



How to make the most of your work experience

You need to make your work experience work for you. Interviewers are looking for you to demonstrate the skills that you have learnt and list the accomplishments you have achieved during your experience, rather than simply stating that you spent a week at a particular work place. To help get the most from your time, we have put together this useful guide. Divided into three sections, we hope that it will help you prepare, enjoy and reflect on your time at work.

Preparation: Before you go

- 1) Do some research about your employer
 - It's always useful to know who you are working for and what they value
 - Use the information to start conversations and ask questions
 - Look on their website and find out: How many vets work there? Is it small/large/equine/mixed practice? Is it a single practice or part of a bigger group?
- 2) Find out what's expected of you
 - What's the dress code?
 - What time should arrive each day and when can you expect to leave?
 - What will you be asked to do?
 - Is there anything you will not be allowed to do (e.g. due to health and safety or insurance issues)?
- 3) Set goals for your placement
 - Creating clear objectives before you go on your work experience will help you to get the most out of your time
 - Look at the types of activities that vets undertake on a day to day basis (or vet nurse or vet scientist see the RVC progression tree)
 - How can you get involved with these activities during your work experience?
 - E.g. Offer to help with practical activities like keeping records, animal handling, preparing the consultation room/equipment etc.
 - You should also try to build on your generic skills such as communication, thinking on your feet, time management, problem solving etc.

Enjoy: Whilst you're there

- 1) Be punctual
 - Arrive a few minutes early to show that you are keen and ready to work
 - Ask if there's anything else you can do before you leave work at the end of the day
- 2) Take responsibility for your own health and safety
 - Follow instructions from the person supervising you
 - Always check before you do something you are unsure of
- 3) Be proactive and have a can-do attitude

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- If you make an effort then those around you are more likely to take an interest in you
- Always offer to help, even with the most mundane of tasks
- Try to experience a wide range of activities so you get a true sense of the job
- E.g. kennel cleaning, feeding animals etc.

4) Ask questions and be inquisitive

- Talk to a range of different people about their experiences in the profession
- Find out about the procedures and systems you are working with
- The more you ask the more you learn
- For example, try to find out about the realities of the job – what are the average working hours and even rates of pay (you can find out about this from looking in veterinary journals such as the Vet Record which advertise jobs in their back pages)
- You could also talk to people about their own experiences of getting into and studying at university as well as aspects of their current and past jobs.

5) Be courteous and polite

- People are giving up their time for you; let them know that your grateful
- Try to be aware of the time pressures that your employer is under – there are good and bad times to ask questions e.g. if a Bitch spay is bleeding it may not be the best time to ask about the type of suture material being used...but after the event, the vet may be willing to talk you through the steps taken to solve the problem

6) Ask for feedback

- Find out how you can improve from the people who have supervised you
- This is a hard thing to do and will be of no use if you leave it until the end of your placement. If you ask for feedback early on – you have a good chance of showing an improvement
- E.g. If I have questions about a case – is there a good time for me to ask? If I run out of things to do – who should I talk to before I go home?

7) Maintain a learning log or diary

- Recording your experiences will help you to reflect on what you've done
- Self-reflection (or understanding what you've learnt, how you've learnt it and why you've learnt it) is an important skill to have at university
- The log will help you with your personal statement and interview for university
- Take note of things that worked well and others that were more challenging? For example, were there any times where the vet had to deal with an angry, tearful client? How did they manage the situation? Were there any particularly interesting cases? Why were they interesting? What did you do to find out more?

8) Make contacts

- The people you meet during your work experience may help you out in the future
- Keep people's details as you may need them for references
- The veterinary community is surprisingly small and therefore making a good, lasting impression is even more important
- You may even want to return to see practice in the future as a veterinary undergraduate student

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What to do if your placement isn't going so well

"I spent all my time cleaning kennels"

If you have spent all your time cleaning kennels, do you understand why this job is so important? Do you understand what diseases are being prevented? Can you comment on the welfare of the animals that you are looking after? Did you read the charts on the front of cages and find out what was wrong with each animal and discuss this further with the nurses? Did you watch an animal recovering from an anaesthetic? What happened?

"No-one wanted to help me because I was just another school kid"

There will be limits to how much you can get involved with and this may well be due to strict health and safety regulations which are there for your own protection. The practice may also have had a bad experience with a student in the past but by being proactive and asking for feedback early on, you may be able to show them just how useful you can be. Take the initiative. Get involved and be an extra pair of hands to do the jobs that no-one else has the time to do. Show enthusiasm, motivation, flexibility and a willingness to learn.

"I was very isolated"

If you feel isolated during work experience you might need to be flexible in what you do. Try to find at least one friendly face that you can build a rapport with and learn about their particular role within the practice e.g. a vet nurse or the receptionist. Again, you might want to try some of the other ideas mentioned above.

"I did something completely different from what I had expected."

If your work experience turns out to be totally different from what you expected you might want to arrange a meeting with your employers to discuss this. It is important that you and the practice are clear about what is expected before the start of your placement. Within reason, try and be flexible and adapt to the new situation and make the most of what is on offer. However, if you have followed the advice on preparation given above, you should not find yourself in this situation.

Reflect: After the event

- 1) Ask challenging questions of yourself
 - Learn from both successes and failures by asking how you'll do better next time
 - Think about the people who impressed you and ask what did they do right and how can I do that?
- 2) Keep in touch
 - Apart from being courteous, keeping in touch will stand you in good stead for the future
 - You will need the employer to be a referee and they may even offer you a job in a few years time!
- 3) Promote your success
 - Now that you've built a good name for yourself, use it to find more work experience

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What can go wrong?

(Taken from the www.thesite.org)

<http://www.thesite.org/workandstudy/gettingajob/careerladder/workexperienceplacements>

Clearly work experience can be a valuable time, but remember that things can go wrong. Placement schemes can be abused as cheap temporary labour but they still provide a valuable experience. Try to avoid hiccups and:

- Ask the practice to explain exactly what your job will entail and for how long you will be doing it.
- Be aware that there may be costs associated with your placement such as travel and lunches etc. These are very unlikely to be covered by the practice.
- Know your rights. Ordinary labour laws cover those undertaking work experience over 16; those under 16 are offered more stringent protection.
- The NCWE offers a **code of practice**, encouraging employers to maintain good safety standards, provide an educational opportunity and offer feedback to their work experience placements.

Taken from the University of Nottingham's Guide to Work Experience

http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/shared/shared_careers/leaflets/pdf/Making_the_Most_of_Work_Experience_2008.pdf

Enhancing learning during the experience

Below is a list of the levels of learning that students can be expected to demonstrate during their work experience. For a professional degree, such as veterinary medicine, you should aim to be working at the higher end of the scale. Read through this before and during your work experience and try to find examples that show that you have been learning at these higher levels.

Level 1

Experience only – students experience the learning without giving any thought to it – it just happens. They find it hard to relate the areas of work covered to their learning targets. They are often not sure if they have encountered a topic or not.

Level 2

Record and make explicit the experience – students are able to articulate their learning experience to others but only at a superficial level.

Level 3

Reflection on the learning experience – students know what the learning has meant to them. They are able to interpret the learning in a deeper way, providing a range of examples and a clear explanation of what they have gained from the experience.

Level 4

Making the links and matching the learning – students are able to draw together and internalise their learning through concepts and models. They can see the links and applications to other learning situations and/or potential careers.

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Level 5

Application of learning to new situations – students can put their learning into practice in new situations. They can make connections and piece together what they have learnt. They are able to transfer their learning and add value in the new context.

Level 6

Adapting to new situations – students are more flexible and effective in applying their learning to new situations, constantly evaluating its worth and adapting their model of thinking accordingly, thus taking responsibility for, and control of, their own development.

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