



WORKPLACE TABOOS

Romantic Relationships

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Veterinary hospitals offer unique conditions that foster close personal relationships. Small practice dynamics create intimate working environments where staff members can spend more time together than with their own families. The shared emotional experiences of saving lives, comforting grieving pet owners, and working through critical cases forge bonds that can easily evolve into romantic attraction.



According to the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) 2024 workplace relationship research, 49% of workers admitted to having a crush on a coworker in the past year, with 21% going on dates with coworkers.¹ The veterinary field, with its intense emotional situations and bonds over patient care coupled with extended work hours, creates fertile ground for romantic connections.

"It's hard to find someone outside of the field when you commit so much of your life to it," stated a veterinarian when asked about workplace relationships. "I think there is a lot of gray area and there is no set right/wrong but some boundaries that could and should be established that would be agreeable to the majority."

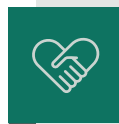
UNDERSTANDING POWER DYNAMICS IN VETERINARY SETTINGS

The power dynamics inherent in veterinary medicine add another layer of complexity to workplace relationships. Teams operate within established hierarchies that influence communication patterns, decision-making, and professional relationships. When romantic relationships develop across these hierarchical lines—such as between veterinarians and veterinary nurses/technicians or managers and support staff—the existing power dynamics become even more complex.

These dynamics often manifest in concerning ways. One veterinary nurse/technician reported witnessing a coworker announce to the hospital, "I can do whatever I want!" because they had a physical romantic relationship with the clinic veterinarian. Conversely, a veterinarian who eventually married a veterinary nurse/technician reflected more thoughtfully: "I suppose there was a power dynamic in the sense that if things didn't go well, he would leave and I would stay at our job."

ASSESSING PROFESSIONAL ACCEPTANCE STANDARDS

Not all workplace relationships carry equal weight in terms of professional impact and team acceptance. SHRM data reveals a clear hierarchy of acceptability: 58% of workers say workplace romances are acceptable between workers of the same level who rarely work together, but only 27% approve of relationships between different hierarchical levels who work closely together.¹



When romantic relationships create tension or perceived inequity, they can undermine positive outcomes.

In situations where most roles require close collaboration regardless of hierarchy, this presents a significant challenge. The reality is that veterinarians work directly with veterinary nurses/technicians, veterinary nurses/technicians coordinate closely with assistants, and reception staff interacts with everyone throughout the day.

According to a practice manager, "When 2 people are dating, especially if 1 supervises the other, it can create perceptions of favoritism that damage team morale. Other staff members start questioning whether schedules, assignments, or performance evaluations are fair."

MANAGING THE RIPPLE EFFECT ON TEAM DYNAMICS

These perceptions of unfairness extend beyond the couple to affect broader team dynamics and workplace satisfaction. When romantic relationships create tension or perceived inequity, they can undermine positive outcomes. This inequity or favoritism signals that performance is less important than personal relationships, causing employees to question the fairness of leadership decisions. Research shows that when romantic relationships create tension or perceived inequity, they can undermine positive workplace outcomes by contributing to these destructive dynamics that negatively impact patient care quality and team effectiveness.²

As a veterinary nurse/technician explained, "My biggest issue wasn't their relationship. It was the way that it affected us when they were fighting. When they were getting along, it was great. But when they weren't, we were walking on eggshells the whole time. You just never knew what would set them off and they would start arguing in the middle of surgery or while we were trying to recover a noise-sensitive patient and they were just screaming at each other."



Perspectives on Veterinary Nurses Entering Workplace Relationships

“It’s easy to meet someone at work; you share an interest, can commiserate and celebrate together, and already spend a lot of time together. But, it’s important to have a plan for what happens if things don’t work. Otherwise, all those shared positives suddenly turn into negatives that eventually impact patient care.”

Anonymous, CVT, Utah

“My husband and I met while working at a small animal hospital, married during his time in vet school, and weathered the challenges of academia and residency. I love that we share an understanding of the demands, culture, and emotional weight of veterinary medicine. The hardest part is when lines become blurred. We spend an extended amount of time with our coworkers, often giving the illusion that there is an entitlement to know things beyond the boundaries of professional work. Keeping work life and home life separate is important for the betterment of your patients and your own sanity.”

Anonymous, CVT, Florida

“The real question to answer before delving into a romantic relationship in a professional setting is not necessarily that they should not happen. Ensuring that healthy boundaries are in place before stepping into a relationship at work can support all involved. In a practice I once worked at, a technician and veterinarian/practice owner were very passionate in their relationship—without boundaries in the work setting. When things went awry, the ripple effects included loss of other employees and an unhealthy environment.”

Anonymous, RVT, North Carolina

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES FOR PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT

Successful workplace relationships require intentional effort to maintain professional boundaries and team trust. This means avoiding public displays of affection, maintaining professional communication in front of colleagues and clients, and ensuring personal disagreements don’t spill into the workplace. The challenge intensifies in smaller clinics where privacy is limited and staff members work in close proximity throughout their shifts.

Communication with the broader team requires strategic finesse. While complete secrecy often backfires in small clinic environments, oversharing personal details can make colleagues uncomfortable. The goal is transparency without inappropriate disclosure, acknowledging the relationship while maintaining professional focus.

To address any appearance of unfairness within the practice hierarchy, equal treatment becomes non-negotiable. This means fair task assignment, consistent performance standards, and avoiding any perception that a romantic partner receives benefits unavailable to other team members.

ADDRESSING POSTRELATIONSHIP WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

The statistics on workplace relationship endings reveal significant operational challenges for veterinary practice managers dealing with romantic entanglements in their facilities: 62% of former workplace couples continued working together after breakups, while 1 in 10 left jobs they otherwise liked due to relationship endings.¹ In an industry where quality job opportunities may be limited and professional relationships span entire careers, reality means that there may be limited options for avoiding ex-partners from relationships that end poorly.

Unlike large corporations where former couples might transfer to different departments or buildings, veterinary staff often continue working in the same treatment rooms, sharing the same equipment, and collaborating on the same cases every day.

Postbreakup dynamics require the same professional standards expected during the relationship, but with added emotional complexity. Veterinary teams require



reliable teamwork and collaboration for safe patient care, making personal conflicts a patient safety issue as well as a workplace concern. When professional conduct breaks down following a relationship's end, practice managers may need to make difficult staffing decisions if the situation remains unresolved.

PROFESSIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

For those contemplating workplace romance, self-reflection is necessary. Consider the following questions:

- How will this relationship affect my professional reputation?
- Will there be a power dynamic at play?
- Can I maintain objectivity in situations involving my partner?
- How will I handle disagreements or conflicts that arise?
- Am I prepared for the possibility that one of us might need to leave if the relationship ends badly?
- Is there a policy regarding relationships? What does it say?

Risk assessment should extend beyond personal consideration to potential legal implications. Workplace relationships can create scenarios that may result in harassment claims, conflicts of interest, or allegations of favoritism. Understanding and preparing for these risks may help with making informed decisions about pursuing romantic relationships with colleagues.

THE MANAGEMENT REALITY

Despite the challenges and complexities, 74% of those who had workplace romances said the experience was worthwhile,¹ suggesting that many people successfully manage these relationships without significant professional damage. A successful workplace relationship requires commitment from both partners to prioritize patient care and team dynamics over personal convenience or preference. It demands honest communication, consistent professional behavior, and the maturity to separate personal emotions from clinical decision-making. **TVN**

***Note:** Individuals quoted in this article spoke with the author under the condition of anonymity given the sensitive nature of this topic.*



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