



CAREER EXPLORATIONS

How to Find Success as a Locum Veterinary Nurse/Technician

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The evening after a long first day at a new-to-me clinic, I am refreshing on oxygen flow rates for use in an anesthesia machine with which I lack familiarity. I want to improve my comfort level for tomorrow's shift where I will be the sole veterinary nurse/technician in-clinic with limited standard operating procedures to guide me. Yet I'm tired; equipment research is the last thing I feel like doing. During moments like these, I question the parameters in defining success as a locum veterinary nurse/technician: freedom, plus schedule and financial autonomy? Business realities exist for a locum in addition to technical skills required on the clinic floor. However, the locum path is interesting, rewarding, and fulfilling for a veterinary nurse/technician who thrives on learning in changing environments and is able to take on business risk.



WHAT IS A LOCUM VETERINARY NURSE/TECHNICIAN?

Locum, or locum tenens, is defined as “a person who stands in temporarily for another member of the same profession”¹ and “to fill gaps in care or occupy vacant positions until a full-time provider can be found.”² Locums are seen in human and veterinary health care, amongst physicians, nurses, veterinarians, and veterinary nurses/technicians. Familiarity with the title “locum” is variable; interchangeable terms are used, such as contractor, temporary, relief, business owner, or self-employed. Considering this language in a business context helps with a mindset shift for the locum: When a veterinary nurse/technician is working within the veterinary clinic, this is no longer an employee–employer relationship. Instead, the veterinary clinic becomes the client and locums are now providing their client with services as an independent, self-employed business. Locums continue working within the scope of their veterinary technician license, with opportunities to offer their clients education on the value of the services they contribute to the veterinary industry as a supplementary workforce.

BUSINESS AND TAX CONSIDERATIONS

This mindset shift includes the need for clear understanding that there are business and taxation responsibilities for the locum. Business set-up differs depending on the country; step-by-step guides exist on canada.ca³ and usa.gov.⁴ Beyond deciding on and registering a business structure and name, licensing and tax regulations must be considered. An employer typically handles these on behalf of employees, outside of income tax time. For a locum business, rather than an employee, these requirements must instead be considered with every invoice to ensure that appropriate monetary amounts are collected from clients and retained to pay to the government at tax time for both business and personal needs.

PLAN FOR BENEFITS, EQUIPMENT, AND COVERAGE

In addition, locums must recognize that their client may not offer coverage to them as a contractor when they are working within the veterinary clinic for things including, but not limited to, professional liability insurance, workers' compensation coverage, a dosimeter, sick and vacation pay, professional association fees, health and dental benefits, uniform

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and continuing education allowance, and veterinary discounts. These are now business expenses for the locum; ensuring coverage for many of them before arriving at a clinic to provide nursing/technical services is important. It is recommended to look at personal expenses, current employee paystubs, and contracts in order to compile an appropriate list of expenses and researching costs per year, which are beneficial to know prior to setting rates.

SET PERSONAL PAY RATES

Initially, setting contractor rates that are both appropriate for business needs and reasonable to clients may feel overwhelming. Building those rates by learning underlying business principles helps boost confidence when offering locum services. Begin building business acumen by seeking professional financial, business, and legal advice; utilizing local veterinary technology association resources; researching the market and projected expenses; and reaching out to peers. Additionally, use math to set rates and consider goals surrounding how much locum work and annual income are desired. Finally, understand that the rate charged to clients is what generates revenue, from which business taxes and expenses are subtracted. Once contract negotiations are agreed upon with a client, follow up with a written contract signed by both parties.

THE REALITIES OF LOCUMING

The rhythm of locuming is often different than that of work as an employee. A locum may be working across a spectrum of veterinary clinics, remembering individual client preferences, and fulfilling a variety of duties



while concurrently running their business. Locums jump in to new environments, typically with minimal training on clinic-specific policies, all while slotting in to confidently work with an unknown team of professionals, sometimes at a rapid pace.

Locums lead communication with their temporary colleagues and face learning new technologies, apps and equipment, and processes and protocols. Additionally, locums are organizing their own scheduling, sales, marketing, contract negotiations, invoicing, cashflow, and accounting—all while ensuring they are earning enough to make their business sustainable and recognizing that no employment guarantees exist with contracting.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Viewing clinic environments from this locum perspective and the need to develop comfort with change, first develop competency and confidence in both technical and professional nursing skills; 3 to 5 years of in-clinic experience is a loose guide. Does the locum need to know how to do every task in veterinary medicine that falls under their scope of practice in the way each individual veterinary clinic performs it? The short answer is no. The skill of the locum is in recognizing their professional limits in each unique situation while communicating clearly with their client, combined with an openness to growth and being adaptable and flexible.

At first glance, locuming may seem challenging; how does a veterinary nurse/technician decide if this

versatile career path fits them? One starting point is to consider personal motivations to take on the associated business risk. Is the idea of offering these services as an independent contractor enticing? Perhaps the desire is to help the industry support their permanent employees with temporary staffing solutions, try emergency services, serve many clients or only a handful, find that next great job, or remain a flexible full-time locum.

Many perceived challenges are also their own rewards, such as being exposed to learning different ways of doing medical tasks, or the knowledge that a locum's presence is supporting teams with critical nursing/technical relief. Being clear about boundaries and values, as well as personal strengths and weaknesses, is necessary to ensure success.

CONCLUSION

As I leave for work, I grab my "locum bag" containing all my essentials to be successful in the clinic. I feel nervous while also looking forward to this shift. I may be running anesthetic, preparing prescriptions, managing veterinary nurse/technician appointments, all of those, or possibly tasks I have not expected. I have prepared, I am organized; beyond that I am willing to adapt and communicate as required. The day will fly by. I will meet new pet owners and colleagues, and deliver veterinary care to the patients I see. I know I am assisting a team of colleagues; I will watch their energy shift and gratitude flow between us as we work together in the rhythm that is veterinary medicine. I will end this day with any business tasks that need completing.

I am choosing my path and providing a much-needed service to this industry. All the challenges of self-employment are balanced with the rewards of fulfilling work in a valued role that makes a difference to colleagues and patients alike. Combined, these are my true parameters of success. A final word to the wise? Don't forget to schedule time off for self-care. **TVN**

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Julie is a registered veterinary technologist who graduated in 2012 and has been locuming in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, since 2021. She primarily works in general practice and through locuming has had the opportunity to work in emergency medicine and tele-triage. She has spoken of locuming as a guest on the Veterinary Business Success Show podcast and as a speaker at conferences and webinars through 2023 and 2024 with the British Columbia and Alberta Veterinary Technologists Associations, the Saskatchewan Association of Veterinary Technologists, and Communivet.



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