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ABSTRACT: Acquiring placement is fundamental for any veterinary nursing course, be it for block placement as a degree student, or full-time employment as an apprentice. With training placements being limited by availability, this highly competitive task can appear very daunting, especially if it is your first time submitting an application of this nature. There are many elements that contribute towards achieving a placement, including a concise curriculum vitae, a professional interview and, above all, your dedication and personality. This article endeavours to provide organisational and formatting advice that will help your passion for veterinary nursing shine through to potential employers.

Where to start

In a sea of training practices, which is the right one for you? The key consideration here is feasibility – travelling is the main hurdle with every job, so bear in mind your method of transport and the length of commute. Should you wish to go a bit further afield, ascertain whether the practice will provide accommodation or if you will need to organise this yourself. In the eventuality of the latter, consider the financial implications or the possibility of staying with family and friends. Use the advanced search on “Find a Vet” (RCVS, 2017a) to locate training practices in your chosen location. The type of practice should also be an important factor – would you prefer first opinion, hospital or referral centre? For your first placement, it may be best to start out in a smaller practice, allowing you time to find your feet before jumping in at the deep end. Solely small animal based, or including a large animal or exotics division? Bear in mind your aspirations and if you intend to specialise in the future. Independent practice or a chain? Take your personality into account and decide if you like to work with a close-knit group of people or a wide variety. Remain open-minded and try to apply for a range of practices. Although the case load will differ, each training practice is inspected regularly to ascertain suitability for student education (RCVS, 2017b); therefore, any will be acceptable for completion of your training.

Attitude and first contact

Your personality and how you present it is without doubt the “make or break” in the success of your application. A practice will want to see that you are organised, personable and committed to veterinary nursing (Sackett & Walmsley, 2014). They will assess you on these attributes from the moment you initiate contact, so it is imperative that you make a good impression here. First contact could be made in the form of a phone call, practice visit, email or letter. Talking directly to a member of staff, either over the phone or face to face, is advisable as they will be able to provide you with the most suitable contact to direct your application to, allowing you to follow up with a personally addressed email or letter (depending on the practice’s preference), avoiding generalised terms such as “to whom it may concern”. Taking this initiative not only demonstrates that you are forward-thinking, but adds a personal touch that will make you stand out in comparison to applicants whom they only know from paper. There is a lot to be said for “putting a face to a name” in making you a memorable candidate, so ensure that you present yourself professionally in language, attitude and attire in whichever method of contact you choose (Bell, 2016).

Curriculum vitae and cover letter

Many practices require a curriculum vitae (CV) upon application, therefore it is best to pre-empt this and include one from

the off – as I am sure you can appreciate, practice staff are incredibly busy so the less correspondence required, the better. A CV is a summary of your professional, academic and personal capabilities and, in short, its content will play a major role in deciding whether you are offered a place. Make sure you use an academic font, such as Arial or Times New Roman and consider the layout carefully so that it is clear and concise. Your CV should include the following sections (Cleary & Horsfall, 2013):

- Contact details, including your full name, address, phone number and email address
- Education history and list of qualifications – place the most recent at the top of this section and list your highest grades first to catch the reader's attention
- Employment history (including relevant work experience) – in order of most to least recent, including a brief summary of each job and give a few examples of how you have made an impact within the role
- Relevant skills – give a brief example of how you have utilised these in previous roles

In addition, you may wish to include a personal statement – a succinct paragraph of no more than 200 words that highlights your career aims and any specific attributes or achievements that would be particularly attractive to the practice. Furthermore, this is also an ideal section for including details of any extra-curricular activities such as volunteering (Moffett, Matthew, & Fawcett, 2015), mentoring or even proficiency in a different language to demonstrate that you are a well-rounded individual, as well as allowing the practice to gain insight into your personality. Another technique to consider is including references – use your contacts. By providing the names and contact numbers of a few consenting referees, you are ensuring that you have character references available to support your CV.

Including a cover letter is a valuable asset to any application when employed correctly and it would be advisable to make use of this. Addressed to your named individual from the practice (usually the head nurse or practice manager), you can use this short letter to explain your intent, specific interests in the practice and what

makes you best suited to working there. Avoid repeating details from your CV; instead, briefly refer to them and then provide further context into the most relevant achievements or skills (Harolds, 2013). Be specific – provide all the information that the practice could need, such as placement dates, what stage you are at in your training and what you expect to get out of this placement, for example completion of particular NPL units. Proof-reading for spelling and grammar errors is imperative before sending both your CV and cover letter. Whether it is an email or hard copy, ensure that a second pair of eyes have thoroughly scrutinised it. Do not rely on computer spell-check programs – you would be surprised what grammatical mistakes can go undetected. Finally, do not be tempted to embellish on your experience or qualifications; be prepared to discuss, reflect and provide examples of key points of interest mentioned in your CV and letter at interview.

Interview

An invitation to interview is both an exciting and daunting prospect, and can be a nerve-wracking experience for some applicants. This is an opportunity for the practice to get to know what is under the formalities of that spotless CV – the real you. Due to the nature of veterinary nursing, this will always be a step on that long trek to gaining a placement position and many practices will describe it as “informal” to help reduce any interrogation preconceptions that students may have. Despite the relaxed nature, it is important to prepare correctly.

Do your research – know the practice's speciality and have an understanding of the services they offer. Collating a few relevant questions to ask your interviewer will promote your enthusiasm, and if they have a “Meet the Team” section on their website, browse the staff bios to highlight any common interests that could become points of discussion (Vet Times Jobs, 2015). In addition, make sure that you have thoroughly planned your travel route, leaving adequate time for delays to ensure that you are punctual. In answer to the age-old question “but what do I wear?”, keep it casual. Formal attire has never been best suited to the medical environment, so as long as you appear neat and presentable, you are on to a winner. To really stand out from the crowd, be prepared to get stuck in after

your interview by bringing along those famous minty green scrubs and offering to help for the day. An extra pair of hands is always appreciated. During the interview, relax and be yourself. Maintain eye contact with your interviewer and actively engage with them and the practice around you. Finally, bear in mind that a smile is your greatest tool (Naim, Tanveer, Gildea, & Hoque, 2015).

No luck?

Avoid being disheartened if you do not receive an offer straight away. It is by no means a reflection on your quality, as the student to training practice ratio is highly uneven, making the decision incredibly difficult. For unsuccessful applications, express your thanks for their time and perhaps suggest keeping your CV on file in case circumstances should change. In the case of practices who are sitting on the fence, a gentle reminder in the form of offering to visit for a trial day can effectively demonstrate your passion and interest in the practice. In such a competitive environment, persistence is key and no matter what, do not give up.

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