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# ALTERNATIVES IN VETERINARY MEDICAL EDUCATION



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## Veterinary Students Making a Difference Lessons Learned From the Job Search

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I would like to share some of the key lessons I have learned, and re-learned, during my recent graduation, subsequent job search, and newfound job in a small animal practice. Much of what follows is not groundbreaking. Yet, from comments I have received from interviewers, it seems even the most basic principles of the job search are often forgotten, especially by recent graduates. Some of my advice pertains directly to my ethics, while some indirectly relates.

### 1. PLAN AHEAD

Be prepared in advance of your job search. I'm a strong advocate of writing everything down. Therefore, I recommend that you make a list of what you want and don't want in a practice, and prioritize all aspects. This involves more than just salary and benefits. Get as

specific as you can about geographic location, hours, equipment, medical ethics, and anything else that is important to you. Don't forget the ethics aspect. How do you feel about cosmetic surgeries, declaws, euthanasias? You can't possibly anticipate every contingency, but you can address those issues that are important to you. For example, my employment contract states that I don't have to do anything that I don't feel comfortable doing.

In terms of geographic location, the more flexible you can be, the more particular you can be about what type of practice in which you want to work. For someone with strong ethics, who also had high expectations in terms of work atmosphere and compensation package, I planned in advance to look at a large geographic area. Think about getting a list of AVAR members in the areas you are considering and making a few cold-calls to network. DO NOT fall into the trap of seeing yourself as anything less than desirable

because you may have ethics that fall outside of the mainstream of veterinary medicine. Rather, consider how this makes you special and potentially more of an asset to a practice.

### 2. PREPARE FOR YOUR INTERVIEWS

Don't leave this until the last minute! Use all of your available resources. Absolutely look at this web site, <http://www.vetquest.com/Classifieds/>, and go to the first three links along the left side of the screen. Check out their survival tools and other information, especially about interviewing. Consider using them or another organization like them. Nothing is stopping you from using a company like this (free to you) and pursuing your own job search simultaneously, which is what I did. I

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## Lessons Learned From the Job Search

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used the list I had prepared initially (step 1); just read it to one of their agents, and let him or her find matches. Get a set of questions ready to ask practice owners/office managers *on the phone* before you ever go to an interview. This allows you to screen possibilities and save time. Don't be ashamed to ask anything on the phone, as long as it is in a professional manner. **DO** ask about a starting salary range before you get off the phone. You will be amazed how much wasted time this will save you.

### 3. SCHEDULE MANY INTERVIEWS

I have to give this one a separate heading. I went on approximately 25-30 interviews over about three months. Sound crazy? I have **NO** regrets. **EVERY** interview is a learning experience. I would need a book to tell all the things I've learned on them; everything from tricks on spaying to practice layouts to methods for working with animal rescue operations. Not to mention that by waiting awhile before looking, I was even more in demand because the major pool of new graduates had dried up by this time. The system I developed consisted of 1) an initial short question session over the phone for screening purposes, 2) a first interview generally lasting no longer than one to two hours (you can do three of these in a day if you plan carefully), 3) a second daylong working interview for those practices that "made the cut." If you end up with a lot of good possibilities, make a spreadsheet to help you narrow things down. Generally, my biggest concern was that I do not feel comfortable doing cosmetic surgeries, cat declaws, or any euthanasia that I don't consider appropriate (i.e., for non-medical reasons). I learned to talk about these issues on the phone with the practice owner after I had had a chance to make a good impression in the first interview but before things became more serious with a second interview. I never had any problems as far as this went. I always kept the discussion centered on what "I feel," versus why doing those



*Dr. Colin Chaves with his co-authors, Sasha and Marley.*

things is wrong in general. A note on ethics: just because your ethics on certain issues are in line with a practice owner's does **NOT** mean you will get along or work well together in general.

### 4. ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

This one also gets a separate heading. A quote from one of my first interviews: "I know from your degree and your resume that you have a good level of knowledge. Anyway, I can teach you things if you don't know them yet. What *I'm* concerned about is your attitude. I can't teach that." This sentiment was echoed in many variations multiple times. The right attitude *works*. Make a great first impression and all of your requests and requirements will be realized much more easily. Again, from interviewer comments, I'm amazed by how many interviewees apparently don't do such basic things as dress professionally, maintain eye contact, enunciate, and have a set of questions in mind that they want to ask the interviewer. Private practices want a person who is not only compassionate, but frankly understands that they will be working in a business and will be part of a team.

### 5. TAKE THE TIME AND DO IT RIGHT

This will be one of the most important decisions of your career. Most seniors in veterinary school allot themselves a small

number of days to go on a whirlwind series of interviews. You probably have a six-month grace period before loan repayment begins. **USE THIS PRECIOUS TIME**. You will not regret it. Plan ahead while you are still in school and do whatever it takes to be financially prepared for an extended job search. You will reap the rewards of careful planning. Statistics say about **80%** of veterinarians leave their first job within 1 to 2 years. I have a feeling these were mostly people who rushed the job search. If you have down time between interviews, you can keep sharp by volunteering at animal shelters, spay/neuter clinics, etc. They will be ecstatic to have you, and you will be building your resume at the same time. Watch an interviewer's eyes widen when he or she asks you how many spays you've done, and you say **20** (or more)!

Of course there is no magic formula to getting into a practice that you feel good about in all aspects, including ethically. Understand that no matter how hard you look, you will likely have to compromise in certain ways. Just know in advance the things that you absolutely must have, and those on which you can be flexible. I wish anyone going through the job search process the best of luck!

I would be happy to talk with anyone who has questions or comments via e-mail: [cchaves@highstream.net](mailto:cchaves@highstream.net).