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Generation and gender— a critical mix

Howard E. Rubin

In mid-February, the **Gender Issues Task Force (GITF)** of the **National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI)** met for the first time to begin developing the deliverable actions. An important outcome from this GITF meeting was setting a goal to ensure that all other working groups consider gender as well as generational issues in their initiatives. This goal arises from the KPMG LLP and Brakke studies, which included gender-specific findings as well as others that were generational in nature. Regardless, all issues identified by the studies will impact all members of the profession, 50% of whom are estimated to be female by the year 2005. The GITF, like all NCVEI work groups, has the daunting task of selecting those issues and opportunities, among many, on which to focus. The process includes a self-imposed requirement to select issues and resultant programs that will have measurable outcomes. The topics discussed at length included the following critical issues or concerns:

- Women's income lags that of men
- Women work fewer hours
- Women may be less likely to own practices, or reach a goal of practice ownership at a later time
- Women may define job satisfaction more subjectively, often with less objective rewards
- Women may price services lower than men
- Women's business acumen may lag that of men

- Women may be more highly satisfied with lower income levels
- Women's income may be negatively influencing income levels for all veterinarians
- Women tend to bear more of the burden of balancing home, childcare, and eldercare responsibilities with professional responsibilities
- Women may be more reluctant to take on job or management responsibilities in the face of home management responsibilities

The GITF agreed that these concerns are generalizations and may not be applicable to any individual. Following discussion of these topics as well as many others, the consensus was that many of the concerns are related more to generational change than shifts in the gender composition of the profession. The incoming generation may work to live, whereas previous generations may have lived to work.

The first focus of the GITF will be conducting a comprehensive review of the following current gender and generational policies in the veterinary marketplace: family leave, pregnancy, and flextime; sexual harassment or discrimination; safe work environment policy provisions for pregnant workers; and child care benefits. Information gathered will be used to develop a financial model that quantifies the impact of these policies. The goal is to make all veterinarians aware of employment policies already in place in many veterinary workplaces and

to provide this information as a reference tool. More important, the GITF believes it is critical for practice owners to understand and evaluate the implications of having well conceived and formalized policies covering these issues. Consequently, the GITF intends to study the economic impact on practices implementing these provisions.

A natural outgrowth from the policy review is the development of an analytical Staff Retention Model that will tie in with the efforts of the NCVEI Efficiency of the Delivery System Work Group. Staff retention is critical to productivity, quality medicine, and sound economics. The model builders will contemplate the following assumptions:

- Employees are demanding more job flexibility, therefore:
 - Employers need to recognize the generational differences in the view of the workplace (live to work generation vs work to live generation)
 - Practice owners must view this as an opportunity to attract quality employees
 - Longer retention of employees is financially and medically advantageous to the practice
 - A positive work environment has been shown to increase productivity
- Employee turnover is very expensive and has many hidden costs.

The GITF is going to build a financial model to analyze the impact of offering employees more job flexibility. The purpose is to better address the feasibility of creating a new work environment by helping employers understand the value of offering varied programs. The model will quantify the impact of offering different work schedules and hours worked, meeting the challenges posed by permanent part-time and temporary part-time staff, and providing family leave options. Among the expected results is reduction in

employee turnover, a goal that is economically and medically sound. The level of adoption of the model will be the measure of its success.

The second focus of the GITF is coming to grips with different generational and gender views about working and family relationships. For example, women tend to place greater emphasis on building and maintaining relationships. Such emphasis encompasses a number of values:

- Needing to spend more time with clients
- Feeling good about interactions with the boss and coworkers
- Balancing home, childcare, and eldercare responsibilities with professional responsibilities
- Working to overcome reluctance to take on job or management responsibilities in the face of competing home management responsibilities
- Mentoring effectively
- Emphasizing quality of life issues

The GITF recognizes the need to create awareness and understanding of these differing views before acceptance will take place. Data obtained outside the veterinary industry suggests that the marketplace will accept different approaches to satisfying customer demands and individual needs. For example:

- Spending more time with clients is OK, but recognize the value of your time
- Relationships enhance practice revenues—they don't have to challenge them
- Productivity is always important, but the road from A to B may differ
- Negotiate more effectively—sharing duties with a spouse is critical to two income family success
- Ultimately, more than one style of practice ownership can be successful. The NCVEI's success will be defined as getting everyone comfortable with varied approaches.

Four main types of relationships will be addressed by the GITF: new

graduates' relationships with their first boss and other mentors; needs within the family, including childcare, eldercare, and time with spouse; the development of good, financially rewarding working relationships with clients; and the transition from being an employee to being the boss. Armed with a better understanding of new rules of engagement, veterinarians can positively affect the work environment, the productivity of their colleagues, and the value of their employees. The GITF anticipates developing a program to be presented at major veterinary conferences including the SAVMA symposium by this time next year.

Facilitating practice ownership in this new environment is essential and provides an opportunity for the NCVEI to meet the challenges ahead. Incentives need to connect management and finance training with opportunities for presenting business plans. The creation of financing plans for ownership structures that include owners who work part-time as well as full-time and balancing schedules of employees with varying personal priorities will be important to meet the goals of the next generation. Educating sources of funding and the veterinary community about the needs of a new breed of veterinary entrepreneurs will facilitate exit strategies for the current generation and entry strategies for the next.

After two intense days of discussion and decision, the GITF feels it has made a good start addressing the profession's major gender and generational issues. As projects are developed over the next few months, more precise time lines will be set, and action items will be defined more specifically. It is critical to the GITF as well as to the NCVEI that issues with measurable outcomes be targeted. Gender and generational changes in the future will provide exceptional opportunities for all veterinarians. The challenge is to recognize and appreciate these changes and opportunities.