

Career Paths: A Guide to Implementing Job Levels

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Meet Your Consultant



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What you’ll learn:

- How to upskill employees
- Build job levels, skill checklists, and tests for client service representatives, veterinary assistants, and technicians
- Get skill checklists and tests
- What to pay as employees advance

BONUS: Facilitator’s guide to implement the training

Why you need to build career paths for your entire team

The Great Resignation has hit veterinary practices. Staff turnover is 23%.¹ If you have 20 employees, five will quit. Building a talented, motivated, and long-term team is the greatest challenge that hospital owners and managers face.

Turnover is expensive. The cost of turnover is 20% of each employee’s annual salary for workers earning \$50,000 or less.² Every time an employee quits, it costs your hospital \$10,000 to replace a staff member. If five employees leave, it’s a whopping \$50,000.

Job levels attract top candidates. Helping employees develop new skills is a selling point for your practice to attract new talent. Whether candidates are credentialed technicians or have entry level skills, they learn about job tiers during interviews. “This system attracts people and dissuades those who aren’t self-motivated,” advises Dr. Christine Staten, owner of Adobe Veterinary Center in Tucson, Arizona, and founder of Veterinary MBA, which helps private practice owners thrive.

At Mount Laurel Animal Hospital in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, candidates take tests as part of job interviews. Practice Manager Krista McDermott, CVT, CVPM, says testing reveals critical thinking skills beyond hands-on technical skills.

Retain top performers. Mount Laurel Animal Hospital’s job level program gives employees a reason to stay. Ten employees have celebrated 20-year anniversaries with the practice.

How can you keep the team you have? Give them careers, not just jobs. Nobody wants to work in a dead-end job. When employees learn new skills and earn promotions from Level 1 to Level 2 positions, they feel valued and motivated to move onto Levels 3 and 4.

How to upskill employees

What is upskilling? The meaning of upskill is to provide an employee with more advanced skills through additional education and training.³ Upskilling is training your employees on new technologies and improved systems. Your staff also sees changing technology and doesn't want to be left behind. Where will the veterinary profession be in the next 5 years and in the next decade? Ask your team if they are currently skilled and equipped to get there. If not, what will it take to make the journey and be the leading hospital in your community?

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos says, "In business, what's dangerous is not to evolve." His \$1.2 trillion company is constantly evolving and innovating.⁴

Building new skills is required to work effectively.⁵ Practices face ever-changing scenarios of curbside care, technology use, medical advances, and more. Business executives identified three benefits of skill building in a LinkedIn study: 1) Employees keep your practice competitive, 2) Your hospital can navigate crises and changes more effectively, and 3) Employees develop into their roles.

Nearly 60% of workers need new skills to do their jobs right.⁶ Upskilling is the key to staying current. This is the capacity you have as a practice to train and develop your team. Veterinarians and managers should put upskilling on their "must do" lists. Why? Competition for workers is fierce. Burnout and underutilization cause too many talented staff to leave the veterinary profession. The average lifespan for a career as a veterinary technician is 5 to 7 years.⁷

Reskilling is training employees for a different job. A kennel attendant can reskill to become a veterinary assistant. Career advancement gives employees a sense of security and confidence.

To ensure success of your practice's upskilling initiative, you must have employee buy-in.⁸ Veterinarians and managers must communicate the benefits to employees. Explain that you will support employees with training resources and dedicate time to training. Your message should be, "We are all in this together...to become better together."

How to build job levels, skill checklists, and tests

When Dr. Michelle McKenzie began her career as an emergency and shelter veterinarian, she worked near a veterinary technician school and enjoyed having all registered veterinary technicians (RVT). When she moved and bought a practice in 2015, RVTs were harder to find and most worked at an area specialty hospital. "I have to train everyone from the ground up," says Dr. McKenzie, who owns Gause Boulevard Veterinary Hospital in Slidell, Louisiana. "When you come in with no skills, there is a ton to learn."

Assess skills during job interviews. RVTs complete a technical skill evaluation as part of the interview process at Gause Boulevard Veterinary Hospital. The evaluation groups skills by category, task, and self-assessment. (Download Dr. McKenzie's Technical Skill Evaluation in eLearning). Categories include radiology, surgery, dentistry, exam room, kennel, laboratory, technical skills, and heartworm treatment. Tasks are ranked by 1 to 4 skill levels. Here are examples of the Surgical Skill Evaluation:

Level 1 Surgical Skill Evaluation

- Restraint for induction
- TPR mm CRT and documenting
- Pulse oximetry set up
- ECG set up
- Cleaning surgical instruments
- Assembling surgical packs
- Operating autoclave

- ❑ Post-surgical instructions

Level 2 Surgical Skill Evaluation

- ❑ Setting up surgery suites
- ❑ Surgical prep (basic technique)
- ❑ Pulse oximetry monitoring
- ❑ ECG monitoring
- ❑ Patient monitoring
- ❑ Anesthesia machine competency

Level 3 Surgical Skill Evaluation

- ❑ ECG troubleshooting
- ❑ Intubation
- ❑ Pulse oximetry trouble shooting
- ❑ Drug calculation
- ❑ Sterile gloving

Create job levels and skill checklists. In addition to defining job levels, checklists are instrumental during onboarding. Orientation packets at Adobe Veterinary Center are pre-tier with the goal of achieving Level 1 within 3 months of being hired. After achieving Level 1, the employee must remain at that level for at least another 3 months before trying for Level 2. “If we move people too fast, they risk forgetting the basics,” Dr. Staten advises. Gause Boulevard Veterinary Hospital takes the same approach. Dr. McKenzie says new hires should be trained on Level 1 within the first 90 days. She checks in with all staff members every two months to see how they are improving. A 90-day goal also gives managers a deadline to decide if a new hire is a good long-term fit.

When designing a job level program, Dr. Staten advises to talk with employees and have them help build the tiers. Team members also will create skill checklists, ensuring everyone follows standard operating procedures (SOP). Adobe Veterinary Center created binders by department with SOPs. For example, the laboratory binder has step-by-step instructions on how to run a fecal.

As employees advance through levels, checklists include mentoring and peer training to teach others. This inspires a culture of “let me help you” attitudes. Adobe Veterinary Center sees small and large animal patients. When a technician had an upcoming skill to complete, Dr. Staten says the teammate announced in the treatment area, “Don’t intubate a pig without me. I need to learn this skill!” Dr. McKenzie at Gause Boulevard Veterinary Hospital gets similar collaboration among her team. “I don’t get any pushback on job levels. Everyone wants to checkoff new skills,” says Dr. McKenzie. “They are always asking, ‘Can I help you with that?’” Checklists let employees focus and gain confidence.

At Adobe Veterinary Center, client service representatives (CSR) can advance from Tier 1 to 4. (Download Adobe Veterinary Center’s CSR tiers in eLearning.) Here are examples of CSR skills by tier:

Client Service Representative Tier 1

An employee has a minimum of 3 months’ employment when completing Tier 1, which includes 55 skills and tasks to learn. Here are brief skill examples:

- ❑ Demonstrate general knowledge of food and over-the-counter products that Adobe Veterinary Center carries.
- ❑ Know common veterinary abbreviations (test)
- ❑ Correctly scan and link records, lab reports, emails, and photos in electronic medical records.
- ❑ Correctly schedule small animal technician appointments, doctor appointments, and surgeries. Check to see if the patient is due for what they are scheduled for and if they are due for anything else while they are here. Check other pets of the owner to see if any services or refills are due. (Keep log)

Client Service Representative Tier 2

Before moving onto Tier 2, CSRs must have 6 months of employment and spend 3 months as a Tier 1 CSR at Adobe Veterinary Center or have been a CSR at another veterinary clinic for at least 1 year. When CSRs reach Tier 2, they must train and mentor others in skills they have attained. This tier has 26 additional skills. Here are brief skill examples:

- Correctly process domestic health certificates for dogs and cats with minimal assistance.
- Complete observation training in the following areas: Large animal ambulatory day, spay, neuter, small animal dental procedure, equine dental procedure, equine wellness exam, cat wellness exam, dog wellness exam, new puppy exam, new kitten exam. (Log and forms)
- Call in prescriptions to outside pharmacies per doctor or technician direction.
- Understand, support, and promote the value of our practice's services.
- Properly handle return requests. (Hint: We don't accept returns.)

Client Service Representative Tier 3

Must meet all requirements of previous levels and be able and willing to train and mentor others in areas that have been attained. Minimum 1 year as a Tier 2 CSR at Adobe Veterinary Center. This tier has 10 additional skills. Here are brief skill examples:

- Demonstrate understanding of the life cycle and pathology of common internal and external parasites. Know the common preventatives, treatments, and diagnostics recommended at Adobe Veterinary Center. Explain them to pet owners.
- Explain all items on a treatment plan and an invoice to an owner, understanding and conveying value.
- Explain the how and why behind protocols and procedures in a positive manner.
- Be assigned as a direct mentor to new hires. Schedule weekly meetings with the trainee and hospital manager and keep orientation on schedule.

Client Service Representative Tier 4

Must be able to demonstrate mastery of all skills and knowledge in previous levels and be able and willing to train and mentor others in areas that have been attained. Minimum 1 year as a Tier 3 CSR at Adobe Veterinary Center. Must be employed full-time (4 shifts per week). This tier has 3 additional skills, leadership duties, and CE requirements. Here are brief skill examples:

- Handle any owner questions and concerns.
- Assist with CPR (chest compression, ventilation).
- Troubleshoot all in-house equipment.

If a CSR completes Tier 4, the employee is proficient in 94 skills, serves as the hospital manager in his or her absence, mediates issues between staff members, assists with CSR performance reviews, leads training sessions, and has annual CE requirements.

Barbara Broach Carter, practice manager at Companion Animal Hospital in Phenix City, Alabama, organized a nursing skills checklist with categories on client care and education, knowledge of medical terms, protocols, and procedures, and animal handling, physical skills, and patient care. (Download Companion Animal Hospital's nursing skills in eLearning.) A new hire is assigned a mentor who teaches and signs off when training is proficient.

Hospital managers also have tiers. If a practice has job levels for paraprofessionals, managers will want to see career paths for themselves, too. The good news: You can grow your skills and advance within your current hospital. There are three management levels for practice managers.

Level 1: Office Manager

An office manager spends 45% of responsibilities on client satisfaction such as overseeing the CSR team, resolving client concerns, and working at the front desk. Another 45% is allocated to training, hiring, coaching, setting front desk work schedules, ordering pet food and retail items, doing CSR performance reviews, and maintaining and training on your practice-management software. The last 10% of duties encompass accounting such as daily bank deposits and managing accounts receivable.

Level 2: Practice Manager

As a practice manager, 60% of your duties are personnel, including hiring, firing, supervising, maintaining personnel policies and manuals, mediating personnel issues, planning staff meetings, setting salaries, and managing employee benefits. Client satisfaction and marketing duties comprise 25% of your focus. You grow and develop revenue centers, monitor key performance indicators, conduct client-satisfaction surveys, track new client and retention rates, and oversee building and equipment maintenance and housekeeping standards. Accounting duties are 15% with review of accounting reports, financial policies for clients, managing accounts payable and receivable, setting the hospital budget, and reviewing purchase of supplies and equipment.

Level 3: Hospital Administrator

A master's or bachelor's degree in business administration is preferred along with a Certified Veterinary Practice Manager designation. As a hospital administrator, 40% of duties are personnel with the addition of hiring and interviewing associate veterinarians in collaboration with the practice owner or medical director. You'll oversee doctors' employment contracts. You will monitor staffing levels for maximum productivity. Hospital administrators manage employee benefits and maintain personnel manuals. Financial duties make up 30%. You will create, manage, and monitor the hospital budget. You'll oversee finances including monthly reports and fees. Administrative duties are 25%, including managing daily business operations, coordinating staff training, and growing new revenue streams such as telehealth visits and your online store. Client satisfaction is 5% of duties. You'll conduct client surveys, develop plans for consistent new client numbers, and coordinate staff training. You'll want to upskill employees, so they and your practice are prepared for tomorrow's challenges.

Download job descriptions for office managers, practice managers, and hospital administrators in eLearning.

Gather learning resources. While mentors will help with hands-on skills, create a library of training resources such as SOP binders or electronic manuals, online courses, journal articles, association memberships, YouTube videos, and lunch-n-learns from sales professionals. Dr. McKenzie developed a playlist of YouTube videos on Level 1 technical skills that RVTs and veterinary assistants watch before they try hands-on skills the first time.

Confirm learned skills with hands-on and written tests. The skill evaluation at Gause Boulevard Veterinary Hospital includes self-assessment signoffs of proficient, efficient, in training, and not trained. Once employees self-assess as proficient in a skill, they perform the skill for a veterinarian who initials the skill as "mastered" when approved.

Mount Laurel Animal Hospital has written tests for each job level. The practice also has a separate anesthesia levels test, which has technicians calculate drug dosages, explain use of surgical equipment, and reviews pain-management protocols. Calculation tests must be passed with a score of 100%. Here is an example of a test question for a Level 2 veterinary assistant:

The correct method to pass another sterile person in the surgical suite is to:

- a. Cross arms and back to the sterile field
- b. Pass front-to-front with minimal of 1 foot between
- c. Pass with hands down
- d. Pass back-to-back

At Adobe Veterinary Center, employees are tested on soft skills such as dealing with angry clients and achieving 80% forward booking of appointments. Team members demonstrate hands-on skills such as successfully placing IV catheters in five cats. At Mount Laurel Animal Hospital, written tests include identifying medical abbreviations, labeling anatomy, reading animals' body language from photographs, calculating medication doses, and more. (Download sample tests in eLearning.)

Everyone completes skill tests—even licensed technicians. At Adobe Veterinary Center, a CVT who is a new hire goes through orientation and completes Levels 1 to 3. A CVT is paid based on his or her

experience as a Tier 3 technician on the first day of employment, but the employee must pass hands-on skill and written tests for all three levels. CVTs can go through the three levels without restrictions on time. Non-credentialed technicians must spend at least 3 months at Tier 1 and spend 1 year at Tier 3 before moving forward to Tier 4. Employees must achieve Tier 2 to do technician appointments. To create a culture of teamwork and collaboration, McDermott says Level 3 technicians still do laundry.

Go slow and use self-paced learning. Don't rush the learning process. Many employees may be so focused on completing the list of skills that they try to jump to another level before they are proficient, McDermott warns. They need skills as well as knowledge. That's why Dr. Staten set minimum times spent at each tier before employees may advance to the next level.

What to pay as employees advance

Adobe Veterinary Center started tiered job levels several years ago to avoid pay discrepancies. Without regular review of employee wages, you risk paying a new hire more than a seasoned employee. With 70% of veterinary hospitals battling staff shortages, managers need to offer competitive wages.⁹

Dr. Staten set salary ranges for each job tier, which are posted in the employee lounge. "We employ intelligent, knowledge-driven and skilled people," she says. "We needed to be transparent about pay and not have secrets behind closed doors. With tiered job levels, employees never ask, 'How can I make more money?' because they know."

Job tiers let employees reskill, too. Several Adobe Veterinary Center employees who began in its pet resort have moved into roles as technician assistants.

"Transparency reassures employees," advises McDermott. "They know we are not taking away any pay or benefits. We want career paths for employees and to help them perform up to the next level."

Average paraprofessional wages

Staff wages should not exceed 22% of income, according to the 2019 Well-Managed Practice Study (excludes doctor compensation).¹⁰ The study reports a technician/veterinary assistant to doctor ratio of 2 to 1 and a full-time support staff to doctor ratio of 4.2 to 1. Here are average hourly rates from the 2019 Well-Managed Practice Study in U.S. dollars:

Staff position	Average hourly wage
Hospital administrator	\$40.90
Practice manager	\$26.20
Credentialed technician	\$16.00
Veterinary assistant	\$12.50
Client service representative	\$13.00

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported an average hourly wage of \$17.72 for veterinary technologists and technicians in 2021.¹¹ Veterinary assistants average \$14.32 per hour.¹² The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not have an industry category for veterinary client service representatives. The average hourly wage for the category of "receptionists and information clerks" is \$14.40, which is all industries.¹³ The 2021 average hourly wage for customer service representatives for all industries is \$17.75.¹⁴

Job website Indeed reports an average hourly wage of \$22.92 Canadian dollars (CAD) for a veterinary technician and \$17.45 CAD for a veterinary assistant in 2022.^{15,16}

Pay increases between job levels

As employees at Adobe Veterinary Center complete hands-on skill test and written exams, they move to the next tier. Pay increases \$0.50 to \$1 per hour per job level. Top tiers have the biggest bump. When a technician goes from Level 4 to 5, the pay increases \$1.75 per hour. At Mount Laurel Animal Hospital, pay increases 10% to 15% between job levels.

At Adobe Veterinary Center, a CVT with a current license gets the tier pay scale plus \$0.50 additional per hour. For example, a Level 4 non-credentialed technician might earn \$17 per hour while a Level 4 CVT makes \$17.50 per hour.

If employees are cross-trained, they earn an extra \$0.25 per hour. Dr. Staten encourages small and large animal technicians and assistants to be cross trained to work on every species from a cat to a pig. Technicians and assistants also can cross train on CSR duties, earning them \$0.25 more per hour regardless of which role they're working in.

Adjust wages annually

At Adobe Veterinary Center, every tier goes up annually in its hourly wage range. This keeps wages competitive and adjusts for cost-of-living increases when employees remain in the same tier.

When employees reach top tiers

The reality is not everyone wants to work at the top level. Adobe Veterinary Center has five tiers for technicians. Most technicians are Level 3 with a few at Level 4 and one at Level 5. When an employee reaches the top of any tier, they know wages are reviewed annually to keep within 21% of revenue and cost-of-living adjustments. Staff members who reach top tiers can become department managers, which has different compensation. How the practice is performing also influences wages. Dr. Staten is researching staff bonuses based on practice key performance indicators.

Most technicians at Mount Laurel Animal Hospital work in Level 2 and 3 positions. "Some people keep going and want more," says McDermott. "We value and support VTS credentialing." The hospital has 10 CVTs who have earned the VTS (Dentistry) specialty through the Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians (<https://www.avdt.us/becomecertified>).

With 325 employees, Mount Laurel Animal Hospital has niches for technicians such as pharmacy technicians, patient care advocates, and technician telehealth visits. Technicians can become peer trainers, shift leads, and nursing supervisors. "If they have leadership skills, technicians can move into management roles," McDermott explains.

Tuition reimbursement programs and CE allowances

Practices can supplement on-the-job training with formal and continuing education. At Mount Laurel Animal Hospital, every employee gets \$350 per year for education and can request additional funds. CVTs get annual CE allowances of \$1,000. CVTs who earn the VTS (Dentistry) specialty get \$1,500 for CE annually. Employees may use educational funds for dues, conferences, online courses, books, college, and other training.

Whether your practice has one doctor or more than 10, you can benefit from job tiers with skill checklists and tests. Creating career paths is the first step. Managers should constantly monitor employee progress in job levels and update skill checklists and tests. Skills need to reflect current standards of care and service and changes in standard operating procedures. You need a skilled workforce capable of facing the challenges of tomorrow. Skills-based learning lets you create lifelong learners and agile professionals.

Which goals will you implement from this training?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Helpful resources	Link
Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians VTS (Dentistry)	https://www.avdt.us/becomecertified
Free videos on CSVETS' YouTube channel	www.youtube.com/csvets
National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America	https://www.navta.net
Veterinary Hospital Managers Association	https://www.vhma.org

Facilitator's Guide: Career Paths: A Guide to Implementing Job Levels

Choose a facilitator to lead your team's discussion. Create plans to implement goals you learned in this training program.

1. Where will the veterinary profession be in the next 5 years and in the next decade? What skills do employees need to learn to prepare for the future?

2. How many job levels will you create for client service representative, veterinary assistant, and technician positions?

3. How will you engage employees in creating skill checklists, tests, and standard operating procedure manuals?

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