to explain the high demand for veterinary technicians, is there anything that can be done?

Of course! We wouldn't want this article to be all doom and gloom.

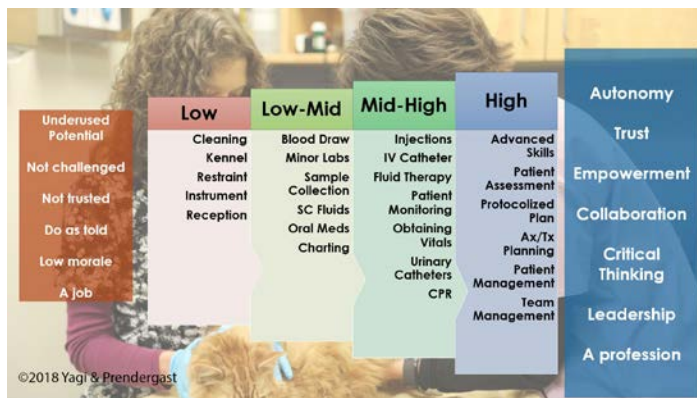
While you may not have control over some of the factors such as graduation rates, increased pet ownership, or the hours of the veterinary practice down the street, you can control other internal influences.

Inefficiency of the delivery system

This concept of fully leveraging everyone on the team is still morphing. Within Colorado, there is no laundry list defining the duties for a veterinary technician. Essentially, they can be leveraged to do all tasks except diagnose, prescribe, treat, and perform surgery (licensed DVMs only, please!).

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This chart, created for the Veterinary Nurse Initiative (VNI), shows the levels and some advanced skills that qualified team members can perform. Are you truly leveraging your credentialed veterinary technicians to perform these types of duties?

No surprise, the NAVTA survey shows there is a direct correlation between utilization and job satisfaction.² Proper utilization can decrease team turnover, increase productivity and improve the delivery of veterinary medicine.

Wages

Let's be real, there is an economic component to everything. We recognize the rising cost of medicine is making veterinary care less and less affordable. It's a tough dilemma. However, the technician AAS wages have not kept up with average national pay as previously noted.

Help is coming!

Because of the crisis the veterinary industry is experiencing in the shortage of veterinary professionals, the AVMA created the Veterinary Technician Task Force to evaluate trends, challenges, and solutions.¹³ This is exciting as topics such as team utilization will be receiving additional attention.

Conclusion

Believe it or not, Colorado is lucky when it comes to technicians. But even with our high number and what seems to be adequate pay, we still succumb to the shortage issue.

There are a variety of reasons for this deficiency, some which are out of our control. It's more important now than ever to focus on the areas you can control. When you find a veterinary technician that fits into your culture, take additional steps to keep this person.

Focus on retention by evaluating job descriptions, increasing utilization, maintaining job satisfaction, and compensating appropriately.

There is no easy fix. By doing many little things right, it will add up to weathering the storm of the technician shortage.

Resources

- 1 Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS.gov) Veterinary Technicians: <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes292056.htm>
- 2 National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America Demographic Survey Results. 2016. https://www.navta.net/page/Demographic_Survey?&hhsearchterms=%22demographic+and+survey%22
- 3 Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2018 <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes292056.htm#st>
- 4 Colorado Association of Certified Veterinary Technicians. Email conversation with Executive Director, Erin Henninger, BA, CVT, VTS (ECC). October 23, 2019.
- 5 AVMA Professional Resources for Veterinary Educators. https://www.avma.org/ProfessionalDevelopment/Education/Accreditation/Programs/Documents/CVTEA%202014%20Mini%20Survey%20Results_Distance%20Website%20Report.pdf
- 6 Career Choices for Veterinary Technicians, AAHA Press 2013 revised edition, Rebecca Rose and Carin Smith, <https://www.amazon.com/Career-Choices-Veterinary-Technicians-Opportunities-ebook/dp/B00OQT9DGI>
- 7 Smartasset, The Average Salary by Education Level, May 2018 <https://smartasset.com/retirement/the-average-salary-by-education-level>
- 8 Occupational outlook handbook, veterinary technologists and technicians <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/veterinary-technologists-and-technicians.htm>
- 9 Pet ownership is on the rise. Nov 19, 2018. AVMA study provides economic insights & data to drive veterinary care conversations. <https://atwork.avma.org/2018/11/19/pet-ownership-is-on-the-rise/>
- 10 Companion Animal Care Market – Growth, Trends, and Forecast (2019-2024). Mordor Intelligence <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/companion-animal-care-market>
- 11 Veterinary Industry Outlook—top global trends & statistics. Business Research Company. July 3, 2018. <https://blog.marketresearch.com/veterinary-industry-outlook-top-global-trends-and-statistics>
- 12 AVMA : More veterinary technicians, higher practice efficiency, DVM360 Sept 2019, <http://veterinarybusiness.dvm360.com/avma-more-veterinary-technicians-higher-practice-efficiency>
- 13 AVMA establishes veterinary technician task force. April 18, 2019. <https://atwork.avma.org/2019/04/18/board-update-avma-establishes-veterinary-technician-task-force/>