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The impact of appreciating your veterinary nurses: part 1

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ABSTRACT: Appreciation has the power to influence an individual in many ways. There is numerous literature reporting the benefits appreciation has across various industries including human healthcare, but very little looking into the veterinary industry. Registered Veterinary Nurses (RVNs) are such a key part of the veterinary team but there are concerns over their long-term retention, and demand for them is ever increasing. If appropriately done, appreciation towards RVNs may help improve their job satisfaction levels, in turn contributing to their retention. This article investigates how appreciation is shown towards RVNs and explores the effect that may have.

Keywords: Appreciation; thanks; retention; job satisfaction; registered veterinary nurse

Introduction

The shortage of registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) across the UK has been widely reported in recent years (Coates, 2015; Robinson et al., 2019; Waters, 2017). Results of a survey conducted by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES) on behalf of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) predicted the demand for RVNs to increase over the next ten years (Williams & Robinson, 2014), with this prediction still standing in a recent survey (Robinson et al., 2019). Coates (2015) further identifies concerns over the long-term retention of RVNs, warning of a situation where there will be insufficient numbers to meet future demands.

The Veterinary Nursing Council reported 269 RVNs leaving the register in a one year period in 2018 (RCVS, 2018), and whilst there has been no investigations into why, Williams and Robinson (2014) suggest reasons for leaving (aside from retirement) are low pay and a lack of being valued and rewarded in the workplace; this remains unchanged after the results of the recent RCVS survey (Robinson et al., 2019). Coates (2015) highlights a lack of recognition in veterinary nursing is one important factor that can cause a decline in job satisfaction.

Increased job satisfaction has shown to lead to heightened morale and commitment, and an increased likelihood of remaining in the profession within human-centred nursing (Hayes et al., 2010). As human healthcare

and the veterinary industries may share common professional stressors, concepts from the first can potentially be readily applied to the latter. Thus, increasing recognition for RVNs may increase their retention by improving job satisfaction.

Appreciation is a critical element to job satisfaction, with a lack of it causing frustration and discouragement within the employee (Nelson, 2006). In a survey conducted by VetNurse (2016), the responses of 206 veterinary nurses were analysed and concluded that the most important attribute of a job was to feel valued/appreciated. Appreciation causes employees' outlook on their job to change; they can be happier which in turn positively affects their health and well-being (Nelson, 2006). The theoretical relationship between gratitude and appreciation, and personal well-being was introduced by Sansone and Sansone (2010); gratitude, appreciation and thankfulness promote positive feelings and attitudes within an individual, successively contributing to good well-being. Robinson et al. (2019) further concur that positive words contribute to a higher average well-being. Increasing an individual's well-being can increase the likelihood of them remaining in the profession (Williams & Robinson, 2014). Well-being in a day-to-day workplace is highly influenced by appreciation (Beck, 2016), strengthening the link between appreciation and overall retention of RVNs. Ford (2020) summarises the potential positive outcomes of gratitude and being thankful, to include many

emotional, mental, and physical benefits. This further highlights the potential power appreciation may have and the importance of implementing it. However, if the form of appreciation is not tailored to the individual it has potential to do more harm than good (Baggett et al., 2016). Time and effort can be wasted if appreciation is not individualised to the recipient, and can also result in frustration by both parties (White, 2018). A lot of literature and studies are based on human healthcare, with more studies into the veterinary profession needing to be encouraged (Ford, 2020).

Forms of appreciation

Chapman and White (2011) created the concept of five languages of appreciation, leading to the development of “The Motivating by Appreciation Inventory” (MBAI), an online based survey which assesses an individual’s primary and secondary language of appreciation along with their least favoured. The five languages are words of affirmation (WA), quality time (QT), acts of service (AS), tangible gifts (TG), and physical touch (PT) (Table 1). White (2017) states how despite “physical touch” being one of the languages, it was excluded from the MBAI to avoid negative reactions linked to inappropriate physical touch.

The MBAI proved to provide useful findings when over 100,000 employees in the United States completed it (White, 2017). White (2018) also conducted a later study comparing the preference in appreciation

of millennials and those of older generations. This tool can be useful to help employers discover the general consensus for preferred appreciation amongst their workforce. Whilst there are no other documented studies using the MBAI raising questions of validity it could provide the basis of investigation into the veterinary nursing profession, and thus was applied to this study.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained by the Social Science Research Ethical Review Board at the Royal Veterinary College who reviewed this study and questionnaire.

Materials and methods

The concept of the five languages of appreciation and the MBAI developed by Chapman and White (2011) was used as a basis to measure the form of appreciation RVNs receive and prefer. The concepts were straightforward and provided a simple but effective method to measure appreciation towards RVNs. The MBAI was thought to be a good basis to use due to its specificity to workplace environments, and its goal to help people communicate appreciation to their colleagues in a meaningful way. Physical touch was excluded as an option due to sensitivity of the nature of this form of appreciation, and also it was frequently chosen as the least common and least preferred during an initial pilot study.

An online questionnaire was created and distributed through social media. The questions comprised of:

- Initial demographic questions including age, years qualified, practice location, and type of practice worked in.
- Multiple choice questions to investigate:
 - The type and frequency of appreciation shown,
 - Workplace dynamics,
 - Who appreciation was received by
 - Intentions to leave the register.
- It then ended with an open comments section.

Chi-squared tests were used to test associations between variables. The following aims were to be analysed:

1. How RVNs are appreciated in the workplace.
2. If this is to their preference and satisfaction.

The following hypotheses were formed:

1. There is an association between age and most preferred form of appreciation
2. There is an association between frequency of appreciation shown in the period of a month and overall happiness with the level of appreciation received.

Results

A total of 389 RVNs took part in the study (Table 2).

The most preferred form of appreciation

The most preferred form of appreciation was words of affirmation (WA), with over half of RVNs selecting it (52.4%, n=204) (Figure 1). This is similar to White’s (2017, 2018) findings where WA were favoured most by the employees who took part in the study.

A verbal word of thanks is an example of WA and the positive power of it should not be underestimated as it can be valued highly amongst employees (Beck, 2016). A common theme amongst respondents’ comments of how “a simple thank you costs nothing and means so much” in this study corresponds with Beck’s (2016) study of 833 employees across a spectrum of industries, whereby verbal words were the most preferred form of appreciation, scoring higher than monetary rewards. White (2017) advocates showing appreciation through the simplicity of words;

Table 1. Examples of each form of appreciation. Adapted from the MBAI and 5 languages of appreciation (Chapman & White, 2011; White, 2017, 2018)

Words of affirmation	Verbal communication, orally or in writing, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emails, written notes, cards • A verbal “thanks,” praise, compliments • Recognition for achievements made and goals met, acknowledgement of your contribution to the team • Being asked for your opinion
Quality time	Time spent with the individual, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One on one time, undivided attention • Work social events • On a difficult day having someone stop to see how you are. • Listening to your concerns and showing a genuine interest
Acts of service	Through actions, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Others offering to help with workload • Working together to complete a task • Small favours • Others doing jobs you have asked them to help with
Tangible gifts	Gifts not related to compensation (raises, bonuses), e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being made a cup of tea • Gift cards/vouchers • Having lunch/snacks brought for you • Receiving something tangible
Physical touch	Appropriate physical touch can be a sensitive issue. In means of spontaneous celebration, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High five • Handshake • Pat on the back, hand on shoulder • Hug

being easy and less effort than other forms. Praise is often undervalued in the veterinary industry yet it can make a vast difference towards attitudes of the team (Flight, 2015).

In accordance with White's (2018) study, there was no significant difference between age groups and preferred form of appreciation, with WA being the most preferred across all age groups (Figure 2). These

results further correspond with Beck's (2016) findings in which verbal praise was most desired. The forms of appreciation shown towards RVNs were comparable with those preferred (Figure 1). Despite this only a third (33.2%) were satisfied with the level of appreciation they received. Beck (2016) determined sincerity of appreciation to be more important than its form; sincerity can be measured in four main themes: specificity, personalisation, timeliness, and equivalency (Figure 3). Bartram et al. (2012) concur that appreciation should always be sincere, specific, timely, and personal; expressing thanks in a sincere and meaningful way can enhance the gratitude felt by the receiver (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Beck (2016) reported one-to-one appreciation to be most preferred, correlating to this current study in which two thirds (65.6%) of respondents preferred to receive appreciation privately/individually. It could be suggested that privately given appreciation is viewed as being more personal, and therefore more sincere to the receiver.

Table 2. Demographical data of the respondents who took part in the questionnaire. To include: age, time qualified, practice location, kind of practice, type of practice, and animals seen in practice

Variable	Categories	Number	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	25 or younger	137	35.2
	26–35	158	40.6
	36–55	86	22.1
	56 or more	8	2.1
Time qualified	0–12 months	73	18.8
	13 months– 6 years	168	43.2
	7–16 years	107	27.5
	17–26 years	30	7.7
	27 years or more	11	2.8
Practice location	East Anglia	36	9.3
	East Midlands	24	6.2
	London	30	7.7
	Midlands	11	2.8
	North	3	0.8
	North East	15	3.9
	North West	29	7.5
	Northern Ireland	4	1.0
	Scotland	41	10.5
	South Central	11	2.8
	South East	75	19.3
	South West	43	11.1
	Wales	17	4.4
	West Midlands	17	4.4
	Yorkshire	21	5.4
Other ^{a,d}	12	3.1	
Kind of practice	Corporately owned practice	195	50.1
	Independent practice	164	42.2
	Other ^b	30	7.8
Type of practice	First opinion	327	84.1
	Referral/specialist	46	11.8
	Other ^c	16	4.1
Animals seen in practice	Small animals	336	87.1
	Mixed	40	10.3
	Other ^d	10	2.7

^aTo include Isle of Wight, New Zealand, Republic of Ireland.

^bTo include academic institutions, charity practices, industry/franchise.

^cTo include both referral and first opinion.

^dTo include equine, large animal, exotics.

Table 3. Table showing the numbers and proportions of the frequency RVNs were shown appreciation in the past month

Frequency of appreciation within the past month	Number of respondents (total 389)	Percentage (%) of respondents
1–2	191	49.1
3–5	135	34.7
6–9	32	8.2
10–15	19	4.9
16+	12	3.1

The least preferred form of appreciation

Interestingly, tangible gifts (TA) were chosen by 55.3% (n = 216) RVNs to be the least favoured form of appreciation (Figure 4), again concurring with White's studies (2017, 2018).

Open comments from the study viewed there to be “no need” for gifts, with gifts being unnecessary and a way for colleagues “to pretend they cared, whilst having to do very little to care.” Tangible gifts can be viewed as unfair selection when employees see their colleagues receiving them without knowing why, thus seeming inappropriate and introducing the “dark side” to appreciation (Beck, 2016). It could introduce a concept of favouritism; if gifts are worth different values it risks an individual thinking they are valued less than others. Respondents commented if gifts were to be given then they should be given to all “or none at all”; it can make “everyone feel rubbish” if only a select group of employees receive them. Feelings of dissatisfaction can arise and cause conflict when an employee feels they work hard but see others receiving gifts, leading to frustration or decreased morale. Tangible gifts could contribute to a sense of hierarchy if the value of the gifts are not equal or do not equate to the task performed, especially if certain employees receive gifts that are viewed as “better” than others. Hierarchy is a reported reason for unhappiness, lower performance, and intentions to quit (Dasgupta et al., 2014). Conversely, if the gifts given are all the same

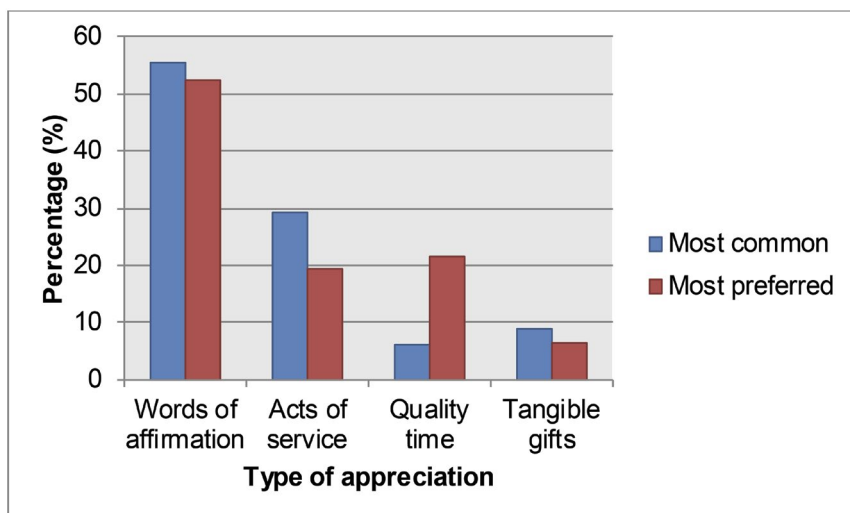


Figure 1. Bar chart showing the proportion of RVNs selecting the most common form of appreciation shown towards them compared to their most preferred form to be shown. Most preferred: WA (52.4%; n=204), QT(21.6%; n=84), AS (19.5%; n=76), and TG (6.4%; n=25). Most common: WA(55.5%; n=216), AS (29.3%; n=114), TG (9%; n=35), and QT (6.2%; n=24).

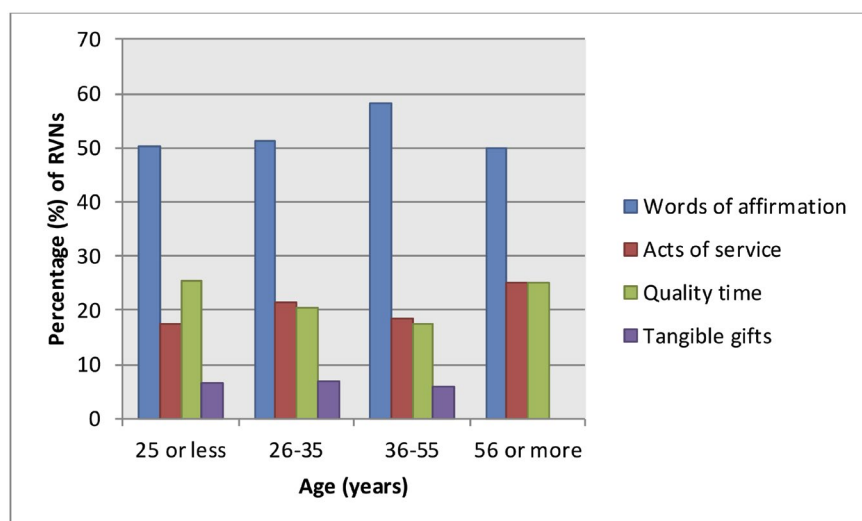


Figure 2. Bar chart showing the proportion distribution of most preferred forms of appreciation per age groups of RVNs within this study.

Specificity

- Being specific to the action in which the appreciation is being given for.

Personalization

- Appreciation that is personal to the individual, such as inclusion of their name and why the appreciation was given, as opposed to a generic expression.

Timeliness

- The appreciation needs to be given in a timely manner after the action, otherwise it becomes void.

Equivalency

- The scope of the appreciation should be equivalent to the magnitude of the action. For example an email of thanks may not be enough for an exceptional action, and a public announcement of gratitude may be too much for a simple act.

Figure 3. adaptation of the four themes of sincerity (Beck, 2016)..

they can also feel impersonal and meaningless (White, 2014). Gifts can be “too sporadic and unrelated to specific work” as one RVN commented, with the Christmas period being a generic time. This correlates to Beck’s (2016) findings in which specificity and timeliness are important factors for sincere appreciation. If not accompanied by praise, offers of help, or checking how an employee is doing, gifts can feel superficial and insignificant (White, 2018). Respondents commented that “buying gifts and paying for nights out does not replace words of appreciation and sometimes just a ‘thank-you’ is enough,” suggesting gifts may be appreciated, but it requires the simultaneous use of words of affirmation to be valued appreciation.

Frequency of appreciation

The majority of respondents reported the frequency of appreciation being shown towards them in the last month as being no more than five times (Table 3). Overall, only 129 (33.2%) of the 389 RVNs in this study were happy with the overall amount of appreciation they receive; 260 (66.8%) were not. Of those unhappy, 247 (95%) recalled the frequency of appreciation shown over the last month to be less than five times. The Chi-squared test indicated that there was a significant difference in frequency of appreciation shown and happiness in the overall level of appreciation received in the last month ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, less than one third (28%; n = 109) of the RVNs felt the frequency of appreciation received equated well to their level of work in the past month, whereas 235 (60.4%) felt it did not, and 45 (11.6%) were unsure.

With frequency of appreciation being a significant factor associated with satisfaction of appreciation received, increasing the frequency could lead to RVNs being happier and feeling more appreciated. However, Beck (2016) warns that excessive appreciation can become meaningless; methods such as “employee of the month” are too frequent and it becomes a standard as opposed to a sincere act of appreciation. Conversely, it should not be assumed that employees know the positives associated with their work, therefore frequent appreciation should not be feared (Eitel, 2014). However, it is important to remember frequent appreciation is meaningless and invalid if it is not sincere (Beck, 2016) (Figure 3):

Summary

The type of appreciation shown to RVNs is generally to their preference with age showing no significant difference in

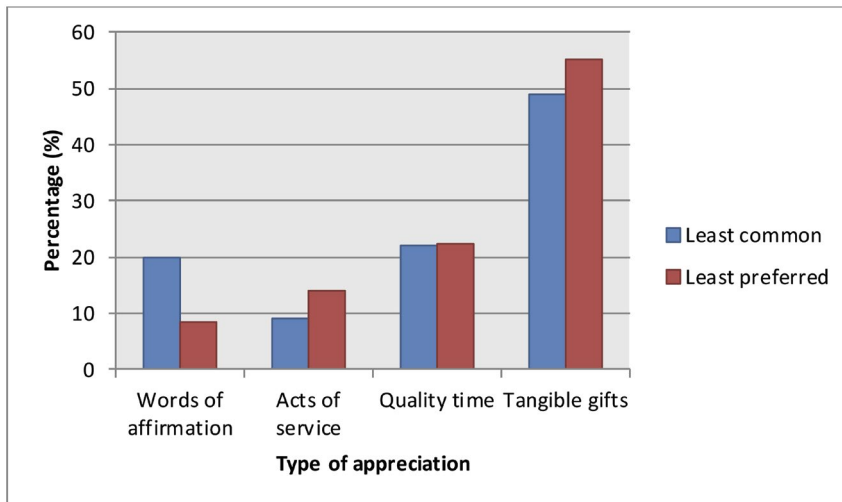


Figure 4. Bar chart showing the proportion of RVNs selecting the least common form of appreciation shown towards them compared to their least preferred form to be shown. Least preferred: TG (55.3%; n=215), QT (22.4%; n=87), AS (13.9%, n=54), and WA (8.5%; n=33). Least common: TG (49.1%; n=191), QT (22.1%; n=86), WA (19.8%; n=77), and AS (9%; n=35).

preference, but RVNs are still not satisfied with the level of appreciation they receive. Frequently communicating appreciation can be an important factor for retention by increasing their satisfaction levels, providing the appreciation is sincere. Tailoring appreciation to individuals is key; a timely, simple, sincere “thank-you” must not be underestimated.

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